

# Perpetual Conflict of 'Turkishness': The Turkish State and its Minority Groups.

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ELIZABETE AUNINA, NOV 4 2018

The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 upon the ashes of the collapsed Ottoman Empire, the conflict with the different resistance movements and the liberation of the territory occupied by the Allied Powers. Fresh in the memory was the Treaty of Sevres (1920), which partitioned Anatolia amongst the Allied Powers and had become a symbol in the identity of the new nation-state. This transformation from the Islamic Empire (the last Caliphate nevertheless) to a Turkish nation-state was thus marked by a deep state insecurity and lack of social cohesion. In such a climate, Turkish nationhood and Turkishness, meaning a state of being Turkish, was created based on the monolith ideal of what being a Turk should mean. This new creation was to be a centralized, modern nation-state that has closed its doors to the past, which was seen as backwards by the ruling Republican elite led by Kemal Atatürk[1]. Established on the principles of republicanism, nationalism, *laiklik*[2], populism, statism and revolutionism, those who did not fit within this Turkishness quickly realized that the state may not be working in their interests (Atasoy, 2011: 106). As coined by Demir (2014), Turkish state throughout its history has employed periphery-centre relations or what she has called the “*Efendi* identity”[3], where the dominant state structure has approached the subjects through the prism of a mission *civilisatrice* against the uncivilized ‘other’, mainly in the East. This has been manifested in state’s relations with its minorities, and while some normalization of relations has occurred, this ‘otherness’ has been embedded in the Turkish society and expresses itself through repeated conflicts.

In this essay, I will explore the imagination of Turkishness as a social construct and its effect upon the social and legal spheres in the Turkish state relations with minorities – the largest ethnic minority the Kurds and the largest religious minority the Alevis. Yet, it is important to regard that the ‘otherness’ inscribed in Turkishness, especially during the Republican era, marginalized more than just the state minorities applying in large numbers to, for example, the Anatolian peasants who did not fit within the conception of a modernized nation imagined by the elites. Due to the scope of the paper, I do not address this dimension in detail. In order to pursue the argument, I begin by outlining the plethora of literature that addresses the philosophical relation between the state and nation. I then proceed to look at *Turkishness* through the prism of social relations, followed by state legislation where I primarily look at what this concept, embedded in the Constitution, implies about the minority citizenship rights and as such the political rights. In both sections I address the theory in regards to both the Kurds and Alevis.

### Nation and the State

A vast body of literature exist exploring the relationship between a state and a nation. The traditional understanding of a nation sees it as a collective whose members are connected through similar features like history, culture, language and territory (Cambridge Dictionary). However, as argued by Connor (1994) any nation is difficult to conceptualize as its essence is not tangible (1994: 93). Wide consensus, however, exist on the self-defined character of a nation, which would imply that it is a socially constructed concept (Anderson 1983; Breuilly 1993; Connor 1994; Gellner 1983; Moore 2001). Moore (2001) points out that nations as social groups are contingent on its members creating and sustaining an image, in turn implying that they are based on the feelings and perceptions of the different members (2001: 6-7). While a centralized state could exert pressure to create an image of national unity, sustaining it through the legal sphere and state control, it is the society as whole (or in part) that must recognize the importance of this construction as a unifying factor. As such Anderson (1983) has called nations “imagined communities”. In this

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imagination, however, various factors have been regarded as important, such as common memories, myths and symbols (Renan, 1882). Halbwachs (1950), however, points out the problem with memory, as the *collective* memory can be inter-subjectively constructed and passed down through artefacts, memorial days and even the state constitution (Halbwachs, 1992 [1950]). It is therefore not surprising that centralized states often choose to attack precisely these aspects of 'otherness'.

Access to culture is regarded as an essential aspect of individual freedom, therefore, governments' decisions on language, holidays, state symbols and recognition of 'official memories' involve recognizing and supporting one identity over another, and therefore, disadvantaging the 'other' (Kymlicka, 1995). The 'otherness' is further complicated when the state is seen as the political extension of a nation, where the political and social communities are reduced to the nation alone. Authors argue that with one group dominating, the enjoyment of citizenship rights becomes associated with the interests of the dominant group which leads the decisions on state-wide creation of laws and policies (Mostov 1994; Kymlicka 1995; Smooha 2002).

As argued by Breuilly (1993) this question is especially pertinent to newly built or transitional states that are merely approaching national unity. In states like Turkey, having emerged through the complete denial of the values and practices of the Ottoman Empire, nationalism can act as a glue that binds together the state that has socially fallen apart. In such cases, authoritarian nationalist ideology can be seen exceptionally attractive as it aims to engineer a society that can be unified behind the strong central state and is therefore easier to be controlled (Breuilly, 1993: 273). Having explored the theoretical relationship between a nation and a state, I will now proceed to use it for an application towards the sociological and legal dimensions in the case of Turkishness and its effects upon Turkey's minorities.

## Social

The Turkish state during the Republican era led by Kemal Ataturk and his followers, even beyond the introduction of the multi-party system in 1950, laid upon two factors. First, it was the imagination of the new state as a state for Turks, and second, the imagination of these Turks to be molded upon the best European inspired traditions. This modernization was to come in stark contrast to the Ottoman Empire[4], deemed to be a history from which the new Turkish nation imagined itself to diverge.

Historically, the Turks were nomadic people who before the emergence of Islam never settled in any one place for too long. This understanding implied that the nation-state, built by the new government could not have been based upon racial identity. Nationalism was to take place, seen as the way to unite this deeply divided society. The early ideas on how to build Turkish national identity were heavily based upon the writings of Turkish sociologist Ziya Gokalp. He saw the dominant movements, those being Turkism, Islamism and modernism as elements that during the Ottoman Empire's demise were in conflict with one another, bringing the Empire to accelerated downfall (Gokalp in Kaya, 2004: 59-60). Therefore, multi-ethnicity and multi-religiosity in the new Turkish state were perceived as threats, as they directly demurred the idea of a homogeneous Turkish state able to leave behind the backwardness and conflicts of the past. Upon Gokalp's imagination, the defining force in the creation of this unified nation was education, as according to him, "Man does not bring with him language, religion, aesthetic feeling, political, legal or economic institutions. All these he acquires later, from society and through education" (Gokalp in Kaya, 2004: 50). With education as the major force in the imagination of the new nation, anyone could become Turkish despite their religious or ethnic affiliations if only they assimilated to the Turkishness (Cagaptay, 2006: 16).

However, this modernized imagination of Turkishness was to be based upon nationalism and engineered through a top-down elite-imposed methods (Demir, 2014: 385). Despite having identified themselves through Muslimness for many centuries, within the new Turkish state its inhabitants were ought to see themselves through Turkishness, as raising the national identity above the religious one (Kocan & Oncu, 2004: 466). From Turkey's six founding principles, mentioned in the introduction, the government placed particular attention to the concept of *laiklik* or *laicite* as it is better known as a French concept for secularization. However, the Turkish idea of secularism varied from that in France, as it quickly moulded to mean a state controlled religious bureaucratization based on Sunni Islam (Atasoy, 2011; Bardakci et al., 2017). Although this secularization led to the 1928 abolishment of the constitutional clause

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which detailed Islam as the state religion, and the 1924 abolishment of the Caliphate, it also created the *Diyanet* (the Directorate of Religious Affairs), which has since promoted Sunni Islam as a source of morality. Later on, through Law No. 633, passed in 1965, the *Diyanet* gained the responsibility to “serve and enlighten society, and thus solidify the unity and integrity of the nation” (Adanali in Atasoy, 2011: 108). In reality *laiklik* applied regulations on religious institutions including the sanctioning of state approved sermons and religious education (Ibid.). Moreover, after 1980[5], the idea of *laiklik* shifted even further towards the Turkish-Islamic synthesis[6], as visible from school textbooks claiming that “Turkic people who did not adopt Islam became distanced from their Turkishness” (*İslam understood as the Diyanet approved Turkish-Islam*) (Cayir, 2015: 528).

## Kurds

Kurds are one of the largest minority in the Middle East that considers themselves stateless. In the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds excluded themselves from the Turkish-Muslim *ethnie*, developing a parallel society. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, they were to be given a homeland according to the Treaty of Sevres (1920), which was to be later replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which no longer mentioned such promise. The South-eastern part of Turkey by many Kurds is perceived as part of their homeland even today, and in the early years of the Republic were mainly populated by ethnic Kurds (Cagaptay, 2006: 19). The physical separation of Kurds in Turkey proved to be essential for those top-down assimilation policies which signify the early Republican era. Because Kurds were perceived as Turks or Turks *to be* the question of early rebellions, like those in 1925 and 1927, were portrayed as rebellions against state modernity and referred to as questions of ‘easterness’ and ‘backwardness’ along with ‘otherness’ (Yegen, 2009: 599). Betrayal has also been historically used as a tool to refer to the Kurds who sided with the British during the War of Independence, reminding of their traitorous acts towards the homeland. These social tools employed by the state, allowed for the Kurdish identity securitization, which further accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s when the discourse changed towards that of terrorism, correlating with the emergence of the PKK. Perceived as either bandits or terrorists, the central state has approached the Kurdish question and its linked conflicts to those of the very state existence and security (Bardakci et al., 2017). Here the marginalization of Kurds has occurred through the engineering of an image of Turkishness as being part of the modernity of the nation-state for Turks, in which the Kurdish problem is a problem of refusal to assimilate and become modern.

## Alevi

Alevi, the biggest religious minority constitute approximately 15-20 percent of Turkish population, have proven to be a very diverse social and religious issue in Turkey (Tekdemir, 2017: 1). Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Alevi identity was very fragmented, yet in general it embraced Ataturk’s policies towards what was ought to be secularization. However, *laiklik* soon proved to be the leading cause of the Alevi grievances. The *Diyanet* which came to exist in the Republican era denied the recognition of Alevi faith, reducing it to mere sub-group within Sunni Islam (Atasoy, 2011: 108). This has traditionally led to the denial of Alevi social (religious) space, with the *Diyanet* not recognizing any of the Alevi religious practices. For example, the *cemvi* (the place of worship) or the *dede*, despite being the spiritual leader of Alevi, are not recognized and therefore, for example, do not permit the appropriate funeral ceremonies (Tekdemir, 2017: 1-2). The Islamic-Turkish synthesis not only led to the Alevi awakening, but also imposed the further connection between Turkishness and Sunni-Islam as the morality guarantor. As Muslims who do not practice the basic Islamic rituals, such as the observance of Ramadan or the prayer five times a day, the Alevi religious expressions have been perceived as wrong and even threatening to the morality of the state. This ‘wrongness’ and ‘otherness’ of Alevi, have also been perceived as something that ought to be fixed[7], visible from the increasing post-1980s campaigns, which included building mosques and sending *Diyanet* approved imams to deliver sermons in Alevi villages, despite them remaining mostly unattended (Kocan & Oncu, 2004: 477). This state-imposed mission *civilisatrice* towards the mainly poor peasant villages therefore allowed and perhaps even fuelled the growth of Alevi scapegoating, especially pertinent in the more radical Islamic movements who pointed to Alevi as to indicate societal sins (Ibid.). In turn, it could be further argued that this sociological creation extends the state’s responsibility in the radical attacks against the Alevi, repeatedly not prevented.[8]

## Legal

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Having explored Turkishness as a social construct of Turkey as a nation-state and its relationship with Kurds and Alevis as its minorities, I now turn to evaluate how this state imagination have played out in the legal strata. I further address this section in reference to citizenship, due to the visible contrast between nationhood and citizenship. The 1924 Constitution founded the new Turkish Republic "as a nation state". It is further revealed, that "It is not a multi-national state. The state does not recognize any nation other than the Turks. There are other peoples who come from different races and who should have equal rights within the country. Yet it is not possible to give rights to these people in accordance with their racial status." (Yegen, 2007: 126). The same 1924 Constitution, in Article 88, regards that "The people of Turkey regardless of their religion and race would, *in terms of citizenship*, be called Turks [emphasis added] (Al, 2015: 91).[9] This in essence has established what Yegen (2009) has called the "pseudo-citizenship" referring to those who for whatever reason are only *becoming* Turkish (Yegen, 2009). As visible from the previous section, being part of Turkishness is limited to only those groups who fully embrace the majority social engineering giving up any ethnic or religious differences.

Furthermore, it is important to regard that the Turkish Constitution in itself does not address the question of minorities, rather referring to the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) which recognizes minorities in Turkey as the non-Muslims. This conception therefore grossly neglects those minorities who although Muslim still exist outside Turkishness. Additionally, the word "minority" (*azınlık*) has traditionally been perceived in a negative light (Kunnecke, 2013). This negative perception ties back to the state creation and the crafting of 'otherness' as a security issue and a threat towards the social cohesion. As such, an outward claim to a minority status, instead of assimilation towards the majority Turkishness, remains to be portrayed as a sign of betrayal. Turkishness is therefore tied to the conception of loyalty to the state in its imagination of a nation-state.

Such understanding leads one to evaluate what Smootha (2002) has proposed to be the outcome of such a conception, with the nation becoming a political extension of a state, therefore aiming to pass laws and regulations that ought to work only in the interests of the dominant group. During the early years of the Republican era, the concept of Turkishness and citizenship were tied to many discriminatory legal practices. For example, Law Nr. 1219 passed in 1928 regarded that for one to be recognized as a doctor they ought to have a Medical degree and "be Turk" (Cagaptay, 2006: 69). Although, many of the discriminatory legal practices have been updated, including the Constitution itself, the idea of Turkishness still plays a large role in the legal strata, for example, in the issue of identification cards and the use of the Anti-Terror Law, which I will explore further in the following sections on Kurds and Alevis.

## Kurds

Throughout the history of Turkey, the disjuncture between the Turkish citizenship and Turkishness have played a decisive role in the conflict with the Kurds. It is not unknown that the conflict between Kurds and the Turkish state has been very deadly and represents the only such large-scale violent conflict in the modern day Turkey. It is particularly through the long-perceived conflict that the Kurdish pseudo-citizenship status can be better noticeable as the state has used legal motives to justify harsh methods towards any outward appearance of being Kurdish. The Anti-Terror Laws (Law 3713), enacted in 1991, are one such a case. According to it, terrorism is any criminal action which among many factors also aims to "change the attributes of the Republic [...], damaging the indivisible unity of the State with its territory and nation, jeopardizing the existence of the Turkish State and the Republic, [...], damaging the internal and external security of the State [...]" (Law 3713, 1991: Art. 1). Here, therefore the protection of national security is especially prevalent and becomes troubling given the factors explored in the previous sections regarding who is and isn't considered as part of the nation. The argument of Smootha (2002) on the legality being used as a tool for the betterment of one part of the society proves to be true when exploring how this legal stratum affects political participation. The largest Kurdish political party the People's Democratic Party (HDP), has recently undergone large political changes after winning 13.12% of the total votes in the recent 2015 general elections. Currently ten HDP members, including the party's chair and co-chair, face charges of up to a life in prison, following terrorism accusations, including spreading terrorist propaganda (Yeni Safak, 2017). This shows how legal provisions can be used to prevent Kurds from political participation or obstruct the rights once they have been gained, despite their perceived equal citizenship status.

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## Alevis

Given the nature of the Turkish citizenship, according to the Constitution, it is possible to make a clear division between the Turkish citizens as rights holders due to their *mere* being, and Turks as Turkish citizens due to their Turkishness. The pseudo-citizenship status as per Yegen (2009) can be additionally used in the case of Alevis as a religious minority, and is exhibited through the question of identity cards. Since before the modern Turkish state, state identification cards have been used to prove one's citizenship status. Although religion (Muslim or non-Muslim) was always part of the identity cards due to the Ottoman *millet* system[10], it is the Population Law of 1972 in modern Turkey, which made it mandatory (Atasoy, 2011: 115). The Alevi grievances with this religious distinction are tied to two issues, which reflect the diversity of Alevi identity in Turkey. First, it is connected to the *Diyanet* not recognizing the Alevi faith in itself, which therefore is referenced through the identity cards, and second, the fact that the Sunni-Hanafi Islam is considered as the basis of Turkishness despite the supposed *laiklik* character of the state. Although, since 2006 citizens are permitted to decide whether religious affiliation should be included on their identity cards, in reality this change encounters various problems, including a lengthy bureaucratic process which requires one to submit formal petition with the aim to "correct and complete" the family record (Atasoy, 2011: 116). Such petition would therefore imply to the state that the citizen is unhappy with what has been traditionally perceived as part of their Turkishness and as such, the state itself. This has prevented many from taking these steps, as it could further marginalize Alevis in the workforce, especially state institutions. Exclusion from state institutions is already the case, since the appointments to high ranking bureaucratic posts are dictated by the ruling parties choosing who to appoint. However, due to the state marginalization the Alevi community has remained relatively poor, and underrepresented in the political sphere (Doganyilmaz, 2013). As such, any political posts for Alevi citizens are rare and further represents how citizenship status alone is by no means conducive in the participation in one's state or even being seen as part of one's nation-state.

## Conclusion

In the Republic of Turkey, Turkishness, as a social construct, created following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and used as the basis of social cohesion creation has proven to be a problematic concept for Turkish minorities. Both the largest ethnic minority the Kurds, embarking on various decades long armed and cultural conflict with the state, and the largest religious minority the Alevis, have been socially and legally marginalized within the nation-state. Built upon the ideas of Ziya Gokalp, the new Turkish state and its founder – Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, envisioned a nation-state, which would be built upon social cohesion (as such leaving behind the ethnic resistance conflicts at the end of the Ottoman Empire) and modernity. With education as the nation-building force, any one subject could become a Turk or be assimilated into being one. This founding moment has been pertinent in the conflict with both Kurds and Alevis, as the assimilation policies have traditionally been perceived as a mission *civilisatrice* or as Demir (2014) regarded, through the *Efendi* or Master identity. Being part of Turkishness and a Turk in both social and legal senses have not only been seen as the modern, non-threatening course towards the state, but also beneficial to the citizenship conception and the political rights stemming from that.

In this essay, I have demonstrated how both Kurds and Alevis have socially been portrayed not only as 'others', but additionally as backwards. Furthermore, in the case of Alevis, despite the state being built upon the principles of secularization, Sunni-Islam became to be associated with state morality leading the perception of Alevis as 'immoral'. It is visible that the concept of Turkishness plays a large role in the relations between the Turkish state and its minorities, and is manifested in both the social and legal dimensions, therefore indicating a very in-depth social incoherence. The minorities, although perceived as citizens, unless assimilated and accepting of Turkishness are seen as pseudo-citizens (Yegen, 2009) in need of saving, or even worse, as a threat to the very existence of the state and its interests, memories and symbols. Any further research could additionally benefit from looking more in-depth on the political, economic and social relations *within* the minority groups themselves. Both Kurds and Alevis cannot be seen as a homogeneous unit, however, due to the scope of the paper this was not addressed in full detail.

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## Footnotes

[1] The name Mustafa Kemal took for himself, meaning "the Father of Turks".

[2] Turkish: Secularism

[3] Turkish: Master Identity

[4] The Ottoman Empire embraced its multi-ethnicity through the *millet* system which organized the population into communities based on their religious membership, which was then ought to be ruled by the religious leader (Barkey & Gavrillis, 2016).

[5] Following the 1980 military coup social re-imagination occurred, as the military regime, in order to "protect" the state from the socialist movements, began promoting state approved "Turkish Islam" meaning Sunni Islam from the Hanafi School (Atasoy 2011; Tekdemir 2017).

[6] "A doctrine that combines Turkish nationalism and Sunni Islam" (Tarhanli in Kocan & Oncu, 2004: 477).

[7] Even as recently as 2006, the *Diyanet*'s official publication states that it advocates for a correct form of religion which is ought to be purified of any superstitions to serve the modernization of the Turkish nation (Atasoy, 2011: 108).

[8] The Alevis have been violently targeted in Kahramanmaras (1978), Corum (1980), Sivas (1993) and Gazi (1995) (Tekdemir, 2017: 4).

[9] The wording in the subsequent 1961 and 1982 Constitutions have since been altered, but both still use inconsistent terminology. The 1982 Constitution, which is also the last, for example, uses the words "citizens", "Turkish citizens" and "every Turk" interchangeably. (Yegen, 2009: 608).

[10] See footnote Nr. 4 on page 4.

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