

Tradition, Secularization, And Religion: Neo-Islamization in the Composition of Turkish Nationalism

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Abstract: This study focuses on the relationship between Turkish nationalism and religion by considering the key role of religion in comprehending the pre-modern foundations of nationalism. The nationalism that emerged in the late Ottoman Empire had an eclectic relationship with Islam and was theoretically and politically religious in nature. With the establishment of the modern state, the relationship between religion and nationalism was interrupted, and Kemalist nationalism with its Western ethno-secular conception of identity represented a new typology within Turkish nationalism. This situation continued until the beginning of the Cold War, and the political, economic, and sociological changes necessitated the reunification of religion and nationalism, which politically reflected upon the establishment and socialization of the Nationalist Movement Party. Today, the understanding of nationalism the Nationalist Movement Party represented has become more Islamized, and the present study uses the theory adaptation approach to analyze this situation through the issues of Palestine and Hagia Sophia. The implications demonstrate the currently increasing Islamization of nationalism to be influenced by Islamic notions within the national identity, pragmatism, changes in the official ideology of the state, and the rising tide of the right worldwide that has led to an increase in the intensity of Turkish-Islamic nationalism.

Keywords: Nationalism, Religion, Islam, Hagia Sophia, Palestine, Nationalist Movement Party, Turkish-Islamic ideal

Öz: Bu çalışma, milliyetçiliğin modern öncesi temellerini anlamada dinin kilit rolünü göz önünde bulundurarak Türk milliyetçiliği ve din arasındaki ilişkiye odaklanmaktadır. Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun son dönemlerinde ortaya çıkan milliyetçilik, İslam ile eklektik bir ilişkiye sahipti ve teorik ve siyasi olarak dini nitelikteydi. Modern devletin kurulmasıyla birlikte din ve milliyetçilik arasındaki ilişki kesintiye uğramış ve Kemalist milliyetçilik, Batılı etnoseküler kimlik anlayışıyla Türk milliyetçiliği içinde yeni bir tipolojiyi temsil etmiştir. Bu durum Soğuk Savaş'ın başlangıcına kadar devam etmiş, siyasi, ekonomik ve sosyolojik değişimler din ve milliyetçiliğin yeniden birleşmesini zorunlu kılmış, bu durum da siyasi olarak Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi'nin kuruluşuna ve toplumsallaşmasına yansımıştır. Günümüzde Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi'nin temsil ettiği milliyetçilik anlayışı daha fazla İslamileşmiştir ve bu çalışmada bu durum Filistin ve Ayasofya meseleleri üzerinden kuram uyarlama yaklaşımı ile analiz edilmiştir. Sonuçlar, günümüzde milliyetçiliğin giderek İslamlaşmasının, milli kimlik içindeki İslami kavramlardan, pragmatizmden, devletin resmi ideolojisindeki değişimlerden ve Türk-İslam milliyetçiliğinin yoğunluğunun artmasına neden olan dünya çapında yükselen sağ dalgadan etkilendiğini göstermiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Milliyetçilik, Din, İslam, Ayasofya, Filistin, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, Türk-İslam Sentezi.

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Introduction

Although nationalism had emerged as a modern intellectual movement resulting from the French Revolution, its historical foundations can be traced back to early modern Europe when the idea of the secularization and limitation of political power became widespread. After the rivalry between the Church and kings ended in favor of the kings, the idea that the arbitrary rule of the increasingly powerful absolute monarchies should be ended and that power should be shared brought about the emergence of nationalism as a modern ideology with the French Revolution. Nationalism has been accepted as the main principle of political legitimacy since the 19th century and is considered as a doctrine and ideology in which people are united by solidarity, fate, and common political aspirations (Gat & Yakobson, 2013, p. 37). Breuille (1993, p. 3) viewed nationalism as a political ideology and described the main goal of this ideology as the acquisition of state power and its legitimization through nationalist arguments that are shaped around the phenomenon of a nation. This means that nations have the highest value and are endowed with sovereign power. Therefore, the phenomenon of nations is a key concept in understanding nationalism. According to Grosby (2005, p. 7), a nation is “an innate territorial community.” However, the concept of nations consists of many other factors, of which religion is in the forefront.

One can argue religion to be the concept with which nationalism has had the most complex relationship since its emergence as a political ideology. Nationalism's ties with the French and Industrial Revolutions, capitalism, and Enlightenment thought caused it to maintain a confrontational relationship with religion initially. Hayes (1995) argued nationalism to be the religion of modernity, while Schulze (2005, p. 155) stated nationalism to differ from religion in that nationalism is the worldly faith of the Industrial Revolution and creates modern states. Nonetheless, the conflict seen in the relationship between nationalism and religion in the early days later turned into eclecticism. This relationship can be observed within nationalist movements (Öğün, 2000, pp. 88–89). In the past, many religious institutions were the driving forces of nationalism. In some places such as the Armenian and Georgian Church, and the Muslim communities in Pakistan and Punjab nationalism was born from the conflict between two rival religions, while in others such as Sri Lanka and Ireland, nationalism was fueled by it. The nationalist attitude of the Church in its struggle against Russian communism should also be underlined in countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary (Kellas, 1998, p. 34). For Gat and Yakobson (2013, pp. 20–24, 35), far from religion being at odds with national and traditional thought, it is one of its strongest supporters. The most fundamental elements of national identity and solidarity are religion and language, which were the basic criteria

of the pre-modern national community. More precisely, religious identity does not overpower ethno-national identity but instead strongly supports national cohesion through the religious community, thus fully harmonizing with it. Ultimately, as the place of religion rises in the phenomenon of ethnicity, which is defined as culture and kinship ties, its importance also rises. According to Baron (2007), who stated religion to have been replaced by nationalism through modernity in the relations between people, nations have been connected to each other only by religious ties for a significant part of world history, and the trinity of religion, nationality, and state has been seen since ancient times.

This study uses the theory adaptation approach (Jaakkola, 2020) with the aim of exploring the evolving fractions between the two critical phenomena (i.e., religion and nationalism) by considering the ongoing live connection between religion and nationalism. The main function of the theory adaptation method is to “problematize an existing theory or concept and resolving identified dilemmas,... expand the application domain of an existing theory or concept,... [and] revise current understanding... [with the aim of] identifying new dimensions of an established construct by introducing a new theoretical lens” (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 22). More precisely, theory adaptation studies examine the process of differentiating a theory with universal implications under varying contexts and conditions. In other words, the main aim of theory adaptation studies is to explore the variability of theories in specific contexts in light of their universal dimensions. The present research mainly discusses the basic theory in the context of the phenomenon of nationalism and in light of the current debates on the opening of Hagia Sophia and the Palestinian issues, thus attempting to shed light on the Islamization processes in Turkish nationalism.

Put more clearly, the hypothesis of this study is determined as follows: Today’s mainstream Turkish nationalism has become Islamized again since the 1970s. In this context, a historical reading of Turkish nationalism needs to be made because this ideology, which began to take shape in the last quarter century of the Ottoman Empire, initially had a religious character. After the collapse of the Empire, the newly established state’s understanding of nationalism, similar to its counterparts in the Western world, had gained a secular character. This was also accepted as the official ideology of the state (i.e., Kemalism), with Atatürk and the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* [CHP]) becoming its main actors. However, with the beginning of the Cold War and the context of where Türkiye was positioned, changes occurred in its official ideology, nationalism, and actors. As a result of the divisions experienced within Kemalism (right and left Kemalisms), the ideological transformation of the CHP (left of center) and the rise of reactions within the right wing against the rise in communism, the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi*

Hareket Partisi [MHP]), and its charismatic leader Alparslan Türkeş became the new actors of nationalism. The MHP's adoption of Turkish-Islamic ideals and becoming a key party in Turkish politics made it the representative of mainstream Turkish nationalism. The present study discusses the issue of the current re-Islamization of nationalism by comparing it with the 1970s through two case studies: the Hagia Sophia and the Palestine issue. The main reason why the study does not include the 1980s when the party was closed, the 1990s, or the 2000s in its scope is that MHP had adopted a more secular approach during those periods. In other words, between 1980-2015, MHP had a more secular nature and did not adopt a dominant policy in terms of Islamization. Therefore, when considering the main objective of the research, the study has excluded this period from its scope and determined the research dataset accordingly. In fact, nationalism does not have just one character or actor in Türkiye, nor has MHP experienced very sharp changes apart from the first period in the 1970s. Nevertheless, examining and analyzing the changes Turkish nationalism experienced is necessary in the context of the two case studies mentioned after the first period of 2000s.

Religion and Nationalism in the Biographical Story of Turkish Nationalism

Comprehending Turkish nationalism's general characteristics is necessary for analyzing the association between nationalism and religion. Turkish nationalism has three main characteristics: (i) It is a state-based ideology, (ii) it emerged in a late period, and (iii) it has a reactionary character (Bölükbaşı, 2020). In the history of Turkish thought, nationalism is a product of modernization. The mission of keeping the state alive during the disintegration of the empire was based on the fact that the subject of Turkish modernization should be the state phenomenon (Bora, 2017, pp. 32–36). In this framework, Turkism, which can be described as the third answer to the question of how to keep the crumbling Empire afloat, was born as a state-based ideology (Köseoğlu, 2009, p. 209) under the leadership of the military and civil bureaucracy. Connectedly, an element of sociological conflict in the relationship between religion and nationalism can be highlighted. The military and civilian bureaucrats were the executors of the Ottoman-Turkish modernization, and the fact that they had graduated from schools that provided a Western-style education shaped by a positivist understanding impacted the secular nature of this process. Additionally, they forced the traditional Ottoman political and social structure to change, which caused the conflict with the ulema and Ottoman elites to surface over religion and nationalism.

State identity also constitutes a function that brings religion and nationalism together in an ideological context. The state's approach to religion (i.e., *Din-ü Devlet*) was the traditional Ottoman idea that emphasized protecting the state to mean protecting religion (Bora, 2017, p. 32). In this context, the Tanzimat reforms, which are considered the deadline of Ottoman-Turkish modernization, were put into effect. In addition to administrative, financial, and legal regulations, these reforms produced approaches to identity. Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism approaches were adopted in order to stop the disintegration of the state by creating an upper identity. Ottomanism, which had been the dominant ideological paradigm starting with the Tanzimat reforms in 1839 until 1913, was shaped by the ideas of a territorial nationalism and Ottoman patriotism inspired by the French type of civil nation and nationalism (Bora, 2017, p. 56). The idea of Ottomanism marked both a rupture and a continuity in terms of the relationship between Islam and nationalism. The continuation of the institutionalized Ottoman order was a parameter of continuity, but the idea of abandoning the millet system based on a religious-sectarian distinction and moving toward equal citizenship symbolized a rupture. This situation led to a conflict between religion and nationalism. The second approach was Islamism, which had been in conflict with nationalism in terms of its desire for the continuation of the sociology of the ummah over the idea of a nation. However, Islamism's reflex of religionizing nationalism and inevitably embracing the developing nation-state model dates back to the Second Constitutional Era (Duran, 2021, p. 135). Meanwhile, the attempt to create a super-identity by referring to Turkish sovereignty can be considered the common characteristics of religion and nationalism, just as in the politics of Ottomanism.

The third fundamental characteristic of Turkish nationalism is its reactionary character. The defeats against Western countries; the uprisings of the Christian elements living in the Balkans and their independence; the loss of Crimea, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East; and the massacres of the Turks living in these regions led to the development of Turkish nationalism in a reactionary context. The wars and migrations that happened have occupied a critically important place in how Turkish nationalism gained a reactionary character. According to Çağaptay (2006, pp. 8–9), thanks to those who migrated to Anatolia as a result of the wars and defeats, this region became religiously and culturally homogenized and formed the sociological structure on which Turkish nationalism would be built. The Armenian deportation that was carried out during the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) period, and the Turkish-Greek exchange, which was one of the first acts of the Republic, should also be added to this. At the same time, Turks should be noted to have been introduced to nationalism through immigrants. Russian Turks had

an important influence in this regard. Among the intellectuals who came to the Ottoman Empire from Russia, Yusuf Akçura is the most crucial name. In his work titled *Üç Tarzı Siyaset* [Three Ways of Politics], Turkism was seen to be articulated as a political option for the first time. Stating that a unity to be established among Turks based on language and culture has many benefits, Akçura (1976, pp. 19–24) had made no clear preference between Islamism and Turkism at the end of his work.

The most important actor in understanding Ottoman Turkism is Ziya Gökalp, but Namik Kemal should also be underscored, because he was the most important representative of Neo-Ottomanism, which criticized the Tanzimat reforms and sought for modernization to be carried out on an Islamic basis. The concepts he used in his works (e.g., state, homeland, nation) opened the door to the idea of a nation and the modern state, and in Bora's (2017, p. 25) words, "The pathos attributed to religious *asabiyya* was replaced by nationalism." On the other hand, Ziya Gökalp theorized Ottoman Turkism and shaped the basic approaches and mental world of traditional-conservative nationalism. As a prominent figure of the CUP, Gökalp constructed his ideas under the influence of Durkheim's sociology and put forward Turkism through his two works, *Principles of Turkism* and *Turkism, Islamism, and Modernism*. According to him, a nation is a community of individuals who share a common religion, morality, education, and tradition, and religion and language are the basic criteria for being a nation (Gökalp, 2004, pp. 18–23). Unlike Akçura, Gökalp (1976, pp. 58–59) also asserted that conflicting identities are complementary elements, emphasizing, "I belong to the Turkish nation, the Islamic ummah, and Western civilization." Gökalp became the founding actor of a culture-based nationalism through the link he established among the phenomena of religion, nation, and nationalism.

Political actors should also be underscored and explained regarding the construction of Turkish nationalism in the Ottoman Empire. Since 1913, the CUP, which had consolidated its power, had been the most important actor in the politicization of Turkish nationalism. The CUP, which used Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism policies until the Balkan Wars, fully gained power after this date and implemented Turkism as a political program. This period, which was essentially the abandonment of Ottomanism, should also be underlined as the time when nationalism occurred in a way that would form the foundations of the modern state without making a sharp separation from Islamism. However, World War I prepared the end of the Ottoman Empire, and nationalism, which had acted as the ideology of the war period, transformed and became effective in the post-war period. During this process, Islam was used as a component of social consolidation and nationalism (Findley, 2010, pp. 201–220). Nonetheless, this situation would undergo a radical change with the establishment of the new state. As the first modern nation-state

in Turkish history, Türkiye also represented a new phase in Turkish modernization. The ideological infrastructure of this period was Kemalism, which is often used interchangeably with Kemalist nationalism, and it was seen to involve a nation-state formation, secular-Western society building, and territorial nationalism. However, Kemalist nationalism severed the link that was seen between religion and nationalism in Ottoman Turkism and turned toward the construction of an ethno-secular identity through the reforms in the 1930s. This would also lead to the emergence of different typologies within Turkish nationalism, and the Kemalist nationalism that had marked the early Republican period would be differentiated by its ethno-secular identity design and its emphasis on pre-Islamic history. Although Kemalism was influenced by civil and ethnic nationalism in terms of national identity, it should also be noted to have not included the element of religion. Nevertheless, the religion-state relationship, being one of the most debated issues in Turkish political history, is important for the nature of the study. The Republican revolutions that corresponded to a radical rupture in Turkish modernization had transformed the religion-state relationship, attempted to nationalize religion by removing it from the public sphere, and sought to construct a smooth Sunni Islam under the control of the state. Therefore, challenges may be had in arguing that religion-state affairs were separated in the early Republican period. Moreover, even though the continued existence of religion as the main criterion for loyalty to the state and the state's attempt to nationalize religion (Çelik, 2019, pp. 84–87) have been described as attempts to reduce or weaken the relationship between nationalism and religion, religion continued to maintain its sociopolitical importance.

The Turkism-Turanism approach is another nationalism approach that needs to be analyzed in terms of the relationship between religion and nationalism in the early Republican period. This typology of nationalism was not an ideology developed and used by the state apparatus as Kemalist nationalism had but was instead fed by a civilian source and developed with a critical attitude towards the official ideology. Turkist-Turanist nationalism differed from Kemalist nationalism with its understanding of ethno-Turkism, Turanist foreign policy, and militarist emphasis. On the issue of religion, the Turkist-Turanists did not differ much from the official ideology and maintained their understanding of secularism and secular society. However, the Turkist-Turanists prepared the groundwork for reestablishing the relationship between religion and nationalism, which had been weakened by the official ideology. The romantic ties that thinkers within this group, who were known as the Turkists of the Republican period, had established with the Ottoman Turkists and their recirculation of Ottoman history within the framework of their criticism of Kemalist nationalism's understanding of history (Bölükbaşı, 2018, pp.

55–56) created the necessary channel for developing a religion-based nationalism. Nonetheless, the construction of such a nationalism would require the official ideology to marginalize Turkist-Turanism through the Racism-Turanism trial in 1944 and the beginning of the Cold War.

The Meeting of Turkish Nationalism with Islam: Turkish-Islamic Synthesis and the Nationalist Movement Party

The understanding of how to control the sociopolitical functions of religion and substitute them with nationalism that was seen in the early years of the Turkish nation-state had been carried out within the framework of a radical secularization program. In this way, Islam had been removed from the public sphere, and the new secular order would provide the solidarity and social cohesion that religion had fulfilled in the Ottoman Empire. However, secular nationalism was realized over time to be unable to function as a substitute for religion and to be ineffective at gaining society's loyalty. In this framework, leaders and intellectuals circulated religious approaches to appeal to the emotions of society and to optimize the nation-building process. Eventually, the secular approach was replaced by a sacred synthesis of religion and nationalism. The political developments after World War II played a major role in the implementation of this approach. Political conflict and fragmentation following the transition to multi-party life and an increasingly pluralistic public sphere, the rise of communism, and ethnicist demands led to the emergence of anarchy and brought the state to the brink of disintegration. In this process, religion was instrumentalized in a context compatible with nationalism in order to ensure social cohesion and combat these problems (Grigoriadis, 2013, pp. 92–97). The main issue during the Cold War was the emergence of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. This synthesis was constructed in the 1950s using Peyami Safa's East-West synthesis alongside Osman Turan, Mümtaz Turhan, Nurettin Topçu, and Necip Fazıl's views; this movement was supported by the various associations, youth organizations, and political parties that were established in the 1960s and 1970s and became the official ideology of the state in the early 1980s (Akgün & Çalıř, 2009, p. 346). During this time, the demand for a common ground between religion and nationalism against the irreligious Turkism in Anatolia (i.e., the positivism of Kemalist nationalism and Turanism's abstract concept of homeland) gave birth to conservative nationalism (Ayvazođlu, 2009, p. 569).

The liberalization process in Türkiye started under the CHP government as part of the efforts to join the Western alliance due to the Soviet threat after World War II. It gained momentum with the Democrat Party (DP) government and the 1961 Constitution, which allowed freedom of association after the coup on May 27,

1960. This period also reenergized the Turkist-nationalist circles, which had been marginalized after the 1944 Racism-Turanism trial. Turkish nationalism, which had been the ideology of a small intelligentsia group and was unable to find the opportunity to spread, started being organized in cities and provinces via non-governmental organizations such as the Association for Combating Communism, the Nationalists Association, and the Union of Turkish Nationalists. Since the 1960s in particular as a result of the right-left divergence within these organizations and the strengthening of communism, religion reached a strong influence on society (Poulton, 1997, pp. 136–139). However, this influence would be observed at the end of the 1960s in the political sphere in which the politicization of Turkish nationalism took place. At this point, shedding light on the transformation the MHP underwent would be appropriate. As the head of the MHP, Türkeş replaced the Atsızizm understanding of nationalism with a religious-based nationalism, which helped stop the rise in communism from becoming widespread. In this vein, the Turkist group known as the *Bozkurtçular* [Grey Wolves], namely Atsız and his followers, were liquidated at the Adana Congress. Türkeş, who considered Turkishness and Islam as inseparable components of national identity,¹ updated the *Dokuz Işık* [Nine Lights], the manifesto on nationalism, because it had had no previous emphasis on Islam. In addition, Grey Wolves Organizations were established with the logo of the Grey Wolf within the crescent moon. While this development symbolized the traces of the Turkist-Turanist approach in the Party, it also showed the impact of Islam on the party (Poulton, 1997, pp. 155–158).

The MHP should also be viewed as a laboratory for Turkish nationalism. In conjunction with Turkist-Turanism and Atatürk's nationalism, which reflect the ethnicist and civilian parts of Turkish nationalism, Islamization added an ethno-religious dimension to the party's ideology. Aside from that, a brief parenthesis should be included for Alparslan Türkeş, who was tried in the 1944 Racism-Turanism trial and was the great colonel of the 1960 coup. In addition, Türkeş was raised in the armed forces where the official ideology had been produced (Cizre, 2009, p. 135). He also had Turkist beliefs, which naturally demonstrated his secular side. In fact, Bora (1995, pp. 289–291) determined the MHP, which led the rise of nationalism with PKK terrorism and the independence of Turkic countries since the 1990s, had reverted to racist-Turkism. This was accomplished through the control of cadres fighting against terrorism, politics based on the awareness of the state's survival, and the expulsion of extremist Islamic forces from the party. Although Bora was

1 "Turkishness is our body, Islam is our soul. A body without a soul is a corpse." (www.mhp.org.tr)

anachronistic and viewed the MHP as racist, noting that the MHP had adopted a more secular concept of Turkism in response to the emergence of political Islam and ethnic terrorism in the 1990s is crucial. Moreover, Türkeş's assertions arguing that Turkish nationalism did not seek to propagate Islam or unite Muslims and that Turks would not be portrayed as the sword of Islam² might be interpreted as a result of his state-centered politics, pragmatism, and conjunctural developments.

To understand the ideological transformation in the MHP and to draw the general framework of Turkish nationalism, one needs to understand *Yeni Ufuklara Doğru* [Towards New Horizons], which Alparslan Türkeş wrote in the relevant period. In this work, Türkeş argued that the Turkish nation must become stronger to return to the glorious days of the past and to fight against the threat of communism. Referring to religion, he viewed one of the four aspects needed for this, "having a high, strong spiritual belief and strong morality" to be essential. Türkeş's criticism of Turkish modernization through intellectuals and secularization can be read as the religionization of nationalism. Nevertheless, the Nine Lights, which is seen as a national doctrine, is said to have two main sources: Turkishness and Islam. Emphasizing the civilizational circle of Turks as Turkish-Islamic civilization in an ethnocentric context and making historical references within this framework are also valuable in this respect. No specific principle related to religion is found in the Nine Lights. However, to understand the party's ideology and emphasis on Islam, the principles of nationalism, idealism, and moralism need to be analyzed. The principle of nationalism is stated as loving the Turkish nation and working toward its interests, while Turkishness is defined by the concepts of consciousness and loyalty. Idealism aims at raising the Turkish nation and comes out based on the *Kızıl Elma* [Red Apple], the mythological ideal of the Turks. Regarding moralism, Turkish tradition and Islam constitute the moral structure of the Turkish nation, which is important for highlighting the traditional-cultural impact of religion and its place in the ideological context (Türkeş, 1974, pp. 8–20).

The influence of intellectuals was also evident in the reunion of Turkish nationalism with Islam in the Cold War conjuncture. During the Cold War in particular, some media organs and the intellectuals who took part in the right-wing politics in the struggle against communism had a significant impact on the religionization of nationalism, which even contributed to the MHP's ideological change. Although many Turkist journals were published in this period, *Serdengeçti* and *Büyük Doğu* in

2 For more information: Alparslan Türkeş: Başbuğ Siyaseti. 32nd Gün Documentary, 1992, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cN0emLBJ220>.

particular attached special importance to religion in the composition of nationalism. Published by Osman Yüksel, *Serdengeçti* was a great success in its day and built the mental codes of the Turkish right. As stated in the first issue of the journal, they positioned themselves at the center of Turkish-Islamic nationalism with the phrase “We are as Turkish as the Tian Shen (Tanrı) Mountains and as Muslim as Mount Hira” (*Serdengeçti*, 1949, p. 3). This phrase is the motto of the journal and has defined the Turkish-Islamic idealists from the beginning of the Cold War until today. The *Büyük Doğu* journal, published by Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, should also be emphasized. Many examples (e.g., Kısakürek’s emphasis on a fascist state based on Islamic foundations in his series of articles titled “*İdeolocya Örgüsü*” placed Turks at the center of Islamic civilization using the figure of the grey wolf; his approach was that “A Turk is a Turk only after becoming a Muslim”) can be underscored concerning Kısakürek’s crucial role in forming the rhetorical and intellectual foundations of the Turkish right on the intersection of nationalism, Islamism, and conservatism (Duran, 2021, pp. 130–151). Kısakürek’s involvement in the MHP and his relationship with Türkeş should also be noted.

Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi was the grandson of a Naqshbandi sheikh of prophetic lineage and was the most important theoretician of the concept of the Turkish-Islamic ideal, which is the theoretical reflection of Islamic-based nationalism. Stating Turkishness and Islam to be complementary concepts, Arvasi (1998, pp. 8, 118–122) explained how the combination of the two should be expressed not as a synthesis but as an ideal, and he made a sociological definition of Turkishness on the basis of religion with the concept of social race. Finally, attention needs to be critically directed toward Erol Güngör. In addition to his organic ties with the MHP, his friendship with Dündar Taşer, and being a student of Mümtaz Turhan who’d continued the Ziya Gökalp tradition, what sets him apart was his approach to Turkish nationalism based on civilization, national culture, and history. Güngör (1975, p. 108) criticized the Turkish history thesis and Kemalist modernization; according to him, nationalism makes “national culture itself a source of civilization.” In short, Güngör viewed the Turkish nation to be within Islamic civilization. The discourse on civilization and the conservative themes were important in shaping both the neo-liberal conservative nationalism of center-right politics based on a service approach and the nationalist rhetoric of Islamist thought based on the understanding of Türkiye as the leading country within Islamic civilization (Bora, 1995, pp. 124–126). This showed the power of the conservative nationalist approach in shaping the world of ideas from among the ideologies that make up the Turkish right.

The Neo-Islamic Period in Turkish Nationalism: The People's Alliance

The People's Alliance refers to a political bloc between the MHP and the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) that started after the 2015 attempted coup on July 15 and that was shaped around the discourse of survival (*beka*). This alliance, which covers the 2017 Constitutional Referendum and the 2018 and 2023 General Elections and Presidential Elections, as well as the 2019 and 2024 Municipal Elections, has brought about significant transformations in Turkish political life. In fact, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, who had harshly opposed the AK Party since the early years of its rule and criticized its expansionist policies, was instrumental alongside President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in shaping this alliance after the attempted coup. Briefly touching upon the evolution of the MHP in the period leading up to the formation of this political bloc is essential. After its transformation, the MHP became one of the important parties of Turkish political life in the 1970s and took its place in Parliament by increasing its votes after every election. It was also a key party in the Nationalist Front (*Milliyetçi Cephe*) governments. The party was shut down with the 1980 Coup on September 12 but reentered politics in 1987 under the name of the Nationalist Workers Party (*Milliyetçi Çalışma Partisi* [MÇP]). With the return of Alparslan Türkeş, whose political ban had been lifted, a recovery period was initiated and MÇP took up its old name again. The MHP, which could not pass the threshold in the elections held in the 1990s, the only exception being the 1991 General Elections when it entered alongside the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi* [RP]), continued to be the strongest representative of Turkish nationalism in the political arena due to the rise of PKK terror and the independence of the countries of the Turkish world. During the same period, Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, who claimed that the party had moved away from its traditional codes, left and founded the Grand Unity Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi* [BBP]). Devlet Bahçeli was elected as the Chairman instead of Alparslan Türkeş, who passed away in 1997. Subsequently, the MHP received 18% of the votes in the 1999 General Elections, the highest vote rate in its political history, and became a governmental partner. Early elections were held after the economic crisis in the early 2000s, but the party failed to pass the threshold in 2002. After this, the MHP acted alongside the nationalists and criticized many of the ruling party's policies, especially the Kurdish Opening, the Cyprus issue, and relations with the Gülenists who would later become the FETO terrorist organization. The 2000s saw three main categories of Turkish nationalism: radical Turkism, neo-liberal conservatism, and Kemalist-nationalism (Uzunçayır, 2013, p. 204), and the MHP stood between the first and third typologies. Nationalism, which includes nation-statist, isolationist, anti-imperialist, and militarist approaches against the democratization and European Union-oriented policies of the early AK Party government (Grigoriadis & Özer,

2010, pp. 111–112), actually became the basic characteristic element of Turkish nationalism until the July 15, 2015 coup attempt. The MHP, which was in Parliament in 2007, 2011, and 2015, gained public appreciation for its effective opposition. After the attempted coup and the developments that followed, the MHP put aside its 13 years of policies and formed a common bloc with the government. While this process reshaped Turkish nationalism with Islamic concepts in the rhetorical and symbolic context, Islamist conservatism also started to adopt Turkist-nationalist concepts. This cycle can be read through two current events: The Palestinian issue and the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a place of worship.

A Change in the Nationalism-Islam Relationship: The Palestinian Question

The Palestine issue constitutes the first example of the Islamization phenomenon with regard to understanding MHP nationalism, the representative of mainstream Turkish nationalism. The issue of Palestine, which is a cause for Islamists, does not mean the same thing for nationalists, as the Turkish world and captive Turks have been given more emphasis from the past to the present. However, this situation is seen to have transformed with the change of discourse in the MHP after the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*). The first sign of this change could be detected in the “Curse on Oppression, Support for Jerusalem” rally held in Yenikapı in May 2018 with the People's Alliance partners after the US embassy moved to Jerusalem. In his speech there, MHP leader Bahçeli criticized Zionism, Netanyahu, Trump, and the Islamic states that did not speak out against this oppression. Bahçeli also emphasized the oppression of the Palestinian people and the importance of Jerusalem for Islam. Reciting verses from Mehmet Akif İnan and Sezai Karakoç, Bahçeli (2018) asserted, “Jerusalem bears the traces of Turkishness, and the Turks who resisted the Crusaders in the past can do the same today. Israel is murderous and a terrorist.” Furthermore, another speech he made in the recent past occupies an important place in showing the position of the Palestinian issue for Turkish nationalists. Harshly criticizing the operations launched in Gaza and the West Bank, Bahçeli argued that the real aim was to realize the Greater Israel Project. Bahçeli also stated, “Netanyahu will be tried for war crimes like Milosevic and Ratko Mladic, and those who criticize Türkiye's support for Hamas are in essence supporters of PKK, PYD, YPG, and FETO” (*BengüTürk*, 2023). Underlining how Hamas is defending Palestine, Bahçeli noted, “Palestine can be defended by volunteer Jerusalem Grey Wolves if necessary” (*BengüTürk*, 2023). Apart from these, the MHP program titled “*Milli Yükseliş İradesi*” [National Will for Advancement] and published in 2024 included the Palestinian issue for the first time. This program emphasized how Al-Aqsa Mosque is a red line, how Israeli

oppression in the region should end, and how MHP supports a two-state solution by returning to the 1967 borders (MHP Party Program, 2024, p. 162).

This sensitivity seen in the MHP approach to the Palestinian issue today essentially expresses a change. To understand this change, a comparison needs to be made with the period when the Turkish-Islamic ideal was formed. First, the Nine Lights Doctrine, which describes the ideological framework of the party at that time and was stated in Alparslan Türkeş's *Yeni Ufuklara Doğru* [Towards New Horizons], does not include any thoughts on this issue. The doctrine formulated the issue of captive Turks as one of the two components of nationalism. Accordingly, the doctrine envisaged the conceptualization of the Red Apple, which symbolizes idealism in ethnocentric terms, and the phenomenon of the rescue of captive Turks (Türkeş, 1974, pp. 19–20). In other words, the political approach of the Turkish-Islamic ideal towards foreign policy has a vision of the Turkic world more than of the Islamic world. Hence, the issue of Turks living in the Soviet Union was kept alive on the axis of Turan. The 1969 MHP Election Declaration (1969, pp. 5–6) gave the Soviets and China wide coverage and emphasized how Turks were enslaved in these regions through policies such as “Slavic and yellow race chauvinism” and how they faced various problems. However, the 1977 MHP Election Declaration (1977, p. 51) limited the problem defined as cognates and foreign Turks to Bulgaria, Western Thrace, and Kirkuk. As can be seen, Turkish nationalism acted with a realpolitik attitude in terms of foreign policy. Regarding the Palestinian issue, the fact that Türkeş's statement regarding the 1967 Six-Day War (*Milliyet*, 1967) when the CKMP (Republican Peasants Nation Party [Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi]) had not yet transformed into the MHP stated that Türkiye should support the Arabs is significant. Another important example is that the MHP, alongside the CHP, supported the National Salvation Party's (*Milli Selamet Partisi* [MSP]) censure of Foreign Minister Hayrettin Erkmek for not reacting sufficiently to Israel after Israel declared Jerusalem as its capital in 1980 (Özcan, 2005, p. 50). In fact, for the first time during this period, the Islamic world was on the MHP agenda, and the need to improve relations with Islamic states through common religious, cultural, and fraternal ties was emphasized (MSP Election Declaration, 1977, p. 51). The reason for the rupture at this point should not be difficult to guess. Since 1964, the foreign policy course was turned toward the Middle East due to the lack of support from the Western Alliance as a result of the Cyprus Problem. After the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, this support became more necessary. The conjunctural changes in the 1990s were reflected in MHP policies. Accordingly, the détente that started with the Arab-Israeli peace talks, the conflicts in Türkiye's neighboring geography, and the rise of PKK terrorism led to the strengthening of the “security-ist” paradigm in foreign policy. In 1992, Türkeş, who'd participated in a program organized by the 500th Year

Foundation, claimed that he considered Jews as close allies. As a matter of fact, the same was also true for the Jews. This approach by the MHP leader was subjected to harsh criticism by the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi* [RP]) and the Grand Unity Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi* [BBP]), but the support of Israel and the USA was considered essential for Türkiye to get out of its situation (Bali, 1997, pp. 51–52). Likewise, Türkeş reported in one of his speeches that the nationalist movement did not have a problem with the Palestinian issue.³ Türkeş, who was friends with Jak Kamhi, a businessman of Jewish origin (Ojalvo, 2020), can also be highlighted for having a national interest-based approach in domestic and foreign policy in the 1990s. Finally, although the fact that he did not mention the Palestinian issue in any of his speeches in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye may seem like a paradox in the 1970s and 1990s,⁴ Türkeş was consistent in terms of realpolitik and was understood to have taken an attitude similar to the official ideology on this issue.

Besides the view of the MHP, which was a political actor in the period when the Turkish-Islamic ideal was shaped, the approaches of important thinkers of the period are also important to include. Atsız, who was opposed to the concept of the Turkish-Islamic ideal despite his many writings on this issue, was known to have been a real antisemite. Furthermore, apart from his antisemitic views, his perceptions toward the Palestinian problem in the 1960s and 1970s needs to be underlined. He articulated in his article “Proposal to Save the Arabs” that Türkiye should unite with Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan under the roof of a confederation and eliminate the danger Israel posed in the region (Atsız, 1992, pp. 215–217). In the article “Ringleader in the Middle East: Israel” published in the *Serdengeçti* journal, Osman Yüksel (1957, p. 13) also suggested that Israel should be abolished, that Jews should be deported to the island of Madagascar, and that all Muslim states from the Atlantic to Indonesia should unite to solve this problem. Meanwhile, Arvasi (1998, pp. 383–384) drew attention to the dangers of Zionism, which represents the dominance of Jews on earth, and thought that Zionism can be defeated by raising national-spiritual values. Güngör (1975, pp. 247–251) argued that Türkiye is a Middle Eastern state and should revise its foreign policy under this framework. According to him, after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, Western imperial powers weakened the Arab states politically and economically by establishing Israel in the region, while Türkiye adopted the wrong attitude by moving away from the circle of (Islamic) civilization. What needs to be done for the Arab states, Iran, and Türkiye is to provide solidarity in the region and come together to solve this problem. The

3 The related speech can be accessed from the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XOLhUznB5M>.

4 For more information: Uğur, 2009.

threat of Zionism and Israel, which were addressed in the writings and journals of Turkish-Islamic idealists apart from Atsız, were not reflected in the MHP's foreign policy vision in this period. Instead, the traces of Atsız Turanism and the foreign policy vision of the official ideology were more effective.

A Symbolic Stop in the Nationalism-Islam Relationship: Hagia Sophia

One of the symbolic concepts that should be emphasized in the context of the relationship between Turkish nationalism and religion is Hagia Sophia. Converted to a museum in 1934, Hagia Sophia was an issue that had been fought and discussed by the components of the Turkish right for its conversion into a mosque with the transition to multi-party life. This goal was achieved 86 years later, with Hagia Sophia having become a place of worship again. The MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli lit the fuse to this transformation, and after his proposal, President Erdoğan transferred Hagia Sophia to the Presidency of Religious Affairs by presidential decree and reopened it for worship as a mosque on July 24, 2020 with the Friday prayer (Erdoğan, 2020). Following the opening of Hagia Sophia and the statements of Ali Erbaş, the Director of Religious Affairs in Türkiye, targeting Atatürk during the first Jumah service and the controversy this caused, Bahçeli made a statement. Noting that the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque was a sign of conquest and a reflection of respect for ancestors, Bahçeli viewed this situation as a result of the sovereignty and independence of the Muslim Turkish nation. However, Bahçeli asserted that Erbaş's statements had been taken out of context and blamed the opposition, CHP and Good Party (*İYİ Parti*), as well as Greece, for the opening of Hagia Sophia and the discussions that took place in this process. In the face of the opposition's criticisms based on Atatürk and the Republican revolutions, Bahçeli specified that Türkiye continues to carry the spirit of 1923 and made special mention of Atatürk. Articulating that any criticism of Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, should be seen as treason, the MHP leader emphasized that Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is a source of pride for the Turkish nation and its history, that his legacy will be protected by prayers and not curses, and that the MHP will always continue to defend Atatürk even if no one makes a noise on this issue. Bahçeli (2020) also underlined how Mehmet the Conqueror who conquered Istanbul, Abdul Hamid II, and Atatürk have the same historical continuity, similarity, and value as the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Türkiye and tried to put an end to the historical debates between Islamist-conservatives and secular groups. Indeed, after the opening of Hagia Sophia, discussions on Atatürk continued, and Bahçeli reacted to the comparisons of the Imam Mustafa Demirkıran as cruel and infidel by stating that such approaches were crypto-Fetöizm and aimed at disrupting Türkiye's internal peace (NTV, 2021).

Putting aside the 2020 opening for worship and the MHP's initiative in this regard, reflecting on the ethno-religious character that Hagia Sophia represents is imperative for the Turkish right as an element of continuity, namely as the origins of its being seen as both a place of worship and a monumental symbol of Ottoman-Turkish history. First, the Hagia Sophia issue is perceived as a cause for Islamists. Necmettin Erbakan, the founding leader of the National Vision (*Milli Görüş*) parties, had made numerous speeches calling for the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Similarly, the BBP leader Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu has expressed similar views on the same issue. However, the MHP had not made any official statements on this issue during or after the formation of the Turkish-Islamic ideal. As a political action, the MHP only supported Prime Minister Demirel's decision to open the Hünkâr Mahfili of Hagia Sophia for worship in 1980. Meanwhile, nationalist intellectuals had written many articles about Hagia Sophia. Although Atsız, one of the ideological pillars of the MHP, did not write directly about Hagia Sophia, he is known to have wanted it to be converted back into a mosque. In fact, he had the idea of converting Hagia Sophia back into a mosque through an event planned to be held in 1953 on the 500th anniversary of the conquest of Istanbul, with Turkist youth occupying Hagia Sophia and praying (Deliorman, 2013). Fethi Tevetoğlu (1951, p. 69), who was tried alongside Atsız in the 1944 trial, emphasized the ethno-religious character of Hagia Sophia, which he saw as the ornament of the Turkish-Islamic paradise of Istanbul, by stating that Mehmet the Conqueror had transformed it into the temple of the Turks in his article published in *Sebilürreşad*. However, Osman Yüksel is the first name that comes to mind when mentioning Hagia Sophia. Yüksel had been tried and sentenced to prison for his article on Hagia Sophia, and his views on this issue are quite clear. His article begins with the phrase "The light of Islam, the pride of Turkishness," in which he described the conversion into a museum of Hagia Sophia, which he viewed as the symbol of Fatih's conquest of Istanbul and Islam, as follows: "Who is the one who removed the Book of the Holy Book, this great religion from the temple of the conquest of Fatih? Who is the one who attacked our religion, our faith!... Whose hands are the hands that want to revive the old Byzantium from behind the centuries-old walls, whose are the tongues that say this? Which madman is the one who made Hagia Sophia a pagan temple?!" Yüksel (1952, p. 3), who criticized the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum, was put on trial at the High Criminal Court (*Ağır Ceza Mahkemesi*) for his statements therein. According to Yüksel (*Serdengeçti*, 1952b, p. 3), who invited the nationalists of the period to action, Hagia Sophia would become a mosque again, a second conquest would take place, and a second Fatih would come. In another article, Yüksel viewed what happened as a nightmare for Fatih and argued, "A thousand Crusader armies could not have done this! How could you do it? Those who did it are now buried and honored on another hill as heroes

of freedom” (*Serdengeçti*, 1952a, p. 3), directly targeting those who’d turned Hagia Sophia into a museum and Atatürk with the analogy of Anıtkabir. Finally, in his defense during the trial, he stated that as a Muslim Turk, he was saddened by what had happened to Hagia Sophia because of all the Islamic elements in this building as relics of Fatih and the symbol of the conquest of Istanbul had been destroyed and in its place, the features of the Christian Byzantine period had been brought to the fore. Therefore, expressing the wrongs that had been committed should not be a crime (Yüksel, 1956, p. 6). Indeed, given Yüksel’s political identity among the AP (Justice Party [Adalet Partisi]), MSP, and MHP, as well as his prominent personality symbolizing the Turkish right, his influence on the Hagia Sophia issue was quite prominent. However, despite all of this, the MHP did not express any official opinion on this issue until 2020, and the views of nationalist intellectuals did not influence the party’s discourse.

Conclusion

The present study was designed as a theory adaptation study, and its main goal can be summarized as shedding light on the phenomenon of neo-Islamization embedded in Turkish nationalism within the framework of two main events: the opening of Hagia Sophia and the issue of Palestine. In connection with this, the study has first analyzed within its scope the basic characteristics of Turkish nationalism and its relationship with religion over historical developments. Also in this context, the study emphasized the religionization of Turkish nationalism during the Cold War period and its transformation into the mainstream. The study then used two critical issues to investigate the parameter of change in Turkish-Islamic nationalism, which was revived with the People’s Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*). The insights demonstrate how mainstream nationalism in Türkiye has become more Islamized throughout history.

The meeting of religion and nationalism, which Grigoriadis (2013) called “sacred synthesis,” was a process whose theoretical origins can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire through Gökbalp in the 1970s. Comparing the Cold War to the present day, various reasons can be found concerning the Islamization of nationalism. Just as the rise of communism and the Soviet threat gave birth to conservative nationalism with an Islamic sensitivity in the past, various problems (e.g., foreign policy, PKK, and Feto-terrorist organizations) currently affect the production of the survival discourse and nationalism. Nationalism can also be suggested to have an Islamic framework for ensuring social consolidation due to the security issue, whereas some have claimed the opposite. Kemal Can (2021) stated that nationalism has been used for various purposes by the state apartheid in every period and that the AK Party

utilized nationalists to maintain its power; similarly, the MHP allied to dominate the judiciary and security bureaucracy. In this vein, the transformation in the official ideology with the influence of the ideological apparatus of the state can be noted to have been effective in the symbiosis between nationalism and Islamism. Although the official ideology is attributed to the early Republican period, the transition to multi-party life and the DP government was the period in which political culture was shaped in Türkiye. The MHP was a product of this process, and as the official ideology is now transforming again, the MHP is embracing more religious nationalism. Nevertheless, the MHP maintains strong ties to the founding ideology, as seen in the debate on Atatürk at Hagia Sophia. In addition, unlike during the Cold War, the MHP is no longer alone in the field of nationalism but is being challenged by secular nationalist parties on the other side of the fault line. Despite this challenge, the MHP remains the representative of mainstream nationalism, because the idea of religious nationalism still constitutes the mainstream itself. Meanwhile, secular nationalism is in its infancy, and this may be reversed in the future.

The present study can be concluded to have made a current contribution to the mainstream literature on nationalism by providing insights into current issues. However, further research can be conducted to shed light on the tendency of the MHP towards Islamization, the ingredients of the MHP's Islamization, and the modifications in the discourses of the MHP and AK Party so as to explore the uniqueness of neo-Islamization within the framework of mainstream nationalism.

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