The Paradox of Turkish Secularism

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Abstract

This article argues that Turkish secularism known as laiklik presents a paradox due to several practices that contradicts the principle of separation of religion and state. Turkish secularism has been implemented as the state control of religion, and, therefore, has resulted effectively in a peculiar blend of state and religion. Much of the secular paradox of Turkey is explainable by the state control of religion. However, this factor alone does not account for the full nature of the paradox. Laiklik must be framed within the context of a larger project, namely, the construction of Turkish national identity to be made sense of. This article maintains that the paradox of Turkish secularism can be better understood if it is viewed as an outcome of this historical process.

Keywords

Secularism, Laicism, Kemalism, National Identity, Religion, Islam.

Introduction

The issue of *laiklik* (laicism) or secularism is often taken to be the key to the understanding of Turkish politics (Jung 2008).[1] Until recently the image of Turkey as a secular state since its foundation in 1923 was almost uncontested and firmly established at both academic and popular levels. Turkish politics, both domestic and foreign, has often been interpreted in light of this long-standing secular image. It is commonly held that the Turkish Republic diverged from the rest of the Islamic world and assumed a Western identity due to its secular character. References to Turkey as a "secular state" in the academic literature are legion.[2] The received view is that with the disestablishment of Islam in the foundational years of the Republic Turkey became "legally and constitutionally, a lay state, secular and modern in her constitution, her laws, and her aspirations" (Lewis 1968, 276).

Domestic politics has usually been interpreted through this lens as well. The political panorama of the last decade is typically framed as a struggle between the "Islamist" and the "secularist" (*laik*) segments of Turkish society over its secular identity. Only three years ago, the NY Times columnist Thomas Friedman, for instance, observed that there was an on-going internal struggle "between those who would like to see Turkey more aligned with the Islamic world and values and those who want it to remain more secular, Western and pluralistic."[3]

The dualist reading of the developments of the last two decades of Turkish politics, as Friedman does, presupposes that Turkey is unequivocally a secular state. This narrative only shows that Turkish secularism, *laiklik*, which is the central tenet of Turkey's official ideology, is still not sufficiently understood.

This received view of Turkish secularism has increasingly come under scrutiny within the last decade. As one scholar puts it, the classic Western image of Turkey as a secular state has long been "a comforting but unexamined myth" (Fuller 2004, 51). The task of this article is to contribute to the questioning of this "myth," and shed further light on the peculiar model of Turkish secularism known as *laiklik*. I shall do so by approaching the issue through its paradoxical aspects. Some scholars of Turkish and Middle East politics have often identified a paradox or a series of contradiction(s) concerning the Turkish system of *laiklik*. Various scholars understand the lack of complete separation of state and Islam in Turkish political system as a "contradiction," which is due to the regime's goal to "control and manipulate the role of Islam in public policy and politics" (An-Na'im 2008, 219). This control is necessarily paradoxical because it cannot be achieved "without violating human rights." The Turkish model of secularism, defended and legitimized by its proponents as an indispensable prerequisite of democracy and civilization, "necessarily undermines constitutionalism and human rights in the name of upholding these principles" (ibid.).

The questioning of Turkish secularism is not merely of academic interest as the official discourse of *laiklik* has played a Foucaldian disciplinary role in Turkish politics. It has been systematically used to de-legitimize and criminalize actors, practices, and

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1   I use the terms "Turkish secularism" and "laiklik" interchangeably without necessarily assuming their conceptual identity; see Davison (2008) for his argument that "secularism" and "laicism" are conceptually different.

2   For the academic literature characterizing Turkey unequivocally as a secular state, see Davison (1998, 182-83).

3   Thomas L. Friedman, "Letter From Istanbul, Part 2," *New York Times*, June 19, 2010.

institutions of Turkish politics that do not fit into the official discourse. These illiberal policies have all been followed in the name of safeguarding Turkish secularism and democracy from *irtica* (religious reaction), which is portrayed from within this discursive frame as the principal threat to Turkish democracy and modernity (E. Aydın 2007; Bilgin 2008; Cizre and Çınar 2003).[4] This article argues that the paradoxical nature of *laiklik* can be better understood if considered in relation to the question of Turkish national identity (Göle 2010, 44-6; Yavuz 2009, 26-7; Haynes 2010). The peculiarities of *laiklik* or its contradictions can be made sense of by the exigencies of this "identity" problem. The first section of the article discusses the nature and extent of what I call "the paradox of Turkish secularism." The second section examines the Kemalist roots of this paradox, and the third section looks at the Diyanet institution as the keystone of this paradox. The last section maintains that the question of national identity must be taken into account to account for the paradox of Turkish secularism.

The Secular Paradox of Turkey

Turkey's secular identity has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Astute observers of Turkish politics have pointed out the peculiar character of Turkish model of secularism. Seyla Benhabib, for instance, points out that certain state policies and practices in Turkey conflict with secularism understood as the separation of religion and state. In particular, the state role in the education and employment of Muslim religious

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4   The 1960 coup and the most recent 1997 military intervention were justified on this basis; see, for instance, Stephen Kinzer, "In Defense of Secularism, Turkish Army Warns Rulers," *New York Times*, 2 March, 1997.

officials as well as the informal restrictions on non-Muslim Turkish citizens barring them from governmental posts stand out (2009, 25-8). These and many other similar controversial practices indicate a considerable level of governmental involvement in religious affairs. The Religion and State (RAS) Project Dataset measures the extent of this involvement (for the year 2002) with a score of 47.21 out of 100 (Fox 2008, 219). This is quite a high score for a state known as secular. To put it into perspective, the scores of Western European countries such as the US, the UK, Germany, and France are 0.00, 27.67, 19.88, and 22.92, respectively. Turkey's score is even higher than that of Greece, 33.31, which is the highest score among Western/European democracies, and this is primarily because of the recognition of Orthodox Christianity as official religion (ibid., 108).

Extensive governmental involvement in religious affairs clearly put Turkish secularism at odds with the so-called Anglo-American model of "secularism" based on the principle of separation of religion and state. This principle, best epitomized in the First Amendment of the American Constitution ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . ."), embodies three components: (1) freedom of religion, (2) state impartiality toward different religions, and (3) state neutrality toward the question of (ir)religion (Audi 2000). The former part (the "Non-establishment Clause") of the First Amendment meets the second and arguably the third requirement, while the latter clause (the "Free Exercise Clause") aims at the protection of the freedom of religion.

The compliance of Turkish secularism with any of these three fundamental requirements is a mixed bag. Numerous irregularities have occurred in the past and still

do occur with respect to religious freedom and state neutrality. When these irregularities are viewed altogether, we encounter a paradoxical situation. We find, on the one hand, certain restrictions on both minority religions (such as the missionary activities of Christians or the denial of official status to the Alevite "cem evi" as a house of worship) and the majority religion Sunni Islam, and, on the other hand, certain practices and decisions that can easily be interpreted as state favoritism toward Sunni Islam.

The contradictions of Turkish secularism in this regard are so conspicuous that some scholars have actually raised doubts about the "secular" character of the Turkish state: "it is unclear if such countries should be called secular" (Keddie 2005, 2194). Another scholar even goes further to declare that what Turkey never had "genuine secularism" (Fuller 2004, 52). Even Binnaz Toprak characterized the Turkish regime in her seminal work as "semi-secular" (Toprak 1981, 47).[5]

How can we explain the peculiar brand of Turkish secularism, which conflicts with the separation doctrine so much so that for some scholars it does not even exist? The contradiction in a paradoxical situation can be resolved by a plausible explanation. Recent scholarship on secularism emphasizes that there is no single model of secularism in the world but rather different patterns or versions of secularism that have emerged under specific historical circumstances to regulate the relationship between religion and state. Scholars who take this relativist or pluralist approach classify states according to their varying degrees of state and religion dynamics.

Such comparisons typically come down to two main types of secularism: the French laicisim and the Anglo-American secularism.[6] Turkish *laiklik* comes out in these comparisons as quite similar to the former and dissimilar to the latter (Kosmin 2007, 3).[7] But *laiklik* actually goes even beyond French laicism in its more extensive involvement in religious affairs (Parla and Davison 2004, 118; Stepan 2000, 51-2). Whereas the French *laïcité* is faithful to the principle of separation, *laiklik* in Turkey is implemented as the state control of religion and gives rise to a peculiar blend of state and religion. Hence, *laiklik* is characterized as "a limited, inconsistent, and ambivalent form of [French] laicism" (Davison 2003, 333, 339).

The empirical multiplicity of secularist models is often used in explaining the secular paradox in Turkey. It is emphasized that *laiklik* is comparable to or modeled after the French tradition of laicism due to their common anti-clerical stance toward religion (Kuru 2006; 2007). But such explanations do not discuss the responsible factors behind its persistence in later periods of the republic. Kuru, for instance, explains the emergence of Turkish secularism as resulting from the ideological struggle between Kemalists and Islamists during the state-building period of the Turkish Republic (from 1923 to 1937), which concluded with the former group's

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5   See also Murat Belge, "2010 sonunda din ve laiklik," [Religion and secularism at the end of 2010], *Taraf*, 14 November 2010.

6   Recent scholarship has also drawn attention to the variations in Western secularism. Variations in the implementation of the separation of religion and state can result in different models of secularism. An absolute separation of religion and state is hardly the case anywhere in the world (Madeley & Enyedi 2003; Bader 2007, 49-62; Fox 2008; Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008; Monsma & Soper 2009).

7   As we shall see later, a version of this "relativist" argument is defended by Kemalist intellectuals, who argue that the distinctive model of Turkish secularism had been necessitated by the unique historical conditions of Turkey.

victory (2007, 589).[8] Even though this may be a plausible account of the origins of Turkish secularism, an adequate account of Turkish secularism must go beyond its ideological and historical origins and shed light also on its later history. For it is not obvious that the paradoxical aspects of Turkish secularism were all determined by the ideological struggle in the early years of the republic. True, ideological struggle continued even after the initial Kemalist "victory" but the outcomes of this ideological struggle in later decades of the republic were by no means decided solely by the agency of the Kemalist actors.

A sound understanding of Turkish secularism needs to consider its contextual factors during the formative years of the republic as well as those that are responsible for its later trajectory. The original conditions of *laiklik* are not the only relevant factors behind the secular paradox. As students of "historical institutionalism" point out, new functions or reasons can be invented for social and political institutions or practices as contextual circumstances change: "changes in the socioeconomic context or political balance of power can produce a situation in which old institutions are put in the service of different ends, as new actors come into play who pursue their (new) goals though existing institutions" (Thelen and Steinmo 1992, 16).[9] Even if the initial ideological struggle may have been won by the Kemalist cadre, as Kuru asserts, the institutions and practices that they instituted have not been

deployed simply for the project of modernization. The turn of events in later decades (from the 1950s to the present) is to be expected as "institutional outcomes need not reflect the goals of any particular group; they may be the unintended outcome of conflict among groups or the result of 'ambiguous compromises' among actors who can coordinate on institutional means even if they differ on substantive goals" (Mahoney and Thelen 2009, 8). The argument of this article is that such an "ambiguous compromise" has indeed developed with respect to the institutions and practices of Turkish secularism.

The paradox of Turkish secularism is multi-faceted. First, Turkish secularism contradicts the separation principle of Western secularism due to various practices that require state involvement in the conduct of religious affairs. Most scholars (except the diehard Kemalists) would concede this much. The second dimension of the paradox, which is primarily the courtesy of the Kemalist narrative, is determined by the voluntaristic claim that Turkey has a unique homegrown brand of secularism, namely, *laiklik*. Those who firmly believe in the uniqueness of Turkey's model of secularism deny the allegation of contradiction, asserting that the so-called "contradictions" are either transient or tolerable but more importantly are *necessary* aberrations from the separation norm. These two dimensions shall be elaborated in the next two sections.

Finally, the third dimension of the paradox is owing to a series of historical conjunctures that have influenced the making of Turkish national identity (Azak 2010, 66-7, 155). As mentioned earlier, there is the Kemalist/republican project of nation-state in the first few decades of the republic. A crucial turning point was the deployment of this project against the leftist threat in the Cold War era during which it acquired

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8   Kuru contrasts the "assertive" type of Turkish secularism with the more "passive" secularism of the American model. "Assertive secularism" is identified through its hostility to the presence of religion in the public sphere and "passive secularism" through its main concern with "state neutrality toward various religions" (2007, *571).*

9   For a brief overview of this comparative-historical approach, see Steinmo (2008).

overtones of religious nationalism. By "religious nationalism," I mean the blending of ethnic (Turkish) and religious (Sunni Islam) sentiments giving rise to a distinct sense of "Turkishness," as well as the development of Turkish citizenship in relation to this religio-national identity. As we shall see later, religio-nationalist themes in Turkish political discourse have been at work even in the early republican era but they became increasingly influential during the Cold War era and made its public debut only in the 1980s after the 1980 military coup under the name of "Turk-Islam Synthesis" with the consent of the Turkish state and army (at least until the early 1990s).[10] I shall discuss this dimension in the last section.

The Kemalist Origins of the Paradox

An example to this strategy from recent history is the mass demonstrations staged against the nomination of Abdullah Gul to the office of the President of the Republic in 2007, which were portrayed in the international media as public protests defending secularism and sparked by the rising Islamist threat, that is, the ruling Justice and Development Party (hereafter JDP) government.[11] A casual outside observer exposed to this coverage would be led to sympathize with the protesters believing that the erosion of Western-style secularism is at stake. However, Western type of secularism is more consistently defended by center-right politi-

cal actors in Turkish politics (Kuru 2006; see also Cizre 2008). The Kemalist intellectuals on the other hand de-legitimize the support of Western-style secularism in Turkey by arguing that it is merely a disguised Islamism, a ploy of religious reactionaries to continue their activities in freedom (Berkes 1964, 479-80). In accordance with this logic, the Chief Prosecutor's indictment, in the 2008 Constitutional Court lawsuit brought against JDP, refers to the public statements of its leading party members in support of Western secularism as an evidence of the party's anti-laik stance.[12]

Despite the ambiguities in the Kemalist defense of *laiklik*, it is not completely amiss to interpret Turkish *laiklik* as different from the separationist type of secularism. *Laiklik* was indeed intended to serve different purposes. The primary Kemalist goal was not the securing of religious freedom but to achieve state's independence from Islam (but not vice versa) for the sake of modernization and secularization. In the republican parlance this goal was expressed as attaining the contemporary level of civilization (Jäschke [1951] 1972, 19-37). For Kemalists then and now, religion must be subordinated to state to reach this goal (L. Köker 1990, 166-69; Toprak 1981, 2).

Modernization was practiced in the early republican era as the adoption of Western culture and civilization *in toto* for which the cultural grip of Islam on society had to be broken (Toprak 1981, 38-40; see also Landau 1984; Zürcher 2004, 186-95; L. Köker 1990, 161-66). As Shaw notes, the Turkish model of secularism "involved not just separation of the state from the institutions of Islam but also liberation of the individual

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10   Turkish nationalism is not unique in this respect as the blend of religion and nationalism can be seen in most countries and ideologies where ethno-nationalism prevails. See Hastings (1997), Safran (2003), and Barker (2009) on the role of religion in the construction of nationhood.

11   See the BBC coverage of the street demonstrations in 2007: "Secular rally targets Turkish PM," *BBC News*, April 14, 2007; "Turks step up pro-secular protest," *BBC News*, May 5, 2007.

12   See the Turkish Constitutional Court Decision, Case Number: 2008/1, Resolution Number: 2008/2, Date of Ruling: July 30, 2008.

mind from the restraints imposed by the traditional Islamic concepts and practices, and modernization of all aspects of state and society that had been molded by Islamic traditions and ways" (1977, 384). The Kemalist justification of this project is built on a narrative of enlightenment: "The Turkish intelligentsia led by Atatürk sought secularism as a modernizing principle as well as a progressive idea covering not only the political and governmental life but a whole social and cultural milieu which was, in its very nature, dominated by superstitions, dogmas and ignorance" (Daver 1988, 29).

To modernize and secularize the society, a series of reforms were enacted in the state structure, law, culture, social life, and administration using authoritarian means (see T. Köker 2010). Among others, we can mention the abolition of the Caliphate (1924), the Unification of Education (1924), and the adoption of a number of western practices (the Latin alphabet, the Gregorian calendar, dress code, civil law). Toprak identifies four aspects of the Kemalist project of secularization (*symbolic,* institutional, functional, and legal) and points out that all of them were "designed to minimize the role of Islam in institutional and cultural life" (1981, 40). This top-down approach to social and cultural change has been characterized by scholars as "secularization from above" (Delibaş 2006; Ergil 1975; Pace 1998).

The main obstacle to modernization was perceived as religion (i.e., Islam) and/or tradition: "*The Kemalist attack on Islam* basically stemmed from an understanding that religion had played a conservative role in the sociopolitical structure of the Ottoman Empire, conservatism being defined by the Kemalist elite as anti-Westernization" (Toprak 1981, 38). The Kemalist suspicion or fear of Islam stemmed from their acceptance of the interpretation of Islam as inherently a po-

litical religion (Toprak 1981, 39). According to this view, Islam is politically "dangerous" (i.e., if Islam is left alone it will invade the public sphere) and needs constant supervision so as not to undermine *laiklik* or the revolutionary project of modernization.

Hence, the official understanding of the *laiklik* principle of the constitution is adamant that the living of Islam in Turkey must be kept strictly as a private affair, which is made clear in a decisive Constitutional Court ruling from 1971: (1) Religion should neither influence nor dominate the state affairs; (2) With respect to the part of the religious faith pertaining to the spiritual life of the individuals, religions are protected by constitutional guarantees giving them unlimited freedom without any discrimination; (3) With respect to the part of the religious faith pertaining to the actions and behavior of the individual affecting social life beyond the spiritual life, restrictions can be made to protect public order, security, and interest; and the abuse and exploitation of religion is prohibited; (4) As the guardian of public order and rights, the state has supervisory authority over religious rights and liberties.[13] This official interpretation of *laiklik* has resurfaced in Turkish politics on numerous occasions, prominently in the lawsuits brought against the ruling parties Welfare Party in 1997 and the Justice Development Party in 2008 with the allegation that their activities violated the constitutional principle of *laiklik* (Hale and Özbudun 2010, 22; S. Yıldırım 2010).

The State Control of Religion

There are only a handful of officially "secular" states in the world one of which is

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13   Turkish Constitutional Court Decision, Case Number: 1970/53, Resolution Number: 1971/76, Date of Ruling: October 21, 1971.

Turkey (Safran 2003, 4). Interestingly, the official stamp of secularity in Article 2 of the current 1982 constitution did not exist in the early years of the republic. The 1924 constitution stated instead that "the religion of the Turkish State is Islam." This clause of Article 2 was excised with an amendment in 1928, and a further amendment of the same article in 1937 proclaimed "laiklik" as one of the six principles of the Turkish Republic, all of which were adapted from the party program of the Republican People's Party (RPP hereafter) (Weiker 1973, 219-57). The later 1961 and 1982 constitutions preserved this *laiklik* principle.

The 1928 and 1937 constitutional amendments were reinforced by the aforementioned secularizing reforms in social and political life. As the republican cadres believed that modernization and secularization could only be achieved by a policy of "control" towards Islam rather than its complete institutional separation from the state, they needed instruments of control. Of strategic importance was the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı;* hereafter *Diyanet*) founded in 1924 as an agency of public service attached to the office of the Prime Minister for the explicit purpose of coordinating and regulating the religious needs of the citizens (Berkes 1964, 484-85; Jäschke [1951] 1972, 57-68). The official mission of Diyanet is stated in its law as follows: to "execute matters related to Islam's beliefs, prayers and morals, educate society about religion and administer prayer locations" (Karaman 2008, 285).

The implicit and perhaps more important mission of Diyanet, however, was to promote secularization by propagating modern values regarding social issues, to struggle against the "backward" or "reactionary" tendencies in society, and thereby to secure the secular character of the state. Diyanet's in-

formal role in this sense is "to educate and socialize new 'Turks' according to the needs of the Republic" (Yavuz 2003, 49-50). To this purpose, it has effectively functioned as an agent of control especially vis-à-vis the Sunni Islam (Gözaydın 2009, 216-17; Kara 2008, 98; Tank 2005).[14] The hope of the Kemalist republican cadre was that "reactionary" Islam would wither away if people were exposed to true Islam, a religion without *hurafe* (superstition) (see Öncü 2006). Ironically, the Kemalist project of secularization has resulted in the recognition of a semi-official religion in an avowedly secular state (Yılmaz 2005, 386-90).

The intent of control is evident not only in the establishment of Diyanet, but also in the opening of state schools to train religious officials in 1940s, a policy which was initially adopted by the RPP government in the late 1940s and embraced and expanded by the subsequent center-right governments (Reed 1955; Çakır, et al. 2004). Due to its political usefulness, Diyanet has been vulnerable to politicization either by the state elites or the competing groups in society (Gözaydın 2009, 221-24). The Kemalist motive in maintaining the policy of control was to propagate the true interpretation of Islam and counteract the rival religious groups. The state employment of *imams* (religious leaders) as civil servants would be instrumental in this battle for the hearts and minds of people. Later developments in domestic and international politics would enhance and transform this "ideological" mission. The increasing emphasis on preserving the national and spiritual values of the nation, which combines the motifs of Turkish

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14   For the controversy over Diyanet, see Çakır and Bozan, "Sivil, Şeffaf ve Demokratik," 106-119; and the special issue of *The Muslim World* Vol. 98.2/3 (2008) on the Presidency of Religious Affairs, and especially İştar Gözaydın's piece "Diyanet and Politics" in this volume.

nationalism and Islam, must be viewed in terms of the ideological services demanded by the varying political aspirations and conjunctures (Landman 1997, 223-24).

The ideological role of Diyanet has been most obvious in its contribution to questionable attitudes and policies toward the Alevis that range from clear hostility to condescending misunderstanding (Bozkurt 1998; Hamrin-Dahl 2006; Massicard 2006; Özdalga 2008). The resentment felt toward such discriminatory attitudes and practices as well as the compulsory religion courses in secondary education brought by the 1982 Constitution underlies the Alevi criticism of Diyanet and staunch defense of *laiklik* (Kocan and Öncü 2004, 476-79).[15] On the other hand, the Alevi stance on *laiklik* and Diyanet is not without paradox. Most Alevi groups in Turkey are impassioned supporters of *laiklik* and Kemalism at the same time. The following statement issued against the JDP government is typical of Alevis' position on *laiklik*: "*Laiklik*, which means the separation of religion and state as well as the state neutrality to faiths and the communities of faith, and is the foundation of the Turkish Republic, will not be opened to debate in the execution of state policies."[16] Leaving aside the ignorance of the control account of *laiklik* in this statement, the Alevi criticism of Diyanet contradicts their alliance with Kemalists given the latter's explicit justification for Diyanet's status and mission (Gözaydın 2009, 275-78). The Alevi struggle

for recognition also comes into conflict with the Kemalist nation-state project, which is aimed at creating a homogeneous identity without ethnic or religious differences (Dressler 2008, 289; Kocan and Öncü 2004; Özdalga 2008, 194-95).

The institutional status of Diyanet and its ideological mission has been a controversial political issue throughout the history of the republic (Gözaydın 2009, 284-87). Two years after the aforementioned 1928 constitutional amendment that dropped the reference to state's religion, Halide Edip criticized the contradiction that she saw in a secular state's involvement in religious affairs (1930, 229-32; 1935, 119-20). Ali Fuad Başgil, a prominent intellectual and politician in the 1950s, similarly warned that Turkey could not be considered truly *laik* given the official status of Diyanet (1954, 219-22). Başgil believed that *laiklik* was a necessary element of modern state and society but state intervention in religion cannot be sanctioned in the name of *laiklik*. Başgil proposed autonomy for Diyanet to protect religion against the corrupting influence of politics.[17] More recently, mavericks such as Ali Bardakoğlu, the former director of Diyanet, and Mehmet Aydın, who held the cabinet position responsible for Diyanet in the JDP government between 2003 and 2007, defended institutional autonomy for Diyanet: "Turkey needs to gradually progress from the model in which Diyanet functions as a state institution to a model in which it operates as a fully autonomous institution" (M. Aydın 2008, 172).[18]

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15   The 1971 Constitutional Court ruling cited above was made in response to a lawsuit brought by a pro-Alevi political party concerning the state employment of religious officials.

16   This statement takes place in the Final Declaration of a conference organized by a leading Alevi NGO (Cem Foundation) in response to the newly re-elected JDP's plans for a new constitution. See "Freedom of Faith and Assessment of the Constitution," October 28, 2007, http://www.cemvakfi.org/basindan_detay.asp?ID=88.

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17   Similar views have been presented in the Turkish media especially after the onset of the multi-party era in 1946. See, for instance, Sedat Oksal, "Laiklik Prensipleri ve Inkilap" [Principles of Secularism and Revolution], *Milliyet*, May 11, 1950; İsmail H. Danismend, "Laiklik Meselesi" [The Problem of Secularism], *Milliyet*, October 20, 1950.

18   Ahmet İnsel, "Diyanet özerklik istiyor"

On the other hand, there is not much to object in Diyanet's status given the official understanding of *laiklik*. As Berkes sees it, Diyanet is a legitimate institution that serves *laiklik* (1964, 484-85). In the same manner, the aforementioned Constitutional Court ruling from 1971 also concludes that the status of Diyanet does not contradict *laiklik*:

> That an unlimited, unchecked religious freedom and the idea of an independent religious organization pose serious danger to our country has been understood from historical experiences . . . For this reason, the framers of the constitution did not consider unlimited religious freedom—as autonomy of the temple or the men of religion outside state control—being compatible with the regime of laiklik and the principles affirmed by the constitution.[19]

A former official of Diyanet expresses his agreement with this "security" perspective: "Leaving religious services to their own devices or to sects and cults . . . could result in polarization and disrupt national Turkish unity and solidarity" (Karaman 2008, 209). As we shall see in the next section, the reference to "national Turkish unity and solidarity" is of crucial importance to understand the nature of the secular paradox of Turkey. To protect Diyanet's role, the current Political Parties Law stipulates that political parties must not oppose the institutional status of Diyanet. Defiance of this law constitutes a legal ground for party closure (Çakır and Bozan 2005, 113-14; Koçak 2010, 259-60).

The Question of National Identity and the Secular Paradox of Turkey

The Kemalist project of "secularization from above" discussed above (with its subordination of religion to state and the Kemalist intellectuals' rationalization of this relation) accounts for part of Turkey's secular paradox. There is also relatively a neglected dimension of the paradox concerning the question of Turkish national identity and citizenship. The question of "who is a Turk?" or how the category of "Turkishness" (*Türklük*) should be defined has been an important consideration for the state elites throughout the republican era (Çağaptay 2006; Eissenstat 2005; İçduygu, et al. 1999; Kadıoğlu 1996; Kirişci 2008; Tachau 1963). The answers formulated in response to this question have had implications for the perception and implementation of *laiklik*. Many of the past and present practices in Turkey conflicting with the separationist secularism can be explained by a *modus vivendi* reached on this question.[20] To make sense of this peculiar situation, *laiklik* must be understood in relation to other aspects of the dominant ideology in Turkey, most importantly, nationalism that is widely shared by both secularists and their conservative rivals (Azak 2010; Karabaşoğlu 2009; Parla and Davison 2004, 100-25).

The third dimension of the secular paradox has been shaped by the persistent and

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[Diyanet wants autonomy], *Radikal*, October 23, 2010; Nuriye Akman, "Diyanet'e kısmî otonomi verilmeli başkanı da ilahiyatçılar seçmeli" [Limited autonomy must be granted to Diyanet and its head must be elected by theologians], *Zaman*, November 24, 2002.

19   See footnote 12 above.

20   One such practice is the mandatory identity cards, which contain a box for religion. Recently, a Turkish citizen of Alevi religious identity applied to the European Court of Human Rights for appeal after the Turkish Courts' rejection of his request to replace the word "Islam" with "Alevi" on his identity card. The ECHR found the plaintiff right and the Turkish state "in breach of the State's duty of neutrality and impartiality in such matters." See the European Court of Human Rights, Case of Sinan Isik v. Turkey, 02/02/2010.

critical role of Islam in the re-production of Turkish national identity and citizenship. The political view of Islam as a "bond" or an element of national identity has its origins in the late Ottoman era. Islam's political use began with the Ottoman sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876-1908), whose Pan-Islamist policy was aimed at saving the empire from disintegration, and continued in an ambiguous way with his political nemesis, the Young Turks, and their political organization, the Committee of Union and Progress (CPU) (r. 1908-1918), which, for reasons of state, "maintained the Islamic identity of the regime, yet endorsed secularism [and] espoused Turkism" (Hanioğlu 2006, 130, 202; see also Karpat 2001; Kayalı 1997, 211; Yavuz 2003, 43-5). Despite their strong antireligious attitudes, "viewing religion as the greatest obstacle to human progress," the CPU did not refrain from using Islam for political purposes: "first, as a protonationalist device to agitate the Muslim masses against the sultan; second, to attack European imperialism; and third, to delegitimize the sultan's position from an Islamic point of view" (Hanioğlu 2001, 306).

The political use of Islam for national unity continued in the republican era in an inconsistent and ambivalent way. The bond of religion was perceived as instrumental to the making of a single Turkish nation whose slogan has hitherto been "unity and togetherness" (*birlik ve beraberlik*). It is well known that Mustafa Kemal during the years of Independence War (1919-22) resorted to the symbolic power of Islam for legitimation purposes (Parla and Davison 2004, 109-111; Yavuz 2003, 45). With the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, these references receded from the public sphere for the most part. One would think that religion would have no place in the first few decades of the republic before the onset of the multi-party democracy in 1950 given the nature of the

Kemalist project of secularization. Indeed, the scholarly consensus in this regard is that "with the establishment of the Republic, Turkish nationalism de-emphasized Islam as part of the Turkish identity" (Çınar and Duran 2008, 21).

This view is partially correct as Islam continued to be a hidden parameter in the construction of national identity and citizenship even during the RPP years (1923-1950); though its influence was subtle, indirect, and ambivalent (İçduygu, et al. 1999, 195). As Shankland points out, "while the Republic was founded upon the premise that 'Turkishness' would be a suitable and sufficient channel through which national identity may be formed, it has gradually permitted Islam to play a greater role in the public life of the country. Today, these sentiments together, and not just 'Turkishness' constitute an intertwined but dominant conception of what it means to be a citizen of the Republic" (2003, 15). There have been two competing versions of nationalism shaping the question of national identity throughout the history of the Turkish Republic: secular ethno-linguistic and religious-communal (Yavuz 2003, 47, 52). The former led by Mustafa Kemal and the like-minded members of the republican cadre excluded any reference to religion (İçduygu, et al. 1999, 194-95), while the latter championed by communitarian-minded republicans and later by the conservative critics of *laiklik* as they saw Islam as an indispensable element of national identity (Azak 2010, 175).

The boundaries of the Turkish national identity have been determined by the convergence and divergence of these two nationalisms. Mustafa Kemal's preference was clearly for the secular type (Bali 2006, 43). But his preference alone did not settle this issue once and for all as there were other notable figures of the republican cadre

such as Hamdullah Suphi, Ahmet Ağaoğlu, Şemseddin Günaltay, and Fevzi Çakmak, who were not willing to forsake Islam (Kara 2008, 252-53; Shissler 2002, 171-84). There were also those who subscribed to extreme ethno-nationalism (e.g., Mahmut Esat Bozkurt), who harbored deep suspicion toward non-Muslims (Kieser 2006; Parla and Davison 2004).[21] As Yavuz points out, "even for the secular intellectuals, there always has been an ironic ambivalence surrounding the Islamic component of Turkish identity" (Yavuz 2003, 47; see also Bali 2006, 48-9; Kirişci 2008, 179).

The Association of Turkish Hearths (*Türk Ocakları*) (1912-1932), whose co-founder was Hamdullah Suphi, promoted a Turco-Islamic identity and emphasized historical roots with the Islamic past as well as with the "outside" Turks (Weiker 1973, 169-71; Yavuz 2003, 54).[22] In this sense, they agreed with Ziya Gökalp's cultural-*cum*-communitarian vision of "nation" as a group "composed of individuals who share a common language, religion, morality and aesthetics" ([1920] 1968, 15). Hence, for Gökalp, as for the aforementioned political and intellectual leaders of the republic, the Turkish nation was effectively "the totality of Turkish-speaking Muslims" (Heyd 1950, 99-101).

Many foreign scholars recognized the ambivalence in the formation of Turkish national identity. Hodgson remarked that in the republican period "being a Turk was still defined more by religion than by language" as Islam continued to be influential "in determining basic cultural allegiance, within a local context" (1974, 262, 263). Bernard Lewis agreed with this view: "One may speak of Christian Arabs—but a Christian Turk is an absurdity and a contradiction in terms" ([1961] 2002, 15; see also 354-57). Lewis further noted that things were not so different in later years: "Even today, after thirty-five years of the secular Republic, a non-Muslim in Turkey may be called a Turkish citizen, but never a Turk" (ibid., 15).

The connection between religious affiliation and national identity was inscribed in the Lausanne Treaty (1923), the peace treaty between Turkey on the one side and Greece and the other Allied Powers of World War I on the other. One of the most contentious issues during the diplomatic negotiations was the status of minorities within the borders of Turkey (Aktar 2009, 35-8). The Turkish position was to deny the existence of any minority group, and if this were not possible then to keep the percentage of legally recognized minorities to a minimum. After hard bargaining, the Turkish side grudgingly agreed to confer the status of "minority" only to non-Muslims (*gayri-Müslim*) (Yıldırım 2006, 63, 110-13). The agreed solution was in a way the continuation of the Ottoman *millet* system, which organized the people along confessional lines. The immediate effects of this compromise were felt in the ensuing compulsory population exchange between Greece and Turkey (1923-33) as stipulated by the treaty.[23]

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21   It is often noted that Mustafa Kemal's nationalism (known in Turkey as "Ataturk nationalism") is of civic type of nationalism, which is inclusive toward people of different ethnic backgrounds. But as Parla and Davison note, there were "two faces of Turkish nationalism: *one that posits membership* in the nation as a membership that transcends particular ethnic or religious identities, *and one that posits it as an ethnic, or even racial, trait*" (2004, 71).

22   The Turkish Hearths, founded in 1912, were a civil society organization with close ties to state authorities. It had multiple chapters across the country, and its purpose was to develop and disseminate the Turkish national culture through cultural activities. It was shut down in 1931 and its belongings were transferred to the Republican People's Party; it was reopened in 1949.

23   For a discussion of the population ex-

This decisive moment entailed the ironic acknowledgment of religion as a criterion of common identity for the majority group, and had critical repercussions for the self-understanding of both the majority group and the remaining non-Muslims minorities in Turkey (Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews) (Alexandris 2003; Birtek 2005, 40-41; Eissenstat 2005, 245-53). The insecure civic status of the non-Muslim minorities with respect to identity and citizenship originates from this "foundational" moment. During the negotiation of the 1924 Constitution in the National Assembly, heated debates took place over the legal status of the non-Muslims (Çağaptay 2006, 14-5; İçduygu, et al. 1999, 196; Kirişci and Winrow, 1997, 96). The compromise solution recognized them as Turks by law or citizenship but not nationality. This understanding informs the continuing tension between national identity and citizenship and the ambivalence felt toward the non-Muslims (Çağaptay 2006, 14-5).

The official recognition of non-Muslims in the Lausanne Treaty provided them initially with some legal protection, but this did not last long as they were soon forced by the state authorities to renounce the rights granted by the treaty, and numerous incidents of persecution or discriminatory legislation targeting them ensued in later years (Aktar 2009; Bali 2006; see also Lewis [1961] 2002, 357). Among others, we can mention the following: the 1926 "Civil Servant Law," the 1934 Settlement Law concerning the Jews of Thrace, the 1942 Wealth Tax, and the 1955 pogroms of September 6-7 (Aktar 2009; Özkırımlı and Sofos 2008, 165-70). All these cases were due to the ethno-religious difference of non-Muslims. Whether the ultimate motivation was religious or economic, they all contradicted the

change and its consequences, see Yıldırım (2006).

logic of secularism that calls for state neutrality with respect to the religious affiliation of its citizens.

As the preceding discussion shows, Turkish national identity and citizenship has been imbued with an ethno-religious sense of "Turkishness" that excludes the non-Muslims but includes the ethnically non-Turkic Muslim minorities (Kurds and other Muslim groups such as Laz or Cerkez) as well as Alevis, who are ethnically either Turkic or Kurdish but religiously differ from Sunni Muslims in rituals (Baer 2010). The republican strategy of the 1930s, similar to the policies of the Young Turks, was to use "nominal Islam (the Muslim identity and culture shared by these groups) as the glue that bonded them [the Muslim minorities] to the Turkish nation" (Çağaptay 2006, 123). So "even under staunch secularism" Islam was an indispensable instrument of the nationalist project of Turkifying the Muslim minorities (Çağaptay 2006, 123; İçduygu et al. 1999, 195-97).

The seeds sown in the first few decades of the republic were harvested in later decades by more conservative-minded governments beginning with the Democratic Party of the 1950s and continuing with its successor center-right political parties. Emphasis on religion as an element of national identity has increased with the changing dynamics of international politics. The international context of the Cold War justified the increasing visibility of religion in domestic politics as an antidote to the threat of communism (Pelt 2008, 95-6). The center-right political parties have inherited the state's involvement in religious affairs and built on this foundation. In the end, *laiklik*'s "original state-centered and control-oriented definition was maintained by all Islamic groups, political actors, and the state" (Çınar and Duran 2008, 28). This ironic development

has been a constant source of complaint among Kemalists who wanted to maintain the state involvement in religion as a means of repressing religious reaction. These complaints fail to understand the logic of democracy, which allows for changing leadership and policy in state affairs.

The common view on the convergence of Turkish nationalism and Islam in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, crystallized in the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis," is that it represents a radical departure from Kemalist secularism (Eligur 2010, 85, 95). This view is not completely wrong but it does not show us the full picture. The "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" supported by the coup leaders as well as the center-right political elite of the 1980s, who repeatedly declared their allegiance to the principles of Ataturk, is indeed different from the indifference or hostility to religion (depending on one's perspective on the reforms instituted in this era) in the RPP years. However, to see the decisions of the military and state in this period as the betrayal of true Kemalism overlooks the highly flexible and pragmatic character of Kemalism, due to which it has been adaptable to the changing circumstances.[24]

It is more realistic to interpret the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" as an outcome of the political conjuncture at a time which, in the minds of the generals, necessitated the use of religion for national unity, especially to fight against the leftist tendencies as well as to stem the rising tide of political Islam (cf. Hale and Özbudun 2010, 10). As Yavuz points out, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis

"was meant to co-opt socially powerful Islamic movements, whose emergence prior to the 1980 military take-over was evident, and to use them against what in hindsight was a much-exaggerated leftist 'threat'" (2003, 38). Contrary to what the leftist secularists tend to believe today, this policy was not intended as concession to Islamism even if it might have had a catalyzing effect on their resurgence. It was rather another case of the instrumental use of Islam for political purposes (Kaplan 2002; Zürcher 2010; see also Parla and Davison 2004, 91). Otherwise, one would have to explain how the Turkish army known for its staunch defense of *laiklik* turned to become sympathizers of political Islam overnight. The truth of the matter is that they remained loyal to the spirit of *laiklik* by contradicting secularism in the Western sense.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the paradoxical nature of Turkish secularism: Is there or is there not secularism in Turkey? As we saw above, some scholars think that there is; according to others, however, there is not. I have tried to argue that one source of this paradox is the project of "secularization from above." *Laiklik* was not established in Turkey merely to separate religion and state as in the American case of secularism. It was rather an attempt at divesting the "world" affairs of the influence of Islam in the sense that it was intended and implemented as a project of *secularization,* which in turn was equated with *modernization*. Hence, the eight-decade long historical trajectory of Turkish secularism has turned out to be quite problematic because the socio-political resistance to this project of secularization from above has been perceived and projected by its advocates (be it within the state bureaucracy or among the intelligentsia) as

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24   The non-doctrinaire view of Mustafa Kemal is enthusiastically accepted by most non-leftist Kemalists even though it is a contested issue in the academic scholarship. For Mustafa Kemal's pragmatism and famous negative response to the question about the need for doctrinization, see Aydemir (1965, 473-74, 502-03), Belge (2001, 36-9), and Weiker 1973 (221).

resistance to the constitutional principle of secularism. Since religion is a diffuse social institution, the project of "secularization from above" depended upon the continual exercise of state power for its enforcement and maintenance.

The above description of Turkish secularism has actually become familiar territory by now for most students of Turkish politics. However, the Kemalist project of "secularization from above" or what some scholars alternatively call "authoritarian" or "assertive" secularism alone is not sufficient to account for the whole paradox. The contribution of this article to contemporary discussions of Turkish secularism is to point out that the paradoxical aspect of Turkish secularism is not caused by the Kemalist project of secularization alone. As the scholars of "historical institutionalism" point out, new functions or reasons can be invented for socio-political institutions or practices as contextual circumstances or dynamics change. I have attempted to illustrate this "fluid" nature of socio-political institutions in relation to Turkish secularism.

The foremost among these institutions is, of course, *Diyanet*. Numerous examples can be given to various types of paradoxical practices such as the mandatory identity cards, which notoriously contain a box for religion. This particular example is indicative of the role of Islam and thereby the key to the paradoxical nature of Turkish secularism. The whole complex of state intuitions and practices has evolved beyond its Kemalist project of secularization into an "ambiguous compromise" of the Turkish political system.

In sum, the crux of the paradox lies in the fact that Islam has been used or seen as an element of national identity in the history of Turkish politics; a policy that first emerged in the late period of the Ottoman state, continued in the early years of the Republic, and has been happily embraced by the center-right political actors of Turkish politics since the 1950s. Today, there is much complaint from all quarters of society about the way *laiklik* is put into practice but it is important to acknowledge that the paradox of Turkish secularism has not been plotted by a single political actor, ideology, or institution. It has rather evolved as an ambiguous political compromise of Turkish politics.

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