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Self-Perception and Identity in Contemporary Turkey

The process of westernization which Turkey has undergone in the last 150–200 years has entailed far-reaching changes in collective as well as individual self-perception. This in turn has had to do with the emergence among the Turks of a European-inspired nationalist movement, based on a newly conceived separate ethnic (or racial) entity. Ottoman Turks, at least members of the educated élite, had two main foci of loyalty and identity during most of their recorded history.¹ One was Islam, the religion adopted by the ancient Turks upon their contact with the spreading Muslim Empire and civilization. The other was the Ottoman dynasty and state, loyalty to which rested not only on the traditional loyalty among Turks to their tribal or political chief, but also on the position of the Ottomans as the champions of Islam in the world. In time the dynasty acquired the sanctity which kept it in power for centuries. An Ottoman gentleman, until well into the nineteenth century, would therefore identify himself as a Muslim and an Ottoman, never as a Turk, a term which was used either to differentiate between Turks and non-Turks, or as a derogatory reference to the ignorant peasant or nomad of Anatolia. Turkish history was written basically as Islamic or Ottoman history, and, perhaps a perfect example of Turkish assimilation in Islamic civilization — the Turkish language became so loaded with Persian and Arabic words and forms that it almost lost its original character.

Interestingly, in the nineteenth century, both foci of identity and loyalty were reinforced rather than weakened by the changing political and social circumstances. The alienation and separatism of the non-Muslim elements in the state, culminating in a series of rebellions, drove the Turkish reformist élite to try to bring about the integration of all communities into a single Ottoman "nation" (millet). This doctrine of Ottomanism (Osmanlılık) was in essence a ‘patriotic’ kind of nationalism, borrowed from Europe, and based on allegiance to dynasty, state and homeland. It went along with the adoption of the principle of the legal equality of all religious communities in the Empire leading to many of the steps toward secularization and modernization which were part of the comprehensive reform movement known as the Tanzimat. As the century progressed and separatism made headway among non-Turkish Muslim citizens as well, however, it became important to re-emphasize the old

¹ The discussion is based on the classical work by Bernard Lewis, The Emergence of Modern Turkey (London 1961). See especially chap. 10, ‘Community and Nation’.
Islamic character of the state and strengthen the institutions and symbols which underlay the partnership of all Muslim peoples in the Empire. This orientation, called Islamism or Pan Islamism (Islamcilik), reached its peak under Sultan Abdülhamid II and found expression in the elevation of the Caliphate, the promotion given to other Islamic institutions, and the granting of high positions of influence to religious personages. It is important to stress that Ottomanism and Islamism were both adhered to simultaneously to accommodate all citizens of the Empire. While non-Muslims were spoken to in Ottomanist terms, the Muslim citizens were addressed, as before, by their double attributes of Osmanli and Müslüman. The Empire remained both Ottoman and Muslim.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a new stream of thought, that of Turkism (Türkçülük), emerged among some Turkish intellectuals and came in time to exercise a profound influence on members of the ruling élite.2 There were several developments which helped bring this about. One set of factors could be referred to as ‘inspirational’. Among them were the close contact members of the Turkish educated class had established with the idea of nationalism, which they learnt from Europe not only in its patriotic form, but also in its other variations, cultural and ‘racial’. This was not only a matter of theory, as Turks could, in actual fact, experience these kinds of nationalism in their own home and among the non-Turkish nationalities clamouring for self-rule and independence. Another source of inspiration was the vast literature which was published in Europe on subjects relating to the Turks. Part of it was of a popular kind, describing the Ottoman Turks in either favourable or unfavourable terms and leading its Turkish readers to reactions ranging from enhanced pride in themselves to a wish to defend their record in the eyes of the world. Of more consequence, perhaps, were the findings of the new scholarly field of Turcology, which established the fact that ‘Turk’, rather than being a name for the despised nomad or peasant, was the proud title of an independent nation (or ‘race’, as it would often be referred to in the nineteenth century), spread over vast areas, with a long and glorious history and its own contributions to human civilization. Finally, there were the actual contacts Turks of the Ottoman Empire were then making with exiles from the ‘Turkic’ peoples living in Russia. Besides demonstrating to Ottoman Turks that the existence of a large Turkic world was a reality, some of these ‘outside Turks’ brought and shared with their ‘brothers’ the new reformist and nationalist ideas which were current at the time in their own communities.

To these ‘inspirational’ factors which had an enormous impact on intellectuals, and educated Turks in general, were added the changing political and social circumstances which enabled the seeds which had been sown to take root. Such, for example, was the growing fear for the Empire’s survival, very intense among members of the Turkish élite. It was accompanied by the

2 For the early beginnings of Turkish nationalism, see my The Rise of Turkish Nationalism, 1876–1908 (London 1977).
realization that Turks were the only really loyal element among the Empire’s population, and that, in the long run, Ottomanism and Islamism would not be able to hold the state together. Furthermore, there was a real fear among the same group of Turks that, with Ottomanism and Islamism carried to their logical limits, a situation might develop where, even if the Empire were to survive, they themselves, through the equality granted to others, might lose their traditional hegemonical place in the state. Whether through loss of state, or loss of status within the state, the two possibilities posed a real threat to the power of the Turkish ruling élite.

Whatever the case, expressions of Turkish national sentiment among the Turkish educated élite became more and more evident as time went on. They were reflected in the abundance of new writings on the history of the Turks, on the Turkish world at large, on aspects of Turkish culture, and particularly on language. It would seem that by the turn of the century most educated Turks had come to identify themselves as ethnically (or ‘racially’) Turkish, and a statement by a writer in the daily Ikdam appears to be typical of this new self-view: ‘By our social order’, he wrote, ‘we are Ottoman, by our religion Muslims, and by our ethnic nationality (kavmiyet) we are Turks.’

To the traditional forms of identification, Ottoman and Muslim, a third was now proudly added, that of ‘Turk’, which had previously possessed derogatory connotations. Still, there was no mention of political Turkism. It was impossible to adopt political Turkism as long as Ottomanism and Islamism were the official doctrines designed to uphold the state, and as long as large communities of non-Muslims and non-Turkish Muslims continued to live in the Empire. Nationalism was expressed mostly in cultural terms — the need to preserve the cultural identity of the Turks within the Ottoman state. It was also only under such terms that it was allowed to be expressed in the heavily censored Hamidian press.

The Young Turk period may be viewed as the one which accelerated the process of ‘conversion’ to Turkism and prepared the ground for Kemalism. The factors at work further drove the Turks in the direction of Turkism — the territorial losses which showed that the collapse of the Empire was imminent, the spread of nationalism among the Arabs (the last major group of non-Turks remaining in the Empire) and, again, the fear that, should Arabs and others remain in the Empire, Turks might completely lose their dominant position in it. The relative freedom of discussion during this period made it easier to express Turkist ideas, and certain journals and associations propagating Turkism appeared. It was during this period that Ziya Gökalp, a poet and sociologist, was able to establish something like a Turkish nationalist doctrine, based on sociological and philosophical foundations. Still devoid of political connotations — at least until the Empire finally collapsed at the end of the first

4 The two main works on his life and thought are Uriel Heyd, The Foundations of Turkish Nationalism (London 1950); Taha Parla, The Social and Political Thought of Ziya Gökalp, 1876–1924 (Leiden 1985).
world war — it professed the discovery, promotion and spread of Turkish culture, the reform of the Turkish language, and the social and economic well-being of the nation. Into his nationalist ideology Gökalp attempted to incorporate two important elements taken from two of the main streams of thought prevalent during his time. One was Islam, which he saw as part and parcel of Turkish culture, an element of Turkish identity, and a link with the Muslim peoples, but without its political and social impact; the second was westernism, which for him was a license to borrow freely from the west elements of civilization like science and technology, though not of culture.

The period of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, following the final dissolution of the Empire, ultimately enabled Turkism to become a political doctrine. The Kemalists did not produce an ideology in the strict sense, but their statements and actions did point to some definite directions.¹ The basis of the new republic was to be found in loyalty both to the homeland Anatolia and to the Turkish nation which inhabited it. All citizens of the Turkish state were deemed constitutionally Turks, and this was the broader, political meaning applied to the term 'Turk'. Remaining legal barriers between the different communities were eliminated and great efforts were made to instil a sense of patriotism in all members of the population. However, it was understood, and often stated or implied, that there also existed a Turkish nation in the ethnic sense with a history, language and culture all its own. All were to be properly studied and disseminated as the particular heritage of the Turks. In this sense only 'real' Muslim Turks — Kurds were also included — were considered part of this Turkish millet, while the non-Muslim communities, like the Greeks, Armenians and Jews, were not. Islam was stripped of its political and social functions and no longer served as the official religion of the state, although it remained in effect an important criterion for affiliation to the nation, as demonstrated in the case of the Kurds. Along with nationalism, modernization (termed by the Kemalists 'reformism' or 'revolutionism') also became an important part of the Kemalist doctrine. It defined Turkey's goal as the attainement of the level of contemporary civilization, which for Atatürk and his associates meant western civilization. For them the distinction made by Gökalp between culture and civilization was far less rigid and they were prepared to borrow from the west certain cultural features as well. The proud member of the Turkish nation was to be both a (secular) nationalist and a western, as was to be Turkish society as a whole. These notions were among the most important principles of the Kemalist heritage bequeathed to future generations and they remain the standards to be followed by contemporary educated Turks.

¹ No up-to-date work on Kemalism exists in a European language. A discussion of relevant topics is to be found in Henry Elisha Allen, The Turkish Transformation: A Study of Social and Religious Development (Chicago 1935); and Donald Webster, The Turkey of Atatürk: Social Process in the Turkish Reformation (Philadelphia 1939).
More than half a century after the death of Ataturk, it is of some use to examine the present state of Kemalist notions of national identity which, like other Kemalist principles, have undergone their own adjustments. Questions relating to national identity and self-perception in Turkey have not disappeared but, on the contrary, remained very much on the Turkish agenda to this very day. They are discussed in speeches and lectures, they are a constant motif in articles and commentaries in the media, and they are likewise the subject of several recent books. These questions stem, in part, from the fact that Turkish society has not yet found its homogeneity, or stability, and is split into many sub-groups with conflicting aspirations. Similarly, the state as a whole has not found its proper place in the family of nations. Everyday problems and crises on both the internal and external level thus tend to bring to the fore time and again these tormenting questions of identity. In the pages which follow, an attempt will be made to bring out the main features characterizing self-perceptions among what may be called ‘mainstream’ educated Turks. These will rely on the statements and pronouncements of leaders and public figures from the political parties of the centre (centre right or centre left). These are the parties which by and large have commanded the support of the vast majority of the Turkish population and have been responsible for running the affairs of the country throughout the post-Kemalist period. The ideas expressed by these public figures have, of course, not only reflected the views of their constituencies, but have also had a great impact on shaping them. Discussion will concentrate on four main issues which have tended to be at the centre of public debate: minority versus nation; the attitude towards the ‘outside Turks’, living beyond the borders of Turkey; the place of Islam; and affiliation with the west.

The question of minorities has negatively affected Turkish political stability for many years and has also inflicted much damage on Turkish international relations. Although the Armenians can no longer be said to constitute a strong minority in Turkey, amounting to no more than several tens of thousands, Armenians of the diaspora have been active in carrying out an anti-Turkish political campaign, and at one time some militant groups among them (notably ASALA) went as far as resorting to terrorism and assassinating Turkish public figures, particularly diplomats. More problematic, however, has been the Kurdish minority, whose numbers are estimated at six to twelve million, largely concentrated in the south-eastern regions of the country. Clandestine Kurdish organizations, and particularly the Kurdish Workers’ Party known as the PKK, in recent years have been carrying out a bloody guerrilla war against Turkish authorities, resulting in thousands of casualties.

6 A recent addition to the literature, written by an anthropologist, is Bozkurt Güvenç, Türk Kimili: Kültürl Tarihinin Kaynakları (Ankara 1994).
7 A comprehensive treatment of all ethnic groups in Turkey is found in Peter Alford Andrews, Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey (Wiesbaden 1989). There are a number of works on individual groups. A recent work on the Kurds in Turkey is Michael M. Gunter, The Kurds in Turkey: A Political Dilemma (Boulder, CO 1990).
There was, in addition, particularly in the late 1970s but also as recently as 1995, serious unrest between members of the Sunni majority and members of the strong Alevi community, estimated at times at up to 20 per cent of the Turkish population. In the face of all these destabilizing events, Turkey has had to resort to some harsh military and political measures. At the same time, however, and faced with what amounted to ominous signs of social disintegration, she has been forced to give answers to some of the very basic political and ideological questions relating to the place accorded by Turkish society to national or religious minorities. In this context, the Turks have inevitably found themselves compelled to touch upon the very foundations of their political community as elaborated by Mustafa Kemal, and define, or redefine, the exact relationships which should exist between Muslim and non-Muslim, Turk and non-Turk, or Turk of one Muslim sect and another. The task was made necessary by the need to address at one and the same time the Turkish public itself, the minorities in question, and the outside world, ever critical of Turkey's handling of her minority problem.

The response, to be sure, has been different in each case. As for the Armenians, Turks would habitually deny Armenian accusations, bring some of their own, and point to the historically good relations which, according to them, had existed in the past, and still exist today, between Turks and Armenian citizens of Turkey. There has been little inhibition in referring to the Armenians by name because, although citizens of the state and not referred to as a national minority as such, they are seen as differing both ethnically and religiously from the main body of the Turkish population. Moreover, the 1923 Lausanne Treaty of Peace specifically refers to the rights of the non-Muslim minorities, including the Armenians, and the Turks have been fairly strict in their observance of these rights. Due to the small number of Armenians in Turkey, Turks had also little to fear by allowing more tolerance toward the separate existence of the Armenian minority (or, for that matter, other non-Muslim communities).

With the Kurds and other Muslim minorities, matters are different. Their separate existence was not recognized during the Kemalist period and they were considered part of the Turkish nation in the ethnic or racial sense. To date, no recognition of the Kurds as a national minority has been forthcoming and Turkish spokesmen still regard Turks and Kurds as part and parcel of the same nation. According to them, Kurds have always been in partnership with Turks, have enjoyed equal rights in the state, and consequently there has not been any real Kurdish problem. The Kurdish uprising is seen as the expression of economic and social discontent, the action of a small terrorist group, the outcome of subversion from the outside, or all of these combined. The solution, therefore, is to be found in suppressing the rebels, accelerating economic and social development, and consolidating democracy in the country as a whole. What has emerged in recent times, however, no doubt not only because of the bitter struggle against the Kurdish rebels but also because of international pressure, is a significantly greater readiness to give legitimacy
to the term ‘Kurd’ and to recognize their existence if not as a ‘national’ group, then as an ‘ethnic’ one. Turkish political leaders are still adamant in their refusal to grant cultural, let alone administrative or political autonomy to the Kurds, but some relaxation in the attitude of official Turkey toward limited Kurdish self-expression has, in fact, occurred and is reflected in the use of Kurdish in publications, the performance of Kurdish music and songs, and the celebration of the traditional Kurdish festival of Nevruz (New Year).

Addressing the Sunni–Alevi question, Turkish leaders, in a similar vein, have seen it as an ‘artificial’ problem, largely fanned by outside forces, and have stressed the insignificance of the religious divisions, the essential partnership between the groups, and the need for unity, as prescribed by the common Islamic religion itself. But the distinction between the sects — never recognized officially — has been given licence in recent years, and has been openly discussed.

These developments have been accompanied by a remarkable change in the conception of Turkish society itself, at least as it has been expressed by Turkish leaders in recent years. For example, there has been a new emphasis on the concept of a Turkish nation as encompassing the population of Turkey as a whole with no distinction of religion or ethnic background. ‘Our conceptualization of nation and nationalism’, President Süleyman Demirel stated, ‘is based on the principles of common destiny, constitutional patriotism, and civic identity.’

Put similarly by Tansu Çiller, former prime minister and leader of the True Path Party, ‘The concept of a nation in Turkey is based on joint values, joint political beliefs, a joint future and the will to build that future in unison’.

According to this view, not only fellow Muslims, like Kurds and Alevis, but non-Muslim minorities, such as the Greeks, Armenians and Jews, are bona fide members of this Turkish nation. Non-Muslims and non-Turks are members insofar as religious or ethnic differences are of no relevance to membership in this ‘civic society’, while Kurds, too, even if one no longer recognizes their ethnic or racial connection to the Turks, are readily accepted for the same reason. Turkish society thus becomes almost devoid of its relationship to the ethnic Turks, and since there is no ethnic majority in Turkey there is similarly no ethnic minority.

All these different groups form, according to Turkish leaders, what they now see as the Turkish pluralistic society. There are as many as 25 or 26 different ethnic and religious groups, and they are all part of the heritage inherited by modern Turkey from the Ottoman period and before. They all have their own vernaculars, customs and traditions, which they are free to develop, and in so doing they make a joint contribution toward the enrich-

ment of Turkish culture as a whole. In the view of Demirel, 'the presence of various sects and faiths in Turkey in addition to peoples from different ethnic origins should not be considered a weakness; on the contrary, Turkey can use this situation to make itself stronger and should do so'.

One other issue which has had an impact on Turkish self-perception is the recent ‘opening’ toward the Turkish world, comprising, among others, the Turkic-Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. The term Turk, when it first regained respectability at the end of the nineteenth century, was indeed understood to apply not only to the Turks of Anatolia or the Ottoman Empire, but to the larger Turkic world stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia. This was the result of new works appearing in Europe on the history of the Turkic peoples and their languages, the racial and linguistic theories prevalent at the time, and the actual contacts established between Turks in and outside the Ottoman Empire. The idea that the Turkic world was one whole was given further impetus by what some Turkists believed the collapse of the Empire might require — a union of all Turks, or Pan-Turkism, to replace or at least support the failing doctrines of Ottoman or Islamic unity. Indeed, there was a great similarity between Turkism and Pan-Turkism in the early stages. Later on, as it turned out, the idea of Pan-Turkism was discarded by Atatürk, who placed the prime emphasis on the Turkish provinces of the Ottoman Empire, mainly Anatolia. For him Pan-Turkism carried with it the danger of overstretched commitments to distant lands and what was more, it could annoy friendly Soviet Russia. But the idea remained, in a sense, the logical outcome of the glorification of Turkish history and culture, as prescribed by the Republic itself. It remained a well-defined stream of thought developed by several intellectuals in their own circles, and during the second world war it even gained momentum for a while when Pan-Turkists believed that the German conquests in the east might help their cause. In the later stages of the war these circles and their publications were suppressed, but scholars and writers at least continued to diffuse the awareness of the larger Turkic world among the Turkish public and express concern over the well-being of the various Turkish communities.

As a possible political doctrine, Pan-Turkism was dismissed throughout the post-Kemalist period by virtually all official Turkish leaders. The prospect of antagonizing and provoking the Soviet Union and other states with large Turkish populations was strongly present in the minds of Turkish policymakers. Even the radical Nationalist Action Party, founded by Alpaslan Türkeş in the 1960s, was fairly cautious in its public statements. But even though Turkish unity itself always seemed remote and impractical, feelings of kinship with Turks living outside the boundaries of the Turkish state (soydq, as

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12 On Pan-Turkism see the recent work by Jacob M. Landau, Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation, rev. edn (Bloomington and Indianapolis 1995).
they are called) were proved to exist well beyond the small circles of active Pan-Turkists or the associations of exiles from different Turkish communities. They were widespread among the population, brought up to be aware of and glorify Turkish history, had a strong impact on politicians and were translated into action by Turkish governments. Cyprus constitutes perhaps the best example. There is no doubt that whatever interests dictated Turkish policy toward the Cyprus question, sincere concern about the fate of the Turkish minority there was perhaps the most important. Nor is the Cyprus case unique. Turkish governments have repeatedly given attention to the well-being of the small Turkish minority left in Western Thrace and said to be living under constant Greek pressure. When in 1984 the Bulgarian government began to force the large Turkish minority to assimilate, a real crisis ensued in relations between the two countries, which did not end until the collapse of the communist régime. Still another example of Turkish concern over Turks outside its borders was the repeated expression of solidarity and concern with the Turkish community in Iraq, although in Iraq's case, for political reasons, Turkish protests, until recently, were somewhat muted. In contrast, Turkish spokesmen were always ready to praise the conduct of the Yugoslav government toward Turks living in that country.

All the aforementioned cases related, of course, to communities which were geographically close to Turkey, were akin to the Turks in language and culture and shared with them an Ottoman past. It seemed natural, therefore, for the Turks in Turkey loudly to voice their concern about fellow Turks who had, as it were, accidentally found themselves outside the homeland. With some of the neighbouring states concerned, Turkey could also be supported by bilateral or international agreements binding them to uphold their minorities' rights. Yet, as already noted, Pan-Turkist circles hardly made the distinction between the 'Ottoman' Turkish communities and those Turkish peoples and communities who had no connection to Ottoman history and were further removed, geographically and culturally, from the Turks of Turkey. The Turkish educated public, if less concerned with its Soviet or Chinese brethren, was definitely aware of them. Ever careful not to be suspected of dormant Pan-Turkist aspirations, 'official' Turkey, it is true, might have been generally silent, but if any proof was needed of the potential force of these feelings of kinship with the more distant 'outside Turks', it came as soon as the first signs of change in the fortunes of the Soviet Empire appeared. Broad cracks in the wall separating Turks from Turkey and Turks from the Soviet Union made themselves visible even as perestroika and glasnost were in progress and, with the final collapse of the Soviet Union late in 1991, the wall came down in toto. What has occurred in Turkey ever since is the development of a deliberate and
systematic orientation in Turkish foreign policy toward the Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union, along with an open and growing concern with the fate and well-being of all Turkic communities ‘from the Balkans to the Wall of China’. The new Turkic republics and other Turkic communities generally proved to be greatly interested in strengthening their bonds with Turkey, and the relationship which has developed between them has been both intensive and multifaceted. It has taken the form of frequent mutual visits of politicians and officials, a multitude of agreements of co-operation, increasing trade and business contacts, the opening of lines of communication, exchanges of students and the like. In addition, several all-Turkic summits and other conferences have been held in Turkey with the express purpose of enhancing solidarity and co-operation between all parts of the Turkic world.

There is no doubt that very important political and economic factors lay behind this new orientation in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey has seen the new Turkic world as according her many new opportunities in increased trade, investment and sources of energy, and in an age of growing isolation in the world, a chance to collaborate with and perhaps even lead a new bloc of ethnically and culturally close peoples. Through her democratic régime, secularism and open market, Turkey could, so has been the Turkish reasoning, act as a role model and help ensure the stability of the new states and their links with the world. This would also serve Turkish relations with the west insofar as Turkey could help promote western economic and political relations with those peoples. But behind all these interests and calculations has been, it is well to remember, the ideological and cultural basis of the new orientation. It has to do, once again, with Turkey’s own self-perception. The very roots of modern Turkish nationalism were not territorial but communal, with strong racial and linguistic components. Even though they were not necessarily translated into political doctrine, they shaped the outlook of generations of Turks. Turks’ perception of their own identity has remained much broader than the narrow limits of Anatolia or the Turkish Republic, and the ground has been well prepared, so to speak, for supporting this new phase of development in Turkey’s international relations. There is no mistaking the genuine spirit of pride and joy in Turkey at the addition of several new liberated Turkic areas in the world, and President Demirel has given voice to such feelings. Speaking at the opening of a summit conference of the Turkic republics in Istanbul, he said:

Our history, which was divided by various events, has overcome the obstacles in its path and has returned to its natural course. The inevitable was realized in 1991 and these five brotherly republics have re-emerged as independent and sovereign states. We welcomed this rebirth with great enthusiasm. The flag of the Turkish Republic was a symbol of independence for 70 years to enable us to view with pride today the flags of these five republics, which share the same roots, language and culture.15

The role that Islam fulfils in forming a part of what Turks see as their

There were signs of an Islamic reassertion in Turkey not long after Ataturk's death, when it became clear that notwithstanding all the Kemalist efforts at secularism, most of the Turkish population still showed a strong allegiance to Islam. This Islamic 'revival', as it was then called, took many forms and showed itself, for example, in a growing readiness to perform religious rituals and observe religious rules, in renewed interest in religious education and, in some extreme cases, in manifestations of hostility toward Kemalist reforms. But the trend was encouraged in no small way by the general political liberalization and the emergence of a multi-party system in Turkey following the war period. This meant that parties now tried to court the Turkish voters and were ready to make some meaningful changes in the rigid secularist policies followed by Ataturk and his associates. Accordingly, a definite liberalization took place in government policy toward religion, allowing for its reinstatement in the educational system and giving more freedom, and even support, to the performance of religious rituals and practices. From the late 1960s, and more conspicuously during the 1970s, there was even something of an 'escalation' in the role of Islam in the state and this was reflected in two different ways. One was the systematic courting of the Muslim world in Turkish foreign policy, to the point that Turkey actually joined the Islamic Conference Organization. The other was the appearance and success of an Islamic-oriented political party, the National Salvation Party, which even participated in several coalition governments. The 1980 military intervention instigated by Kemalist officers was motivated in part by the challenge to secularism coming from this Islamic party. It is worth noting, however, that the secularist officers themselves continued and even reinforced the new Islamic orientation in Turkish foreign policy. Moreover, they made religious education compulsory in elementary and secondary schools, and even wrote it into the new 1982 constitution. With the restoration of political activity later on, a new Islamic party, the Welfare Party — in reality a successor to the National Salvation Party — came into being. It has enjoyed freedom of action and has managed to show remarkable gains in the polls. It emerged as the strongest party in the 1995 general elections and in July 1996, after the failure of a coalition made up of the two major secularist parties, formed the new government.

These and other apparent concessions made to Islam by otherwise secularist political leaders and officials might have called into question Turkish adherence to Kemalist secularism which remains a solid principle of state embodied in the constitution. There have been, to be sure, particularly among leftist politicians and intellectuals, some ardent critics of the apparent deviation of the state from its secularist course, and the excessive tolerance shown, according to them, toward 'fundamentalist' manifestations. How could Turkish Kemalists and secularists, it has been asked, reconcile, for

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example, secularism and Turkish propagation of Islamic education? Yet, a point made by the vast majority of Turkish politicians and officials — all claiming to abide by the precepts of secularism — is that Turkey’s population is, after all, 99 per cent Muslim, and that Islam remains an essential part of Turkish culture and identity. Moreover, they argue, Islam is of intrinsic value to Turkish society and the Turkish state. In its teachings it has an extraordinary role to play in elevating the moral standards of the nation and in promoting brotherhood and peace among all members of the population. It similarly plays a unifying role among the different Muslim sectarian and ethnic groups. Considering the negligible numbers of non-Muslims still living in Turkey, what better link is there than Islam, which can bring together the important groups of Turks and Kurds, Sunnis and Alevis? In the words of the late president Turgut Özal:

What holds together, or rather brings together, our unity and our cohesiveness is the fact that we are all citizens of the Turkish Republic. This is the first point. Everybody who lives in this land, everybody who was born here and everybody within the boundaries of the Turkish Republic who is a citizen of this country is a first-class citizen of this country with no distinction being made. Our state is secular. But what holds our nation together, what serves in a most powerful way in our national cohesiveness and what plays the essential role is Islam.17

It is perhaps here that the officers’ strongest motivation and, in fact, the strong commitment of all the subsequent Turkish governments to continue and even expand religious education in state schools can be seen. By propagating the study of Islam in the educational system a double goal could be attained: the control of the state over Islamic education would ensure that Islam was not left to the fanatics and the superstitious ‘fundamentalists’; and it would be the ‘right’ Islam, stressing the common denominator among the various groups in the Turkish nation and promoting brotherhood and love among all of them. Of course, an additional role for Islam would be to form a bridge between the people of Turkey and other Muslim nations, yet another important national interest designed to enhance Turkey’s political status and economic prosperity.

Finally, turning to yet another strong focus of Turkish loyalty and identity, a strong western or European orientation has shaped Turkish attitudes and policies for many years.18 It has not been the product of Kemalist policies alone, but of many centuries during which Turkey, as the Ottoman Empire, faced the west in a variety of relationships and forms. The west, or Europe,

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18 On Turkish relations with the west, apart from the general works on foreign relations and works on bilateral relations, see Nuri Eren, Turkey, NATO and Europe: A Deteriorating Relationship? (Paris 1977); David Barchard, Turkey and the West (London, Boston and Henley 1985); Metin Heper, Ayşe Oncu and Heinz Kramer, Turkey and the West: Changing Political and Cultural Identities (London and New York 1993); Canan Balkir and Allan M. Williams, Turkey and Europe (London and New York 1993).
was often the enemy, but in more recent times also included friends and allies who helped the state to preserve its independence and territorial possessions. More importantly, the west has been the inspiration, often the motivator, behind the efforts undertaken by the Ottoman rulers to modernize their state. Western-inspired reforms were introduced as part of the Empire's effort to survive and in time accounted for a far-reaching transformation of state and society. The movement toward adopting the ways of the west became, in fact, an essential part of the world outlook of the Turkish élite and an essential feature of modern Turkish history. Atatürk may not have been particularly pro-western in his foreign relations, but modernization along western lines became, as has already been noted, one of the main principles, or articles of faith, of the Republic. The assumption was that the Turks could, should and would become members of the civilized western world. In the post-Kemalist years there have been significant strides forward in this direction and both foreign policy and cultural orientation have converged and fed each other. For example, in the face of the Soviet threat, Turkey entered the western system of alliances and groupings and developed very close bilateral relations with a number of western powers. Internally, Turkey adopted a multi-party system, and demonstrated a strong resolve to abide by western democratic rules.

Yet, the road to total absorption in the west, after a smooth beginning, has been strewn with obstacles and has seen a great many deviations from course. On the home front, Turkey has undergone a series of military takeovers in the last few decades leading to the provisional suspension of freedoms, and there have also been what appeared to be infringements of human rights in her handling of the Kurdish problem. Internationally, the question of Cyprus has remained unresolved and has led to a serious deterioration in relations between Turkey and Greece. These and other issues have accounted for frequent western criticism of Turkey's conduct, and have more than once disrupted relations between Turkey and one or more of her western allies. They have also led to periods of tension between Turkey and the European organizations to which she belongs and have considerably slowed the process of Turkey's integration into the European Union. What is important to stress here is the effect western criticism has had on the Turks. By and large, the Turks have viewed it as unfounded and unjust. What is more, they have felt that at the root of their troubles with the west lies not the issue in question itself but the simple fact that, in spite of their alliance and partnership with it, the west has been basically reluctant to see them as one of its own. The lack of readiness in Europe to accept Turkey as a full member of the European Union, for example, is contrasted with the policy toward such countries as Greece, Portugal or the East European states. In the Turkish perception, this attitude of the west, particularly the European west, stems, at least in part, from a traditional anti-Turkish bias, and this in turn, has to do with what Turks would often call the Christian 'mentality' of western nations. In an interview with a German magazine, President Özal said bluntly: 'Why are we not yet in
the European Community? . . . The answer is simple. You are Christians and we are Muslims."9 Many in Turkey would speak of the spirit of the Crusades still dominating western public opinion and still aimed at driving the Turks out of Europe.20

These and other difficulties have led to interesting reactions in Turkey. They have no doubt helped to some extent to nourish the reorientation toward the Muslim world which has already been noted. One other kind of reaction has been the attempt to stress Turkey’s unique position as a bridge — a bridge between east and west, between Europe and Asia, and between the Christian world and the Muslim world. This motif has been extensively used by Turkey to promote her international relations or simply explain her ‘multifaceted’ foreign policy. It has often been necessary, for example, to explain to the west Turkey’s Islamic orientation, and to the Muslim nations the state’s alliance with the west. But the bridge motif has also been offered as an answer to Turkey’s identity problem in general. This is well reflected in the words of Mümtaz Soysal, a former foreign minister:

This is the most opportune time to rid ourselves of the complex of being considered Europeans. This complex has agitated our heads again now that Greece has entered the EEC. We are Turks from Turkey. Turkey is a country with one bank in Europe and the other in Asia. The same thing can be said of our geography and culture. We must realize and accept this as such and we must turn this embarrassment into a sense of superiority.21

For most educated Turks, it must be added, the European section of this ‘bridge’ which is called Turkey seems more deeply grounded in the west than the east. Turkish public figures of the mainstream have been united in the view that Turkey is European and western and this cannot simply be attributed to political expediency, expecting western political or economic support. For the Turks, belonging to Europe or the west is really belonging to the civilized world and it is the legacy of Kemal Ataturk. Perhaps this civilized world does not want Turkey, but as one Turkish commentator put it, Turkey was trying to stick to Europe despite Europe’s dislike of her.22 The experience has been most painful for the Turks because, in a sense, the rejection they feel on the part of western nations is perceived as the rejection of one member of a family by the other members.

Little doubt remains that Turkey, in many ways, has had to depart from a strict observance of the guiding principles of the Kemalist period and the kind of self-perception and views it aimed to instil in the population. Perhaps a unified homogeneous nation was Ataturk’s ideal, but Turkish society has proved to be divided across many lines and is increasingly recognized as

19 Der Spiegel, 14 October 1991.
ethnically heterogeneous; a strong orientation toward the larger Turkic world has once again come to the fore and runs somewhat counter to the previous emphasis on the homeland Anatolia; secular Turkey, where reference to Islam as the official religion was dropped from the constitution, is now recognized as a Muslim society and state; and there have been problems with becoming part of the western world and western civilization.

In a sense, it is possible to view the changes as signs of a withdrawal of Turkey into her old self. Clearly, Turkey, experimenting with new policies and orientations, has had not only to encounter the difficulty of parting with her own traditions but also to surmount the realities of her situation and some very practical obstacles along the way. It has not been easy to accept the kind of loyalties prescribed by 'patriotic' and secular nationalism, nor has it been easy to find the way for integration with the west and western civilization. Instead, some more conservative notions, religious or 'tribal', have proved their strength and worth. Turkey, as seen from her recent history, has had to waver between the appeal of all of them as circumstances have led her to shift her emphasis from one to another. In the process, contradictions were inevitable. These were not all matters of internal or external policies alone, but matters of identity as well, and, as such, they have resulted in much soul-searching and torment for both individuals and society as a whole.

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