The Beginning of a Post-Kemalist Era for Turkish Politics?

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Abstract

Turkish national identity is incredibly unique, multi-faceted, and at times seemingly paradoxical. What’s more, that identity has been in a state of flux over the past few decades, as a resurgent current of Islamist populism has risen to challenge the foundational secular and ‘modernist’ tenets the state was founded on. Drawing heavily from the literature on social identity and collective memory, this paper traces the historical development of Atatürk’s nation-building ideology—Kemalism—and the near century-long hold it had over Turkish politics. It then sets out to demonstrate Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s attempts to reshape Turkish nationalism, beginning a “post-Kemalist” era and discusses what implications that might have on the countries foreign and domestic relations.
Introduction

On the night of July 15th, 2016, the people of Istanbul and Ankara were stirred awake by the sounds of fighter jets flying overhead and a series of explosions ringing throughout their cities. Tanks rolled through the streets, blocking off key areas and shutting down the Bosporus and Fatih Sultan Mehmet bridges. Shortly after, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan broadcasted an appeal to his supporters—via Facetime and CNN Turk—to take to the streets and resist the “treasonous” rebellion being staged by “a minority in the armed forces.” Various other government officials “used to social media platforms and alerts from mosque loudspeakers to rally Turkey’s citizens in opposition to the plot.” Come morning, the struggle was over. When the dust had settled, nearly 300 people had lost their lives, the Turkish Parliament building, Presidential Palace, and police special forces headquarters outside of Ankara had all been bombed, and Erdogan—furious but resolute—remained in power.

In the days that followed, the cloud of suspicion and discord hanging over the Turkish republic gave way to an unprecedented purge of thousands of personnel throughout the military, judiciary, civil service, media and educational system. The significance of the events was not lost on the international press. Headlines seized on the chaos, claiming a “pyrrhic victory” for “Turkey’s new sultan,” referring to the failed coup and the ensuing events as a “Erdogan’s Reichstag fire,” “a bounty for Erdogan,” and “the countercoup in Turkey.” For some, the incident signaled a major victory for the growing Islamist currents in the country. For others, particularly in Turkey, it was a sign of the West’s hostility toward a democratically elected leader. As time has worn on, the growing consensus on all sides of the debate is that the failed coup marked a watershed moment in Turkish politics. Indeed, though the history of the Turkish Republic is a story defined by swells of illiberalism and militaristic responses, the aftermath of July 15th holds a significance that extends beyond the immediate effects of Erdogan’s consolidation of power. It signals the start of a new era in Turkish politics—a redefinition of Turkish identity that renders inert the constraints of the country’s foundational ideology, Kemalism, and curtails the military’s traditional role as a guardian of constitutionally mandated laicism.

By way of an historical analysis of the historical development of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s nation-building ideology and its role in Turkish politics over the past century, I aim to demonstrate a few things. First, after a review of the relevant literature on the role that identity and collective memory play in driving action, I will demonstrate the centrality of Kemalism in Turkish politics since the founding of the Republic. Though loosely defined and at times seemingly paradoxical, Kemalist narratives have dominated the Turkish political sphere and provided a justification for the military interventions that have punctuated the country’s history. Second, I will debunk the rigid, popular perception of the ‘secularism’ of the Turkish state and the oft-exaggerated threat posed by Islamism. Finally, I will argue that Erdogan’s recent efforts to consolidate executive power, cripple the independence of the military apparatus, and re-narrate the history of the Turkish people—especially with regard to their Ottoman past and the role of Islam more generally—signify the end of the hegemony of Kemalist discourse in Turkey.
Beyond a simple change in rhetoric, the ascendance of Erdogan's “majoritarian conservative” ideology paves the way for a new, Post-Kemalist era in Turkish politics. Though this shift is representative of peripheral developments in Turkish politics since the founding of the republic, it ultimately leaves Erdogan, empowered by a majority of the populace and unencumbered by a meddlesome military, free to drive the country's history in whichever direction he so chooses.

Identity Construction and Collective Memory

National identity, as a concept, is inherently riddled with complexity and contradiction. The nation, despite being a distinctly modern phenomenon, is deeply rooted in a primordial connection; it exists at the intersection of civic, territorial, genealogical, ethnic, religious, and cultural bonds. Nationalism prescribes basic value orientations that structure our social lives and help us derive meaning from the world. It also dictates overt identifiers that signal inclusion in a community and the benefits that entails. These overt signals can range from functional commonalities such as language to more cosmetic features like dress or bone structure. Such qualities often carry significant weight; they set the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’—between those afforded rights and protections and those subject to the exercise of state oppression and violence. This significance should not, however, cloud the fact that such features are also essentially arbitrary and subject to change over time. There are infinite modes of variation between individuals along which lines of similarity and difference can be drawn. Given the enormous scale of a nation, it stands to reason that as much difference exists within the group’s boundaries as without. So, in spite of the common perception of the nation as a monolithic, long-established phenomenon with well-defined features, we can say that national identity is actually in a constant state of fluidity and reconstruction. In a nation, as Farhad Dalal points out, “there is always a decision being made as to what aspect [of identification] will be emphasized.” The construction and performance of myths and rituals becomes central to the unity of a group because they validate the importance of, and add meaning to, the otherwise arbitrary content of an identity. These myths and rituals are, principally, expressions of a people’s relationship with its past.

The root of nationalism is the suggestion of continuity—a common thread of history that weaves together the experiences of generations dating back ad infinitum. Thus, the ways in which a society remembers its past can have tremendous bearing on its actions in the here and now. Bakiner argues that the “stability of cohesive social identity depends critically on the preservation of shared collective memories.” If the cohesion of a national identity is central to social order, collective memory narratives are a crucial aspect of political stability. To Nienass and Poole, “collective memory plays the same role in the life of groups as individual memory plays in the life of individuals.” It “transmits the demands of the past into the present,” “reminds us...of those episodes in the past that we ought to take account of,” and pushes us to act in particular ways. Memory narratives provide schema into which current events can be incorporated, contextualized, and understood. But these narratives, just like the identities they constitute, are characterized by some degree of change over time. Collective memory can be said to have a recursive
relationship with the present, where it informs contemporary opinions and actions while simultaneously “draw[ing] on current beliefs and meanings to make sense of the past.”

Kansteiner suggests that collective memory coalesces and fluctuates according to the interaction of forces on three different levels: first, “the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past,” second, “the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions,” and third, “the memory consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artifacts according to their interests.” Thus, memory (and by extension, identity) formation is both a top-down and bottom-up phenomenon. Elites, especially political leaders, often rely on historical narratives to act as a justification for policy options. They can appeal to the historical strength and unity of their people as a means to restore order; they can dig deep into the past to establish the historicity of a conflict as a way to legitimize a war effort; they can even highlight the failures of more recent administrations as a tool to justify higher taxes or austerity measures. It is a means to legitimacy and a mode of mobilization. From a top-down perspective, the utility of historical narratives should be readily apparent.

The degree to which national constituents play a role in the successful formation of historical narratives varies depending on the situation. Mark Wolfram suggests that bottom-up processes of collective memory formation are constrained by what he describes as the state’s ‘cultural matrix’: where on the spectrum between liberal democratic and conservative authoritarian a society is located, as well as the degree to which it is open to outside influence. This will determine a government or elite class’s ability to set, control, and assert a dominant “master narrative.” Once well established in the canon of collective myths and rituals, “master narratives” also tend to become entrenched. Civil society, the arts, global media, and academia offer key channels through which “counter memories” can take shape and gain traction. It should follow that a closed, authoritarian state will have greater leeway in shutting off these alternative modes of memory production. Perhaps the biggest reason for the continued success of Kemalist narratives in Turkish politics is the degree to which the Turkish government was able to institute authoritarian policies that very effectively targeted and eliminated such means of counter-memory production.

A final touchstone of memory studies that is useful when trying to understand the Turkish case is the distinction between competing “memory camps.” Just as the category of ‘memory consumers’ entails a diverse range of people from all walks of life, each with a different perspective, so too are the ‘memory makers’ divided along different sets of ideologies and ambitions. Naturally, the way these elites will utilize history will differ according to the people they seek to mobilize and the goals they want to achieve. Although there is a certain degree of variation allowed within any given narrative, we can say that a discrete “memory camp has formed when a segment of the elite class directly (and publicly) challenges a core feature of some other popular narrative. When a particular memory camp achieves a hegemonic position in political discourse (i.e. becomes the master narrative)—often to the effect of silencing debate over ‘correct’ interpretations of history—it can be said to have achieved the status of “memory regime.”

Until quite recently, the Kemalist memory regime effectively muzzled public dissent with regards to the country’s Ottoman past and history of minority oppression. But Atatürk’s redefinition of ‘Turkishness,’ which pitted western-style modernism against Islamic tradition, set in motion the wheels of an “identity crisis” that persists today. As Turkish society has opened and reopened in the past seventy years, however, the Kemalist
elite have had to face down the proliferation of competing memory camps that seize on some global zeitgeist or repressed fragment of Turkish collective memory. The coups in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997\textsuperscript{29} all represented the military’s attempt to ‘reset’ Turkish politics back in line with Atatürk’s founding principles following a period of disorder and resurgent Islamism.

The failure of the 2016 coup against President Erdogan, however, marks a dramatic break with this trend. The rise of the AKP hinged on a reformist platform that morphed into an ideology of majoritarian conservatism—one that has successfully challenged Kemalist secularism with its Islamic populist lean. This is not to suggest, though, that Kemalism is ‘dead.’ Given that the reverence for Atatürk continues unabated—even among supporters of the overtly Islamist and hard-right National Salvation Party, where nearly half of members surveyed listed him as the greatest man of all time, “even before the Prophet Muhammad”\textsuperscript{30}—it is unlikely that Turkey will ever see a total break with their founder’s ideology. What we can say, though, is that the failed coup marks the successful disarticulation of core tenets of the Kemalist memory regime and the beginning of a new age in Turkish political discourse that is less inhibited by Kemalist political interference: a post-Kemalist era. Before diving into what this means for the future, however, it is important to first discuss the past. Understanding the institutionalization of Kemalism in Turkish politics is a necessary prerequisite for understanding what the implications for its gradual dislodgment from its hegemonic position might be.

**Defining Kemalism**

First, it is necessary to clarify what is actually meant by the term ‘Kemalism.’ This is not an easy task, as there is a great deal of conceptual imprecision in the scholarship on the topic.\textsuperscript{31} ‘Kemalism’ simultaneously connotes a political regime, an ideology, a nation-building strategy, a narration of the history of a state’s formation, and a mythic depiction of its beloved founder. For the vast majority, the Kemalist project was a means to a positive end: despite some potentially ill effects, authoritarian and oppressive policies were always geared towards “developing the preconditions of a democratic order,” and the results were undeniable.\textsuperscript{32} As Turkish society has gradually opened over the past half-century, however, various critical historiographies have arisen to try and redefine its historical significance. Many Marxists of the 1970s and Islamists of the 1990s challenged the claim that the ends justified the means, arguing that Kemalist policies were a hindrance to the country’s development and equating Kemalist narratives to an erasure of the true history of the Turkish people.\textsuperscript{33} By and large, such critical perspectives failed to take root in the greater political arena, and both ultimately played their part in contributing to eventual coups. In a comparative sense, it would also be fair to say that Kemalism, at least in its earliest stages, was not so different from forms of nationalist developmentalism found in many post-colonial societies: it included high levels of state-led industrialization, clientelistic redistribution of land and wealth, and vindictive purges of all remnants of the ancien régime.\textsuperscript{34}

The true definition of Kemalism lies somewhere in between all these concepts. In fact, perhaps its most important feature—the reason it has such staying power—is that it was “never a tight theory,” but rather “consisted of general principles” that evolved over
time. This relative incoherence should not be taken to insinuate that Kemalism was meaningless. In fact, the perception of alignment with Kemalist principles was, for the vast majority of the 20th century, a requisite feature of any successful political movement. Conversely, those fleeting moments of seemingly direct opposition that found resonance in segments of society were met with intense public pushback and eventual military intervention. The standard that Atatürk set for civil-military relations was an essential feature of Kemalism, one that would have profound effects on the country’s governance for the rest of the twentieth century. As Kemal himself declared, “When speaking of the true owners of this country…the Turkish nation…considers its army the guardian of its ideals.”

These fundamental principles, which Atatürk termed his “six arrows,” were republicanism, laicism, nationalism, populism, statism, and reformism. Their purpose was to ensure the unity and progress of the Turkish state. Their premise was to correct the failures and ‘backwardness’ of the Ottoman Empire that had led the Turkish nation to the brink of ruin. The future Atatürk envisioned was centered on a new conceptualization of modernity, one that hinged on crafting a Turkish identity which struck a “balance between the benefits of the West and the East by opting for adopting the science and technology of the former and the spirituality of the latter.”

Unfortunately for Atatürk, such a solution could not be easily achieved. This is largely owed to the fact that his “six arrows” had some glaring incongruities. In particular, the principles of laicism and populism had an inherent conflict given that, at the time of founding, nearly ninety-nine per cent of the citizens of the Republic were Muslims who widely supported the caliphate. The populace simply did not have a desire for secularism. Similarly, there is a fundamental disconnect between the style of statism practiced by the Atatürk regime and the republicanism he desired to instill in his people. Though the “means to an end” argument is certainly relevant in this context, it does not erase the fact that there is some degree of tension between the two principles.

And these tensions cut to the core of the so-called ‘identity crisis’ that persists in Turkey today. Kemalism called for a holistic transformation of Turkish society. Modernism was its primary goal. But the modernism Atatürk and the Kemalist elite desired was imitative of Western standards of progress; standards that went beyond institutional changes like increasing organizational efficiency and bureaucratization and instead sought wholesale societal liberalization. In a social milieu as highly segmented, traditional, agrarian, and religious as post-WWI Anatolia, it was implausible that such changes would occur spontaneously at the grassroots level. Additionally, given the perceived high levels of threat coming from without, internal unity behind the nationalist cause was absolutely imperative. In Atatürk’s mind, the realization of Kemalism’s loftiest ambitions—and the continued survival of the nascent Turkish Republic—required a high degree of state intervention in the nation-building process. In practice, when republicanism, populism, and reformism impeded Atatürk’s homogenizing mission or threatened the unity of the Turkish people, those principles were put on the back burner. Notably, when Atatürk experimented with opening the political system to allow an opposition party on two separate occasions during the first seven years of the Republic, both were quickly shut down under the pretext of “provoking opposition” to Turkish unity. Similarly, though laicism was ostensibly a fundamental aspect of Atatürk’s vision from the outset, his earliest mobilization efforts relied on religious networks for support. Even more shocking is the fact that the early rhetoric of the independence movement was heavily laced with Islamic discourse, with
even Atatürk referring to the national struggle as a jihad.\textsuperscript{42} In fact, prior to the first meeting of the new Grand National Assembly, it was arranged that Sunni clerics would recite the Quran in its entirety, As Hanioğlu writes, “the Islamic character of these opening ceremonies outdid any comparable solemnity in Ottoman history and gave no inkling of the secular revolution to come.”\textsuperscript{43} In terms of governance, Kemalism initially took the form of an authoritarian regime specifically designed to indoctrinate its constituents with a communal identity and extinguish all dissent from that new norm.

That identity—the ‘Turk’—was a virtual blank slate onto which Atatürk could project his ambitions. In fact, it was not until around the end of the nineteenth century that “Turk” began to garner any significance.\textsuperscript{44} Prior to that, the primary forms of identification during the imperial period would have likely been village (or millet) based, religious, tribal, or simply “Ottoman.”\textsuperscript{45} Lines of inclusion and exclusion were not drawn around ethnicity. Atatürk’s Republic, by comparison, was modeled after European nation-states like France and was established around a mix of ethno-linguistic and civic ideals,\textsuperscript{46} ones that pit the country’s future against the failures of its imperial past. Tossing aside the religious foundations of Turkish civilization helped chip away at the institutional dualism that might have otherwise posed a threat to his absolute authority during the nation-building process\textsuperscript{47} while simultaneously signaling a clean break with Ottomanism. This clear distinction between the old Ottoman ways, which led to a humiliating defeat and the near total collapse of Anatolian autonomy, and the bright future of the modern ‘Turks’ was the cornerstone of Kemalist policies. But the outright replacement of an old collective identity with a new one would not come easy. It hinged on a total reconstruction of Turkish institutions, a campaign of oppressive policies geared towards rooting out difference, and the quite literal re-writing of history.

Disputes over the true intentions or real meaning of Kemalism are unlikely to end any time soon. Ultimately, though, it can be said that Kemalism was more concerned with the politics of control than any of its specific philosophical pillars. Its successful ascent to hegemony stemmed from a mix of the admiration for Atatürk, the institutionalization of Kemalist histories, and the coercive termination of dissent wherever it reared its head. Though one could argue whether or not Atatürk’s vision ever came to fruition, it is indisputable Kemalism was the driving force behind the most monumental moments of Republican Turkey’s history.

\textbf{The Institutionalization of Kemalism}

The hegemony of Kemalism is inseparable from the historical context in which it arose. Though the country was unready for many of the reforms Atatürk sought to establish, the gratitude he garnered from snatching victory from the hands of defeat in the National Struggle of 1919-1922 enabled him to act without opposition.\textsuperscript{48} Following the disastrous failure of the Ottoman campaigns in the First World War, the empire was overrun with occupiers looking to divvy up its territory. The Treaty of Sèvres was a punitive peace that sought to punish the Turks for their collaboration with the Germans and their treatment of the Armenians in particular.\textsuperscript{49} Part II, Article 27 stipulated the total dismemberment of Ottoman territories, dividing them into between the Greeks, French, and British and creating independent Armenian and Kurdish states—leaving only a small
piece of central Anatolia bordering the Black Sea and occupied Istanbul to be governed by
the Sultanate. But during the treaty's negotiation period, remnants of the previous
Ottoman regime, particularly members of the Young Turk’s Committee of Union and
Progress (CUP), were hard at work sowing the seeds of resistance. By 1920, the “rights
societies” they formed in the latter stages of the war held nearly thirty congresses geared
towards establishing “secure sovereignty” of the Turkish state. Thus began the
splintering of the Turkish government, with a shadow government and military forming in
central Anatolia while the Sultan and his cronies negotiated in Istanbul. By the time the
Greeks arrived in Izmir in May 1919 to claim the territories bestowed upon them by the yet
unsigned peace agreement, Mustafa Kemal—“the most successful Ottoman commander of
World War I”—had already mobilized forces to challenge them. The Entente occupiers,
already wary from years of bloodshed and content with the mandates they had built out of
the outer Ottoman territories, were unwilling to engage in yet another all out war for the
spheres of influence they had established in Anatolia. Thus, following the Greek retreat
after several years of significant defeats, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed and the
‘shadow government’ led by Mustafa Kemal had solidified its legitimate sovereignty over
Anatolia on the international stage.

The National Struggle of 1919-1923 was, by definition, an existential one. With
international powers circling the Ottoman ruins like vultures, the former Ottoman citizens
felt ostracized, shamed, and vulnerable. In many ways, these conditions would become
enshrined in Turkish identity for decades to come. Mustafa Kemal’s military campaign,
however, restored some sense of pride and security. But, as Carter poignantly notes,
Turkey’s National Struggle actually “consisted of two simultaneous struggles.” Insofar as
the National Struggle was a war for sovereignty, it had been a total success. The second
struggle, however—the political campaign to create a unified nationalist movement—had
only just begun. This was a battle over the hearts and minds of the people, vying to
establish society-wide buy-in to the developmentalist project that set the upending of the
old social order as a necessary precondition. This was the beginning of the
institutionalization of what would come to be known as Kemalism.

Though post-hoc attributions of labels like “nationalist war for independence” are
common in the literature on Turkey’s National Struggle, it is important that we
problematize the limited degree to which “nationalism,” in a strict sense, actually pushed
Anatolian peasants to fight. The early mobilization efforts were primarily driven through
religious channels and called upon the “Ottoman Muslim majority” (rather than the
“Turks”) to challenge the postwar seizure of land; as such, it would be a stretch to claim
that the motivations for the resistance were purely ethno-nationalistic. In point of fact,
the vast majority of the population was virtually apolitical for most of the Republic’s early
years. The people were not nationally conscious. Keyder goes so far as to label the Turkish
nationalist project as “an extreme example of a situation in which the masses remained
silent partners and the modernizing elite did not attempt to accommodate popular
resentment,” and that the Turkish public, “generally remained passive recipients of the
nationalist message propounded by the elites.” Thus, from the perspective of Kansteiner’s
model of collective memory formation, when it came time to introduce the Kemalist
memory regime, Atatürk did not focus much at all on the concerns of the “memory
consumers.” As the sole arbiter of the character of the new Turkish identity—effectively a
monolithic “memory maker”—Atatürk’s chief concern was ensuring support from elites as he dismantled the existing intellectual and cultural traditions in favor of his own. In spite of rhetoric that wanted to suggest a total, clean break with the Ottoman regime, there was a high degree of continuity—in terms of elite, government, and military personnel—between the Second Constitutional Era of the Ottoman Empire (1908-1918) and the new republic. Kemal’s stranglehold on the military apparatus was particularly unassailable, a fact which directly influenced the military’s longstanding identity as protector of Kemalist ideals. The precedent Atatürk went on to set—of leaving near total control over the recruitment, training and promotion processes in the hands of the military—cemented this role. As for the government personnel, Atatürk was quick to fire, jail, and execute many of his would-be political opponents on the pretense of being beholden to the old regime. What remained was Atatürk’s new Republican People’s Party (CHP), which largely consisted of the bureaucratic remnants of the Young Turk and Young Ottoman movements, who had long espoused the same goals of modernism, secularism, and industrialization but never had the opportunity nor political will to achieve them. A fundamental aspect of the National Struggle’s success, the co-optation of the conservative elite to the cause of the “managerial-technical” and military elite, hinged on the convergence of the two group’s interests. Though ideologically opposed, the material conditions of the post-WWI era drove them to ally with one another. In one respect, military contracts were a potential windfall to these elites. More important, though, were concerns over property rights. Keyder asserts that the political structure of the Ottoman Empire inhibited the growth of a strong landlord class and left huge tracts of land under government control. Additionally, the genocide and mass relocation of Armenians, Greeks and other non-Muslim minorities from 1915 through the early 1920s left territory ripe for the picking. Thus, to the propertied agrarian Muslim elite throughout Anatolia, the Treaty of Sevres would have meant the seizure of huge amounts property and the possibility of reprisals. Conversely, the success of the Kemal’s National Struggle would see that land become, “part of the dowry of the new state that could be distributed to the rest of the population.” Thus, after 1923, the redistribution of the spoils of Atatürk’s war became a means of creating a new, subservient, and native bourgeoisie to replace the old, diverse merchant/landowning class that had been decimated in the war. The clear implication of all this is that the Armenian genocide (and the related forced relocation and killing of other minorities) was a foundational aspect of Atatürk’s Turkish Republic. The Ottoman Empire, or as Karen Barkey terms it, the “Empire of Difference,” was well known for the immense diversity of its population and relative tolerance of religious minorities. The onset of proto-nationalist uprisings in the Balkans during the Second Constitutional Era stirred a growing fear of enemies arising from within, which in turn transformed into the regime’s chauvinistic pivot from ‘Ottomanism’ to ‘Turkism’—with devastating effect. By 1923, the Anatolian population Atatürk set to unify under a single communal identity was already drastically more homogenous thanks to the ‘Turkification’ policies (and eventual forced relocation and genocide) instituted under the Young Turks and Committee of Union and Progress. Thus, the permissive conditions for the second half of Atatürk’s campaign, the struggle to create Turkish national consciousness, were set. What followed was an assault on all forms of deviation from the new norms dictated from the office of the president.
First and foremost, alongside Atatürk’s initial purges of political opposition, was the depoliticizing of the deeply entrenched religious institutions. As has been discussed, the central role that Islam played in the mobilization effort for the National Struggle was little more than a bait-and-switch maneuver. Once in power, Atatürk was quick to renege on his rhetoric and began a rapid assault on Islamized political institutions. On March 3rd, 1924, just five months in, the Grand National Assembly passed three pieces of legislation that individually abolished the Office of the Islamic Caliphate (ending over five hundred years of dynastic Islamic rule in the region), eliminated the Ministry of Shari'a (i.e. all Islamic courts, replacing them instead with European legal codes), and brought the Ministry of Education under full state control (i.e. closing Islamic schools). Within a year and a half, Islamic orders like the Naqshbandi were outlawed, Islamic headgear was banned, the modified Roman alphabet was adopted, and the Islamic calendar was replaced with the Western Gregorian calendar. Shortly thereafter, the teaching and writing in Arabic script was outlawed, and eventually even the call to prayer was required to be sung in Turkish. But while these reforms were certainly extreme, it is important not to fall prey to the common misconception that Atatürk sought to totally erase Islam from the republic. Waxman claims that from the start, Sunni Islam was a central component of Turkish identity. The religious curricula in state-run schools equated religion with Islam, and Islam with Sunnis. But from a political utility perspective, the primacy of the supraethnic, international bond of the umma (the global Muslim community) within Islamic scripture posed a direct threat to the hegemony of Turkish identity. Always fearful of outside forces trying to tear his nation apart, Atatürk could not suffer potential cross-border loyalties to some non-Turkish religious leader or group. Furthermore, the Kemalist regime would not afford Islamic courts and schools any possibility of subverting the legal and educational enforcement of the new Turkish identity. Hanioglu claims that Kemal and other republican leaders genuinely believed that a privatized, Turkified Islam would simply, “render the orthodox religious establishment…obsolete.” Similarly, Carter argues, “the purpose of the laicizing reforms was not to separate religion and state, but to bring religion under state control.”

Unsurprisingly, these reforms were wildly unpopular. Though the masses were passive and apolitical at the outset of the nation-building process, these serious restrictions on their traditional way of life began stirring some degree of political consciousness in certain segments of society. Of particular importance was a 1925 rebellion led by the religious leader Shaikh Said. Although the uprising was based on religious motives—hoping to gain control of a large portion of the tribal lands in the mountainous region of Eastern Anatolia and re-establish the caliphate—the vast majority of those involved were ethnically Kurdish. The Kemalist regime therefore treated the revolt as ethnic insubordination. A similar insurrection at Mount Ararat a few years later thereby solidified the Kurds as an ongoing threat to Turkish unity, resulting in harsh government reprisals, forced relocation and eventually the near-genocidal response to yet another Kurdish revolt in Dersim in 1937. These brutally oppressive responses to the Kurds, despite being intrinsically driven by the Kemalist ambitions of ethnic unity, had the paradoxical effect of awakening the national consciousness of the Kurdish people. Given that the Kurdish issue has remained at the center of so much of Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy issues for nearly a century, this is perhaps the clearest example of Kemalism’s lasting effect on Turkish politics.
But while the Kurds were the most disproportionately targeted minority in Turkey (likely due to the fact that they are the largest ethnic minority in the country), their treatment was indicative of more general policies of ethnic oppression. As early as 1924, schools were legally barred from teach any language other than Turkish. Even more extreme was the stipulation that any form of political association “must not claim that there are any minorities in the territory of the Turkish Republic, as this would undermine national unity.” This amounted to the virtual erasure of the existence of any minority identity from all political discourse during the Republic’s early years. From thereon out, everyone was legally a Turk, and the ‘Kurds’ were officially rebranded as “mountain Turks.” In the 1930s this de-ethnicization of politics coincided with widespread westernizing measures propagated through so-called “People’s Houses,” which were established all throughout the country. These renovated Turkish Hearth Associations held movie screenings, jazz concerts, and dances all in hopes of replacing traditional cultural practices with new, modern, and state-sanctioned ones.

All these policies highlight the core essence of the Kemalist project: to totally erase all vestiges of Ottomanism—vestiges which Atatürk faulted for the near demise of his people—and replace them with the attributes necessary to ensure a bright, modern future. The coercive measures taken to punish dissent—perhaps most absurdly demonstrated in the execution of fifty-seven individuals, including prominent Islamic intellectuals, for refusing to give up the traditional Muslim fez in favor of western-style top hats—were a central feature of this project. But even more important was the comprehensive re-education program that was instituted in concert with the prohibition of alternative forms of large-group identity. The Turkish nation required a founding myth, a narrative that could supplant Ottoman collective memories. Nowhere is this narrative more clearly laid out than in Atatürk’s legendary six-day, thirty-six hour long speech to the Grand National Assembly in 1927, the Nutuk.

Coming on the heels of a particularly thorough political purge after the uncovering of an assassination plot in 1926, Atatürk addressed the congress with a history of events from the beginning of the National Struggle up to that point. In many ways it functioned as a justification for his actions. But more than just an impassioned personal account, the Nutuk laid out a narrative of the Turkish nation’s genesis, purpose, and destiny. It was a teleology that painted Mustafa Kemal as a sort of omniscient prophet, the savior of his nation who from day one separated the ‘real Turks’ from the enemies that would try and bring them down. It depicted Turks as an intrinsically militaristic people willing to fight for their nation and demonized the dangerous enemies within, namely the Sultan and the “crowd of madmen” comprised in his government. He described the lonely nation’s encirclement by highly homogenized foreign adversaries like the Greeks, French, English and Italians, gleefully awaiting the chance to tear them apart. He fearfully decried the penetration of these enemies within Turkish society, particularly the Armenian and Greek Christian minority. In the speech, Atatürk also adeptly redefined Turkish history, digging up distant memories of their pre-Islamic Turkish ancestry. This was a particularly significant rhetorical signal, the reviving of an alternative “usable past.” Historicity is a vital facet of legitimacy. By highlighting the deep history of the Turkish ethnicity, which extended well before Islam or the Ottoman Empire took root in Turkish lands, Atatürk demonstrated the apparent primacy of that identity. What this implied, then, was that Islam—and especially the Ottoman Empire—were just pieces of a much larger puzzle. This
allowed Atatürk to separate the Ottoman Turks from the history of the Ottoman Empire, which in turn afforded him the right to demonize the Ottoman period as an aberration in the grand scale of Turkish history dating back to the primordium.\(^8\)8 To Kemal, the hubris of the Ottoman sultans’ expansionist desires to rule the world had nearly brought the destruction of the Turkish people.\(^8\)9 The survival and prosperity of the Turkish nation, he argued, could only be achieved by looking inward—saving Turkey for the Turks.

Once the narrative was set, the Kemalist regime set out to institutionalize it. Understanding “power of ‘history’ not just to record the past but also to produce the future,” Atatürk had the Nutuk published and widely distributed in Turkish, English, French and German.\(^9\)0 The speech would go on to shape historical writing on the National Struggle and early republic for generations to come, largely without critical engagement with its contents.\(^9\)1 Hülya Adak makes the compelling argument that this lack of criticism stems from the fact that the way the Nutuk tells its story, from the first-person perspective of the heroic founder, which essentially equated an attack on the narrative to an attack on Atatürk himself.\(^9\)2 With a new history set in stone, the nationalized schools became the primary modality through which its message of strength through unity could spread. In Atatürk’s words, “the first duty of education is to raise individuals to function well in the society, educate them and furnish them with culture.”\(^9\)3 Courses like ‘Turkish History,’ ‘Turkish Geography,’ and ‘National Studies’ were staples of the national curriculum.\(^9\)4 Their content was structured around the so-called “Turkish History Thesis.” This thesis maintained that Turkish (or ‘proto-Turkish’) “migrants from Central Asia had been responsible for the spread of civilization to all corners of the earth, and by implication, even modern Western civilization was itself Turkish in origin.”\(^9\)5 By extension, Kemalist westernization measures were justified as a natural feature of Turkish development. Similarly, the characterization of other ethnicities (and languages) as being Turkish descendants justified the erasure of ethno-linguistic difference. Lastly, though it was widely disparaging of the Ottoman period, significant historical moments such as the Conquest of Constantinople in 1453 were included in the Turkish History Thesis, but credited to ‘Turks’ rather than ‘Ottomans.’\(^9\)6

Beyond the schools, the narrative laid out in the Nutuk also had far-reaching effects on economic and foreign policy. In terms of the economy, Atatürk and his advisors were extremely adept at positioning themselves well in response to global trends. Possibly seeking to re-establish their credibility in the international arena and to garner assistance in the reconstruction era, the early years of the republic were characterized by openness to foreign investment and trade.\(^9\)7 By the time the global economic depression started to sink in, however, the Kemalist regime had smartly transitioned to robust program of import-substitution industrialization (ISI).\(^9\)8 State-owned enterprises rapidly expanded and government opened the Central Bank and several state banks.\(^9\)9 The mass industrialization project that began to set in during the 1930s also contributed to (and was bolstered by) rapid urbanization around the country. While many other developing nations faced serious economic crises that undermined the ruling regime’s authority, it can be said that inward-focusing Kemalist economic statism not only saved Turkey from financial ruin, but actually helped propel it to become arguably the “second most successful independent developing nation outside Europe and North America, outstripped by only Japan.”\(^10\)0

Another way in which Turkey saved money was through a significant reduction in military spending.\(^10\)1 Though the Nutuk is thoroughly colored by the omnipresence of foreign threat, the great speech also hinged upon the key argument that, as Atatürk said,
“the state’s foreign policy’s most important base is the inner structure of that state,” and, “an attack is always followed by a counterattack.” Atatürk’s obsession with all things domestic left little room for any foreign quarrels. Atatürk’s foreign policy was so non-confrontational, in fact, that he even allied with two of his country’s greatest historical enemies—Russia and Greece—for a period of time. The 1930s were marked by Turkey’s negotiation into a series of international institutions, most notably joining the League of Nations in 1932, joining in the Balkan Pact of 1934 (involving Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia), and signing the Sadaabad Pact of 1937 (including Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan). Kemalism’s non-alignment and domestic focus was crucial to the country’s early development; furthermore, it set the standard for Turkey’s non-aggression for nearly half a century—save for its declaration of War on the Axis powers at the end of WWII and its limited role in the UN forces in Korea, both of which were expressly geared towards gaining UN and NATO membership. However, it should not be forgotten that other cornerstones of Kemalism, namely the active denial of the Armenian genocide and the brutal oppression of its Kurdish minority, continue to severely complicate the country’s diplomatic relations today.

By the time Mustafa Kemal Atatürk died in 1938, his legacy was written in stone—quite literally, in fact, considering the ubiquity of busts, statues and monuments depicting his likeness in prominent public spaces in virtually every city and town in the country. Atatürk’s absolute control over the intellectual and cultural traditions allowed him to craft a Kemalist master narrative that would both guide and justify his oppressive construction of a new Turkish identity. Though the chauvinistic Kemalist histories might not have immediately caught on, owing largely to the fact that it was impossible for the Kemalist regime to erase Turkish citizens’ memories of lived experiences prior to the republic, the nationalization of the schools went on to become one of Kemalism’s biggest successes. In fact, these wildly inaccurate and overtly politicized versions of history persist even today. One can also reasonably argue that the frequency with which Kemal made reference to ethno-religiously defined enemies during the Nutuk (and elsewhere) is indicative of the xenophobia that he wished to instill as a core, unifying feature of ‘Turkishness’. Haynes argues, based on a series of recent opinion polls in Turkey, that a general fear of foreigners—both Western and Muslim alike—and their desires to dismember the Turkish nation-state is a defining feature of modern Turkish identity. But even beyond the crafting of new national selves, Mustafa Kemal’s nation-building ideology would go on to play an central role in Turkish politics for generations after his death.

**Kemalism After Kemal: The Staying Power of Atatürk’s Legacy**

As is usually the case when a country loses its charismatic autocrat, Atatürk’s death marked the beginning of political fractionalization that had long bubbled under the surface. İsmet İnönü, the long-time Prime Minister and close associate of Atatürk, was elected with widespread support. İnönü was himself a devout Kemalist; indeed, many of Atatürk’s policies were directed and executed by İnönü. His tenure was marked by a strong degree of continuity with old policies. But within a year of his presidency, World War II had commenced, a fact that seriously complicated his presidency—especially with regard to economic matters. Throughout the war, İnönü stayed true to the “Turkey above all else”
mantra, selling valuable Turkish chromite (a key ingredient in steel production) to both the Axis and the Allies and remaining neutral until the very last months of the war.\textsuperscript{107} Furthermore, in an attempt to deal with the struggling wartime economy, İnönü passed the Capital Tax of 11 November 1942, which set religion and ethnicity as the criteria upon which tax levels would be set, costing non-Muslims up to ten times as much as Muslims and deporting the Greeks, Armenians, and Jews who default to labor camps.\textsuperscript{108} By 1945, however, the defensive mobilization of the Turkish military placed heavy burdens on agrarian landed elites; simultaneously, the economic opportunities of the war grew the clout of the urban merchant class who would then go on to seek political power.\textsuperscript{109}

The CHP had begun to lose control the coalition of elites that had backed it since the founding of the Republic—the period of single-party rule by the People’s Republican Party (CHP) was coming to a close. İnönü sensed this growing discontent and, through a series of critical decisions that would mark the beginning of a new era in Turkish politics, opened the Republic to direct (i.e. public, rather than two-stage) multiparty elections in 1946 and willfully gave up his seat after the CHP’s surprisingly massive electoral defeat in 1950.

Adnan Menderes, leader of the Democratic Party (DP), was the first non-CHP president of Turkey. The DP rose to power by running on a reform platform that railed against the antidemocratic and elite-serving policies that had characterized the previous twenty-five years of CHP rule. Despite this rhetoric, the DP was comprised almost entirely of segments of that elite class—former CHP members. In terms of actual policy positions, virtually the only major difference between the two parties was the DP’s desire to liberalize the economy. Critically, both the CHP and DP espoused commitment to Kemalist ideals. Furthermore, despite campaign promises to overhaul the antidemocratic laws in place, Menderes instead used those same laws against his political opponents. With the opposition parties effectively handicapped, the DP went on to win landslide victories in the following two elections. The stranglehold the Democratic Party had garnered on the political system inevitably led to in-fighting and fracturing that were again met by increasingly undemocratic reactions. After ridding himself of many of his former allies (and a serious economic downturn led the government to impose harsh austerity measures which seriously hampered his public support), Menderes’ control of the government stemmed almost entirely from autocratic policies. His effort to bar the CHP from the assembly while it was “under investigation,” was the straw that broke the camel’s back, thus leading to the 1960 military takeover.\textsuperscript{110}

Contemporary opinions on the nature of the 1960 coup are extremely divided. In many respects, the military takeover stemmed from a loss of power—both for the CHP and the military. Indeed, multiparty politics marked the end of the “symbiotic link between the army and the regime,” and Menderes’ removal of some of the top brass did not help.\textsuperscript{111} The erosion of military salaries due to inflation and economic stagnation also certainly played a role.\textsuperscript{112} However, characterizations of the military apparatus being in the pocket of the CHP are often exaggerated; in fact, large segments of the military strongly supported the DP even before they took power.\textsuperscript{113}

The degree to which Menderes had acted against Kemalist ideals is also highly debatable. Foreign policy-wise, it could be argued that the hard turn towards the West after WWII—actively seeking Marshall Plan funds and membership in NATO—was a departure from the Kemalist tradition of non-alignment. But given the potentially colossal threat posed by the rising power of their historical adversary, the USSR, and given the fact that
this westward turn actually began under İnönü—undeniably the most Kemalist president besides Kemal himself—this argument is somewhat dubious. Additionally, Menderes antidemocratic tendencies were not inherently anti-Kemalist, given Atatürk’s penchant for autocracy. Furthermore, Menderes did little to undermine the Turkish identity narrative or Kemalist memory regime. Perhaps the only significant challenges posed to Kemalism during the DP’s rule were the program of economic liberalization (which acted against statism) and the reversal of the ban on the Arabic call to prayer (which acted against laicism). But these somewhat minor transgressions were far less important than effects of public perception. Given that the party of Atatürk was the primary target of the political oppression, there was naturally some perception that Menderes was indirectly attacking Kemalism. The Democratic Party’s actions in the last years of its rule had stirred widespread social unrest, especially from the CHP bloc, which pushed the government to declare a state of emergency. With the reigns in the hands of the military, it came down to an issue of the military’s institutional identity. “Faced with the conviction that the Democrats were undermining Kemalism,” the military sided with solidifying its role “as the bedrock of the Kemalist regime.”

A year later, after a new constitution was drafted and ratified, the military handed power back to the civilian government. Thereafter a precedent had been set, one that affirmed the military’s role as an independent Kemalist watchdog willing to step in and reset the government when civilian politics went awry.

The re-entry into multiparty democracy also led to another interesting development. Though the top DP leadership had been executed and the party was legally disbanded following the 1960 coup, the party’s constituents quickly and successfully reorganized into the new Justice Party (AP). In spite of the expectation that the CHP would ease back into total control, the first election of the ‘Second Republic’ was a tight race, resulting the formation of a CHP-AP coalition government. Owing to the 1961 Constitution’s drastic opening of the political space in the country, the 1960s would continue as a period of uneasy coalition rule during which ideological divides would proliferate and fester. An important link in this chain of events was the degree to which public participation in politics had developed since the founding of the republic. The economic growth leading to increased social welfare, the growing reach of public education, and rapid urbanization all helped contribute to the explosion of political activity that began in the late 1950s and only continued to grow through the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, this opening of the ‘cultural matrix’ spurred the deep penetration of the global Marxist phenomenon and related leftist movements. This, in turn, sparked the growth of right-wing counter movements. By the end of the 1960s, these ideological differences would give way to violence.

Intriguingly, though, virtually all of these new movements sought to justify their ideologies through Kemalism. The left praised Atatürk’s statist national economic development and “anti-imperialist” stance against the West; conversely, the right appealed to his strong, centralized authority and his ‘Turks-first’ mentality. As Esen writes, gradually:

Owing to [its] hegemonic status, Kemalism appropriated, co-opted, and modified a host of political ideas, just as various movements appealed to different aspects of Kemalism to conjure legitimacy for their respective agendas. As each of these groups developed their own interpretation of Mustafa Kemal’s legacy, Kemalism began to lose some of its ideological coherence.
It is clearly apparent that the contents of Atatürk’s historical identity narrative, as well as the legal measures and commemorative practices upholding his legacy, remained totally intact. However, ideological divides over how to interpret his six arrows plagued the unity of the country. Republicanism was well established, but the nature of what modernism, statism, populism, laicism, and even nationalism meant for the republic was hotly contested. The two large, centrist parties that dominated the elections proved totally incapable of working together, thus leading to a total breakdown of governance, law, and order. It would also spur the successful growth of smaller, more extreme parties that further polarized the political arena.

These conditions would persist and worsen throughout the 1970s. In 1971, the military issued a memorandum “demanding the formation of a strong government that could end anarchy and carry out reforms ‘in a Kemalist spirit’.” Unfortunately, the reformed government remained an ineffective coalition—this time growing to include a smaller, right wing party. Its repressive tendencies (i.e. its campaign of mass incarceration and torture) only seemed to inflate the societal problems. The success of that small third party, the National Salvation Party (MSP), was the first openly Islamist political party to play a role in controlling the government—albeit a minute role. The MSP’s inclusion in government was an important symbol of the changing political landscape, in which irreparable fragmentation and ideological conflict had consolidated currents of extremist identity politics into small but cohesive associations. Another key minority party like this was the National Action Party (MHP), an ultranationalist organization founded on the premise that the CHP had abandoned Atatürk’s core values in the 1960s. The MHP was responsible for the rise of the militant “gray wolves” and other “idealist associations” that clashed with leftist terrorist/militant groups. By the end of the decade, conditions had deteriorated to levels of anarchy and violence even worse than in the late 1960s. Though certain currents of extremism had begun to vocalize dissent from Kemalist principles, the chaos of the 1970s could at least partially be described as a rhetorical battle to color the content of Kemalism with a particular ideological hue.

However, the descent towards a virtual civil war would, by 1980, necessitate yet another military intervention—one far more decisive than the memorandum of 1971. According to Birol Yesilada:

Rough estimates of deaths from political violence grew as follows: 1975, 35; 1976, 90; 1977, 260; 1978, 800-1; 1979, 1,500; and 1980, 3,500...When the military coup took place, the generals moved quickly to end domestic political violence. Within a year, 150,000-200,000 individuals were arrested and, by 1983, some 39,529 persons were given jail sentences. For three years following the seizure of the means of governance, the military establishment worked tirelessly to coerce the public out of its state of intractable political discord. Early efforts were geared towards rounding up the major political leaders, shutting down the extremist parties, criminalizing public political activity, and instituting widespread economic liberalization reforms. But the arrest and indictment of fundamentalist leaders could not last forever, as banned parties were quick to reorganize under new names. The radical currents of Marxist-Leninism, fascistic ultra-nationalism, and Islamic fundamentalism continued to lurk in the shadows. In 1982, a new constitution was put in place to curb the potential influence of these forces. The constitution widely expanded presidential power, got rid of the second chamber of congress, and set a high
threshold for gaining seats (10%) in order to prevent splinter parties from playing a decisive role in coalitions.¹²⁵ These reforms would prove hugely consequential to the rise of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party just two decades later. But the military regime’s actions went beyond institutional changes. Sensing the intractability of the country’s ideological divide, the military leaders set out on a unifying mission. It was in this context that the military took the first steps towards undermining its strict observance for Kemalist principles.

Effectively what came about was the government’s reopening of Turkish Islamic public life as a means of mending society’s deepest divisions. The “Turkish Islamic Synthesis,” as it came to be known, was a campaign in which military rulers sought to integrate Islamic values back into politics and education in order to strengthen national unity.¹²⁶ In essence, the rationale behind this move was that Kemalism could no longer suffice as a unifying tool on its own. By making space for a populist turn towards recognizing the overwhelmingly Muslim character of the Turkish population, it was believed that there would be a huge flight of political support from both extremes of the political spectrum back to the center.¹²⁷ The government sought to co-opt a less political Islam to combat “a much-exaggerated 'leftist threat.”¹²⁸ In some ways, this move paralleled the logic behind Atatürk’s appeal to a homogenous, all-encompassing definition of Turkish identity in order to bandage the diversity he faulted for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Similarly, the post-1980 government’s use of schools to inculcate the people with its message was also congruent with Atatürk’s strategy. Waxman explains that the “Turkish Islamic Synthesis” was not about replacing Turkish national identity with Islamic religious identity, but rather the cooption of that religious identity as a central feature of Turkishness.¹²⁹ The military erred on the side of sacrificing ideological purity for the sake of Kemalism’s greater mission: maintaining the nation “as the principle locus of collective political identification.”¹³⁰ Furthermore, save for the moderate recognition of Islam, the military continued its rhetorical commitment to Kemalist principles, even intervening one last time in 1997 on the basis of the elected coalition’s overtly Islamist platform.

Arguably, the “Turkish Islamic Synthesis” helped to restore order to the country and contributed to the collapse of the far-left. It also contributed to the successful privatization of mass media, economic liberalization, and middle class growth under Özal, as well as the beginning of the country’s bid to join the European Union.¹³¹ However, this does not negate the fact that it was an affront to Kemalism’s foundations. It opened the door for further challenges to the hegemonic Kemalist “master narrative.” Furthermore, when the synthesis eventually failed to produce another desired result—namely, the crippling of fundamentalist Islamic parties—the military effectively reneged on its commitment to other Kemalist principles like populism and republicanism. The 1997 ‘postmodern coup’ ousted the fairly elected Islamist Welfare Party (RP)—a direct descendent of the Islamist National Salvation Party (MSP) led by the same man, Necmettin Erbakan. Though Erbakan’s base of support was relatively small compared to traditional ruling parties (receiving only 21.4% of the vote), the politically conscious masses were suspicious of what seemed to be the military and secular elite’s attempt at an antidemocratic power grab.¹³² A critical mass in the public, both secular and Islamist, had finally grown weary of the military’s antics.
Erdogan, the AKP, & the End of Kemalism’s Hegemony

It was in this context that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) would begin its rapid ascent to political supremacy. The “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” quickly took root in the education system, popular media, and society. Furthermore, Özlü's accommodating approach to Islam after the end of military rule in 1983 opened the floodgates for more public displays of faith by politicians. But by the early 1990s, Özlü's Motherland Party (ANAP) was incapable of maintaining its hold over a majority in the political center. Granted the opportunity, peripheral political figures like Necmettin Erbakan successfully grew the political footprint of more overtly Islamist parties, bringing them into the governmental fold by the mid-1990s—a fact that greatly upset the largely secular elite class. Particularly worrying to these elites was the Welfare Party's rhetoric of a Muslim “reconquest” of Istanbul and other parts of Turkey. Multiple instances of brazenly Islamist oratory from Welfare Party members marked the crossing of a red line that ended in the 1997 military memorandum. One such instance, in which the Mayor of Istanbul recited lines from a famous poem by a pre-Ottoman sultan that likened minarets to bayonets and believers to soldiers, resulted in a ten-month jail sentence for inciting hatred on the basis of religion and a decade-long ban from holding political office. That mayor was Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

By the early 2000s, public resentment of elite corruption and government overreach had reached a fever pitch. Though legally barred from office, Erdogan reentered the political scene in earnest, using his newfound fame as a vocal critic of the establishment to jumpstart a mass movement. The Justice and Development Party, founded by Erdogan, was constituted by a coalition of right-wing politicians whose political backgrounds included both centrist and Islamist associations. The party campaigned heavily on a reformist platform that was, above all else, economically focused. Within fifteen months of its formation, the Erdogan's party had secured a majority in national elections; just a few years later, AKP political leadership had nullified Erdogan's ban from politics. The AKP has since been able to main that majority in parliament for over a decade and a half, the only sign of faltering occurring in June 2015 (which was reversed after a hung parliament resulted in a snap election later that year, reaffirming the AKP's control).

Ideologically, the AKP initially ran on a philosophy of self-defined “conservative democracy,” which favored limited and well-defined power legitimized by popular sovereignty and rule of law. Though Erdogan’s roots were initially grounded in a more extremist Islamism, his AKP years have been dominated by a much more moderate stance on religion’s role in government. This is not to suggest it is totally unproblematic, however. In effect, the AKP has toed ideological lines in such a way that it could sponge up the support of several other parties. A 2002 pre-election survey showed that just a quarter of its base had voted for the Islamist Virtue Party (heir to the Welfare Party) in 1999; the rest was built off of stealing support from the ultranationalist National Action Party (21.9%), the center-right Motherland Party (9.2%) and True Path Party (7.3%), and even the center-left Democratic Left Party (6.9%). Center-right parties have traditionally fared best in Turkish politics since the opening of multiparty politics in 1950. By successfully weaving appeals to the far-right into his rhetoric, the AKP has coalesced into a party of nearly insurmountable majoritarian allure. This was compounded by the major successes of the
country under AKP rule, which saw a stabilized economy, reduced inflation, widespread anti-corruption investigations and trials, reform to the military-led National Security Council (a body which had wielded undue influence over the political sphere for decades), and minor concessions to minority rights. After this majority had congealed in the 2007 and 2011 elections, the AKP leadership was afforded the strength to further, “undercut the military’s role in politics and force judicial, bureaucratic, and higher education institutions to cooperate with the government.”

Bakiner argues that these victories amounted to an exhibition of a new, alternative form of progress, one divorced from Kemalist understandings that equated modernism to secular westernism. Erdogan’s alleged attainment of the primary goal of the Kemalist project—modernity—was itself grounds for the beginning of the disarticulation of that philosophy. Interestingly, it could well be argued that Kemalism directly produced this result. The mission to construct a highly homogenous, monolithic, and rigidly self-concerning Turkish collective identity was a success. For generations that identity—and the modernity it was geared towards creating—had been dictated solely via top-down measures. Once education and economic development brought the masses into the political fold, however, those successes inadvertently led to the seizure of the means of socio-political control by a populist majoritarian. Progress, it seemed, was now accessible through popular means—achievable without the intervention of a secularist, Westernizing military or elite class. As time has worn on, various trials, purges, laws, and constitutional referenda, have allowed Erdogan to increasingly chip away at what remains of the military-elite stratum’s foothold in Turkish politics. The changes made to the constitution in 2010 and 2017 were particularly effective in first breaking “the monopoly of the secularist judges in both the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors,” narrowing “the domain of military privileges and immunities,” and consolidating near-total power in the executive.

Even beyond his attempts to weaken Kemalism’s institutional standard-bearers, Erdogan similarly set out to challenge the core features of the Kemalist master narrative. Rather than attempting to highlight the failures of Kemalism for the purpose of affirming plurality, growing liberties and protections, and walking back some of the more egregiously repressive laws in the country, Erdogan has instead used his success to simply displace Kemalism with his equally coercive “majoritarian conservatism.” Bakiner writes:

The AKP’s strategy is to re-narrate the history of the twentieth century as the struggle of democratic Muslim masses struggling against the authoritarian encroachments of the Kemalist civilian-military elite upon democracy and human rights. This narrative, while holding some essential truths, whitewashes the agency of conservative-nationalist politicians and masses in many Republican-era atrocities. It also obscures the government’s failure to tackle present domestic conflicts.

Much of the groundwork for this discursive shift had already been laid during the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” of the 1980s. But the ruling politicians in the 1980s and 1990s had still been constrained by the possibility of further military intervention on Kemalist grounds, and unsanctioned challenges to the Kemalist memory regime were met with reproach from elites. After a series of impressive electoral performances, Erdogan has seemed to shrug off such worries. Though never going so far as to directly attack Atatürk’s legacy, Erdogan has worked to subtly subvert Kemalism. He has faced “criticism for interfering with official
commemorations of republican anniversaries associated with Atatürk.”

In 2011, he made the highly unprecedented move of apologizing for an atrocity committed on behalf of the state: the massacre of thousands of Kurds at Dersim in 1937-1938. This highly calculated move simultaneously cast a shadow on the previously unassailable period of Kemalist rule in the First Republic (during Atatürk’s reign, no less), placed blame on the CHP (his largest opposition party), and reached a conciliatory hand out to the Kurds.

Erdogan has also shown a growing interest in reconstructing Turkish history to be more inclusive of Ottoman memories: constantly making references to sultans, attending funerals of members of the Ottoman dynasty, and frequently alluding to the glory of the imperial period. Importantly, though, it should be noted that Erdogan’s transgressions against secularism are also subversive and largely indirect. He does not advocate for total transformation of the government or the institution of sharia law. Instead, instances like his promise to “raise pious generations” and his insults lobbed towards alcohol drinkers more amount to a “ghettoization of the secular way of life, to make it less publicly visible.” Commentators around the world have come to label this rhetoric and memory framework as “Neo-Ottomanism.” In many ways, Erdogan’s digging up of a usable past from Ottoman history in order to subvert the Kemalist narrative bears a striking similarity to Atatürk’s reach into the history of pre-Islamic Turkic peoples in order to subvert the Ottomans. Importantly, though, as Bakiner notes, neo-Ottomanism is only a piece of the majoritarian conservative memory regime. Kemalist ideas about the primacy of Turkish national identity, the threat of foreign interference, the centrality of the state, the legitimate use of force, and denial of the Armenian Genocide all remain central to the AKP’s identity narrative. Thus, Erdogan’s memory regime is representative of a synthesis of Kemalist notions of identity and popular Islamic ideals, rather than an outright rejection of Kemalism. As it stands, overtly Kemalist forces still exert influence in Turkey today. However, the successful rise of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party and its majoritarian conservative memory regime—compounded by its extensive crippling of Kemalist opposition following the recent failed coup and constitutional referendum—it seems safe to say that Kemalism no longer holds a hegemonic control over Turkish politics.

**Conclusion: Implications of a Post-Kemalist Era?**

For nearly a century, the harshly oppressive but economically and socially sustainable nation-building project of Turkey’s revered founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has categorically molded the country’s politics. Beginning, first and foremost, as a struggle to construct a national identity, Kemalism has deeply embedded itself into the very definition of what it means to be a Turk. However, over time, the secular military and elite classes proved incapable of inculcating the masses with its westernizing vision of a modern Turkey. Kemalist military interventions in domestic politics in 1961, 1970, 1980, and 1997 all worked towards resetting the government, but ultimately failed to maintain order. Following a period of particularly rampant instability, the military inadvertently paved the way for the gradual disarticulation of the hegemonic Kemalist memory regime that had been constructed by Atatürk himself. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, backed by a serious majoritarian coalition, has since rendered inert the role of Kemalism in politics, particularly in terms of the military elite’s ability to intervene and reset the government. What’s more,
he has totally undermined its hegemonic role in Turkish national identity and collective memory. The implications of such a shift in collective memory are vast. Essentially, though, what it boils down to on the international level is a potential justification for a drastic foreign policy shift. Though fears of irredentist expansionism are likely overblown, Turkey has seemingly pursued a far more aggressive foreign policy in the region in recent years. Kemalism had, for the majority of the republic’s existence, guided Turkey towards a non-interfering and pro-Western stance. The opening of public opinion into the policy domain via the AKP’s populist rise, however, has allowed critical anti-Western opinion to negatively affect relations with NATO and Europe, particularly due to widespread belief that the country was being ‘used.’147 This sentiment has also fed into Erdogan’s recent standoffishness with the European Union after the mass influx of Syrian refugees drastically changed the membership debate. Rather than relying on Western powers to dictate Turkey’s foreign policy, Turkey has set out on its own to become a “problem solver” in the Middle East.148 Moreover, Turkey has begun to project soft power through regional investments by the ‘Anatolian Tigers’—conservative elites highly supportive of the AKP—as well as a more general rhetorical shift that seeks to use its increasingly Muslim character as a means of encouraging sentiments of cultural affinity and historical companionship with neighboring populations.149 Some worry, however, that the integration of Sunnism into mainstream Turkish identity has enabled the possibility of entanglement in the growing currents of sectarian conflicts in the Middle East.150 What the future holds for Turkey and the region remains to be seen.

As Turkey’s regional role grows, so too do the potential effects of instability there. Though a full examination of Erdogan’s descent into ‘postmodern authoritarianism’ is beyond the scope of the present article, it should suffice to say that events of the past five years have been troubling. Majoritarian conservatism is premised on a “plebiscitarian conception of democracy” where the “ballot box [is] the only legitimate instrument of accountability.”151 As a columnist in the once-popular Turkish paper, Today’s Zaman, described, in such a system, there is little room for minority opinion; it is authoritarianism built by democratic means.152 Perhaps unsurprisingly, Today’s Zaman was one of the first papers to be seized by the government in the recent purge. The failure of the corruption charges lobbed against Erdogan and his cabinet in the late 2000s and early 2010s were just the beginning of his gradual descent into autocracy. As Freedom House reported in 2014, in the wake of the mass protests in Gezi Park, the government crackdown consisted of, “jailing reporters (Turkey leads the world in the number of imprisoned journalists), pressuring independent publishers to sell their holdings to government cronies, and threatening media owners with reprisals if critical journalists are not silenced.”153 The worsening of conditions even after 2014 ultimately fed into the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Intriguingly, though, if government forces are to be believed about the roots of the plot stemming from international moderate Islamist cleric Fethullah Gülen, it would mark a notable transition from the traditionally secularist roots of military intervention in domestic politics—a symbol of the weakening of the Kemalist tradition.

At least in terms of their mode of governance and desire to redefine Turkish identity, there seems to be some convergence between Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. If the old adage about history’s rhymes is true, it seems we can say that Erdogan’s reign marks the beginning of a new verse in Turkish history.


ibid. p. 2

ibid. p. 4


Ibid.


Ibid p. 75

Bakiner “Is Turkey coming to terms with its past?” p.692


Ibid p.92 authors’ emphasis; p.89.

Bakiner “Coming to terms?” p.692

Ruth Wittlinger & Martin Larose, “No Future for Germany’s Past? Collective Memory and German Foreign Policy.” German Politics, 16(4) 2007, pp. 481-495; p.482


Ibid.

Ibid.

Bakiner, “Coming to terms?”
Though the 1970–1997 military memoranda ‘recommending’ that the parties step down did not involve direct military intervention, it is often referred to as a ‘postmodern coup’ and commonly listed alongside those of 1960, and 1980.

Dov Waxman, “Islam and Turkish National Identity: A Reappraisal.” Turkish Yearbook of International Relations, 30(1), 2000, p.20


ibid. 602

ibid. 602-603

ibid. p.603


ibid. 258


Bakiner, “Coming to Terms,” p.700


ibid, p.250

Sener Akturk, "Religion and Nationalism: Contradictions of Islamic Origins and Secular Nation-Building in Turkey, Algeria, and Pakistan." Social Science Quarterly, pp.1-29, p.8


Martin van Bruinessen, Agha, Shaikh and the State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan. 1992, London: Zed Books Ltd., p.268; “Ottoman” was especially widely used amongst elites and members of the civil service or bureaucracy

Kadioğlu, “Paradox,” 188

Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.252

ibid, p.417

ibid, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.211

The Treaty of Peace Between the Allied and Associated Powers And Turkey Signed at Sévres, Aug. 10, 1920. The Treaties of Peace 1919-1923, Vol. II (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924.); As an important side note, the Treaty of Sevres, despite never being fully ratified, marked the beginning of troubles that have plagued the Middle East in the last century by creating the British Mandates Iraq, Palestine, and Hejaz (Northern Saudi Arabia), and the French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon which arbitrarily dissected religio-political lines and upending the social order that had previously existed in the region.

Carter 2010 p.221; Notably, these congresses used the logic set up by the twelfth of Wilson’s Fourteen Points (the right to secure sovereignty), later enshrined in the Treaty of Versailles, as their basis for legitimacy

ibid. p.222

ibid.p.222-224

The Treaty of Lausanne was signed in place of the Treaty of Sevres, which was never fully ratified. The borders of Turkey agreed upon at Lausanne have remained virtually unchanged

Carter 2010 220

Toni Alaranta, “Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s Six-Day Speech of 1927: Defining the Official Historical View of the Foundation of the Turkish Republic.” Turkish Studies, 9(1), 2008, pp.115-129., p.119
Harris 25

57 ibid. p.120
58 Keyder, “Whither the project,” p.43
59 ibid., p.39
60 Jeffrey Haynes, “Politics, identity and religious nationalism in Turkey: from Atatürk to the AKP.” Australian Journal of International Affairs. 64(3), 2010, pp. 312-327., p.315
61 Keyder “Whither the project,” p.39-40
62 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.417
63 ibid.
64 ibid p.40
65 ibid, p.40
67 Van Bruinessen, Agha, Shaikh & State, p.269-270
68 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism p.256; Specifically the Swiss civil code, the Italian penal code, and a blend of the Italian and German commercial legal codes
69 Akturk, “Religion and Nationalism,” p.14
70 ibid.
71 ibid.
72 Waxman, “Islam and Turkish identity,” p.14
73 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p. 382
74 Hanoğlu, Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography, p.102
75 Carter Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.252
76 Arfa 1966
77 Carter Turkey, Islam, Nationalism p.251
79 ibid. p.12
81 Carter Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.256
83 Hülya Adak, “National Myths and Self-Na(r)ra(t)ions: Mustafa Kemal’s Nutuk and Halide Edib’s Memoirs and The Turkish Ordeal.” South Atlantic Quarterly, 102(2-3), 2003, pp.509-527
85 ibid. p.492-497
86 ibid. p.492-497
87 ibid. p.499
88 Morin & Lee, “Constitutive Discourse of Turkish Nationalism,” p.499
89 Alaranta, “Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s Six Day Speech of 1927” p.121
90 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism p.251-252
91 ibid.
92 Adak “National Myths and Self-Na(r)ra(t)ions”
94 ibid. p.200
95 Brockett, “When Ottomans became Turks,” p.412
96 ibid. p.412
97 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism p.270
98 ibid.
100 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism p.247
101 ibid. p.264
102 Quoted in Alaranta, “Atatürk’s Six Day Speech,” p.121
103 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.247
105 ibid., p.256
106 Haynes, “Politics, identity and religious nationalism in Turkey,” p.319-323
107 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.265
108 Waxman, “Islam and Turkish National Identity,” p.11
109 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.267
110 ibid., p.267-269; 306-309
112 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.308-309
113 Hale, “The Turkish Republic and its Army” p.197
114 ibid., p.200
115 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.311-316
116 Bakiner, “Coming to terms?” p.697
117 Esen, “Nation-building, Party-strength” p.602
118 Bakiner, “Coming to terms?” p.697
119 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.312
120 ibid.
121 ibid, p.316
122 ibid, p.320
124 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.321
126 Waxman 2000, p.19
127 Carter Turkey, Islam, Nationalism
129 Waxman, “Islam and Turkish National Identity,” p.19
130 ibid., p.20
131 Ahmadov, “Counter Transformations,” p.20
132 ibid. p.22
133 ibid, p.22
134 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p. 360
135 ibid. p.359-362
137 Ibid, p.155
138 Carter, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, p.361
139 Bakiner, “Coming to Terms,” p.698
140 ibid, p.698
141 Özбудun, “AKP at the Crossroads” p.156
142 Bakiner, “Coming to Terms” 2013, p.706
143 Brockett, “When Ottomans Become Turks,” p.426
144 Bakiner, “Coming to Terms,” p.701
145 Bakiner, “Coming to Terms,” p.698-699
146 Özбудun “When Ottomans Become Turks,” p.157
147 Cengiz Dinc & Mustafa Yetim “Transformations of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward the Middle East: From Non-Involvement to a Leading Role.” Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, 11(1), pp.67-84
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