Understanding the Dynamics of Turkish Nationalism
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Many scholars have analyzed Turkish nationalism to understand its progress in the Turkish Republic from different perspectives. While some scholars have forefronted the importance of cultural and religious aspects of Turkish nationalism, others have emphasized the significance of politics and economics in its formation. Three influential scholars have provided distinctive perceptions on the significance of this nationalism in Turkish society. Carter Vaughn Findley presents a thorough reevaluation of Turkish history in examining various dynamics of Turkish society. While Findley provides an overview on the role of nationalism in the nation’s history, Derya Bayir emphasizes that minorities are not protected in the Turkish legal system because the system aims to preserve Turkish nationalism. In contrast to these two perceptions, Jenny White expresses a modern analysis of the cultural and social aspects of Turkish society with an emphasis on the contrasting outlooks of Muslim nationalists and Kemalists on asserting one’s Turkishness. These three scholarly perspectives concerning the various aspects of Turkish nationalism are essential in assisting readers to grasp the impact of nationalism in Turkish society.

Carter Vaughn Findley, Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and Turkish Studies at The Ohio State University, provides a vital historical reassessment of Turkish history focusing on the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of Turkish society with an emphasis on the impact of Ottoman influence. In this crucial work, he provides an enriched and detailed analysis from the late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic (1789-2007). The overall premise of Findley’s work hinges on the significance of two currents of change in dialectical interaction within Turkish society: one as radically secular, the other as more conservatively Islamic.

According to Findley, the two currents of change assisted the progression of Turkish identity, which was fueled by both secular nationalism and religious perceptions. The overall structure of the work focuses on various aspects of Turkish society with the development of Turkey from Ottoman rule to the Turkish Republic. It includes the impact of the Tanzimat reforms, the reign of Abdülmecid II, the Kemalist secularism of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and conservative Islamic movements initiated by Mevlana Halid, Said Nursi, and Fethullah Gülen.

Findley suggests that the period from 1789 to 1922 marked a new period of crisis and change within the empire resulting in the need for reform to overcome threats exhibited toward it. At the turn of the nineteenth century, it became apparent that the diversity of people in the empire hindered centralization, especially the role of the millet system, which identified religion as the main attribute in defining one’s identity. In furthering this notion, Findley asserts that these persistent tensions, from a Turkish perspective, resulted in the collapse of the diverse empire into a Turkish
republic. This seemed to resolve these issues by shifting from an ineffective domestic approach to an effective diplomatic one. In terms of the necessity of the Tanzimat reforms, this stemmed from the Ottoman Empire’s desire for centralization and modernity which might allowed it to maintain its political and economic authority throughout the empire.

Some of these reforms involved transforming the political process, governmental expansion, and amending intercommunal relations. In relation to intercommunal relations, it aimed to create equality for non-Muslim groups like the Greek Orthodox, Gregorian Armenians, and Jews, whose religious rights were protected as millets but who were not previously granted rights equal with those of the dominant Muslim population. Another crucial outcome of these reforms was the emergence of the Young Ottomans, who served as an initial modern intellectual opposition movement. They possessed a combined knowledge of Europe and Islam and advocated certain reforms with Islamic reasoning and became influential in creating the constitutional government. Most importantly, Findley articulates that these reforms proved instrumental in furthering the distinction between the two currents of change.

Following the Tanzimat era, the reign of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) represented a vital period of Turkish history with the shift of political power from the bureaucrats to the sultan. The assessment of his reign proved intriguing; contrasting depictions of his reign include some who perceived him as an aggressive tyrant and others viewing him as an effectively prestigious Muslim ruler. Findley says that some of his prominent policies focused on centralization, emphasis on the Islamic faith, reformist activities, and foreign policy. In relation to the future of the empire, he states that Abdülhamid viewed four essential fundamentals to ensure its survival which included Islam, the imperial dynasty, the role of Istanbul as its capital, and the religious significance of Mecca and Medina. While these four aspects represented his perception in sustaining the empire, the transformation of former opposition, the Young Ottomans, who had paved the road for his power, to the Young Turks, who contributed to the end of his reign. In terms of the impact of Abdülhamid’s reign, it proved vital in the empire with it shifting from a constitutional government to autocracy and reverting back into constitutionalism.

In terms of the secularism of reformist movements like the emergence of Kemalism under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, it contributed in their active presence in the early stages of the Turkish Republic with the demise of the Ottoman Empire. One of the most influential figures was Ziya Gökalp, a sociologist and political activist who expressed corporatism as an alternative to the Young Turks’ desire for promoting constitutionalism with the objective of achieving modernity. In furthering Gökalp’s perception on the direction of the nation, Findley asserts that three main aspects expressed by him would still determine Turkish identity: Islam, modernity, and Turkishness. Most importantly, his perspective on these three vital aspects resulted in establishing a foundation for conservatives and radicals in executing their respective progression within Turkish society.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Turkish Republic endured various political and social changes with the radically secularized movements no longer acting as the dominant power in the nation. The diminution of these secular influences allowed the emergence of conservative Islamic movements led by Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen. These movements harkened back to the Halidiye-Naksibendiye Sufi order, established by Mevlana Halid in the early nineteenth century, which Findley identifies as the foundation for the conservative Islamic current of change. In terms of the movement initiated by Nursi, the Nur movement, emerged in the 1940s, but its influence faltered in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Findley, it focused primarily on the revival of Islam within Turkish society to assert the importance of the Qur’an, with an emphasis on it as a living document which requires continuous reinterpretation. More importantly,
the Halidiye tradition as modernized by the Nur Movement heavily influenced Fethullah Gülen in founding the Gülen Hizmet Movement in the late 1960s.

In furthering the influence of this movement, Findley asserts that the evolution of the Gülen Hizmet Movement from a regional movement to a global one was instrumental in the modernity of Turkey, assisting in placing the nation within the context of globalization as well as fostering identity politics within Turkey itself. As expressed by Findley, the two currents of changes assisted in comprehending Turkish history as a continuous process from Ottoman rule through the establishment of the republic. The current state of the Turkish Republic expressed through Islam, nationalism, and modernity proved instrumental in largely overcoming the diversity of the people.

Findley’s work provides a detailed and enriched analysis of various aspects of Turkish society from the late Ottoman period to the creation of the Turkish Republic in defining the attributes of Turkish identity. Due to the extensive coverage of this work, various primary and secondary sources were utilized in fully comprehending the changes in the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of Turkish society. References to literary sources like Ahmed Midhat’s Müşahedat proved vital in comprehending their impact on society. It became apparent that these works demonstrated that “modernism was not limited to politics and that Islamic responses to modernity were not produced only by religious movements” (Findley, 185). The usage of literary works served as qualitative data in expressing the influence of these sources toward modernity within the nation.

Findley clearly expects his readers to already be familiar with the overall timeline of Ottoman and Turkish history. Beside this minor weakness, the author remains objective in his presentation of late Ottoman and republican Turkish history. He presents a balanced narrative emphasizing the impact of the two currents of change in Turkish-Ottoman history, which distinguish this from other scholarly works on this diverse topic. The overall impact of the book proves significant in examining the various aspects of Turkish society to expose the interaction between the radical and conservative currents of change. In terms of its importance toward future research, it serves as a vital work necessary in understanding Turkish society from its history to the first decade of the twenty-first century.

While Findley provides a detailed and enriched overview of Turkish history from 1789 to 2007, Derya Bayir provides a distinctive perspective on the progression of Turkey by viewing it from a legal angle. She serves as a visiting scholar at GLOCUL: Centre for Culture and Law at Queen Mary University. Her main areas of expertise include religious diversity and secular law in Turkey, especially their impact on minorities and on nationalism within Turkish society. In her work, she provides an enlightening and detailed analysis of the persistent dilemma of managing diversity within Turkey from a legal and historical viewpoint. Bayir confronts the nation’s legal system for ineffective accommodation of ethno-religious diversity, especially that stemming from the impact of Turkish nationalism on social, political, and legal developments, noting that this form of nationalism places legal emphasis on one’s Turkishness.

The significance of examining the Turkish legal system assists in conveying the developments within it as the nation progressed with a concentration on the legal and conceptual issues aimed at the protection of minorities. The overall structure of Bayir’s work focuses on presenting the historical legal changes toward minorities in the transition from the Ottoman Empire to Turkish nation-state as well as the conceptual legal obstacles prohibiting the protection of minorities with the rise of Turkish nationalism. It includes the importance of the Ottoman Empire’s execution of managing diversity, the cultural diversity in the emergence of the Turkish Republic, the
impact of Turkish identity being determined in the legal system, the jurisprudence of the Turkish Constitutional Court (AYM), and the desire for equality as well as anti-discrimination laws toward minorities within Turkish society.

The diversity management exhibited by the Ottoman Empire proved instrumental in the foundation of the Turkish legal system by creating political and legal dilemmas that transferred to the Turkish Republic. In the management of different minorities in the empire, the introduction of the millet system assisted in preserving religious freedom. While Findley previously expressed that this system focused on protecting minorities, Bayir asserts that it served another purpose: it being an organized structure that dealt with non-Muslim diversity within a pluralistic society. Despite the importance of the millet system in providing a more desirable status for minorities, it contributed to resentment among the Muslim majority which set the foundation for a greater emphasis on Islamic attributes. As a result, the introduction of Turkish nationalism in the creation of the Turkish Republic deepened these antagonistic perceptions toward non-Muslims with the desire for a more Islamic and Turkish identity.

As the empire progressed, the reign of Abdülhamid II furthered the desire for unity. This desire for Pan-Islamism proved crucial in unifying all Muslims, who desired to reconstruct their identity around Islam. While nationalist views allegedly declined among Turks and the desire for Pan-Islamism took root, the presence of Turkism became more apparent in the cultural life of the empire with its media and literature, which intensified the Turkish movement in the early twentieth century. Bayir mentions that the emergence of the Committee of Union and Progress or İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (İTC) in the late nineteenth century proved vital in advocating a strong Turkish nationalist approach toward the progression of the empire. It became apparent that their desire for the Turkification of the population might be achieved with the use of settlement policies. As expressed by Bayir, the İTC executed the resettlement of Kurdish people within the Turkish population with the intention that they would lose their culture. While the actions of the İTC toward the Kurds signified their efforts to establish a singular Turkish identity, the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the Turkish Republic served as a vital indicator in the shift of perception toward non-Muslims within the society.

The emergence of nationalism in the early Republican period set the foundation for its perception on managing diversity within Turkey. The significance of cultural nationalism served as an essential indicator of how the nation wanted to create a unified Turkish identity. Bayir states that this form of nationalism focused on people having a Turkish ideology with their support of Turkish nationalism as well as being loyal to the nation. One crucial aspect in fulfilling this objective derived from the importance of language, which served as the core of the Turkish national identity. As a result, it proved vital in defining the Turkish language to assist in the Turkification of non-Turkish groups’ linguistic assimilation. Bayir states that this became more prominent towards the end of the twentieth century with the declaration in the 1982 Constitution that made Turkish the official language of the nation.

In terms of the legal perception of minorities within the Turkish legal system, Bayir focuses on various legislations that assisted in defining a Turkish citizen through their legal status and national identity by creating the image of a Turk. It proved instrumental in determining one’s Turkishness with the emphasis on the three different constitutions of the Turkish Republic. The 1924 Constitution defined the people of Turkey as Turks from a citizenship standpoint with no regard to their religion or race. Also, it referenced the importance of nationalism in protecting Turkish culture. In contrast, the 1961 Constitution maintained this stance on citizenship, but asserted a more inclusive perception that loyalty to the nation would be essential in expressing
one’s citizenship. Comparing these two previous constitutions, Bayir argues that the 1982 Constitution adopted the same stance on citizenship as the 1961 Constitution, but it expressed clearer depictions of Turkish culture which overshadowed the previously inclusive, nationalist outlook for defining Turkishness. These three different constitutions reflected the progression of the Turkish legal system in determining the attributes in defining one’s citizenship within Turkish society.

In furthering the legal perspective toward minorities in the Turkish legal system, the importance of the jurisprudence of the Turkish Constitutional Court (AYM) represented an essential aspect in fully comprehending the treatment of these minorities within Turkish society. As expressed by Bayir, the AYM was initiated with the 1961 Constitution, giving that body sole jurisdiction in reviewing the constitutionality of Turkish laws as well as presiding over cases that involved elite state officials and politicians. One vital argument expressed by Bayir on the AYM focuses on it being criticized for its clear bias in advancing an underlying interest in preserving the status quo instead of protecting the natural rights of its citizens. This derived from its objective to maintain three vital principles of Turkish nationalism: preventing the emergence of minorities, maintaining the absence of regionalism and racism, and the protection of equality within society. As a result, Bayir asserts that in preserving these three principles the AYM proved vital in providing legal justification for opposing the rights of minorities.

While the AYM served as a prominent obstacle to minorities’ advancement in Turkish society, the emergence of equality and anti-discrimination laws in the late twentieth century assisted in their gradual protection and recognition as minorities. One vital argument presented by Bayir depicting the lack of equality toward minorities focuses on the Turkish legal system being more favorable to ethnic Turks and Sunni Muslims than to other people who do not exhibit qualities associated with these categories. The introduction of an amendment to the Turkish penal code in 1981 criminalizing the provocation of animosity and hatred did not protect minorities because the judicial system would not recognize the discord between the various minority groups. While there have been some developments in protecting minorities, the jurisprudence within Turkey continued in protecting Turkishness, advocating Turkish nationalism which hindered effective protection toward minorities in its society.

Bayir’s work presents an enlightening and detailed analysis of the evolution of the Turkish legal system’s posture toward minorities from its foundation in ideals expressed in the Ottoman Empire to the progression of the Turkish Republic. Also this work proved instrumental in presenting a new perception on the existing literature on minorities and the Turkish legal system with its emphasis on the perspective of the Turkish courts like the AYM as well as the jurisprudence toward minorities. Bayir uses crucial documents like records of the Lausanne Conference to comprehend the 1923 Lausanne Treaty as well as the usage of various court cases like the Trial of 1944, which focused on the issue of Turkish racism. The usage of these sources served as qualitative data in conveying the progression of the Turkish legal system aimed in grasping the scope of protection toward minorities in Turkish society.

In comparing the two works covered so far, the legal approach exhibited by Bayir in comprehending Turkish nationalism differed from that of Findley whose perception derived from a historical reassessment of Turkish history, especially his detailed account of the various aspects of its society. While he does provide an enriched analysis on Turkish history from 1789 to 2007 with the impact of nationalism within it, Bayir presented a more focused analysis with her emphasis on the treatment of minorities under the Turkish legal system with the role of nationalism in hindering effective protection toward them. More importantly, their respective perception on what defined one’s Turkishness distinguished them from each other. Findley focused on the
growth of a Turkish identity from key aspects of its history while Bayir presented the legality of the Turkish identity from the various legislation initiated in the progression of the Turkish Republic. Also, the presentation of the social aspects of Turkey exhibited by Findley assisted in comprehending the diverse culture as with the relations between Turks and Kurds. In contrast, Bayir covered the legal implications of the diversity in Turkish society like the discord in Turkish-Kurdish relations with the mistreatment of the Kurds in the legal system. Findley’s perception in viewing Turkish nationalism from a reassessed historical analysis of Turkish history proved crucial in comprehending its impact in its society, but Bayir conveyed an insightful analysis in perceiving the influence of this nationalism in the Turkish legal system with it hindering the effective protection for minorities.

While the previous works focused on the overview account of Turkish history from 1789 to 2007 and the impact of nationalism on the Turkish legal system with respect to the protection of minorities, Jenny White conveys the impact of nationalism on the social and cultural aspects of Turkish society. White is a social anthropology professor at Boston University and her various publications on contemporary Turkey support her credibility in analyzing the role of nationalism in the cultural and social realms of Turkish life. Her influential work emphasizes Turkish national identity as it has endured various changes in terms of the presence of Islam and secularism. The premise of her work involves these changes in Turkish society contributing to its new identity as Muslim nationalism.

The development of Turkish nationalism throughout the twentieth century consisted of vital changes with respect to the cultural and social aspects of Turkish society. White’s outlook on Turkish national identity as it relates to Muslim nationalism stemmed from its culture rather than its ethnicity. As a result, this perception reflects her main intention of fully understanding the attributes that contributed to this new national identity. Most importantly, the main arguments expressed by White focused on the division between Kemalists and the Muslim nationalists in their differing perceptions about Turkish identity as well as the desire of these nationalists to preserve the secularization of the nation as opposed to Islamist individuals who desired to assert their faith openly.

In terms of the overall structure of the book, White emphasizes essential aspects of Turkish society that influenced national identity including its correlation with Islam, the significance of secular nationalism, and headscarf, and the importance of conservative Islamic movements. In terms of these aspects, the significance of Kemalism proved instrumental, it served as a contributing factor in determining Turkish national identity. It stemmed from the ideals expressed by Turkey’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who desired a secularized Western society with the military preserving its democracy. While White asserts that Atatürk favored Turkish society to be westernized with democracy, Findley argued that the founder of Kemalism desired to shift Turkey culturally to make it more similar to the West but wanted to distance the nation from the Western practice of democracy. Besides these differing perceptions on Atatürk’s attitude toward democracy within Turkish society, White argues that Kemalists supported the ideals from Kemalism which contributed in their disapproval of Islamist movements like the Milli Görüş or National Vision. Also, she asserts that the structure of this movement linking Islam with nationalism created tension with the Kemalists, who did not favor this approach. However, the discord with the Muslim nationalists became more prominent in Turkish society with these nationalists defining Turkish national identity with Sunni ideology. In terms of defining the attributes of the Sunni ideology, it focused on Muslims expressing their faith through the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah) especially elected leaders deriving from those who follow his traditions. Despite Kemalism serving as the basis of Turkish identity, the emergence
of Muslim nationalism resulted in a new identity within the nation stemming from a more flexible cultural approach in defining their identity.

Besides the various differences between Muslim nationalists and Kemalists in expressing their Turkish identity as a vital aspect in grasping the development of Turkey, other essential aspects that assisted in conveying this identity pertained to the symbolic impact of the missionary and headscarf and the complexity of Turkish social life. White asserts that Western missionary activities in Turkey and in the former Ottoman Empire was viewed as a threat to national identity. In furthering this notion, the outlook toward the missionaries united all nationalists around this perceived threat. In terms of the headscarf, it represented another threat to secular national identity with its tesettür or turban. More explicitly, White argued the headscarf tended to be perceived as threatening the secularity aspects of Turkish society. This concern in losing Turkishness differed between the Muslim nationalists and Kemalists, the latter being more concerned about maintaining secular nationalism while the former were more flexible in approaching these new cultural aspects within its society.

However, the emergence of conservatively Islamic movements contradicted the secularized perception of nationalists like the Kemalists. One vital movement initiated in the late twentieth century involved the Gülen Hizmet Movement founded by Fethullah Gülen. While Muslims who supported this movement could only be perceived as sympathizers and not members, White argues that Gülenists remained an influential movement expressing Islamic faith throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Also, she says that the Gülen Hizmet Movement served as one of the main factors in asserting the prominence of Muslim nationalism. The various differences between these nationalists on how to assert their Turkish identity derived from the changes in society. Most importantly, it greatly assisted in comprehending its impact in the current social tensions within the Turkish Republic.

This book presents a rich and detailed analysis of the cultural and social aspects of Turkish society that defined its national identity. The use of primary and secondary sources assist in fully comprehending their respective influence on the new Turkish identity. In furthering this notion, White uses various interviews from different categories of people that conveyed a clearer image in understanding the current state of the Turkish Republic. These interviews add a distinctive aspect to her analysis in presenting personal accounts of Turkish people who experienced the internal discord within the nation over national identity. Also, they serve as qualitative data with White interviewing people from different social backgrounds with her intention of devising an appropriate image of the Turkish identity. Despite the significance of these interviews in her analysis, they seem to be devised randomly without any form of systematic approach, which limit their credibility.

White presents a balanced account on the various differences between Kemalists and Muslim nationalists with their respective perception in asserting their Turkishness. One vital assertion put forth by White focuses on defining the new Turkish identity as being “a pious Muslim Turk whose subjectivity and vision for the future is shaped by an imperial Ottoman past overlaid onto a republican state framework, but divorced from the Kemalist state project” (White, 9).

In comparing the three works presented in this review, each author pursued a distinctive approach in perceiving the significance of Turkish nationalism. While White focused on the cultural and social aspects of Turkish society, Findley provided a historically reassessed overview of that society from 1789 to 2007 which seemed to be too broad, though he executed it with immense detail. More explicitly, he focused on nationalism’s impact on the Turkish Republic
through the two currents of change, one being radically secularized and the other as more conservatively Islamic. In contrast, Bayir focused on minorities not being effectively protected under the Turkish legal system with its overall structure heavily supportive in preserving Turkish nationalism.

In relation to Turkish national identity, both Findley and White presented intriguing outlooks on the social aspects of the society that reflected this Turkish identity. Findley depicted the various changes in these aspects within Turkish history allowing the reader to comprehend the shift in perception on how one’s Turkish identity might be asserted, especially the impact of the two currents of change. White provided a more modern account in presenting the social and cultural aspects of Turkish society like the differing perceptions of Muslim nationalists and Kemalists in how to properly assert one’s Turkishness. She pinpointed the impact of the emergence of more conservative Islamic movements like the Gülen Hizmet Movement as it helped to spread a new national identity of Muslim nationalism. Bayir emphasized the influence of nationalism from a legal standpoint with the various changes in the Turkish legal system that were ineffective protecting minorities. Most importantly, she expressed the necessity for change in the Turkish legal system because Turkish nationalism continued to hinder legal rights of minorities. The various dynamics of Turkish nationalism conveyed by these three scholars are significant for helping readers to fully comprehend its significance within Turkish society and the ways in which its people express their Turkishness.