

Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey:

Who Is a Turk?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Conventional wisdom holds that in the interwar period, Kemalist secularism eliminated religion from the public sphere in Turkey, leaving Turkish national identity devoid of religious content. Yet in his new book, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey*, Institute senior fellow Soner Cagaptay reaches an altogether different conclusion through an investigation of the impact of the Ottoman millet system on Turkish and Balkan nationalisms. Dr. Cagaptay demonstrates that even though Mustafa Kemal Atatürk successfully secularized Turkey's political structure in the interwar period, the legacy of the Ottoman millet system, which divided the population into religious compartments called millets, shaped Turkey's understanding of nationalism in the same era.

See Inside This Book (<http://www.ewidgetsonline.com/tnf/Reader.aspx?token=f70td3kROUkOEu4MfZh%2FMg%3D%3D&rand=253472207&buyNowLink=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ewidgetsonline.com%2Ftnf%2FLandingPage.aspx%3Fbookid%3D97802039>)

This book approaches its subject by investigating such topics as:

•Turkish Nationalism •Nationalism in Eastern Europe in the Interwar Period •The Ottoman Legacy •Kemalist Citizenship Policies and Immigration •Kurds, Ottoman Muslims, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and the Ethno-Religious Limits of Turkishness

Accordingly, the book, based on Dr. Cagaptay's doctoral dissertation at Yale University, "Crafting the Turkish Nation: Kemalism and Turkish Nationalism in the 1930s" (2003), reaches a number of important conclusions on Turkish nationalism.

Atatürk's Turkey successfully promoted an agenda of secular nationalism in the interwar period. However, Dr. Cagaptay's analysis of interwar Turkey's state-citizen relations shows that Islam, nevertheless, imprinted itself on this process. In this regard, the legacy of the Ottoman millet system played a significant role. For more than five hundred years, the millet system had divided the Ottoman population into strict religious compartments -- bulking Turks, Kurds, Bosnians and other Ottoman Muslims together as the Muslim millet, and Greeks and other Orthodox Christians as the Orthodox (Rum) millet -- such that Atatürk's Turkey understood Turkishness as a derivative of Islam. Ankara saw all Muslims, including the Kurds, as Turks and implemented policies to ensure that they regarded themselves as such. At the same time, Ankara saw Christians in Turkey as Turkish citizens but not necessarily members of the Turkish nation. Accordingly, the legacy of the Ottoman millet system ensured that religion remained a major vehicle for identity formation in modern Turkey despite the emergence of secular state and the rise of secular nationalism in interwar Turkey.

The nationalization-through-religion that dominates nationalism in Turkey points to the saliency of the millet system and ethno-religious identities in Turkey as well as the former Ottoman lands in general -- as in Greece for example, where Greekness is congruous with membership in the Ottoman Orthodox Christian millet, resulting in a perception that Orthodox Bulgarians, Macedonians and Albanians are Greeks. This conclusion explains the following religion-and-nationality-related dilemmas within modern Turkey:

1. Turkey is unsympathetic to the idea of Muslims, such as the Kurds, being distinct national groups inside Turkey. This is because Turkish nationalism sees all members of the previous Muslim millet as members of the Turkish nation. While many such Muslims (Bosnians, Circassians, Albanians, Greek-speaking Muslims, Tatars, and others) have already willingly and successfully assimilated into the Turkish nation, most Turks cannot comprehend why it is difficult for the Kurds to merge into the Turkish nation. In addition, when groups such as the Kurds resist incorporation, Turkish nationalism reacts, demanding the assimilation of the Kurds seen as members of the Turkish nation. While most Kurds in Turkey have already merged into the Turkish nation, the roots of the Kurds' Turkification lies in the juxtaposition of ethnic and religious definitions of the nation under Kemalism.
2. There is political tension in Turkey between Islam as a religion and Islam as an identity. This is a product of the overlapping processes of secularism and nationalization of the recent past. At present, while nominal Islam is a marker of Turkishness, Islam as a faith is outside of the secular public sphere. Accordingly, when parties move to introduce Islam into the political sphere, they encounter resistance from Turkish secularism, as in the case of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) in the early 1990s, or the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) in the late 1990s.
3. Turkish nationalism sees Ottoman Christians as outside the body of the Turkish nation by the virtue of the fact that they were previously not members of the Ottoman Muslim millet.
4. Turkish nationalism is ambivalent toward Jews. On the one hand, they are a non-Muslim group, like the Christians. Yet compared to the Christians, they are in a better position vis-a-vis Ankara. Historically, agreeable relations between the Turks and the Jews, and the absence of potent anti-Semitism in Turkey rendered Kemalism accepting toward Jews. Consequently, unlike in many other interwar European countries, where racial walls separated Jews from Gentiles, Kemalist Turkey did not establish such a divide. On the contrary, accessing thus far unused archival documents, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey* demonstrates that Atatürk's Turkey welcomed thousands of Jews escaping persecution in east-central Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. However, since language and the legacy of the millet system were important components of the notion of Turkishness, the Jews, who did not speak Turkish and who had not been part of the Muslim millet, remained on the margins of the Turkish nation.
5. Given its sensitivities vis-a-vis its Christian and non-Turkish Muslim communities, Turkey remains cautious today toward neighboring states that are home to nationalist movements among these groups. Ankara's wariness against interwar French Syria, which harbored Kurdish and Circassian nationalist rebels and provided safe haven to Armenian terrorists who tried to assassinate Atatürk and other leaders of the republic, illustrated this phenomenon. In the 1990s, that situation repeated itself, when Syria provided refuge to the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Turkey views its neighbors as security threats when they shelter its non-Muslim and Muslim groups.

Based on these conclusions, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey* serves two useful purposes. First, it explains how the distinctions that evolved during the interwar years endure in perpetuating nationality-related issues in Turkey today. For example, the book explains why most Turks see the Kurds as members of the Turkish nation.

Second, by highlighting the saliency of Islam in Turkey, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey* demonstrates that even in the most secularized of Muslim societies, Islam remains a force to be reckoned with. This is an important conclusion for two reasons. First, it highlights why the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), rooted in Turkey's Islamist opposition, is often at odds with the secular system in Turkey. Second, this conclusion sheds light on the struggle that is taking place in the wider Muslim world between religion and secularism.

Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey, a book based on research in Turkish archives, as well as German, British, and American government depositories, is relevant not only to those interested in Turkish politics, Turkish nationalism, the Balkans, and Middle Eastern history, but also to scholars, students, and policymakers interested in the prospects and challenges facing the contemporary Muslim world.

Critical Praise for Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey

"There is no question that Cagaptay -- a highly intelligent, serious, soul-searching, and inquisitive scholar -- has put his finger on several crucial issues in Turkish political and cultural life." --Kemal H. Karpat, International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 39 No. 2, May 2007

"It stands apart from some of the previous works on the subject by its in-depth and judicious analysis based on a careful reading of the available archival evidence." -- Sabri Sayari, Sabanci University, Istanbul, Middle East Studies Association Bulletin, Winter 2007 ❖

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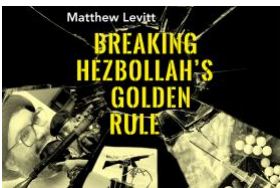
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