

POLITICS OF TURKIFICATION DURING THE SINGLE PARTY PERIOD

This paper is a short analysis of the Turkification policies of the founding fathers of the Turkish Republic towards the minorities in the country. It will try to analyze how the top Republican leaders, Mustafa Kemal and his colleagues, defined the Turkish nation, and determined the guidelines to convert non-Muslims into Turkish citizens and the indicators of having been Turkified. It will also try to describe the methods they used for speeding up the process, and the hidden face of the Turkification project, which was the Turkification of the economy. The term “minority” strictly refers to the non-Muslims, as the term was designated at the Peace Treaty of Lausanne.¹ The term “Turkification” means the Turkish Republic’s project to create a state of citizens with equal rights, who will define themselves first and foremost as Turks, their religion being a private matter.²

How Mustafa Kemal defined the term “Turkish nation”

According to Mustafa Kemal, unity of religion was not essential for the formation of a nation. For him, a nation was a society formed by persons (a) which shared a rich historical legacy, (b) who had a sincere desire to live together, and (c) who had a common will to preserve their shared heritage. Mustafa Kemal’s definition of Turkish nation did not exclude the non-Muslim citizens, provided that these considered themselves as part of the nation, a thought which he expressed in the following statement: “If the Christian and Jewish citizens who live among us today will bind their fate and destiny to the Turkish nation because their conscience tells them to do so, then how can the civilized and nobly moral Turkish people consider them as strangers?”³

¹ For the Lausanne Peace Treaty texts refer to Seha L. Meray (translated by), *Lozan Barış Konferansı Tutanaklar-Belgeler*, 2nd printing, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, İstanbul, 1993. This translation is based on the following original text: *Conférence de Lausanne Sur Les Affaires du Proche-Orient (1922-1923) Recueil des Actes de la Conférence*, Paris, 1923, Imprimerie Nationale.

² For a study of the Turkification process of the minorities the reader is invited to refer to Ayhan Aktar, *Varlık Vergisi ve "Türkleştirme" Politikaları*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları), 2000, pp. 101-134 and Rıfat N. Bali, *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni 1923-1945*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları), 1999.

The Minimal Conditions for Becoming a Turk

The various statements of Mustafa Kemal and other Republican leaders declaring that non-Muslim citizens were accepted as part of the Turkish nation always included three minimum conditions: the non-Muslims had to adopt (a) the Turkish language as their mother tongue, (b) the Turkish culture, and (c) the ideal of Turkism. In 1925 after repressing the Sheih Said Kurdish rebellion, Prime Minister İsmet Pasha made a declaration to the delegates of the nationalist organization *Türk Ocakları* (Turkish Hearths.)⁴ The forceful tone of his words proved the strong determination of the Republican elites of Turkifying its minorities. These were his words: “Our immediate duty is to make Turks all those who live in the Turkish fatherland. We will cut and throw away the minorities who are opposing Turks and Turkism.”⁵ Both the Republican People’s Party (RPP) and Mustafa Kemal would repeat this message in different forms in the subsequent years. For example, an RPP regulation accepted in 1927 specified once again that “the strongest bond among citizens is the union of language, sentiments, and ideas”.⁶ Similarly Mustafa Kemal, while visiting Adana in 1931, underlined once again how speaking Turkish was an important criterion for being considered a Turk. He said: “One of the most obvious, precious qualities of a nation is the language. A person who says he belongs to the Turkish nation should first and under all circumstances speak Turkish. It is not possible to believe a person’s claims that he belongs to the Turkish nation, to the Turkish culture, if he does not speak Turkish.”⁷

The person who best understood how to interpret such declarations was a Jewish businessman by the name of Moiz Kohen. Kohen changed his name to Tekinalp and in 1928 published his book entitled *Türkleştirme* (Turkification), which he dedicated to the nationalist organisation *Türk Ocakları*. In his book Tekinalp argued that not only Jews but all minorities had to be turkified if they wanted to deserve the status of

³ A. Afetinan, *Medeni Bilgiler ve M. Kemal Atatürk’ün El Yazıları*, 3rd edition, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu), 1998, p. 23-24.

⁴ For the historiography of *Türk Ocakları*, the reader is invited to refer to the works of Füsün Üstel, *İmparatorluktan Ulus-Devlete Türk Milliyetçiliği Türk Ocakları 1912-1932*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları), 1997. Yusuf Sarıncay, *Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Tarihi Gelişimi ve Türk Ocakları*, (İstanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat), 1994.

⁵ *Vakit*, 27 April 1925 quoted in Füsün Üstel, *İmparatorluktan Ulus-Devlete Türk Milliyetçiliği Türk Ocakları 1912-1931*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları), 1997, p. 173.

⁶ Taha Parla, *Türkiye’de Siyasi Kültürün Resmi Kaynakları, Cilt 3: Kemalist Tek Parti İdeolojisi ve CHP’nin Altı Oku*, (İstanbul: İletişim), 1995, p. 27.

citizenship granted to them by the Constitution of 1924. A chapter of his book included his address to the Jewish community in the form of ten instructions that the community had to follow for becoming Turks. They were modeled after the Ten Commandments of Moses, and were in essence a summary of the Republican founders' expectations:⁸

- . Turkify your names
- . Speak Turkish
- . In the synagogues read part of the prayers in Turkish
- . Turkify your schools
- . Send your children to state schools
- . Interest yourself in Turkey's affairs
- . Socialize with Turks
- . Eliminate the [Jewish] community spirit
- . Do your special duty in the field of national economy
- . Know your constitutional rights

What the Republican elites were really wishing was for non Muslims to disband their "community" structure, to melt and dissolve their religious/ethnic identities into the new Turkish national identity, and to emerge as Turks of Jewish or Christian faith. These new Turks, sharing a unity of language, spirit and culture with the Turkish society, would no longer be distinguishable from their compatriots, the Muslim Turks.

What Were the Main Indicators of Being Turkified?

Speaking Turkish

The first condition of language unity was to speak Turkish. Obviously the Jewish community, which spoke Ladino for centuries, could not adopt Turkish as its mother

⁷ "Mustafa Kemal'in Adana Türk Ocağı'ndaki nutku", *Vakit*, 19 February, 1931.

⁸ Tekin Alp, *Türkleştirme*, (İstanbul: Resimli Ay Matbaası), 1928, p. 63-65. The only study on Tekin Alp is the book of Jacob M. Landau, *Tekinalp, Turkish Patriot 1883-1961*, (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut), Istanbul, 1984.

tongue in a matter of a few years time. For this reason, Deputy Chief Rabbi Becerano stated in the first years of the Republic that Jews would adopt Turkish in a matter of 10 to 15 years time. In other words he was asking the authorities to show patience and tolerance towards the Jews not yet speaking Turkish.⁹ However Mustafa Kemal and his entourage who implemented the Reform Laws (such as adopting latin letters, adopting as weekday holidays Saturday and Sunday instead of Friday, accepting the Georgian calendar, etc.) day to day, did not have the patience to wait for 10 to 15 years. Consequently the “Citizien Speak Turkish!” campaign of the first years of the Republic, which aimed to put public pressure on minorities for convincing them to speak Turkish in public, mainly targeted the Turkish Jewish community because of its special situation. Turkish Jews were not speaking Hebrew, which was considered by the Turkish elites as the Jewish mother tongue. If they had spoken Hebrew, Turkish Jews could easily argue that according to the rights granted to the minorities by the Lausanne Peace Treaty, they could continue to speak and teach Hebrew freely. However they were speaking Ladino, which was Castillian Spanish mixed with Turkish, Greek, and French words, and also French, which they had learned at the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools.¹⁰ For this reason they were continuously criticized by the republican elites, in whose eyes Turkish Jews were the prototypes of a minority population which did not want to be Turkified. Not a day went by in the humoristic journals and the daily press when Jews were not made the laughing stock in articles or caricatures, whereas such ridicule was rarely aimed at Greeks or Armenians.¹¹

Turkification of Names and Surnames

⁹ Rıfat N. Bali, op.cit., p. 156.

¹⁰ For a study on the Alliance works in Turkey the reader has to look to Aron Rodrigue’s *French Jews, Turkish Jews The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860-1925*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press), 1990.

¹¹ For a study of the cartoons in the Single Party Period the reader is invited to refer to the following articles: For a study of Jewish caricatures, see Laurent Mallet, “Dessins Satiriques et Représentations du Juif dans l’Entre-deux-guerres en Turquie: D’un préjugé à l’autre?”, in Bernard Heyberger, Sylvia Naef, [eds.], *La Multiplication des Images en Pays d’Islam: De l’Estampe à la Télévision (17e-21e siècle) Actes du Colloque Image Functions and Languages. L’IncurSION de l’Image Moderne dans l’Orient Musulman et sa Périphérie. Istanbul, Université du Bosphore (Boğaziçi Üniversitesi) 25-27 Mars 1999*, Orient Institute, Wirburg, 1999, pp. 247-266 / Hatice Bayraktar, “Türkische Karikaturen über Juden (1933-1945)” in *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 13, Metropol Verlag, Berlin, 2004, pp. 85-108.

Another indication of being Turkified was to Turkify names and surnames. The Law of Family Names accepted in 1934 made mandatory for everybody to take a family name. However the law prevented the adoption of names of tribes, foreign race and nations as family names. The Greeks of Turkey would Turkify their names by dropping the “-dis” and “-pulos” suffixes. Most of the Jews would Turkify their names and surnames by finding a Turkish equivalent for each Jewish name.¹²

Participation to Donation Campaigns

The most important indicator of having assimilated to the Turkish ideal was the making of donations to non profit societies such as the Red Crescent, the Turkish Aviation Society, the Children’s Welfare Society, or to campaigns which were initiated after natural disasters in the country. Contributions to such campaigns aimed to convey a message to the Turkish society and the Republican elites, saying, “We are like you, Turks. We are together in our happy and sad moments”. At the same it aimed to prevent the slightest criticism that minorities were not faithful to their fatherland. In fact, when looking at the lists of donors to such campaigns, one can immediately discern that non Muslims did contribute much more in comparison to the Muslim contributors.¹³

Liquidation of Community Schools

The most important method for achieving cultural unification was the Turkification of minority schools, which in the Ottoman Empire taught the language and culture of the specific minority groups. In the Turkish Republic, these schools would start to Turkify their curriculum according to the dictates of the Ministry of Education. As a matter of fact, Prime Minister İsmet Pasha, in a speech pronounced in 1925 at the Union of Teachers, made crystal clear the new national education policy of the young Republic. These were his words: “The foreign cultures must melt into this homogeneous nation. There can not be different civilizations in this nation. Each

¹² Rıfat N. Bali, op.cit., pp. 287-288.

¹³ Rıfat N. Bali, op.cit., pp. 369-377.

nation of the world represents a civilisation. We now clearly propose to those who see themselves tied to other communities rather than the Turkish people's civilization to join with the Turkish nation. But not as an alloy, not as a confederation of civilisations but as a single civilization. This fatherland belongs to this people and to this nation which is unified."¹⁴

Methods Used for Speeding Up Turkification

The Republican elites sometimes used different ways and means to speed up the Turkification process. Among them two methods were encountered most often and were most effective.

The first one was to exercise public pressure on minorities via well known journalists who were at the same time members of the parliament and of the RPP. These journalists in their editorials indirectly conveyed the expectations of the RPP leadership for the Turkification of minorities, thus prompting public pressure.¹⁵

The second one was the pressure put on the minority communities for dismantling their centrally structured community organization. The most important institutions of the minority communities were the non profit foundations which ran hospitals, churches, synagogues, schools, and old age homes. After the Law of Foundations was accepted in 1935, the General Directorate of Non Profit Foundations had the authority to designate the director of the minority foundations. This externally imposed director, having no internal support from the community grassroots, could not generate donations as in the past. At the same time, the new law put a freeze on the acquisition of new property, thus weakening the structure of the communities. These changes resulted in reducing to a minimum level the cash flow of the community foundations, and as a result weakening their structure.¹⁶

¹⁴ Hasan-Âli Yücel, *Türkiye'de Orta Öğretim*, (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı), 1994, p. 25.

¹⁵ Rıfat N. Bali, op.cit., p. 530.

¹⁶ Rıfat N. Bali, op.cit., p. 529.

Turkification of the Economy

For the minorities who had lived for centuries as *dhimmis* in the Ottoman Empire, the project of Turkification promised equality, constitutional rights and public participation in building the new Turkish Republic. For this reason community leaders were eager to accept and promote the project to their grassroots. However from the early years of the Turkish Republic, there were symptoms which hinted at a hidden agenda which was in full contradiction to the project of transforming minorities into citizens with equal rights. This hidden agenda was the project of Turkifying the economy.

The founders of the Republic, after having won the National War of Independence, wanted to make Turkey economically fully independent. However, for them “independent” meant making the Muslim Turks dominant in the banking, trading and manufacturing sectors. This was for two reasons: (a) because they considered the Muslim Turks as “the true masters of Turkey since only they had shed their blood for the fatherland”, and (b) because in the eyes of the Republican elites the non Muslims represented the last remains of the Capitulations, a system of economic privileges granted to the European powers which exploited the Ottoman Empire.

In their addresses during the First Congress of Economy in February 1923, both Mustafa Kemal and Minister of Economy Mahmut Esat Bozkurt emphasized that the sovereignty of the Turkish people had to be consolidated with that of the Turkish economy. In the same spirit Mustafa Kemal’s address in Adana to the artisans of that city is also very meaningful. When an artisan complained that the Armenians had the upper hand in all crafts, Mustafa Kemal’s reply was as follows: “Armenians have no right in this prosperous country. The country is yours, the country belongs to the Turks. In history this country was Turk, therefore it is Turk and will remain Turk for ever. The country has finally been returned to its rightful owners. Armenians and the others have no right here. These fertile places are the country of real Turks”. These words showed without any doubt the intention of the Republican leadership, as it presented the Armenians as foreigners, rather than as Turks.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Atatürk’ün Söylev ve Demeçleri*, (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu), 1997, Vol. II, p. 129-132.

The first step of implementing the Turkification of the economy was the firing of non Muslim employees working in foreign companies established in Turkey. This decision aimed to make room for the Muslim Turks returning from the War of Independence and looking for employment. In the 1920s the employees who were fluent in a foreign language and had some commercial experience were all non Muslims of foreign or Turkish nationality. A quota was imposed to drastically limit the number of employees of foreign nationality that foreign companies could employ. Many employees exceeding the quota were fired and replaced with Muslim Turks. The companies who did not comply were warned that unless they did comply, their activities would be suspended. The officials who enforced this decree did not differentiate between non Muslims of Turkish nationality and those of foreign nationality. As a result non Muslims Turkish citizens also lost their jobs.¹⁸

Another method used in the Turkification of the economy was the interpretation of the term “to be a Turk”, a term which was used in the clauses of different legislations, such as those establishing the qualifications for being a state employee, or opening a pharmacy. In its application, the term “Turk” was interpreted, not as a nationality but as an ethnical and religious identity, and therefore came to mean “Muslim”. The result was that non Muslims were de facto discriminated.¹⁹

Did the Executors of the Turkification Policy Really Want to Turkify the Minorities?

The Turkish Republic was established as the continuation of the Ottoman Empire, but it denied its Ottoman past since it wanted to establish a new state with new citizens not governed by Sharia Law but by Republican principles. This meant that religion would be a private and not a public affair. However the behaviour of the Republican elites vis-à-vis non Muslims was quite contradictory to the Republican principles. On one hand they were repeatedly stating that they would accept the minorities as real “Turks” provided that they sincerely embrace the Turkish ideal, language, and culture,

¹⁸ Rıfat N. Bali, op.cit., pp. 206-225.

¹⁹ Rıfat N. Bali, op.cit., pp. 226-228. Also Ahmet Yıldız, “*Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyebilene*” *Türk Ulusal Kimliğinin Etno-Seküler Sınırları (1919-1938)*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları), 2001.

and on the other hand they interpreted the legislation and the concept of non Muslim in a manner that made it very clear that they considered Turkey as a predominantly Muslim country in which non Muslim citizens did not have full rights.

Even Tekinalp, the Jewish ideologue of Turkification, admitted that until 1931 there was an significant number of people in Turkey who believed that unity of religion was necessary for the nation's unity and that it was only in 1931, in the Third Convention of RPP, that this situation was clarified.²⁰ Indeed, in this convention the RPP defined the nation as "a political and social entity formed by citizens bonded together in a unified language, culture and ideal" and made the following statement for its non Muslim citizens: "We have to declare our ideas very clearly to our Christian and Jewish citizens. Our party totally accepts these citizens as Turks provided that they participate to the unity of language and ideal. Needless to say that in this new society there is not even a trace of the anachronistic *reaya* (non Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire) mentality."²¹

In the face of this crystal clear declaration, how can we explain the reasons of the discrimination that existed in daily life and in the application of the various legislations in the Single Party period? My tentative answer is the following:

The most important reason for the failure of the Turkification policies was the Ottoman legacy that the young Republic wanted to get rid of but could not. The Turkish Republic, born from the remains of an Empire run for centuries by Sharia Law, was not able to change the collective memory of its elites and of its society, even in the period when the principle of secularism was applied in its most rigid form. The Ottoman Empire, until the reforms of Tanzimat, administrated its non Muslim communities with the *millet* system and considered them as *dhimmis*, people of the book, which were under the protection of the Muslims. The Republican regime, in spite of its declarations that it accepted its non Muslims as equal citizens provided that they melt into the Turkish national identity, could not forget the years of Armistice and of the National War of Independence. The Republican elites remembered how

²⁰ Tekin Alp, "Türk Kültür Birliği", *Yeni Türk Mecmuası*, Vol. 1, issue 15, November 1933, p. 1239-1250.

²¹ Fahri Çoker, *Türk Parlamento Tarihi TBMM – IV Dönem 1931-1935*, Vol 1, (Ankara: TBMM Vakıf Yayınları), 1995, p. 33-34.

the minorities cheered the Allied Forces when they occupied Istanbul and the Greek Army when it occupied Izmir. They could not forget the famous Grande Rue de Péra in Istanbul, where one could one hear, Ladino, Greek, Armenian and French, and practically not one word of Turkish. They called İzmir “Gâvur İzmir” (infidel Izmir) because the majority of its population consisted of non Muslims and levantines. They could not forget the fact that while a National War of Independence was going on, the minorities living in Istanbul and İzmir were tending to their own businesses. All these negative snapshots from the past formed the collective memory of the young Republic’s elites and became the main handicap in the successful implementation of the Turkification project.

The Republican regime promised equality and secularism to non Muslims, but it could never accept these as citizens and continued to view them as *dhimmi* because of the Ottoman legacy. Furthermore, the memory of the War of Independence, never faded from the in the minds of the Republican elites, in whose eyes non-Muslims were “strangers whose loyalty was suspect” and were not founding members of the Turkish nation since they had not fought in the National War of Independence. The relationship between the Republican elites and the non Muslim Turkish citizens was somehow a love-hate affair as on one hand they put pressure on them for their Turkification but on the other hand they really did not want to embrace them as loyal citizens with full rights.

This negative legacy of the past would resurface later in the atmosphere of World War Two and recreate the trauma of the years of Armistice and War of Independence. As a result, the Capital Tax levy promulgated in 1942, which rightfully intended to tax profits earned from speculations and black market operations would be implemented in a totally discriminatory manner against citizens of Jewish and Christian faiths and those of *Dönme* origins.²² The discriminatory implementation of the Capital Tax levy would be the last and the unforgettable example of the de facto

²² One of the best sources for this subject is the recollections of this period by Istanbul’s then-Director of Finance. Faik Ökte, *The Tragedy of the Capital Tax Levy*, [translated by Geoffrey Cox], London, Croom Helm, 1987. For a recent collection of documentary evidence on the Capital Tax, see: Rifat N. Bali, *The “Varlık Vergisi” Affair. A Study on Its Legacy: Selected Documents*, The Isis Press, Istanbul, 2005. Two other Turkish language works on the tax are Ayhan Aktar, *Varlık Vergisi ve ‘Türkleştirme’ Politikaları*, İletişim Yayınları, Istanbul, 2000, pp. 135-244 / Rıdvan Akar, *Aşkale Yolcuları-Varlık Vergisi ve Çalışma Kampları*, Mephisto Yayınları, Istanbul, 2006.

discrimination of the non Muslims in the Single Party period. It was, at the same time, the testimony of the complete failure of the Turkification policies.

Published in Hans Lukas-Kieser (ed), *Turkey Beyond Nationalism*, (London: I.B. Taurus), 2006.