MODERNIZATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TURKEY’S OFFICIAL IDENTITY

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As far as the modernization and construction of Turkey’s official identity is concern, this article by Yücel Bozdağlioğlu is an analysis of the impact of the West during the Ottoman Empire on the construction Turkish official identity in the years following the War of Independence in 1920. The article argues that since Turkish politics was dominated by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, the author looked at his definition of western identity and his ideas on both western and eastern civilizations. As such the author includes elements and institutionalization of Turkey’s western identity. He concludes with the argument that it was this identity that determined Turkey’s foreign policy preferences and its alliance with the West during the Cold War. That said, we are going to summarize this article following its major developments, as expressed by the author. But first who is

**Structure**

A. The Impact of the West and the First Ottoman Reforms
B. Reforms and the Organized Opposition
   1. The Young Ottomans
   2. The Emergence of Islamism
C. Young Turk Revolution and the Constitutional Era (1908–1923)
D. Ataturk and the Institutionalization of Turkey’s Western Identity
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**Point 1: The Impact of the West and the First Ottoman Reforms**

Yücel Bozdağlioğlu argues that it was the first impact of the west on the first ottoman reforms, effectively came in the early 18th century during which the first deliberate and conscious attempts for westernization came into the Empire. In effect, this era also coincided with the period of the decline of the Empire. After two humiliating defeats by the Austrian and the Russian Empires, the Ottoman political elite where forced to search for the reasons of the decline. As such, two views emerged: The first argued that the reason for the defeats was due to the deteriorating state structure, while the second view contended that it was the military superiority of the West. According to this second view, a vigorous programme of Westernization and modernization might enable the Empire to throw off its weaknesses and once again become the terror of its enemies.
In order to achieve this, high-ranking statesmen where sent to various capitals of Europe “with instructions to make a thorough study of the means of civilization and education, and report on those capable of application in Turkey.” The impact of these exchanges in the realms of military and industrial technology began to spread to cultural and social life. French manners and lifestyles appeared among the upper classes and the palace circles.

During the French revolution periods, the Ottoman Empire witnessed some reforms such as; the creation of different channels of communication with Europe, through European instructors in military education and the embassies established in various European capitals that facilitated the flow of Western ideas into the Empire. As a result, these major channels, embassies, had an influence on the creation of a Westward-looking bureaucratic class, similar to the army and naval officers. Later, these bureaucratic and military classes were going to be the pioneers of the later Ottoman and Republican reforms. Ambassadors traveled to Europe with some young secretaries whose duty was “to study the languages of Europe and to learn something of the ways of Western society.

The result of these reforms was the drafting and promulgation of the Noble Rescript of the Rose Chamber (3 November 1839), the first of reforming edicts, which are collectively known as the Tanzimat. The Edict was promised the establishment of guarantees for the life, honor and property of the sultan’s subjects, an orderly tax system, a system of conscription for the army and equality before the law of all subjects whatever their religion. This document legitimized the entire enterprise of the reforms and outlined the direction it was to take. The second edict, Hatt-I Humayun (Imperial Rescript), was promulgated in 1856 confirming the principles of the first one.

The impact of these reforms began to be felt in every aspect of the Ottoman society during second half of the 19th century with the founders of the Tanzimat adopting the military and administrative structure of the West. Western culture was penetrating into the daily lives of the individuals, clothing, the use of money, the style of houses and interpersonal relations all became European. For reformers, “there was only one civilization, and that was European civilization. We must borrow Western civilization with both its rose and its thorn.”

**Point 2: Reforms and the Organized Opposition**

During the second half of the 18th century, it became clear that the reforms that had been undertaken since the 16th century had not produced the expected results and had not saved the state from decline. It in this light that in the Ottoman Empire we witnessed a strong opposition between the Young Ottomans and the emergence of Islamism

**A- The Young Ottomans**

The political opposition, which emerged in this period of decline, generally known as the Young Ottomans, “was the first example of a popular Muslim pressure group whose aim was to force the state to take their interests into account.” For them, the gap could be filled by taking Shariat (Islamic Law) and Islamic values into account. They contended that the solution was the introduction of representative, constitutional and parliamentarian government in the empire,
“thus instilling a true feeling of citizenship and loyalty to the state among all Ottoman subjects, Muslim and non-Muslim.” To put their ideas into practice, they played important roles in drafting and writing the 1876 Constitution and opening the Parliament.

B- The Emergence of Islamism

Another opposition movement, whose effect was felt in the long run in contrast to Young Ottomans arguments, was the emergence of Islamism. This new group believed that with the introduction of the Tanzimat, the Ottomans started to lose their ‘cultural identities.’ The best way to prevent this was to bring the Values of the Shariat back into the Ottoman society. As such, Pan-Islamist ideology, which aimed at the unity of all Muslims, was introduced to consolidate this movement. But unfortunately already the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of the Ottoman society was very vulnerable to such an ideology.

Point 3: Young Turk Revolution and the Constitutional Era (1908–1923)

This revolution takes its origins from the formation of the Young Ottoman movement which was made up of trained in the military academy, the school of medicine, the school of administration and the secular law school. The core of this first organized opposition was the Ittihad-i Osmani Cemiyeti (Ottoman Unity Society) founded by four students of the Military Medical College in 1889 to reinstate the constitution and parliament. Those in the Diaspora formed a small committee called Ittihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (Committee of Union and Progress, CUP). In France, the group came to be called as Jeunes Turcs (Young Turks).

The 1908 Revolution that opened the second constitutional era in Turkish history was greatly influenced by the ideas of the Young Turks. The CUP became the major ruling power in the empire and shaped the ideology of a modern Turkey which unquestionably, has a link in the chain of the Ottoman modernization movement as well as representing the modernist wing of the Ottoman bureaucracy.

They dreamed of several of the socio-cultural reforms which Mustafa Kemal was later to implement: abolition of polygamy, replacement of the fez by European headgear, new rights for women, complete secularization of the educational and legal systems, and purification of the Ottoman language. They not only changed the political system but they also attempted to refashion society by borrowing more freely from the West than ever before.” The political and social debate then centered on three competing ideologies: Ottomanism, the ideal of the Young Ottomans to unite the different communities in the Empire around the Ottoman throne; (Pan)Islamism, which tried to create solidarity within the Islamic community; and (Pan)Turkism, which sought the union of the Turkic peoples under the Ottoman flag. But according to the CUP “Western civilization did not achieve its superiority by means of science alone, but as a whole with all its concepts.” As it should be obvious, the fundamental question in these debates centered on the identity of both state and society.

In the beginning of the 19th century, Turkism gained grounds and prepared the ground for Kemalism. In effect the founder of a Turkish nationalist doctrine in this era was Ziya Gokalp, whose idea heavily influenced the founders of the Turkish Republic, especially
Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Gokalp basically tried to formulate an answer to the prevailing question of the time: **“who is a Turk and how ought this national identity be understood in relation to Islamic religious identity, on the one hand, and to modern scientific-rational identity, on the other.”**

According to Gokalp, nations merge on the scale of civilization; what separates them is their unique culture. Thus, the only way to save the empire was based on the formulation of “Turkization, Islamization, and Westernization.” Turkization was the purification of Turkish culture from mixed culture and traditions. Islamization meant a reform in the religious language such as the translation of the Koran into Turkish. As for Westernization, Turks were to be westernized or were to fit into Western culture.

The phrase: **“I am of Turkish race, Islamic religion and western civilization”**, answers the question on Turkish revolution and its underlying ideologies.

**Point 4: Ataturk and the Institutionalization of Turkey’s Western Identity**

After independence in 1923, the fundamental question that was to be settled was the form and the structure of the Turkish state. Some advocated the selective adoption of appropriate aspects of Western civilization while others encouraged the complete adoption of it. Ataturk being the leader of the second school of thought nurtured the idea that culture and civilization were not separable: “Our largest claim is to continue our nation as the most civilized and prosperous of nations. This is the dynamic ideal of the Turkish nation, which has performed a true revolution not only in its institutions, but also in its thought.” On another occasion, he remarked: “If we are going to be Westernized let us go to the fundamentals of the West.” For him, modernization cannot succeed by combining the old with the new. “It would have to assume a radical character, to affect all aspects of Turkish society, and to sweep away most, if not all, of its traditional beliefs and institutions.”

Hence in 1931, as leader of the Republican People’s Party (RPP), his ideology was defined in terms of six principles, namely nationalism, republicanism, populism, secularism, statism and revolutionism. But among these principles, republicanism, nationalism, and secularism occupy the most important place in the construction of the Turkish state since they symbolize “the rejection by the Turkish revolution of the Ottoman dynasty, the Caliphate and ummet ideology.” **Kemalism**, the official ideology of the Turkish system alone. In the words of **Rom Landau** “it is giving understanding and meaning to the emergence of Turkey into modern science and development; to new technology, education, ethics, as well as to new faith and work-life.”

As such, the natural result of this shift in the basis of state legitimacy was the exclusion of Islam from social and political life and replacement of it and its symbols with a newly-defined Turkish nation. The only way to realize this was to make a clean start by cutting attachments to recent history. In fact, it should be obvious from the above discussion, the Kemalist reforms were directed toward the disestablishment of Islam, “changing the Ottoman institutions and reshaping the physical environment in order to make it more similar to that of their European counterparts” and creating a new society that fit into the new circumstances:
**Point 5: Implications and Conclusion**

According to Yücel Bozdağlioğlu, the transformation of the state from a theocratic empire into a modern, secular nation-state through Kemalist reforms and the creation of a new political elite, who was responsible for preventing any deviations from the Kemalist principles, carried important implications for both Turkey’s foreign and domestic politics.

In terms of foreign policy, the construction of a new identity through the Kemalist reforms provided the new political elite with the framework within which Turkish foreign policy was thenceforth to be formulated. The most important aim of the new Turkey was to join with all civilized nations in pursuit of peace and friendship. Civilization meant the West “the modern world, of which Turkey must become a part.” The Kemalist reforms served to realize this purpose by removing the obstacles that stood on the way. After the abolition of the Caliphate, Atatürk remarked: The Turkish nation has perceived with great joy that the obstacles, which constantly, for centuries, had kept Turkey from joining all civilized nations and marching on the path of progress, have been removed.

Also, the debate concerning the identity of the Turkish state and society between the Kemalist Westerners and Islamists extended to the formulation of Turkish foreign policy. While the Kemalists argued that the best way to protect Turkey’s interests lay in its Western oriented foreign policy, Islamists contended that Turkey’s interests are in the Muslim world and civilization to which Turkey originally belonged.

In effect, the implication of Westernization and the Western-oriented foreign policy was a movement away from Islamic practice and tradition, and therefore, from Middle Eastern civilization, toward Europe. The modernization and westernization process, which constitute the raison d’être of the Republican regime, “required that interaction with the Middle East to be kept to a minimum.” The most important aim of the Kemalist regime was to Free State institutions, juridical structure, the educational system and society in general from the influence of religion. The Kemalist regime sought to create a modern society in line with that of the West. This policy resulted in a gradual exclusion of Islam, which was an important component of the old system, from political and social life. When the Kemalist elite abruptly removed the traditions of centuries, they did not replace it with a new culture. The nature of the modernization process in Turkey created a society, neither old nor new, that began to search for a definite cultural identity. This search, coupled with the failure of modernization, created an anti-Western segment and led to a polarization of the society.