

# Making nation from history. A challenge (4)

Thursday 19 June 2008, by [Hans-Peter Geissen](#)

**Turkish nationalism is a puzzling enigma, which may be manifest on the level of its main protagonists.**

**After some considerations on the mystery of the nascent Turkish nationalism, and a analysis of the notion of ethnicity, Hans-Peter Geissen shed some light on the conditions for Turkey to become a nation-state.**

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## Backside

Nonetheless, this pluralism did not mean equality but a hierarchy with Muslim superiority and gradually declining order of privileges from Greek over Armenian to Jewish. But for the very same reason the central power controlled Muslims (considered possible rivals) in particular, with the paradoxical consequence that newly emerging bourgeoisies were mainly Christian and still had a relative overweight of Jews as compared to Muslim Turks.

Yet Muslims continued to dominate the state administration and military, which however at that time were confronted with superior competitors of various European empires.

Likewise, Muslim "heterodoxy" (mainly Turkish, but including some Kurdish and Arab segments) had always been persecuted by imperial Islamic forces. But with the abolishment of the Janissary corps in 1826 also the Bektashije order, the last influential stronghold of this old-Anatolian segment, was prohibited and their properties transferred to the heavily orthodox Naksbandije.

So the Muslim segment became more orthodox and conservative on average while emerging Christian bourgeoisies based their aims on their Western analogues, with rights and liberties and finally collective (national) sovereignty becoming predominant on the agenda.

There is also a regional shift. The Naksbandije had already been strong in most of the Kurdish provinces, whereas the Bektashije had their strongholds (besides Anatolia) in Albania (still today) and some south-Slavic populations. An unintended effect was therefore diminished support for the empire in the Balkans while increasing it in Kurdistan (which may have been intended).

The main intention of the coup against the Janissaries had been a modernization of the military, but the desired effect was greatly delayed because the Russian Empire soon started the biggest offensive ever at both the Balkan and Caucasian borders while the Ottoman army was still in disarray, causing a crushing defeat and large-scale losses of territory as well as finances. Southern Greece was lost due to a coalition of Britain, France and Russia. The empire, including its imperial "state churches", was broken step by step along ethnic lines, which partly coincided with or indeed meant religious ones - now including various national(ist) state churches. One product of this breakup is republican Turkey.

All these shifts left their marks to the present.

## **The return of ... what? History? But whose history?**

If we look back on these pictures from Turkey's history, we may distinguish several layers and perspectives.

The name of Turkey is entirely a European creation. In this European image, three core elements may be distinguished:

(Turkish) ethnicity,  
the empire (state),  
and (Islamic) religion.

In comparison, the historical development and self-image differs, because at the beginnings, neither ethnicity nor religion had a determining role. As maybe in every empire, mere rule (state, empire) and pragmatism was at the core. Islamic religion served for legitimation, however, religious pluralism was always accepted.

### **Now, what is a nation?**

To cut discussion short, I only take a state-nation into account, as this is the manifest nation. Mere "ethnic nations", I presume, are just ideas or ambitions aiming at a state nation.

Then, "nation" is a collective sovereign of a state. As a collective, it is determined by the inhabitants of the territory of that state. As a sovereign, it cannot be subjected to a specific creed or ideology. A sovereign is basically free.

Some further implications may emerge from this. Most notably, only a democracy can be the state of a nation, because otherwise from one angle this "nation" is not sovereign, but subjected to the rule of some particular force (possibilities range from a corporate majority to a single dictator).

As to Turkey, it has a strong tradition of state, including a defined territory. But it has yet to become a nation state.

Turkey has a strong tradition to tolerate the existence of a wide variety of ethnicities. But it has no tradition to formally recognize them, while the former recognition of "tradition" is no longer in use in the legal framework. Hence, conditions for minorities have worsened from imperial to republican times. While accepting the European attribution of ethnic "Turkishness", Turkey failed to realize that there is at least one more territorial ethnicity, and several non-territorial ones. As part of a nation, these have the right that their ethnic markers, especially language, be recognized by the state. Otherwise (as is the case) there is no nation, and in the one (Kurdish) case mentioned, territorial integrity of the state is put at risk by, it must be highlighted, the state itself.

Turkey has also been described and even defined as an Islamic state by European tradition. However, in this case it is also part of the self-legitimization of the former empire, which is inherited in the republic, though in a paradox mode. Here, nominal secularism is combined with almost full state control of religion while state employment is, practically without exception, bound to Muslim identity. So that we might speak of Turkey as essentially an "Islamic" Republic. Indeed, the more an institution describes itself as "secular" (say, the army for instance), the more exclusively its ranks are reserved for (cultural) Muslims. But of course an exclusive Muslim army cannot be the army of a democratic nation. It might be described as the (post-) Ottoman army, still traumatized by what they feel was a betrayal of the Christian subjects, including the "state churches" of the empire. At this point it appears as a regression, at least if compared to the rather inclusive conception of the Turkish nation of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

However, even Atatürk - and his Greek counterpart Eleutherios Venizelos - displayed this still Ottoman understanding in the "population exchange" ("mutual" expulsion/deportation) between Greece and Turkey (1924/25, treaty from 1923). Many of the "Greeks" deported from Turkey were actually native

Turkish-speakers, while many of the deported “Turks” were actually speakers of Greek or some Slavic dialect or some other tongue of the Balkan region. The actual criterion to distinguish “national” (“ethnic”) “Greeks” from “Turks” was religion exclusively.

Naturally, this terminological confusion is not restricted to the army, though the army represents its spiritual core. Admittedly, it aspires, theoretically, to the opposite of what it is. PM Erdogan however was probably in full accordance with his ambitions when he spoke of Islam as the “glue” sticking Kurds and Turks together - literally repeating Ziya Gökalp’s century-old formula.

But unfortunately, religion is not the appropriate glue for a nation, as democracy requires liberty and equality also in matters of creed and world-view. As an approximation, Ottoman pluralism and inclusiveness was more suitable to that end. The missing feature, obviously in both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, was (is) equality (and thus freedom) in religious as well as ethnical matters. Which may easily be extended to issues of gender and class.

The end