CHAPTER 6:
FROM ‘NATIONAL CAUSE’ TO ‘NATIONAL BURDEN’: TURKISH CYPRIOTS WITHIN TURKEY’S KINSHIP AND DIASPORA POLITICS AND PERCEPTIONS

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In the past nothing could be said about Cyprus apart from the official position. The Annan Plan marked a new era. It’s no longer on the political agenda. The government looks at it from a more geopolitical perspective. It comes on the agenda when we talk about the EU or energy. But for the society, it’s gradually begun to occupy a smaller place in their minds. No one’s interested in Cyprus. In the past, whenever you said “babyland” everyone would get excited. But the subject has now been normalized. Turkey has much bigger problems to deal with… the Kurdish problem, Syria.

— Head of a Turkish NGO

Introduction
The above remark summarizes the Turkish government’s current disinterest in their ‘kin’ in Cyprus. While there are numerous factors that may lead to Turkey’s increased interest in the island—e.g., gas reserves recently discovered off the coast of the island (Tzimitras and Gürel 2018)—our concern in this paper is with Turkish perceptions of Cyprus and Turkish Cypriots, as well as how these perceptions play into Turkey’s foreign and domestic policies.

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that Turkey is now politically and socially divided in a way that, arguably, it has not been since the establishment of the Republic. While class, gender, ethnic and political differences have always existed in the country, there now exists a rift between those who oppose the AKP government and a majority that support the

AKP/Erdoğan agenda. That agenda includes increasingly autocratic powers for the presidency, given impetus by the 15 July 2016 coup attempt and threat to Erdoğan’s life. Public dissent has been stifled in the country, as many opposition and dissident voices have been swept up and silenced in the vast purges that have ‘cleansed’ the state’s military-bureaucratic complex.

In this chapter we will provide a broad outline of the ways in which Turkish state attitudes towards Cyprus and Turkish Cypriots have changed over time, and we will also discuss the resulting policy implications. For instance, as other studies have noted, the idea of Cyprus as a ‘national cause’ was so hegemonic until the early 2000s that to question it was equated with treason (Kaliber 2005). Moreover, as we explain below, this was because Cyprus has always stood somewhere between the domestic and the foreign, with influence in both realms of policy. It was only with the AKP’s sidelining of the military and bureaucracy—what Metin Heper (1992) calls the ‘state elites’—that this narrative began to break down. As we will explain, that narrative has yet to be fully replaced, although its breakdown has been accompanied by increasing tensions between north Cyprus and Turkey, and indeed between Turkish Cypriots and Turkish nationals.

**Historical Background: Becoming a ‘National Cause’**

During the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkish speakers living in Cyprus fell outside the boundaries of the National Pact that defined the limits of the Turkish state; as a result they were cast as ‘outside Turks’ (diş Türkler). The National Pact also defined the limits of non-intervention, the idea being that protecting one’s own sovereignty—something that Turkish citizens clearly desired after so many decades of war at the end of empire—meant respecting the sovereignty of others. As a result, despite growing Greek Cypriot agitation for enosis, or union of the island with Greece—intensifying in the first half of the twentieth century—Turkish governments kept a political and military distance from an island that was, at the time, a British colony.

Turning the Cyprus problem into a national cause was possible in part because of the many Turkish Cypriots living in Turkey who, in the late 1940s, started to form associations and join forces with ultra-nationalists in Turkey. Many of these nationalists were sympathetic to Turanism, i.e., the idea of the unification of all Turkish-speaking peoples in one homeland; in fact, they often fell afoul of the official Kemalist ideology because of their support for their ‘kin’ who were not covered in the National Pact.

By the early 1950s, the plight of the Turkish Cypriots, aka the Turks who ‘remained’ in Cyprus, had penetrated Turkish popular culture, while demonstrations kept the matter constantly in the news. The decade was also a time of martial pride in Turkey, when the Turkish military showed its mettle in Korea, Turkey’s first involvement in a foreign war. In the same period, however, regional interests required the Turkish government to take a position against intervention on the island, expressed by then Foreign Minister Fuat Köprülü in 1950 when he remarked: “for us there is no problem called the Cyprus Problem.” Retired Turkish ambassador Tugay Uluçevik notes that in the context of the early Cold War period, Turkey watched Cyprus
from the sidelines, partly because it did not want to ruin the good relations it had with Greece at that time (Uluçevik 2016).

It was not until the late 1950s and the start of a Greek Cypriot anticolonial struggle aimed at enosis that the Turkish public began to be more aware of the Cyprus issue. Organizations of Turkish Cypriots in Turkey joined with associations of nationalist students to hold large-scale protests around the issue of Cyprus (Armaoğlu 1963: 441, 557-559). Indeed, such associations used the media and mass rallies to whip up popular opinion in a way that would ultimately change foreign policy (see Bryant and Hatay 2015).

By the end of that decade, the rhetoric of a ‘national cause’ (milli dava) had become common in Turkish public discourse on Cyprus. Moreover, the excitement around their island kin, this group of ‘outside Turks,’ continued as violence in Cyprus escalated in the 1960s. Following the 1974 Turkish military intervention/invasion in the island, Cyprus also became a subject of national pride. In this regard, former ambassador Uluçevik remarked:

Starting from the mid-1950s and continuing until the beginning of 2003, in Turkey, despite occasionally being faced with very difficult internal and external conditions, there was a “national excitement” that covered all of the state institutions, the parliament, and all of the people young and old and was reflected without exception in our press. What made this excitement possible was the idea of the “national cause.” This idea came about because of becoming aware of the importance and value for Turkey of the island of Cyprus. Adopting this “national cause” entailed demonstrating an unwavering “national stance.” There was no thought, in either the government or the press, of taking a step back or making a concession on the question of Cyprus in order to achieve some other foreign policy goal. (Uluçevik 2016)

As Uluçevik describes it, then, ‘national excitement’ easily turned into a ‘national stance’ (milli duruş)—in other words, a policy principle. Within the context of that national stance, he asserts, it was impossible either to question that principle or to think of sacrificing it for other interests.

Securitization of the Cyprus Problem

The transformation of the Cyprus Problem into a Turkish national cause also blurred the lines between domestic and foreign policy in Turkey; as the Cyprus question became increasingly ‘securitized,’ it made what would otherwise appear to be foreign policy a matter of domestic concern. An emerging literature on securitization reveals the ways in which particular events or subjects are transformed into issues of national security through the intervention of state actors and/or the media. Securitizing an issue in turn enables state actors to take extreme or otherwise unacceptable steps to counter the subject that has been securitized. An example would be the United States immediately after 11 September 2001, when the government explained U.S. security needs as the reason: to open Guantanamo, to justify the torture of suspected terrorists, and to institute large-scale surveillance of its own population. More recently, the 2015 flood of refugees into Europe elicited a similar securitizing response, one that implied that the only way to stem the tide of migrants was by policing borders and erecting border fences.
While for the first three decades after the establishment of the Turkish Republic that country’s stance on Cyprus had been a distant one, the intense mobilization by Turkish and Turkish Cypriot elites and youth, as well as Turkish media, ultimately convinced a large portion of the Turkish public that Turkish Cypriots were ‘blood brothers’ under threat, and moreover, that geographically the island was actually part of Anatolia. The sense of threat to a national cause that had also become part of Turkey’s national interest carried into the post-1974 period, primarily through the collusion of Rauf Denktas and other Turkish Cypriot nationalist politicians with the military-bureaucratic establishment in Turkey (Kızılyürek 2003: 118-119).

Historian Behlül Özkan notes: “Cyprus was used to construct a national consensus as well as an authoritarian system which silenced opposition” (Özkan 2015: 544). In an important article, political scientist Alper Kaliber (2005) argued that the process by which the “national stance” became unquestionable and opposition silenced was through the bureaucratic normalization of the issue. Returning to the USA response to 9/11, we can see how various forms of anti-terror legislation can lead to—even justify—an increased surveillance of populations; surveillance also becomes bureaucratized and normalized. As an issue becomes bureaucratized, it becomes harder to question, and it may even serve to increase the power of the bureaucracy. In the case of the Turkish securitization of Cyprus, Kaliber notes:

> It has forced the government as the political authority to pursue predetermined policies by remaining loyal to the “red lines” drawn up by the “foreign” policy and security establishment. Second, the consistent efforts of the bureaucratic elite to hold the Cyprus question within the sphere of “the existential” and “the imminent” thwarted the occurrence of widespread social debate within an autonomous public sphere, and thus led to the depoliticization and fixation of the issue as an area of bureaucratic specialty and competence. (Kaliber 2005: 320)

In other words, once Cyprus became a national cause and a matter of national pride, it was no longer debatable. As Kaliber remarks: “The conventional state rhetoric on the Cyprus question substantially contributed to the institutionalization of a regime fetishizing such concepts as security, stability and ‘national sensitivities’ in Turkey.” So while the securitization of the Cyprus Problem served to bolster the state elites in Turkey through ‘fetishization’ of national security, often against political elites, it simultaneously bolstered the position of nationalist politicians in Cyprus, especially Rauf Denktas, who was greatly admired by the Turkish public (ibid. 2005: 321).

Marching on to more Pragmatic Games

It was not until the early 2000s— when Turkey was in the process of EU-oriented changes intended to lead it closer to the European Union— that Turkey’s position on Cyprus began to change. Then EU Coordinator Egemen Bağış called Turkey’s new position on Cyprus a ‘win-win’ (kazan-kazan) strategy, echoing the rhetoric of conflict resolution experts who had sought to intervene in the conflict. As a result of this so-called win-win strategy, Turkey
actively participated in the negotiations of the Annan Plan V, the version that would ultimately be put to twin referenda on both sides of Cyprus in April 2004. While there were vociferous voices decrying the state’s ‘selling out’ of Cyprus, these were soon drowned by the AKP’s EU-oriented agenda and sidelining of the military. It was only in the de-securitizing of the Cyprus Problem, then, that a new Turkish policy towards the island could be born.

Even after Greek Cypriots defeated that plan at referendum, the AKP-led Turkish government insisted on a policy towards Cyprus in which they would be ‘one step ahead.’ This meant a departure from Rauf Denktaş’s previous insistence on certain ‘red lines,’ especially the idea that the unrecognized TRNC would first have to be recognized “if only for a minute,” as the former Turkish Cypriot president used to say. This had given Denktaş, and perforce the Turkish Cypriot side, the reputation of intransigence. Instead, the new ‘one step ahead’ policy was built on Turkish Cypriot support for the Annan Plan in a bid to ‘show the world’ that, actually, the intransigent side was the island’s south.

In addition, the defeat of the Annan Plan at referendum led to a new Turkish policy of ‘developing’ north Cyprus through both state and private investment. This included, for instance, the development of large hotel complexes in the Kyrenia and Bafra regions of the island, building new roads, and most recently, the construction of a massive water pipeline bringing fresh water undersea to Cyprus from the south Turkish coast. All this infrastructural and economic investment aimed to develop the north has been called by some Turkish diplomats a ‘Plan B’ — i.e., a plan for north Cyprus’s future in the event that there never will be a settlement. However, as we will show below, that development has also created further rifts, as many Turkish Cypriots interpret it as a use of Cypriot resources without direct benefit for Cypriots. Because many of the projects employ workers from Turkey and funnel profits back to Turkey, Turkish Cypriot unions have objected that this is a form of exploitation and colonization. Indeed, in the post-Annan period, even as incomes have risen in Cyprus’s north, the discourse of Turkish colonization has also gained considerable ground.

Rebecca Bryant and Christalla Yakinthou (2016) observed that the current relationship between north Cyprus and Turkey might be described as a paternal protectorate, a type of protectorate that is justified and explained by both Turkish Cypriots and Turkish nationals in the idiom of kinship. The authors remarked: “This perceived kinship relationship, then, makes it ‘natural’ that Turkey would protect Turkish Cypriots and intervene in their affairs.” However, it is also the familial nature of this relationship that “creates ambiguity in this particular relation of domination and authority,” as that familiarity “often slides between the paternal and the paternalistic.” Paternalism, or interference against someone’s will in the interests of their own good, was also a feature of European colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially the belief in a European “civilizing mission.” They also observed: “And so like a good father, Turkey has for so long ‘taken care of’ north Cyprus, protecting it, advising it, giving its allowance, and intervening to chastise. Like other parent-child relationships, Turkish Cypriots must struggle to have their autonomy recognized, and there is therefore often resentment that the child is never allowed to ‘grow up’” (Bryant and Yakinthou 2012: 16-19).
Gradually in the post-Annan period, the Turkish state’s protectorate relationship with its client in Cyprus’s north moved from the paternal to the paternalistic, including not only north Cyprus’s development but also the imposition of austerity measures associated with Turkish aid packages. As we will see, the response of the Turkish public to Turkish Cypriot protests of an increasingly colonizing relationship has increased tensions and led to periods of stand-off between Turkish leaders and their counterparts on the island.

**From Victimized ‘Brotherhood’ to ‘Ungrateful Parasites’**

In early 2011, the streets of north Nicosia filled with, by some estimates, upwards of 20,000 angry Turkish Cypriots who gathered to protest Turkey’s demands that the island’s north go on an economic diet. Since the 1960s, Turkey has sent millions of dollars each year to support a community whose economy has been hampered, and at times crippled, by various forms of isolation. The current figure is around $650 million. A large part of that money goes to pay the salaries of civil servants, and Turkey had demanded the imposition of austerity measures, including downsizing the bloated bureaucracy, increasing working hours, and eliminating privileges such as the thirteenth salary, a remnant of British rule on the island. The trade union and civil society leaders who organized the protest proclaimed that it was part of a *Toplumsal Varoluş Mücadelesi* (Struggle for Communal Existence). In Turkey, however, the protests tended to be interpreted as ingratitude and as asking for handouts with no strings attached.

In the post-Annan period, even as Turkey used diplomacy and soft power to improve relations with its neighbours and renew its influence in the region, relations with Turkish Cypriots grew worse from day to day. Around the time of the Arab Spring, in early 2011, Turkish Cypriot relations with Turkey also entered a new period, following the protests described above and as a response to the paternalistic and even bullying reaction of then Prime Minister Erdoğan, who remarked in a press conference:

> Lately there have been provocative protests in North Cyprus. They’re organizing these with the South. . . . They tell us “get out.” . . . They have no right to engage in protests like this against Turkey. The very lowest civil servant salary is close to 10,000 TL. . . . The gentleman gets 10,000 lira and shamelessly holds such a protest. . . . They say “Turkey should get out of here.” Who are you to say something like that? *(sen kimsin be adam).* I have martyrs, I have wounded veterans, I have strategic interests. Whatever business Greece has in Cyprus, Turkey also has the same business for strategic reasons. . . . It’s quite significant for those who are being fed by our country to take this route *(Ülkemizden beslenenlerin bu yola girmesi manidardır).*

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Erdoğan then claimed that he would order the prime minister of the TRNC to appear in Ankara and ‘call him to account’ (çağırıp kendisiley konuşacağız, soracağız).

The language used was inflammatory: Turkish Cypriots interpreted Erdoğan’s description that they are ‘being fed’ (besleniyorlar) by the Turkish state to be a way of calling them besleme, a word used to describe the traditional practice of taking poor children into one’s home and raising them as a type of servant. The tone with which Erdogan claimed that he would call the TRNC prime minister to his office suggested, again, a master calling his servant, or a father calling his son to account. The immediate reaction in the Turkish Cypriot media was shock and indignation, with the editor of one newspaper ironically commenting, “Erdoğan . . . has begun to talk like a colonizer. We have no need of a president in a puppet government. This state that we call the TRNC should be abolished and joined to Turkey. A governor should be sent to Cyprus so that it can be a modern colony.”

All of this was a long way from the close cooperation of seven years earlier, when the AKP had recently come to power and strongly supported a U.N. plan to reunite the island. In 2011, there were numerous Turkish commentators, especially those of a more pragmatic nature, who warned that Erdoğan’s rhetoric, rooted as it was in the idea of Cyprus as a national cause and Turkish Cypriots as persons who had been saved, would ultimately result in north Cyprus appearing to be a colony of Turkey, if Turkish Cypriots’ identity and wishes were not respected:

What are you going to do if you don’t support [feed] the TRNC? If you have the strength, let’s see you solve the problem by annexing the TRNC. It’s only then that you’ll have the right to treat the President of the TRNC like the “governor of the 82nd province.” . . . However, you can’t annex the TRNC, because you rightfully don’t want to put yourself in the position of accepting a solution that’s a step behind the Annan Plan. So in that case you’ll show respect for the law created by the reality of your state recognizing the TRNC as an independent state; you’ll play the game by those rules. Even if for you the TRNC’s independence is a lie, you’ll behave as though it’s not one [authors’ italics].

The final sentence is especially telling, as it acknowledges that for many people in Turkey and for Turkish politicians, Cyprus is like another Turkish province, even if it is called by another name. Indeed, one sees this in many aspects of everyday relations between Turkey and north Cyprus, including the right to enter the country using only an identity card, and the way that Turkish travel agents describe Cyprus as a destination somewhere between domestic and foreign tourism.

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Indeed, as early as 1995, Tanıl Bora, a leftist intellectual writing in the magazine Birikim, described what he saw as the difficulties created by persons from Turkey equating Turkish Cypriot identity with Turkish identity:

Turkish Cypriot (kıbrıslıtürk) identity has been equated with the Turkishness of Turkey. While ethnic kin such as Turks from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Balkans are not deemed “worthy” of this same degree of identification, it is approved by official Turkish Cypriot nationalism: Denktaş, in a speech before the Turkish parliament in May 1993, used the phrase, “the Great Turkish Nation of which I am proud to be a member.” . . . Turkish Cypriots, in both meaning and rhetoric, are positioned as a branch of Turkey’s Turkishness (Bora 1995).4

It was the lack of identity or sameness that particularly came to the fore during the besleme row. It was at this point that certain writers reminded the Turkish public that north Cyprus was not simply a branch of Turkishness in Cyprus:

Some time ago I wrote in this column, “Cyprus belongs to the Cypriots.” I don’t want to repeat the same thing again, but briefly I want to make clear that Cyprus is not Turkey’s colony. At least that’s not how Cypriots see it. And this problematic perspective is going to create even bigger problems in the future. The day may come when those Turkish Cypriots seeking to be free of Turkey may even establish secessionist groups. Before any solution we need to be clear on the perception of Cyprus in the heads of politicians from all parties in Turkey. Positioning ourselves as “saviors” from 1974 won’t solve the Cyprus Problem and could complicate it even more. The Northern Cypriots, like the Kurds, support an honorable solution. They want their identity to be protected and respected.5

In this period, Turkish Cypriot insistence on their distinctiveness, as well as the increasingly antagonistic relationship created by others’ insistence on their Turkishness, or seeing north Cyprus as a branch of Turkishness in the island, as well as by Turkish Cypriot reactions against large numbers of Turkish nationals arriving on the island as temporary or seasonal labour, led to a general perception amongst the Turkish public that “Cypriots don’t love Turks from Turkey,” or even that “Cypriots don’t love Turkey.” This was and continues to be widely expressed and discussed on social media, where in some cases the question is framed as “Why do Northern Cypriots (kuzey kıbrıslılar) not love Turkey and/or Turks from Turkey?”

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It was mainly in the 1990s that Turkish Cypriots began to express increasing anxiety that they were being outnumbered by Turkish immigrants from Turkey. Because north Cyprus's only door to the world at that time was through Turkey, this also meant that economic migrants arrived via Turkey and that most were Turkish citizens. Despite the opening of checkpoints in 2003, Turkey and points east remain the main source of cheap labour in the island’s north.\(^6\)

**How Do We Save Them from Degeneration?**

In addition to perceptions of ungrateful Cypriot ‘brothers,’ however, is another growing perception of Cyprus as a centre for gambling and prostitution, in other words, for so-called decadent tourism. One senior researcher at a well-known Turkish research institute commented in an interview with us that even the rhetoric of Cypriots not loving them has begun to be replaced by one that views the island as a place to engage in activities that are illegal in Turkey, such as casinos and night clubs that are actually brothels.\(^7\)

The current picture of the island, then, is one where activities that are illegal in Turkey take place openly, where higher education is nothing more than an economic sector, and where locals ‘dislike Turks.’ For nationalists and religious conservatives in Turkey, this is further accompanied by an impression that the island’s universities shelter Kurdish separatists and that Turkish Cypriots are losing their Turkish and Muslim identities. For instance, there are frequent clashes at north Cyprus universities between Kurdish students and members of the Turkish nationalist ultra-right. Although both groups are from Turkey and bring their disagreements from Turkey to the island, the refusal of the north Cyprus government to stamp out Kurdish nationalism has led members of Turkish ultra-right organizations and parties to call Cyprus a ‘traitor land’:

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6 Beside the economic migrants who started arriving in Cyprus in the late 1980’s, there was also another kind of migration was already taking place. After the division of the island in 1974, approximately 30,000 Turkish nationals were settled in the island’s north as part of a facilitated migration (1975-1979) intended to increase the Turkish population on the island. This act of demographic engineering was planned by the Turkish Cypriot leadership in collaboration with the Turkish state and primarily involved moving to the north of Cyprus persons who had been displaced as a result of dams or other state projects. Soldiers who had participated in the military intervention/invasion were also encouraged to settle on the island. Upon their arrival, all settlers were given Greek Cypriot houses and citizenship in Turkish Cypriots’ new breakaway state, and they became an important element in building an economy out of Greek Cypriot land and enterprises. Many were used as agricultural labour, and they were usually settled in remote areas where Turkish Cypriots did not wish to live, such as the Karpassia Peninsula. Many others married Turkish Cypriots and were incorporated into the community, while their children and grandchildren speak the Turkish Cypriot dialect and often are indistinguishable from Turkish Cypriots. However, this facilitated migration ended in 1979, and so these ‘settlers’ should be distinguished from persons who later arrived in the island as labour migrants. The latter group comes to the island of its own volition, seeking a better life. This population began to increase in the 1980s and 1990s first with the growth of tourism and later because of the construction in the island’s north, as both these industries are dependent on cheap labour. However, the numbers of these migrants, as well as a perception of a rise in crime, has caused Turkish Cypriots to perceive this influx as a ‘population problem,’ and popular discourse often accuses Turkey of ‘sending these people to the island’ (For more further reading see: Hatay 2005, 2007, 2008).

While the blessed island is being run with a mentality that gives credence to traitors and makes it seem not like a Turkish land but like a traitor land, what are our Ambassador and our military commander doing there if they’re not raising an objection? . . . This island for which we sacrificed thousands of martyrs and Turkey’s future cannot become an island of treason, prostitution, and gambling, this should not be allowed!8

Moreover, in the AKP period, what had in the past been simply a need to prove their Turkishness became entwined with that party’s mingling of nationalism and religiosity. Today, in other words, Turkish Cypriots often find both their Turkishness and their Muslimness questioned. One political scientist explained in an interview the current perceptions of religious conservatives in Turkey from a historical perspective:

For the more conservative elements, it seems more like a military area. It’s the place where all the Kemalist fantasies have been realized. What Kemalism wanted to accomplish, it accomplished it there. For instance, education is completely secular. . . In other words, there’s an unadulterated Kemalism there, with all its faults. Overly Western.

This interviewee, then, argues that for conservative Turks, an ‘unadulterated Kemalism’ is responsible for the lack of religiosity amongst Turkish Cypriots that today calls their identity into doubt. Not only have party officials often noted Turkish Cypriots’ loss of religious identity and the need to revive it, but ordinary authors and intellectuals who affiliate themselves with the party have also remarked upon the lack of religious identity they find in Cyprus’s north. For instance, only a few months after the besleme crisis, one religious author who had visited Cyprus briefly spoke rather definitively on its religious lack:

This weekend, as I was walking around the cities and streets of the TRNC, where I had gone for a conference, and conversing with people, and talking to officials—especially religious officials—for some reason the last gasp of Andalucia appeared before my eyes. My brain was making connections with the Andalucia of Leo Africanus that I had read about years ago. . . . I don’t want to paint a negative picture, but the TRNC has become a country in limbo. Neither religious nor without religion . . neither Muslim nor Christian. There’s an incredible indifference to religious and national values. . . . I assure you, the Cypriot community is melting like snow. Turkey keeps thousands of troops there, it sends billions, but the community is quickly melting. If a plebiscite were to happen now, the percentage of those wanting to join with the South Greek Republic would be at least fifty percent.9

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From ‘National Cause’ to ‘National Burden’

What this writer expresses as a ‘melting away’ (erimek) of identity often finds expression as a fear that Turkish Cypriots will be assimilated into a non-Turkish majority and thereby lose their identity. The interviewee above, for instance, continued:

The state has an assimilation fear, in other words they fear that the people there will lose their identity. Whether it’s the Kemalists or the religious people, they don’t want the people there being assimilated in the long run. Before they would do this [counter this] by feeding them Kemalist nationalism. Now it’s with conservative ideas. But there’s certainly a fear that their own symbols will be reconstructed. In other words, that a new identity will be created. There’s a fear that “they shouldn’t be assimilated in the majority” or “in the EU.”

As we see from the quotes above, there is a logical association at work that equates secularism with loss of faith, loss of faith with loss of Turkishness, and loss of Turkishness with loss of values. Moreover, that loss of values, for some, appears to imply a willingness to do anything for profit, including joining with Greek Cypriots. This has become a theme in Islamist writings about the island:

People who have lost their Islamic consciousness and sensitivity have also weakened their awareness of being Turkish. Because throughout history the Muslim religion and Turkishness have been intertwined. Those Turks who have lost their Muslimness have, after a period of time, also lost their Turkish identity. Those who remained attached to Islam, on the other hand, retained their Turkish identity. There are very strong bonds between Muslim identity and Turkish identity. . . . In North Cyprus, because of anti-religious secular policies, the Cypriot Turk has begun to lose his Islamic consciousness and Muslim identity. Distancing from religion has brought with it a loss of identity. Those persons whose spiritual side has been damaged have also weakened their ties with Turkish culture and identity. Instead of faith and culture, material interests and profit relations have begun to take precedence. A public has emerged that for the sake of its own interests is not disturbed by collaborating with the Greek side and behaving against Turkey, that instead of a unity of faith is more interested in an association of profit.10

As a result, a newly articulated conflict has emerged between adherents of the AKP who seem to think bringing Turkish Cypriots back to the faith is their duty, and Turkish Cypriots who resent having their faith questioned. One leftist commentator remarked ironically on this perspective:

While Davutoğlu’s “strategic perspective” gives little importance to the presence of Turkish Cypriots, the culture men of the religious segment declare Turkish Cypriots “without religion” and practically count North Cyprus as “Darül Harp” [the “place of war,” a phrase used to refer to non-Muslim territories where Islam cannot survive].

The ‘war’ declared here is a fight against the secularism of Turkish Cypriots, and an insistence on drawing them back into the faith. The AKP has sought to accomplish this on the island through religious education, including building an imam-hatip school; through financing the building of mosques;¹¹ and most recently through a ‘coordination committee’ intended to control funding for youth housing and activities.

**Building a Trojan Horse**

Since 2004, the AKP has also shown its political economic face to Cypriots in the form of neoliberalism. As explained above, the Turkish government has attached conditions to its aid packages, e.g. privatization of public works, and has encouraged Turkish investors to pour large amounts of money into the sorts of building projects that have fuelled the Turkish economy (Buğra and Savaşkan 2014). These have included large resort complexes, universities, housing developments, and even an airport. The Turkish government has also invested in infrastructure, such as new roads and a water delivery project, primarily using Turkish contractors. And most controversially for Turkish Cypriots, the Turkish government has invested in the construction of mosques and religious schools.

All these projects have brought new and powerful Turkish business interests to the island for the first time. These business interests, furthermore, have inserted themselves into the island’s nepotistic system, which had previously been the exclusive terrain of local interests. These Turkish individuals/companies have invested large sums of money to support parties that would give them favours, e.g., prime locations to build hotels or overlooking zoning restrictions, etc. Although many of these interests are not directly affiliated with the AKP, there is still the perception among many Turkish Cypriots that their own assets and resources are secondary to Turkey and its economic interests.¹²

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¹¹ Between 1974 and 2000, only nine new mosques were built in the north. In contrast, between 2000 and 2018, 45 new mosques were built, most of these in the post-2001 AKP period. Of course, it is also important to explain that the actual number of mosques has not increased; all these new mosques were built in the ‘former’ Greek Cypriot or mixed villages where Muslims had converted the Christian churches into mosques. Once the new, purpose-built mosques have been built, Turkish Cypriot authorities evacuate the churches and move all the carpets and other furniture to the new mosques, while also keeping the former mosque/church locked (High level clergy from TRNC Religious Affairs Office, phone interview, 5.9. 2018).

¹² As an example, businessman Besim Tibuk, the owner of the Merit International Hotels Group, first came to the island in 2000. Today, he owns 12% of the bed capacity in the north, spread among seven resorts. He is the owner of six of the 17 five-star hotels in the north, while five of these five-star hotels were built in the past decade. The same businessman owns a newspaper, a television station a and radio station in north Cyprus.
In addition to these changes, there is also the AKP’s new diaspora politics in Cyprus, which is no longer targeted to their Turkish Cypriot kin but is now aimed at the Turkish immigrants who settled/were settled on the island post 1974. This new policy resembles AKP trans-national politics elsewhere and has the potential to disturb the peace on the island. Since 2014, political parties led by diaspora Turks who support the AKP have begun to emerge in countries with Turkish immigrant and minority populations (Sahin Mencutek and Baser 2018). In Germany, the Netherlands, Bulgaria and elsewhere, the AKP has established political parties that are in some cases rivals to established diaspora parties. These new rival parties are intended to have an influence on domestic politics in the countries where they operate, but they also are used to mobilize absentee votes for the AKP in Turkish elections. In north Cyprus, on the other hand, these policies have created new problems both because of the island’s geographical proximity to Turkey and because of its dependence on it.

In Cyprus today, Turkish nationals, or persons of Turkish origin, have access to new networks and new forms of political connection that have been emerging on the island since the late 1990s. There are now often direct connections between important members of the diaspora in Cyprus and businesspeople/politicians in Turkey, particularly when they are from the same region in Turkey. This is precisely the sort of grassroots mobilisation that the AKP has encouraged, providing both the means and the networks to address local-level grievances that were often overlooked in the past. In the last decade, for instance, there has been a proliferation of associations based on place of origin in Turkey (hemşehri associations). According to one Turkish immigrant association, at present there are over 35 different diaspora organizations in north Cyprus, with four only for people from the Hatay region (Hataylılar Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği, Hataylılar Derneği, Ak Hataylılar Derneği, and Özk Hataylılar Derneği).

A founder of one Turkish settler civil society organization complained that in the past, “Whenever a deputation came from Turkey, it was necessary to gain a place in the official representation. If you weren’t a civil society organization or political party, you couldn’t meet with the delegation” (quoted in Özekmekçi 2012). However, as explained above, today Turkish nationals on the island have many options for accessing the Turkish government and political networks in Turkey. Indeed, in some instances it is easier for them to access Turkish government officials than to access local government officials in any effective way. Building on the AKP’s encouragement of what Jenny White (2002) calls ‘vernacular politics’ has provided a vehicle for new political agents to emerge, ones who achieve their goals through the AKP and other Turkish political networks, even as they ‘defend’ Turkey.

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14 For instance, YDP General Secretary Bertan Zaroğlu belongs to an important Hatay family that includes an uncle who is the head of the Reyhanlı Chamber of Commerce and Industry and a cousin, Hüseyin Zaroğlu, who is an important name in the Hatay branch of the National Action Party (MHP) http://www.kibrispostasi.com/index.php/cat/35/news/31508.

15 On the grassroots mobilization of the AKP, see Doğan 2016, and White 2002.
In the past many Turkish Cypriots viewed Turkish nationals and their descendants as a sort of ‘Trojan Horse,’ a rather passive vehicle; they did not appear to be active agents for Turkey’s politics in north Cyprus. Today, however, there is an increasing fear amongst many Turkish Cypriots that the arterial networks that are the vehicle for vernacular politics are enabling new forms of political agency that directly link persons living in Cyprus to Turkish politics and the Turkish state. This impression is reinforced in instances where there is tension between Turkey and north Cyprus, or between the Turkish government and Turkish Cypriots, and when some of the immigrant associations unquestionably defend Turkey and the Turkish government whether they agree with them or not. Such instances only reinforce the idea that they are Turkey’s agents on the island, and the feeling that they are in Cyprus to produce new forms of polarization that had not existed in the past.

This polarization was only to increase in the autumn of 2017, when a newly formed settler party began to gain ground in parliamentary election campaigning in Cyprus’s north. In response, the main faces of the party affiliated with ultra-right nationalist parties in Turkey—rather than the AKP and their supporters—immediately began to defend the Turkish government in any tensions with Turkish Cypriots or their own administration. The party had been formed only a year earlier, when it quickly attracted a solid base of Turkish-origin ‘TRNC’ citizens who believed that they had been excluded by the system in the island’s north. That system is one in which persons who were born in Turkey or whose parents were born in Turkey complain that they have difficulty finding jobs in the civil service and find themselves excluded from nepotistic networks. They also perceive that any tension between Turkish and Turkish Cypriot political leaders, or between north Cyprus and Turkey, reflects on them.

Conclusion

In this article we have shown chronologically how Turkish policies with regard to Cyprus have changed, and more particularly Turkish policies related to Turkish Cypriots. As explained above, the events of the 1950s led Cyprus to become a national cause in Turkey’s view, and in time the Turkish public discourse about Cyprus became securitized, rendering the national cause rhetoric indisputable. This is the reason why, for decades, the Turkish government, no matter the party or ideological leaning, endorsed the sole discourse of a national cause and manipulated it for domestic political purposes.

However, with the AKP’s rise to power and the start of EU negotiations, Turkish Cypriots gradually began to be cast not as a national cause but rather as an impediment, a negotiating strategy, or more recently as a burden from which Turkey needs to be rescued. Ironically, it was in this same AKP period that Turkey’s investments in Cyprus increased. The AKP’s policy towards Cyprus became one of constructing a strong state that could be a partner in a federal Cyprus. In this period, the subject of Turkish policies became the north Cyprus state, while Turkish Cypriots were cast as ungrateful, spoiled brothers.
When Ahmet Davutoğlu became Turkish Foreign Minister in 2009, the effects of his new foreign policy strategy began to be felt in Cyprus, too. In this period, capital investments in Cyprus increased, but even more importantly, a politics slowly began to be put in place that cast Turkish Cypriots as not only spoiled but also degenerate and alienated from their Muslim roots, and therefore persons who needed to be disciplined as Turks and as Muslims. When Turkish Cypriots showed determined resistance to such policies, the AKP effectively lost hope of reforming them and instead turned its attention to the ‘other’ Turks in Cyprus. For this reason, even as the Turkish government continued the rhetoric of Cyprus as kin or a ‘brother country’ (kardeş ülke), it simultaneously began to implement the same diaspora politics that it had used in other countries with regard to Turkish citizens who had been settled in Cyprus after 1974. The intention appears to have been to create a type of loyal ‘Trojan horse’ within this kin state. It was in this period that the number of North Cyprus civil society organizations based on place of origin in Turkey multiplied; later, many of these same organizations gathered under the political umbrella of the Rebirth Party.

The current rise of a ‘settler’ party tells us much about both political polarization in the island’s north and also the changing landscape of relations between north Cyprus and Turkey. Moreover, the current political conjuncture is more complex than in the past, particularly because the extreme political polarization of Turkey is also being reflected in Cyprus. A polarization has emerged that had not existed in the past: one between Turkish Cypriots, along with their allies in the Turkish immigrant community, and certain groups of Turkish immigrants who align themselves more closely with the Turkish state. Rifts, then, are emerging not only between Turkish Cypriots and the Turkish government and its supporters in Turkey, but also between Turkish Cypriots and the Turkish government’s supporters on the island, some of whom allow themselves to be used as instruments of Turkish government policy. This rift not only impedes the integration of Turkish migrants to Cyprus but also has sent many Turkish Cypriots in search of a new politics that can lessen Turkey’s influence in the island.

References


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