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# The Struggle Between Sunni Islam and Turkism in Turkey from 1950 to 1970

<sup>1</sup>\*Zebiba Hassen Mohammed

<sup>1</sup>\*Political Science and International Relations, Istanbul Nisantasi University, Turkey

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## Abstract

This article analyzes political and ideological strains between Turkism and Sunni Islam in Turkey between 1950 and 1970, which was a time of transition through the establishment of multiparty democracy and Cold War politics. The Democratic Party (DP) challenged the secularist tradition of the Republican People's Party (RPP) by reinstating Islamic values into public affairs and thereby instigating a partial revival of Sunni Islam. At the same time, Turkism rooted in the principles of Kemalism sought to preserve secularism and an integrated national identity. The study discusses the interplay between nationalism, politics, religion, and secularism and examines how the two supreme powers—Turkism and Sunni Islam—competed and co-habited in the evolving Turkish state. Drawing from a critique of political occurrences, religious movements, and personalities like Said Nursi, the essay puts at center stage the tension and potential for reconciliation between the two extremes of ideology. The paper concludes by laying out ways to improve social cohesion in the form of interfaith dialogue, education to encompass, and political pluralism.

**Keywords:** Turkism, Sunni Islam, Religion, Politics, Secularism, Nationalism, Republican People's Party, Democratic Party

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## Introduction

The Republican People's Party (RPP) was instrumental in shaping a multiparty system during Turkey's post-World War II democratic transition (Altınörs, 2014). This is due to two major factors: first, the regime's failure to improve living conditions, healthcare, education, and communication for small-scale farmers in rural areas and urban civil servants. Second, external dynamics such as the defeat of the Axis powers, which elevated the United States to the position of dominant global power, necessitated a shift toward multiparty politics and democratization. As a result, the ruling RPP engaged in multiparty politics, and the Democratic Party (DP) emerged as a competitive political party (Kasapsaraçoğlu, 2019).

This aligns with the RPP's strategy of secularizing state affairs, education, and legal frameworks, challenging the traditional stronghold of institutionalized Islam held by the ulema (Çelikoğlu, 2023). Moreover, religious emblems were replaced with symbols emblematic of European culture, sparking a process of secularization that posed a threat to mainstream Islam. Consequently, the regime

faced dwindling support and appeared at odds with the predominantly rural population constituting 80% of the population (Abu-Rabi, 2008).

The Democrats introduced economic reforms aimed at boosting the financial well-being of civil society members, rural farmers, and traders. These efforts resonated with the majority of Turks, endearing the DP to the populace. Furthermore, DP representatives, mostly with localized ties and backgrounds in commerce or law rather than extensive formal education, garnered favor among rural communities (Pike, 2025). Despite the DP's mixed stance on religion, the establishment of mosques, religious schools, and the publication of numerous religious texts during their tenure laid the groundwork for the renaissance of Sunni Islam in the 1950s (Zürcher, 2017).

Therefore, this study will focus on the struggle between Turkism and Sunni Islam in Turkey during the two decades after the Cold War, from 1950 to 1970. The focus of the study on religion, politics, secularism, and nationalism. Accordingly, I will discuss the basic and prominent factors that cause friction between Turkism and Sunni Islam and

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**Zebiba Hassen Mohammed**

Political Science and International Relations, Istanbul Nisantasi University,  
Turkey

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the reconciliation of the two ideologies in order or bring cohesiveness amongst the Turkish population.

### Religion

Turkey is primarily acknowledged as a Muslim nation, distinguished by a dichotomy of two main factions (Pamuk, 2021). The predominant sector of the populace adheres to the Sunni denomination, while a smaller contingent identifies with a unique faction known as the “Alevi” (Tuğsuz, 2021). The religious schism transcends ethnic delineations, encompassing both Alevi Turks and Alevi Kurds, as well as Sunni Turks and Sunni Kurds (IRAQI, 2019). Empirical data regarding this demographic composition lacks precision, with numerical approximations being subject to the influences of political assertions and rebuttals. (Placeholder1) Nonetheless, it is plausible to posit that roughly 10–12 percent of the Muslim community aligns with the Alevi sect, with the remainder subscribing to the Sunni faith (Heper & Sayari, 2012).

Likewise, during the period from 1950 to 1970 in Turkey, the role of religion underwent a significant transformation, shaping the country’s social, cultural, and political landscape in complex ways (Azhari, 2024). Turkey concerning its stance on religion. The rigid secularism advocated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his followers was slowly evolving towards a more tolerant understanding of the division between religion and government (Ak, 2025). This transformation facilitated a progression towards democracy, as the implementation of a multi-party system in 1950 enabled greater involvement in politics, particularly from conservative religious factions within the society (Abu-Rabi, 2008).

One of the notable outcomes of this democratic opening was the emergence of parties that appealed to voters based on their religious identity, challenging the long-standing dominance of secularist parties. Islamist parties, including the National Order Party (MNP) of Necmettin Erbakan, grew popular in the 1960s, calling for more participation of Islam in society but doing so within a democratic framework (Çelen & Altay, 2020). They demanded the upholding of Islamic values and practices and spoke to a portion of society which felt alienated by the dominant secularist approach.

In spite of the increasing power of religious feelings, Turkey continued to pursue modernization and Westernization during this time (Demirdağ & Khalifa, 2020). There were numerous reforms for economic growth, industrialization,

and social advancement, which frequently created tensions between religious traditional values and the drive for modernization. The cultural scene of the 1950s and 1960s also saw changes in people’s attitudes towards religion, prompted by urbanization, education, and greater exposure to media (Gürel, 2018). Whereas some sections of society moved towards secularism, others reasserted their religious identity, leading to a diversification of practice and belief (Ueno, 2025).

The shifting relationship between religious institutions and the state was central to the revitalization of Islam in Turkey during this period (Albayrak, 2019). Although still presenting itself as a secular state, Turkey came to recognize religion’s place in society and sought to create space for a wide range of religious practice within a secular constitution. This delicate balance between secularism and religious freedoms set the stage for further debates and transformations in the role of religion in Turkish society in the decades that followed (Somer, 2019).

According to Abu-Rabi, Islam in Turkey between 1950 and 1970 witnessed a shifting political landscape where the RPP responded to societal opposition from the DP by adopting a softer stance towards Islam (Abu-Rabi, 2008; Elçi, 2024; Tachau, 2016). While the DP introduced symbolic gestures like the Arabic call to prayer and religious classes in schools, it remained committed to secularism, allowing for a liberalized space for Islam without compromising Kemalism (Çolak, 2013). Islamic demands primarily focused on private realm practices, education, and access to religious teachings. The era was characterized by nationalist conservatism and prominent figures like Said Nursi (Khaja, 2018).

Thus, it is commonly acknowledged that Said Nursi, also known as Bediüzzaman, was a notable Turkish Islamic scholar and thinker who had an impact on the revival of Islam in Turkey between 1950 and 1970 (Yazicioglu, 2022). His numerous accomplishments had a significant impact on the development of Islam in Turkey at the time. One of the most significant contributions of Nursi was his emphasis on Nursi’s goal was primarily pedagogical, and not political, with a focus to enlighten various segments of society to the numerous advantages of constitutionalism (Akhmetova, 2021). He established contemporary schools, remodeled curricula, and added new courses to the curriculum (Darda, 2023). Alongside this, he put utmost emphasis on moral renovation in accordance with Kemalism.

The legacy of Nursi is marked by encouraging tolerance and harmony, especially in multicultural Turkish society (Mohammad, 2020). He encouraged dialogue between religions, tolerance, and interfaith cooperation among religious and cultural communities, resulting in a more tolerant approach towards religion and greater harmony in Turkish society.

Other than that, Nursi had to deal with Islamic thought because of what happened to Muslim societies in his time (Khairuldin et al.). His books brought Islamic teaching into the contemporary world, with social justice, morality, and participation in the life of society, making a new generation of Muslims fall in love with Islam and work for the good of society (Alatas et al., 2017). Nursi's charitable philanthropic philosophy of society based on charity, service to humanity, and altruism has been a revolutionary force in establishing healthy, integrated societies of common values and beliefs that generate a feeling of belongingness and togetherness among the believers (Ziaulhaq & Sen, 2021).

Briefly, Said Nursi had a significant and essential role in the Turkish Islamic resurgence of 1950-1970 (Mohammad, 2020). His call for educational reform, unity and toleration, resuscitating Islamic thought, communities' construction, and heritage have positioned him within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Hence, most of his books and writings during this period were able to be published and well-known throughout the nation. Moreover, his students had no trouble comprehending his lessons, which were based on Islamic doctrines. The long-lasting influence of Nursi is a testament to his commitment towards promoting Islamic values, knowledge, and spirituality in modern times (Tuna, 2017).

Finally, between 1950-1970, Turkey was marked by political development, partly driven by a revival of Islamic sentiments instigated by cultural forces and the continued struggle towards modernization. The conflict between archaic religious views and changing social attitudes towards religion was used to highlight the complexity of Turkey's religious environment in this time of transformation.

### **Politics**

Politics in Turkey became more complex following the "Arab Spring" and increasing calls for political reforms in North Africa and the Middle East. Turkey has maintained multiparty politics and transparent and fair elections since its move from authoritarianism to democracy in the late

1940 (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). Despite having gone through various regime breaks through military coups, Turkey has come a long way in consolidating its democratic base in recent years. The Turkish experience thus sheds light on the gross oversimplification of the claims placed on Islam and democracy incompatibility (Elsalhy, 2023). From 1950 to 1970, Turkey went through revolutionary political change that transformed its governing system, social organization, and politics in general (AKMAN). The period saw the demise of single-party politics and the beginning of multi-party politics, the rise of new political parties, and the significant shift in power dynamics in the administration. Such changes laid the groundwork for modern Turkish politics, mapping the destiny of the nation for decades to come (Zürcher, 2017).

The peak of this period was the transition to multi-party government following the 1950 elections when the DP landslide ended RPP's long decades of one-party dominance (Kasapsaraçoğlu, 2019). The transition to multi-party resulted in greater political pluralism and competition, transforming Turkish politics at its very core (BÖLÜKBAŞI).

Under the rule of Adnan Menderes, the DP enacted numerous reforms in a bid to enhance economic growth, especially agricultural policy and infrastructure (Acar, 2020). This notwithstanding, the party was perceived as authoritarian and corrupt, and this led to the ousting of the party from power in the 1960 military coup (Rogenhofer, 2018). The coup did not only remove the DP government but suspended the constitution and created a military junta, which showcased the weakness of democracy at the time (Feroz, 2002).

Its wake was soon followed by new political movements and parties, mainly the Justice Party (AP) of Süleyman Demirel (ÂŞIK, 2019). The AP's popularity, especially among the conservative and rural vote, was a sign of a turn in Turkish political life towards increased pluralization in the party system. This was the beginning of political pluralization of forces and the phase that set the stage for further development in the country.

Apart from this, there was huge economic growth and urbanization in Turkey during 1950-1970 due to industrialization, the development of infrastructure, and land reform (Gürel & Selamet, 2025). All these socioeconomic developments not only influenced the economic profile of the country but also led to larger social changes and political changes.

Even with the advancement in economic development, the era was characterized by political instabilities, military intervention, and constitutional reforms to restore stability and democratic values. The decision to execute Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and other Democratic Party officials following the 1960 coup underscored the tumultuous state of Turkish politics during that time (San, 2023).

In summary, between 1950 and 1970, Turkey experienced a complex blend of power shifts, the emergence of new political groups, military involvement, and socio-economic changes (Ersel, 2013). These events shaped a diverse and competitive political environment, impacting the country's future political trajectory.

### **Secularism**

No concept better embodies the fundamental values of contemporary Turkey than the principle of secularism. Following the decline of authoritarianism during the single-party era and the emergence of more progressive and democratic ideologies post-World War II, secularism remained the focal point around which the Kemalist ruling class (comprising the military, the judiciary, and the upper echelons of the civil service) safeguarded its dominance (Heper & Sayari, 2012).

Secularism, in terms of politics, involves limiting the influence of religion in political affairs (Deagon, 2018). Its roots can be traced back to European religious wars, particularly solidified by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which marked a shift towards recognizing secularism as a guiding principle in international politics (ZREIK, 2021). The concept advocates for the separation of state and religion at both the interstate and national levels. Different countries have implemented secularism differently; for instance, post-revolutionary France enforced strict state control over the church, known as laicism (Dwyer, 2023). This model was also adopted in Republican Turkey, shaping the concept of laik (laic) (Kaya, 2022).

While the interpretation of secularism varies across contexts, it ultimately represents a universal principle, as highlighted in Joan Wallach Scott's analysis of the veiling debate in France, revealing the complexities surrounding the application of secularism globally (Scott, 2009). In view of this, secularization brought about a significant shift in the rationale behind Turkish nationalism. Previously, Anatolian-Turkish Muslims were united by their adherence to Islam. However, starting from 1924, Kemalism

disregarded this aspect in defining the nation. The secularization process resulted in the removal of Islamic principles from the public domain, prompting Kemalism to seek alternative ideologies. Aligned with Atatürk's vision of a modern nation-state where citizenship prevailed, the regime aimed to foster a new, comprehensive national identity for the populace of Turkey (Demiriz, 2023).

Following this assumption, by the year 1925, in contrast to its Ottoman precursor, the Turkish republic exhibited a higher degree of ethnic homogeneity. It also manifested characteristics of a more secularized state. The initial indication of this transformation was observed with the termination of the caliphate on November 2, 1924 (Tezcan, 2020). This particular action marked the commencement of a sequence of reforms aimed at secularizing Turkey throughout the 1920s under the governance of People's Republican Party (PRP). Additional secularizing initiatives commenced on January 2, 1924, with the substitution of the Muslim sabbath, Friday, with Sunday (Jenkins, 2020). As a result, Saturday and Sunday were designated as the official weekend in accordance with the revised calendar. Subsequently, on March 2, the ministry responsible for Islamic law (Shariat) and religious endowments (vakıfs) was dissolved. This decision effectively eliminated the state's endorsement of Islam.

On the contrary, in the 1960s, Turkey grappled with the issue of secularism, particularly in the political landscape dominated by the Democratic Party (DP) policies allowed for a more visible Islamic presence in cities, reflecting the cultural shift amid urbanization (Yildirim, 2024). While some viewed this as an Islamic revival, it mainly represented the traditional cultural expression of the broader population asserting itself, challenging the established secularist order.

In summary, from 1950 to 1970, secularism emerged as the predominant ideology from the 20th century onwards. In Turkey, secularism continues to be a prevailing ideology where the state maintains no religious affiliation.

### **Nationalism**

In the historical backdrop of Turkey, nationalism has played a crucial role in influencing the nation's identity and political scenery. At the core of this patriotic fervor stood Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the architect of contemporary Turkey, who advocated for a type of nationalism recognized as Kemalism. Kemalism aimed to modernize Turkey and position it as a secular, westernized country following

the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. This brand of nationalism underscored the cohesion and advancement of the Turkish populace, endorsing the significance of the Turkish language, heritage, and customs in shaping the national character (Heper & Sayari, 2012).

Moreover, Atatürk envisioned a significant societal transformation that necessitated the replacement of the religious community inherited from the Ottoman Empire with a secular nation by the Republic (Ülker, 2023). At the outset of 1920, Atatürk observed a profound level of cultural assimilation among individuals with diverse religious, sectarian, and ethnic backgrounds over many centuries, leading to the emergence of cultural similarities outweighing differences. Consequently, Atatürk deduced that a notion of “nation” could now be articulated, implying a considerable level of uniformity. He opted to identify this nation as “Turkish,” deeming it the most fitting term for the context at hand. This decision reflects his intention to use “Turkish” not merely as an adjective but as a comprehensive label encompassing individuals with varied religious, sectarian, and ethnic affiliations. Essentially, the term “Turk” was not limited to ethnic Turks in his conceptualization (Çora & Çora, 2022).

Atatürk’s Kemalism represented an initiative aimed at achieving modernity in line with Western standards (Ak, 2025). Democracy was viewed as a crucial component of Western modernization. The shift towards democracy was envisioned to occur once individuals could utilize their rational faculties instead of relying on the Qur’an or religious figures. Advocates of Atatürkist Kemalism sought to facilitate the development of people’s rational thinking abilities while simultaneously establishing the necessary foundations for democracy (Ter-Matevosyan et al., 2019). Kemalism was not a static ideology but rather an adaptable worldview that distanced itself from both political Islam and ethnic nationalism (Cantelmo, 2017). Hence, proponents of Atatürkist Kemalism did not intend to present “Atatürkism” as a rigid set of principles to be uncritically adopted by future generations; rather, they envisaged Atatürkism as a set of policies best suited for the specific time and context of their implementation. Atatürkist Kemalism underscored the importance of rational deliberation over blind imitation (Özdemir, 2025). As Turkey became a multicultural Muslim republic in the 1920s, it saw a dramatic transition (Al, 2019). Turkey undertook several reforms to modernize and secularize the nation when the Ottoman Empire fell apart following

World War I, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Kissane, 2022). By embracing the various ethnic, religious, and cultural groups that make up the nation, Atatürk policies were meant to forge a unified Turkish national identity. Throughout the 1920s, Turkey was revolutionized as the government enforced reforms such as a new legal code, secular education facilities, and Western-style clothing (Himam, 2019). The foundation for today’s modern Turkish state was developed through this stage of Turkey becoming a multicultural Muslim state amid the challenges and resistances encountered by some parties.

But alongside Kemalist nationalism, ethnic nationalism also existed in Turkey, working towards advancing the ethnic identity of Turkish society (Al, 2019). This form of nationalism is still influencing the political landscape of Turkey and its social life. As a hegemonic ideology, Kemalism remains prevalent in the Turkish state, even though recent ethnic nationalism over the past twenty years has been underpinned by rising interests in national identity and sovereignty (Ter-Matevosyan et al., 2019). Adequate understanding of the past circumstances and intricacies of such competing nationalist discourses is required in appraising the character of Turkish politics and society in contemporary times, with the country trying to reconcile its nationalist past while grappling with the intricacies of its multi-ethnic contemporaneity.

### **Sunni Islam vs Turkism**

The years 1950 to 1970 constituted a watershed for Sunni Islam and its fortunes in relation to the Turkish state (Yavuz & Öztürk, 2020). These decades were characterized by revolutionary change in the Turkish political landscape with the rise of conservative Sunni political parties that worked to undermine the secular Kemalist order. Tension between Sunni Islam and the Turkish state during these decades is the result of a multifaceted set of political, social, and cultural forces (Zürcher, 2017).

A central cause of Sunni Islam-Turkish state tensions during the 1950s and 1970s was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s secularizing reforms (Donef). The founder of contemporary Turkey, Atatürk, wished to create a secular state that would exclude religion from politics. Atatürk’s reforms attempted to secularize Turkish society and lead Turkey away from the Islamic tradition of the Ottoman Empire. However, these reforms were countered by conservative Sunni forces that viewed them as an attack on their religious identity and values (Cagaptay, 2006).

Politically, from 1950-1970, there was the emergence of right-wing Sunni parties that aimed to oust secularist parties from power (Banik, 2018). An example of such a party was the Democrat Party, founded in 1946 and controlled by Adnan Menderes (UYULUR, 2020). The Menderes regime started implementing policies more tolerant of Sunni Islam, e.g., allowing the call of prayer to be read in Arabic instead of Turkish (Kandemir, 2022). Moreover, the struggle between Sunni Islam and the Turkish state also occurred in social and cultural domains. Conservative Sunni forces opposed the state's efforts to secularize education and public life. They advocated for normalizing religion's role in society and criticizing the state for its alleged anti-Islam policy. The conflict culminated in the 1960 military coup, which overthrew Menderes' government and led to the execution of Menderes' and other party leaders (SURID, 2019)

Apart from these clashes, the decade of 1950-1970 also saw efforts to align Sunni Islam with the Turkish state. During the coup of 1960, the new military regime attempted to strike a balance between secularity and religious conservatism. More religious freedom was granted by the state without compromising the secularity of the state.

Generally, 1950 to 1970 saw tensions and conflicts between Sunni Islam and Turkish state in Turkey. Social and cultural forces, the rise of conservative Sunni parties, and the effects of Atatürk's secularizing reforms were some of the causes of the conflict. Reconciliation and accommodation did take place, however, between Sunni Islam and the Turkish state during these years.

## Conclusions

Sunni Islam and Turkism are the important influences in Turkish history, politics, and culture. They must be the preponderant influences in Turkish cooperation, cohesion, and understanding as well. The optimum practices for being more cohesive include encouraging interfaith dialogue, emphasizing commonalities, engaging Sunni Muslim religious leaders, intellectuals, and cultural spokespeople, and having cultural exchange programs. Education and knowledge about Turkic history and culture and Sunni Islam is key to building respect and appreciation. Cultural exchange programs that focus on Sunni Islamic diversity and Turkic cultural heritage, and the promotion of tolerance and acceptance, are essential. Political involvement and political leadership are required to promote reconciliation initiatives. In general, bridging

the gap between Turkism and Sunni Islam in Turkey requires an inclusive approach that accommodates dialogue, shared values, education, cultural exchange, and political collaboration.

## Limitations and Strengths

The study adequately synthesizes religious studies, political science, historical, and sociological perspectives and presents a comprehensive account of the ideological struggle in mid-20th-century Turkey. Positioning the struggle between Sunni Islam and Turkism within the broad historical, cultural, and geopolitical context—like the Cold War and Turkey's democratization—the study attains depth and specificity. The study relies extensively on secondary literature and historical documents. The absence of archival records, oral evidence, or original political papers might limit the novelty and depth of knowledge. Even though the study is focused on Turkey as a country, it will not explore much the regional variations, say, how these ideological clashes were present differently in Anatolian countryside and towns such as Istanbul or Ankara.

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