

# Windscreens as sites of competing Turkish nationalisms: Kemalists vs. Islamists

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In Turkey, the dominant political ideology is nationalism, but there are different variants competing for influence. Kemalism, the philosophy that laid the foundations for modern Turkey, advocated for a top-down modernization and secularisation of society, but also crucially involved creating a modern western-style nation state. The decades of the 1920s and 1930s saw the establishment of Kemalism as the official state ideology.

Until the late 1990s, Kemalism remained as the state ideology, despite being challenged by a wide range of political tendencies. The greatest and most serious threat has come from political Islam, which rejects key tenets of the Kemalist ideology, namely western modernization and secularism. Conflict between Kemalists and Islamists on the national level has simmered since the 1970s, but a defining moment occurred in 2002 with the electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). Over a period of 20 years in power, the AKP has eliminated much of the Kemalist improvements to Turkey's state institutions, society and culture. The result of the AKP's Islamic nationalist policies has been increased political polarisation and friction in Turkish politics and society.

This political polarisation led to an unusual practice in everyday politics; supporters on both sides manifest their respective ideologies via stickers with political messages displayed on the rear windscreens of cars as a challenge to the opposing ideology. Based on the findings of interviews conducted with owners of cars displaying these messages, this study aims to analyse the meaning of this practice in relation to everyday nationalism, and its implications for Turkish politics at large.

**Keywords:** Kemalist nationalism, Islamist nationalism, identity conflict, Turkey, windscreen stickers.

## **Introduction**

The struggle between rival nationalists has dominated the political agenda ever since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Although national identity is a source of pride for most Turks, the most acute struggles in Turkish political life have been waged over how this identity should be defined. This political struggle has inevitably become reflected in daily life. The daily interactions of individuals who identify with one or another of these competing ideologies are also affected by these confrontational politics. The fiercest political struggle in the last two decades has been between Kemalist and Islamist nationalism. Since the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the symbolic struggle has intensified between the Kemalists, named after the founding father of modern Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the Islamist AKP. While secular nationalists have resisted the 'de-kemalisation' policies of the AKP, Islamist-Ottomanist nationalists have been battling against the Kemalist establishment to restore the 'authentic' Ottoman Islamist state. A peculiar expression of this struggle is the Kemalist and Islamist-Ottoman symbols affixed to cars' rear windscreens. The following section provides an overview of the emergence of Kemalist nationalism and its rival Islamist-Ottoman nationalism. This historical perspective allows us to see the processes of creating a nation and national identity, and the operations of banal nationalism. The final section draws on the reflection of this political rivalry in media and explores how individuals who adopt these symbols contribute to the reproduction of nationhood in everyday life.

## **Kemalist reforms: The foundation of a modern Western state and society**

Nationalism was one of the three currents of thought, Ottomanism, Islamism and Turkism/pan-Turkism, that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, when the power of the Ottoman Empire was in decline in comparison to the West.<sup>1</sup> The basic mission of all three ideologies was, according to their own philosophies, the salvation of the state. Islamism/pan-Islamism and Turkish-Islamic syntheses first emerged during the reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909) and became the state's official policy.<sup>2</sup> Turkism, i.e. a unification of the Turkic peoples based upon a shared history and supposed common racial origins, was advocated by the Young Turkish revolutionaries, whose pan-Turkist ideology led to a series of initiatives that included forced assimilation and forced migration. Undoubtedly the most tragic of these were the Armenian and Assyrian genocides in 1915.<sup>3</sup>

Following the end of the First World War in 1918 which marked the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal emerged as a nationalist leader in the wake of the Greek forces' landing in Western Anatolia in 1919, when Istanbul, Thrace, and the south and east of Anatolia were already under British, Italian, and French occupation. The Treaty of Sevres was signed on 10 August 1920 by the Allies of World War I and the Ottoman Empire, ceding large parts of Ottoman territory to the Allied Forces and allowing for the formation of independent regions for the Armenians in the East, the Greeks in the West and the Kurds in the Southeast.<sup>4</sup> Mustafa Kemal however rejected the treaty and initiated a national independence war in 1919, forming an alternative government in Ankara in 1920. Two years of armed conflict ultimately ended with the victory of the national liberation forces. The Grand National Assembly in Ankara abolished the Ottoman Sultanate on 1 November 1922 and officially ended the Ottoman Empire, which was founded in 1299. The

Lausanne Treaty, signed on 24 July 1923 by the Allied Forces and the Ankara government, recognised the sovereignty of the Republic of Turkey, paving the way for the declaration of the republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on 29 October 1923.

The concept of Kemalism refers to a model of modernisation that ultimately aimed at building a modern Western and secular nation-state. After Kemal's death (1938), the doctrine of Kemalism was elevated to the status of the ruling ideology of the Turkish republic, and the cult of Atatürk became the main symbol of the regime, regardless of the wide variety of political tendencies that in fact ruled the country.<sup>5</sup> Kemalist reformists' task of modernisation and the creation of a Western nation-state required disowning the Ottoman past, which was partly achieved through the political changes of abolishing the Sultanate (1922) and the Caliphate (1924), but these were only the first steps in a longer period of reforms that lasted throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Ensuring the survival and consolidation of the nation-state was the first important task of the Kemalist regime. To this end, it was necessary to de-emphasise the religious and ethnic diversity based on the *millet* system,<sup>6</sup> which, according to Kemalists, was responsible for bringing the Ottoman Empire to an end. The new republic was conceived as a homogeneous nation-state based on a Muslim majority who believed in secular values and adhered to Turkish culture. Moreover, the homogenisation of the population was the most efficient way to contribute to the strength and cohesion of the state.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Turkey remained an ethnically and religiously diverse country. Consequently, homogenisation policies necessitated certain practices of exclusion and prohibition. Kemalism consolidated its power as a mono-party regime during the 1930s, and the ethnic tone of the nationalist discourse increased dramatically, although the Kemalist notion of citizenship was strictly territorial rather than ethnic. Any resistance to Turkification policies was labelled as a reaction incited by

the remnants of the ancient regime. The development of a national consciousness was considered essential for the survival of the new nation-state. The foundation of the Turkish Language Research Society (1932) and the introduction of the Turkish History Thesis (1930) were used as traditions<sup>8</sup> of the young nation-state to promote interest and research in the Turks' specific national history, as distinct from Ottoman history.<sup>9</sup> The 'Turkish History Thesis' 'proved' that the Ottoman past was an unfortunate accident in the Turks' long and glorious history, while the 'Sun Language Theory' asserted that all languages, and therefore all civilisations, originated from Turkish. These reforms contributed to the reproduction and dissemination of the ideology of nationalism and the idea of Turkish republican citizenship. The Kemalists believed that the concept of citizenship would guarantee people's attachment to the state and nation through both legal status, and a 'sense of belonging', thereby supplanting previous allegiances.<sup>10</sup>

Kemalism's second important task was spreading secularism. Secularisation policies, involving the prohibition of religious instruction and enforcing the secularisation of education, required the annihilation of traditional religious practices in society, namely the abolishment of the Caliphate and the establishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the closure of religious orders and madrassas and the unification of education (1924). These reforms created a secular education system, disempowered the *ulema* (religious scholars), and ultimately, de-emphasised Islam. The main objective of the Kemalist regime was to control all autonomous Islamic political and civic activities.<sup>11</sup>

Turkish nationalism needed a paradigm shift to allow secularisation, whilst simultaneously restricting Islamic political expression.<sup>12</sup> The secularisation process was imperative to create modern Western-oriented citizens, who were loyal to republican values, conscious of the merits of modern Western values, and rejected the traditional religious values of the Ottoman-Islamic tradition. The Kemalist elite used a

positivist rhetoric of secularism, whilst simultaneously employing the concept of *irtica* (reactionary Islam) to present religion as an obstacle to progress and modernisation.<sup>13</sup>

These goals were achieved with further reforms, including the prohibition of religious garb and introduction of a certain dress code for the whole nation (1925), the adoption of the Gregorian calendar and solar clock in place of the lunar calendar (1926), the passing of a secular civic code (1926) and the annulment of the Sharia courts (1926), the establishment of coeducation to abolish sex segregation (1927), the replacement of the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet (1928), and finally the implementation of the surname law (1934) and universal suffrage (1930, 1934).

These reforms were greatly appreciated by a significant section of the middle class and civil-military bureaucracy. During the founding and consolidation of the nation-state, from the 1920s to the 1940s, state intervention in the economy and in social life brought economic benefits to those close to the authorities, and social benefits to those closely associated with the republican ideology of the Western secular state and society. However, a large segment of society was excluded both from economic benefits and social transformations, and was left with uncertainties, insecurities, and anxieties, caused by a constant attack on their value systems. Under these conditions, these grievances were articulated through identity politics. In this context, the resurgence of political Islam was seen partly as a response of those who were excluded from this modernisation process. The Kemalist elite were aware that force alone would not ensure compliance, and thus decided to seek citizens' consent. In other words, the question of legitimacy, i.e., the state's ability to establish citizens' loyalty and obedience, was a serious issue for the republican elite, who faced challenges from diverse groups, – namely, the Kurds (ethnic nationalism), and the Islamists (religious

nationalism) – and ideologies which were competing with the state for loyalty.

Along with these social and cultural reforms, the Kemalist principle of populism generated a political-cultural network of ‘Peoples’ Houses’ and ‘Village Rooms’ (1932-1951), in which the republican ‘periphery’ was indoctrinated with modern cultural values, secularism and nationalism.<sup>14</sup> The People’s Houses also functioned as schools for teaching the people their history, Anatolian culture, language and literature, and also promoted a production network supporting a corporatist solidarity model and the statist economic model, which had been adopted by the revolutionary cadres.

The One-Party rule, which lasted from 1923 to 1946, was characterised by the consolidation of Kemalist reforms with the cooperation of political, military, and bureaucratic elites and was backed by the military which had played an important role in Turkish politics since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Consequently, until the republic’s first multiparty election in 1950, the ruling Republican People’s Party (CHP), had imposed strict control on Islamic political and civil activities.<sup>15</sup> Although the new government formed by the Democrat Party (DP) introduced no radical political changes, as a counter-hegemonic move, it succeeded in including previously excluded identities into political life. Its Islamist sensibilities and its politico-economic policies however threatened the privileged status of the military, ultimately leading to the 1960 military coup. While the 1961 Constitution was a liberal constitution it was notable in that it secured the role of the military in politics by ‘establishing the National Security Council as an advisory body to the Council of Ministers on issues of national security, measures which intended to reduce the political power of the Grand National Assembly’.<sup>16</sup>

Even though industrialisation accelerated in the 1960s, the 1973 oil crisis deeply affected the Turkish economy, and a new political crisis emerged. The right-wing parties resorted to Islamic discourse to increase their votes and unite against the dissemination of socialist and communist influence.<sup>17</sup> The Radicalised Islamist National Order Party for example directly targeted Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's values in public meetings, angering the armed forces. In 1971, the Constitutional Court dissolved the party for allegedly threatening secularism.<sup>18</sup>

The military intervention of 12 September 1980 was justified on the grounds that anarchy in the streets threatened the unity of the country and that the rise of radical Islam threatened the secular character of the Turkish Republic. At the same time, the coup generals considered the Turkish-Islamic synthesis to be the centrepiece of the attempts to consolidate conservative forces and to pacify social dissent. The aim of the military government was to raise a generation of youth who were 'Atatürkist', but also with Islamic sensitivity. However, the putschist generals' understanding of Atatürkism was different from that of Kemalism; for the junta generals, it was an ideology of national security in which the nation was defined in its opposition to communist, Kurdish and Islamist conspiracy.<sup>19</sup> According to the 1986 Turk-Islam Synthesis Report by the Atatürk High Council of Culture, Language and History which was established by the September 12 Coup Administration, 'we must add the element of religion to the culture without damaging the element of secularism'.<sup>20</sup>

For the political Islamists, the major breakthrough came in the 1994 local elections, when the Islamist Welfare Party (RP) was the most successful party, and won municipalities in 28 provinces, including Istanbul and Ankara. The RP became a mass party and expanded its membership base. In the 1990s, the RP targeted the Kemalist secular values and secular establishment, and advocated for an Islamic lifestyle. Islamist symbols and Islamist lifestyle became more visible in public spaces due to the



increasing presence of a new Islamic middle class in the party. These new Islamic spaces included Islamic hotels, cafes, and fashion.<sup>21</sup> The RP was closed down as a result of military pressure, in what is known as the 28 February process, in 1997, for violating the secular principle of the republic.

Despite the gradual erosion of its principles, with its goals of 'civilisation', secularisation and becoming one nation, Kemalism remained the official state ideology until the early 2000s when the political Islamist party AKP took office. The paradigmatic shift of the republican era was apparently completed with the elimination of the power of the military as the 'guardians of the republic' in the mid-2000s.

## **Political Islam: A radical challenge to Kemalism**

The greatest success of the political Islamists is undoubtedly the electoral victory of the Islamist AKP in the 2002 general elections. In its first years in office, the AKP followed a pro-European Union (EU) agenda, abandoned Islamic vocabulary, and underlined human rights, social justice, and economic development. This move earned the AKP liberal support from business circles and the intellectual world. The other significant group within this new middle class that supported the AKP was the newly emerging Anatolian bourgeoisie, aspiring to compete in European and global markets.<sup>22</sup> Although negotiations for full European Union membership started in 2005, progress has been very slow since 2016, when accession negotiations came to a standstill.

Beginning in 2007, Turkish politics witnessed the largest political showdown between Kemalists and Islamists to date. Tensions between the military and the AKP reached their peak when Abdullah Gül, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, was nominated for the presidency. The cause

of the tensions was his wife's Islamic headscarf. The Chief of the General Staff published a memorandum on 27 April 2007 drawing attention to the threats to secularism.<sup>23</sup> However, after securing 46.7% of electoral support in the 2007 electoral victory, Abdullah Gül was elected as the 11<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of Turkey on 28 August 2007.<sup>24</sup> In view of the threat that Erdoğan would be nominated for the presidency, 'Republican Meetings'<sup>25</sup> were organised by institutions and organisations such as the Atatürkist Thought Association (ADD), the Association for the Support of Contemporary Life (ÇYDD) and the leftist trade unions.

The AKP passed a series of legislation to eliminate the military's influence in politics, which it achieved by relying on an increasing electoral support following the 2007 general elections. The Ergenekon and the subsequent Balyoz trials put most of the military elite behind bars, and the ADD chairman and retired general Şener Eruygur was arrested. Erdoğan's attack was seen as dealing a fatal blow to the secular republic, which consequently lost its long-term guardian.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the biggest obstacle to the AKP's efforts to Islamise the state and society was removed, allowing the AKP to arbitrarily interfere with institutions, civil society, and culture, so as to neutralise the already weakened democratic practices.

On 15 July 2016, a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted a coup d'état against state institutions, including the government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The government claimed that the coup leaders were linked to a movement led by an influential leader of a religious order – the Gülen movement –, and a long-term ally of the AKP.<sup>27</sup> Immediately after the attempted coup, Erdoğan called for support for an executive presidency, leading to extensive crackdowns on judicial independence and opposition of all types.<sup>28</sup> This accelerated the pace of changes, the most important of which was increasing the power of the executive either by constitutional changes or the de facto ordinances of

prime ministers, resulting in the diminution of the Great National Assembly's authority.<sup>29</sup>

These structural changes formed the basis of Erdoğan's effort to create a new state and nation, resulting in a period of intervention in social and cultural fields, promoting the discourse of neo-Ottomanist Islamist nationalism and rejecting the Western-Kemalist understanding of the nation-state. The AKP's Ottomanist-Islamist nationalism manifested itself as a shift from Western-oriented foreign policy to a neo-Ottomanist type which emphasised relations with Muslim governments and Middle Eastern societies.<sup>30</sup> Erdoğan, furious about foreign diplomats' criticism of his government's foreign policy, claimed that the mentality of '*monşers*', i.e., Western 'wannabees', have dominated foreign affairs. Erdoğan's next move was to change the century-old bureaucratic structure by amending the foreign affairs personnel assignment law in 2011,<sup>31</sup> representing another step in the de-Kemalisation process.

The AKP embraced neoliberalism and developed a nepotistic system whereby, through state tenders, construction licences were granted to companies with close ties the President. This new economic system required a working class that submitted to, rather than opposed, government policies. In fact, in 2012, the Council of Ministers was authorised to postpone strikes on the grounds of national security and threats to public, economic, and financial stability. That power was then transferred entirely into the hands of President Erdoğan.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, the AKP needed identity politics to maintain its economic policy. To this end, the AKP was able to consolidate its supporters by using identity politics to cover centuries-old political problems. After winning 46.6% of the general vote in the 2011 general elections, the AKP abandoned the democratisation policies, instead using explicitly religious slogans.<sup>33</sup> This was the beginning of rebuilding the nation in the image of Ottomanism and Islamism. During that time, the President often

made references to the 'New Turkey', thus simultaneously demarcating the Kemalist era as old.<sup>34</sup> The AKP's novel mode of identity politics was built upon a recognition of Turkish identity based on a Sunni Orthodox Islam.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, Islamic nationalism set itself to challenge Kemalist nationalism and develop an alternative conceptualization of society.<sup>36</sup>

In his public addresses, the President often referred to the 'golden age' of the Ottomans under Mehmed the Conqueror, Suleiman the Magnificent, or Abdulhamid II. New official days were invented, the conquest of Istanbul began to be celebrated as an official holiday, and the birthday of the Prophet Mohammad was commemorated.<sup>37</sup> As Hobsbawm argues, these invented traditions exhibit a symbolic character, attempting to instil certain values and norms of behaviour and suggesting a natural continuity with the past.<sup>38</sup>

The AKP mayors and governments mobilised national sentiment through the commemorations of the Istanbul Conquest (1453) as elements of neo-Ottomanism.<sup>39</sup> 15 July, the Democracy and National Unity Day of Turkey, was designated as an official holiday; this new event was to commemorate the national unity against the coup attempt. The AKP intervened in the education system by reforming the national curriculum to allow for more religious instruction and reducing primary education from eight to four years, lifted the headscarf ban in public service and increased the number of Imam Hatip Schools<sup>40</sup> to raise 'new religious generations', all of which contributed to the deeper rooting of Islamic identity in society, against the secular principles of Kemalism. The AKP presented these changes as the national will, by which the AKP meant the will of their Sunni Muslim supporters. The first goal was to ban chanting of the Kemalist oath and end the official celebrations of National days, with the aim of targeting the symbolic presence of Kemalism in public spaces.

During the heyday of Kemalism, these national days' ceremonies involved certain re-enactments of events in which the enemy (typically Greeks, Armenians, and the Western imperialists) unjustly attacked the Turkish civilians but was eventually killed by a heroic soldier.<sup>41</sup> In the AKP period, commemorations of National days either turned into a show of protocol or were transformed into a format suitable for its own Islamist-Nationalist ideology. In one of these commemorations, an Islamic-style bearded imam was shown being tortured and killed by an enemy (a Greek or an Armenian). The AKP mayor who organised this show was accused of racism against Armenians, but defended himself, saying 'we must introduce our friends and enemies to our new generation. As Master Necip Fazıl said, we want to raise a new generation of youth who is a claimant to his religion, chastity, honour, and religion'.<sup>42</sup>

There have also been confrontations between the Kemalists and Islamists over city squares, as these public squares embodied the symbols of the nation-state, modernity, and secularism.<sup>43</sup> The Ottoman city squares were commercial centres and the AKP has been fighting for a long time to reclaim these squares. The most impressive of these battles was the government's plan for Istanbul's Taksim Square. Here, the AKP government insisted on building a mosque and Ottoman Era barracks in Gezi Park, a location overlooking the National Independence Monument and the Atatürk Cultural Centre. The square, which also traditionally hosted large May Day rallies and other mass protests, fell victim to the AKP's Islamisation policies, which triggered mass protests.<sup>44</sup> The AKP governments also passed various laws and regulations which directly intervened in secular lifestyles, such as restrictions on alcohol consumption in open public spaces and restrictions on abortion. Erdoğan despises and challenges Kemalism, as he and his party adopt 'revanchist'<sup>45</sup> politics to inflict a crushing blow on the modernist and secular state and society, and to establish an

'Erdoğanist system', which could be described as an Islamic-nationalist autocracy.

In sum, nationalism is an ideology that serves the political elite to legitimise their rule over people and a given territory.<sup>46</sup> As shown, both Kemalist nationalism and Islamist-Ottoman nationalism involved top-down reforms to reshape politics, society, and culture. These processes also involved the inventions of traditions and the creation of national myths,<sup>47</sup> as Turkish state elites needed the support of the people for the survival of the state and society they created. When a section of the people did not give this support, the ruling elite chose to silence the people with repression, and instead sought and strengthened the approval of their own supporters. Both in the Kemalist and in the Islamist-AKP periods, 'the Turkish nation' has been actively institutionalised in daily practices; the Kemalists contested the Islamic side of Turkishness, and correspondingly, the AKP opposed (and still opposes) secular Turkishness.

## **Windscreens as sites for political rivalry between Kemalism and Islamism**

Neither Kemalists nor Islamists are homogeneous groups. Cultural and class differences also determine the relations of individuals with the ideologies they advocate. Although they have adopted the essence of these ideologies, individuals who defend these ideologies develop alternative discourses.<sup>48</sup> The following section draws on the findings of brief interviews with people who affixed Kemalist or Islamist-Ottoman symbols to their car rear-windshields, and media coverage of crucial issues that led to conflict between Kemalists and Islamists. It should be noted that, on both sides, not all are in favour of using these symbols on their cars, as some even oppose the practice.

One of the interesting contexts in which the all-encompassing political rivalry between Kemalist nationalism and Islamist nationalism manifests itself, is the rear windscreens of cars. A variety of pictures, images and slogans representing either Kemalist or Islamist nationalism are used to decorate car windscreens. Car stickers were first seen on the back of trucks in Turkey in the 1970s; they were referred to as ‘truck quotes’, which usually expressed the hardships of life and the longing of drivers for lovers out of their reach. These images and writings included for example ‘I loved you, but what happened? The tavern became rich’, ‘Destiny is not sold, so I can buy a better one’, and ‘You said let us go to death. Did we say there is no diesel?’ These have been ridiculed for their low cultural taste and melancholic style. It is however still common to see stickers with the names of loved ones, short poems, witty quotes, and pictures on the rear windscreens of cars.

Left and right radicalism developed a great number of political slogans that flooded public areas in Turkey in the 1970s. Political symbols on car windows appeared in the 1990s but became increasingly common in the last fifteen years, when the secularist-Islamist conflict reached its peak. Özyürek argues that in the 1990s, for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic, consumers moved official state imagery into the market and their homes, which indicates that ‘citizens perceived the official state ideology (Kemalism) in need of their personal protection’.<sup>49</sup> This conflict has enveloped everything, from political parties to nongovernmental organisations, from the media to daily life. There seems to be a direct correlation between political conflicts, which have been waged over the secular-religious divide since 2007, and the increased use of political symbols in everyday life.

## Kemalist symbols



**Figure 1:** Atatürk in military uniform. Atatürk's signature. Image credit: Aysun Akan

is the most popular.<sup>50</sup> Stickers with pictures of Atatürk in military attire and in elegant suits and portraits are also widely seen on rear windows (Figures 1-6). Other common images are Atatürk pictures and

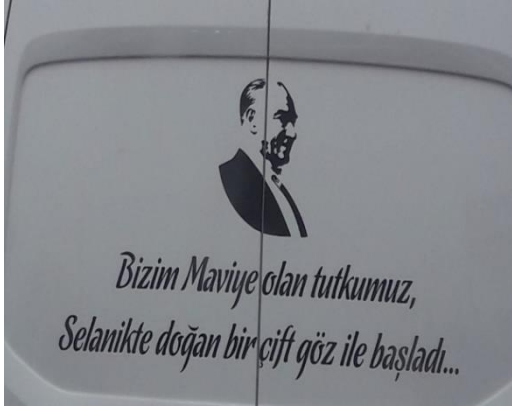
**Figure 2:** Atatürk's picture on a Turkish flag. **Caption:** The strength you need is in the noble blood in your veins. We are Mustafa Kemal's Soldiers. How Happy is the One Who Says I am a Turk. Image credit: Aysun Akan



The Kemalist symbols on the backs of the cars are very diverse and very colourful. The most common symbol is Atatürk's signature, either in the middle of the windscreen or between the names of the driver's children (a common practice) on the right and left side of the glass. Atatürk's three signatures are well known: 'K. Atatürk', 'M. Kemal' and 'Gazi M. Kemal', but the first



signatures on a Turkish flag or a map of Turkey (Figure 4). All these images, accompanied by Atatürk's aphorisms, and words praising Atatürk, continue to decorate the rear windows.



**Figure 3:** Atatürk's image. **Caption:** Our love for blue started with a pair of eyes (Atatürk had blue eyes) born in Salonika (Atatürk's birthplace). Image credit: Aysun Akan



**Figure 4:** Pictures of Atatürk on a Turkish flag shaped like a map of Turkey. Image credit: Aysun Akan



**Figure 5:** Atatürk's image and his signature. **Caption:** Never Dies. Image credit: Aysun Akan



**Figure 6:** Atatürk's image in military uniform and his signature. Image credit: Aysun Akan

## Islamist-Ottoman symbols



**Figure 7:** An Ottoman Tughra. Image credit: Aysun Akan



**Figure 8:** 1453 (The year of Istanbul's conquest). **Caption:** Ottoman. Image credit: Aysun Akan

Most Muslims refrain from using any visual depiction of the Prophet Muhammed or any other historical figure because Islamic teaching prohibits the drawing of images of living creatures. For this reason, Islamists use images showing verses and the prophet's aphorisms on car rear windows. One of the most popular truck quotes is 'God forbid', but this phrase is not used solely by religious people; in everyday language, it simply means, 'Do not let bad things happen to you'. However, 'In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate' (*Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*) (Figure 10) and 'Everything belongs to Allah' (*Mülk Allahındır*) (Figure 11) are widely used Islamic expressions. In the last twenty years, these words have increasingly appeared in Arabic script rather than Turkish script and are often accompanied by 'tughras', the signatures of Ottoman Sultans

(Figures 7, 9 and 10), as expressions of Islamist nationalism, accompanied by an image of a Turkish flag or a crescent (Figure 9 and 12). The Ottoman tughra is a calligraphic emblem, seal or signature of the Sultan's authority that was affixed to all official documents and correspondence. The first tughra in the Ottoman period dates back to 1324 and belonged to Orhan Gazi. To date, 35 sultan signatures have been used as contemporary emblems.<sup>51</sup>



**Figure 9:** A tughra in the shape of a Turkish flag. Image credit: Aysun Akan



**Figure 10:** In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. Image credit: Aysun Akan



**Figure 11:** Everything belongs to Allah. Image credit: Aysun Akan



**Figure 12:** A tughra, the star and crescent of the Turkish flag. **Caption:** God Protect. Masallah. Image credit: Aysun Akan

## **Kemalist and Islamist-Ottoman symbols on rear windscreens**

Political symbols on rear windscreens hold a special significance. Through these symbols, drivers openly declare their political identity to those behind them in traffic, and (possibly) challenge others' political identities. To elucidate how individuals appropriate Kemalist and Islamist symbols to articulate their national identity claims, I conducted 10 brief interviews with drivers in 2018 and 2022 in car accessory shops located in different quarters of the city of Izmir. I also reviewed news articles and commentary in the media and academic debates on the issue to investigate the projections of this rivalry, indicating a wider political agenda.

My findings suggest that both Kemalist and Islamist nationalists are concerned with the themes of national history, and these are articulated via the vocabulary of lifestyle and cultural values, though they attach completely opposite meanings to these. These symbols, which are heavily imbued with political and cultural connotations, remind Turks of their past, but the Kemalists and the Islamists are reminded of completely different pasts. Therefore, individuals selectively refer to the symbols so as to suit their particular concerns, according to the current political agenda. The theory of banal nationalism, which explains the ways in which the nation is actively institutionalised in daily practices, can be useful to understand these complex processes.<sup>52</sup> By focusing on the analysis of agents and everyday practices, banal nationalism enables an understanding of the ways that people actively reproduce or challenge the nation through ordinary daily practices.

According to Skey, 'nationalism provides individuals with a discursive framework to make sense of the world around them'. It is a set of attitudes that shape the perception and behaviours of individuals. 'A

strong identification with the nation involves an excessive pride and perception of national superiority'.<sup>53</sup> Knott states that the 'everyday' is not only a place where the nation is expressed through banal practices, but also incorporates a variety of 'hotter differences and conflicts' that affect people's lives.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, this shows one of the multiple ways in which the nationalism promoted by the state and 'episodic' everyday nationalism interact.<sup>55</sup>

## **National history**

Nations have competing stories to tell, and the story that stands out is often the result of a hegemonic struggle between classes, religions, regions, or ethnicities.<sup>56</sup> National history constitutes one of these areas of conflict between Kemalists and Islamists. In Islamic historiography, the Ottoman Empire is presented as the strongest representative of the glorious Islamic-Turkish past. In this view, the West was hostile towards the Ottomans, and the sultans regressed because they were deceived by the West (and the Western elite) and because they lacked faith in their own past. In contrast, according to Kemalist historiography, the Ottoman Empire was a period that hindered the progress of the glorious Turks. The Kemalists instead sought the Turks' glorious past in ancient Central Asia. For the AKP, the Ottoman past provides resources for the reconstruction of an Islamist nationalist identity. As Ural argues, Islamist subjectivities yearn for the Ottoman past as times of victory and grandiosity, and such a view helps Islamist nationalists regain their pride, wounded at the hands of Kemalists.<sup>57</sup>

Sultan Abdulhamid II was at the centre of these two conflicting national histories. Kemalist historiography portrayed him as a dictator who represented the East, despotism, and backwardness, while the Islamist historiography of the AKP elevated him to the position of a powerful

statesman standing against imperialist Western hegemony. Examples that manifest this discursive shift can be seen in the increasing prevalence of historical figures' names on public buildings, the rise of Ottoman-themed TV series in public and private broadcasting, the reproduction of Ottoman architectural styles, especially in mosques, and educational campaigns aiming to persuade youth to learn Ottoman Turkish. These are banal reminders of neo-Ottomanism and are used to reconstruct Turkish nationalism.<sup>58</sup> This clearly demonstrates that 'in the context of ever-present contestation, individuals engage in localised meaning making practices'.<sup>59</sup>

One of the drivers I interviewed expressed this pride very well:

I have an Ottoman Sultan signature on my rear windscreen. We have been made to forget our great Ottoman past. Now we are learning how our great Sultans ruled across three continents. The Ottomans were respected, and Islam was respected because the Ottoman Sultans were fair and merciful towards the people under their rule.<sup>60</sup>

He was quick to add, 'the Sultans were not the types that had good times at the drinking tables', which was a reference to Atatürk's drinking habit. Islamists, who neither regard Atatürk as a statesman nor respect him, refer to his drinking as an insult. In fact, when President Erdoğan announced that he was limiting the sale of alcohol, he referred to Atatürk, and İnönü, the second-in-command during the War of Independence, as two drunkards.<sup>61</sup> It is important to note in this context that Atatürk's dinner table was very famous, as he discussed important state issues with the deputies and bureaucrats he invited. Even today, the restaurants visited by Atatürk keep an 'Atatürk table' with a sign reading 'reserved forever'.

A female driver, also objecting to Atatürk's leadership, stated that 'people talk about Atatürk as if he saved the country by himself. That is false. Our grandfathers fought in the war'.<sup>62</sup>

This is the exact opposite of the Kemalists' idea of leadership. For them, Atatürk's leadership is indisputable:

To me, this symbol represents the homeland, the nation and everything that is valuable to us. Atatürk is a unique person. I think there is no leader in the world that can be compared to Atatürk, neither in the past nor today. Atatürk's love for me is like the love of my children, like the love of my parents, it is a precious love. Thanks to Atatürk, we exist, thanks to him this nation exists.<sup>63</sup>

Another female driver described Atatürk's leadership qualities:

Thanks to him, we breathe. We, as a nation, exist today because of him. Thanks to what he did, people were able to improve their lives. Atatürk gave priority to science and did not put religious elements in the centre. When I see Atatürk's signature on a car windscreen, I think that person is reliable, he is committed to secularism and science. It is an honour to carry this symbol.<sup>64</sup>

This aligns with another Kemalist driver's thoughts on the leadership qualities of the Ottoman Sultans:

The Ottoman symbol represents backwardness, bigotry, primitiveness, and immorality. Now we know how the Ottomans lived, we know what kind of mentality they had, we know how they used women, children and how they abused them for personal gains, because the Ottomans led a completely immoral life.<sup>65</sup>

One of the most important conflicts between the two opposing nationalisms is over the discourse of civilisation. For the Kemalists, the

aim of the social and political transformations during the single party era (1923-1946) was 'to reach the level of contemporary Western civilisation'. For the political Islamists, this type of civilisation is an alien construct; they believe that, because it is of Western origin, it has nothing to do with their own origin. The AKP's civilisation discourse is not based on the idea of citizenship, but on recognising the brotherhood of believers rather than the people. Moreover, the hallmark of the AKP's discourse on civilisation is its rejection of the first condition of civilisation, 'the recognition of the other'.<sup>66</sup> This is best exemplified by a party supporter who said that 'wives and daughters of the opposition party (CHP) should be considered booty' on the day of the Presidential Government System Referendum on 16 April 2017.<sup>67</sup>

The interviews that I conducted reinforced this idea; a young male driver said: 'When I see a tughra on a car window, I think that the owner is a religious person. I think he is linked to the past. Tughra reminds us of our roots, our past, the great wars, the Ottoman Empire's glorious conquests'.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the response of a middle-aged male driver indicates how Islamists reconstruct Ottoman history as a vision of an ideal society. He reported that his Ottoman sticker reminds him of the Ottoman times, when there was more tolerance because of religion and morality. He said, 'I wish I lived in those times. The Ottomans fed their hungry people. It was a fair system, unlike today'.<sup>69</sup>

## **Lifestyle and cultural values**

From the founding of the Turkish Republic to the present, all nationalist ideologies have meticulously defined the qualities of an acceptable citizen. Since 1923, Kemalist nationalists have praised the type of citizen who is loyal to Western values and is modern but has a strong commitment to serving the country and the nation and does not refrain



from making any sacrifices for the state and the homeland. For Islamist nationalists, since the 1970s, the ideal citizen has been defined as one who adheres to religious and national values and does not refrain from making any sacrifices for his or her faith, religious values, or the state. The way that citizens respond to the ideal citizen type, defined by the nationalist elite, is a highly complex issue, and is undoubtedly influenced by the economic, social, and cultural conditions of the period.

In Turkey, lifestyle issues are closely tied to the idea of citizenship, and this is an area where micro-scale 'wars' are fought. It is a political battle between secularism and Islamism in which symbols play the leading role, and lifestyle itself becomes a political symbol. As an example, one participant insisted that she was very disturbed by young people's unconscious imitation of the West, stating, 'Young people should be proud of their Muslim-Turkish identity. That is what we have lost'.<sup>70</sup> However, despite my persistent questions, she was unable to elaborate on the nature of these imitative European behaviours. Her comments merely echo the persistent claim by the political Islamists that the republican reforms have caused a cultural rupture.

Identity politics served as the main determinant of the Kemalist reformists' struggle to build a modern Western citizenship that required certain identity claims. A century later, the main axis of the Islamists' projects to reconstruct the Muslim-Turkish identity is to find a cure for the cultural corruption, which they argue, is caused by 'mindless' Westernisation, and requires certain identity claims of an essentially vengeful nature.

In Turkish politics, political divisions across ethnic or class lines are often expressed through lifestyle discourses, and are almost always interlaced with social class background.

For example, Kemalists disdain Islamist identity claims on the basis that they represent backwardness, as expressed in the following:

We usually see tughras on commercial vehicles such as Doblo. Don't mess with them. These drivers usually keep a cudgel under their seat. They are the ones who drive as if they own the roads, and they go over the speed limit. They always carry a gas cylinder in the trunk of the car. Wherever they find a suitable place, they barbecue.<sup>71</sup>

For a Kemalist, a tughra on the back window of a Doblo car is a reminder of the 'nouveau rich' that have unrefined habits, such as violating traffic rules and 'barbecuing' in public spaces, which implies an inability to adapt to city life. These 'othering' practises are manifested in their geographical marking of the city, where individuals socialise with likeminded people and avoid 'others'.<sup>72</sup> This is true for both the Kemalists and Islamists. Mixed gender gatherings, night clubs, and alcohol consumption are activities associated with the secular lifestyle, whereas gender-segregated gatherings and non-alcoholic beverage consumption are associated with Islamists. These divisions also explain people's preferences when choosing whether to live in a modern or religious city neighbourhood. These cleavages have replaced the previous ones based on 'hometownsmanship', which refers to the forms of solidarity networks based on migrants' hometown origins. However, with the current secular-Islamist divisions, hometownsmanship is reformed according to more complex layers of identity claims.

A woman who had an Atatürk signature on her car, stated:

There are a few of them (Islamists) in our neighbourhood; unfortunately, they are also my fellow countrymen. Thankfully, there are just a few of them so we do not feel any pressure.

We are annoyed because they don't hang Atatürk pictures and flags on their windows on national days. Pity them. The ungrateful do not deserve to live in Atatürk's Turkey.<sup>73</sup>

Even within apartment buildings, people keep a close eye on the actions of 'others', and this is especially linked to situations of ideological significance. The abovementioned woman claimed that if she lived in a religious neighbourhood, she would face 'pressure', which is a common fear shared not only by women, but also by men who have a secular lifestyle. She reinforced her message by telling me about an incident a few years earlier:

I had such an experience. In a hardware store where I went to buy paint, the seller did not want to take the money I gave him. He said, 'I am going to the mosque now. My ablution will be invalidated. Can you leave the money on the counter?' At first, I was surprised, but then I saw Islamist and Ottoman symbols on the wall behind the counter. That is when I understood. The man did not want to take money from the hands of a woman, who by nature has the potential to tempt a man. I was also very angry. I said that my money could also invalidate his ablution, and I left the shop without buying paint.<sup>74</sup>

These tensions between Kemalists and Islamists in daily life often go unnoticed; however, they are part of the othering that is reflected in everyday life practices. The Islamist AKP's de-secularisation policies have been at the centre of the political agenda for the last two decades, as President Erdoğan often takes the opportunity to advocate for a more Islamic lifestyle. When he attends marriage ceremonies, he makes the couples promise to have at least three children. Moreover, in 2012 Erdoğan stated that Turkey needed a young and dynamic population, and that practising caesarean section is a plan to control the country's population growth. He stated, 'The woman who refuses to have children

is half a woman, because our religion has given women a rank, the rank of motherhood...It has laid heaven under her feet'.<sup>75</sup> On 24 November 2014, at the 1<sup>st</sup> International Women and Justice Summit, he stated, 'Equality between men and women is against nature'. At the International Conference on Population and Development held in Istanbul on 25 May 2012, Erdoğan said, 'I see abortion as murder. No one should have the right to allow it. Killing a child in the womb is not different from killing it after birth...'<sup>76</sup> He also warned couples against exhibiting romantic displays of affection in public.

Moreover, Erdoğan openly insults those who regularly consume alcohol and prohibits the consumption of alcohol in open public spaces and within 100m of mosques. An Islamist recently made the following controversial comment: 'The equality of men and women is completely false. Make your wife pray and cover her head. The streets are like a butcher's shop [implying that women wearing revealing clothes were displaying their 'meat']. We are out of our minds when we see meat.'<sup>77</sup> This statement indicates that the AKP is trying to normalise such policies to consolidate its supporters. Erdoğan uses the concept of a 'national will' to criticise Kemalist elitism at every opportunity, and to glorify people-peasants (who lead an Islamic lifestyle) as authentic groups that preserve Islamic values. To do this, the AKP needs to marginalise Kemalism as a political understanding in which, among other things, (Muslim) believers are prevented from fulfilling their religious beliefs. These are just some of the examples of the gradual Islamisation of society, which is protested by the whole secularist opposition, and not just by Kemalists: thousands of women for example protested against the government's plan to restrict women's reproductive rights and interfere with their choices about their lives.<sup>78</sup>

On 25 May, in response to Erdoğan's warning against couples exhibiting romantic displays of affection in public, dozens of couples gathered in an Ankara subway station to protest by kissing.<sup>79</sup>

The appearance and status of women and their role in society have been critical for Kemalists, who believe that the level of contemporary civilisation is measured by the status of women in society, and often proudly point to reforms such as universal suffrage and the education reforms in the 1930s that elevated the status of women in Turkey.<sup>80</sup>

A female driver said that she feels proud of being the follower of Mustafa Kemal, a modern and sophisticated leader. She said, 'Atatürk's European-ness was not an imitation; he was brought up that way, so Europeans respected him'. Atatürk's image in a European outfit in modern social gatherings was inspirational for her generation, who are committed to secular lifestyles. She said the pictures of Atatürk's ballroom dancing show an elegance that no other leader has ever shown in Turkey. She saw her lifestyle under threat from the Islamist government, and she proudly displayed her love and admiration for Atatürk'.<sup>81</sup> Then she contrasted her own identity with an Islamist one:

I get very irritated when I see Ottoman-Islamist stickers on cars driven by female drivers. I can't figure out how women believe in an ideology that sees them as slaves, it seems impossible to me. I want to go and shake her. How can a woman not see her own interests? Look at our current president, he insults women.<sup>82</sup>

The image of emancipated or westernised women came to represent Kemalist modernization. Secular women believe that the Kemalist republican reforms increased women's opportunities, but the AKP's assaults on women's rights demonstrate the role of a crude Turkish nationalism in the formation of a religion-based society.

## Conclusion

Turkish politics have long been shaped by concerns about the survival of the state and the continuation of the nation/*umma*. To some extent, everyday nationalism is infused with official versions. The rivalry between the supporters of Kemalist nationalism and Islamist nationalism reveals irreconcilable differences and exclusionary discourses. 2023 is the centennial of the foundation of the republic, and also the year of the general elections, which for both sides carry great symbolic meaning. Either the Kemalists will win and ensure the continuation of the century-old republic, or the Islamists will win and close the 'Westernisation bracket' and revive the Ottoman Empire. Political symbols on the car windscreen are a small manifestation of much wider political tensions that are likely to rise to unprecedented levels in 2023.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> 'Turkification', <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkification> [Accessed: 30/10/2022].

<sup>4</sup> 'The Treaty of Sevres', [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty\\_of\\_S%C3%A8vres](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_S%C3%A8vres) [Accessed: 30/10/2022].

<sup>5</sup> A. Kazancıgil, and E. Özbudun, *Atatürk: Founder of a Modern State* (London: C. Hurst, 1981); A. Mango, *Atatürk the Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 2002).

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<sup>8</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> U. Heyd, *Language Reform in Modern Turkey* (Jerusalem: The Israel Oriental Society, 1954), 26.

<sup>10</sup> F. Üstel, *Makbul Vatandaşın Peşinde* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005), 126-128.

<sup>11</sup> M. Çınar, and B. Duran, 'The Specific Evolution of Contemporary Political Islam in Turkey and Its "Difference"', in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of Justice and Development Party*, ed. by Ü. Cizre (London, New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> S. Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Natinalism in Modern Turkey Who Is a Turk?* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 14.

<sup>13</sup> U. Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010), 14.

<sup>14</sup> M. Yeğen, *The Turkish State Discourse and the Exclusion of Kurdish Identity* (New York, London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> A. Akan, and Z.F. Yörük, 'Studies in a Dying Culture Kemalist Columnists Coverage of the Kurdish Peace Initiative', *Athens Journal of History*, 1/2 (2015), 115-34.

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<sup>19</sup> Akan and Yörük, 'Studies in a Dying', 122.

<sup>20</sup> M. Karabaşoğlu, 'İslam Ve Milliyetçilik Arasındaki İlişki Ve Etkileşim', in *Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce, Dönemler Zihniyetler* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2009), 690-702, 697, 698.

<sup>21</sup> Ü. Cizre, 'Introduction: The Justice and Development Party: Making Choices, Revisions and Reversals Interactively', in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of Justice and Development Party* ed. by Ü. Cizre (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1-10; K. Çayır, 'The Emergence of Turkey's Contemporary Muslim Democrats', in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of Justice and Development Party* ed. by Ü. Cizre (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 69; N. Göle, 'The Quest for the Islamic Self within the Context of Modernity', in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. by S. Bozdoğan and R. Kasaba (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 81-94.

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<sup>37</sup> A. Erçifci, 'The Question of National Identity in Turkey: Reflections on Tv Series as Popular Cultural Products' (MA Thesis, Izmir University of Economics Graduate School of Social Sciences, 2018), 44-45.

<sup>38</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention of Traditions*, 4.

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<sup>40</sup> Vocational schools to train government employed imams.

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<sup>43</sup> Z.Y. Yaman, 'Siyasi/Estetik Gösterge Olarak Kamusal Alanda Anıt Ve Heykel', *METU JFA*, 28/1 (2011), 70-71.

<sup>44</sup> On 28 May, protests began in Istanbul Gezi Park, when the government began to destroy the park to redevelop the square, planning to build Ottoman-era barracks, a shopping mall and a mosque. The protest turned into a mass unrest on 30 and 31 May when the police raided the park to clear off the park of the protestors, which triggered a country-wide demonstrations and protests throughout June 2013.

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<sup>46</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention of Traditions*.

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<sup>63</sup> Interview (Male, 42 years old) 19/5/2018.

<sup>64</sup> Interview (Female, 37 years old) 3/6/2022.

<sup>65</sup> Interview (Male, 62 years old) 17/3/2018.

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<sup>67</sup> 'Onların karıları bize helaldir', *Cumhuriyet*, 21/12/2020. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/mhpli-vekil-bunlarin-karilari-bize-helaldir-diyerek-kapilarina-dayandilar-606057> [Accessed: 9/7/2022].

<sup>68</sup> Interview (Male, 62 years old) 20/6/2022.

<sup>69</sup> Interview (Male, 39 years old) 4/9/2022.

<sup>70</sup> Interview (Female, 51 years old) 18/7/2018.

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<sup>82</sup> Interview (Female, 45 years old) 26/9/2022; 'Erdoğan, 'Gezi' eylemcilerine 'sürtük' dedi, art arda suç duyuruları geldi', *Cumhuriyet*, 2/6/2022. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/erdogan-gezi-eylemcilerine-surtuk-dedi-art-arda-suc-duyurulari-geldi-1942714> [Accessed: 12/1/2023].