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THE IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE TURKISH MHP AND THE GREY WOLVES

Abstract

The Turkish Idealist movement, encompassing the militant Grey Wolves as well as the current Turkish coalition partner, the Nationalist Action Party, represent the most influential elements of the Turkish (or Turkic) far right, with activities reaching from Western Europe all the way to Xinjiang, China. This paper seeks to map the ideological framework and evolution of the Idealist movement. It argues that, while strongly influenced by fascism, it is not in essence a totalitarian movement. Furthermore, while it evolved out of secular pan-Turkic aspirations with explicit racist components, it has largely abandoned explicit racism, dreams of a pan-Turkic empire, and embraced Islam as an integral component of Idealist ideology and Turkish identity.

Key words: Turkey, MHP, Grey Wolves, Islam, nationalism, ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The current governing alliance in Turkey is composed of Erdogan's own Justice and Development Party (AKP) and a far-right party called the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). The MHP has previously not shied away from opposing or criticizing Erdogan and the AKP, particularly during the period of negotiations and lessening tensions between the government and the Kurdish minority. However, at least since the 2016 coup attempt, the MHP has been cooperating with the AKP, has facilitated Erdogan's grasp on power through the constitutional referendum and

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has formed a coalition government, thereby entrenching and extending their own influence.

The MHP was established as a pan-Turkic and Turkish nationalist party, influenced by Kemalism, fascism and Islam. Inseparable from the MHP is its unofficial militant movement, known as the ‘Grey Wolves’, whose members have engaged in political violence, participated in armed conflict and built a network of organizations in order to engage with youth and communities. The ‘Grey Wolves’ have a strong presence not only in Turkey, but also in the diaspora, such as in Western Europe, where they have a great reach. This paper will seek to explore where the ideological framework of the MHP and the Grey Wolves lies at the intersection between Turkish ethno-nationalism, fascism, Islam, pan-Turkism and Kemalism.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is very little academic literature treating the subject of the MHP, in particular relating to its ideological history and framework and various ideological currents (Erken 2014). There is even less academic literature on the closely related ‘Grey Wolves’ movement, though much useful non-academic research has been done in the journalistic field. Furthermore, much of the available academic literature is outdated, with very little treating the recent years in which the MHP has been governing alongside the AKP.

One major contribution has been Landau’s 1982 seminal paper ‘The Nationalist Action Party of Turkey’, written shortly after the movement was banned following the 1980 military coup. Landau examines fifteen years of the MHP’s political history, since its inception in the late 1960s, including its style, structure, propaganda and ideology (Landau 1982). He describes the conflict between Turkish nationalism, which holds the Turkish state above all else, and Pan-Turkic/Turanist ideology, which seeks to look to Turkish kin beyond the borders. He describes a party established upon the ideology of its founder, Alparslan Türkeş, which draws strongly from neo-fascism and opposes the establishment of status quo, while refraining from revolutionary upheaval and condemning totalitarianism. Islam remains a central ideological component and the party has enjoyed considerable clerical support, but it walks the line of political Islam without crossing into Islamism, remaining secular in regards to affairs of the state and the freedom of religion.

Another important contribution has been Erken’s ‘Ideological Construction of the Politics of Nationalism in Turkey: The

Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP), 1965–1980’, which analyses the ideological evolution of the MHP over the same period and details the competing strands of nationalism within the movement (Erken 2014). Erken argues that shifts in power and influence led to a gradual transformation of the MHP’s discourse from secular nationalism to a more religious-conservative form of nationalism, not least as a consequence of the attitudes of the Turkish post-coup military government.

Cengiz, seeking to explain the ideological inflexibility of the MHP, argues that the synthesis of nationalism and Islam in the party, the MHP’s identification with Turkey’s national security issues (particularly the Kurdish question and separatism) and the personality cult surrounding the founder Alparslan Türkeş are the reasons why the party currently resists ideological change and political pluralism (Cengiz 2021). He further argues that the MHP has benefited from this ideological immoderation and became a key political actor that has long been close to the state structures.

Turanism is a nationalist concept aiming for collaboration and unification between peoples of Central Asian origin. Originally a concept developed by Finnish scholar Matthias Castrén in the 19th Century in response to pan-Slavism or pan-Germanism, the theory bound together peoples as diverse as Finns, Hungarians, Mongols and Turks (Britannica 2022). It was adopted and further developed into pan-Turkism by scholars such as Ziya Gökalp of the ‘Young Turks’ to focus on various Turkic peoples outside Turkey, such as Azerbaijanis, Tatars, Uyghurs, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Tatars (Uzer 2016).

Agaogullan, an important pan-Turkist ideologue, identified five basic tenets of pan-Turkism: Turanism, racism, militarism, anti-communism and ‘other components’, including the need for discipline, hierarchy, obedience, glorification of the leader and self-sacrifice for the state (Poulton 1997). The pan-Turkist currents, therefore, naturally gravitated towards fascism and authoritarianism.

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and its militant arm the ‘Grey Wolves’ (*Bozkurtlar*), also known as ‘the Idealists’, emerged in the late 1960s under the leadership of Turkish Cypriot and former soldier Alparslan Türkeş as a “predominantly Sunni, provincial, and conservative” party (Uzer 2016, 125). It is the second oldest party in Turkish political history and third largest in the polls, obtaining a little bit over 11% (Erken 2014).

Türkeş had been court-martialed in 1945 on charges of attempting a coup and “fascist and racist activities”, and thus spent ten months in prison before charges were dismissed. These trials came to be known as ‘the Racism-Turanism trials’ and specifically targeted Turanists and pan-Turkists, whose militantism was deemed to cause tensions with neighboring countries, particularly the Soviet Union. In 1960, Türkeş was involved in a military coup toppling the government, but was exiled alongside other nationalists out of fear that they would seek to grasp power. He returned from exile some years later and took over the Republican Peasant Nation Party, which they transformed into the MHP and which Türkeş led until his death in 1997 (Erken 2014). It was temporarily banned after the 1980 military coup and Türkeş was imprisoned for some time, but he remained the leader of the MHP until his death in 1997, after which DevletBahçeli took over, pushing the movement in a more conservative and religious direction (Counter Extremism Project 2022).

The MHP has participated in a number of coalition governments since the 1970s and received as many as 18% of votes during the 1999 general elections (Eskisar&Durmuslar 2021). During the early years of the AKP governments, it was very critical towards Erdoğan and his party. However, after the 2016 coup attempt and the MHP’s pivotal importance to the constitutional referendum which turned Turkey from a parliamentarian to a presidential republic, the MHP and the AKP formed a political alliance and have been governing in coalition since (ibid.).

The ‘Grey Wolves’ was one of the main nationalist terrorist organizations between 1976 and 1980, engaging in a great number of killings, particularly against their leftist rivals and Kurds, and even being involved in the failed assassination attempt of Pope John Paul II (Global Security 2022). They had established close ties to the CIA-backed Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations. Banned after the 1980 coup, many of these extremists formed diaspora networks in Europe, before arising again in the 1990s and becoming entrenched in organized crime, particularly the international heroin trade (ibid.). In the following decade, the ‘Grey Wolves’ participated in the 1992 Nagorno-Karabakh War, both Chechen Wars, were involved in a coup attempt in Azerbaijan, as well as in the conflict against the PKK in Turkey. Nowadays, the MHP is a coalition partner of the AKP, and the ruling discourse has taken increasingly ultranationalist tones, while the ‘Grey Wolves’ have taken deep roots among the Turkish diaspora population in Europe.

ANALYSIS

The MHP is an extremist right-wing political party that is uniquely Turkish in its ideological framework and does not fit neatly within classifications such as conservative, ethnonationalist, Islamist or fascist, while drawing from all these influences throughout its history. It has experienced conflicts between Islamists and those emphasizing pre-Islamic Turkic past, civic nationalists and ethnonationalist, those seeking Turkish expansion and those focused on the existing Turkish state, as well as regarding the Kurdish question.

Nationalism and pan-Turanism

The two most prominent figures in the formulation of early 20th century Turkish nationalism are Yusuf Akçura and Ziya Gökalp, both articulating an ideology breaking both from Islamism and Ottomanism (Uzer 2016). While Gökalp and Akçura diverged on many topics, both embraced the idea of a Turkish nation-state as opposed to a multi-national Ottoman state, and actively supported the Kemalist regime of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. They both emphasized a Western model of a Turkish national state, embracing both secularism and women's rights. Akçura attached more importance to ethnicity, while Gökalp underlined the cultural construction of the state and the importance of religion. The dominant strand of Turkish nationalism was the cultural nationalism, represented by Kemal and Gökalp (ibid.).

Ethnic nationalism was confined to a small group of intellectuals. Nihal Atsız was an intellectual who greatly influenced Turkish idealist nationalism and Alparslan Türkeş himself, representing the racist and anti-Islamic strand of nationalism. He opposed intermarriage between Turks and non-Turks, admired the race theories of Nazi Germany, viewed non-Turkic ethnic groups as enemies of the Turkic people and was arrested alongside MHP founder Alparslan Türkeş in the Racism-Turanism trials of 1944 (Counter Extremism Project 2022; Landau 2004, 258). He denounced Islam as an 'Arab religion', and embraced ancient Turkic traditions and folk religions instead, arguing that 'nationalism was superior to religion'. He was the one to popularize the grey wolf as the symbol for the Turks through his novels, whilst he was not the first to use it (Uzer 2016).

However, while there have been strong undercurrents of racism and ethnonationalism within the MHP, it has never been openly embraced by the party: it has rather embraced a republican and patriotic nationalism

and has embraced both Kurds and Alevis in the party, while rejecting the conception of Kurdish or Alevi nations separate from the Turkish nation (Uzer, 2016). It has also been characterized by ideological flexibility due to its multiple sources of its nationalism, which have supported its changing political behavior throughout times and allowed it to take ambivalent or pragmatic positions on topics such as the influx of refugees or policy towards European integration (Esikar&Durmuslar 2021).

Much of the ideology of Türkeş, of the MHP and the ‘Grey Wolves’ originates from the concept of Turanism and pan-Turkism, and there are many pan-Turkic supporters and members. However, pan-Turkism has only been one among many streams within the movement, and the party took a clear departure from pan-Turkism when they adopted the three Islamic crescents as their party flag (Landau 1982).

The influence of pan-Turkic thought is, however, still tangible in the movements’ significant activity abroad and participation in foreign military conflicts on the side of their Turkic brethren. The grey wolf from which the MHP militant wing draws their name is also an important symbol of the ancient Turkic peoples and a recurrent Turkish nationalist motif, representing a legendary female wolf from the Oghuz Turkic foundation myth who nursed a boy injured in battle, by whom she was impregnated and consequently to whom she gave birth to ten boys. These boys would later establish the clan that rule over the Turkic nomadic empires (Amran 2007; Findley 2005, 38; Roxburgh 2005, 20).

Türkeş wrote the foundational ideological book entitled ‘The National Doctrine of Nine Lights’ (*Dokuz Işık*), in which he both amalgamates nationalism and Islamic values while emphasizing the need for secular state structures. The ‘Nine Lights’ he outlines are nationalism, idealism, moralism, societalism, scientism, libertarianism, peasantism (*köycülük*), progressivism and populism, as well as industrialism; he envisages a disciplined and hierarchically organized nationalist society along the modernist lines (Uzer 2016).

Another important ideological father is Fikret Eren, who refined the ‘Nine Lights’ doctrine by imagining a ‘national-societalist order’ different from both capitalism and socialism, which would result in a classless society by dividing society into six segments: workers, employers, peasants, artisans, bureaucrats and professionals, each represented by unions (ibid.).

This ideological framework lacked the totalitarianism and ethno-nationalism inherent in fascist thought, but was largely aligned. While Islamic principles were absent from the original formulation of this doctrine, in 1967, Türkeş adopted Islam as an essential component of

Turkish identity, and the importance of Islam gained in prominence in the party ideology (Counter Extremism Project 2022).

Turkish-Islamic Synthesis

In picking moralism as one of the ‘Nine Lights’, Türkeş sought to replace Atatürk’s secularism; the concept of moralism was interpreted through a religious lens, leading to what is referred to as the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (Areteos 2021; Uzer 2016).

According to Çetinsaya, as cited by Areteos in 1965, ‘the ‘morality’ section of the ‘Nine Lights’ does not mention Islam and refers only to ‘Turkish traditions, spirit and to beliefs of the Turkish nation’. By 1972, ‘Islamic principles’ had been added, and the preamble to the ‘Lights’ stressed the Islamic contribution to world civilization”.

Türkeş himself declared that “in the path of Turkish nationalism, cultural groups were molded in Turkish-Islamic tradition. Islam constitutes an important component of Turkish morality. Islam is a source that keeps the nation together and provides spiritual and moral discipline. Thus, Turkish nationalism is not based on a conflict between Islam and ethnic-nationalism rather it includes an historic synthesis of Islamic and Turkish ethnic values” (ibid). The embrace of Islam as the predominant cultural value is made clear by the choice of the clearly Islamic three crescents on the flag of the MHP, as opposed to the pre-Islamic Turkic grey wolf.

It was in great part as a response to the conflicts pitting nationalists against communists that Islamic values resurged among the MHP and ‘Grey Wolves’, as the struggle took a new dimension: a struggle for the global order, in which the activists became religious warriors on a holy quest, Areteos argues (2021). An ideological ‘father’ of this sacred mission was the intellectual Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi, who developed the concept of the Turkish-Islamic Ideal “as a form of cultural and religious nationalism, framing national and religious identity as indivisible and mutually constitutive” (ibid.). According to him, Turkey should seek to dominate the global order through its religious and historical mission: “Turkishness is our body, Islam is our soul” (ibid.). The Turkish-Islamic Ideal would serve to strengthen and elevate the Turkish nation through Islam, and vice versa. Another father of this Islamic nationalism was the writer İbrahim Kafesoğlu, who argued that the original Islam had a lot in common with the Central Asian Turkic culture, which made it Turkish people’s mission to be the ‘soldiers of Islam’ (Netherlands Scientific Council).

The rejection of Atsız-style exclusionary ethnic nationalism in favor of the ‘Turkish-Islamic Synthesis’ seems to be in large part functional, in accordance with the belief that nationalism without an Islamic component would be rejected by the religious masses. It also added a religious layer to their struggle against enemies such as the Kurdish separatists, who they accused of betraying not only their homeland, but also Islam, while it also enabled them to absorb Kurds or Alevis who ascribed to the ideal (Uzer 2016).

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to explore the position of the Turkish Nationalist Action Party and its militant wing, the ‘Grey Wolves’. These movements grew out, together with Kemalist ideology, of a unique pan-Turkic nationalism that envisioned a union of Turkic peoples stretching from Europe to parts of China and the former USSR. Early forms of the ideology had clear racist elements and borrowed from fascism, notably in the organization of the street movement of the ‘Grey Wolves’. However, pan-Turkic aspirations, as well as explicit racism were marginalized within party doctrine, which in large parts aligned with the republican aspirations of Kemalism, albeit rejecting the multi-ethnic ideal in favor of a generous conception of a nationalist Turkish nation. Fascist elements remain central to the authoritarian movement, but reject totalitarianism as an ideal in favor of labor institutions and the republic as an institution. While it had strong secular and even anti-Islamic leanings in its early stages, these were also gradually moved away from. The movement, while preaching secularism for state institutions, adopted an Islamic view on the cultural sphere of society, and came to embrace the concept of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis. According to this idea, the Turkish nation and Islam are naturally compatible and mutually reinforcing, and it is the sacred mission of Turks to fight for the empowerment of both. The Idealists thus walk a fine line between secularism and political Islam, embracing both secular values and a political ideology merged with Islam. However, it is argued that the Islamic turn may primarily be instrumental as a form of un-Islamic Turkish nationalism would alienate the masses.

It can thus be seen that the MHP and the ‘Grey Wolves’ are the embodiment of a unique mixture of ideological influences, borrowing both from extremist racist, fascist and Islamist ideas, as well as from secular republicanism and moderate civic nationalism. It is therefore difficult to ascribe them a certain label. The lack of insight into current developments also makes it difficult to ascertain the current ideological

debates within the movement, or to what extent rhetoric truly aligns with ideology. The Idealists have aptly been able to transform through history, borrowing from other ideologies and changing their own stances according to the conditions they found themselves in. Furthermore, there may be important differences within the ideological spectrum of the party, between the MHP and the ‘Grey Wolves’, or between militants in Turkey and those active in the diaspora, which could represent important lines of research.

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