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Ulusalcılık: The Neo-nationalist Resurgence in Turkey

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ABSTRACT Nationalism has been a powerful force in Turkish politics since the founding of the Republic. Yet nationalist activists have become unusually strident in their rhetoric, coalescing around various radical political platforms to seek the ouster of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) regime, either through the ballot box or by violent means. This study considers the psychological and theoretical bases of Turkish nationalism and analyzes why militant nationalism is becoming a more significant political factor. Particular attention will be devoted to a loose collection of extremist organizations and media known as the “ulusalcılar.” Despite philosophical differences within the group, three fundamental elements in Ulusalçılık thought can be identified: uncompromising anti-Westernism; externalization of Islam from Turkish nationalism; and ethnic exclusionism. These elements, as well as social and political background and basic beliefs, are examined, the leading components of the neo-nationalist movement are identified, and their objectives and the tactics they use to achieve them are analyzed.

Introduction

Nationalism has been a powerful force in Turkish politics since the founding of the republic. Lately, however, nationalist activists have become unusually strident in their rhetoric, coalescing around various radical political platforms to seek the ouster of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) regime, either through the ballot box or by violent means. This study considers the psychological and theoretical bases of Turkish nationalism and analyzes why militant nationalism has recently become a more significant political factor. Particular attention will be devoted to a loose collection of extremist organizations and media known as the “ulusalcılar.”

“Ne mutlu Türküm diyene!” (“How fortunate he who calls himself a Turk!”) These four short words, the famous conclusion to Kemal Atatürk’s 1933 speech celebrating the accomplishments of the first ten years of the republic he founded, encapsulate his theory of nationalism: that an individual’s “Turkishness” does not depend on race or blood but on his acceptance of Turkish culture—Turkey’s language, its customs, its historical traditions—in short, in the affirmation...
“Türküm!” “I am a Turk!” Atatürk’s views on nationalism were not original. He and his colleagues relied heavily on the writings of the philosopher Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), who helped promote new pride in Turkish identity based on “an awareness … of Turkish language, folklore, and tradition.” Atatürk believed that Turkey should be governed by a “unitary state” and that the citizens of that state represented but one nation, with only one official language. He did not recognize a separate identity for the Kurds or accept the legitimacy of linguistic and cultural rights for this large ethnic minority. Atatürk’s nationalism extended to the economic sphere. His doctrine of “statism” (devletçilik) held that the state should control the economy on the macro level; he was unsympathetic to foreign investment. He summed up his foreign policy with the slogan “yurta sulh, cihanda sulh” (“peace at home, peace abroad”), a declaration of Turkey’s commitment to neutrality in international affairs, which he believed essential for the rapid development of the infant republic.

Mainstream Nationalism

Today, the Turkish nationalist mainstream is represented by two mass political parties: the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Action Party, MHP) and the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People’s Party, CHP). The MHP is the more conservative of the two, with an ideology that verges on fascism. It argues against any special treatment for Turkey’s ethnic and religious minorities, taken here to include the large heterodox Muslim Alevi community as well as Kurds, Christians, and Jews. Not surprisingly, it strongly opposes Turkey’s bid for membership in the European Union. The MHP believes in the supremacy of the state over the individual, and, correspondingly, its own internal organization is rigidly hierarchical and tightly disciplined. Unlike the rigidly secular CHP, the MHP’s ideology fuses radical nationalism with orthodox Sunni Islam. Popular party slogans read: “Turkishness is our body, Islam our soul” and “As Muslim as Hira Mountain [in Mecca] and as Turk as the Tanri mountains [in Central Asia].”

The MHP’s hardcore popular support probably lies in the 8–9 percent range. However, in the 1999 elections it received enough protest votes—18 percent—to be represented in parliament and become part of the three-party coalition that governed Turkey over the course of the next three years. Unfortunately for the party, its cabinet ministers proved corrupt and incompetent, and in the 2002 elections its vote total fell beneath the 10 percent threshold. In the 2007 election, when the main stream True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi, DYP) and the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi, ANAP) failed to run for the election, the MHP received enough votes to enter into the parliament with 14 percent of the vote. Much of its success in 1999 was due to the moderate image projected by its clever president, Devlet Bahçeli, a former college professor. However, its success in the 2007 election was mainly the outcome of the two mainstream parties’ failure to run for the election.

The CHP is the party that was established by Atatürk after the founding of the Turkish republic. It dominated the Turkish parliament in what amounted to
single-party rule until it was thrown out of office by Adnan Menderes’s Democratic Party in 1950. It has enjoyed significant representation in parliament since then but has never returned to its past glories. Indeed, it failed to breach the 10 percent threshold in 1999, though in 2002 it elected over 150 deputies to become the main opposition party. In the 2007 election, the CHP lost 50 deputies when the MHP and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP) successfully entered parliament.

In contrast to the MHP view that Islam constitutes part of the Turkish consciousness, the CHP adheres uncompromisingly to its founder’s doctrine of secularism (laïcité) and has generally remained faithful to Atatürk’s nationalist beliefs. However, when the European Union, at its December 2004 summit, agreed to allow Turkey to begin accession negotiations, the CHP responded with enthusiasm—in contrast to the congenitally isolationist and anti-foreign MHP. To the CHP, the EU’s favorable decision meant that Turkey had at last achieved the ultimate goal of the Atatürk reform program: Westernization (batılılaşma). Initially, the party supported the far-reaching legislative reforms that the Erdoğan government introduced in order to meet the EU’s “Copenhagen criteria.” This support was offered even though the reforms recognized linguistic and cultural rights for the Kurdish minority, contrary to the Kemalist doctrine of a “unitary state,” and reduced the power and influence of the army—an institution the CHP has always unquestioningly supported—within the executive and judicial branches.

As Europe’s attitude towards Turkey stiffened, however, the CHP decided that its support for the EU’s reform program was a political liability. Since mid-2006, when the party announced that it would not support further reform legislation, the CHP has begun to adopt a more nationalist and isolationist posture towards both Europe and the United States. For example, the CHP’s leader, Deniz Baykal, stated that “nationalism is the cement which holds all of us together.” When the AKP government sought the necessary parliamentary approval to send Turkish troops to Lebanon to participate in the multinational peacekeeping force there, the CHP declared its strong opposition, charging that the deployment would serve Israel and America’s interests more than Turkey’s and would take troops away from where they were most needed: the campaign against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey’s southeast. “Lubnani bırak! PKK’ya bak!” (“Forget Lebanon! Look towards the PKK!”), thundered CHP President Deniz Baykal. (Of course, the party’s argument made little sense, as even normally sympathetic columnists pointed out. The absence of a few hundred soldiers in Lebanon was not going to affect anti-PKK operations. Moreover, an international force led by France—hardly an American protégé—for which other Muslim nations such as Indonesia had already signed up could hardly be expected to serve as an American or Israeli surrogate in the Middle East.)

The CHP’s re-emergent nationalism and Bahçeli’s apparent moderation have led to murmurs in both parties that some sort of collaboration between them might be in order. However, an alliance with the strictly secular CHP could threaten the MHP’s devoutly Muslim base. Also, MHP and CHP partisans, as members of
various youth organizations, fought violent street battles during the periods of turmoil preceding the 1971 and 1980 coups, and the memories of those bloody clashes live on all too vividly.

As nationalist themes have achieved more prominence in Turkish political discourse, a radical new nationalist movement has emerged: the ulusalcılars, or neo-nationalists, whose influence appears to be spreading to the highest levels of state and society. This movement is not an organized group with an established doctrine. Its various components have their philosophical differences. Nevertheless, three fundamental elements in ulusalci thought can be distinguished: uncompromising anti-Westernism; externalization of Islam from Turkish nationalism; and ethnic exclusionism. These elements, as well as social and political background and basic beliefs, will be examined, the leading components of the neo-nationalist movement will be identified, and their objectives and the tactics they used to achieve them will be analyzed.

In order to examine this movement, it is necessary to identify what encapsulates it. On the eve of the EU accession process, the militant nationalist thought system is shaped by the fear of “Sèvres Complex.” Thus, to examine its sociopolitical juncture it is necessary to examine how the “Sèvres Complex” plays a role in shaping ulusalci discourse.

The “Sèvres Complex”

Kemal’s nationalism was forward-looking and optimistic (“ne mutlu” or “how fortunate”), but Turkish nationalism has always had a darker streak. The collapse of the Ottoman armies in World War I brought with it a sense of national inferiority along with grave doubts that Turkey could ever compete intellectually or economically with Europe, doubts that the success of Turkish resistance forces in the 1919–22 War of Independence could not alleviate. The aftereffects of the punitive Treaty of Sèvres (1920), imposed by the allies on an Ottoman government too feeble to resist, remain to this day an insidious psychological factor, undermining Turkey’s trust in other nations and its confidence in its ability to conduct an effective foreign policy, even though the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne rendered most of Sèvres a dead letter. This self-deprecating national mindset is known colloquially as the “Sèvres Complex.”

Although the Sèvres Complex has often given birth to irrational fantasies bordering on paranoia, its genesis lies in a genuine national trauma. The Sèvres treaty parceled out large chunks of the Ottoman Empire to the victorious allies, including much of the territory Turks regard as their homeland. Greece received Eastern Thrace and the area around Izmir; France and Italy were allocated “spheres of influence,” which they later occupied, in southern and southwestern Anatolia, respectively; and an independent Armenian state was to be created in the northeast. Lastly, Kurdish Anatolia was to remain an autonomous area within Ottoman boundaries, but after one year its inhabitants were to be granted the right to request independent status from the League of Nations through a referendum or similar mechanism.
Furthermore, the 1878 Congress of Berlin had left Cyprus technically within the Ottoman Empire while ceding administrative control to the British Crown. Sèvres made Britain the *de jure* sovereign of the island. Cyprus became independent in 1960, as determined by the treaties of Zurich and London. The island was effectively partitioned between a Turkish north and Greek south after the Turkish invasion of 1974.

Four Sèvres-related issues—the Kurds, the Armenian “genocide,” Cyprus, and Kirkuk—are the poisonous fodder that nourishes the Sèvres Complex and the darker side of Turkish nationalism today.

*The Kurdish Issue*

Most Turks, and not only those who consciously define themselves as “nationalist,” are particularly sensitive on the Kurdish question. Any intimation from the West that Turkey’s Kurds should be accorded enhanced linguistic and cultural rights, or, worse yet, partial autonomy, is understood, consciously or unconsciously, to be the first step toward realizing the old imperialist designs to carve up Anatolia.

For instance, during a 1995 visit to Turkey, the French prime minister insisted that Turkey needed to find a political solution to its Kurdish problem. Turkey’s conservative president, Süleyman Demirel, replied sharply, charging that Europeans clearly sought to separate the southeastern provinces from Turkey. Demirel’s phrasing became a standard part of official Turkish rhetoric in responding to European demands on Kurdish issues. Even more liberal Turkish political figures appear to share Demirel’s suspicions that Europe has a secret, Sèvres-like agenda when it comes to Turkey’s majority Kurdish provinces. Their opinions have been reinforced by the policy of some European powers in permitting militant, even pro-PKK, Kurdish-language television stations to broadcast from their soil. In the wake of numerous Turkish protests, such a station (Roj TV) today exists only in Denmark.

Not surprisingly, Turkey’s senior generals have been the most outspoken of Turkey’s elites regarding the EU’s Kurdish policies. In his inaugural address on becoming chief of general staff in August 2006, General Yaşar Büyükakın made several references to the Treaty of Sèvres, concluding: “I do not think there is any power that can compel Turkey to confront the Treaty of Sèvres again.”

*The Impact of the PKK.* Until winter 2006, the Kurdish issue was relatively quiescent, in no small part because the Kurdish terrorist organization, the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party), had declared a ceasefire; Turkish soldiers were not dying as a result of PKK ambushes, and thus Kurdish terrorism was out of the headlines. Yet this changed dramatically in spring 2007, when better fighting weather offered the Kurdish insurgency a greater opportunity to inflict damage. Moreover, most PKK militants have been accorded safe haven across the Turkish–Iraqi border by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. This has aroused Sèvres Complex-based suspicions of the intentions of both the KRG and its American allies.
The existence of the PKK has always kept the Sèvres trauma alive for the Turks. After the PKK was formed, Turks began to hold foreign powers responsible for stirring up the Kurdish issue. Turkish authorities have treated the Kurdish question as an artificially created problem. At critical times, security agencies have tried to identify a foreign connection, be it Syrian, Iranian, Iraqi, Greek, Armenian, US, or European, and this discourse carries over into the public domain. Typically, the prosecutor’s indictment of Abdullah Öcalan held many countries responsible for aiding the PKK in terms of logistical support, training, and weapons supply. Greece, Syria, and Iran are specifically charged with sharing intelligence; Western countries are charged in more general language. These charges are not completely contrived—far from it. Öcalan confessed that the PKK had greater freedom of movement in Western Europe; received military and political training in Greece; and that Armenia offered opportunities to open training camps and to function as a bridge to extend PKK activities to other former Soviet republics.

As for the United States, while Washington early on declared the PKK a terrorist organization, the Turkish media and some security bureaucrats have always doubted US intentions towards the Kurds in general and the PKK in particular. Nihal Ali Ozcan claims that the United States uses the PKK for its own strategic purposes. While Washington wants to maintain a productive relationship with Turkey, he argues, it seeks to keep the Kurdish debate alive to hold Turkey in check. The reluctance of the United States to take meaningful action against the PKK has led some Turkish terrorism experts and bureaucrats to conclude that the United States is in fact supporting the PKK.

The Turkish public came to this conclusion independently after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent American tolerance of PKK presence in northern Iraq. This is perhaps the major factor in widespread anti-Americanism found in Turkey today. Several factors contributed to the sudden rise in Turkish–US tensions over this issue. On the eve of the Iraq War, a US delegation offered Turkey a deal that would have permitted Turkish troops to be deployed in northern Iraq to counter the PKK’s terrorist activities, but without the right to use weapons except in self-defense. Shortly thereafter, in March 2003, the Turkish parliament rejected the US request to use Turkish territory as a launching pad for its invasion of Iraq, doubtless the major factor precipitating a rapid downturn in Turkish–US relations.

In fall 2007, the Turkish government charged, and the Pentagon admitted, that American weapons were now in the hands of the PKK. (Prime Minister Erdoğan even claimed that the PKK was in possession of American tanks, which seems highly unlikely.) While it is likely this material reached Kurdish terrorists through theft, smuggling, or illegal weapons sales by GI’s or military contractors, it is not surprising that their discovery in the hands of Kurdish terrorists has led to deeper suspicions of US support for the PKK. Some would attribute this to Washington’s intentions to use the PKK and its Iranian Kurdish clone, the PJAK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan), in operations against Iran. Such allegations, true or false, inevitably drag consideration of Turkish–US relations into the framework of the “Sèvres
The Armenian Issue

In accordance with Article 147 of the Sèvres treaty, Woodrow Wilson drew the boundaries of the new Armenia so as to extend deeply into largely Muslim areas in southeastern Anatolia, even including territory with a majority Kurdish population. In the Turkish mind, demands by many Western statesmen that Turkey recognize the “Armenian genocide” are linked to Wilson’s plan to carve a large Christian Armenian state out of Muslim territory. Moreover, Western promotion of Armenian claims, to many Turks, seems to be an effort to disrupt Turkey’s development as a major conduit for Central Asian fossil fuels. Important new pipelines, such as Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (oil) and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (natural gas), which are expected to carry not only Azeri but also Kazakh and conceivably even Turkmen product, currently bypass Armenia because of its occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, legally the territory of Turkey’s ally, Azerbaijan. The Armenian lobby has campaigned against Western oil companies’ support of these pipelines, to no avail. On the other hand, responding to the lobby’s pressures, the US Congress recently vetoed any ExIm Bank funding of a new railway that similarly will connect Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia but bypass Armenia, adding fuel to Turkish nationalist fires.

Cyprus

Although Atatürk assembled a relatively strong army to defeat the Greeks in the 1920s, Republican Turkey, in its early years, could not claim a world-class military to match its Ottoman forebears, either in status or in prestige. Until the Cyprus operation of the Turkish military, this was a source of social trauma—Turks felt so weak themselves because they did not have a world-class military like they did during the Ottoman period. This sense of military inferiority was overcome in no small part by the successful amphibious operation that secured northern Cyprus for the Turkish inhabitants of the island in 1974 and established the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC) in 1984. Moreover, in the immediate post-World War I period, Turkey had been compelled to absorb numerous Muslim refugees fleeing areas occupied by the allied armies. In Cyprus, however, it seemed as if the tables were turned, when, in 1974, ethnic Greeks resident in the north were forced to flee southward. Moreover, the Turkish invasion had defended the local Turkish population against a potential Greek takeover of the entire island, which might well have led to suppression of the island’s Turkish inhabitants.

For the first time since the collapse of Ottoman Empire, because of the Cyprus operation of the Turkish military, Turkish society was able to get rid of the ashamed feeling of collapsed empire. With this operation, the Turkish military for the first
time faced its enemy and defeated it. The symbolic meaning of the Cyprus operation was so profound in the Turkish subconsciousness. Turkish society perceived this operation as the first time that instead of being passive and welcoming other uprooted Turk-descended refugees to Anatolia, the Turkish military’s active role made it possible to save Turkish descendants no matter where they lived. Because of its healing effects on the social trauma, the Cyprus operation was perceived as a “conquest.” Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit was heralded as a conqueror, and “Kıbrıs gazisi” (hero of Cyprus) became a term of sacred honor and respect accorded to all who had fought in the campaign. For Turks, the TRNC is sacred soil, and the Cyprus issue is a “matter of national honor.”

Turkey recognizes the TRNC as sovereign over the entire island, but the rest of the world considers the Nicosia regime to be the only legitimate government on Cyprus and regards the Turkish north as occupied territory. In the past, the international community made numerous efforts to resolve the Cyprus problem, but Rauf Denktaş, until April 2005 the TRNC’s long-time, hardline president, rejected them all. After Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became Turkey’s prime minister in 2003, he pledged to seek a solution to the Cyprus issue. Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan offered a plan to unite the island while providing substantial autonomy to the Turkish community. In a referendum in early 2004, 64 percent of Turkish Cypriot voters endorsed the Annan Plan, but the Greek Cypriot tally was 70 percent against. Shortly thereafter, on May 1, the Republic of Cyprus—that is, the internationally recognized ethnic Greek regime in the south—was admitted into the European Union. Thus, the Nicosia regime enjoys a veto as far as the future of the TRNC—and of Turkey—within the EU is concerned.

Because the TRNC is not internationally recognized, it suffers from a de facto trade embargo. Most of its import–export business must be conducted through Turkey; also, its lone international airport can only serve flights from Turkey, preventing the development of what ought to be a flourishing tourism industry. The European Union has pledged efforts to end the isolation of the north, but none have materialized to date. Meanwhile, Turkey, which does not recognize the Nicosia regime, refuses to open its harbors and airports to Cypriot carriers. In response, the EU has partially suspended Turkish accession negotiations.

Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül have offered various compromise formulas, all proposing that some Turkish ports be opened to the Cypriots in exchange for the EU permitting international access to a similarly limited number of Turkish harbors, but the EU has rejected all of Turkey’s efforts to negotiate an agreement on this critical matter. Many Turks, not unreasonably, conclude that certain EU countries are quite happy that Cypriot obduracy is delaying, perhaps indefinitely, Turkish accession. Furthermore, the EU’s lack of sensitivity for Turkish concerns over Cyprus seems to Turks to be just one aspect of a general European posture of condescension towards Muslims.

Meanwhile, opposition politicians charge that Erdoğan and Gül, by offering to open certain ports to Cypriot shipping, have tacitly recognized the Cypriot government, thus compromising Turkey’s negotiating position regarding the TRNC,
and—though it seems to be a stretch—implicitly accepting “Enosis,” the union of Cyprus with Greece, a heavily freighted word in nationalist vocabulary.

While some opposition politicians would be satisfied if the Cyprus issue were to be negotiated within a United Nations context, where Turkish interests would presumably be treated on an equal footing, neo-nationalists advocate rigidly standing by the status quo. Rauf Denktaş, now a regular columnist for the ulusalci daily Yeni Çağ, characterizes Cyprus as a “national struggle” and therefore not a proper matter for negotiation. In language similar to that employed by General Buyukanit, Denktas links the Cyprus issue directly to the Treaty of Sèvres. Those nations who were initially unable to implement the treaty, he charges, are dictating EU policies on Cyprus as a means of finally attaining the treaty’s objectives.22

**Kirkuk**

Assumed imperialist designs on regional oil supplies also exacerbate the Kurdish issue. The Treaty of Lausanne, though a decided improvement on Sèvres, placed Iraq’s oil-bearing regions of Mosul and Kirkuk under British control in return for a modest cash payment. However, Turks regarded these areas as integral parts of their national homeland, as defined in the 1920 National Pact (Misak-ı-Milli), which established the territorial principles on which the War of Independence had been fought. The conflict in Iraq has had the side effect of reviving Turkish interest in Kirkuk by arousing concern that the Iraqi Kurds, supported by their American allies, will in time forcibly integrate Kirkuk and its oil fields into an independent Kurdish regime.23 A deep concern for many Turks is a possible ethnic cleansing towards Turkmen in this city. They are afraid of facing their historical trauma once again, accepting Ottoman remnants as refugees into Anatolia. What makes Turkey’s involvement in the Kirkuk issue look unavoidable is this social trauma that Turkish society has suffered since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in order to avoid social pressure, it is very likely that Turkish governments will intervene in the Kirkuk issue, as Turkey intervened in the Cyprus crisis in 1974.24

**Why Has Ulusalçılık Blossomed into Such a Potent Political Force Today?**

*The Impact of the AKP Government*

If national resentment over these four “Sèvres” issues—the Kurds, the Armenian “genocide,” Cyprus, and Kirkuk—has been an element the Turkish political consciousness for decades, why has it blossomed into such a potent political force today?

The fundamental causes were, first, the overwhelming victory of the Justice and Development Party in the 2002 general elections, which enabled the AKP to establish a single-party government; and second, the AKP government’s implementation of the fast-forward reformation process towards membership in the European Union.
Turkey’s state elites—the civil service, the judiciary, and the military—are rigidly secular. They have never trusted Erdoğan and believe that he and the AKP have a “secret agenda” to introduce elements of Shari’a into Turkey’s legal and constitutional system. Erdoğan has insisted that the AKP is a “conservative democratic,” not an Islamist, party (as were its predecessor organizations), and that for him the separation of mosque and state is a basic operating principle; however, the elites remain unconvinced. Erdoğan has reinforced their misgivings by promoting certain Islamist projects, such as facilitating the entry of clerical high school graduates to institutions of higher learning. Yet elitist discontent lies more in Erdoğan’s appointment of individuals loyal to the AKP to senior bureaucratic posts, occupied throughout Republican history by the secular establishment. Also, to meet the European Union’s Copenhagen criteria, AKP legislation has reduced the military’s influence in the National Security Council and eliminated military membership in the security courts and the Higher Education Council. Hence, the disempowered civilian secular elite view the military as allies in the struggle against Erdoğan and his presumed Islamist program.

Furthermore, the AKP’s liberal economic policies have created a thriving private sector and stimulated increased foreign investment. Nationalists accuse the AKP (as they did earlier governments led by Turgut Özal) of reviving the “capitulations” the West imposed on the Ottoman Empire and violating Atatürk’s principle of statism.

Distrust of Erdoğan on secular versus Islamist grounds is a religious rather than a nationalist matter. However, many—though not all—declared Turkish nationalists are also committed secularists. Antipathy towards the allegedly Islamist Erdoğan therefore encourages them to attack the prime minister’s policies ever more vigorously where nationalist causes are involved. These include not only his perceived concessions to the European Union but his efforts to restore good relations with the United States as well.

The Impact of the EU Accession Process

Turkish nationalists came late to an understanding that the EU accession process involved the sacrifice of much of their status and ideology. To qualify Turkey for EU membership, the AKP regime, taking advantage of their overwhelming majority in parliament, swiftly passed a broad series of major reform measures. Many of these enhanced individual freedoms and thus implicitly threatened the authority of the powerful state bureaucracy, which had for so long served as the power base of secular nationalism. That the reform legislation was being promoted by a political party with an agenda far different from their own was further cause for alarm. However, the bureaucracy has taken its revenge by moving very slowly, if at all, to develop the regulations and other measures needed to implement the reforms. Because of this, the EU has complained frequently over Turkey’s failures in the area of implementation. The AKP has also passed reforms that limit the military’s role in making security and education policy, as well as its participation in the notorious security courts. This also concerns the bureaucracy, which considers the military its close ally.
What Makes the Ulusalçı Movement Different from Mainstream Turkish Nationalism?

Anti-Western Discourse in Ulusalçılık

If orthodox nationalists have adopted anti-European and anti-American positions on foreign policy issues, Turkey’s neo-nationalists absolutely reject Westernization as an operating principle. Achieving “honorable and equal status in the world society of nations” requires shunning all formal association—political, military, or economic—with the Western world, not merely the EU and the “strategic partnership” with the United States. Western civilization pollutes true Turkish language and culture. Thus: “The process of cleaning out and enriching the Turkish language can save us from Cultural Imperialism.”

A review of ulusalçı manifestos and policy statements reveals a common “Turkey for the Turks” theme. Turkish natural resources must belong to the citizens of Turkey, not to foreign capitalists. “Globalization” is a particularly ugly word in the neo-nationalist vocabulary.

Nineteenth century Ottoman modernizers such as Namık Kemal and Ahmet Mithat had argued in favor of modernizing the empire through fusing the spiritual virtues of Islamic culture with the science and technology of the West. Since the earliest days of Turkey’s Westernization project, the Turkish educational system has burdened the Turkish psyche with the difficult task of achieving a balance between Western civilization and Turkish culture. Rejecting this balance, Professor Suna Kili of Boğaziçi University and the Atatürkçü Düşünce Derneği (Atatürkist Thought Society, ADD)—a neo-nationalist association—asserts that the foundation of “Atatürkist thought” is not Westernization but to learn “who we Turks are,” “to once again embrace our basic culture.” “The ADD prioritizes the long-forgotten Anatolian man.”

More strident neo-nationalists, such as Uludağ University President Mustafa Yurtkuran, insist that “Atatürk always opposed Western civilization,” an arguable proposition.

Neo-nationalist publicists seek to exploit the “Sèvres Complex” to galvanize anti-Western sentiment. For example, in winter 2001 the ulusalçı youth journal İleri 2000 republished anti-Turkish articles that originally appeared in the Western media in 1918 and the years immediately thereafter, such as an op-ed piece by M.M. Housepian in the November 3, 1918 New York Times that contended that:

Turks have been occupying this abundant land [Ottoman territories from the Balkans to Jerusalem] for 500 years … but brought only massacre and destruction … It would be wrong to help these barbarians … It is time to bring an end to the Turkish chapter in world politics.

Another New York Times article in this series referred to the “historical responsibility for Christian nations to establish Christian states in Anatolia.” In this context, the EU process is considered to be one of the deliberate policies of the West to keep Turkey out of Turkic world. According to Altemur Kılıç, a prominent ulusalçı intellectual, that means that the Western countries would never give Turkey
a chance to be a leader state. The West, the ulusalçı Yeni Çağ further argues, had planned these policies a long time ago to divide Turkey by using the Kurdish question during the EU accession process.

Externalization of Islam

Although the nationalism adopted by the founders of the Turkish Republic had a distinctly secular tone, it internalized Islam as a psychological glue to ensure that ethnically different populations within the boundaries of the new Turkey remained united. Republican elites did not allow such ethnically similar groups as the Gagavuz Turks to migrate into Anatolia because they were Christian, but non-Turkish Sunni Muslim communities—Bosnians and Bulgarians, for example—received permission to immigrate as former citizens of the Ottoman Empire. Bernard Lewis suggests that the famous population exchange with Greece was really “no repatriation at all, but two deportations into exile: of Christian Turks to Greece; and of Muslim Greeks to Turkey.” The establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), which institutionalized moderate Islam within the Republican order, is another example of how Islam has been used as an internal part of Turkish identity.

A prominent Kurdish intellectual, Tarık Ziya Ekinci, argues that traditional Turkish nationalists believe in a Turkish–Islamic synthesis. They prioritize symbols of Turkish nationalism and the Turkish race and accord secondary importance to Atatürkism and secularism. They oppose leftist ideologies, broad applications of democracy, and minority rights whenever the homogeneity of Turkish nationalism might be threatened. Neo-nationalists, Ekinci continues, in order to establish a bond with the military, emphasize Kemalism and secularism and thereby distinguish ulusalçılık from milliyetçilik. Not surprisingly, a milliyetçi spokesman, the MHP’s Aydın Yesilyurt, condemns ulusalçılık ideology as “artificial.” True Turkish nationalism, he contends, in keeping with MHP principles involves both “a sense of Turkishness and a vision of Islam.” The neo-nationalists, Yeşilyurt comments, use the very narrowness of their approach to subvert genuine nationalist doctrine.

In their propaganda, ulusalçılıar portray the AKP regime as a serious threat to Turkish secularism. Like many other Turkish nationalists, they question the sincerity of Prime Minister Erdoğan when he claims that the AKP has redefined its identity, rejecting its Islamist past in favor of “conservative democracy.” What distinguishes the neo-nationalists in this respect is their virulent hatred of the prime minister. For example, a prominent spokesman, Tuncay Özcan, owner of the ulusalçı TV channel Kanalturk, publicly charged Erdoğan with running a “democracy of murderers” and a “regime of thieves.” Not surprisingly, Erdoğan is suing him for moral damages.

Also, while military chiefs and other nationalists have fundamentalist Islam in mind when they warn of the dangers of irtica (religious reaction), neo-nationalists identify moderate Islamists, such as groups that follow the teachings of Said-i Nursi or Fethullah Gülen, as a more dangerous threat, in part because their very moderation
makes them useful to “Western imperialists” bent on subverting Turkey’s secular order. In retaliation, Zaman, a large-circulation Istanbul daily funded by Gülen supporters, has begun to publish articles exposing factionalism and alleged corruption in neo-nationalist organizations.41

Anti-Americanism

Most Turks opposed the American invasion of Iraq. Washington’s inability to explain its motives effectively confirmed their misgivings, which were further reinforced when neoconservative spokesmen such as Richard Perle began to advocate military action against two other countries sharing a border with Turkey, Iran and Syria.42 Turks foresaw the United States generating chaos in their immediate neighborhood with little consideration for Turkish interests. The Turkish intelligentsia regarded American ambitions to bring democracy to the Arab world, the so-called Greater Middle East Policy, as delusional and resented the suggestion by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and others that Turkey’s “Muslim democracy” could somehow serve as a model for the Arab world.43 Even Erdoğan bristled at the suggestion that Turkey’s democracy was somehow “Muslim” and not Western and secular. The Bush Administration’s uncritical support of Israel against the Muslim Palestinians and Muslim Hizballah further undermined US prestige in Turkey.

However, it is America’s behavior in post-invasion Iraq that has most offended Turkish public opinion and stimulated the sort of xenophobic reaction associated with the Sèvres Complex.44 The PKK, battered by intensive Turkish military operations in Turkey’s southeastern provinces, has taken refuge in the Kandil mountain area across the border in northern Iraq. The Kurdish terrorist group no longer poses a critical threat to Turkish security, but it can easily penetrate the mountainous Iraqi–Turkish border region to carry out deadly hit-and-run actions against Turkish military personnel and installations.

Turkey expected the American military in Iraq to tackle the PKK problem. After all, Ankara reasoned, the US officially lists the PKK as a terrorist organization and is ostensibly engaged in a “global war on terror.”45 However, US forces in Iraq have been unable or unwilling to take on this responsibility: unable because they are stretched too thin; unwilling because an American intrusion into Iraqi Kurdistan for an extended military campaign against a well-dug-in insurgency could create unforeseeable complications in the one area of Iraq that remains relatively secure and peaceful. To assuage Turkish sensitivities, in August 2006, Joseph Ralston, a retired general in the US Air Force, was appointed US special envoy for anti-PKK operations. American authorities have credited the Ralston mission with the January 2007 raid by US and Iraqi forces on the refugee camp at Mahmur in northern Iraq, a notorious PKK hangout. However, no PKK cadres, “not even one bullet,” were found—clear evidence that Iraqi or Kurdish Regional Government officials had provided the PKK with advance warning of the raid and allowed them to clear out beforehand.46 Thus, if Ralston has accomplished anything, the world remains uninformed.
US inaction, and the unproductive Ralston mission, which to most Turks seems more like deliberate delay attempts with each passing day, have aroused Turkish suspicions that Washington has plans to use the PKK for its own strategic purposes. The PKK collaborates closely with its counterpart in Iran, the PJAK. Is it not obvious, Turkish commentators conclude, that America expects to employ this experienced insurgent force as part of a general effort to destabilize the government of the mullahs in Tehran?\(^{47}\) Worse yet, the close collaboration between the Americans in Iraq and the KRG enhances Turkish suspicions that the United States backs an independent Kurdish state in Iraq, an independence that might include Kurdish majority areas in eastern Turkey. The military buildup on the Iraqi border has aroused expectations from the United States, yet Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan’s visit to Washington did not produce any result towards a massive military operation into northern Iraq. Instead, the United States offered to initiate “on-time intelligence sharing” for a small tactical operation against the PKK militants, which does not satisfy the ulusalcı circles. Yeni Çağ harshly criticized Erdoğan for not invading northern Iraq.\(^{48}\) In short, it is Sèvres all over again.

In fact, in the notorious bestselling 2005 Turkish novel *Metal Storm*, later made into an enormously successful motion picture, US forces plot to partition Turkey between Greece and Armenia and to allow a Kurdish state to come into being under a project coyly titled “Operation Sèvres.”\(^{49}\) Similarly, an allegedly official US military map of the Middle East showing an enormous “Free Kurdistan” that includes 17 provinces in southeastern and eastern Anatolia elicited widespread outrage when it was disseminated in leaflet form throughout Turkey by the Atatürkist Thought Society in 2006. The map is the product of the fevered imagination of a retired US Army lieutenant colonel who contributes columns to the *Armed Forces Journal*. Many sophisticated Turks who should have known better—retired generals and senior opposition politicians, for example—unhesitatingly accepted the map as an official US document.\(^{50}\)

Given increasing anti-Americanism in Turkey, it is no surprise that Erdoğan’s efforts to improve relations with Washington have added to nationalist suspicions of his motives. He made an apparent tactical error by supporting the Greater Middle East Project, which, in the nationalist view, implies that he endorses Kurdish independence, however outlandish that may seem.

*Kurds as American Proxies*

For neo-nationalists, the Kurds, whether in Turkey or Iraq, are agents of American imperialism. Therefore, the usual formulae offered to “solve” the Kurdish problem are without foundation. Trying to negotiate with Iraqi Kurdish leaders or granting a degree of autonomy to Turkish Kurds, for example, would be fruitless. Instead, ulusalcı spokesmen such as Türk Solu editorialist Gökçe Fırat argue in favor of Atatürk’s policy of denying recognition to Turkey’s Kurds as a separate ethnic group under the slogan of the “unitary state”: “one language, one nation, one flag.”\(^{51}\)
The concept of the Kurds as US proxies resonates well among a Turkish public alienated by the American invasion of Iraq and its aftermath and by the apparent favoritism shown by American authorities to the Iraqi Kurds. The success of *Metal Storm* and the easy acceptance of the “Free Kurdistan” map bear witness to widespread Turkish suspicion of American intentions.

**Anti-Semitism**

Inevitably, the Bush Administration’s unstinting support of Israel has led fringe media commentators, including some *ulusalcı* outlets, to charge that the US government is “in the hands of the Jews,” and therefore, they suggest, Erdoğan, as a handmaiden of US policy in the Middle East, is also an agent of Zionism. The December 21, 2006 issue of the neo-nationalist daily *Yeni Çağ*, for example, reported on its front page that Erdoğan and his close advisor, Cüneyt Zapsu, during a visit to New York had held a “private consultation with the ‘Jews’” (a reference to Henry Kissinger and Richard Holbrooke), from which they emerged “very pleased.”

**Who are the Ulusalcılar?**

**Organizations**

As stated, the neo-nationalists have no political party or overarching command structure, but there are a number of activist organizations that can be identified as *ulusalcı* based on their members’ shared acceptance of the movement’s principles.

Activist neo-nationalist organizations include the purposefully named Kuvaiye Milliye Hareketi (Nationalist Forces Movement) and the Vatansever Kuvvetler Güç Birliği Hareketi (Patriotic Forces United Movement, VKGB). The VKGB, led by senior retired military officers, claims more than 100 branches in 46 cities and towns. Better known are the Büyük Hubukçular Birliği (Great Union of Jurists) and its leader, Kemal Kerinçsiz. It is Kerinçsiz and his organization that have been responsible for numerous lawsuits brought under the notorious Article 301 against Turkish intellectuals and writers—most famously, the Nobel prize-winner Orhan Pamuk and the journalist of Armenian origin, Hrant Dink, for “insulting Turkishness.”

The ADD has sought preeminence in the movement on doctrinal and ideological matters. Its roster of founders includes an impressive number of professors, and it claims a nationwide membership of 4,852. However, some ADD factions are dissatisfied with the policies of its current president, former gendarmerie commander Sener Eruygur (see below). Generally, rivalries and doctrinal differences within and among other neo-nationalist organizations may stand in the way of the movement’s achieving cohesion in the near future.

Certain nongovernmental organizations with economic connections to the traditional secularist bureaucracy, such as the Turkish Drivers and Automotive Owners Association, have joined the *ulusalcı* camp, along with several trade unions, most
notably the large Devrimci İşçi Sendikalari Kurumu (Confederation of Revolutionary Labor Unions), formed in 1967 by various unions who found the policies of the national confederation TURK-IS insufficiently Marxist for their taste.

Moreover, each branch of the military has a “Cultural Foundation” (Şavaş Kültür Vakfı Kurumu) run largely by retired officers, which, if not definitively ulusalcı, actively promotes Atatürkist values. Also, while generally avoiding political activity, OYAK (Ordu Yardımlaşıma Kurumu), the giant, highly profitable retired officers pension fund, occasionally “plays the ulusalcı card” to acquire Turkish firms destined to be purchased by a foreign company—such as the Erdemir steel factory—at very low cost.

The Ulusalcı Underground. Turkish neo-nationalists have their own underground network involving both active and retired military officers, significant elements of which were exposed in a series of startling revelations in mid-2006. Police investigations into the May 17, 2006 murder of a Daniştay (court of appeals) judge revealed that the murderer had been under the control of a neo-nationalist group of retired military personnel and that the shooting was probably a “black” operation intended to look like the work of religious reactionaries. Another series of arrests revealed the existence of the Atabeyler Gang, composed largely of low-ranking active special forces officers who possessed diagrams apparently intended to support assassination attempts against Erdoğan and his chief advisor, Zapsu. More worrisome, a third clandestine outfit neutralized by the police, the Sauna Gang, which specialized in blackmail and extortion, included both ulusalcı military and ex-military personnel and members of the Turkish mafia. On the eve of the general election, the police launched a criminal investigation against the ulusalcı associations and arrested tens of ulusalcı gang members with large stockpiles of weapons.

The Hrant Dink Assassination. Ulusalcı provided the ideological context for the January 19, 2007 assassination of Armenian newspaper editor Hrant Dink; the lawsuit against Dink, brought under Article 301 by Kemal Kerinçsiz, head of the neo-nationalist Istanbul Lawyers Union, had made him a likely target of extremist violence. It appears the 17-year-old assassin, Ögün Samast, was merely a member of a small gang of adolescents who had gathered around a braggart with vague but strongly expressed extremist and xenophobic views. His crime seems more of a rite of passage to establish his masculine credentials—akin to a drive-by shooting—than an act with broader political implications. Some believe this small, apparently independent gang is representative of a new and nasty phenomenon. “They call themselves nationalist, ulusalcı, or anti-imperialist; find their like-minded friends through the internet; and select their targets. These people are horizontally organized, loosely connected, and more secretive than the traditional terror organization.” Dink received death threats from notorious neo-nationalist bullies such as retired Colonel Veli Küçük, who allegedly is the leader of these ulusalcı mafia rings, but there is no evidence that links these unsavory elements to his murder.
Nationalist and ulusalçı commentators have engaged in a shameless campaign to gain propaganda capital from this heinous crime. Various columnists, even Fetih Çekirge of the mainstream Hürriyet, have hinted darkly at the involvement of Western intelligence services. Several saw the motivation for the assassination in the likelihood that it would smooth the passage of the Armenian “genocide” resolution through the US Congress, and Tercüman newspaper actually claimed that Samast was an ethnic Armenian. Inevitably, some, including senior spokesmen of the MHP, explicitly blamed the CIA, Mossad, or both. Meanwhile, Güler Kömürçü of the Istanbul daily Akşam, a nationalist columnist with an established reputation for uncovering elaborate conspiracies on the basis of minimal evidence, linked the location of Samast’s gang in his native Trabzon to a certain “US Black Sea Project.” This project, Kömürçü alleged, is intended to project American influence in areas east of Turkey and involves, as a key element, securing Trabzon as an American base.

Of the leading ulusalçılar, only the man most responsible for this dreadful affair, Kemal Kerinçsiz, showed any contrition, condemning in a public statement shortly after the crime the use of violence to achieve political ends. Ulusalçı bellwether Türk Solu, however, in its editorial written by Gökçe Fırat, placed the conspiracy closer to home, describing Dink’s assassination as a propaganda ploy by Turkey’s “Kurdish-Islamist fascist dictatorship” to maintain itself in power. Fırat, demonstrating the ability to harbor two contradictory opinions at the same time, is also cheered by the assassination. “Turkey has lost an enemy!” he advises his readers, with evident happiness.

In September 2007, a well-known neo-nationalist poet, Ozan Arif, and a well-known singer, Ismail Tururt, came together and composed a song that is dedicated to the murderers of Mr. Dink. As soon as the video clip of the song was broadcast through YouTube, it sparked a national controversy.

However, there is good news as well. The immense funeral procession in Istanbul reflected the often unexpressed ethnic and religious tolerance of the preponderance of Turkish citizens and should have made an impression on policymakers. Senior media commentators have broadly condemned efforts to charge external forces with the crime; and Erdoğan’s aide Ömer Çelik went so far as to charge that Dink’s murder was “a consequence of pop-fascism.” Kerinçsiz’s implied apology may signal at least a temporary halt in the pernicious Article 301 lawsuits, and pressure seems to be building to revise or repel this unfortunate law. Unhappily, Erdoğan has, rather timidly, confirmed that he will not seek the law’s repeal but is “open to all suggestions for change.” However, in a late January 2007 speech, he called for action to put an end to the “deep state,” that murky coalition between elements of the security services, the military, and ulusalçı activists to take the law into their own hands against “enemies of the republic.” Sadly, this will take more doing than the repeal or amendment of Article 301.

Media

The neo-nationalists boast an impressive array of media outlets. They control one daily newspaper, Yeni Çağ; several periodicals, among them the bi-weekly Türk
Solu and its youth magazine, İleri; Yeni Hayat; Türkeli, a publication of the VKGB; and the weekly Aydınlık, the mouthpiece of the Türk İşçi Partisi (Turkish Labor Party) and its venerable Marxist leader Doğu Perinçek, who has lately reinvented himself as a staunch Kemalist. There are two neo-nationalist television channels: Kanalturk and Mesaj TV. (It is interesting that leaders of the ostensibly Marxist DİSK and Turkish Labor Party can so easily identify themselves with extreme Turkish nationalism. It seems clear that the arbitrary dogmas of fundamentalist Atatürkism, as preached by the neo-nationalists, are easily accepted by activists trained in authoritarian Marxism.)

Additionally, the Istanbul daily Cumhuriyet, favored by the older Atatürkist intelligentsia, frequently voices ulusalcı themes. Cumhuriyet was once the most respected newspaper in the country, but through its venomous attacks against AKP leaders and their policies, it has lost any claim to objectivity. Additionally, several mainstream newspapers carry the columns of ulusalcı pundits alongside more orthodox commentators—among them Emin Çolaşan (a former columnist at Hürriyet) and Melih Aşık (of Milliyet). (Yeni Çağ’s lead columnist is the popular hardline nationalist and former president of the TRNC, Rauf Denktaş.)

Objectives and Tactics

Programmatic neo-nationalist documents state the movement’s objectives, but in generalities at best. The ulusalcılar apparently see no need to describe the specific policies they might seek to implement should they achieve positions of influence or power. Their goals are phrased in such vague phrases as: free Turkey from imperialist occupation; ensure that local entrepreneurs work for the national benefit, not personal profit; establish a unitary state; create modern Turkish values and substitute them for the standards of Western civilization; free Turkey from international relationships that merely legalize economic colonialism; enforce laicism; and create social equality, particularly for women. Neo-nationalist literature often descends into mere rant. For example, Türk Solu’s manifesto, in a mere two single-spaced pages, uses the words “imperialism” or “anti-imperialism” 49 times, with sprinklings of “capitalism” and “colonialism” added.

To realize these goals, neo-nationalists believe they must remove Prime Minister Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party from power. Thereafter, if fortune smiles, events will simply play out in their favor. How Erdoğan’s removal is to be achieved is an issue that divides the ulusalcılar roughly into two camps: the core militants, who advocate military intervention, and those more on the periphery of the movement who prefer democratic means. For both fractions of the Ulusalcis, the key date on the calendar was April 26, 2007. That was the deadline by which Erdoğan had to nominate a presidential candidate. According to Ulusalcis, if Erdoğan ran, the AKP’s parliamentary majority would guarantee him a victory. Presumably, APK second-in-command Abdullah Gül would replace him as prime minister. This, the ulusalcılar reasoned, would have created a “secularists’ nightmare”: the presidency and the prime ministry both occupied by politicians
sympathetic to Islam. In turn, *ulusalcı* argued, senior military leaders, who inveighed heavily against *irtica* right before the election, should have quickly intervened against the AKP government to install a secular regime.

To pressure Erdoğan into nominating a “secular” candidate to the presidency, *ulusalci* organizations organized a number of demonstrations in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir, in which participation may have reached a total of 1.5 million.

Responding to these massive demonstrations, on April 26, 2007, Erdoğan abandoned his presidential ambitions and instead nominated the AKP’s second-in-command, Abdullah Gül, to be the next president. Gül’s candidacy deeply disappointed the *ulusalcılar*, who had expected that the agitation they had inspired would lead to the selection of a more moderate candidate. One day after the Gül nomination, senior Turkish generals, under the leadership of the *ulusalci* chief of general staff, General Yaşar Büyükanıt, issued an ultimatum over the internet. The ultimatum stated clearly that those who do not adhere to *ulusalci* principles are enemies of Turkey. There was a great similarity between the themes of the ultimatum and those of the mass demonstrations. Unexpectedly, the AKP government responded to the ultimatum promptly and coolly by reminding the generals that they were the servants of the government; shortly thereafter, they made a crucial strategic decision: to set an early date for general elections.

The *ulusalci* militants were ready, if necessary, to speed the process along by sending their shock troops to the street, expecting to provoke a violent reaction from either government or opposition supporters. The assassination of the Dаниstay judge on May 17, 2006, led to mass demonstrations in Ankara, the secularists’ stronghold, two days later, and the “success” of this event must have figured in *ulusalcı* planning. The underground elements that plotted this “black operation” might well be employed again to provoke public disturbances.

However, to prevent such disturbances during the 2007 election campaign, the police, with government support, launched a criminal investigation into the *ulusalci* underground. In raids on underground hideouts they seized large numbers of weapons that had been lifted from military stocks, probably with the connivance of serving officers. In these operations, many underground leaders, a high proportion of whom were retired officers, were arrested. These bold police tactics prevented the underground from terrorizing or otherwise manipulating the election process.

Neo-nationalist militants do not openly and specifically advocate a coup d’etat, but their literature is full of rather obvious hints. For example, the *Türk Solu* manifesto states: “Imperialism, which bases its hegemony on armed force, can only be destroyed by armed force.” Furthermore, the website of the youth magazine İleri 2000 shows a photograph of former Prime Minister Adnan Menderes in the dock following the 1960 coup, with a photograph of Erdoğan superimposed beside him. The caption below reads: “He came like Menderes; he will leave like Menderes.” (Former Prime Minister Menderes was hanged after a trial of dubious legality.) Similarly, the Aydınlik website states: “Whether [Erdoğan] goes to Çankaya [the presidential palace] or he doesn’t, he will be sent to the Supreme Court for the crime
of treason and receive the punishment he deserves.” At a mid-December 2006 meeting of 40 neo-nationalist and like-minded organizations, the ADD president retired. General Şener Eruygur, a former gendarmerie commander, stated: “The occupation of the Presidency by an individual or individuals who have not assimilated Republican values cannot be accepted.” Thereupon several key moderates in his audience quit the meeting. In a press conference the following day, the Turkish Public Employees Union (Kamu-Sen) president, Bircan Akyıldız, accused Eruygur of advocating a repeat of the February 28, 1997 so-called “soft coup,” which forced the Islamist prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan, to resign. Eruygur lamely responded that he was a democrat and had been misunderstood. Former cabinet minister Hasan Celal Güzel, who maintains close relations with active bureaucrats, claimed in the May 23, 2006 issue of Radikal that the ulusalcılar were indeed plotting a “new February 28” and also that they maintained clandestine ties to sympathetic elements in the secular bureaucracy.

Most journalists, politicians, and academics who share ulusalcı views, however, hope to engineer a “regime change” in Turkey through orderly constitutional processes. Initially, some have advocated that opposition deputies should resign from parliament en masse and force an early parliamentary election. Their expectation—realistic or not—was that in an early election the AKP would lose parliamentary seats in sufficient number to make Erdoğan’s election to the presidency unlikely. Yet this proposal, initially supported by a few CHP deputies, was greeted coolly by the leaders of other opposition parties and never seemed to win the favor of CHP Chairman Deniz Baykal. Senior politicians, both from the opposition and the AKP, seemed unsure where the idea had originated, but Radikal’s astute columnist Murat Yetkin placed the blame squarely on the neo-nationalists. Yetkin commented that the strategy would not have worked, as the AKP’s parliamentary majority would merely have refused to ratify the resignations.

In April 2007, a senior public prosecutor claimed that the AKP needed two-thirds of the membership of parliament present to elect the president, a quorum that could not be obtained if the opposition stayed home. However, other constitutional experts laughed this idea out of court, so to speak. Yet the constitutional court under the pressure of the military ultimatum decided that the AKP needed two-thirds of the membership of the parliament present to elect the president. Cumhuriyet’s managing editor İlhan Selcuk, on the other hand, called for opposition forces to unite on a nationalist platform in the parliamentary elections under the leadership of former president Süleyman Demirel.

In the end, most of the ulusalcı projections did not develop the way in which the ulusalcılar wanted. The AKP, despite ulusalcılık expectations, successfully increased its votes by 13 percent, which deeply disappointed the ulusalcı circles. Gül’s presidency and police operation on ulusalcı undergrounds have brought a major crisis to the ulusalcı organizations. However, they are quick in reorganizing their goals, strategies, and motivations. This movement is undergoing a major reorganization process, and it will resurface in Turkish political discourse again.
Potential Leaders for the Neo-nationalist Movement

While, as explained above, the odds against Turkey’s opposition parties forming an electoral coalition seemed high, Sezer indeed seemed to be positioning himself to become the honorary leader of the nationalist, or neo-nationalist, movement in Turkey once he left office. In so doing, he did not hesitate to stretch or even violate the constitutional injunction that the presidency must be a non-partisan office. In this respect, he drew sharp criticism for taking an active role in the debate over sending Turkish troops to Lebanon. Moreover, while CHP President Baykal, as has been described, argued against Turkish participation in the peacekeeping force on (rather flawed) pragmatic grounds, Sezer, on the other hand, opposed the deployment in strict nationalist, Atatürkist terms. Turkey was a great nation, he explained, and would remain great without involving itself in overseas adventures benefiting other nations. In December 2006, Sezer and his wife ostentatiously attended the opening of the new ulusalci TV Channel, Kanalturk. Sezer provoked many liberal Turkish intellectuals when he refrained from congratulating Orhan Pamuk for his Nobel Prize in literature. (Pamuk became an ulusalci bogeyman after seeming to accept the Armenian “genocide” in a press interview.)

Militant neo-nationalists, however, consider Chief of General Staff General Yaşar Büyükanıt the ideal leader for a post-Erdogan Turkey. Many believe that Büyükanıt’s frequent, fiery public warnings about the threat irtica poses to the integrity and security of the Turkish state are veiled attacks against the AKP regime; the ulusalcılar in particular have concluded that Büyükanıt would endorse, if not lead, a military coup, and that the Kemalist officer corps would follow him in good order.

While some believe that the neo-nationalists and CHP leader Baykal share a reciprocal high regard for one another, the preponderance of evidence suggests otherwise. Aydınlık noted, in dark tones, that Baykal’s two-hour meeting with US Ambassador Wilson in mid-December 2006 was private and that no notes were taken. The intention, the article concluded, was to prevent leaks of the nefarious plots Baykal and the American emissary had considered.

Conclusion: Neo-nationalist Ambitions and Miscalculations

The ulusalcılar base their plans on various assumptions that may prove wishful thinking, among them that the government is going to cave in to European pressures on Cyprus, after which it will be easy to mobilize the military, “the Atatürkist youth,” and the intelligentsia in support of a coup d’etat. However, it is evident that the AKP regime has no intention of making serious concessions on Cyprus or on other sensitive issues such as the Kurds, since this would be tantamount to political suicide.

Second, the ulusalcılar may well misread General Büyükanıt’s intentions. The ultimate source of Büyükanıt’s discontent is not Erdogan himself but the limitations the government has placed on military involvement in policymaking in response to EU requirements, as well as the prime minister’s tentative efforts to establish
outreach to Kurdish nationalists in Turkey, from which he has withdrawn. Indeed, on at least two significant occasions Erdoğan and Büyükanıt appeared to be “reading from the same page.” First, the prime minister endorsed the military’s plan to collaborate with Iran in intensified operations against PKK bases in northern Iraq. Second, both leaders obviously supported a December 2006 National Security Council decision to warn the EU that Turkey would suspend accession negotiations if the Union did not change its uncompromising position on Cyprus.

Self-deception on these issues mirrors the general shallowness of neo-nationalist thinking. Atatürk’s statist economic model may have been appropriate for the fledgling Turkish Republic of the 1920s, but national prosperity in later years has depended on freeing up the economy and opening it to foreign participation. Some economists may reasonably argue that foreign direct investment should not include selling major industrial components such as Erdemir to foreign interests, but shutting Turkey’s doors entirely to “global capitalism” could plunge the country into a dismal recession.

Also, the ulusalci claim to reject “Western civilization” but fail to define what they mean by that sweeping assertion. For example, they consistently refer to bringing Turkish society up to “contemporary” standards, but “contemporary” by whose yardstick if not the West’s?

Nevertheless, the neo-nationalist movement constitutes a latent threat to Turkish stability. They have their ideologues and propaganda assets in place and could prove effective proselytizers for radical change in a time of national economic or political crisis, when their audience will be disinclined to fret over gaps and inconsistencies in their arguments. Neo-nationalists seek to mask their shallowness by frequent protestations of their Atatürkist purity. The subtle, dynamic, innovative, and visionary founder of the Turkish Republic must be turning over in his grave.

Unfortunately, Turkey’s political elite have not yet accepted that a democratic system implies that voters will grant power to one’s political opponents about 50 percent of the time. Until they are ready to tolerate opposing views and to compromise on key issues, political instability will frequently prevail, and radical groups such as the neo-nationalists will find ample opportunities to make trouble.

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Notes

1. Milliyetçi is the traditional Turkish word for “nationalist” and is still in frequent use. Ulusalci (pl. ulusalçular) is a modern Turkish synonym. Some Turkish commentators alternately use the English
term “neo-nationalist” and *ulusalçı* to describe the movement under discussion, a practice that will be followed in this essay.


8. The Treaty of Sèvres, Articles 62 and 64.


15. The Turkish negotiator, Ambassador Deniz Bölükbaşi, revealed the negotiations documents to the Turkish media on May 28, 2007, through HaberTurk TV.


25. On May 7, 2004, the parliament passed a law that ended the military member’s position on the Higher Education Council, Law No.5170.


