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Militarism and Military Discourse in the Creation of a Nation: The Example of Turkish Modernization

Ulus İnşasında Militarizm ve Militarist Söylem: Türk Modernleşme Örneği

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Abstract: Nations and nationalisms are, in the modern world, quite a fact. However, the biggest problem for a modern state is to create a nation from its citizens. In order to fulfill this task modern states have used every opportunity and tool. The military is one of these tools. As has its modern counterparts, the Turkish Republic has used its military to indoctrinate its citizens to create a nation. However, the usage of military has never been limited to time, or to the military itself. Both the military and militarist discourse, in modern Turkey, have involved and permeated almost every aspect of social life from the very beginning. This article is not the first attempt to examine the Turkish military and its effects in the country. Nevertheless, the militarist discourse have been studied very little in all its complexity. This study intends to examine militarist discourse and indoctrination processes in Turkey from military, political, educational, and media points of view with the context of modernization.

Keywords: militarism, democracy, Turkey, modernization, politics, nationalism.

Öz: Uluslar ve milliyetçilikler modern dünyada önemli bir olgudur. Ancak modern bir devlet için en büyük sorun vatandaşlarından bir ulus çıkarabilmektir. Bu görevi yerine getirebilmek için modern devletler her türlü fırsatı ve aracı kullanagelmiştir. Ulusal ordular da bu araçlardan biridir. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti devleti de tıpkı diğer modern emsalleri gibi orduyu bir ulus yaratmak için vatandaşlarına bu fikri aşlamak üzere kullanagelmiştir. Binaenaleyh, ordunun kullanımı zamana yahut ordunun kendisiyle sınırlı kalmamıştır. Hem ordu hem de militarist söylem modern Türkiye’de başından beri toplumsal hayatın hemen her alanına sirayet etmiştir. Bu makale Türk ordusunu ve ordunun ülkedeki etkisini ele alan ilk makale değildir, ancak militarist söylem bütün karmaşıklığı içerisinde çok az çalışılmıştır. Bu çalışma Türkiye’deki askeri söylemin ve endoktrinasyon süreçlerini modernleşme bağlamıyla birlikte ordu, siyaset, eğitim ve medya açısından incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: militarizm, demokrasi, Türkiye, modernleşme, siyaset, milliyetçilik.

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Introduction

At the end of the Ottoman Empire political elites had begun employing nationalistic policies in the country. This was a late and desperate response to the new world order after the French Revolution. After the creation of the young republic, these efforts were more systematized. The governing elites, who were mainly former military officials, utilized almost every opportunity to create a modern nation. As the Italian nationalistic figure Massimo d'Azeglio said for Italy, they "have brought Turkey to light," and "now they have to bring the Turks to the light" (Kaya, 2011:122). Since its very inception, the Turkish military and military discourse have been parts of nation building in the new Turkish Republic.

During the last century of Ottoman Empire, modernization efforts had focused primarily on the military. This gave security a priority in the country; however, the exclusionist nature of military discourse led to a catastrophe for the state itself and nations in the Ottoman Empire. Between 1911 and 1922 the country was involved in four major wars (the first and second Balkan wars, World War I, and Independence War), one serious battle (with Italians over Libya), and one "controversial" ethnic clash (referred to in Turkey as the Armenian Issue). After founding the new republic, the military's role has never disappeared from politics. The founding fathers of the young republic were military officials, and although some of them relinquished their military roles and engaged into civil politics, when the new regime felt challenges, they (the former military officers) had been called to duty by the early governments. For example, Kemalettin Sami Pasha had been recalled twice from his post as an ambassador in Berlin to active duty for surpassing Kurdish uprising in 1925 and 1930 (Ihrig, 2014:123).

This use of the military and military discourse is not unprecedented; Turkey is not the only example (see Battistoni and Taylor, 2009; Mann, 2013; Levy and Levy, 2008; Chesterton and Isaenko, 2014; Hale, 2011). Some scholars and intellectuals examined the military's tutelage and militarist discourse from different perspectives such as socio-economical, socio-political, and so on (Kaya, 2011; Jenkins, 2001; Brown, 1989; McFadden, 1985). However, the Turkish military's effect in the nation building process is an area fertile for examination because Turkish nationalism is one of the late examples in the Europe and easy to track. Also, since Turkey did not involve in the World War II, policymakers, the majority of whom were former military-men, in the republican era had a long period of time to implement their nation building policies.

Military discourse, in Turkey in nation building, consists of four aspects. First and foremost, the Turkish Armed Forces, itself, has been used as a tool to indoctrinate Turkish citizens according to the new paradigm. Second, a common education is one of the most typical tools in the world used to accustom the populace of a country to new perspectives. In the Turkish example, military discourse fills a special place in Turkish national education system, from the very beginning to the end of college education. Third, political language in the Turkish environment infuses every citizen with a military perspective. There is almost no way to avoid its influence. And finally, the media has helped to strengthen the militarization process and legitimizes the military's tutelage over the country. In the sections below I will examine both the military and militarist discourse and discuss its effects on the general nation-building process in the conclusion. I use the term militarism in this investigation not merely its attachment to the military institution but as a holistic and inclusive worldview.

Militarist Indoctrination Processes in Turkey

In Turkey, every healthy man has always been legally obliged to serve in the military for a certain period. The duration was originally three years, and it has been reduced by the government gradually. Until 2019, the obligation was six months for college graduates, and fifteen months for non-graduates. In some cases, the military used to choose college graduates, especially doctors and engineers who can be used for their expertise, for one year of service. Since 2019, the duration of military service is six months for everyone.

Young people during their military service are not only educated for possible future military confrontations but also indoctrinated. As Basaran's (2014) article successfully showed us, the Turkish

military has a single-minded dualistic worldview, and this world view has only blacks and whites such as gender. There are only two options, and if others are considered they must be eliminated or, in the best scenario, treated.¹

It is understandable for modern militaries to indoctrinate its citizens according to the paradigm of the state apparatus. Otherwise, it might be impossible to convince people to die for the country. This is not, I think, a phenomenon only for modern militaries but also pre-modern ones. However, what is unique is that this modern militarist discourse extends into and can be felt in every part of social life. In Turkey's context, it is an inevitable fact for the citizens, especially for those who are serving in the military.

Military recruitment plays a major role in indoctrinating citizens with a nationalistic attitude. With common recruitment, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) can reach all male citizens across the country, and during mandatory military service soldiers experience a multi-layered indoctrination process. Regular military training consists of basic repetitive nationalistic slogans, nostalgic/folkloric elements, and some religious discourse as well. In regular basic training, repetition is an important part of indoctrination. Individuals become saturated with these slogans and discourse, but eventually they become accustomed to these patterns and begin thinking accordingly. Additionally, for illiterate soldiers there have been some basic courses (Âli schools - in vulgar Turkish "Ali okulu") that teach reading and writing in order to familiarize soldiers with modern life.² These basic courses also help the military to indoctrinate individuals.

Moreover, the Turkish military has an indoctrination commandership (*Eğitim ve Doktrin Komutanlığı [EDOK] - Education and Doctrine Commandership*) in order to develop indoctrination (as its name implies) strategies not only for soldiers but also for every citizen in the country. Indoctrination processes can include psychological warfare, but primary objective in this case is to indoctrinate the Turkish nation itself.

Militarist Education in Turkey

Turkey's educational system has some serious problems³, but here I will briefly examine the introduction of militarist discourse in the educational system. First and foremost, the educational system in Turkey has been based on citizen's duties to the nation-state, not rights for individuals. The nation-state wants to create obedient masses (Kaya, 2011). This emphasis appears to come from both security concerns and a militarist mindset. Since security is the prime priority of the state, the military and the militarization process of the nation is quite important. The idea of the "armed nation" (Sarıgil, 2013; Hür, 2014) remains paramount in Turkish political environment, and children in primary and secondary (even college youths) have undergone an indoctrination process during their education in accordance with the idea of "armed nation".⁴

In the very first stage of education for young Turkish children, the curriculum has had a "*Vatandaşlık Bilgisi*" (Knowledge of Citizenship) course. This course does not prioritize teaching youngsters their rights as individuals but infuses them with nationalistic duties. Although militarist understandings may not be revealed in full, i.e. militarist discourse is premature in these courses, still these first courses do not present a democratic, individualistic, civics curriculum (Şen, 2018). In high

¹ Ayşegül Altınay's compilation on the topic titled *Vatan, Millet, Kadınlar* (Homeland, Nation, Women, 2016) shows the gendered relations and masculine discourse in depth. Also see: (Selek, 2021).

² The author taught such courses while serving in the Turkish military.

³ Scholars have examined this fertile topic many times. To see a comprehensive example see: Kaplan, Ismail. 1999. *Türkiye'de Milli Eğitim İdeolojisi ve Siyasal Toplumlaşma Üzerindeki Etkisi* (The Ideology of National Education in Turkey and Its Effect on Becoming a Political Society). İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

⁴ It should be noted that since the late Ottoman times, the relations between the Turkish state and Germany was pretty close. Many German officials were served in the modernization of the Turkish military since the late Ottoman Empire until the World War II. The Ottoman Empire joined the World War I alongside with Germany, and many German generals fought in the Ottoman Army, including General Colmar von der Goltz who is the author of the famous book titled *The Nation in Arms* (1887). Hence, the Turks were quite familiar with the notion of armed nation.

school, on the other hand, there is a mandatory *Milli Güvenlik* (National Security) course, which is taught directly by uniformed military officials in the class. This course provides a direct introduction of militarist discourse into the educational system.

One can see a militaristic approach in some other classes too. For example, in the *Beden Eğitimi* (Physical Education) course, children receive some basic regular military training such as parade walking and other military drills, as if they were in a military post. In History classes, the whole curriculum is based on the idea of the Turkish nation. Other issues are taught either in speed (perfunctory), or in relevance to the Turkic world and the land of the Turkish Republic (Kaya, 2011:88-97). For example, the Crusades are taught because the topic relates to some historical Turkish states; such as the Seljuk Empire, or the Hittite civilization's importance comes from its relevance to Anatolia (today's Turkey). This is a very ethnocentric approach to history.

However, the biggest issue, I think, concerns the perception of the history. The Turkish nation is described as the most belligerent nation (Sargil, 2015) in the whole human history in the course books, and the situation is normalized by the authors (Altınay, 2003 - cited by Kaya 2011, p. 178-179). The educational system antagonizes the whole history from a militarist point of view, and imparts this view to the children. The concept of "we and others" leads people to normalize conquests of Turkish history without any objection/criticism, and solidifies this understanding with a yearning for a romanticized "glorious" past.

Furthermore, on national days, students were required and prepared to join parades. This is not a rare phenomenon in modern nation states, but what is unique in Turkish example, these nationalistic parades have been overly militaristic until recent years. Students have been prevented from joining classes, and forced to join parades, preferably in stadiums. Entire parades used to be organized to infuse citizens with nationalistic pride but accompanied by militarist language (Jenkins, 2001; Kaya 2011, ch. 8 - 9; Hür, 2014:275-281). Almost every city has a special day to celebrate its freedom from invasion during World War I and Independence War, and students take a part in these celebrations by giving nationalistic speeches, animating some battle scenes, reading chauvinistic poems related to battles.

Militarist Discourse about and within Politics

Although the Turkish military does not have a continuous direct impact on Turkish politics other than through both domestic and foreign security, officials tend to see themselves as the protector of the Kemalist/laicist (secularist) republic. Until 2013, the military acted as the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Law article 35 indicates:

"The duty of the Turkish Armed Forces is to protect and preserve the Turkish homeland and the Turkish Republic as defined in the constitution."⁵

This article has been used by military coup leaders to legitimize their actions, and by other military officials to pursue the role of the military as an arbitrator of the politics of the country (Jenkins, 1989).

The Turkish military's role in Turkish politics is not limited to military coup d'états only. High-ranked military officials in the strict hierarchal structure tend to involve themselves in politics as an arbitrator of founding principles. During time, the military has developed a unique language in order to warn civilian politicians. In peaks of political discussions in the country, high-ranked military generals have spoken at ceremonial events with a carefully-constructed language in order to reflect the military's bias and to warn civilian politicians. Whenever military officials have felt uneasy about Turkish politics, they have always implemented this signal-language by utilizing both formal and informal warnings. A memorandum to the government from the military (27 April 2007) addressed by General Staff Yaşar

⁵ This article was abolished in 2013.

Büyükanıt can be seen as an example. In his speech, the General Staff explicated the military's disapproval to the policies of the democratically elected government.⁶

"The problem that emerged in the presidential election process is focused on arguments over secularism. Turkish Armed Forces are concerned about the recent situation. ... the Turkish Armed Forces are a party in those arguments, and absolute defender of secularism. Also, the Turkish Armed Forces is definitely opposed to those arguments and negative comments. It will display its attitude and action openly and clearly whenever it is necessary ... Those who are opposed to Great Leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's understanding 'How happy is the one who says I am a Turk' are enemies of the Republic of Turkey and will remain so. The Turkish Armed Forces maintain their sound determination to carry out their duties stemming from laws to protect the unchangeable characteristics of the Republic of Turkey. Their loyalty to this determination is absolute."

Ceremonial speeches have not been the only way. The military has used the media in order to convey their messages by utilizing embedded journalists, and pressed politicians (either face to face, or on phone behind closed doors) in order to influence, or to balance, the political environment. It was quite common for journalists of the mainstream Turkish media to ask generals' opinions on specific issues or, without mentioning officials' names, to convey their messages to the populace as well as to the politicians (Bildirici, 2000).

This is one part of the story. On the other hand, politicians have endorsed and reproduced militarist discourse in Turkish politics as well. Until Turgut Özal's presidency in 1989, for example, his predecessors had always had a military background; preferably the General Staff of the Armed Forces would be elected by the parliament (the only exception was Democrat Party's president Celal Bayar, but he had also had some role both during the independence war and one-party era). The position of General Staff in the military had been seen as the last rung on the ladder before reaching presidency until the 1990s; Özal broke this custom in Turkish politics. However, the military has never given up affecting politics in the country, and for every presidential election in the parliament⁷, officials have always implied their positions to the personality of the future presidents (preferably a secular but from Sunni-Muslim background Turkish candidate), and tried to impose these reserves on politics.

Some political parties have positioned themselves according to military and militarist discourse. From a democratic point of view, this was obviously a shame, but during the cold war, since Turkey's position was vital for NATO, there was no foreign pressure for further democratic progress in the country. Of course, this is not an excuse, but considering the country's political changes over the centuries, the big picture can be seen clearer. During the country's modernization process, governing elites have always needed foreign encouragement for further reforms (Sarigil, 2013). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the political environment has slowly changed; but the country's Kurdish question has restrained Turkey from becoming free from military guardianship.

The Media and Militarism

Of course the militarist engagement of the Turkish media needs a close examination, and I am not able to cover the whole story here. Many works examine the media's effect on Turkish politics (Talu, 2000; Cemal, 2008; Bildirici, 2001), with the Turkish media always playing a unique role in strengthening the military's influence in Turkish politics.

Between two World War, Turkish Republic had been seen as an autocratic state by the Western powers, and in fact Turkey's one party's role has always been questioned as an inspiration to Nazi and Fascist regimes in Germany and Italy respectively (Ihrig, 2014). After World War II, the ruling elites had to make a decision for both the fate of the country, and for themselves as well. As a security state,

⁶ To see a further examination of 2007 military memorandum to the ruling government and the reactions to it see: Türkis, Olric (ed.). 2007. *Örs ve Çekiç: Akbabanın Üç Günü* (Incus and Hammer: Three days of the Condor). Istanbul: Paradigma yayinlari.

⁷ Until 2007 the president of the country would be elected by the parliament. In August 2007, the law that regulates the presidential elections was changed by a referendum, and in 2014 the first president elected by populace took the power.

it was not acceptable to give all the power to the "demos" (populace or civilians). On the surface, there was an electoral system, but in fact it was a controlled hand-over of the power. The military has never trusted to the civil authority, and always been on the alert for any kind of treason. During one-party rule between 1923 and 1945, the media acted as a part of the ruling elite. The most eminent writers of the country were at the service of the ruling party. This role has evolved during the multi-party, or democratic establishment, era; that is to say, the mainstream Turkish media had sided with the militarist clique against Prime Minister Adnan Menderes' Democrat Party (DP) (Harris 1965). After the 1960 military coup d'état, the Turkish military controlled and manipulated the Turkish media (Wuthrich, 2010). The roots of the discourse has stemmed from both Atatürk's, the symbolic figure of the new republic, *Nutuk* (Speech) (1927), and the *Askeri İç Hizmet Kanunu 35. Madde* (35th Article of the Military's Internal Administration Law).

The military has legitimized its interventions by referring to these two sources; the media has made military discourse widespread across the country, and the populace has been indoctrinated. One of the most popular novelists and intellectuals of the country, Yaşar Kemal, who also has worldwide popularity, conducted interviews (Milliyet Daily, Interviews with the members of Turkey's National Unity, June, 11-15 1960) with some military officials after the first military coup d'état of the Republican era, and depicted them as heroes and saviors of the country (Oğur, 2015). The head of the Press Council, Oktay Ekşi, wrote an article (*Alçakları Tanıyalım - Let's Identify the Viles*) in 1998 in *Hürriyet Daily*, and put his colleagues in danger. This was an unacceptable move for a journalist because he, by betraying his profession's principles, leaked a military memorandum against some journalists who were considered traitors because they did not obey militarist understanding, and attempted to investigate other people's narrations. Hasan Cemal, who once was the head of the *Cumhuriyet* daily in the 1980s, wrote a book (2008) including confessions about how he and his colleagues were involved and supported a failed military coup in 1970s, and jailed after a counter-coup. These are just three examples of the common behavior by the Turkish media toward the military.

Decisions by the military on February, 28, 1997 resulted in what was named a post-modern coup by top military officials, and the name has lasted. What was unique for this "post-modern" coup was that it was conducted with the help of the Turkish mainstream media outlets (Çağlar, 2012). During the coup process, it was quite prevalent to quote from top military officials, write journal articles to address both politicians to take into consideration military officials' concern, and military officials to take an action to protect the republic's values. The "post-modern" coup era still remain a fertile area for scholars to examine.

Conclusory Remarks

At the dawn of 18th century, governing elites of the Ottoman Empire came to a decision point. Obviously, the state had encountered a huge challenge from Western civilization, and the Turkish state was in trouble. Some reforms had been implemented in the empire, and these processes accepted the superiority of the West. The ruling elites had read the situation as a power balance, and the very first and largest proportion of the modernization efforts had been concentrated on military structure (Heper and Güler, 1996; Demirel, 2003). This understanding might have been based on solid reasoning, however the militarization of politics in the empire caused an unintended vicious circle, and the new republic -- its successor-- up until now.⁸

The military began seeing itself as the guardian of the state and its politics. Whenever its top officials find it necessary, they have toppled governments both in the empire and in the new republic. These interventions were catastrophic for the country and for the people, if we think both in a time continuity. I do not intend to investigate these interventions and their results here, but this knowledge

⁸ Some scholars say that the empire had already been a war machine, and its entire tradition was based on war campaigns (Demirel, 2003). I do not oppose this way of thinking here. Even if this view is true, reform efforts were still a hint of a cleavage from the tradition. Now, the empire was in a defending position rather than attack, and security have been the main concern for the Turkish nation up to date.

provides an important prelude to understanding of the Turkish military's role in manipulating politics in the country.

After World War II, the elites announced their sympathy with democratic values, and one party regime had an end. Nevertheless, the military has always been interested in politics, and military officials have always felt that they are the guardian of republican values. If one closely examines the history of the military coup d'états, or interventions in Turkish Republic, s/he can trace the military's discourse.

It is proper to question the effects of using military discourse in politics. First and foremost, over-militarization of politics may cause an authoritarian regime as modern (and much in pre-modern) history shows us. It would be naive to expect democratic values to flourish under these circumstances--a unidirectional understanding of the world and erasure of differences. These approaches, which are quite valuable in non-democratic countries, undermine a poly-vocal pluralist environment.

As this article intends to show, military discourse has not been used only for regulating politics, but also for building a nation. In the Turkish the educational system many courses have been designed to give the people a sense of nationhood. Children are the most vulnerable part of the population, and since they are not able to critique what they encounter in the classrooms, they can easily be indoctrinated into whatever the state wants them to learn. As I showed above, military discourse has always been used to indoctrinate the young generations, and is still in use.

On the other hand, militarist discourse and understanding may cause a vicious circle for a country and its citizens. Unilateral understanding tends to ignore and/or eliminate the differences in a society, and this ignorance may cause an uneasiness or unrest in the society, especially for minority groups which are strongly segregated or discriminated against. This kind of unrest helps to strengthen nationalistic discourse, and due to that raise militarist intervention of the politics.

This account is quite true in modern societies but especially in the Turkish case. Ignorance politics causes unrest among minority groups (such as Kurdish people), and nationalistic pride takes place, oppression increases. An insurrection comes about, and the military becomes involved. The country's society has seen that strict politics have failed. It is time consider a different, rather softer tone of politics.

In closing, the Turkish state has relatively been 'successful' in creating a nation. There are strong nationalistic streams in Turkish politics both in the left and the right wings. However, the cost of creating the nation is what I have discussed here. Recently, Turkey has begun facing its anti-democratic history. The process is quite slow and agonizing for most of the state institutions (especially for military and military affiliated institutions), mainstream media, and citizens. It is a very hard process to change the mindset of the whole country. The democratization reforms were promising in the beginning, but militarism is still high in the country (Sarigil, 2013; Çatalbaş, 2022:212).

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