

Flagging the Nation

Constituting National Identity Through Visual Narratives in Turkey

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Abstract: This thesis investigates the role of symbols both in reflecting changes in discourse around Turkish national identity and memory, but also how symbols, both in state-led and in private initiatives have been employed as tools that create political legitimacy and affirms national identities. Specifically, this thesis explores how these symbols compete with and complement certain right-wing narratives regarding history and nation. As with the global trends of the 1990s, nostalgia has become an increasingly important aspect of political and cultural identity in Turkey. This change has coincided with a rise ethnocentric discourse in Turkish politics that highlights the place of Turkishness as a central constitutive part of the nation. Ideas of what the nation is and what symbols are properties of the state has also changed, as the internet and commercialization of political symbols have brought ‘official’ symbols of state into the private sphere.

Keywords: MHP, AKP, 16 Turkish States, Flagging, Post-Kemalism

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1. Introduction

At the Ninth Congress of the *Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi* (CKMP, Republican Peasant-Nation Party¹) held in Adana in February of 1969, a new name and a new logo for the party was to be decided. While the new name invited little if any debate, the now newly branded *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*'s (MHP, Nationalist Action Party) decision on a new logo came at the very apogee of a multiple decades long internal conflict among Turkish nationalists in determining the identity and direction of the movement going forward.

The decision was one between two distinct choices. The most popular choice was a logo of three white crescent moons on a field of red, backed by a group of *hilalciler* (crescentists), invoking many popular depictions of one of the multiple historical Ottoman Standards.² The colour red also reflected the general climate around colours in Turkish politics at the time, being the chosen colour for the majority of the mainstream parties up until that point, as the colour paid deference to the national flag which itself was an adoption of a 1844 flag used by the late Ottomans as well being the party colour of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP, Republican People's Party) which most prominent nationalist politicians and parties had some connection to.³ As such the colour was connected with patriotic and nationalist sentiments, while the three crescents illustrated a continuity with the Ottoman state which by many religiously inclined nationalist voices was depicted as an honourable and pious state. It was the irredentist and radical Pan-Turkist Dündar Taşer, the second in-command to party leader Alparslan Türkeş who led the charge arguing that the party should be emphasising an Ottoman heritage in its use of symbols.⁴ However, the MHP at this point was far from unified around a singular outlook on heritage and identity. The other logo that was argued for was one of a *Bozkurt*, a grey wolf, a mythologized animal in much of Central Asia, most famed for its depiction on the traditionally blue banner of the *Göktürks*, who were considered to be direct

¹ Using the translation provided by; İlker Aytürk, 'Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69', *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 5 (2014): 711.

² Ibid.

³ Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey*, Politics, History, and Culture (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 73.

⁴ Nizam Önen, *İki Turan: Macaristan ve Türkiye'de turancılık* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2005), 130; Umut Uzer, *An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism: Between Turkish Ethnicity and Islamic Identity* (Salt Lake City, USA: University of Utah Press, 2016), 198. This is also attest to by Landau in a conversation with a party member of the MHP who was present at the congress; Jacob M. Landau, *Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation*, 2. ed., rev.updated, with a new bibliography (London: Hurst, 1995), 154, 173.

ancestors to the Turkish peoples in Anatolia.⁵ This logo was backed by a group of kurtçuler (wolfists), many of whom was followers of the famous Pan-Turkist firebrand Nihal Atsız.⁶

The question at the root of the conflict was not merely symbolical, it was both a pragmatic question of strategy and of deep ideological significance to the party at the time. Pan-Turkism, especially its secular manifestations, while deeply influential both within Turkish nationalism as a whole during the early years of the republic, and for the factions of nationalists within the CKMP and MHP in particular during its inception, had progressively come face to face with a conservative nationalist voter base in Anatolia that considered Islam and the Ottoman legacy integral parts of their national identity. As such, the newly minted MHP, after a hard-fought congress, with fisticuffs breaking out on the assembly floor with the physical expulsion of the Atsız faction, they would arrive at the three crescents for representing the party.⁷ The Greywolf however also survived and has become the logo for the youth wing of the party, the *Ülkü Ocakları Eğitim ve Kültür Vakfı* (Idealist Hearths Educational and Cultural Foundation), commonly referred to as *Ülkü Ocakları* (Idealist Hearths), had been founded by the Türkeş in the year before the congress, and was meant to be the activist beating heart of the organization. Both the members and the organization are alternatively referred to as *Ülkücüler* (Idealists) for short, or *Bozkurtlar* (Greywolves).⁸ *Ülkücü* (Idealist) however also remains a common term for referring to radical nationalists in general, and to members of the MHP in more specific terms.⁹

The importance of the 1969 Adana congress is not only emergent in how it would define the MHP as a party ever since, but also in how it has represented a near total victory over secular radical nationalism in Turkey until this day, in what İlker Aytürk, writing about the congress, considered the most important post-war turn in Turkish Nationalism. The CKMP was one of the only safe harbours for many secular Pan-Turkists and individuals that had been persecuted

⁵ Emrullah Öztürk, 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Forsu ve 16 Türk Devleti Tartışması', *Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 15, no. 57 (11 January 2015): 91, https://doi.org/10.1501/Tite_0000000433.

⁶ Aytürk, 'Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69', 711–12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Landau, *Pan-Turkism*, 156; Jacob M. Landau, *Radical Politics in Modern Turkey*, vol. 14, Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 276.

⁹ Ibid.

in the 1944 trials against prominent radical nationalists, and they now found themselves without a party.¹⁰

In the years of the conservative *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP¹¹, Justice and Development Party) government, which have ruled with an unprecedented unity and popularity in recent Turkish history, and who challenged many of the boundaries for how the national past and memory is imagined, there has been a marked shift in how the past is commemorated and the role national memory has come to play in politics. Already before his ascension, president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his former tutor Necmettin Erbakan pushed for an increased focus on commemorating an Ottoman past and Ottoman glory. This was highly controversial in many circles as it stood to challenge the republican and secular Kemalist conception of the past which had often painted the Ottomans as an ultimately failed project and an antithesis to modernity. The Republican sovereignty over the shaping of collective memory through state institutions came under challenge as institutions of learning and state were met with a ‘subaltern’ awakening of long buried marginalized voices, particularly Islamist and liberal ones. When Erdoğan ‘conquered’ Istanbul in the mayoral elections of 1994, connections were made to Mehmet the conqueror and his own capture of the city over 500 years earlier—a historical figure Erdoğan has voiced an explicit admiration for.¹² The city had been returned to pious Turkish hands.

With the late 90s shift in culture and public discourse, as well as with the ascension of the AKP to power in the 2002, there emerged a spirited debate over Turkish memory and the role nostalgia of the Ottoman past has come to make its mark on the political and cultural discourse. Specifically, assertions of a ‘Neo-Ottoman’ politics have been levied against the sitting president and his party, while in the cultural arena observers have been highlighting the way

¹⁰ Aytürk, ‘Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69’, 711–12; İlhan Darendelioğlu, *Türkiye’de milliyetçilik hareketleri*, 3rd ed. (Toker yayınları, 1977), 139–42.

¹¹ Official party abbreviation is AK Parti, invoking the Turkish word for white (*Ak*), carrying positive connotations of brightness, goodness, and purity amongst others. AKP remains a colloquially popular alternative, especially in foreign coverage; Hüseyin Şengül, ‘AKP mi, AK Parti mi?’, *Bianet*, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://www.bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/180743-akp-mi-ak-parti-mi>.

¹² Etienne Copeaux, ‘1996-1997 - Erdoğan, Erbakan and the Conquest of Constantinople’, *Susam-Sokak in English*, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://susam-sokak-in-english.over-blog.com/2022/10/fetih-2.html>; Etienne Copeaux, ‘The Conquest of Constantinople: How Emerge the Meanings of a Commemoration (1953-1994)’, *Susam-Sokak in English*, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://susam-sokak-in-english.over-blog.com/2022/10/fetih-1.html>.

the Ottoman past is being explored and examined secular and culture, arguing a bottom-up transformation and an opening of the public discourse to allow for a reimagining of the past outside of the Kemalist paradigm that had promoted secular and modernist values, eschewing conservative and minority voices. Republican, Ottoman, and Pre-Islamic symbolic displays all represents instances of flagging identities, tying the physical cloth together with the narrative identities. The group these symbols envision largely consists of ‘the nation’ but imagined differently, with disparate ideas of origins and futures envisioned between them. The disparity being in how the ‘text’ of the cloth is interpreted, the narrative universe it reflects. The difference in how these symbols interprets the nation emerges from the narratives they construct, and as such the past and the ideals they stand to project. Flags then are ‘memory objects’, tied to nostalgia and symbolising a continuity to past conditions and past symbols. These symbols are layered in political and nostalgic messaging, from the narrative they weave of a story of a greater ‘Turkic’¹³ ancestral homeland in Central Asia, a kinship with ‘outer Turks’, a lost ancestral connection, and more grimly they speak to the political projects and ideologies of Turkist thinkers and movements like the Ülkücü.¹⁴

With the ascension of the AKP government under Erdoğan, Devlet Bahçeli’s leadership of the MHP, and with offshoots of this nationalist mainstay in Turkish politics spawning other brazen Turkish nationalist parties like *İYİ Partisi* (İYİ; İYİP¹⁵, Good Party) and *Zafer Partisi* (ZP, Victory Party), as well as the electoral coalition of the *Ata İttifakı* (ATA, Ancestral Alliance) the Turkish right is undergoing many important changes in ideology and language, renegotiating how the right sees itself vis-à-vis the nation and the state.

As Islamism, Kemalism, and non-Kemalist Nationalism contest over space and roles within Turkish society, they rely on nostalgic language, symbols, and symbolic acts to self-identify and define in and out-groups and narratives of nation and identity. I seek to explore this

¹³ While there is a lack of distinction between ‘Turkish’ and ‘Turkic’ in the Turkish language and sources (*Türk* denoting both terms generally), I will be employing the latter term in relation to conceptions of Turkish peoples stretching outside of the boundaries of modern Turkey and its immediate vicinity.

¹⁴ Darendelioğlu, *Türkiye’de milliyetçilik hareketleri*, 139–42.

Flags as memory objects

¹⁵ While the official abbreviation of the party is rendered as *İYİ Parti* (With the İyi fully in uppercase, it is made to look like the *tamga* (emblem) of the Oghuz Kayı tribe. Similar references exist in the choice of party logo of a sun, and party colour of sky-blue, both historically significant symbols for Central Asian Turks) I will be using the unofficial alternative of İYİP—both for the sake of brevity and for consistency with other party abbreviations in Turkish.

emerging nationalist visual lexicon and how these narrative discourses both challenges and complements the nation-state in visual space.

By exploring different imaginings of the nation on the Turkish right, I seek to answer the question of

‘How are different historical narratives of ‘nation’ competing and complementing each other?’

While I will be looking primarily at some illustrative cases of ‘flagging’ I am not only focusing on the ‘flag’ itself as an object, rather I lean on the place of visual politics and nonverbal communication in constructing identities and in communicating national narratives as well as the action of flagging and the use of national and nationalist symbols in the process of denoting in-groups and out-groups.

Secondly, I seek to explore the question of ‘How are these narratives flagged among nationalists in Turkey today?’

Here I wish to tie my discussion of my initial question, where I seek to contrast Ottoman, Republican, and Turkist competing narratives, together with select instances of flagging on the Turkish right by focusing on illustrative cases that highlight the role and place of symbols and symbol politics on the Turkish right.

Chapter 2 will cover the literature on flags and nationalism and attempt to provide an insight into some of the relevant debates, particularly pertaining to the everyday reproduction of the nation through the display of national symbols, as well as the field of Turkish nationalism and the surrounding debates. Chapter 3 covers the role of teleology, self-image, and self-identity, and how they shape the way the nation is reproduced, and the narratives that undergird this process. Chapter 4 tackles the issue of flagging and the differentiation between passively and actively employing the flag, and how clear distinctions between banal and hot-blooded nationalism are problematized in a nation-state context. Chapter 5, while short, covers the role of ‘State Myth’ in Turkey in shaping imaginations of the nation and community, and how the nation is understood in a narrative continuum. From Turks in Central Asia, to the Ottoman state, to the Turkish Republic. Chapter 6 examines how this narrative continuum has manifested itself in various symbols. Specifically the flags of the 16 Great Turkish States and the Presidential Flag and Seal.

2. Literature

This investigation stands at a juncture between disciplines and as such the main challenge is to be able to look at the issue through different approaches and to identify where they converge. The main object of examination is the flag, which is the metonymic image of many related *signifying devices* as described by Massimo Leone, through which identities and ideas are telegraphed.¹⁶ These devices as such must be approached both by understanding them as symbolic objects in themselves carrying their own universes of meaning and also as ‘gateway objects’ that through ‘performance’ convey this meaning. In the discussion presented in the edited work *Flags, Color, and the Legal Narrative* the flag as an object/noun and the flag as a verb is deconstructed.¹⁷ The fact that the flag is not only a passive object, but also a device which one *flags* with in order to signify a message or identity must be highlighted.

Related to the breakdown of the flag is the ethnographic explorations of narrative and narrative dimensions in space. Yağmur Karakaya through her extensive writings on the subject, seeks to explore museums and commemorative events as narrative devices, examining how history is experienced within the boundaries of these places. Karakaya investigates the role composition of visual elements and physical space occupies in telegraphing narratives and placing the observer within the story that’s being told.¹⁸ Her exploration of these museums, as well as Zeynep Kezer’s investigation of the Ankara ethnographic museum, and Gönül Bozoğlu’s investigation of the Istanbul panorama museum, helps to deconstruct encounters with instances of flagging in physical space and to understand how narrative stories are communicated through compositions of symbols and place, the text and context of flagging.¹⁹

¹⁶ Massimo Leone, ‘The Semiotics of Flags’, in *Flags, Color, and the Legal Narrative*, Law and Visual Jurisprudence (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 53–54, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32865-8_3.

¹⁷ Anne Wagner and Sarah Marusek, eds., *Flags, Color, and the Legal Narrative: Public Memory, Identity, and Critique*, vol. 1, Law and Visual Jurisprudence (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), xii–xiii, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32865-8>.

¹⁸ While Karakaya has published extensively on this issue, including her doctoral thesis. The most succinct work is; Yağmur Karakaya, ‘The Conquest of Hearts: The Central Role of Ottoman Nostalgia within Contemporary Turkish Populism’, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 2 (August 2020): 125–57, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-018-0065-y>.

¹⁹ Zeynep Kezer, ‘Familiar Things in Strange Places: Ankara’s Ethnography Museum and the Legacy of Islam in Republican Turkey’, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 101, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3514409>; Zeynep Kezer, ‘The Making of a Nationalist Capital: Socio-Spatial Practices in Early Republican Ankara’, 2023; Gönül Bozoğlu, *Museums, Emotion, and Memory Culture: The Politics of the Past in Turkey*, Routledge Research in Museum Studies (London, New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

For covering the political landscape of right-wing nationalism in Turkey, the most prolific writer in recent times has been Tanıl Bora, who continuously publishes articles and books on the history and ideas of Turkish Nationalists with special attentiveness to the 70s to 90s, a period which despite its importance in shaping the current political landscape in Turkey, and which leads us into the currently flowering field of new nationalist parties, has remained much underexplored.

Part of understanding the Turkish right today is understanding the historiographical and discursive shifts. İlker Aytürk has contributed a lot to this end with a series of articles and responses on the Post-Kemalism of the AKP period, and the possibility of a Post-post-Kemalist shift.²⁰ Aytürk emphasizes the importance of understanding the place of the Turkish right and to not be blind to its emergence beyond the place of the AKP, and has contributed to this end through his very comprehensive investigations into the place of Turkism and Racism (or Racism-Turanism, *Irkıçılık-Turancılık*) with *The Racist Critics of Atatürk and Kemalism, from the 1930s to the 1960s*, and *Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69*.²¹ With Bora, Aytürk, as well as others (notably Ismail Cem and Husseyin Kalaycı) all being contributors to the journal *Birikim*, where many debates and discourses on Post-post-Kemalism and Turkish nationalism have been front-and-centre, it has been an indispensable source for current and updated discussions around a field that is constantly evolving and shifting.

2.1 Mapping the Field

As this thesis is primarily concerned with the place of symbols and symbol narratives within the political discourse, a big part of my work has been dedicated to note and document interactions and instances of such narrative ‘flagging’. In that sense, much of my work started before the formulation of the idea for the thesis itself. Living in the city of Izmir in 2016-2017,

²⁰ For discussions on Post-post-Kemalism see the journal *Birikim*, issues 319, 371, and 396: ‘*Birikim Sayı 319 - Kasım 2015*’, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-319-kasim-2015/7319>; ‘*Birikim Sayı 371 - Mart 2020*’, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-371-mart-2020/9898>; ‘*Birikim Sayı 396 - Nisan 2022*’, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-396-nisan-2022/10071>.

²¹ İlker Aytürk, ‘The Racist Critics of Atatürk and Kemalism, from the 1930s to the 1960s’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 2 (April 2011): 308–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009410392411>; Aytürk, ‘Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69’.

a central location in the national narrative of the ‘Turkish war of Independence’—having been liberated in 1922 by the man who would soon thereafter declare the Turkish republic in 1923, the nation-father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, I was no stranger to instances of ‘flagging the nation’, the continual reminder of nation and place through the display of symbols.²² I was for instance greeted each day by the two-meter-tall golden visage of Atatürk at my faculty’s entrance. Izmir is well known as a hotbed of Kemalist patriotism and for its ostentatious nationalist displays featuring the national flag and depictions of Atatürk which adorned buildings and streetlights all across the city. These patriotic displays may very well be more prominent in Izmir, but only so by a factor of degrees. All across Turkey there is a continual flagging of national symbols—from classrooms to bumper stickers, the constant reinforcement and reminding of nation is an ‘endemic condition’ as Micheal Billig termed it.²³ Contemporaneously with my stay in Izmir and journey to Manisa, instances of ‘flagging’ had emerged from the background as banal displays to active patriotic waving during a time where Turkey was plagued by terrorism, conflicts with the Kurdish PKK following the breakdown of the “Kurdish Opening”, and while the nation was still reeling from the trauma and confusion in the aftermath of the aborted 2016 coup d’état.

I remained very much attentive to overtly Turkist nationalist displays, and through the years since 2016 I was able to observe many changes and noteworthy developments as they emerged. One such example was the rise of the İYİP in 2017 which I was able to observe in real-time, their tight-roping when they picked overtly nationalist imagery to represent themselves, repeated commemoration of radical Turkist Nationalist writers and politicians such as Atsız and Türkeş, while simultaneously extolling themselves as a moderate right-wing alternative.²⁴ While this multiyear interest resulted in a significant collection of data points, it was mainly focused on things which I witnessed myself or came across during my time in Turkey

²² Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1995), 6–7.

²³ Billig, 6–7.

²⁴ İYİ Parti [@iyiparti], ‘İnandıklarını hiçbir zaman savunmaktan vazgeçmeyen, Fikir dünyamızın ve edebiyatımızın değerli isimlerinden, Büyük Türk milliyetçisi #HüseyinNihalAtsız’ı saygı ve rahmetle anıyoruz... <https://t.co/sSI91fjbD7>’, Tweet, *Twitter*, 11 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/iyiparti/status/1601918698234810368>; ‘Maltepeliler, Parklarına Verilen Faşist “Nihal Atsız” İsmi İstemiyor’, *Avrupa Demokrat – Sansüre İnat!* (blog), 3 January 2021, <https://www.avrupademokrat2.com/maltepeliler-parklarına-verilen-fasist-nihal-atsiz-ismini-istemiyor/>. accessed 1 May 2023.

intermittently between 2016 and 2021. Among the things I documented, through extensive private photographing, notetaking and talking with acquaintances and people on the street external to my thesis work. As I started working and preparing for this thesis however, I soon realized that there was an immense gap created by the fact that I had no prior personal connection with Turkey pre-2016 and had therefore missed out on a large part of the emerging discourse during the period my thesis is concerned with. Especially the early years of the AKP has proven itself a central part of this investigation, as this period is often highlighted as turning point in the national discourse for many writers who observed the rise of the party and the changing conditions of nationalist flagging in the country, and who wrote about it contemporaneously, but has therefore been something I have had to engage with post-fact.

The main objects and symbols of investigation are those used to visually telegraph narrative identities about what constitutes the nation, and how these national narratives and myths are constituted visually. Both through active ‘waving’ and as passively displayed objects, hung, worn, or adorned. As such, while the emphasis will be mainly on the four specific cases of depictions of Atatürk on or as part of compositions of the national flag, the Turkish Presidential Flag and the related flags of ‘The 16 (Great) Turkish States’, and the İYİP party flag.

Flags need to be understood as just one medium in a larger material discourse where narratives and politics are expressed or reflected through material mediums, be it pins, bumperstickers, statues, or any other effects. Similarly, these displays must be understood in the context they are found in and from how they are presented. The same flags on display at a governor’s office wall or flown at an ultranationalist rally are completely different things.

Considering the importance of understanding the context of the displays themselves, it therefore became important for me to visit and seek them out myself—parks, museums, local party headquarters, and bazars all became central in understanding the many ways these objects were used. Due to having an interest in tracing some of the developments of these symbols, I also had to rely on social media posts, official party promotional material, as well as Turkish government websites to serve as my primary sources for detailed information of the history and use of some of the symbols I was investigating, as well as providing me with insight beyond what I could get in person. Here particularly, freely shared and available pictures of political meetups and rallies became central in documenting uses of these symbols that were intended for internal consumption.

Understanding which audience the displays were intended for, what is public- and what is private-facing, constitutes a core element in understanding these symbols. This is particularly important for symbols in use among political parties like the MHP and İYİP, where there is a conscious effort to downplay more radical elements of the parties outwards. Here having an insight into events and spaces only intended for party interns becomes crucial. It is similarly important to be able to deconstruct the use of ‘dog-whistle’ language in order to layer messages differently depending on recipients and allowing the communication of ideas on multiple levels while maintaining plausible deniability. Hence, innocuous symbols and displays needs to be engaged with critically, and through the frame of their own symbol-universes to get a complete and multifaceted understanding of them. This is a central issue when engaging with social media and political campaigns, where there is an increased value in being able to speak to the public at large, but also signal political belonging towards more committed members, by using language and symbols that specifically speaks to them but might go unnoticed by others.

2.2 Theory

The main theoretical considerations relate to nationalism and its expressions, as well as how nation and national identity are imagined. Michael Billig’s *Banal Nationalism* offers up an important critique of the term ‘nationalism’, how it is conceived of, and employed, in a western political and academic discourse. The issue, he argues, is in the way the term has come to denote radicals and projects in creating new nations, or offer up a more radical identity, upending the established order. It is framed as an ‘exotic’ force and the property of radicals. This is inherently problematic in the current world system he argues, as it is itself a system of nation-states. It is not as if as soon as a nation is established and joins the community of recognized states that nationalism ceases to be a political force or that it atrophies and withers away. If the world system rests on the core idea of the ‘nation’ then it needs to be manifested in some sense.

Billig argues that the term nationalism needs to be conceptually expanded to account for this namely, the term needs to move from being a ‘problem’, something that ‘occurs “there” on the

periphery, not “here” at the centre.’²⁵ Rather than just being a term to explain the periphery it needs to be able to cover ‘the ideological means by which nation-states are reproduced’ in everyday society.²⁶

By moving the discourse from the extreme and into everyday life, nationalism is able to be viewed as a continual process, an ‘endemic condition’ wherein a ‘national identity’ is cultivated through habits and ‘banal’ displays. This is the difference between the PKK fighter raising the flag of Rojava, and the Turkish flag fixed to the wall of a doctor’s office. In Billig’s reading, both are engaging in nationalist displays, but one is an active flagging of identity, and the other is the banal reproduction of the already established nation-state. Core to Billig’s concept of banal nationalism and the reproduction of it, is the idea of national identity.

Identity, he posits, is a very nebulous concept. Rejecting the idea of identity as something inherent and something we are naturally imbued with, rather than the space of ‘primordial ties’ as some thinkers have conceptualized it. The operation of identity, rather, is the process of internalising this social construct. Much like Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ then, he conceptualizes a national identity as something that is contingent on communication, symbols then are part in this communicative effort.²⁷

Main forms of flagging in Turkey are constituted of Republican-Kemalist imagery that focuses on aspects of the Turkish republic and its history. The national flag is, as in most modern nation-states, the main symbolic presence manifesting the nation in everyday life.

The Turkish state is intrinsically connected to its Ottoman past, both sharing institutions, history, and physical location. The Ottoman state even today has left a material imprint on the physical, political, and cultural landscape, with cities, architecture, and national symbols all sharing a connection with the preceding state. As such, nostalgia has become an important lens through which to examine Turkish politics. Aslı Çırakman argues that the Kemalist state had a strained or even hostile view of its past, but as Kemalist notions and narratives around national origins have weakened, so has this view of history.²⁸ Neo-Ottomanism, the political dimension

²⁵ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 6, 43–45.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 7, 55–56.

²⁸ Aslı Çırakman, ‘Flags and Traitors: The Advance of Ethno-Nationalism in the Turkish Self-Image’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 11 (November 2011): 1894–1912, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.556746>.

of Ottoman nostalgia, focuses on the political presence of the Ottoman state presence in the region it inhabited. And as such prescribes an outlook that sees Turkish foreign policy as necessarily a continuation of a policy of a declared interest in this space, as well as in governing and influencing the people there. Similarly, the symbols and nostalgia for the greatness of the Ottoman state has been attributed by scholars such as Yağmur Karakaya to be behind an increasing cultural ‘Ottomania’ in which people gradually more associate themselves with this nostalgic past.

Nostalgia however becomes a very different force if tied to the Pre-Ottoman Turkic past. Here the material presence of this past is much harder to discern, and symbols and memories are much harder to call upon. Hence there is a tendency for these symbols to be to a much larger extent constructed. As Aynur Köşe and Mustafa Yılmaz also notes, the ethnic and geographical connection to central Asia and pre-Ottoman Turkic groups have always been quite tenuous in modern times, carryovers into present-day Turkish life and society are largely limited to the linguistic dimension, forming an imagined nostalgic community with lost families among the Outer-Turks, *Diş-Türkler*.²⁹

The trichotomy of nationalism and memory politics on the Turkish right, Ottomanism, Nationalism, and Pan-Nationalism, should not be understood as mutually exclusive, hegemonic, or even necessarily coherent. As I wish to illustrate, there is a large degree of heterodoxy among these symbols and how they interact and overlap, and far from competing they often complement each other. While my focus is mainly on the place of the MHP and the İYİP, I also want to dedicate a substantial part to discuss the role of the AKP in contributing to this changing nostalgic field. Primarily due to how they have in large part contributed to the revival of nostalgic politics through their continued engagement in Ottomanism and Neo-Ottomanism, but maybe even more importantly—and less acknowledged—their entanglement with Kemalist-Republican symbols, and even ethno-nationalist imagery. While the ‘Post-Kemalist’ paradigm that the AKP has ushered in can and is largely seen as a rejection of certain aspects of core Kemalist narratives, the importance of such symbols as political rallying points and as symbols of legitimacy has meant that within the AKP there has emerged a Republican-

²⁹ Aynur Köşe and Mustafa Yılmaz, ‘Flagging Turkishness: The Reproduction of Banal Nationalism in the Turkish Press’, *Nationalities Papers* 40, no. 6 (November 2012): 915–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2012.742495>.

AKP symbolic connection. Mainly centred around their long time in government, placing them as part of a narrative continuum and as the destined holder of the mantle of state. Core to this has been the increased deployment of the flag and seal of the office of the president, as well as frequent depictions of Atatürk at official and party events.

Competing interpretations and understandings of what is supposed to constitute the ‘Turkish Nation’ is a core-pillar to the public political debate in Turkey. Çırakman argues, Turkish self-identity and self-conception emerging out of the fall of the Ottoman empire and its institutions had to construct a nation out of a polity that had consisted of many competing identities, and where opposing nation projects were emerging and struggling to construct their own national identities. As such, late Ottoman intellectuals and nationalists, such as Yusuf Akçura and Ziya Gökalp were torn between political, cultural, and strategic considerations when envisioning possible fundamentals for the Turkish state.

3. Nationalism

Following electoral setbacks in the 2015 general elections, dissident voices in the until then increasingly successful MHP called for an Extraordinary Congress which was held in June 2016. The main tension was around the leadership of Devlet Bahçeli which was contested by prominent figures in the party, among them Meral Akşener and Ümit Özdağ. The basis for the contention had been the possibility of a coalition with the CHP which Bahçeli had rejected and another possibility of a coalition with the ruling AKP which Bahçeli also rejected. The party appeared rudderless and ideologically adrift. With the Extraordinary Congress resulting in no clear winner in the bid for leadership, the party found itself in the midst of a split. The main through-line was the change in direction under the leadership of Bahçeli, towards a more populist and decidedly conservative Islamist outlook that aligned the party increasingly with the Turkish Islamist right of parties such as the AKP. Reminiscent of the controversy surrounding Türkeş around the 1969 Adana convention when he had sided with Taşer and the crescentists, hoping that more moderate and traditionally conservative values would entice rural Muslim voters.

As the party trended towards the ruling AKP, culminating in an eventual coalition between the parties in 2017, the dissident voices never quieted down. As such, the aforementioned Akşener, and later Özdağ, would both go on to start their own political parties, looking to reignite a Nationalist platform which they felt the MHP had increasingly betrayed. Akşener and her compatriots in the now newly established İYİP telegraphed their dissatisfaction and intentions by their choice of name, colour, and logo, which all evoked a pre-Islamic and Central Asian Turkish origin narrative.³⁰ This choice reflected a long-lasting split within the Turkish Nationalist Right which have been internally feuding over the role of nationalism and an ethnically based identity versus a religious identity based in Turkish history as a Muslim society.

The split within the MHP and the Turkish Nationalist right illustrates one of the core conflicts around Turkish nationalism today, that is, which identity narrative should be highlighted? And

³⁰ 'Kayı Boyu'ndan İYİ Parti'ye suç duyurusu!', <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2017/10/26/kayi-boyundan-iyi-partiye-suc-duyurusu> (Gazete Duvar, 26 October 2017), <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2017/10/26/kayi-boyundan-iyi-partiye-suc-duyurusu>.

while Secular Nationalist parties like the CHP, and the religiously minded AKP all have their own prescriptions, there has been an increased overlapping and interplay between these traditionally disparate narratives. The emergence of ethnonationalist rhetoric in daily political discourse and the rise of Ottomanism and Neo-Ottomanism highlights the shifting understanding of Turkish identity. As this process is taking place there is also an accompanying transformation in the way people and politics relate to symbols, as the symbols and what they stand to represent shifts in order to reflect the changing political landscape. Secular symbols, such as pictures of the nation-father Atatürk is now contested space between widely different political projects, and Ethnonationalist and pre-Islamic symbols are employed by both the Secular and religious right in Turkey.

One of the overriding challenges in covering the right in Turkey, and the place of nationalist imagery is the very question of nationalism and how it is understood in a Turkish context. With the amount of deference that is paid to the Kemalist state-building project in Turkey and the ideas of the Kemalist revolution, one of the common throughlines have been the importance of ‘Nationalism’, *milliyetçilik*—a core tenant of Kemalist and right-wing conceptions of nationalism in shaping the political discourse.³¹ Nationalism is one of the defining throughlines in Turkish politics, and if taken at face value, a poor point of differentiation between disparate political alignments within the country’s political landscape. Nationalism of course does not only appear in one flavour, one articulation, rather there is a wide array of ways nationalism is manifested and understood in the Turkish political landscape. Rather than asking if a right-wing group in Turkey is nationalist, or even ‘more’ or ‘less’ so than others (something that is itself a difficult task to quantify), attention instead needs to be put on how nationalism and the nation is conceptualized between and within these *movements*.

For the specific groups in question E. Burak Arıkan created a workable set of qualifiers to label at least the more extreme cases of Turkish nationalism. In situating the position of the MHP on the Turkish right-wing of the political spectrum, he focuses on the overt racism of the party, both in its history and language, as the main identifier of the party’s position as being an ‘extreme’ articulation. Arıkan writes, ‘According to Hugh Poulton [...], “while overt racist-

³¹ On the left the term *Ulusçuluk* and later *Ulusalcılık* gained traction as a more civic-minded alternative nationalisms, although *milliyetçilik* still remains broadly in use.

Turanist ideology was dropped from official doctrine to address a wider electorate, it remained a constant thread". [...] in Poulton's words the nationalism of the MHP is based on the 'insistence on a unitary state, [and] at the same time championing the cause of Turkish and Turkic peoples outside the country' [...].'³² This observation also highlights one of the other points of contention in this discourse, that is the challenge of understanding the nuances and breadth of the *ırkçı*, racist, discourse. In many ways, this is a discussion of teleology, of goals and ambitions for the movement, and the understanding of the Turkish nation in history, in the world, and as a people. Jacob Landau in his coverage of the Pan-Turkist right among the MHP and the Ülkücüler highlighted the irredentist nature of the organization, and the core place the perceived ancestral relationship with Central Asian and other Turks external to Turkey has been a driving force of the movement. Usually justified through myths, history, and narratives of kinship, as well as a foreign policy issue, through opposition to the USSR and Russia in subjugating brother-peoples.³³

3.1 Nationalist teleology

To understand the visual elements on the right in Turkey, their context both historical and situational, as well as the politics that motivate and undergird their deployment, it is important to have a grasp of the teleological foundations and tenets of the right in Turkey. Teleological understandings of history are not relevant or identifiable in all political projects, but as far as discussing the ideological and historical underpinnings of the MHP, certain Kemalist nationalist manifestations, and other related nationalist projects it becomes a central aspect. As one of the main questions nationalism poses is 'what is the nation' and who belongs to it often leads to the extrapolation of who the nation should serve.

The exclusionary and otherising place of nationalism emerges in part in how the nation building project is seen as just that, a project towards a defined community. For Tanil Bora, Turkish nationalism emerged as a response to other nation building projects under the traumatic events of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the importance at the time was to find a defining project to

³² E. Burak Arıkan, 'Turkish Ultra-Nationalists under Review: A Study of the Nationalist Action Party', *Nations and Nationalism* 8, no. 3 (July 2002): 357–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8219.00055>.

³³ Landau, *Pan-Turkism*, 78–79.

explain the need for a Turkish nation, was it to represent the people of Anatolia, of the people of a specific blood, or a religion. The CHP is an important part of the puzzle; the party's emergence historically was one that tightly bound it to the idea of the Turkish nation and the republican core of the Kemalist revolution.

Yet, this closeness and importance, both of the CHP, but also of the Kemalist project as an intrinsic part of Turkish politics has been challenged in later years. While one of the challenges that was levied against the Kemalist historiography was mainly towards its silencing of minorities and the place of Islam as something more than a pure oppositional force to the Kemalist modernization. It has been emphasized that the distinction between the two sides as often portrayed, and clear dichotomy may be an emergent historical reinterpretation that is born out of the 1970s and especially 1980s political clashes and debates around the historiography, rather than something that had such an important sway contemporaneously at the time. That is not to say that there were not broad sides that could be identified at the time, but rather that their relationship was not purely oppositional.

3.2 Self-Image, Self-Identity

Aslı Çırakman's 2011 paper on *The Advance of Ethno-Nationalism in the Turkish Self-Image*, comes as a response to a late 20th century political and cultural sea-change wherein questions of national identity and the Turkish self-image have purportedly undergone some significant developments. Çırakman identifies a shift in the Turkish self-image from a secular-modernist outlook towards a more ethnonationalist defined identity, something she highlights by exploring the expression and reconstitution of this changing identity, its 'self-assertion', in media and symbols. An important constitutive part in this change is the entrenchment of oppositional self-expression in the Turkish identity, a furtherance of 'Us' vs 'Them' narratives and the place of the collective 'Us' vis-à-vis an amorphous 'Other', usually marginalized groups and minorities, when constructing a national identity in media and symbols. She writes 'The question of identity designates a story of foundation, origins, and ethos for a collectivity

[...]', highlighting the importance of displays and symbols as physical and visual tethering points for identity.³⁴

Her declared interest is to wrestle with the changing media and popular symbolic language when it comes to the Turkish identity, but she avoids largely talking about specific political actors or parties. The importance of political actors and questions in shaping our popular discourse however have become only increasingly visible since the publication of Çırakman's paper in 2011. With the worsening of the migrant crisis in Turkey and increased tensions with minorities within the country there has been a coinciding harshening of political language and an increased prominence of these ethno-nationalist assertions in the political space of Turkey.

Çırakman's further point is highlighting the role of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking in disparaging the *other* and composing rival identities that one's own identity is constituted in response to. This is another important part of understanding the advance of ethnonationalism in the political discourse, as political conspiracy theories have been fuelling and been fuelled by a media and symbolic landscape that operates together with Turkish political discourse in mobilising and entrenching divides in Turkish society. As such, I do not intend on supplanting or disputing Çırakman's 2011 findings, but rather to expand the discussion and to include the symbols and expressions of national identity and self-image as constituted through the leading right-wing Turkish parties of the AKP, MHP, and İYİP

Billig's discussion on the place of symbolism in reproducing the modern nation-state has been challenged since its writing. Ivana Spasić highlights a crucial question about the limitations and universality of Billig's Banal Nationalism discourse, by asking 'Can the Flag Hang Unobtrusively Outside a Serbian Post Office?'³⁵ The central point being that in producing and reproducing the nation, and the "Self" as part of that unit, one also constructs the 'Other'. This is acknowledged by Billig, but it is not addressed to which degree this causes dissonance in everyday interactions with national symbols. The banality of national symbols needs to be challenged on the basis of their inherently exclusionary functions. This is an extension of the

³⁴ Çırakman, 'Flags and Traitors', 1894–96.

³⁵ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*; Ivana Spasić, 'The Universality of Banal Nationalism, Or Can the Flag Hang Unobtrusively Outside a Serbian Post Office?', in *Everyday Nationhood*, ed. Michael Skey and Marco Antonich (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 31–51, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57098-7_3.

discourse already surrounding Anderson's imagined communities, Partha Chatterjee similarly posed the question in response to Anderson, asking 'Whose imagined community' is being imagined? Who has right to claim a community to imagine?³⁶

³⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton Studies in Culture, Power, History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 3–4.

4. Visual Politics

Core to the discussion of visual politics is the relationship between society at large and the state, and the role visual and ritual objects play in displaying this relationship. Core to Benedict Anderson's argument is the idea of the collective imagination, which when channelled through a visual language constitutes a core part in how the subject envisions themselves as such. To situate oneself in the collective community, then, visual representations of the community become anchor points, visual reminders as Billig argues. Visual politics as it is engaged in by the state according to Brent J. Steele in *Visual Global Politics*, is about the way the state is manifested in a corporeal form, that is to say in a way wherein it can be 'displayed, seen, sensed or felt'.³⁷ This is through the process of branding, of creating and emphasising visual markers that evoke an 'affective connection' to the state, its 'ideas, ideals and principles.' Steele considers there to be two audiences to a state's visual politics, that is its own national political communities and broader international communities. This however is never clear cut, as external flagging can be a constitutive part in constructing a national identity or reinforcing the nation state vis-à-vis other political external entities. As such, Steele identifies two core problems. Which images and representations are affective to which audience, and how can the impact of images be known?³⁸

With the advent of new media, and mass communications, much in line with Anderson's preoccupation with the printing press as an important part in constructing imagined communities, there has been a democratisation of visual self-representations. While the state remains the central actor in reproducing itself, its visual self-representations have become diversified. For Steele then, visual politics and visual self-representations are largely polyvalent, that is having different, even opposing meanings or functions, of the same image or visual representation.³⁹ This comes into play with the competing understandings and interpretations of Turkish identity and how it is differently communicated through deployment and engagement with disparate visual identities. There exists a common visual lexicon between how the state envisions the nation, and how it is envisioned by nationalists. While they may both share core ideas and ways of visually expressing these ideas, there also exist a tension

³⁷ Brent J. Steele, 'State', in *Visual Global Politics* (Routledge, 2018), 284–85.

³⁸ Steele, 285–87.

³⁹ Steele, 285–87.

over how these symbols are deployed, interpreted, and made into a constitutive element of self-identity.

Iver B. Neumann argues that identity is a key precondition for foreign policy, and that territorial and social boundaries are questions of ‘identity maintenance’ much through the same mechanism as outlined by Billig. For Neumann, as with Boran and Spasić, identity then remains a process of constructing an Us and an Other. Neumann finds this juxtaposition in the portrayal of “vanquished enemies” in historical statues and national monuments. The Other here is explicitly depicted, on the other hand, as with Spasić’s flag on a Serbian Post Office the ‘Other’ is implicit.⁴⁰ This is reflected in Karakaya’s investigation of the Turkish panorama museums, with Karakaya illustrating that by placing the visitor to the museum in the shoes of the Turkish besiegers to Constantinople, there is a tacit shared connection with the Turk in the story, the Greek on the walls never gets to tell their story and remains only a speck on the horizon.⁴¹ As such, any investigation into visual identities and visual politics needs to firmly establish the receiver as well as both the intended and unintended spectator to instances of flagging identities.

4.1 Hot-Blooded nationalism, where and when the flag flies

The importance in examining the everyday- as well as political performative aspects of nationalism as communicated through collectivising and identity producing symbols is primarily in how it affects relationship between groups and how it shapes society. Spasić, in responding to Michel Billig’s use of Serbian Nationalism as a main case of ‘Hot’ nationalism, both succinctly summarizes Billig’s argument, engages with its strengths and responds critically. Mainly she takes issue with the way the Serbian nationalists are juxtaposed as the antithesis to Billig’s conception of Banal Nationalism. She acknowledges the importance of

⁴⁰ Iver B. Neumann, ‘Identity’, in *Visual Global Politics* (Routledge, 2018), 182–88.

⁴¹ Yagmur Karakaya, “‘The Panorama of Conquest’: A Cultural Approach to National Emotions”, *Sociological Forum* 37, no. 3 (September 2022): 789–811, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12822>.

Billig's critique of 'the habit of limiting the title of "nationalism" to its extreme forms than the distinction itself, or its association with actors and places.'⁴²

She goes on, 'In these and other similar passages in the book, the dichotomy banal/non-banal is basically framed as Us/Them.' Billig's critique then of the limits of the conversation, is also contributing to an otherising language, as he lacks a sufficient explanation that accounts for the distribution of the two kinds of Nationalism, why (if at all) are Serbian nationalists the red hotblooded nationalists? To put it the other way, what about the Serbian post office and its flag?

Spasić's critique then is of what she terms a nationalism 'thermometer' the idea that displays of nationalism are responding to conditions. This is crucial as it helps frame the discussion around why nationalist displays are found to begin with. 'This implies, unlike the frame deployed in the book, that banal and non-banal nationalism are conditions of some sort of collective thermometer, switching on and off according to circumstances, a matter, that is, of time rather than space.' The focus needs to be on what Billig already identified in his book, that is the function of Banal nationalism in reproducing the nation, and to explain to what end. Billig's account help to understand the mechanisms, but as Spasić importantly highlights, is lacking in an explanatory factor. Turkey, much like in Spasić's account of Serbia, had to 'constitute itself anew' after its independence, and national symbols played an important part of this process, but these symbols have, much like the temperature of nationalism in the country, undergone a change. 'the nationalism being banalised in today's Serbia can hardly be seen as basically the same as the ethnic nationalism that had driven Serbs to war—only cooler. Like the flag, it has to be reinvented. This looks like a change of the matter itself, rather than just its temperature.'⁴³ Nationalism, and the nation-state it promotes.

⁴² Spasić, 'The Universality of Banal Nationalism, Or Can the Flag Hang Unobtrusively Outside a Serbian Post Office?', 32–33.

⁴³ Spasić, 33–37.

5. State and Myth

Bora argues that at the core of the process of constituting a nation-state in Turkey was the development and expansion of a 'Myth of State'. In the Turkish context, this term encompasses several core premises (*Kaziye*) that highlights the main traits demarcating Turkishness, and the central idea of the Turkish People through time. Perhaps the most important of these traits is the presumed natural inclination and ability of the Turk to create states, as demonstrated by the idea of the 16 Turkish states. This is the idea that throughout history, 16 great Turkish states have developed, the Republic of Turkey being the latest. Other core premises of the state myth include the continuity between Turkish states, the central position of the army, and, paradoxically, strong democratic traditions combined with a strong khan or statesman.

The mythologization of history is the instrumentalization of the past to construct and justify structures in the present. For Bora, the State Myth in Turkey became an important tool in the early to mid-republic that was central in establishing the current paradigm. The highpoint and the most dynamic period of the State Myth in Turkey was during late 20s and through the 30s. He situates the first phase to be between the two very influential First (1932) and Second (1937) Turkish History Congresses. During this time the Turkish History Thesis stood strong, and ancient, largely pre-Islamic, history was emphasized. From the infamous claims to ancestral connections between the Anatolian Hittites, the Sumerians, and the modern Turks, to the completely discredited Sun Language-Theory, proposing an ur-Turkish origin of all human language. This is the romantic phase wherein grand narratives were seldom questioned.

The importance of the State Myth at this juncture was to (support) in constructing the Nation-State in Turkey, the allusions to a great and 'Glorious Past' for the Turkish people were aimed at creating alternative identities for the Turkish people, to construct a community out of an imagined past outside of the failed Ottoman state.

6. The 16 States

Nationalist symbols show up in a breadth of ways, and are often largely unnoticeable in their existence, they make a difficult field to map out and often rely on their own visual languages that requires some intuitive understanding of their internal symbol-universes, their internal discourses – what wells of reference they are pulling from when communicating their message. The main questions when disentangling the symbols are who the communicator is, who is the receiver, and what is the message that is attempted to be relayed.

The context of their displays also varies radically, with the separate situations of displaying a flag on apparel, on a courthouse, or at a nationalist rally all radically changing the meaning of the flag itself.

This chapter will first engage with the place of Atatürk and Kemalism in visual politics within Turkey, to understand how depictions of the “Milli Sef” is utilized and contextualized in physical space. Here the place of Kemalist and Kemalist nationalist symbols are presented as floating signifiers, allowing for a bridging the gap between disparate right-wing political projects by incorporating a common nationalist visual glossary.

Secondly it will cover the place of the “The 16 Great Turkish Empires” and its place in bridging nationalist and ultranationalist/racist language through the use of pre-Ottoman nostalgia and a third-way teleological historical understanding that places the Turkish republic, through visual representations, in a narrative connection with a long line of perceived Turkish empires.

Assigning the nation and the people certain traits and a historical role/destiny to explain the origins and purpose/place of the Turkish Nation project. The Turkish Presidential Flag will be discussed in this context, as a mediating symbol between the Kemalist nationalist symbol universe and the far-right, as the flag has been reinterpreted and remade in a more explicitly racist articulation since the 1980s, and have increasingly become an important nationalist symbol for President Erdoğan to use to tie himself both to Turkish nationalism, but also to the role of ordained leader and inheritor of the legacy of his office, and as a leader of the Turkish people.

6.1 Encounters with Atatürk

In a 1998 article in *Birikim*, Hüseyin Kalayci decries that the Turkish Flag has come to represent ‘almost everything and nothing’. It is an emptied symbol, according to Kalayci, a vessel which actors are free to pour their aims, interpretations and agendas into. Building on Ernesto Laclau, Kalayci argues that the flag then is an empty signifier whose meaning can only be gleaned contextually, this has only been made possible to processes wherein the flag has increasingly become ‘independent from its political meaning’. The flag, which has traditionally been considered the very manifestation of ‘official’, has been moved into the home and the private sphere.⁴⁴ In this context, I make the argument that depictions of Atatürk similarly have become increasingly separated from their political dimensions as national symbols, rather being deployed as an identity marker, and a tool of political legitimation. The reason this is an apt comparison is due to how depictions of Atatürk have traditionally been employed, and owing to his own position within the national pantheon. Atatürk, in the role of the nation-father has been cemented in the mythos of the state in his role as an eternal patriarch, further illustrated by the juxtaposition between *Baba Devlet*, Father state and *Anavatan*, Mother country.⁴⁵ Much like with the case of the Turkish flag, depictions of Atatürk have increasingly come to decouple him from his political revolution and politics whenever they are inconvenient to the cause they are made to support today.

While contestation over Atatürk’s memory and politics have been a mainstay in Turkish politics throughout all the years following his death, the aforementioned Post-Kemalist paradigm as Aytürk termed it has increasingly allowed for questioning and reframing of the Kemalist past.

Beyond performing an all-out ‘Kemalectomy’, trying to remove Atatürk as an institutional force, it has been increasingly that opposition to Atatürk the politician has instead utilized him as a symbol for legitimacy by decoupling him from his policies, and his secular institutional

⁴⁴ ‘Bayrak, Milliyetçilik, Kutsallık - Hüseyin Kalaycı | Birikim Sayı 105-106 - Ocak/Şubat 1998’, accessed 19 April 2023, <https://birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-105-106-ocak-subat-1998/2301/bayrak-milliyetcilik-kutsallik/6276>.

⁴⁵ As Einar Wigen highlights “Turkish politicians often invoke metaphorical kinship in their conduct and legitimation of both domestic and international politics.”; Nergis Canefe and Deniz Boyraz, *Anavatan dan Yavruvatana: Milliyetçilik, Bellek ve Aidiyet*, 1. Baskı, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları 176 (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2007); Einar Wigen, ‘O Brother, Where Art Thou?: Kinship in Turkish Region-Building 1’, in *Kinship in International Relations* (Routledge, 2018).

legacy by distancing him from his connections to secular politics, the CHP, and the Turkish Armed Forces.⁴⁶



Figure 1: Private. Taken in 2022, The Turkish flag partially obstructed and accompanied by a banner of Atatürk and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the presidential seal is featured prominent behind President Erdoğan.

The issue the Islamists have had to deal with in relation to this pantheon of imagery is negotiating a discourse in which their politics and image can be considered patriotic in a way that respects the Republic as an ambitious Turkish project for a nation-state, but also not wholly embrace all the associated ideological trappings. This is where the issue of distinguishing between patriotic symbols and Kemalist symbols become relevant. As already expanded on, the CHP has the most direct connection with Kemal and Kemalist symbols but is not the sole proprietor of these images. Similarly, it has also been highlighted how Kemalist imagery and its ubiquity in politics have changed over time, with the last 40 years perhaps seeing the largest

⁴⁶ Aytürk, ‘Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69’, 696.

conscious effort to emboss its presence in the political discourse and culture.⁴⁷ This highlights the textured and multifaceted nature of how these symbols are deployed.

The AKP, with their over 20 years now of governing have had an unprecedented run in Turkish politics of a relative stable time governing, and with a sustainable streak of victories that are only rivalled by the CHP under Atatürk in time governing. Holding the office for this long has had some interesting and important effects in the way the party governs and how it conceives itself vis-à-vis the Turkish state.

Due to the Kemalist legacy and the importance of Atatürk and the Kemalist revolution as part of the national identity and the national narrative, it is hard to compete in Turkish politics without making some kind of reference to this legacy. While patriotic and nationalistic framing of issues and of one's own political project is nothing unique for Turkey, the situation is complicated by how the different factions of Turkish politics relate to and identify with the Kemalist revolution.

6.2 Flags outside Manisa

The inception of this thesis came to me during a 2016 bus ride to the city of Manisa in western Turkey. Yağmur Karakaya describes a similar bus trip inspiring her doctoral dissertation which investigated how Ottomania and Neo-Ottomanism has been produced and reproduced through culture and cultural expressions in modern day turkey, spurred by observing a large billboard commercial depicting people in Ottoman re-enactment attire. Similarly, peering out the window while heading into Manisa I saw 16 flags prominently on display in a roadside park leading into the city, erected on tall flagpoles.⁴⁸ While I could hardly identify more than a handful of them, nor did I count them precisely at the time, I was still left somewhat baffled. I was able to identify the purported flags of the Göktürks, the Turko-Mongolic Golden Horde, Seljuks, and Ghaznavids, as well as the much more commonly flown Turkish and Late Ottoman flags which one encounters all over Turkey today. This all seemed like quite an eclectic mix, and beyond a

⁴⁷ 'Bayrak, Milliyetçilik, Kutsallık - Hüseyin Kalaycı | Birikim Sayı 105-106 - Ocak/Şubat 1998'.

⁴⁸ The park in question; 'Şehzadeler Kentinde Türk Devleti Bayrakları - Manisa', Haberciniz, 7 January 2010, <https://haberciniz.biz/sehzadeler-kentinde-turk-devleti-bayraklari-manisa-752709h.htm>. The blog CRW flags have done an amazing job in documenting different instances the 16 States flags have been deployed;

vague suspicion about some Pan-Turkist historiography having informed the display, I still struggled to muster a cohesive message from the encounter.

Over a year earlier, in January 2015 President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan welcomed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to an official visit of state at the Presidential Palace. The welcoming ceremony of this audience saw the Turkish president walking down a marble staircase surrounded by 16 ceremonial soldiers dressed in a wide array of colourful historical or historically inspired uniforms and armour. These uniforms were supposed to represent the *On Altı Büyük Türk Devleti*, Sixteen Great Turkic States⁴⁹, a controversial and opaque Turkish historiography that carries heavy nationalist overtones as well as an association with a Pan-Turkist outlook on history.

The event at the time drew much attention and was criticized both for its dubious historicity, and for what was perceived as a cynical deployment of history and historical symbolism for political ends, with its pomp and colours, it was derisively dubbed by detractors as the, *Osmanlı sirki sarayda*, ‘Ottoman Circus at the palace’.⁵⁰ The apparent ‘Neo-Ottoman’ language and outlook of the President and the AKP government is already a much-discussed topic, both in the way it has transformed culture and shaped politics, but also for how it has shaped portrayals and narratives about Turkish history. However, many observers to this event were missing out on a crucial and equally interesting aspect of this ‘circus’. Only one of the soldiers, mockingly called ‘the sons of the shower cabin’, *Duşakabinoğulları*, for their bathrobe like re-enactment attire, were portraying an Ottoman past, with the other soldiers signifying 15 other purported Turkic States through history.⁵¹ And while this was one of, if not the first, just such a re-enactment with this specific group of soldiers accompanying it in an official diplomatic setting under the AKP, it was not the first nor the final time the 16 Great Turkish States had been presented at an official ceremony. At a previous meeting in 2014 with the Latvian president,

⁴⁹ There is no easy distinction between ‘Turkish’ and ‘Turkic’ in Turkish, as such one might reasonably argue that ‘16 Great Turkish States’ might also be an apt translation, as the concept seeks to establish a narrative lineage leading up to the Turkish Republic of today. However, ‘Turkic’ does well to emphasize the Central Asian origins of these alleged states.

⁵⁰ Kadri Gürsel [[@KadriGursel](#)], ‘*Osmanlı sirki sarayda*’; Hürriyet, ‘İngiliz Guardian Sirk Dedi’.

⁵¹ “‘*Duşakabinoğulları*’ istifa getirdi: O kıyafete “bornoz” diyen dekan görevinden ayrıldı - Diken’, 17 January 2015, <https://www.diken.com.tr/dusakabinogullari-istifa-getirdi-o-kiyafete-bornoz-diyen-dekan-gorevinden-ayrildi/>.

and a following meeting with the Azerbaijani President, these 16 Great Turkish states were symbolized with 16 flags, but without the accompanying actors.⁵²



Figure 2, left: Private. Picture taken in Bandırma by the Cumhuriyet Meydanı in 2021. At the location all 16 Flags were present, as well as a 17th flag representing the Turkish Republic and its founder Atatürk.” Figure 3, right: Private. Picture taken in Ördek in 2021, across the street from ‘Kurtoğlu Kebap Salonu’ which carried the three crescent moons used by the MHP, as well as a greywolf as their logo. While I could not determine a connection to the flag in the photo and the Salon, the flag is a modified version of the presidential flag and Presidential seal, with the red changed to blue, and with added turkic script runes, highlighting the relationship between the Presidential seal and the narrative connection to a Central Asian past of the turkish people. This flag is emblematic of many other similar products and effets for sale at markets and online, and which has become especially popular among the Ülkü Ocakları.

The flags of the ‘16 Great Turkic states’, while employed in a wide variety of contexts, the core tenets of their composition remain largely consistent. Typically a collection of 16 flags, wherein each flag represents a separate Turkish State throughout history, and where the flags will be displayed in physical space in such a way to suggest continuity and progress between the states

⁵² ‘Erdogan, 16 Turkish Warriors Join Solemn Welcoming Ceremony for Aliyev - Türkiye News’, Hürriyet Daily News, 16 January 2015, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Erdogan-16-turkish-warriors-join-solemn-welcoming-ceremony-for-aliyev-76981>; Ensonhaber, ‘Gül, Letonya Cumhurbaşkanı’nu atli birliklerle karşıladı İZLE - En Son Haber’, Ensonhaber, 2014, <https://www.ensonhaber.com/gundem/gul-letonya-cumhurbaskanini-atli-birliklerle-karsiladi-2014-04-16>.

the flags are made out to represent, usually presented in an order going from left to right starting with the oldest state and terminating at the 16th state which is consistently made out to be the Ottoman Empire [See Fig. 2, here Batı (Western) Hun, Avrupa (European) Hun and Ak (White) Hun are accompanied with their dates and ‘founders’ (*Kurucusu*) on stone plaques] . Similarly, the flags can be displayed in increasing elevation, wherein the oldest states are situated at the bottom and form a timeline moving upwards. This is especially common in public displays in parks where the flags will often be presented in the shape of a pyramid or situated on staircases or platforms of increasing heights. The pyramid articulation is also quite popular as an office and home decoration, here miniature versions of the flags are placed on a stand reminiscent of a candelabra [See Fig. 3].⁵³ Another common arrangement in public displays is that of a half circle, usually encircling a small plaza.



Figure 3. Alparslan Türkeş The candelabra formation of the 16 Turkish states is a popular decoration at MHP and Ülkü Ocakları offices. This particular one also includes a collection of extra flags representing contemporary Turkish states, including Northern Cyprus: ‘Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, Resim Galerisi’, accessed 1 May 2023, https://www.mhp.org.tr/htmldocs/fotogaleri/8/Resim_Galerisi/Fotograflar.html.

The most commonly referred to origins of this display of these flags was in Akib Özbek’s *Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanlığı Forsu ve Taşındığı Anlam*, ‘The Turkish Presidential Fors and its

⁵³ ‘16 Türk Devleti Bayrakları Satın al | AntepBayrak.Com’, Gaziantep Bayrak || Flama - Bayrak İmalatı - Bayrak, Bayrakçı, Bayrak Satışı, accessed 25 May 2023, <http://AntepBayrak.com/urunler/16-turk-devleti-bayraklari-satin-al.html>.

Meaning' from 1969.⁵⁴ Notably, they were not displayed here as flags in the modern sense, that is as largely rectangular flags. Instead, these early depictions were of those of banners, and standards with frills and tassels, more reminiscent of what would have been period appropriate for the depicted states.⁵⁵ This is important, as the later rendition of these flags are today made to be uniform and shaped to invoke the modern nation-state manifestation of the flag, one which is singular in its representations and a manifestation of the modern sovereign Nation-State. Meanwhile banners and colours in traditional contexts were deployed to represent everything from dynasties, to armies, to religions, and would not be subject to the same uniformity we see today. Even the Ottoman Empire, which is usually associated with the White Star and Crescent reminiscent of the modern Turkish flag, did not have a properly codified national flag until the time of the 1844 and the time of the Tanzimat reforms. As such, the current-day manifestation of these flags, in their simple and uniform rectangularness invokes what is an anachronistic depiction of the past, wherein the flag of the modern-day world system of nation-states is projected backwards. One of the first depictions of these flags as proper 'flags' in the modern sense, was in a series of calendars broadcast by the Turkish public broadcaster TRT in 1969.⁵⁶ The 16 flags, as they are depicted, are largely thought to be complete fabrications, with only the Seljuk eagle, Göktürk wolfshhead, and the Ottoman star and crescent having any agreed upon historical attestation.⁵⁷ The origin of this fabrication again remains unclear, but their ahistoricity is demonstrated by many historians, such as Ibrahim Kafesoğlu and more thoroughly by Coşkun Üçok.⁵⁸ Firstly, the TRT during the 1980s was becoming an instrumental tool in the post-1980 coup atmosphere in contributing to communicating and promoting in reconstituting and deploying national symbols and historical narratives to undergird the new vision of Kemalism and nationalism, in concordance with a push to introduce Kemalist and nationalist imagery all across Turkey as a response to the rising polarization of Turkish politics into perceived right- and left-wing extremes. During this time,

⁵⁴ Öztürk, 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Forsu ve 16 Türk Devleti Tartışması', 86–87.

⁵⁵ Oran Baskın, 'Müsamereden yüzkarasına "Yeni Türkiye"', Agos, 22 January 2015, <https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/10335/musamereden-yuzkarasina-yeni-turkiye>. Accessed 22 April.

⁵⁶ Atsız Nihal, '16 Devlet Masalı ve Uydurma Bayraklar', Hüseyin Nihal Atsız, 5 May 1969, <https://huseyinnihalatsiz.com/makale/16-devlet-masali-ve-uydurma-bayraklar/>.

⁵⁷ Ekrem Ekinci, 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Forsundaki 16 Türk Devleti', accessed 11 March 2023, <https://www.ekrembugraekinci.com/article/?ID=562>.

⁵⁸ 'Millî Tarih ve Devlet Mitosu - Tanıl Bora | Birikim Sayı 105-106 - Ocak/Şubat 1998', accessed 19 April 2023, <https://birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-105-106-ocak-subat-1998/2301/milli-tarih-ve-devlet-mitosu/2827>. ; Üçok, Coşkun (1987): "Sixteen Turkish States", *History and Society* 38 (February)

and well into the 90s, an extensive push was made publicly commemorating Atatürk and the Turkish revolution, Turkish nationalism, and Turkish history more broadly.⁵⁹ At this time, during the increased questioning of the secularist paradigm under Kemalism, the Ottoman past was becoming more and more accepted and present, having been often minimized during the beginning half of the republican century. Public spaces, parks, classrooms all become instrumentalized towards this end.

TRT's utilization of the 16 Great Turkish States is significant in the way these flags were represented. Each of the 16 flags were accompanied by the date of the reign of a great leader of the separate states. As Öztürk highlights however, there seems to have been some arbitrariness in the manner in which the depicted leaders were chosen, as the leaders that were portrayed were not necessarily the founders nor the last leaders of any of these 'states', rather the leaders were the likes of Mete Han and Suleiman the Magnificent, great rulers that instead nebulously personify their associated state in their golden age.⁶⁰

It is notable here then how seemingly TRT was one of the earliest if not the first adopter of portraying the 16 flags with associated leaders accompanying them, this has become a staple of this medium, and most manifestations of it today includes some combination of flag and leader, either only by name and ruling-period, but oftentimes also with images, or even more strikingly, as busts or full-body statues.⁶¹ The TRT example highlights the transition these symbols were undergoing from early into their deployment, decoupling from their physical manifestations as flags in parks, they were from their inception being brought into the home, first through the television, but later also commodified into various products. Early examples include the use by mobile carriers Alactel and Karel operating in Turkey which in 2002 released a slate of themed Smart Chips depicting variations of the flags seen in Özbek's book, accompanied again by the 16 great leaders.⁶² Since then, the flags have increasingly penetrated the private sphere, with phone cases, bags, and various apparel sporting variations on the 16 flags, as well as becoming a frequently shared image in various online space and in social media.

⁵⁹ Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern*, 94–95.

⁶⁰ Öztürk, 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Forsu ve 16 Türk Devleti Tartışması'.

⁶¹ Nihal, '16 Devlet Masalı ve Uydurma Bayraklar'.

⁶² 'Buyuk Turk Devletleri', accessed 25 May 2023, <http://www.turkcards.com/c/chip2001.html>.

TRT's choice to publicize this calendar then in this setting becomes significant, as it introduced many Turks to this very articulation of the continuity aspect of the 'State Myth' in Turkey that Boran discusses.

6.3 1000 States

The flags, as far as it can be confirmed, were originally presented as the historical grounding and explanation for the design of the Turkish Presidential flag and pennant, *Fors*, as it is termed in Turkish. Prior to the publication of Özbek's book, there has been no attested to formal standardization of the concept. There have been multiple attempts to trace the origins of the Presidential Fors and the underlying mythology behind it⁶³, with the most notable and thorough investigation into the Fors having been undertaken by Öztürk who was able to situate a supposed early connection between the Fors and the 16 States already in 1962, in a document before the connection was alleged by Özbek.⁶⁴

The Fors itself was first formalized as a symbol in the *Sancağ Talimatnamesi* law of 1925. and took on precise dimensions that are in use today in 1985, this is the same time that under then President Kenan Evren that the 16 Turkish States concept was officially adopted as the explanation behind the presidential Fors. The dimensions being of one 16 pointed sun (having been decreased from 20 in 1978) surrounded by 16 smaller 5-pointed stars. While there's some speculations about the exact use-cases of it during its earliest deployments, it was attested to have been used repeatedly by Atatürk on his personal boat and car as early as 1922.⁶⁵

One of the core debates early on about the presidential Fors was related to the number 16, and how the number of 'Great States' had ever been arrived on, as it is not a precise concept that emerges as part of the Turkish History Thesis, or any other of the larger historiographic discourses at the time. Multiple academics during the 1970s and 80s would point to it as a complete fabrication, and a needless narrowing of the scope of Turkish history to a linear succession between states that failed to account any room beyond the orthodoxy of the number 16. Coşkun Üçok declared he would be able to make it '1000 states', counting a number of

⁶³ Ekinci, 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Forsundaki 16 Türk Devleti'.

⁶⁴ Öztürk, 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Forsu ve 16 Türk Devleti Tartışması', 85–86.

⁶⁵ Öztürk, 83.

beyliks, sultanates, and other historical polities ruled by Turks throughout history. This also highlighted the ‘State’ issue with the concept, as it imposed the framing of statehood posthumously to these states.⁶⁶

As the presidential flag had emerged without any clear explanation to its shape, it can be reasonably argued that the number informed the 16-state concept, rather than vice-versa, the frame was set to 16 and a mythology had to be constructed to account for that, this is illustrated for example by the decision to decrease the number of points in the presidential Fors. This is further strengthened by the fact that in the environment of Turkish historiography regarding narrative origins of the Turkish people, and their heritage as a great people long has been a mainstay in historiographic circles. The 16 States Thesis kept being reinvented and reinterpreted, but the presidential Fors was never modified, nor did the Turkish government ever change the delimitation of the number of states to anything other than 16.

6.4 A 17th state

The question of how many states should be included, the connection to the presidential Fors, the visual presentation of the 16 States, the state myth, and the Narrative that this concept weaves all connects to one other important aspect of how the 16 states have come to be represented. Originally in Özbek’s book, TRT’s calendar, the mobile cards and other early deployments of the 16 States it was only made to include all the states up until and including the Ottoman Empire, only presenting a historical recounting of which states preceded the Republic. Most present-day invocations of the 16 States are now presented with the Turkish Republic occupying a central role in the displays.

This element seems to be downstream from several debates about the central large star in the Presidential Fors. Currently, according to the website of the Turkish Presidency ‘The sun symbolizes eternity and therefore the Republic of Turkey’, this, much like the 16 states was subject to some debate, the 17th State then, the 17th Star in the Fors, the Turkish Republic, quite

⁶⁶ ‘Millî Tarih ve Devlet Mitosu - Tanıl Bora | Birikim Sayı 105-106 - Ocak/Şubat 1998’. ; Üçok, Coşkun (1987): “Sixteen Turkish States”, *History and Society* 38 (February)

literally occupies a central position in the presented narrative.⁶⁷ We are presented with a recounting of Turkish history as leading into the Republic, and the Republic being the cumulation of Turkish statecraft through history, the terminus. This is congruent with Tanil Bora's highlighting of the 'Uniqueness' of the Turkish State in the Turkish State Myth.

This narrative is again reinforced by one other element that is included in many of the public and commercialized displays of the 16 States, which is the inclusion of Atatürk, not as one in the aforementioned chain of Great Leaders, but rather as the focal point of the displays themselves. A common theme in the pyramid and half-circle articulations is the inclusion of statues to go with their corresponding flags, at the terminus of the pyramid, or the centre point of the half-circle layout where the flag of the Turkish Republic and a bust, statue, or placard of Atatürk is usually situated. His central position reflecting his unique role and by extension, the special place of the Turkish republic in the visual storytelling. As with Atatürk's 'Self-Narrative' and Bora's myth of the Great Leader, the inclusion of Atatürk underlines the importance of continuity between the states and the central position of the 'leader' in both embodying the Nation-State and in taking on the historical responsibility of ensuring its continuation.

The insertion of Atatürk into grander historical narratives is not a new thing, nor is his portrayal as that of a great Warrior and a Commander of Men. Since the very first times the 16 Flags were accompanied with their corresponding leaders, their depictions have been of that of warriors, dressed in military garb⁶⁸. The focus of the militarist side of these leaders, who often ruled close to the territorial apex of their states, remains an important part of the way Turkish History is portrayed in these narratives.

The TSK to this day cites the founding of the first Turkish army as having been founded under Mete Han of the Great Huns in Northeast-Asia, and the 16 Flags are still featured as part of the exhibition at the Istanbul Military Museum.⁶⁹ Bora and Öztürk both underline the importance

⁶⁷ 'T.C.Cumhurbaşkanlığı: Fors', accessed 1 June 2023, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/cumhurbaskanligi/resmi-simgeler/fors/>.

⁶⁸ With the exception of Suleiman the Magnificent who is dressed in the style of a great administrator and is (never) depicted with a Helmet or Armour.

⁶⁹ 'Tarihçe', accessed 25 May 2023, <https://www.kkk.tsk.tr/tarihce.aspx>; 'İstanbul Harbiye Askeri Müzesi | Turkish Museums', Turkish Museum, accessed 25 May 2023, <https://turkishmuseums.com/museum/detail/22335-istanbul-harbiye-askeri-muzesi/22335/1>.

of similar historical myths and narratives to the 16 Great Thesis as important for institutions such as the TSK. Notably, historian Bahaeddin Ögel, according to Öztürk, was reluctant to change the number of states because of the importance of the number and the concept had achieved among the soldiers, and that the topic was much discussed topic among the General Staff.⁷⁰

As with its closeness to the institution of the TSK, the 16 States have naturally also been close to the office of the president, especially since the 1985 law that codified the 16 states as the explanation for the design of the Fors. While the importance of the office of President has waxed and waned over the years, it has become an incredibly powerful and symbolically important office under the Presidency of Erdoğan and especially with the change to the constitution in 2016 that transformed the office of the President into that of an Executive President, fundamentally changing the institution and placing it at the centre of power in Turkey.

The Presidential office has since the ascension of Erdoğan into it come to play an increasingly important role for the President and his party, not only through the power it wields, but also the legitimacy it conveys. While the AKP has had the presidency since 2007, under Erdoğan it has come to feature more prominently in promotional material for the party and at party events. This is best illustrated by the importance the Presidential Fors as a symbol in particular has come to play. It is now regularly featured and made visible in most context where Erdoğan is president, be it either in an official state capacity, but also as part of promotional material for the president and his party as well. The symbol has thus become an important part in their campaigning strategy, emphasising Erdoğan's sole right to use the Presidential Fors as an illustration of his political authority and the legitimacy invested in him through his office.

While the Presidential Fors is meant to signify the office of the President, much like Atatürk and the National Flag, the symbol has become increasingly detached from the office as well in recent years, and it is notable that one of the main opposition alliances to the AKP in the 2023 election, the ATA İttifakı (ATA; Ancestral Alliance) has chosen the symbol as part of their campaigning strategy, featuring it prominently at events headed by their Presidential candidate,

⁷⁰ Öztürk, 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Forsu ve 16 Türk Devleti Tartışması', 87.

Sinan Oğan.⁷¹ The Alliance, which includes Ümit Özdağ's ZP, the breakaway party from the İYİP, consists of factions of right-wing and radical right Turkish Nationalists.

6.5 Pan-Turkist Detractors

The 16 State Thesis and its universe of symbols have become an important part of the visual repertoire of the Turkish right-wing radicals today. The MHP, as the traditional home to nationalist radicals in Turkey have often embraced a Central Asian teleological tradition in their rhetoric and visual vocabulary. While granted the Greywolf lost out at the Adana congress as the logo of the party, the MHP has continued to employ many Turkist symbols and references within their organization. Most notably are the decorations at the party headquarters in Ankara, which has two real sized replicas of the *Orhun* Runes that were discovered in 1889 in Mongolia. While Ottomanist merchandise make out the bulk of non-party symbiology that is present in their diverse party offices across the country, as well as Turkish flags, depictions of Atatürk and the old party *Basbuğ*, 'chieftain', Alparslan Türkeş, also feature heavily. Sporadically, the 16 flags are also present and in use by party members, usually in the aforementioned style of a candelabra-pyramid for office-decoration.

The party has also been part of establishing many of the parks commemorating the 16 States across turkey, either as private initiatives by the party or in local government. The most striking example, and one which serves as a comprehensive example of many of the visual tropes that have been discussed so far, is the Pınarbaşı *Türklük Anıtı*, Monument to Turkishness. The park was inaugurated in 2000 by party leader Bahçeli, and features a staircase, decorated with busts of the 16 great leaders, as well as the corresponding 16 flag.⁷² The display terminates at the centre-top of the staircase, where a full-body statue of the old Basbuğ of the party, Türkeş, is situated. Behind him, situated on a high wall, is the gilded face of Atatürk.

This exhibition is the convergence of the visual narratives that have been discussed so far, with the 16 States + Atatürk now also introducing Türkeş, we can see manifestation in stone and

⁷¹ 'Sinan Oğan: Seçim ikinci tura kalacak, ikinci tur için iddialıyız', euronews, 28 March 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/03/28/sinan-ogan-secim-ikinci-tura-kalacak-ikinci-tur-icin-iddialiyiz>.

⁷² *Alparslan Türkeş ve Türklük Anıtı Açılışı Pınarbaşı 8 Nisan 2000 [# 261]*, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAsXMffA2S4>.

metal of the party line of being the true guarantors of the state. While Türkeş was never made president, placing him amongst the 16 leaders, under the watchful eyes of Atatürk, the effect is the communication of continuity and a connection between these actors in having a responsibility for the Turkish Nation and State. While I have had not been able to document the MHP ever utilizing the 16 flags at any of their political rallies, except at the inauguration of the aforementioned parks, the continued pairing of Turkes and Atatürk has remained a central theme.

Conclusion

In presenting Turkish history in a nutshell, as a self-contained and easily comprehensible universe, myths and narratives of national identity has spread across the political spectrum and proven a persistent nut to crack.

The presentation of these narratives in easily digestible symbols, spectacles, and repeated patterns have demonstrated themselves stronger than any attempt to reject them. With the number of 16 simply having become established orthodoxy in modern nationalist popular historiography, being widely adopted both by politically minded activists and consumers of national symbols alike. While corrections could have been made at multiple times throughout the years in the historical composition of the concept, it simply proved too enticing of a possibility to instead onboard the 16-state myth and employing it as a practical narrative tool. This has meant that over their time in government, the AKP with their hold on the presidency, and the MHP continuing to play a middle ground between nationalist and Islamist tendencies, they have converged on a similar toolbox of symbols and narrative stories to tell.

Here, the AKP through their long time in power have increasingly taken on symbols of the state as legitimizing mediums. Especially prominent to this end has been the deployment of depictions of Atatürk, and more recently of the Presidential Seal and flag. The presidential seal, just like depictions of Atatürk have also increasingly become decoupled from their positions as state symbols and have become democratized, increasingly finding their way into the private sphere.

Having set out to see how disparate narratives about the nation have been communicated and how they complement and compete with each other, I have identified some core themes.

Firstly, is the role played by an envisioned leader. Here the MHP's continued reverence for Alparslan Türkeş does not conflict with their respect for Atatürk, nor for their ability to see him as a great leader of the Turkish nation. Instead, both leaders are made to fit into the same narrative continuum, where Türkeş as the *Basbuğ*, great leader, can simply be seen as picking up the baton from Atatürk, and now together both play as historical examples of great Turks that are commemorated regularly together at events.

Similarly, Erdoğan, in his position as President is depicted not as in conflict with the institutions of state and their historical Kemalist legacy, but rather as responsible caretaker, willingly pictured alongside Atatürk despite clashing values. The conservative Islamist direction under

Erdoğan is enabled to be presented next to Atatürk by the latter having become an emptied signifier, decoupling Atatürk the nation father with Atatürk the man and politician.

Lastly, the 16 states and the narrative of a misty Central Asian past has proven an inviting narrative that has allowed for a bridging in visual language across very different political projects. With the main throughline being how the history of Turkey is portrayed as synonymous with the history of the Turkish people, and in so doing erasing that would get in the way of easily communicating a common national history and myth.

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