Islam and Ethnicity: Secular and Non-Secular Ethnic Identity Perceptions

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1. Introduction

Among social identity categories, religion and ethnic identities create strong loyalties among their adherents, resulting in frequent conflicts (violent or non-violent) that form major cleavages in many parts of the world. The nexus between these two identity categories, however, has not been sufficiently examined. One reason is that their relationship displays quite different patterns because of the varying nature of the religions involved. Some religions are mono-ethnic, that is, distinctively associated with a particular ethnic group as is the case in the relationship between Judaism and Jews, Yazidism and Yazidis, or Mandaeanism and Mandeans. Other religions, however, whose messages have become universal in scope, are multi-ethnic and/or multi-racial, as exemplified by Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

The relationship between religion and ethnic identity are being envisaged mainly in two ways. The first is to treat ethnicity and religion as separate social identity categories, each with its own attributes. From this perspective, ethnicity refers to secular cultural attributes such as language, myth of common origin, and castes as well as distinguishing physical features such as skin color, whereas religions reflect belief systems and rituals that are considered to transcend human agency. Hence, they are two distinctive categories that coexist without overlapping.

The second way is to consider religious identity as a sub-category of ethnicity. This is a common tendency in the social sciences, especially in political science studies of ethnicity, which tend to adopt inclusive conceptualizations of ethnicity as comprising all “descent-based” attributes, including religious identities (Chandra, 2012; Fearon & Laitin, 2000; Gurr, 1993). From this perspective, many ethnic categories in the world are defined exclusively on the basis of religious affiliations such as Maronite, Sunni, and Shi’a ethnic categories in Lebanon; Sunni and Alawite ethnic categories in Syria; and Catholic and Protestant ethnic categories in Ireland. In these cases, religion functions as the defining marker of an ethnic category in the sense that the only or the most distinctive attribute that distinguishes these ethnic groups from one another is religion.

There is a third way to examine the relationship between religion and ethnic identity. In many cases, religion functions not as a discrete and autonomous ethnic identity category but as only one of several defining cultural attributes. The following passage we quote from Horowitz illuminates this phenomenon:

> …For many groups, religion is not a matter of faith but a given, an integral part of their identity, and for some an inextricable component of their sense of peoplehood. When missionaries began their work in colonial Burma and Java, the early reaction of subject peoples was that conversions produced fundamental changes in identity: “The Sundanese (or, for that matter, the Javanese or any other group),” wrote a contemporary observer, “consider conversion identical with *masuk Belanda* (becoming Dutch), with a change of *bangsa* (people).” (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 50-51).

Here religion is not limited to spiritual beliefs or rituals for the members of the Sundanese and Javanese ethnic categories but is viewed by them as a powerful defining component of their ethnic identities. Similarly, Ghodsee (2009) documents that “[m]any Bulgarians believe that to

change religious affiliation is to change ethnic and cultural identification" (p. 234). As an outcome of this tendency, Orthodox Christian Bulgarians do not accept Bulgarian Muslims (*Pomaks*) as Bulgarians despite the fact that they share other ethnic attributes. This situation applies also to the Yezidis, a religious minority living among the Kurds in Northern Iraq. They speak Kurmanji and self-identify as Kurds, but as Bruinessen (1992) has observed, "some of the more pious Muslims [Kurds] nevertheless refuse to recognize them as Kurds because of their religious peculiarities" (p. 38). Some Balkan people also strongly associate their ethnic identity with religion, such as Serbians with Orthodox Christianity, Croatians with Catholicism, and Bosniaks with Islam (Ayata, 2004; Leustean, 2008).

We suggest that this tendency to view religion as an integral part of ethnic identity is particularly common in the Muslim world, largely because Islam provides prescriptions for every aspects of life, leaving substantial imprints on the political, cultural as well as the religious fabrics of Muslim societies. The relationship between Islam and ethnicity is, thus, fertile ground for investigations of the intersectionality of religious and ethnic identity. To this end, we argue that two perceptions of the relationship between Islam and ethnic identity can be observed in Muslim societies. We call the first the *secular ethnic identity perception,* which dissociates Islam from the cultural content of ethnic identity. This form of ethnic identity perception defines ethnic identity solely based on non-religious cultural elements such as language, myths, and common history. The second perception is what we call the *non-secular ethnic identity perception*, which strongly associates Islam with ethnic identity. This form recognizes Islam as a critical component of ethnic identity inextricably entwined with secular cultural elements.

To pursue this line of reasoning, this paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, we examine relevant theoretical literature on the socially constructed nature of ethnic identities. In

the second section, we present our argument comprising constructions of secular and non-secular forms of ethnic identity perception. In the last section, we provide evidence from Turkish, Persian and Kurdish cases to support our arguments.

2. The Social Construction of Ethnic Identity

It is now common wisdom among social scientists that ethnic identities are socially constructed through a particular historical process (Chandra, 2012; Barth, 1969; Brubaker, 2002; Fearon & Laitin, 2010; Wimmer, 2002). More explicitly, Fearon and Laitin (2010) explain that the "membership rules, content, and valuation [of ethnic identities] are the products of human action and speech, and that as a result they can and do change over time" (p. 848).

So while there is consensus on the socially constructed nature of ethnic identities, scholars have formulated different mechanisms in order to explain this construction process. Fearon and Laitin (2010) identify three agents of ethnic identity construction in the extant literature, the first being substantial economic and social change over the course of a group's history. To this end economic modernization and print capitalism have been considered agents of the construction of ethnic identities (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983). Second, Fearon and Laitin (2010) have argued that ethnic identities are products of "…supra-individual things like discursive formations or symbolic or cultural systems" (p. 851). These two forces impacting identity construction, economic and social changes or discursive formations and cultural systems, portray individuals as passive recipients of these processes who play only supporting roles.

However, the third approach views individuals as the agents of the processes of ethnic identity construction (Brubaker, 2002; Fearon & Laitin, 2010; Posner, 2004; Wimmer, 2002). With regard to individuals' actions and practices instrumental in construction of ethnic identities, Fearon

and Laitin (2010) make a distinction between “strategic action by elites” and “strategic action on the ground,” which refers to the everyday practices of ordinary people. In the next section, we build our argument on this distinction.

2.1.The Construction of Ethnic Identity by the Everyday Practices of Ordinary People

All ethnic categories have cultural content that may include various elements and traditions including language, religion, dress codes, tribal ties, ceremonies, and core values, produced by the everyday practices of ordinary members of an ethnic group (Fearon and Laitin 2010). Members collectively construct these cultural attributes through intergenerational socialization, which begins shortly after birth. In this sense, identity construction is not necessarily a conscious or strategic process. In Bourdieu’s (1990) words, this cultural perpetuation refers to *doxa* or *doxic* experience, meaning that “Most people, most of the time, take themselves and their social world somewhat for granted: They do not think about it because they do not have to” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 70).

While the main objective is to maintain social continuity, not to construct an ethnic category, it is a natural process of socialization to a particular culture or ethnic category. All individuals, in this sense, are both products and makers of their cultural habitat. They are products in the sense that the cultural environment into which they are initiated shapes and reshapes their worldviews, life styles, family relations, and in some instances tribal ties. On the other hand, they are makers of their cultural environment as well because how they pattern and act out these cultural aspects in their everyday lives actively contribute to both their preservation and incremental reconstruction over time. Thus, it is possible to claim that cultural attributes of

an ethnic category come into existence, endure, and are transformed through the collective practices of the members.

2.2. The Construction of Ethnic Identity by Elites

Ethnic political entrepreneurs or elites mobilize ethnic masses for achieving certain political objectives, ranging from gaining more cultural or political rights to forming an independent state. When such ethnic entrepreneurs approach members of an ethnic category to mobilize them to form a politicized ethnic group, it may be said that they initiate a process of negotiating the meaning of ethnic identity. They generally tend to propose or impose a particular understanding of ethnic identity based on certain cultural attributes that have been constructed by the everyday practices of the ordinary ethnic members in the historical process.

Wimmer (2002) defines the process in which different actors (elites and other segments of an ethnic category) negotiate the cultural meaning of their ethnic identity as "the process of cultural compromise" that "emerges when the actors sharing a communicative space can agree that certain values are valuable and that certain modes of classifying the social world make sense" (p. 8). Once this process produces a compromise, "certain cultural markers are singled out in order to reveal and reinforce the distinction between insiders and outsiders – between those partaking in the basic compromise and those remaining on the margins" (Wimmer, 2002, p. 32).

We suggest that this process of cultural compromise is an open-ended process. Within a particular ethnic category, reaching a compromise on the cultural meaning of ethnic identity is quite difficult, if not impossible given the fact that different members may have different perceptions of the defining cultural elements of their ethnic identity. Recent constructivist and instrumentalist scholarship indicates that members of an ethnic category may conceive of their

ethnic identities in different ways with different meanings (Abdelal *et al.,* 2006; Dawson, 2009), implying that contestation of the cultural meanings of ethnic identity is an on-going process.

Although individual members collectively construct an ethnic category with their everyday practices, they individually identify with the category through different cultural lenses that are already present in the content of the ethnic category. Every individual ethnic member develops a sense of ethnic identity based on available cultural attributes, but the question of what attributes should define a particular ethnic identity may evoke different answers from the category members. While some may define their particular understanding of ethnic identity based on the most prominent cultural attributes, others may also include less distinctive attributes in their understanding of identity. This is to say that the cultural content of an ethnic identity adopted and practiced by an individual member is a subset of the cultural content of that ethnic category. Thus, two ordinary members of an ethnic category may define the cultural attributes of their ethnic identities in quite different ways (Abdelal *et al.,* 2006; Schildkraut, 2014). This point is particularly visible in Muslim societies, especially in terms of how elites and ordinary people perceive their ethnic identities in relation to Islam. In the next section, we will discuss this issue.

3. Secular and Non-Secular Ethnic Identity Perceptions

We have argued that ethnic identity may assumes two forms in relation to Islam, *secular ethnic identity perception,* which does not recognize Islam as a defining attribute of ethnic identity, and *non-secular ethnic identity perception,* which accepts Islam as a strong defining attribute of ethnic identity. The cultural content of secular ethnic identity includes only non-religious/secular cultural elements such as language, myths, and common history. This identity perception is promoted mainly by political and intellectual elites in Muslim societies, while non-secular identity perception is mainly shared by ordinary members of an ethnic community. These forms

are continuously subjected to the processes of cultural compromise, by which ethnic members negotiate, embrace, adapt or refuse them.

We suggest that these two forms of ethnic identity perception are more likely to emerge in Muslim than in other societies. To be sure, they may be found in other religious groups as well but the distinction between secular and non-secular forms of ethnic identity perception is not as sharply defined as in the Muslim world.

3.1.The Construction of Non-Secular Ethnic Identity Perception in Muslim Societies

Ethnic and national identities are modern constructs, but they have deep roots in history. Ethnic categories and, more specifically, their cultural contents, e.g., language, religion, social relations, dress codes, weddings, funerals, and certain myths of destination or common origin, are all products of everyday practices of the ordinary people. These cultural features are practiced, acted upon, negotiated, internalized or sometimes rejected by the members of the ethnic category. Over time, some cultural features may lose their significance or go through substantial transformations. Some others, however, evolve into essential cultural elements of the ethnic identity. Religion as a cultural and symbolic system falls into latter category, meaning that, once adopted, religions take root in the cultures of ethnic categories and may influence or shape non-religious cultural elements and domains as well.

It is worth mentioning how cultures and religious symbolic systems gain an aura of factuality or reality in the minds of members. According to Berger (1967), “Society is a product of man…yet it may also be stated that man is a product of society” (p. 3). This dialectical relationship, argues Berger, rests on three steps: externalization, objectification and internalization. Externalization implies “the ongoing outpouring of human beings [as a result of their nature or imperative to live in a meaningful world] into the world, in both the physical and

the mental activity of men.” Through externalization, human beings collectively produce products. These physical and mental products attain a social reality that its human producers regard as a facticity external to them. This refers to the second step, which refers to objectification in Berger’s conceptualization. Internalization, as the third step, refers to “the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness” (Berger, 1967, p. 3). This is an ongoing process throughout the lifetime of the individual and his/her larger society.

This dialectical process, according to Berger (1967), creates a *nomos* (a social order including material and non-material culture) in the society, which is collectively recognized and taken for granted as a result of the process of objectification, of which religion is both a product and an instrument that powerfully legitimates the nomos by connecting it to a sacred cosmos. All socially constructed worlds, argues Berger, are inherently precarious and threatened by chaos or anomy, which “all the nomic constructions are designed to keep … at bay” (Berger, 1967, p. 21). Religion gives stability to and justifies the nomic constructions in the face of this terror. In other words, “religious legitimation purports to relate the humanly defined reality to ultimate, universal and sacred reality. Put differently, the humanly constructed nomoi are given a cosmic status” (Berger, 1967, p. 27). Thus, in the religious participant’s mind, the denial of this cosmic status of nomos is equal to evil or madness as “The denier risks moving into what may be called a negative reality, the reality of the devil” (Berger, 1967, p. 30). From this perspective, one must choose either “nomic security” or “anomic abandonment.” In this way, religion creates “plausibility structures” for the humanly constructed nomos and cosmos.

Berger’s point that religion shapes while being shaped by culture is of critical importance for this study. Moreover, some religions, notably Islam, are more assertive than others in terms

of shaping non-religious domains of societal life. Islam provides prescriptions for almost all aspects of human action, which shape and have been shaped by varying cultural systems of Muslim ethnic/national communities throughout the world (Asad, 2002). Thus, the influence of religion on non-religious cultural elements of society is greater under Islam than under most other religions.

After its inception in the seventh century, Islam rapidly spread throughout vast geographical regions in a short span of time, emanating out from the Arabian Peninsula to Spain in the West and to India in the East, a geographical area that included various distinctive local cultures, interactions that resulted in the Islamization of those cultural basins.

This brings us to the relationship between Islam and ethnic categories. For more than a millennium now, Islam has been integrated into the cultures of many Muslim communities, meaning that it has penetrated and substantially informed the socio-cultural and socio-political landscapes of these societies. Put simply, Islam's modes of thought and practice have intensively permeated local cultural, social, political and economic systems. Ordinary members of ethnic categories in the Muslim world, through their everyday activities, have produced and reproduced these cultural structures and incorporated Islam into the cultural content of their ethnic identities, not as a conscious process of cultural production but as a production resulting from the natural urge toward socialization. Thus, Islamic modes of thought and practice have so thoroughly penetrated the capillaries of the cultural systems of various ethnic categories in the Muslim world. In this sense, it would be difficult if not impossible to separate Islam from the cultural contents of these ethnic categories.

Following the lead of Berger (1967), the natural processes of socialization into a particular ethnic category can be described in three steps. In the first step, members of a Muslim

ethnic category collectively produce and act upon cultural elements and mores, which have an Islamic imprint. In the second step, objectification, these mental and physical cultural products assume an existence external to the members of the society, who do not consider them as the products of their own actions but as objective realities. In the third step, members of the community internalize these cultural modes of thought and practice as inherently correct. The internalized cultural and religious forms and symbols are elevated to emblematic importance in the process of negotiating the meaning of an ethnic identity initiated by ethnic elites.

According to Wimmer (2002), members of an ethnic category, by adhering to their "internalized culture forms," participate in this process. In this sense, each member has an internalized cultural scheme, or what we call internalized ethnic identity perception, regarding the cultural meaning of his/her ethnic identity. We suggest that in Muslim societies Islam is a significant element of these internalized cultural schemes of ordinary members by connecting them to a sacred cosmos in the minds of ordinary members. Thus, we argue that the broad masses in Muslim societies develop a perception of non-secular ethnic identity, of which Islam is viewed as an inextricable component. So when ethnic political entrepreneurs begin negotiating the cultural meaning of an ethnic identity, individuals join this process, bringing along their internalized culture forms that have been strongly informed by Islam. In the next section, we discuss the construction of secular ethnic identities by ethnic elites in Muslim societies.

3.2.The Construction of Secular Ethnic Identity Perception in Muslim Societies

While the construction of non-secular identity form is also a product of the everyday practices of ordinary people, in this case political and intellectual elites construct secular ethnic identity perceptions in Muslim societies by radically ruling out Islam from the cultural content of their ethnic identities. To better understand this process of identity construction and the motives of

these elites in constructing secular ethnic identity forms, we need to look at the early 20th century transition from the age of empires to the age of nation states in the Islamic world. This transition entailed significant transformations in many domains of life, including the worldviews of political and intellectual elites in Muslim societies. In their efforts to make sense of this transition, many of these elites, who later turned into founding figures of new nation-states, promoted certain political and cultural projects to shape their new states and societies.

Two significant issues emerged during the aforementioned transformation. First, the transition from empire to nation-state was perceived as a capitulation to Western civilization and its modernized nations, which became part of the collective memory of Muslim societies. Secular elites, contemplating this forfeiture to European ways, ended up blaming all political, economic, and technological lags on Islam and its modes of thought and practice that had been part of everyday lives of their societies for more than a millennium and thought that, in order to advance, they had to follow the trajectories of Western countries by separating religion from the political realm, and establishing their own nation-states. In some cases, they even took the further step of attempting to eradicate the visibility of Islam in the public sphere (Kuru, 2009). This led them to take antagonistic positions against Islam and its institutions. Their major objective was to modernize all sectors of their societies to catch up with Western countries, something that encouraged them to de-Islamatize their cultures and separate Islam from the state (Aktar, 2009; Alam and Worral, 2015; Çetinsaya, 1999).

This brings us to the second issue, which is about the ideology of nationalism. As this new ideological trend reached Muslim lands at a time of the disintegration of empires, it resulted in an identity crisis among the Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire including Turks, Arabs, and Kurds. Political and intellectual elites of these ethnic categories started to think about and

eventually negotiate the meaning and cultural boundaries of their own ethnic identities. Their major objective was to create ethnic/national awareness among their people that would lead to nationalist movements seeking independence from Ottoman rule. On their way to fulfilling their objectives, however, they faced a resilient and persistent challenge by the supra-ethnic notion of Islamic *ummah,* which rendered ethnic/national sentiments unappealing or perhaps meaningless for the larger masses. In other words, the idea of nationhood or nationalism was not one that the Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire would easily digest.

As a general tendency, these secular elites attempted to reconstruct the histories of their own ethnic categories, seeking to link the present with an invented glorious past that preceded Islam and thus free of its influence (Boroujerdi, 1996; Dawisha, 2003; Kılıç, 2020; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011). In this historical reconstruction processes, two tendencies stand out. First, they proposed certain myths of common origin for their ethnic categories that would support a sense of unity, which they considered a required step on the way to creating a shared ethnic/national awareness (Aydın, 2014; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011). The elites of many ethnic categories in the Islamic world have followed this path.

The second tendency was to resurrect national/ethnic religions that preceded the Islamization period of their ethnic categories and depict Islamic period as an era that halted and reversed the cultural, political, and economic advancement of their ethnic groups. In other words, in these historical reconstructions, an Islamic dark age obscured the enlightenment of pre-Islamic faiths. The clear purpose of these efforts was to get rid of Islamic supra-ethnic loyalty that blurred the clear delineation of ethnic categories and the boundaries separating them. These historical reconstructions were incorporated in school curriculums, reinforced in public speeches,

promoted in political campaigns, and promulgated via other state apparatuses (Çetinsaya, 1999; Dawisha, 2003).

This attempt by secular political and intellectual elites to impose an alternative worldview on the masses, however, came up against the natural response of ordinary members or other actors within each ethnic category to bring their internalized culture forms, which were deeply shaped by Islam, into the process. This clash led to long-lasting tensions and struggles between influential secular political and intellectual elites and religious segments of the each ethnic category. Although these elites in the newly emerged Muslim nation-states succeeded in expanding secular perceptions of their identities within their communities, a significant segment, perhaps the majority, of their societies continued to consider Islam as a significant defining element of their ethnic identities and thus subscribe to non-secular ethnic identity. It should be noted that this process of negotiating the meaning of ethnic identity is ongoing within many ethnic categories in the Muslim world as is discussed in the next section.

4. Secular and non-secular ethnic identity perceptions in Turkish, Kurdish and Persian cases

In this section, we will provide some evidence for the analytical arguments sketched above. We selected Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian cases for two reasons. First, the transition from empires to nation-states was a historical juncture that triggered the processes of negotiating the cultural meaning of various ethnic categories in many parts of the world (Wimmer & Min, 2006). The early contemplations on the cultural meaning of these ethnic categories (in relation to Islam) emerged during the aforementioned transition from empires to nation-states, especially in the cases of Turkish, Kurdish and Persian ethnic groups. Second, they are among the largest ethnic categories in the Middle East, a region in which Islam was born and flourished. Thus, these cases

provide us with an ideal opportunity to examine the relations between Islam and ethnic identity

Before examining the cases, we want to make one point clear. We do not argue that the members of the aforementioned ethnic/national groups are clearly divided between these two forms of ethnic identity perceptions. Such an argument would be misleading and/or inaccurate. Of course, there are grey areas between the secular and non-secular ethnic identity perceptions, or other classifications can be used to define the reality on the ground in terms of how individuals perceive their ethnic identities. What we argue, however, is that these two perceptions of ethnic identity in relation to Islam are prominent in these societies and can provide insight into the nature of the nexus between ethnic identity and Islam in Muslim societies.

4.1.The Turkish Case

We will start with the Turkish case, which is perhaps the most exemplary case in point. To understand the trajectories of secular and non-secular Turkish identity perceptions, one must analyze the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, and the social and political tensions it induced, When the revolutionary ideas of nationalism and nation-state reached the Ottoman lands in the second half of the 19th century, they immediately appealed to non-Muslim subjects of the Empire. In a sweeping trend, non-Muslim nations of the Empire revolted against the Ottoman rule, culminating in the creation of separate nation-states such as Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia.

To contain the disrupting impact of nationalism, the Ottoman rulers first employed the strategy of promoting an all-embracing Ottoman identity, dubbed “Ottomanism,” an ideology that the ruling elites hoped would prevent the subjects of the Empire, especially non-Muslims,

from joining nationalist movements against the Ottoman rule (Kayalı 1997), but the strategy failed as all non-Muslim ethnic categories of the Empire struggled to establish their own independent nation-states and eventually succeeded.

The Ottoman elites next employed the ideology of Islamism, which was intended to keep at least the Muslim subjects of the empire together under the Ottoman flag, The Ottoman *millet system* (Barkey & Gavrilis 2016) was designed to treat Muslims as the most privileged subjects of the empire regardless of their ethnic backgrounds as an incentive for Muslim nations remain within the Empire. Eventually the ideology of Islamism also failed as the intellectuals of various Muslim ethnic categories within the empire had already started to contemplate the meaning of their own ethnic identities and promote nationalist sentiments.

The Ottoman ruling elites, who were predominantly of Turkish origin, realized that neither Ottomanism nor Islamism succeeded to keep the Empire from disintegrating. They started to promote the ideology of Turkishness as a last resort to at least protect the interests of their own ethnic group. According to Ziya Gökalp (2010 [1929], p. 12) who was one of the major ideologues of Turkish nationalism of the time, Turkish ruling elites embraced Turkish nationalism as a specific ideology relatively late because, for them, ruling the empire was in itself Turkish nationalism, a reality which they chose to downplay to avoid provoking opposition to their control.

However, after all other means used failed, they too started to embrace nationalist ideas. In order to justify this endeavor, Ziya Gökalp (2010 [1929]) wrote, “The West and East of the world show us in an explicit way that this century is a century of nations. A state… cannot fulfill its duties if it ignores this fact” (p. 12).

However, this endeavour to sow the seeds of nationalist sentiments among the Turkish subjects of the empire or to explicitly pursue Turkish nationalist ideals faced a fierce challenge, which was Islam's supra-national notion of *ummah* (the community of believers) that had been in place for many centuries. Thus, they had to align their nationalist ideals with this Islamic notion in order to convince their potential followers of the idea that Turkish nationalism was perfectly compatible with Islamic teachings (Çalen, 2017). To this end, early Turkish nationalist intellectuals promoted what we call a non-secular Turkish identity perception that was closely linked to Islam. In this understanding, Islam, together with the Turkish language and common history, was proposed as a defining element of Turkish identity.

Major figures who promoted this form of identity perception were Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals such as Ziya Gökalp, Ahmet Ağaoğlu, and Ömer Seyfettin. For them pursuing Turkish nationalist ideals was not only an imperative in the age of nationalism but also closely compatible with Islamic teachings. This link between Islam and Turkish identity is quite clear in the writing of these early ideologues of Turkish nationalism. For instance, Ömer Seyfettin (1980) suggested that "the natural borders of a nation are not mountains or rivers but the language and religious borders that it relies on" (p. 1). According to him (Seyfettin, 1980), "speaking Turkish, being a Muslim, and living according to Turkish manners and customs are enough for one to be a Turk" (p.5). He clearly singled out language and Islam as the two primary defining elements of Turkish identity. Following the same line of reasoning, Ziya Gokalp also defined Turkishness largely on the basis of Turkish language and Islam, asserting that "a nation is a community that consists of individuals who share a language, religion, morality, and art, in other words, have the same education." Some other leading figures of Turkish nationalism proposed similar views by

emphasizing the importance of language and Islam as the two constitutive elements of Turkish identity (Çalen, 2020).[1]

These authors promoted Islam as a significant element of Turkish culture for the pragmatic reason that the Turkic people scattered across Central Asia and the Balkans were predominantly Muslims, so Islam could play a unifying role in the formation of a "great Turkish nation" (Akçura 1995, [1911], p. 38). They were not concerned with Islam's theology but its unifying social function (Parla, 1989, p. 47), which they believed might support the formation of Turkish nation/nationalism. Thus, these early ideologues of Turkish nationalism adopted a non-secular Turkish identity perception by proposing that the Turkish language and Islam were the two major defining elements of Turkish identity.

However, when the modern Turkish republic emerged out of the Ottoman Empire in 1920, the founding figure Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and his close entourage promoted a secular Turkish identity perception by purging Islam from the cultural content of Turkishness, making language and common history the two major defining elements of Turkish ethnic identity. The Kemalist notion of history neglected, or rather negated, the Islamic periods of Turkish history by glorifying pre-Islamic times. Ataturk's own words clearly explain this revision:

> Some say that "unity of religion" is effective in the formation of a nation. But we see the opposite when we look at the Turkish nation. The Turks had been a great nation before they accepted the religion of the Arabs [Islam]. …The Arab's religion had no impact on the

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[1] This tendency to incorporate Islam into the attributes of Turkish identity can be seen as an outcome of the scholarly debates between Islamist scholars and these early Turkish nationalist figures. While Islamists coded nationalism as un-Islamic, these nationalist scholars by emphasizing Islam as an attribute of Turkishness aimed to show compatibility between nationalism and Islam. For more details, see (Çalen, 2017).

> construction of a Turkish nation. On the contrary, it loosened the national ties of the Turkish nation; it dulled the national feelings and emotions (Çetinsaya, 1999, p. 363).

Here, in contrast to Gokalp and Akcura, Ataturk suggests that as Islam is not part of the authentic Turkish culture, it cannot be regarded as a defining element of Turkishness. His expression, "the religion of Arabs," reveals his characterization of Islam as an alien implant having nothing to do with the Turkish nation and nationalism. This idea was widely shared by early political and intellectual elites of the Turkish Republic. One revealing example is a widely cited poem written by Kemalettin Kamu, a secular Turkish author:

> Çankaya [Ataturk's presidential residence] – here
> Moses reached spiritual perfection
> Here Jesus ascended
> …
> Neither miracle nor sorcery
> Let the Arab possess Ka'ba
> Çankaya is sufficient for us (Hanioğlu, 2011, p. 193).

The last lines Kamu's poem also reflects the point that Islam is the Arabs' religion, and Turks have no need for it. As will be shown in the rest of this discussion, it may be argued that this approach was also widely adopted by the secular elites of other Muslim ethnic categories.

The Kemalist regime aimed to impose this secular perception of Turkish identity on the larger masses through certain state apparatuses, neglecting popular sentiments (Keyder, 1997, p. 43). Waxman (2000, p. 9) contends that the regime's "eliminat[ion of] Islam from their official definition of the nation" was antithetical to the Turkish identity that had been constructed by the everyday practices of the masses. In this sense, Waxman (2000, p. 6) observes, this "manufactured character" of new secular Turkish identity was "regarded as a purely alien and

artificial construct" by a large segment of Turkish people.

For instance, İsmet Özel, a prominent conservative/religious Turkish poet and thinker, takes this connection between Islam and Turkish identity to the extreme by claiming that Muslimness is a prerequisite condition for Turkishness. He argues that conversion to other religions would eventually cause changes in national/ethnic identity as well, as was the case in the Javanese and Sundanese examples mentioned in the introduction. Thus, Özel does not recognize Gagauz communities living in the Balkans as Turks even though their native language is Turkish. They do not qualify to be Turks simply because they are a Christian community. In this conception, Islam is seen as the pre-eminent signifier of Turkish identity.

These two conflicting perceptions of Turkish identity have characterized the process of negotiating the meaning of Turkishness since Kemalists' imposition of the secular notion of Turkish identity became a top-down state project. Although widely promulgated through such channels as school curricula and political broadcasts, this perception met the resistance of the Turkish masses, who have maintained their perception of Islam as a defining element of Turkishness (Çetinsaya, 1999, p. 364).

At present, these two Turkish national identity perceptions are termed *millet,* an etymologically Arabic word meaning nation with a religious connotation, and *ulus,* an invented term for secular Turkish identity perception introduced to replace *millet.* Although both terms, *millet* and *ulus*, denote nation, they have opposite connotations and represent the division between secular and non-secular Turkish identity perceptions.

4.2. The Kurdish Case

The second empirical case is the Kurdish ethnic category. Kurds are one of the indigenous peoples of the Middle East. The lands where they live have historically been called Kurdistan,

which remained intact for centuries until 1639, when the Safavid and the Ottoman Empires made an agreement to divide the territory between them (Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 1996; Tan, 2010). However, in the 20th century, with the breakdown of the Ottoman and the Safavid empires and emergence of new nation states in the Middle East, the Kurdish populated lands were divided further among four countries, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, with the majority of Kurds remaining under the sovereignty of the Turkish Republic. Although no reliable official data are available, it is estimated that between 25 and 35 million Kurds inhabit a mountainous region straddling the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Here, our analysis will focus on the Kurds living in Turkey.

For centuries, Islam as a religion has substantially shaped Kurdish cultural, political and economic life (Acker, 2004), and the majority of Kurds see Islam as an integral and indispensable part of their ethnic identity (Acker, 2004; Atacan, 2001; Bruinessen, 1992; Koter, 2013; Leezenberg, 2017; Özoglu, 2007). As ethnographic observations indicate, "Islam has . . . deeply affected Kurdish society; even ostensibly non-religious aspects of social and political life are moulded by it" (Bruinessen 1998: 7). The vast majority of Kurds belong to Sunni Islam with a small segment (in Iran and Iraq) affiliated with the Shi'a sect and Alawism (only in Turkey) (Bruinessen, 1992; Houston, 2008; King, 2017; Leezenberg, 2017).

The Kurds were perhaps the last ethnic group of the Ottoman Empire to embrace nationalist ideas, in large part because their strong tribal and religious loyalties made it hard for Kurdish intellectuals to trigger a national awakening. Thus, like their Turkish counterparts, Kurdish Ottoman intellectuals had to deal with the impact of the notion of Islamic *ummah,* which, along with tribal affiliation, made the concept of nation and the ideology of nationalism alien to the Kurdish people. Therefore, one of the main objectives of the Ottoman Kurdish

intellectuals was to instill the notion that the idea of nationhood was not contradictory to Islamic teachings (Bozarslan, 1985; Kılıç, 2020).

Despite these early scholarly activities, the production of a secular Kurdish identity perception did not flourish until the 1960s. When Turkish Republic was established, its political elites pursued two aggressive socio-cultural projects in order to mold the country and society according to their political and cultural agendas. The first was a Turkification campaign to assimilate all Muslim minority groups into a Turkish identity that included all who self-identified as Turks. The second project was an aggressive secularization policy by which visibility of Islam in the public sphere was to be eradicated. Between 1920 and 1938, these two movements triggered numerous Kurdish revolts, but they were all suppressed by the Turkish governments, after which Kurdish political and intellectual activism entered into a silent phase lasting from 1938 to 1960.

When, after the military coup in 1960, the military regime paradoxically promulgated a relatively democratic constitution Kurdish intellectuals in Turkey found solid ground on which to engage in literary and political activism by establishing political parties, cultural institutions, and publications in the form of journals, magazines, and newspapers (Bozarslan, 2005; Watts, 2010). The majority of these intellectuals were left-leaning university students who embraced socialist ideals. One of their objectives was to weaken or extinguish the tribal and religious institutions of Kurdish society, which they viewed as barriers to the emergence of a Kurdish national unity (Gündoğan, 2012), through different means including violence, especially after the foundation of the insurgent Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in 1978.

Kurdish intellectuals aimed to establish two main pillars in the construction of a Kurdish ethnic identity perception, the Kurdish language and a myth of common origin. Like their Turkish

counterparts, they constructed a glorious pre-Islamic Kurdish history and claimed that Islam had never been an authentic part of the Kurdish culture. As part of this endeavor, Zoroastrianism was exalted as the ancient Kurdish faith. For instance, Kurdish intellectual Musa Anter wrote:

> According to significant sources, Kurdish theological/religious belief was inspired by fire because Kurds had accepted fire as the source of enlightenment, righteousness, and truth. It is thus that they worship fire. Over time this sacredness was extended to the sun as well (Quoted in Kılıç, 2020, p. 815).

As a result, they "equated progress and unity with Zoroastrianism [as the true religion of the Kurds] and Islam with division, deterioration, and regression" (Kılıç, 2020, p. 817). For instance, Murat Karayilan, one of the influential leaders of the PKK, who wrote:

> In pre-Islamic times, Kurdish ideological identity and national ideology were Zoroastrianism. When Zoroastrianism as the national ideology of the Kurds was overcome, an alienation from national values took place at the ideological level among the Kurdish society…. This situation set the ground for an alienation from the self, societal existence, and reality. Thus, the extent of treason has almost always corresponded to the level of resistance [to the domination of other nations] in Kurdistan (quoted in Kılıç, 2020, p. 816)

Here Murat Karayilan associates Islamization with Arabization of the Kurdish culture and argues that "conversion to Islam marked a downward turn in Kurdish history… As its hegemonic character penetrated to the cellular level of society in Kurdistan, Islam decimated Kurdish culture, making the people ideologically dependent [on foreign cultures or powers]" (Kılıç, 2020, p. 818).

Since the 1960s, Kurdish elites have promoted this secular Kurdish identity perception, with greater momentum since the 1970s. For the larger Kurdish masses, this construction of Kurdish identity meant a radical and ultimately unacceptable disengagement from Islam, leading

to contention between secular Kurdish elites and religious segments of the Kurdish society on the cultural meaning of Kurdishness. For instance, Mufid Yüksel, a prominent Kurdish intellectual in Turkey who frequently emphasizes the Islamic foundations of Kurdish identity, stated in an interview that "The PKK and recently some other secular [Kurdish] movements [dream about a Kurdistan without Islam]. [They aim to] de-Islamatize Kurds, and make Islam and the Kurds inimical to to each other" (Yüksel, 2015). In a similar way, Kurdish novelist and poet Jan Dost (2013) has pointed out, "Kurds are a Muslim nation; if we separate Islam from ourselves [the Kurds], this would be like separating our soul from our body." Thus, for him Islam is the soul (thus a constitutive element) of Kurdishness.

In order to minimize the appeal of the nationalist Kurdish movement (the PKK and its political wings) to the Kurdish masses, Turkish governments have also involved themselves in this debate. For instance, in a campaign speech in Diyarbakır in 2015, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkish prime minister at the time) said: "All the oppressive and violent activities [of the PKK] in this region have an insidious objective. This objective is to separate my Kurdish brothers' and sisters' faith [Islam], which they have carried for 1,376 years with dignity, from their ethnic identity."

Kurds in Turkey are now politically divided between the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (*Halkin Demokrasi Partisi*, HDP) and the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi,* AKP). When the Kurdish nationalist movement led by the insurgent PKK decided to use legal political platforms by establishing political parties in 1990s, they replaced their anti-religious discourse with religious-friendly language in order to appeal to pious Kurds (Dağ, 2014). While this strategy has helped them extend their support base, it does not mean that they have given up on their secular perception of Kurdish identity that

has been in the making since 1960s. Thus, the tensions between secular and non-secular perceptions of Kurdish identity still endure among the Kurds of Turkey.

4.3. *The Persian Case*

The third case to be examined is Persian ethnic identity. Here we focus on the Persian ethnic category rather than Iranian national identity because, although they largely overlap, Iranian national identity extends beyond the Persian ethnic category, which is the dominant ethnic group in the cultural, political and economic landscapes of the country. Iran is a multi-ethnic country, and the relationships between these two identities and between them and Islam are contentious (Alam and Worral, 2015).

Meanwhile, a parallel debate has been going on about the cultural content of Persian ethnic identity, in which, we suggest, the division between secular and non-secular ethnic identity perceptions is also a factor. The relationship between Persian ethnic category and Islam has deep roots. The Islamization of the Persian people started in the seventh century, when Arab-Muslim forces conquered Iran by defeating the Sassanid Empire, leading to the weakening of Zoroastrianism. The other significant historical turning point in Persian history was their conversion from Sunni to Shi'a Islam in 16th century under Safavid rule (Stanfield-Johnson 1994). Since then, the Shi'a faith has become a significant element of Persian ethnic identity (Farzaneh, 2007; Amanat, 2012).

However, during the *Pahlavi* dynasty in the 20th century, especially after the Constitutional Revolution in 1905, a secular understanding of Persian ethnic identity emerged. Like Kurdish and Turkish political and intellectual elites, Nationalist Iranian elites, together with the ruling politicians, aimed to de-Islamatize Persian identity (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2018). This was an

outcome of a larger transformation taking place as Iranian intellectual and political elites constantly compared Islamic world including their society with Europe and, in Boroujerdi's (1996) words, came to perceive "the Islamic world as the embodiment of all that was recently left behind in Europe: an all-encompassing religion, political despotism, cultural stagnation, scientific ignorance, superstition, and so on" (p. 7). Thus, they connected with the pre-Islamic period, which they portrayed as the source of authentic Persian identity, a strategy that, as Alam and Worral (2015, p. 81) point out, mirrored the Turkish and Kurdish cases in that "In this process of reaching back into the glorious ancient past, the Islamic present and past was cast as an aberration…."

While glorifying pre-Islamic Iranian history, Marashi (2008, p. 72) emphasizes, the elites aimed to detach "Iran from its Arabic-Islamic heritage and [mark] that heritage as an external and antimodern element within Iranian tradition", which destroyed the progressive culture of ancient Persia (Alam & Worral, 2015). Thus, they defined Persian identity on only the basis of language and their narrative of authentic Persian culture.

Rulers of Pahlavi era took concrete steps in order to revive ancient Persian culture, such as replacing the Islamic lunar calendar with the Persian solar calendar, manufacturing an Aryan link to connect with European civilization, renaming cities and towns in Persian, and coining Persian words to replace Arabic and Turkish words, and Muhammad Reza Shah adopted the ancient King of Persia's honorific title, *Shahanshah Aryamehr* (King of Kings) (Alam and Worral, 2015; Vaziri, 1993; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011). In other words, Iranian elites "have anchored their conception of [Persian Identity] on the matrices of language, selective historiography, and a Persian-centered nationalism…" (Boroujerdi, 1998, p. 43).

To be sure, this secular perception of Persian ethnic identity faced a powerful challenge from the larger Iranian society, which viewed Islam, especially Shi'a ideology, as an inextricable component of their Persian identity. In particular, the Iranian religious establishment led the opposition to the secularization projects of the Pahlavi dynasty. After Islamic Revolution in 1979, all secular projects of the Pahlavi era were eradicated, the connection between Islam and Persian identity was strongly reinforced. In this new era, it was now the pre-Islamic Iranian past that was de-glorified, as illustrated in the following statement by Ayatullah Khomeini:

> Before Islam, the lands now blessed by our True Faith suffered miserably because of ignorance and cruelty. There is nothing in [that] past that is worth glorification….All I know…[is that] it concerns a nation which throughout history has suffered under the rule of kings. Throughout a 2500 year history it has been under the rule of kings, kings who have brought it nothing but suffering and misery. Even those supposedly just rulers were also evil. (quoted in Alam and Worral 2015, pp. 86, 88).

Thus, for Islamic clerics, the cultural content of Persian identity includes language and Persian culture with a strong Islamic heritage as a powerful element of Persian identity. It may be argued that secular vs. non-secular perceptions of Persian identity are still being debated in the ongoing process of negotiating the meaning of ethnic Persian identity in Iran.

5. Conclusion

The nexus between religion and ethnicity is complicated, requiring further empirical investigation and theoretical analysis. In some cases, religious affiliations enhance ethnic character by delineating one group of people from another; in other cases religion is limited to the private realm and has nothing to do with ethnicity; and in some other cases, as discussed in this paper, religion is considered to be a defining attribute of an ethnic identity category.

Departing from this last point, we argued that two forms of ethnic identity perception may emerge with regard to the relationship between Islam and ethnic identity: secular and non-secular ethnic identity perceptions.

Secular ethnic identity perception excises Islam from the defining attributes of ethnic identity. As we documented in the analyses of various cases, this secular form of ethnic identity perception is mainly a product of political and intellectual constructions. In other words, political and/or intellectual elites of various ethnic categories in the Islamic world construct this form of ethnic identity perception to promote an ethnic/national orientation within their ethnic group. In this sense, it is an ethnic identity perception that is imposed from the top down.

There are some common tendencies to be noted. First, these elites characterize Islam as a foreign cultural element superimposed on their authentic national cultural structures, which they propose to restore by connecting the present to a glorified pre-Islamic past. These historical reconstructions include "manipulating history, exaggerating, obfuscating and even inventing historical facts" (Dawisha, 2003, p. 74). Second, these elites used educational and media channels to impose their secular perceptions of ethnic identity on larger masses.

Even though they have successfully spread secular ethnic identity perception to some segments of their societies, the majority of ordinary members adopt non- secular ethnic identity perception that recognizes Islam as a defining element of their ethnic identities. Non-secular ethnic identity perception emerges from the everyday practices of members of ethnic groups who for generations have woven particular religious beliefs and practices into the fabric of their lives. Thus, unlike the conscious construction of secular ethnic identity perception, non-secular identity perception is a product of natural socialization processes.

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