Paper Presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021
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Religion and Nationalism in the Turkish Mosques Abroad

A Comparative Case Study of the UK and the USA

Mehmet Kurt[1]

Abstract

In this article, I explore the role of religious discourses and practices in the diasporic Kurdish-Turkish conflict and investigate the ways in which presentations of the political conflict has been disseminated and reproduced via Turkish mosques located in Europe and the USA. Through an extended ethnographic research, I examine the imagination of Turkish political theology and the exclusion of the Kurds from the imagined transnational Muslim ummah that Turkish Islamist discourse promotes the Turkish state as the flag-bearer of. I demonstrate that the existence of the Kurds, by virtue of their exclusion from this imaginary worldview, unravels the limitations of Turkish pan-Islamist discourse. On the other hand, I present examples of counter-hegemonic discourses emerging from Kurdish imams who expand the interpretation of religious texts in defense of Kurdish civil rights and make room for a plurality of Muslim perspectives excluded from the overly militarized and nationalist rhetoric espoused in Turkish mosques in the diaspora.

Keywords

Kurdish-Turkish conflict, diaspora, transnational mosques, militarism, Turkish nationalism, pan-Islamism, political theology

[1] Lecturer, Yale University and Marie Curie Global Fellow, London School of Economics. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Sklodowska-Curie grant agreement No 796193. London School of Economics and Political Science (London), Yale University (New Haven, CT), and SciencesPo Paris are the partners and hosts of this research project. Contact email: mehmet.kurt@yale.edu and m.kurt2@lse.ac.uk

Introduction

On 9 October 2019, the Turkish armed forces and its radical Islamist proxies, under the banner of the Syrian National Army, once again, invaded part of the Northern Syrian provinces, Tal Abyad (Girê Spî) and Rasul Ayn (Serê Kaniyê) that was previously under control of the US-backed Kurdish forces. The invasion came right after US withdrawal from the North-eastern Syria three days earlier, which created many reactions and the resignation of one official within the Trump administration. Turkey's invasion of North Eastern Syria was a continuation of their aggression and intolerance of Kurdish emancipation on its borders and it was a reflection of the ways in which the Kurds have been governed by the nation-states they live in.

Two days after the Turkish invasion started, I arrived at the door of a London Turkish Mosque,[2] which is run by the Turkish state's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), to participate in a Friday sermon for my ongoing ethnographic research on transnational Turkish mosques in the UK, France and the USA. As a Kurdish human rights activist, I have been involved in several protests since the aggression started and observed the ways in which the invasion created massive discontent and anger among the Kurds around the world. Given that the Turkish state utilizes mosques administrated by Diyanet, both within the country and abroad (Çıtak 2010; Azak 2010; Gözaydın 2009), to distribute its nationalist-Islamist discourse, I expected that the khutba[3] will be about the invasion which was named as the Operation Peace Spring by the state. I was not wrong. When I sat a few lines away from the imam, in a position that I could observe the attendees and listen to the sermon, he was preaching about the eternal struggle between the right (haq) and the vanity (batıl), implying the righteousness of the Turkish invasion. Towards the end of preaching, an attendee screamed

[2] The exact names of mosques and, if necessary, their locations are anonymized in this paper, as a part of the ethical protocol of the research project to avoid identification and endangering the research communities and participants.
[3] Khutba is the Islamic sermon delivered before the Friday prayers or after the Eid prayers.

"will we pray for our army, hocam!". The imam said that we will pray during the khutba, yet the attendee, a middle-age stocky man, insisted that we pray for "our army" now and then as well. Full of discontent by this militarist cry, I looked at the man who insisted on praying for the army and other participants of the Friday congregation. They looked proud and happy. There was no sign of regret or doubt on anyone's face, but vulgar cheer overflowing from their "amens" to the prayers, which in practice meant celebrating the suffering of their fellow Muslims, the Kurds. As expected, the Khutba was dedicated to the "peace mission" that the Turkish army undertook to "help our Syrian brothers and sisters". According to the sermon, "the Muslim world was going through difficult times and the Turkish army, as the flag-bearer of the Muslim *ummah*, took up a religious and national mission to bring peace and eradicate terrorism from Syria a few days ago". The khutba went on, praying for the Turkish army and damnation of its "terrorist and separatist enemies", meaning the Kurds. The attendees, with pride and enthusiasm, affirmed the prayers with "amens". I remained silent as this was not a prayer that I could say amen to. I could not help thinking that "it is the Muslim Kurds they are killing and it is Kurdish land that they are invading, yet they still talk about separatism".

In this paper, I investigate the role of Turkish mosques and religious sermons in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in the diaspora and examine the ways in which portrayals of the regional conflict has been disseminated and reproduced via Turkish religious organizations. I examine the political imagination of Turkish Islamism, the predominant usage of militarist and nationalist discourses in the preachings of transnational Turkish mosques, and the exclusion of the Kurds from the imagined transnational Muslim ummah that Turkish Islamist discourse promotes the Turkish state as the flag-bearer of. I argue that the Kurds are incorporated into this imagined Muslim ummah by virtue of their exclusion from it. As a result, the Kurds mark the boundaries and set up limitations of this imaginary unity. The Kurds enter the discourse of this imaginary world through the discourse of "separatism and terrorism", which is perceived

as a threat to the imagined territorial unity of the Turkish state, even beyond its borders. Hence, the Kurds, in this discourse, could only exist either apologetically or by virtue of their sole belief, that is expected to be indifferent to their ethno-political identity. As such, a Kurd could be a Muslim and be a part of this imaginary ummah in Turkish religious discourses but is not allowed to be a Kurdish Muslim, whereas this does not apply to the members of other ethnicities in the Turkish transnational Muslim spaces.

The research data presented in these pages come from my extended field research on political Islam among Kurdish and Turkish citizens of Turkey. My research began as an examination of Kurdish Hizbullah, an underground militant organization active in the 1990s who later turned into a legal social and political movement operating in the Kurdish region of Turkey (Kurt 2017). I pursued my research on Islamist civil society organizations operating across the Turkish-Syrian border and investigated the role of these organizations in the radicalization processes of Kurdish and Turkish youth. Having done ethnographic research on regional and national aspects of Islamist mobilizations, these lines of inquiry have led me to conducting an ethnographic research on Transnational Turkish mosques run by the Turkish Diyanet in France, the UK and the USA. For the purposes of this paper, I am drawing upon extended ethnographic research from regional, national and transnational settings and relying primarily on interviews conducted with leaders of Kurdish Islamic organizations (Mele and Seyda) and mosques in Germany and France.

The Transnational Turkish Mosque

Experiences similar to the above example is common in the Turkish mosques and among the Turkish diasporic organizations. Indeed, during my fieldwork in British and American Turkish mosques, I have often come across instances when members of these organizations presented religion and nationality as inseparable concepts and the mosques are seen as an embodiment of this imaginary unity. For many Turks, they were leader of the

Muslim world and their model of religiosity was the truest interpretation of Islam. Some believe that god has given the Turks a special mission to be the flag-bearers of the Muslim ummah. A majority especially take pride in the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and believe that the Islamist government of Turkey and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is restoring this legacy. In her book, *Under the Banner of Islam: Turks, Kurds and the Limits of Religious Unity,* Gülay Türkmen (2021) examines how religious, ethnic and national identities converge in ethnic conflicts between co-religionists, demonstrating the ways in which the Turkish religious elites (imams, scholars and heads of religious NGOs) assume a superior role in representing Islam and leading the Muslim ummah. This assumed superiority, and the conflict it creates, gains more importance in diasporic settings, where Turkish mosques undertake further roles in becoming social, cultural and political hubs for the Turkish citizens and their mobilizations.

This inseparable but reversible national and religious mission is an important characteristic of the Turkish political theology,[4] which has been shaped and formulated by the state-controlled Diyanet since its inception on behalf of the Abolition of Caliphate in 1924. The secularist project of the founding fathers of the Turkish republic was not a total separation project between religion and the state; rather it aimed to nationalize Islam and integrate it into the state's governmentality (Kurt 2019). Over the course of decades, Diyanet adopted further missions to realize some of the state's militarist and nationalist practices packed in a religious form (Mutluer 2018: 8-10). In the 1982 Constitution, article 136, the military junta introduced a new mission for Diyanet, that is to maintain national unity and solidarity (Ulutas 2010). Religion classes became compulsory on secondary and high school levels, the number of mosques and religious establishments dramatically increased in the country. Relying on *Da'if*

[4] I rely on Carl Schmitt's understanding of political theology, in which he argues that "All significant concepts of the modem theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development-in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver-but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts" (1985: 36).

hadiths[5] that are methodologically and contextually problematic, Diyanet glorified militarism and the Turkish army,[6] promoted patriotism as a "part of the Islamic faith (iman)", and announced those who were killed during military service and operations as *shaheeds* (martyrs), who will resurge and be the neighbors of prophets and saints in the paradise *(jannah)*.

The first Turkish mosques in Europe were established in the 1970s by members of the Islamist Nasion Vision Movement (Milli Görüş Hareketi) (Yukleyen 2010) and the followers of the Turkish Islamic scholar, Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan. State-run Diyanet mosques soon followed to provide religious and cultural services to the Turkish immigrants who arrived in Europe during the post-WWII labor migration period. In the following decades, Diyanet, backed by the state, has become the main organization for Turkish immigrants in transnational religious fields, expanding its services to Balkans, Central Asia and Africa. It is clear that Diyanet has been an important asset for the government from its inception. However, the AKP government contributed to the exponential growth of Diyanet (Lord 2018), diversifying its activities and increasing the number of mosques and religious personnel both in the country and abroad as a part of its foreign policy drawing upon its neo-Ottomanist nationalist and Islamist aspirations. Under the current Islamist government, Diyanet has become the main façade of the Islamist foreign policy and the number of Diyanet mosques and services across the globe has reached two thousand, half of which are in Germany, where the majority of the Turkish diaspora lives. Unlike the Kurdish diaspora organizing around secular establishments, mosques have become central to Turkish diaspora's social, cultural and political engagements and mobilizations.

[5] Hadith refers to words, acts and approvals of prophet Mohammad and ranks second after Quran as reference of Islamic law and moral guidance in Islam. Yet, throughout history, people, with different motivations, fabricated hadiths attributed to prophet Muhammad. In Hadith methodology (ûsûl), hadiths are classified into several groups and *Da'if Hadiths* are considered weak due to several problems in the lineage of narrators or because of contradiction of the context of a particular hadith with more reliable hadiths or Quran.

[6] https://www.diyanet.gov.tr/tr-TR/Kurumsal/Detay/25909/cuma-hutbesi-vatan-bize-emanettir, accessed on 05 December 2020.

Militarism and Nationalism in Turkish Mosques

During the Turkish-Kurdish conflict in the 1990s and after, Diyanet played a central role in disseminating the state propaganda in a religious form, glorifying and sacralizing the Turkish state's "war on terror" against the Kurdish insurgency, defaming the rebels as non-believers, atheists, Armenians and morally corrupt. This was also the period when a vast number of Kurdish political refugees arrived in Europe, escaping the state violence. In the earlier periods practicing religious Turks and Kurds attended mosques together, yet nationalist discourse within preaching soon began to create discontent among the more politically engaged Kurds. In Germany and elsewhere, according my interviewees, these tensions created debates and fights, and resulted in the abandonment of Turkish mosques by the Kurds, who would later start to establish their own mosques as early as 1993.

In a previous article, I presented the case of Kurds in Turkey as an internal colony and discussed that Islamist governmentality does not constitute a break from this colonial continuity, but rather seeks new ways to enforce and legitimize ongoing colonial rule (Kurt 2019). Considering this continuity in Diyanet's role, it is no surprise to see the ways in which the transnational Turkish mosques are becoming vectors of a particularly Turkish brand of governmentality, promoting nationalist and militarist discourse; and mobilizing Turkish citizens for political gains. These nationalist discourses created tension and discontent among the Kurds and Turks of diaspora especially during Turkey's invasion of Kurdish cities and towns in Northern Syria in recent years. In Germany, where the majority of Kurdish and Turkish diasporic communities live, tensions were especially high during Turkey's military invasion of Afrin, Syria in the early 2018. Some thousand mosques under the central administration of the Turkish-Islamic Union of Religious Affairs (DITIB) in Germany were accused of praying for a military defeat of Kurds in Syria and for 'the victory of the heroic

Turkish army and soldiers'.[7] Although the DITIB denied that it has called for a specific prayer in the congregations and that "the congregations of all religious communities decide for themselves what prayers are said, which is a part of the constitutionally protected area of religious freedom",[8] my observations from transnational Turkish mosques across Europe and the USA, as well as my conversations with several imams in these locations prove that indeed there is a central decision making process behind these prayers, regardless of the exact wordings of the prayers being dictated by the DITIB or Diyanet. However, this was not the only occasion where Turkish religious organizations were accused of promoting hatred and spying under the directive of the Turkish state on their congregations. Following the 2016 coup attempt, German authorities launched a federal investigation Europe-wide of 'Spying Imam' cases, in which Turkish-state appointed imams were charged with collecting information about Gülen movement supporters, who were held responsible for the failed coup attempt in 2016 and designated as a terrorist organization by the Turkish state. Imams were charged with providing information to Turkish diplomatic missions across Europe, including Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland and Belgium.[9] As a result of espionage investigations, Turkey had to recall several imams and religious affiliates from a few European countries, as spying imams sparked a new crisis between Turkey and Europe.[10]

A few months after the Turkish invasion of North-eastern Syria, on 27 February 2020, the Turkish army, in Idlib Syria, was attacked by the Russian airstrikes. Thirty-six Turkish soldiers were killed, marking the event as the biggest loss to the Turkish military since their involvement started in the Syrian Civil War. Curious about the responses it will create in the Turkish mosques, I arrived at a Diyanet Mosque located on the East Coast of the USA the

[7] https://www.dw.com/en/are-german-imams-praying-for-turkey-to-beat-kurds-in-syria/a-42327276, Accessed on 04 December 2020.
[8] https://www.ditib.de/detail1.php?id=631&lang=de, Accessed on 04 December 2020.
[9] https://www.dw.com/en/turkish-imam-spy-affair-in-germany-extends-across-europe/a-37590672, accessed on 21.10.2020
[10] https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/turkey-europe-new-crisis-spying-imams.html, accessed on 21.10.2020.

following day for the weekly Friday congregation. The imam had already started the sermon and was reciting Surah Al-Fath, a passage from Quran that heralds a triumph to Muslims following the Treaty of *Hudaybiyyah* between the Muslims of Madinah and Makkan polytheists in the year of 628. Although the passage presents the peace treaty as a victory, its recitation in Turkish mosques became a tradition on the anniversary of military operations and incursions. Indeed, Surah Al-Fath has been recited on many occasions by the Turkish imams and members of religious orders during the military invasions in Syria and previous interventions. During the invasion of the Kurdish populated city of Afrin, Syria in 2018, the president of Diyanet, Ali Erbaş, ordered that until "Operation Olive Branch ends, all 90,000 mosques in Turkey will recite the Surah Al-Fath and pray for the success and victory of the Turkish military".[11] I have come across many examples, where Kurdish practicing Muslims in Turkey abandon Friday congregations and swear to never attend Turkish mosques anymore because of the utilitarian usage of religion for nationalist agendas.

On the occasion of Russian airstrikes in 2020, attendees of the Turkish mosque looked devastated by the fact that Russia is a more powerful actor in the field and Turkey might have come to a point of helplessness and withdrawal from the occupied territories of Syria. Compared to the previous example of the invasion of Kurdish cities in Syria, in which the mosque attendees took special pride, this time mosque-goers looked humble and helpless in joining prayers for the Turkish army with their amens. The imam, after finishing his recitation, started his prayer by saying that "this honorable congregation, as you all know, we lost thirty-three[12] of our soldiers last night. May Allah accept their martyrdom and grant us a consciousness of martyrdom". Then, he went on repeating a quest for "the consciousness of martyrdom for all of us" a few times. He continued praying that "Turkey is the last castle of

[11] Hurriyet Daily Newspaper, 21 January 2018, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/fetih-suresi-harekat-sona-erene-kadar-devam-edecek-40717096, accessed on 03 December 2020.
[12] The number of casualties reached thirty-six later that day.

Islam and any defeat of the Turkish army will result in the fall of this last castle" and "the Muslim ummah will be left an orphan". I was surprised that the prayer had this conditional clause, as if Allah does not grant what the Turkish Muslims pray for, the religion of Islam will be left without defenders. The self-esteem and confidence that imagines Allah's unconditional support is administered at the Turks' discretion, according to the imam's prayer, requires "a victory necessary against the infidels and their insidious plans in order to maintain the national and religious survival (*dini ve milli bekanın devamı için*)".

As 'the survival problem' (*beka sorunu*) had become a discursive strategy of the Islamist nationalist government in recent years and has proven especially useful to legitimize the state's violence against the Kurds during the urban conflict in 2015-2016, I expected that the prayer will draw similar parallels and eventually make a turn to hint the Kurds. I was not wrong. The imam then continued praying for unity and oneness in the country as if it were not the Turkish state occupying a foreign land, "O our Lord, do not bring out separatists and traitors among us, do not let them succeed," the imam said during his sermon. It was the moment when the Kurds were implicitly referred to, included in the discourse by virtue of their exclusion. I looked around at this point and saw no Kurds other than myself among the Turkish immigrants, who were mostly from the conservative and nationalist Black Sea region of Turkey. The imam, at the end of his prayer, made an announcement: the American Turkish community will hold a protest in front of the White House on Sunday afternoon, the Turkish mission in New York and the religious attaché are organizing transportation and other means for the citizens to take up this important mission and "fulfil their religious and national duties".

This assumed duty, however, is the main reason why religion cannot create a common platform and a mutual understanding between the Kurds and the Turks. Rather, religion creates an even further divide. In the discursive sphere, Turkish diasporic religious organizations often utilize militarist and nationalist interests. The transnational Muslim ummah in the Turkish

imagination is one that Turks are *primus inter pares* (first among equals) and the Kurds could only be a part of as a rhetorical other where proclamations of imagined unity served to further strip the Kurds of their ethno-political identities. The Turks believe that the privileged position they occupy in relation to the Kurds is a result of a legacy that they inherited from their Ottoman ancestors, who have served as leaders of the Muslim ummah for centuries. Neo-Ottomanist aspirations promoted by the current Islamist government go hand in hand with militarism and Turkish nationalism in Turkish mosques. Religion in this configuration becomes only a practical tool in the hands of a utilitarian Islamist government, fundamentally lacking the potential to bring together co-religionists under one umbrella of faith.

Kurdish Responses to Turkish Political Theology

Unlike the centrality of the mosques and religious organizations for the Turkish diaspora, the Kurdish diaspora mainly organizes around secular associations. Kurdish imams explain the abandonment of religious institutions by referencing the utilization of religion against the Kurds in the homeland and more recently the suffering of the Kurds at the hand of radical Islamist groups and terrorist organizations such as ISIS and the Turkish state's jihadist proxies in Syria. However, beginning from the early 1990s and as a result of discriminatory and nationalist attitudes, practicing Muslim Kurds disassociated themselves from Turkish mosques and started establishing their own places of worship. Kurdistan Islamic Society (Civaka Îslamî ya Kurdistanê, CIK), which was established in 1993 under the name of Kurdistan Islamic Movement, later changed its name to the CIK in 2004. This organization serves as an umbrella for around eighty Kurdish mosques across Europe, the majority of which are in Germany, France, Austria, Netherlands and Belgium. These mosques are often targeted by the Turkish

state's propaganda and are charged with being centers of terrorism and separatism;[13] often accused of exploiting the religiosity of the Kurdish people and collecting donations for the terrorist organizations (Bayraklı et al. 2019). However, these religious groups, in reality, play a vital role for practicing Kurdish Muslims living in diaspora and serve as an important hub for solidarity with Kurdish refugees and forcibly displaced people. Mele Serhildan,[14] a Kurdish imam working in Germany, explains the purpose of the Kurdish mosques as follows.

> As you know that there is DITIB in Germany that cooperates with the Turkish fascism. They have monopolized Islam for their political power. We aim to raise the consciousness among people against those who monopolize Islam and use it as tools for their colonizing interests. We want to assure and let people know that the religion of Islam is not under control of particular persons, nations and communities. Islam is a pure religion of peace and every person and nation has a place within this belief. Our aim to teach people about the real Islam. For example, if we look at the life of prophet Muhammed, we can see that Jews, Christians and polytheist people were welcomed in his mosque. When these people had problems, they asked the prophet for help to solve them. Therefore, we don't discriminate against someone's faith. We accept everyone to our mosque, who recognizes the values of humanity and who is not racist. We don't care if someone is Muslim or not. It is not that important to us. That is why we have members of different faiths and ethnicities from all four parts of Kurdistan. We have Yezidi members. It is maybe a mosque but we also have Yezidi members because everyone sees that we solve problems and do not discriminate against anyone.[15]

Compared to Turkish mosques, Kurdish mosques in Europe are more appreciative of religious and ethnic diversity. In their sermons and preaching, they use verses from the Quran

[13] https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/pkk-icin-fitre-ve-zekat-topluyorlar-185657.html, accessed on 05 December 2020.
[14] All names and exact locations are changed for the safety and security of participants.
[15] This and the following quote are obtained from Veysi Dag's unpublished manuscript (2021). I thank him for allowing me to read and cite his book before its publication.

that highlight the diversity of humanity rather than triumph and conquest. For example, Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13, is a frequent reference used in the sermons and preaching, which translates as “O humanity! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another.” This welcoming attitude and openness to other faiths and ethnicities propels Kurdish mosques to engage with the wider Kurdish community beyond Sunni Kurds, and to collaborate with members of different secular and religious organizations, such as Alevi, Yazidi, Assyrian and Jewish minorities, as well as their religious and official counterparts. Kurdish mosques in Europe are critical of the utilization of religion for political purposes, yet they believe in the importance of Kurdish religious organizations to provide religious services to the Kurds as well as support for Kurdish civil rights. Mele Azad, a Kurdish imam working in France, explains why it is important for them to provide religious services in the Kurdish language and criticizes Turkey for not allowing the Kurds to use their language in prayers.

> When we look at the Turkish regime, it instrumentalizes many Sheikhs of religious orders, imams and mosques of Diyanet for its benefits and ruling power. They have transformed religion into business, and sell and buy it in accordance with their interests. Similarly, when Saddam Hussein faced danger, he wrote on his flag that “God is great”. They use religion as an instrument to advance their power and position. In Turkish Kurdistan there are twenty million Kurds. However, Kurdish imams are not allowed to use a single Kurdish word in their preaching. In our homeland, we are not allowed to translate a verse of Quran into Kurdish[16] and let our people understand it in our own language, but we are free here and do not face restrictions because of our language. In our mosques in Europe, whose number amounts to 70 or 80 at least, we are happy that we can pray and share the religion of prophet Mohammed in our language. There are also Arab, Pakistani and black people

[16] In a previous article, I examined the utilization of the Kurdish translation of Quran, made by Diyanet, by the ruling Islamist government during the electoral campaign in 2015 (Kurt, 2019: 358).

> who visit our mosques to pray. However, we have never seen a Turkish individual coming to our mosques to pray. In their view, these mosques, which are administered by the Kurds, are the mosques of terrorists. This approach of the Turks is expressed overtly, and everyone knows it.

Objection and critique of the Kurdish imams against Turkish political theology, and efforts to build alternative and inclusive religious spaces show us that religion, in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, is not only a tool of oppressive governmentality perpetuated by the Turkish state, it has also started to serve as a platform of resistance for the Kurds. However, Turkish and Kurdish religious institutions cannot be equated in terms of the support they have and the power they hold. Turkish mosques in the diaspora are demonstratively more powerful and widespread with massive organizational, financial and political support from the Turkish government. Whereas Kurdish mosques in the diaspora rely on limited resources—mostly obtained through membership fees and donations—they operate as a conglomeration of a comparatively small number of organizations. Yet, the existence of Kurdish mosques outside of Kurdistan and the counter-hegemonic discourses of the Kurdish imams shapes the formation of a liberation theology in the making that calls for liberation from exploitation, colonial domination and the utilization of religion for political purposes (Gutierrez 1973).

Conclusion

In this paper, I investigate the role of religion among diasporic Kurdish and Turkish communities and the ways in which the Kurdish-Turkish conflict plays out within religious discourse that is presented in and legitimized by mosques—revealing the extent to which militarism and nationalism are omnipresent in Turkish mosques. Mosques for diasporic Turkish communities prevent, rather than engender, shared understandings of faith or common grounds for mutual dialogue between Kurds and Turks living in the diaspora. Upon discussing the political imagination of Turkish Islamism and the exclusion of Kurds from the imagined

Muslim ummah that Turkish religious discourse promotes itself as the flag-bearer of Islamic custom writ large. As such, I question the limitations of this imagination and argue that despite the discursive strategy of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) to place itself as the inheritor of a legacy that assumes its authority from the Ottoman empire, the Turkish state assumes the position of leader for the Muslim ummah. The influence of the AKP in practice, however, is curtailed by predominant nationalist discourses and practices that systematically exclude Kurds from this imagined community. On the one hand, I argued that this exclusion marks the boundaries of Turkish nationalist political theology, which is rooted in neo-Ottoman nostalgia that romanticizes Turkish-Muslim leadership in the world. Hence, I demonstrate that the existence of the Kurds, by virtue of their exclusion from this imaginary worldview, unravels the limitations of pan-Islamist discourse—indicating that ethnic and political identities are as decisive as religious belonging in transnational contexts. On the other hand, I present examples of counter-hegemonic discourses emerging from Kurdish imams who challenge predominant assumptions and accusations made by the Turkish imams and ideologies that circulate within Turkish mosque communities. By expanding the interpretation of religious texts in defense of Kurdish civil rights, Kurdish imams are also making room for a plurality of Muslim perspectives excluded from the overly militarized and nationalist rhetoric espoused in Turkish mosques in the diaspora.

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