CHAPTER TWO

MINORITIES IN TURKEY:
MINORITIES AND THE BUILDING OF THE TURKISH IDENTITY

Introduction

Nations are structures that can be dated and analyzed, and are under an ongoing process of restructuring as they are in continuous interaction with their surroundings, other nations, and their developments. In other words, determining the conditions for loyalty to a nation is closely related to the context that applies to the moment. This is also the case for the Turkish nation, whose loyalty criteria were defined ambiguously and somewhat obscurely in the early 20th century.

The building of the Turkish nation was fairly belated in comparison to similar movements in the Ottoman Empire. The non-Muslim confessional communities, millets under the Ottoman regime, had retained their religious attributes due to this system, and evolved into ethnic and religious groups that became nationalized. Forming separate pockets of autonomy within the empire, these groups struggled against the governmental authority, associated with the Turks, and ascended to nationhood. The concept of “Turks” had been in circulation since the establishment of the Ottoman State in the 13th century. However, during the classical ages of the empire (15th to 17th centuries), Turks were the common peasants in the eyes of the elite. The ruling class of the Ottoman Empire consisted of Turks, Muslim converts and the clergy of all religious communities.

Following the “uprisings” for independence, with religious, and then national motives, Ottoman thinkers and the elite found themselves confronted with peoples that were dedicated to the cause of independence, and started looking for ways to save the Empire, or more accurately, the intermittently despotic and constitutional monarchy. Three ways

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1 It must be noted that the Millet System is not the ONLY social framework in which the ottoman society was organized. There are other social structures as geographical hierarchy or professionnal stratification which cross the Millet system. In other words this system is not a mechanical and pyramidal social classification one.
prevailed. These three ideologies also shaped the thought system of 20th century Turkey.2

The Ottomanism movement called for the restructuring of the Ottoman social structure based on religious or both religious and ethnic differences, and the establishment of a new “nation”—the Ottoman nation where all these differences would lose their reason to exist. The new Ottoman nation would be founded on a social structure where the loyalties of the individuals would lie not with a religious or ethnic community, but in Ottomanhood. This required the further Ottomanization of Ottoman history, accentuating the difference of the Ottoman nation from Western nations. This project seemed implausible for a number of reasons: First of all, the non-Muslim communities of the empire had long since started the process to become ethnically autonomous, with institutionalization to follow in natural progression. This meant that it was too late to support the cause of Ottomanism where all differences would be eliminated (the support was never wholehearted anyway). Secondly, the preeminent figures, particularly religious leaders in non-Muslim communities were naturally not in favor of the elimination of a millet-based society because such a change would mean the loss of their political, legal and even economic privileges. Perhaps most importantly, the Ottoman elite realized that the Western civilization was far advanced in “modernization” compared to the Ottoman empire, and believed it was superior in this respect. Therefore, the idea to posit the Ottoman nation against the Western nations became too fraught with risk.

Another movement attempted to convene those who wished for a front that stood against Christianity. This Islamist movement aimed for the establishment of a confessional community that would not only oppose Western Christianity, but also be positioned against the non-Muslim population of the Empire, which defined their differences (partially) on a religious basis. According to the supporters of this movement, the fact that the Ottoman Sultan was also the Caliph could aid the movement’s success, and the Ottoman monarchy could be saved with the cooperation of all Muslims. But this movement too met with obstacles: non-Turkish Muslims (particularly Near Eastern Arabs) were already attempting to build their own nations against Ottoman sovereignty, which made a Muslim alliance impossible. Meanwhile, the idea of building a secular society that was based more on regional than religious loyalty was advancing.

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