



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Turkey Continues to Honor Its Racists

by Dr. Efrat Aviv

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,904, January 26, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The true danger facing modern Turkey is not religious extremism but ultra-nationalism. While other nations tear down their monuments to racists, Turkey continues to honor its own.

In November 2020, the Istanbul metropolitan municipality, led by Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), named a park in Istanbul after Hüseyin Nihal Atsız. Atsız (1905–1975) was an unabashed racist antisemite, Turkey's most prominent Nazi sympathizer, and one of the most controversial figures in the history of Turkish political thought. The request was made by members of another Turkish opposition party, The Good Party (İyi Parti). The park is located in Istanbul's Köyiçi region of Maltepe district, where Atsız spent most of his life.

Atsız is also identified as a Pan-Turkist (Pan-Turkism is a movement that emerged in the 1880s among the Turkic intellectuals of Azerbaijan and the Ottoman Empire with the aim of culturally and politically unifying all Turkic peoples) and pan-Turanist (a late 19th- and early 20th-century movement to politically and culturally unite all Turkic, Tatar, and Uralic peoples living in Turkey and across Eurasia). Atsız was a prolific writer, novelist, poet, philosopher, and publisher of several magazines.

According to Atsız, the Turkish nation consists of members of the Turkish race. Jews are thus not part of the Turkish nation no matter how long they may have lived in its territory. According to him, a Jew of Istanbul can never be a Turk, but a distant Kirghiz is a Turk by definition because Turkish blood flows through his veins.

Atsız wrote several articles accusing Jews of being unrestrainedly greedy and nationally disloyal, and of being communist and cosmopolitan at the same time. Atsız labeled Jews and communists Turkey's two main rivals, and

claimed in an issue of *Orhun* published in November 1933 that “Germany has become the first country to solve the Jewish problem.” In 1944, he wrote that Jews are the secret enemy of all nations.

Motivated by the writings by Atsız and other antisemitic authors, Turks targeted the Jews of eastern Thrace in pogroms from June 21 through July 4, 1934, collectively known as the “Thrace Incidents” (Trakya Olayları). The pogroms began with a boycott of Jewish businesses and descended to physical attacks on Jewish-owned buildings, which were first looted, then set on fire. Jewish men were beaten and some Jewish women reportedly raped. Terrorized by this turn of events, many Jews fled the region.

Naming public spaces after ultra-nationalist or racist figures is not new in Turkey. In 1998, Fenerbahçe Stadium, a football arena located in the Kadıköy district of Istanbul, was named after Fenerbahçe’s legendary chairman (1934-1950) and Turkey’s fifth PM, Şükrü Saracoğlu. Saracoğlu (1887-1953) was the Turkish FM during the early stages of WWII. He signed the German-Turkish Treaty of Friendship in 1941, which would prevent Turkish involvement in the war.

During WWII, the Turkish government was inspired by the antisemitism of the Nazi regime to enact various laws against minorities, especially Jews. The most notorious was 1942’s “Varlık Vergisi,” or capital or wealth tax, which had the stated aim of raising funds for the country’s defense in case of an eventual entry into the war. A high rate was set for all Jews, and sometimes they could not afford to pay it. It was discovered later that the committees administering the tax were instructed to charge Jews five times what Muslim Turks were charged.

Atsız still has many fans in Turkey. His commemorative ceremony, which is conducted by youngsters from the İyi Parti, is held in Istanbul, an event that attracts members of all other parties as well. As Turkish nationalism has grown more permeated by Islam and neo-Ottomanism, Atsız’s “pure nationalism”—or “ethnic nationalism,” as some of his adherents would put it—attracts many Turks. But İyi Parti youth also embrace Atsız as a symbol of secular-nationalist opposition to Erdoğan and other nationalist Islamist politicians, especially from the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) party.

A look at the development of religion and religious life in Turkey makes one thing very clear about Turkey. As recent studies show, 73% of graduates of the İmam Hatip Schools (vocational schools to train government-employed imams) would not study at the institution again if given a choice. Only 38% of respondents said they chose to attend İmam Hatip schools of their own volition, while 51% said they made the choice at the request of their families.

People aged 15-29 described themselves as less “religiously conservative” than older generations and less religious than the same age group a decade earlier.

Despite more than a decade of effort by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) to mold a generation of pious Turks, the country’s youth appear to be turning away from religion. In a country where around half the 82-million-strong population is under 30, even small changes in attitude can have a dramatic impact on Turkish politics and society in the future.

The real peril facing modern Turkey is not religion, as one might think, but nationalism or ultra-nationalism. Whether that message is delivered via religion (MHP) or by secular voices (Atsız), ultra-nationalist and racist tendencies are very popular in contemporary Turkey. While other countries tear down their statues of racists, Turkey continues to bestow honor upon them.

Dr. Efrat Avio is a senior lecturer in the Dept. of General History at Bar-Ilan University and a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. She is the author of Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism in Turkey: From Ottoman Rule to AKP (Routledge 2017).