

**Atatürk's Citizens:  
Examining Turkish American Diasporic Identities**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the role of Kemalism in Turkish American diasporic identities and asks how the ideology has been reconstructed in an American diaspora context, in response to transnational pressures. The analysis relies on data from interviews conducted with a specific population of first generation Turkish Americans in the Southeast Michigan region, as well as participant observation carried out at a Michigan-based Turkish cultural organization. I argue that Kemalism is central to Turkish American diasporic identity and has been reconstructed in three main forms in diaspora: as an act of belonging in American society, an act of cultural retention in diaspora, and a response to a loss of legitimacy in Turkish society. By considering how Turkish American experiences in American society have influenced their embrace of Kemalism, I highlight how long-distance nationalism is a phenomenon that evolves in response to transnational pressures. With my findings, I attempt to complicate previous studies of long-distance nationalism by highlighting how Kemalist Turkish Americans present a unique example to diaspora studies, and by emphasizing how long-distance nationalism is a transnational phenomenon inextricably linked to not only home country pressures but also domestic host country dynamics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every year on the 29th of October, in a conference room in suburban Southeast Michigan, the Turkish American Cultural Association of Michigan, or TACAM, hosts its annual “Republic Day Ball” in honor of Turkish Independence Day. The room is adorned with Turkish flags, as well as many posters and a life-size cardboard cut-out of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish Republic. While the event serves as a way for Turkish families to mingle with plenty of food and music, it is started off by talks from community leaders and local politicians. The opening remarks, which proceed after a performance of both the Turkish and American national anthems, serve to acquaint any unknowing visitors with the history of the Turkish Republic and the contributions of its founder Atatürk. According to TACAM and many Turks, it is a story of civilizational triumph- one of a modern, secular, and Western-friendly leader who defeated the backwards Muslim leaders of the Ottoman Empire. The remarks are also meant to emphasize how the values of the Kemalism and the Turkish Republic, and consequently Turkish Americans, are compatible with those of American society. Friendship between members of the Turkish American community and Americans is emphasized, in addition to information about how Turkish Americans are contributing to their local communities. While this event represents a small glimpse into one subset of Turkish Americans, it stands as a fascinating example of diaspora dynamics, where the forces of home-country politics play out within an American diaspora community, eager to organize and present themselves as productive, ideologically coherent members of American society while embracing the secular nationalist ideology of their home state.

I am interested in examining Turkish American diasporic identity, specifically in the case of Kemalist Turkish Americans who strongly identify with and organize around Kemalism, or the official secular nationalist ideology of the Turkish Republic. This population of Turkish Americans is of particular interest, as the broad and diverse literature on Turkish diasporas has traditionally overlooked Kemalist Turks. Therefore, with this study I hope better understand why Kemalism, as an ideology that is typically analyzed solely within the national context of Turkey, is so prevalent in Turkish American identities and so central to their local and community organizing. In order to answer these questions, I attempt to incorporate a transnational viewpoint which considers not only how developments in Turkey, or the ‘home country’, are influencing diasporic identities but also developments in the ‘host country’ of the United States. I find that both factors are significant to understanding the role of Kemalism in the Turkish American diaspora. I argue that pressures from American society in the form of feelings of marginalization and alienation have led Turkish American actors to embrace Kemalism as an act of belonging and cultural retention in the diaspora, while pressures from their home country in the form of a loss of legitimacy in Turkish society have also fueled an embrace of Kemalism. With these findings, I attempt to contextualize Turkish American diasporic identities, illustrating that they are complex in that they evolve in tandem with transnational experiences and developments.

### Background

There is a rich literature on Turkish migration and diaspora populations originating in Turkey. From Turkish immigrants and diaspora communities in Germany and France (Mandel 2008; Yurdakul 2009) to Kurds, who are an oppressed ethnic

minority in Turkey, and Alevis, a marginalized sect of Shia Islam, scholars have tackled a range of communities and national contexts (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Sökefeld 2008). These groups demonstrate the diversity of the Turkish diaspora experience and that the Kemalist Turkish Americans in my analysis are a highly specific and relatively homogenous political and cultural group. In focusing in on Kemalists, I attempt to analyze a very specific population which has been relatively overlooked by the broad literature on the Turkish diaspora.

The specific population of Turkish Americans in this study are by no means representative of the entire Turkish American population. Kemalist Turkish Americans can be understood as individuals who ideologically align with Kemalism, or the secular nationalist ideology of the state of Turkey. Kemalism is the ideology created and propagated by the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who led the Turkish independence movement after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and formed the modern Turkish Republic in 1923. His ideology is one that relies on a modernization paradigm and which promotes Westernization, nationalism, and perhaps most centrally laïcité, which advocates for state control over religious practice and fundamentally believes that religion should be practiced privately and individually. (Şenay 2013). For the purposes of this study, other significant elements of Kemalism include an embrace of Western models of democratic citizenship and secular democracy; Atatürk was heavily influenced by Western Enlightenment ideals and was motivated to model the Turkish Republic after Western European models of democracy (Içduygu, Çolak and Soyarik 1999). While Kemalism is a multifaceted phenomenon which can be seen in a number of forms and contexts, for the purposes of this analysis it is important to recognize it as a

political identity which persists today. I classify my respondents as Kemalists, or people who define their political and cultural orientations around their Kemalist views, including a strong belief in laïcité and support for the political and historical legacy of Atatürk. They stand in contrast to other ideological groups within Turkish society, such as Islamists or ultra-nationalists who have differing views on how the state should control religion or about the role of religion in public life. Kemalists specifically define themselves as being in opposition to Islamist groups in Turkish society, and in particular the Islamist governing party, the AK Party, which has been in power in Turkey since the early 2000s. It is this political context which is crucial to understanding why Kemalism is a distinct category of political and cultural identity, and why it is valuable to study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Acts of belonging to both the host and home societies

I first consider the general literature on immigrant to understand how diaspora groups may mobilize or rely on certain identities, ideologies, and beliefs to negotiate belonging in their host societies. Scholars have previously considered the ways in which immigrant groups have mediated belonging through other identities. For example, some have examined how religious identity has been used as a means for expressing and feeling belonging in the host country, while also linking immigrants to a broader transnational religious movement (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008; Hepner 2003). Pentecostal Christian immigrants in Germany did not articulate their belonging to German society through narratives of citizenship and multiculturalism but rather “believed they belonged in Germany because of their status as believers” and their membership in a global Pentecostal Christian movement (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008, p. 204). In the Libyan diaspora, it was a strong ethno nationalist identity which created “a sense of belonging to the Libyan nation together with a sense of loyalty ... towards the ‘homeland’” (Aluni 2019, pp. 257-258).

Understandings of citizenship can be a powerful tool of belonging for diaspora actors in the host society. Scholars of immigration in America have explored how immigrants tend to reject an assimilationist, ‘melting pot’ view of immigration, embracing instead a view of multiculturalism which grants them belonging in diverse American society while allowing them to retain their cultural, ethnic, religious, and national identities (Bloemraad 2006; Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul 2008). In France, Turkish immigrant activists also embrace a hyphenated understanding of



citizenship in order to demand equal legal rights as well as cultural and ethnic distinction in the eyes of the French state (Demirci 2018; Kastoryano 2002). Ideologies and activism surrounding citizenship are thus influential factors in how diaspora actors negotiate belonging in both their home and host societies. This begs the question of how Kemalism relates to these examples and how it may play a similar role in diasporic identity and negotiations of belonging.

### Long-distance nationalism and the anomaly of Kemalism

Next I narrow in on the literature of long-distance nationalism which is a significant component of diasporic identity. The literature on long-distance nationalism has been an influential part of diaspora studies since the 1990s and can be broadly defined as “a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographic locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home” (Glick Schiller 2005, p. 570). It has been studied in a plethora of diaspora contexts around the world, from the Tibetan, Eritrean, East Timorese, Lithuanian diasporas, and more (Misra 2010; Hepner 2010; Wise 2004; Ciubrinskas 2013). Within these explorations, for instance Ciubrinskas’ (2013) examination of Lithuanian long-distance nationalism, the diaspora’s relation to the state of its home country plays an influential role in the shaping of nationalism. As many Lithuanian Americans had settled in the United States after leaving Lithuania during the Soviet period, central to their diasporic identity was a “commitment to homeland nationalism expressed in the feeling of duty and mission to do what is possible to retain the ‘national culture’ challenged by Soviet occupation” (Ciubrinskas 2013, p.118). Here we see how long-distance nationalism is articulated,

often motivated by a desire to retain cultural or national distinction, in response to pressures from the political situation in the home country.

Furthermore, the aforementioned examples are all similar in that they examine long-distance nationalism predominantly within diaspora populations in exile; these groups usually have had to flee their home countries due to violent conflict or state repression, or might have been targeted on the basis of their minority ethnic and religious identities by the state. While not all studies of long-distance nationalism have focused on groups in political exile, which we will explore further later, some scholars such as Skrbiš (1999) have argued that “long-distance nationalism develops only if an emigrant population contains a critical mass of political exiles that has experienced a loss of status in their homeland” (as cited in Şenay 2013). Glick Schiller’s (2005) broad discussions of examples of long-distance nationalism emphasize political and separatist struggles taken up by diasporas who are at odds with the regimes in their home countries. These scholars emphasize the ways that the political pressure of exile, brought on from individuals’ ties to their home country, is influential in motivating and shaping the development of nationalism.

These examples are notably different from the case of Turkish long-distance nationalism in the form of Kemalism, however. While it operates in the same timbre as the aforementioned examples, such as through transnational political ties, desires of cultural retention, and maintaining national distinction in the diaspora, the case of Kemalism is unique from other exiled populations, specifically in its relation to the Turkish state. In her study on Kemalism in the Turkish Australian diaspora, Banu Şenay (2013) works through this theoretical complication, explaining that Kemalist diaspora

actors cannot be categorized as a traditional exiled population, as they migrated for the purpose of seeking economic opportunities rather than due to persecution on the basis of their identities. Thus she explains that “what causes the long-distance nationalism of Kemalists is not their minority status but their ideological affiliations and emotional commitments” (Şenay 2013, p. 379). She continues to discuss how a loss of legitimacy in Turkey in the wake of the Islamist AKP government has led Kemalist elites to “no longer occupy unchallenged hegemonic or professionally distinct positions in Turkish politics” which has prompted a unique threat narrative within the diaspora (Şenay 2013, p. 379). Therefore the Kemalist case stands out from the majority of studies in the field of long-distance nationalism, as the diaspora population in question has a different relationship to the state than those of traditional exiled groups.

#### Kemalism in the diaspora

Lastly, I consider the how scholars have approached the specific example of Kemalism in diaspora. Many scholars of Kemalism in the 21st century consider the phenomenon in context of the changing political sphere in Turkey. Not only has Kemalism continued to take on a new urgency for secularist Turks who feel threatened by the Islamist government, but it has become a powerful force of nostalgia (Özyürek 2006). Longing for the time before the current Islamist regime, Kemalism becomes a “sentimental state of longing and nostalgia for the past” (Şenay 2013, p. 382). This is reflected across the diaspora through a number of mediums, including local organizational activism, media consumption and circulation, and in individual practices.

Another scholar who focuses more generally on Turkish American diasporic identity is Cameron Thibos (2014), whose work narrows in on how Turkish nationalist

causes, such as denial of the Armenian Genocide, have become a central tenet of Turkish identity and activism in the diaspora. In order to explain the prevalence of this phenomenon, then, he employs the analytical framework of competitive identity development, explaining that the struggle for recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Armenian diaspora has prompted an intense Turkish opposition which has “fundamentally shaped the construction of Turkish American diasporic consciousness” (Thibos 2014, p. 5). With this example, we see how Turkish nationalism can be employed within a diaspora context in response to domestic pressures; not only do Turkish American actors embrace and mobilize around Kemalist ideology in response to the changing political situation in Turkey, but also when faced with competitive identity threats from other diaspora groups in the United States.

While Thibos considers the Turkish diaspora in the United States, other scholars of the Turkish diaspora have looked at Kemalism in different national contexts. Working in Australia, Banu Şenay (2013) similarly examines Kemalism in the context of diaspora in her study of Kemalists in the Turkish Australian diaspora. Just as Kemalist actors are threatened by the rise of Islamism and the Islamist government of Turkey, she finds that “they also wish to live in an Australia sterilised against ‘out of place’ Muslims” (Şenay 2013, p. 388). Their Kemalist beliefs are also in conversation with the political changes in Australian society, as they feel threatened by the presence of other Muslim immigrants who do not conform to their secular ideals. This anti-Islamic/Islamist sentiment amongst Kemalist actors, who differentiate themselves from other Muslims because of their secular beliefs, is consistent within studies of Kemalist political discourse in Turkey and the broader diaspora (Arat-Koç 2017; Aydar 2018; Yorukoğlu 2017).

## METHODS

The primary methods of data collection were interviews and supplemental participant observation at a Turkish American cultural organization. These methods were selected for their ability to capture in-depth the responses and views of a narrow, specific population.

### Interviews

Interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection for the project as they resulted in the most comprehensive, detailed perspective on the views and identities of subjects. The format of interviews allowed for greater flexibility and more in-depth responses than a survey format and 13 interviews were conducted with Turkish American candidates, each of which lasted about 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in person or via phone, and were kept completely confidential- identifying information was not collected or shared with others besides myself. Data was collected through the recording of interviews upon the consent of the interviewee, and were later destroyed upon completion of the analysis. The format of the interviews also allowed for significant flexibility in asking questions, allowing for a space where interviewees could be asked to elaborate upon their answers and their views more clearly when needed. The personal, casual environment of the interviews allowed interviewees to respond with a mixture of Turkish and English, if they saw fit. While some interviewees might have been uncomfortable sharing political views or opinions, the casual and familiar interview format lessened this tension and created an environment conducive to openness and honesty

The interviewees were primarily first generation Turkish Americans, of differing genders and from ages 30-50. The study only considered first-generation Americans and did not include second-generation Americans, as the dynamics and views presented by both groups would have been very different. To allow for a comprehensive discussion of one group, the study opted to include only first-generation Turkish Americans, as a way of focusing on their unique experiences and relationship with national identity. Due to the demographics of the Turkish American community in Southeast Michigan and its first-generation members, the interviewees were all of middle to upper middle class backgrounds. Many of them had originally immigrated to the United States with the intention of pursuing graduate-level education or similar professional fellowships at universities.

The homogenous nature of the class backgrounds of the community was a consequence of the nature of the Turkish American community in the Southeast Michigan area, as most its members are of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, much of the Turkish American community in the area, including the interview subjects, are ethnically Turkish and are of Muslim faith but identify as secular. This is an important characteristic to mention as there are a minority of Turkish Americans in the Turkish American community of Southeastern Michigan who identify as conservative or religious Muslims. While this dynamic will be discussed later in the analysis, it should be noted that religious differences and socioeconomic divisions are present in the Turkish community.

While the cultural organization I consider in this project chose to identify explicitly as secular, there are several smaller Turkish cultural organizations in Southeast

Michigan which organize more specifically around religious practice and tradition. Initially, one of such organizations was reached out to for the purposes of this project, however they did not respond to requests for interviews. Therefore, this study exclusively considers the views and identities of a specific subset of the Turkish American diaspora, which have socio economic and religious identities. This study does not contend to represent the views and experiences of all Turkish Americans, but intentionally chooses to explore the identities of a significant subset of the Turkish American community, as opposed to taking on a comparative approach. A comparative look at the identities of Turkish Americans of differing religious and ethnic backgrounds could be the subject of a future study.

#### Participant Observation

In addition to interviews, roughly 10 hours of ethnographic observation of a local Turkish American organization was conducted to supplement interview data. The material yielded from observation was valuable to the project as it helped contextualize some of the responses of interviewees, especially as a majority of the interviewees were also members of the organization chosen for observation. The majority of ethnographic observation, over 6 hours, took place at a well-attended event organized by the Turkish cultural association to celebrate Turkish Independence Day. I chose the event it reflected certain understandings about the place of Turkish Americans in American society and the role of Turkish Americans in the Turkish national sphere. It also allowed for in-depth conversations with attendees at the event, who were almost exclusively members of the Turkish American community, which was a relevant supplement to interview data.

A limitation of the ethnographic approach was my position within the community as a potential intruder. While I have a personal relation and connection to the community, it might have been difficult for me to adopt a critical lens, as someone closely familiar with the social and political context of the event. Additionally, another limitation might have arisen from the fact that a small number of attendees, approximately 5 out of 200 people, knew that I was there to observe for a project, as they had been previously interviewed for the project. This awareness of the observer might have prompted them to act or behave differently in the face of scrutiny.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I examine the role of Kemalism to Turkish American diasporic identity and how transnational pressures shape Turkish diasporic identity in the United States. I argue that Kemalism is significant to Turkish American diasporic identity as because it functions as an act of belonging, as a representation of Turkish cultural identity, and as a response to a perceived loss of legitimacy in Turkish society. It becomes clear that Kemalism has been reconstructed in the diaspora in response to the unique transnational pressures put on Turkish Americans from both host and home country political contexts. I will now discuss and analyze these three elements of the formation of Turkish American diasporic identity.

### Kemalism as an act of belonging in the United States

In the following section I argue that Kemalism is an integral part of Turkish American negotiations of belonging. In response to their perception of alienation and fundamental misunderstanding from their American peers, respondents felt the need to reclaim their image and present themselves as productive members of society, and therefore worthy of belonging. To accomplish this mission, they turned to Kemalism as a method of belonging since they believed it exemplified Western values and overlapped with Americanness. These ideals were significant as they revealed how Turkish Americans' notions of belonging were tied to a perception of their own Kemalist identities as being compatible with American society and worthy of belonging.

The need to negotiate belonging came about and took on a new sense of urgency because of respondents' alienation and perceptions of their negative image as Turks in American society. Interviews revealed that Turkish Americans were greatly concerned

with how their American peers and society viewed them, based on ideas expressed through media narratives or opinions shared in passing conversations. Firstly, many respondents believed that Americans simply were not informed about Turkey, including its geographic location, its political history, and its current political climate. Others expressed that many Americans were just recently beginning to learn about Turkey through news headlines regarding its foreign policy and political developments, such as its role in the Syrian conflict or the actions of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. These perceptions were largely acquired from and based on personal experiences, anecdotes and encounters that my interviewees had had with American peers. For instance, two interviewees stated:

I think all the Americans know where Turkey is now, from the news. When I first moved in the late 90s, we weren't on the news that often ... Turkey was a little bit more Western-oriented, before this current president and it was almost like a model that a Muslim country could be also secular. So people I think knew and admired how Turkey was moving ... Now, they know about it because of the other issues and struggles that the region is going through. (Interviewee 13, November 2019)

I don't think they have any idea about Turkey. Like I can tell 80% [of Americans] think that we are an Arabic [sic.] country. Just one of those Muslim countries like Iran, like we have to cover our heads, we don't have any accessibility to modern life, we don't have democracy, our education sucks. They think we are in the middle of nowhere, just one of those Arabic countries, and we are living in a very bad situation and riding our camels. (Interviewee 10, November 2019)

These experiences illustrate how immigrants internalize host country narratives about themselves when conceptualizing their own immigrant identities. Studies on Turkish immigrants in Germany have also explored how “Turkish immigrants grapple with and internalize the ways that Germans portray them” (Ehrkamp 2006, p.1686). Ehrkamp illustrates how Turkish immigrants would often reference and respond to political debates regarding their role in German society as immigrants, including their

categorization as ‘guest workers’ or unassimilated ‘others’ in German society. In response to their perceived alienation and contested relationship with dominant narratives, she determines that Turkish immigrants attempt to “assert their belonging in German society and cities by participating in local politics and claiming their place in German society” (Ehrkamp 2006, p. 1674). Similarly, we can observe how Turkish Americans have internalized narratives regarding themselves, which in turn has mobilized them to seek new ways of claiming belonging.

Hence my interviewees combatted negative narratives by promoting Kemalism and Ataturk’s legacy through education and recognition initiatives. Many advocated that Turkish Americans, and their representative organizations such as TACAM, should work to educate Americans about the “true nature” or “origins” of Turkey as a country founded on Kemalist principles. They believed that educating the American public about Turkey’s secular, Western values, among other things, would put forth a positive image of Turks, showcase their compatibility with American values and ‘Americanness,’ and therefore their worthiness of belonging. Their conception of the overlap between American and Kemalist values can be seen in statements regarding respondents’ ideas about ‘Americanness.’

America is a united people, a united nation. It has many ethnic people, many religious people. All laws of the United States are based on secularity, they don’t decide based on ethnicity or religion. So it [Ataturk’s secularism] is quite appropriate to the United States. (Interviewee 3, October 2019)

The connections Turkish Americans made between Kemalism and belonging in the US were also reflected in the work of the organization TACAM. In addition to organizing programs for the local Turkish community, TACAM leaders believed it was their role to dispel negative notions about Turks while also negotiating belonging in

American society. As one respondent put it, TACAM must dispel negative notions and “show we are a part of this society and Western civilization.” (Interviewee 4, October 2019) The negotiation of belonging through an embrace of Kemalism was also reflected in TACAM’s outreach initiatives. One such initiative was the issuing of proclamations to local city and state governments to designate October 29th as Turkish Republic Day. TACAM leaders expressed that this initiative helped involve Turkish Americans in local government as well as bring the issues they care about into the American public sphere. One leader from TACAM stated that these provided “an important way of us reaching to the people living around us saying we are here, we are celebrating this day and join us in celebrating this day.” (Interviewee 4, October 2019). This mission to stake a claim for Turkish Americans in American society is a negotiation of belonging.

Furthermore, the proclamations themselves contain language which illustrates the link between Kemalism and Americanness by highlighting Turkey’s secularism and Western alignment. The following are direct quotes from a proclamation issued by TACAM to the state government of Michigan, recognizing October 29th as Turkish Republic Day.

“Turkey is the only secular democracy in the Muslim world and has made significant contributions to United States foreign policy”

“Turkey was one of the first allies to show unconditional solidarity with our Nation in the war against terrorism and has thrice commanded the International Peacekeeping in Afghanistan”

The proclamations present a valuable look into how Turkish Americans view themselves in relation to American society and negotiate their belonging in the process. They reveal the kinds of traits which Turkish Americans believe to be positive, and more broadly, what values or characteristics they believe make an immigrant community worthy of

belonging to American society. In line with Kemalist ideology, Turkish Americans believe that the secular, democratic origins of their state, its contributions to the West, and its alliances with the United States make them worthy of being recognized as equal, productive members of American society. It is also significant that TACAM as an organization chooses Turkish Independence Day, a nationalist holiday that celebrates Ataturk, as the day most worthy of recognition by their fellow Americans. I will return to this notion in later discussions of the interconnected nature of Turkish cultural identity and Kemalism.

Similarly, another TACAM initiative which illustrated the use of Kemalism in claims of belonging to the United States was the recently established Ataturk Park. The park itself features an open green area and a walking path, and more notably a small bust of Ataturk himself in the center of the space. Many respondents were impressed at this TACAM initiative and deemed it valuable not just as a contribution to the Turkish American community but as an educational and promotional tool for their American peers. One interviewee stated that:

It's very important to me because it's good to educate the society of the US about a great military and political statesman like Ataturk. I think it's a point of pride that we Turks have a person like that ... I think it's good cultural advocacy to spread knowledge. (Interviewee 11, November 2019)

TACAM members' rationales for creating the initiative revealed that they saw Ataturk as a point of pride in their identities. They expressed the desire to introduce the figure of Ataturk to Americans because of the importance of his values and accomplishments. Both the proclamations and the Park showcase how Turkish Americans engage with the American public sphere through a promotion of Kemalism in order to respond to and negate their feelings of alienation from American society; they highlight the values and

history they believe to be compatible with Americanness and which make them worthy of belonging. This helps us understand how in a transnational context, Kemalism has been reconstructed as Turkish Americans lay claim to the ideology in response to pressures from their host country.

### Kemalism as an act of cultural retention

Another new reconstruction of Kemalism in a diaspora context is its significance as a cultural identity marker of Turkishness for Turkish Americans. In other words, my respondents believed Kemalism to be an integral part of Turkishness, and thus promoted it as an act of cultural retention in the diaspora. This act of cultural retention and its significance is a characteristic of diaspora contexts and can be understood as a response to domestic pressures from the host country.

Firstly, we can observe the overlapping nature of Turkish American cultural identity and Kemalism in many responses of my Kemalist interviewees. Most respondents did not make a clear distinction between celebrating Turkish-state sponsored nationalist events, such as Independence Day or “National Sovereignty and Children’s Day”, or cultural and religious events such as Eid al-Adha (known in as Kurban Bayramı in Turkish) or Eid al-Fitr (known as Şeker Bayramı in Turkish). This way of thinking was also echoed by TACAM as an organization and its leaders. I argue that the lack of distinction between national and cultural events is evidence of the role of Kemalism in Turkish American understandings of Turkish cultural identity and ‘Turkishness.’ The ways that my respondents centralized Kemalism as a crucial, defining aspect of their cultural identities aligns with the Turkish nationalist articulation of categories of nation, ethnicity, culture, and language. Therefore, the presence of Kemalist or nationalist ideals

or celebrations was never questioned or challenged for my respondents and for the members of TACAM which I interviewed.

Given how integral Kemalism was to Turkish cultural identity for my Kemalist respondents, we can thus understand the prevalence of Kemalism as an act of cultural promotion and retention for Turkish Americans in the diaspora. This diasporic dynamic became apparent in respondents' discussions of wanting to "pass down" Kemalism to their children. All interviewees were first-generation Turkish Americans, born in Turkey but naturalized as US citizens, and almost all of them had children who were born and raised primarily in the United States. Many respondents answered that one of their main reasons for being involved in the Turkish American community was wanting their children to grow up around the Turkish language and Turkish culture. Many stated that they were involved in TACAM specifically so that they could bring their children to cultural and national events. They placed great importance on not only educating their children in the Turkish language and culture, but also the values and norms of Kemalism, as well as the role of Atatürk in Turkish history.

It's one of the main reasons we go to national events, because we grew up with them in Turkey. They are also important events because they emphasize important values not only in our culture, but also universally. They emphasize democracy, human rights, freedom. For instance, the upcoming event is the celebration of the Republic, the establishment of the Republic in Turkey. It's not just about the Republic but it comes with a lot of different values, and we also want to emphasize those and we want the children to remember those as well. (Interviewee 7, October 2019)

I argue that this is evidence of how cultural identity or retention takes on increased importance in a diaspora context. For first-generation Turkish Americans, who expressed that "passing down" Turkish culture to their children was of significance to them, Kemalism takes on an additional importance to retain Turkishness for their American

children. The overlap between Kemalism and cultural identity is better understood, then, in a diasporic context where it takes on a new importance in light of being in diaspora and away from the home country. A similar example can be seen in the Lithuanian diaspora, where diasporic identity largely relied on “cherishing and perpetuating nation-ness in terms of culture, language, traditions, and heritage” (Ciubrinskas 2013). Teaching children the Lithuanian language, passing down cultural traditions as well as supporting the Lithuanian nation became central aspects of community life and practice for Lithuanian Americans. In the Lithuanian example, however, such activities took on an increased importance in light of Soviet occupation of Lithuania, with many diaspora exiles believing that they would one day return to Lithuania after the fall of the Soviet Union. Turkish Americans present a unique case of diasporic identity, as they may exhibit some of the same beliefs and practices as exiled diasporic groups who are at odds with their home country states, while not being in exile and in fact actively supporting the Turkish nationalist project. The unique case of Kemalist Turkish Americans to studies of long-distance nationalism and diasporic identity thus presents a theoretical challenge and will be further explored in the discussion to follow.

#### Kemalism as a response to a loss of legitimacy in Turkish society

Lastly, the significance and prevalence of Kemalism in the Turkish American diasporic identity must be understood in the context of Kemalist Turkish Americans’ loss of legitimacy in Turkish society. Alienated and threatened by the political changes which have taken place in Turkey over the last twenty years, Turkish Americans who identify with Kemalism, or as secular Turks, have increasingly felt the need to respond to threats to their identity. My respondents embraced Kemalism in new ways as they felt political



pressures from their home country, especially as the diaspora context allowed them to express their beliefs freely without fear of backlash from the Turkish government.

One very significant reality is the alienation and frustration that Turkish Americans feel from the developments in Turkish politics over the years. Respondents felt that since the Islamist AK Party came to power, Turkey had undergone severe changes in its cultural, religious makeup as well as its orientation towards other countries.

One interviewee commented that:

There's a Turkey that I left 15 years ago and there's another Turkey now. Our image is not good and as a government, they are making it worse. They are not spending any time for our image. We are doing many embarrassing things, our democracy is not working, the judicial system is not working. (Interviewee 10, November 2019)

These ideas were largely reflected in their understandings of their current image in American society, such as Turks being seen as Middle Eastern or being conflated with Muslim Arabs, which they understood to be reflective of the societal and cultural shifts in Turkish society. One respondent declared that Turkey was now seen as “a religious country governed by Islamic rule” which was reflective of the very pertinent and stark feelings of political alienation experienced by Turkish Americans.

The link between the threat to Kemalism in Turkey and the need to promote Kemalism in the United States was explicitly stated in a number of responses. Interviewees felt that while they did not have the ability to control the government policies or societal changes they witnessed in Turkey, they did have the agency to implement some changes or certain lifestyle choices which were in line with their Kemalist beliefs in their Turkish American community. One interviewee said:

It feels like as a Turkish person, both at home and here, that our identity is being threatened quite a bit. With the recent AKP government and their politics, it feels

like it's a secured space and time for us to be ourselves and represent the best selves that we can put forward. (Interviewee 5, October 2019)

Examples of such efforts were the initiatives taken by TACAM, such as the Ataturk Park, the celebration of nationalist events such as Independence Day, or the passing down of Kemalist values and history to their second-generation children. This dynamic is one which helps us understand diaspora's unique contributions to the development and embrace of Kemalism; not only were my respondents threatened and motivated by political pressures from the home country, but they were compelled to act on their feelings because their diaspora context in allowed them to express their views more openly without the same fear of retribution or backlash which they might have felt in Turkish society. The diaspora context in the United States was a "secured space" where Kemalist Turks could mobilize in their own ways against the threats from the Turkish political climate while not having to worry about potential retribution from the state.

#### Threatened but not in exile

It is important to delineate Kemalist Turkish Americans from other diaspora populations in exile, not only to better understand their specific ideological situation but to recognize that the transnational pressures they face are more complex than simply being oppressed by their home state. While my interviewees were vocal in their alienation from the current Islamist government of Turkey, they had complex responses when it came to defending Turkish state actions in the United States. As interviews were being conducted, Turkey was in the midst of a military operation wherein it invaded Northern Syria to attack Kurdish militias stationed there. Several respondents specifically

referenced the ways that they felt the American media cycle was unfairly demonizing Turkey's involvement in Syria and its military action against Kurdish groups.

Additionally, this coincided with a vote in the US House of Representatives wherein a resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide was passed. The state of Turkey and many Turkish citizens were outraged at the passing of the resolution, as their official stance was against the usage of the term genocide to describe Ottoman Turkish atrocities against Armenians. While some respondents acknowledged that they did not support some of the actions of the Turkish government, there was an overwhelming consensus that Turks were being wrongly vilified and that it was the responsibility of Turkish Americans to advocate for a more positive image. Interviewees felt the need to defend and clarify the Turkish government when its actions aligned with their nationalist, Kemalist outlooks. This differed from their stances on other Turkish government actions, where they saw themselves as fundamentally opposed to Turkey's Islamist government, such as state policies which conflicted with their secular or 'Western' values. However, it was when the state's actions aligned with Kemalism's secular nationalist paradigm that some of my respondents felt the need to defend and clarify the actions of the state.

In the case of the aforementioned examples, the military incursion against Kurdish militias in Northern Syria or the denial of the Armenian Genocide were both state actions which were in accordance with Kemalism, which has always furthered policies of denial and a strong nationalist, militarist outlook towards Turkey's Kurdish population. Thus, we see that the relationship between Kemalist Turkish Americans to the current Turkish government is a complicated one that evades strict categorization and which has significant implications for the ways in which they engage with Kemalism in

the diaspora. The Turkish American diasporic population cannot be characterized as being directly marginalized by the Turkish state, as they actively support and hold a stake in carrying on its legitimacy. This is in direct contrast to more traditional exiled diasporic populations, such as Kurds, who are threatened by the Turkish state not only through a history of identity-based violence and oppression but through a continuing violent conflict in Turkey's Southeast region. Kemalist Turkish Americans in the diaspora, therefore, present an interesting anomaly to the traditional literature on exiled diaspora populations such as the Kurds in Turkey.

In her study on Kemalist Turkish immigrants in Australia, Şenay (2013) engages with her population in tandem with Glick Schiller's (2005) concept of long-distance nationalism, which is typically studied within diaspora groups who are in exile from their home countries. Many scholars have argued that long-distance nationalism primarily develops in exiled diaspora groups because it is motivated by a loss of status and a desire to mobilize against repressive governments. This leads us to questions of why long-distance nationalism has developed in the Kemalist Turkish American diaspora and also to ask what the status of Kemalist Turkish Americans is via the Turkish state. Şenay elaborates on the argument of Kemalist activism as being a response to a loss of legitimacy, and how this is perceived loss of status has led to a sense of threatened identity. This concept is useful in understanding why Kemalism, a national state ideology, has been promoted by Turkish Americans seemingly as a response against the current Turkish state. Kemalist Turkish Americans, then, are not strictly an exiled community; they are not necessarily singled out by the Turkish state on the basis of their ethnic and religious identities or political beliefs, while other groups such as Kurds, can

solidly be categorized as populations in exile (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). They play an active stake in promoting and embracing a state national ideology which also provides them with legitimacy and power in society.

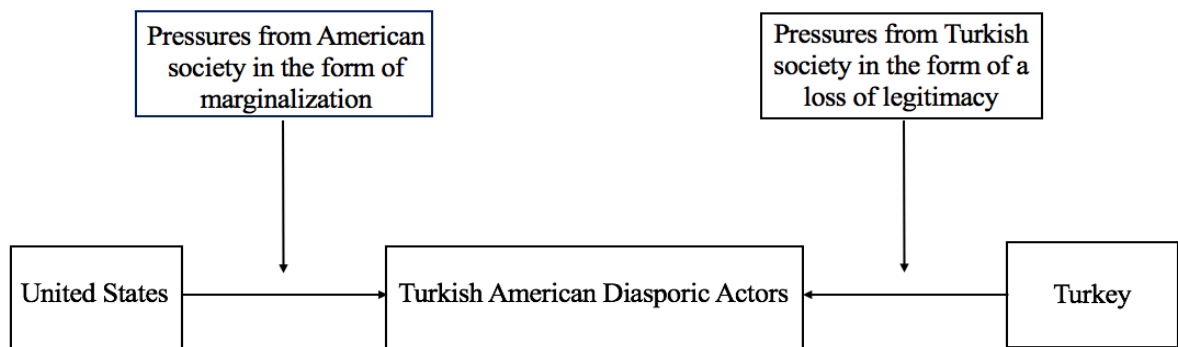
### Kemalism and transnational pressures in a diaspora context

My discussions of the reconstruction of Kemalism in diaspora lead to the question of how transnational pressures shape and influence such meaning making processes. It becomes clear that there isn't a single phenomenon or political occurrence that can explain the prevalence and centrality of Kemalism to the Turkish American diasporic identity. When the members of TACAM mobilized to pool their funds into building an Atatürk Park, there were a plethora of motivations and pressure which motivated their initiative. They were not only responding to a political situation in Turkey which threatened their identities and beliefs, but they were motivated by a need to contribute to their host country society, to present themselves as worthy American citizens, and to educate their children and others about their Kemalist political identities. These complexities provide us with a valuable context to understand not only Kemalism in diaspora but also other cases of long-distance nationalism.

Oftentimes studies of long-distance nationalism primarily focus on transnational pressures and how connections from the home country motivate or shape nationalism in diaspora. A focus on solely international or home country pressures can often overlook how domestic dynamics, or host country pressures, also present a valuable context to better understanding long-distance nationalism. In other words, long-distance nationalism is often imagined as a linear relationship between diasporic actors in their home countries, with pressures from the latter shaping actions within the former. Within my

analysis of Kemalism in the Turkish American diaspora, I try to not only question how pressures from Turkey and the Turkish government motivate diasporic actors, but also how their identities, beliefs, and motivations are influenced by pressures from American society. This relationship can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.



It becomes clear that it is impossible to consider Kemalist identities in diaspora without considering how both domestic and international pressures play out onto their daily lives, beliefs, and diasporic activities.

## CONCLUSION

The secular nationalist ideology of Kemalism has come to take on new importance within the Turkish American diasporic imaginary as it has faced multifaceted transnational pressures. I argue that Kemalism is significant to Turkish American diasporic identity as because it functions as an act of belonging, as a representation of Turkish cultural identity, and as a response to a perceived loss of legitimacy in Turkish society. It becomes clear that Kemalism has been reconstructed in the diaspora in response to the unique transnational pressures put on Turkish Americans from both host and home country political contexts. Outside of the context of Turkey, Kemalism has been granted new meanings in the diaspora space by its supporters, whose transnational positioning leaves them to grapple with challenges from both home and host countries. Finally, Kemalism is central to understanding how this particular population of Turkish Americans has taken on the complex challenges of navigating different cultural, national contexts and the compelling question of their transnational identities.

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