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CHAPTER 1

AZERBAIJANI AND TURKISH NATIONALISM AND RELIGION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: CONSTITUTIVE CONFLICTS, ECUMENICAL MUSLIM IDENTITY AND SECULARISM

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Abstract

This paper asks and answers a critical multidimensional question regarding the nature of Azerbaijani and Turkish nationalism in relation to religious and sectarian identities from their intertwined origins in the early 20th century until the end of the first quarter of the 21st century. What explains the seeming puzzle between the close association of Azerbaijani and Turkish nationalism with Islamic identity on the one hand, and their ability to overcome the sectarian Sunni-Shiite divide and to justify and support a secular state on the other? I argue that the constitutive conflicts of nation-building that pitted Azerbaijani and Turkish nation-builders against common Christian enemies explain their identification with Islamic identity, whereas the secession of, or the threat from, polities with the same majority sectarian affiliation (Shiite Iran for Azerbaijan and the Arab Revolt for the Ottomans/Türkiye) explains in part the secular and ecumenical Muslim (including Sunnis and Shiites) conception of Azerbaijani and Turkish national identities. Azerbaijani and Turkish nationalisms have exceptionally intertwined origins such that it is possible to describe them as two branches of a common Turkish nationalist movement in the early 20th century. The founding of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918 and the declaration of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 provided the first two nation-states that resulted from these intertwined origins. The significant contributions of Azerbaijani intellectuals to the growth of Turkish nationalism first in the late Ottoman empire and later in the nascent Republic of Türkiye are well-known. Similarly, the arguably decisive contributions of the Ottoman-Turkish forces organized under Caucasian Army of Islam (*Kafkas İslam Ordusu*) for the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic are also well-known. The puzzles of nationalism, religion, and secularism are evaluated against this ethno-religious background along with common intellectual and political origins.

Keywords

Nationalism, Religion, Constitutive Conflict, Secularism, Sectarianism

1. Introduction

Nationalism has been the paradigmatic form of modern consciousness across the world. There are many theoretical, empirical and methodological debates and disagreements about the origins of nationalism and its spread around the world. Different scholars argue that nationalism may have been the result of print capitalism and the Protestant Reformation (Anderson, 2006 [1983]), industrialization, urbanization, and the need for near universal literacy in a modern economy (Gellner, 2008 [1983]), religious beliefs of ethnic election (Smith, 1999), or the contingent result of merging the different classes of the medieval society of orders in Western Europe, starting in England (Greenfeld, 2019). Regardless of which causal argument they advance, however, all major scholars of nationalism agree that nationalism emerged somewhere in Western Europe.

Prominent scholars of nationalism also disagree somewhat on which country became the first nation-state, with England, France and the Netherlands as the most common examples given as the first modern nation-state (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 2008; Greenfeld, 1992; 2019; Gorski, 2000). Related to these disagreements, they also disagree on the timing of the origins of nationalism. Some trace it back to England in the early 16th century (Greenfeld, 1992; 2019), whereas many others think it appeared later in the 17th or even the 18th century, most likely in France (Calhoun 1993, 212; with reference to Best 1989). Despite these disagreements, there is broad consensus that the rise of nationalism signaled an epochal shift in both collective and individual identity and consciousness away from religion (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 2008; Greenfeld, 1996; 2019).

In the specific case of Western Europe, where nationalism originated, the pre-national societies were organized based on Catholic / Western Christian identity by the clergy under papal leadership (Aktürk, 2024), with Latin as the holy script language (Anderson, 2006), and monarchs as temporal authorities. The rise of vernacular languages with the spread of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation were the major engines of modern nationalism according to Benedict Anderson (2006), since these two forces divided Catholic Christian societies along ethno-linguistic lines. The dominant modernist understanding of nationalism contrasts a pre-national religious past with a nationalist secular present. On the other hand, most scholars also recognize that a specific religious sectarian tradition often constitutes the core of a particular nationalism and nation-state (Marx, 2003; Gorski, 2000; Smith, 1999). In other words, most nationalisms are mono-religious in their orientation. Nonetheless, the relationship between nationalism and religion varies significantly across different nationalisms and nation-states. Against this background, Azerbaijani and Turkish nationalisms provide a very intriguing and intertwined dyad for the study of the relationship between nationalism and religion. The purpose of the current study is to examine and explain how and why the constitutive conflicts of nationhood shaped Azerbaijani and Turkish nationalisms as “Muslim secular” identity projects that bridge the Sunni-Shiite divide, since Russia, Iran, and their local proxies appeared as the key adversaries of Azerbaijan and Türkiye in the Caucasus during the formative years of Azerbaijani and Turkish nation-building.

2. Nationalism and Religion: Extant Scholarship

The typical form of nationalism across Western Europe and the West more generally has been mono-religious and even sectarian (Aktürk, 2020; 2022; Marx, 2003; Smith, 1999). For example, English and later British nationalism has a Protestant Christian core, whereas French and Spanish nationalisms have a Catholic Christian core, suggesting that many of the paradigmatic Western European nationalisms have a sectarian core (Marx, 2003). Eastern European nationalisms, most famously German nationalism and arguably also Russian nationalism, developed as examples of ethnic nationalism (Greenfeld, 1992; 2019), which also often limits them to a single religion, such as Christianity, and even to a single sect, such as Orthodox Christianity. Some have argued that religious difference constitutes an even more definitive

boundary and identity marker than ethnicity or language, since it possible to be bilingual or ethnically mixed but it is almost impossible to be an adherent of more than one religion at the same time (Mavrogordatos, 2003). Nonetheless, there are also rare examples of multireligious nationalisms in which common ethnicity or language is used to bridge religious divides. Albanian and Egyptian nationalisms, both of which mobilize Christians and Muslims in the name of nationalism are exceptional examples of such multireligious nationalisms (Bozkuş, 2023).

Why is religious and sectarian identity a major determinant of national identity in some nationalisms but not in others? Why can some nationalisms overcome the sectarian or the religious difference whereas some others reinforce it? This question is not systematically examined in much of the extant scholarship on nationalism and religion. Some scholars suggest that the existence or lack of a conflict between the rise of the nation-state and religion is what determines whether they maintain a religious dimension of national identity (Martin, 2007, 142), but such a claim is somewhat endogenous if not even tautological, because the hypothesized cause of the outcome (conflict between nation and religion) is too proximate to the outcome itself (religious versus secular nationhood). Thus, one must look beyond an immediate conflict between nationality and religious identity to identify causal patterns across different cases of nationalisms and different religious traditions.

3. Nationalism and Religion: Doctrine, Institutionalization, and Constitutive Conflicts

There are at least two major dimensions of nationalism and religious identity that significantly if not decisively influence and even determine whether nationalism and religious identity support or contradict each other. These two dimensions relate to the nature of the specific religion and the nature of specific nationality. First, if the majority religion in the nation is one that doctrinally and institutionally privileges a specific ethnic or national group, then such a religious identity is more likely to correlate with, reinforce, and support a specific nationalism (Aktürk, 2022).

What are some of the observable indicators of a religious tradition that privileges a specific ethnic or national group? At a very basic but critical level, if a religious tradition has a hereditary priesthood, then it is more likely to correlate with, reinforce, and support a specific nationalism than a religious tradition that does not have hereditary priesthood. Many religious traditions have hereditary priesthood, such as Brahmins among Hindus, rabbis (*kohanim*) among Jews, and *dedes* among Alevis. The fact that one has to be a descendent of a Brahmin, a *dede*, or a rabbi in order to assume these religious functions in Hinduism, Alevism, and Judaism, respectively, suggests that a kind of religiously exalted status is attributed by heredity, which in turn has elective affinity with ethnic nationalism, given the Weberian definition of ethnic identity as subjective belief in common descent.

Beyond hereditary priesthood, doctrinally, there could also be a religious myth of ethnic election (Smith 1999), which provided ideational support and legitimacy for various nationalisms ranging from Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa to Dutch nationalism, from English nationalism to Jewish nationalism also known as Zionism.

Beyond the religious *doctrinal content* in relation to questions of ethnicity and heredity, briefly discussed above, the *institutional form* of the religious sectarian tradition is also an important aspect that may facilitate its ethno-nationalization, or on the contrary, may facilitate resistance against ethno-nationalization (Aktürk, 2022). In short, if the religious sectarian tradition has extra-territorial, trans-national, and even universal institutional forms, such as very similar if not standard rituals, worship, and places of worship, and in some cases even the exact same language for religious rituals and worship regardless of ethno-cultural and geographical context, then this religious sectarian tradition would be highly resistant to ethno-nationalization. Sunni Islam, with its standard religious rituals including five daily prayers and call to the prayers as well as all other key religious rituals in Classical Quranic Arabic, is perhaps the best example of such a trans-national and universalist religious tradition. In stark contrast, for example, the institutional

form of Protestantism is remarkably conducive to ethno-nationalization with the Bible, other religious texts, rituals, and worship in vernacular languages, and local organization of the churches without a trans-national or universal hierarchy. Protestantism has been identified as a main cause of nationalism (Anderson, 2006) or at least as a “midwife” of nationalism (Mavrogordatos, 2003) because of its powerful advocacy of vernacularizing Christianity.

Constitutive conflicts play an arguably greater role than religious doctrine or institutionalization in determining the relationship between nationalism and religious identities. The nature of the constitutive conflict that established the nation-state varies significantly across cases. The constitutive conflicts are usually identified as wars of independence, wars of liberation, or wars of secession. In determining the relationship between national and religious identity, the key question that matters with regards to the constitutive conflicts is whether the main enemy (empire, colonizer, occupier, etc.) against which the constitutive nationalist mobilization (war of independence, secession, etc.) was undertaken had the same religion and sect as the majority of the nation, or whether the main enemy was of a different religion and sect than the majority of the nation.

If the main enemy against which the original nationalist mobilization took place was of a different religion than the majority of the nation, then nationalism and the majority religious identity are often fused and reinforce each other, *because fighting for the nation and fighting for the religion during the constitutive conflict is perceived as practically the same*. For example, Protestant England famously fought against Catholic France and Catholic Spain in numerous major wars, and since both of these main adversaries were of a different religion or sect, namely Catholic, while England was Protestant, fighting for Protestantism and fighting for English nationalism were fused (Colley, 2009 [1992]). Thus, one would expect English nationalism and Protestant religious sectarian identity to reinforce each other (Aktürk, 2022). Among many consequences of such a national-religious configuration, we observe that the United Kingdom had three hundred years of Protestant Prime Ministers despite having a very large Catholic and significant Jewish and Muslim minorities (Aktürk, 2026). The national-religious configuration of Turkish nationalism in some respects resembles the British/English pattern but is remarkably more ecumenical with regards to intra-Muslim sectarian differences, as will be discussed below.

If the main adversary in the constitutive conflict of nationhood is of the same religion and sect as the majority of the nation, then nationalism and the majority religious identity are not fused, do not reinforce each other, and may even moderate and weaken each other to create a very secular national identity where religious or sectarian minorities may be more nationalistic than the religious or sectarian majority. For example, Catholic Hungary fought against similarly Catholic Habsburgs for its freedoms, and thus, Hungarian nationalists counted many Protestant Hungarians among their leaders from the 17th century to the 21st century, such as Imre Thököly, Lajos Kossuth, Miklos Horthy, and Viktor Orban (Aktürk, 2026). The national-religious configuration of Azerbaijani Turkish nationalism resembles the Hungarian pattern in terms of its ecumenical approach to intra-Muslim sectarian differences, but it is nonetheless monoreligious in terms of displaying Muslim nationalism in its broad contours.

4. The Case of Turkish Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Türkiye

A clear majority of Turks in Türkiye have been Sunni Muslims both historically and at present. Sunni Islam does not have hereditary priesthood, since religious duties and professions are open to Muslims from any ethnic or racial origin. Moreover, mainstream Islam, both Sunni and Shiite, does not have a religious myth of ethnic election whereby one ethno-racial category would allegedly have divine favor as the “chosen people” such as the Israelites in Judaism. Thus, Islam, in this case Sunni Islam, is doctrinally supra-ethnic. Moreover, Sunni Islam is also institutionally trans-national since the institutional and linguistic forms of religious worship, embodied in the mosque and Arabic prayers and call to prayers, are rather uniform across countries and peoples. In short, these factors would militate against the fusion of religious and nationalist identities since Sunni Islam has a very powerful universalist tendency, both doctrinally and institutionally.

In terms of its constitutive conflict, however, Turkish nationalism observed within the Ottoman Empire and within the Russian Empire follows a monoreligious pattern akin to the English and broadly British pattern referred to earlier, since the main enemies in the constitutive conflicts of Turkish nationhood within the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire were Christians, and primarily but not exclusively, Orthodox Christians (Aktürk, 2009). This is similar to the cases of Algeria and Pakistan, both of which have had Muslim mobilizations for independence against non-Muslim adversaries, namely, French Empire, British Empire, and India (Aktürk, 2015).

5. An Exceptional Dimension of Turkish Nationalisms: Ecumenical Muslim Identity

It is important, however, to note that the national-religious configuration of Turkish nationalism has been significantly ecumenical with regards to intra-Muslim sectarian differences in including both Sunni and non-Sunni Muslims. This is in part because the constitutive conflict(s) during the formation of the Turkish nationalist movement did not pit Sunni Muslims versus Shiite Muslims. To find a major conflict that pitted Sunni Muslims against non-Sunni Muslims one must go back several centuries. The most notable exception to this general pattern would be the conflict between the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim I (Yavuz) and Safavid Iran under Shah Ismail at the turn of the 16th century, peaking in the Battle of Çaldıran in 1514 (Emecen, 2021 [2010], p. 92-164). However, the Battle of Çaldıran took place almost four centuries before the origins of modern Turkish nationalism, and many other greater constitutive conflicts that pitted Muslims more generally against Christian powers far superseded the Ottoman-Safavid conflict as the constitutive conflicts of late Ottoman and modern Turkish history.

The origins of modern Turkish nationalism within the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire brought Shiite and Sunni Muslim Turks together against common non-Muslim adversaries, which also played an important role in making Turkish nationalism ecumenical vis-à-vis sectarian differences within Islam. A key turning point, both substantively and symbolically, was the formation of the Turkish-Muslim political movement and faction in the Russian Imperial Duma, where an Azerbaijani Turkish and Shiite figure, Alimardan bey Topchubashov, assumed the leadership of the otherwise Sunni-majority Turkish faction in the Imperial Duma (Rorlich, 1986). This fraternization between Sunni Turks and Shiite Turks was not limited to the Turkish nationalist movement in the Russian Empire and it is also observable in the Ottoman Empire. For example, Ali Hüseyinzade (1864-1940), a leading ideologue of Turkish nationalism, who lived in Istanbul for decades until his death, was Azerbaijani Turkish and Shiite Muslim, and yet he had a huge impact on formulating and spreading Turkish nationalism among overwhelmingly Sunni-majority Turkish Muslims of the Ottoman Empire and later the early Republic of Türkiye. “Highly educated emigres from Russia were also conspicuous in this period: in addition to the above-mentioned Yusuf Akçura, Sadri Maksudi Arsal, Zeki Velidov [Velidi Togan] and Ahmet Agaev [Ağaoğlu] were the most important figures” (Aktürk, 2007, p. 357-358). Three of these, namely, Volga Tatars Yusuf Akçura and Sadri Maksudi Arsal, as well as Azerbaijani Ahmet Ağaoğlu became members of the new Turkish parliament in Ankara, which is another significant indicator of how influential they have been in their new homeland. To reemphasize how Turkish nationalism in Türkiye transcended sectarian differences, one should note that Ahmet Ağaoğlu was originally an Azerbaijani Turk and a Shiite Muslim.

6. No Christians or Jews but dozens of Non-Sunni Muslims in the First Turkish Parliament

The first nationalist parliament that was convened in Ankara on April 23, 1920, is indicative of the national-religious configuration of what would later become the Turkish Republic. Unlike the many previous Ottoman parliaments with numerous Christian and Jewish deputies, the “1920 assembly differed strikingly from the Ottoman parliaments in having no Christian, Jewish, or other non-Muslim deputies” (Aktürk, 2025, p. 74). On the other hand, “[t]here were 27 Alevite members of the First Parliament, and Cemalettin Çelebi, a leader of the Bektashi Sufi Order, was a deputy chair of the parliament” (Aktürk, 2009, p. 903). In

short, in a remarkable transformation of parliamentary representation, the rise of Turkish nationalism led to the inclusion of Alevite and Shiite Muslim Turks alongside majority Sunni Muslim Turks in the definition of the nation, in contrast to the exclusion of non-Muslims such as Christians and Jews.

The main reason for the national-religious configuration of Turkish nationalism, I would argue in line with my general theory, is the fact that the main adversaries in the constitutive conflict of Turkish nationhood, known as the *Millî Mücadele* or the “National / Religious Struggle,” were Christians, namely, British, French, Greek, and Italian forces of occupation and their local Greek and Armenian collaborators. Moreover, all the major Muslim ethno-linguistic groups, including both Sunnis and non-Sunnis, such as Alevis, supported the National Struggle against the aforementioned Christian adversaries. This ethno-religious alignment in the constitutive conflict of nationhood, alternatively known as the National Struggle and the War of Liberation (*Kurtuluş Savaşı*), explains both the inclusion of Muslim groups regardless of their ethno-linguistic and sectarian differences, and the exclusion of Christian groups, in the national-religious definition of Turkish nationhood.

7. The Case of Azerbaijani Nationalism in Imperial Russia and the Republic of Azerbaijan

Azerbaijani nationalism also exhibits a pattern that is very similar to Turkish nationalism in terms of its monoreligious nature, which nonetheless transcends sectarian divisions within Muslim identity, and yet Azerbaijani nationalism is arguably even more secular than Turkish nationalism. Both features, namely, Azerbaijani nationalism’s monoreligious but secular and ecumenical Muslim nature are explicable on the basis of the constitutive conflicts of Azerbaijani nationhood as my typological theory predicts. For both Azerbaijani and Turkish nationalism, the main adversaries in the constitutive conflict that established the original nation-state were Christians. Even more specifically, for both Azerbaijan and Türkiye, Russians and Armenians figure prominently among the Christian adversaries of their constitutive conflicts.

These striking similarities are due to the fact that the Azerbaijani and Turkish constitutive conflicts for nationhood were the continuation of the same military-political struggle during and after World War I, and they were even carried out in part by some of the same military-political actors such as Enver Pasha, Nuri Pasha and the Caucasian Army of Islam (*Kafkas İslam Ordusu*). Furthermore, and against the background of the aforementioned Turkish-Azerbaijani military-political cooperation during their constitutive conflicts, I also argue that the significant difference in the sectarian composition of Muslim-majority Azerbaijan and Türkiye had a particularly secularizing effect on the formation of Azerbaijani Turkish nationalism: Since the primary military-political ally of otherwise Shiite-majority Azerbaijan has been Sunni-majority Ottoman and Turkish state for over a century, and since Shiite-majority Iran was consistently an adversary of Azerbaijan and an ally of Armenia, Azerbaijani Turkish nationalism has been Muslim but very secular and inclusive of both Shiite and Sunni Turks as Azerbaijani Turkish nationalists. This makes Azerbaijani nationalism comparable to Hungarian nationalism in having both a monoreligious dimension (Christian in the Hungarian case, and Muslim in the Azerbaijani case) but also an ecumenical religious identity that transcends sectarian differences (Catholic and Protestant in the Hungarian, and Shiite and Sunni in the Azerbaijani case), since both Azerbaijan and Hungary faced a major adversary of the same sectarian tradition in their struggles for nationhood, namely, Shiite Iran and Catholic Habsburgs, respectively (Aktürk, 2026).

Azerbaijani Turkish nationalism is arguably central to “general Turkish” nationalism often associated with Türkiye precisely because many of the leading scholars and ideologues of Azerbaijani Turkish nationalism, most prominently Ali Bey Hüseyinzade (1864-1940), as mentioned and emphasized above, lived and published in Türkiye and had a leading role in articulating and spreading the kind of secular Turkish nationalism that became dominant in both Türkiye and Azerbaijan (Valiyev, 2020, p. 93-155). The fact that the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was established as a secular national Turkish republic in 1918, five years before the founding of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, suggests that Azerbaijani Turkish nationalism also chronologically preceded Turkish nationalism in Türkiye in establishing a nation-state, however short-lived, and thus may have even served as an inspiration if not a model for the new political elites in Ankara.

The origins of Azerbaijani nationalism can be traced to the broader Turkic-Muslim reformist movement in late Imperial Russia. The Turkic-Muslim reformist movement in Imperial Russia gained momentum especially following the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, and the opening of the First Duma (Rorlich, 1986; Sohrabi, 1995; Valiyev, 2020). From a more expansive and reformist orientation encompassing all the Turkic Muslim groups across the vast Russian Empire, smaller territorial projects of national autonomy and independence sprouted, especially after the February and October revolutions of 1917. Apart from predominantly Muslim and Turkic Central Asia that came under Russian occupation or influence only in the 19th century, there were significant and separate attempts for self-government by Turkic Muslim peoples in Crimea, in the North and South Caucasus including Azerbaijan, and in the Volga-Ural region.

8. Common Adversaries of Azerbaijani and Turkish Nationalism: Russia, Iran and Armenia

The constitutive conflicts of nationhood in all these cases pitted Muslim Turkic peoples against mainly Eastern and Orthodox Christian adversaries. In the case of Azerbaijan, the constitutive conflicts pitted Azerbaijani Turks against Russians to the north and against Armenians to the west but also against Persians to the south of the Aras River. Leading Azerbaijani nationalists such as Mehmed Emin Resulzade (1884-1955) considered both north and south of the Aras River as part of a single national homeland for Azerbaijani Turks (Valiyev, 2020, p. 174). Thus, the opposition to any Persian-Iranian assimilation and subjugation of Azerbaijani Turks in South Azerbaijan with its center in Tabriz remained another important vector of Azerbaijani nationalism since its very origins in the early 20th century. For example, leading Azerbaijani Turkish nationalist and a leader of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920), Mehmed Emin Resulzade, continued his publications critical of both Soviet Union and Iran during the 1920s when he lived in exile in Türkiye. In short, the constitutive conflicts of Azerbaijani nationhood pitted Azerbaijani Turks against Armenian, Iranian, and Russian adversaries. While the opposition to Christian Armenian and Russian adversaries explains the “Muslim” dimension of Azerbaijani nationalism, the opposition to Shiite Persian-Iranian adversaries explains the ecumenical and secular dimension of Azerbaijani nationalism, which allows the inclusion of both Sunni and Shiite Turks in a secular framework that downplays the religious sectarianism in favor of linguistic commonality.

9. Azerbaijani and Turkish Nationalism and Religion in the 21st Century

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 symbolically indicated the terminal decline of Marxist socialism as a rival cosmology to nationalism and religion. This was followed by the reconstruction and revival of nationalisms and religions, including Turkish nationalism and Islamic religiosity across the Turkic Muslim peoples of the former Soviet Union, including in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. In this new era, Azerbaijani nationhood once again faced triple challenges emanating from the west, north, and south, which were allied against the rise of Azerbaijani Turkish nationhood. Armenian occupation of Karabakh and the surrounding regions, with implicit and/or explicit support of Russia and Iran, posed the greatest challenge, making Armenia the primary adversary of Azerbaijan in its constitutive conflict of nationhood. This conflict also reinforced Azerbaijan’s definition as a Muslim nation, albeit a very secular one, since Armenia made ample use of Christian religious nationalism both domestically and internationally to cultivate and mobilize support for its invasion of Karabakh.

Russia’s support for Armenia and Turkish support for Azerbaijan also reinforced the perception of the conflict both by its participants and by outside observers as a clash between Christian and Muslim forces. On the other hand, Iranian support for Armenia motivated increasing aversion and opposition to Shiite clergy and Shiite religious nationalism in Azerbaijan, and thus reinforced Azerbaijan’s avowedly secular and ecumenical Muslim nationhood inclusive of both Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

The official understanding and definition of nationhood in Türkiye also went through major transformations since the end of the Cold War, especially with changes in state policies toward ethnic diversity that began in 2004, peaked after 2009 (Aktürk, 2012) and continued at least until late 2013. These reforms entailed a de facto redefinition of nationhood in Türkiye to include Arabic, Kurdish, and other non-Turkish ethno-linguistic identities along with more open recognition of non-Sunni religious identities such as Alevism as part of the nation. At the same time, all of these reforms were publicly presented and legitimated with Islamic multiculturalist and Muslim nationalist discourses (Aktürk, 2018). Although these reforms have a primarily domestic audience and are primarily motivated by domestic actors, factors, and interests, they also appeal to cross-border, international audiences that share an affinity with the ethnic, linguistic, religious, and sectarian groups that are targeted for accommodation with these reforms. In this context, although rarely if ever noticed, Türkiye's increasing accommodation of non-Sunni and especially Twelver Shiite (Caferi) Muslim groups, would also appeal to Azerbaijan. Most recently, in late October 2025, what is advertised as the greatest Shiite house of worship in Europe, Zeynebiye Mosque, was inaugurated with a major ceremony attended by the Vice President of Türkiye and a Deputy Minister from Azerbaijan, and both Azerbaijani and Turkish flags were displayed on the walls of the mosque during the ceremony (Erkan, 2025).

Far more importantly, Türkiye's overwhelming support for Azerbaijan in its struggle to regain Karabakh, which has been decisive and ultimately successful, arguably brought the two polities closer together in terms of their understandings of nationhood than ever before. In conclusion, the complementary similarities between the religious-national configurations of Azerbaijani and Turkish constitutive conflicts, both during their origins in the early 20th century as well as during their revivals and transformations in the early 21st century, combined with the mutual accommodation of religious and secular, Sunni and Shiite Muslim identities in both polities, explain the considerable similarities between the understanding of nationhood in these two polities. Azerbaijan's conflictual relationship with Iran and the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance also explain in great part the more secular, ecumenical and non-sectarian understanding of Muslim identity within Azerbaijani nationalism.

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