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## CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds  
Studies

28 June - 2 July 2021



## Panel 67

## Questioning secularism *alla turca*, from nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms to Erdoğan's AKP

Depicting Turkey as a “secular exception” in the region has undeniably become commonplace; and if that statement appears to lack nuance (and to be oversimplified), it nevertheless attests to the significance of secularism as a founding pillar of the Turkish Republic, following its proclamation by Mustafa Kemal in 1923. Since the end of the 1990s – and particularly after the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) victory during the 2002 general election – (re)defining secularism (and more generally, religion-state relationships) has stood out as a major issue on the political stage. Numerous signs seem to point to a religious resurgence within society and Turkish institutions: among them, one can mention the increase in funds granted to the Diyanet (the Directorate of Religious Affairs); the requests made by the Speaker Grand National Assembly İsmail Kahraman, who called for the removal of the constitutional provisions of the secular nature of the Turkish state; and more recently, the controversies over the reversion of the Church of Hagia Sophia back into a mosque. Therefore, this workshop intends to recount the Turkish experiment with secularism, starting from the nineteenth-century *Tanzîmât* – which were the first concrete expression of this secular impetus – to this day. Our main ambition is thus to shed light on the stakes of this debate, the latter being all too often unnuanced and portrayed as a radical polarization between Kemalist supporters of secularism and their Islamist opponents.

**People in charge :** Merve Özkaya (University Grenoble Alpes, CERDAP2) and Sophia Mouttalib (ENS Lyon, Triangle)

**Discussant :** Élise Massicard (Sciences Po, CERI)

### Program

#### Sophia Mouttalib (ENS Lyon, Triangle)

*Advocating for political reform through a reinterpretation of Islamic tradition: considerations around the nineteenth-century constitutionalist Ottoman discourse*

As a response to its structural weakening and the geopolitical threats and foreign meddling (both emphasizing the pressing need for reforms), the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire endeavored to reinvent its political system. However, despite its attempts at political centralization, legal codification, “secularizing” courts of law and redefining the rights and status of non-Muslim communities, the *Tanzîmât* era did not manage to put an end to the Empire’s internal decline, nor did it succeed in winning over the political and religious figures opposed to the reform. These “reorganizations”’ inherent limitations and contradictions were therefore underlined by a rising intellectual elite: criticizing what they deemed to be superficial reforms, they called for the adoption of a Constitution and the formation of an Ottoman Parliament. While this plea for a constitutional regime was deeply marked by European political liberalism, it nevertheless did not make a clean sweep of Islamic tradition, and

rather fully invested it through a reinterpretation. It is precisely this peculiarity of the constitutionalist Ottoman discourse that is at the core of this presentation: it aims to highlight how Islamic principles and concepts were mobilized and reinterpreted in favor of the establishment of a constitutional regime, thus questioning the relevance of the commonly assumed opposition between secularism and religion.

### **Merve Özkaya (University Grenoble Alpes, CERDAP2)**

*The evolution of Islamic authority from the Şeyhülislamlık (Ottoman Empire) to the Diyanet (Turkish Republic)*

In the Ottoman Empire, Islam was at the base of the political, administrative, legal, educational and religious domains. This vast field of Islam's competence was gradually limited during the process of modernization. In my presentation, I will address the withdrawal of Islam in the public sphere through the analysis of institutions, notably the Şeyhülislamlık and the Diyanet, from the Ottoman Empire to the secular Turkish Republic. This institutional secularization has concerned particularly education and justice. Today the Diyanet deals only with religious affairs (construction of mosques, training of imams, administration of Koranic courts, etc.). Nevertheless, the increase in funds allocated to the Diyanet (2002: 550 million TL; 2020:11.5 billion TL) and the political dynamics of the AKP suggest a rising tide of official/institutional Islam.

### **Théo Malçok (EHESS, CETOBaC)**

*Was Atatürk an atheist? About some uses of the political, ideological and cultural heritage of laiklik within the Association of Atheism (Ateizm Derneği)*

What if Mustafa Kemal, also known as Atatürk, was an atheist? This question is asked by members of the Association of Atheism ( Ateizm Derneği ), the first non-governmental organization in the Middle East, founded in 2014, that openly advocate for atheism. This is not the first time that the Turkish Republic's 'founding Father' religiosity is questioned. The allegation of apostasy hangs over this omnipresent and almost mythical figure of Turkish national imaginary since the foundation of the Republic in 1924. Within the context of a struggle for redefining the boundaries of legitimate religiosity induced by the Kemalist revolution, supporters and opponents of secularist reforms were mutually charging one another of atheism and irreligion. Without being a direct and planned outcome of the political management of religious affairs, the militant atheist movement arising in Turkey nowadays draws from the political, ideological and cultural heritage of laiklik (i.e. the core principle of Turkish secularism) as a resource and a means of struggle for the recognition of the right to be and to openly identify as atheist. Beyond a historical debate on Mustafa Kemal's religiosity and beliefs, this presentation, based on an ethnography of the Association of Atheism and an analysis of its documentary output, will explore the pragmatic scope of the references to Atatürk's figure and the principle of laiklik within militant atheist milieux of Turkey. What particular uses do they make of it? How are these operations of appropriation, demand and debate being expressed and for whom? What are the political-ideological and cultural consequences for these groups?