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Of Minarets and Bayonets: The Poem that Landed Erdoğan in Jail

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On 6 December 1997, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (1954–), mayor of İstanbul at the time, visited the southeastern Anatolian city of Siirt, which is the hometown of his wife Emine (1955–). He gave a speech in which he accused the Turkish state of not respecting intellectual freedom and discriminating against race and religion. As he often did, he embellished the speech he gave with poetry. Later, when he was on trial, he stated that the lines he recited that day were from a poem written by Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), who was a poet, sociologist, and ideologue of Turkish nationalism.

At the time, Erdoğan was the rising star of Turkish political Islam. In the 1990s, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP, 1983–1998), of which he was a prominent member, had been gaining increasing popular support for its conservative Islamic agenda, and in the elections of December 1995, it won the majority of votes. The RP was the successor of several other Islamic parties, namely the National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*, MNP, 1970–1971) and the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*, MSP, 1972–1980), which had been closed down by the Kemalist secular-orientated military-judiciary establishment as it had been trying to politically accommodate an emerging class of contemporary Turkish nationalist Sunni Muslims. The parties had succeeded in drawing in constituents in Anatolia from among Turkish and Kurdish Sunni Muslims and internal migrants to the country's larger cities who had obtained better educations, thereafter coming to constitute a new conservative Muslim middle class.

Under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011), such political parties propagated their ideas through the National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*), a worldview in which Muslim culture and norms were seen as the shared heritage of Turkey's citizens. It was based on notions of high moral standing, just rule, fairness to different ethnic and religious groups, and fighting corruption. Adherents of the National Outlook embraced democracy and modernity but rejected the radical secular model of Westernisation adopted by Kemalists, stating that it ran contrary to Turkish/Ottoman culture. They sought a return to a nineteenth-century Ottoman combination of modernisation and Turkish-Islamic reinvigoration.

Sufi orders, which had been officially banned since 1925, played an important role in these developments, and over the years they were transformed into cultural and educational organisations. In particular, the İstanbul-based İskenderpaşa Mosque, which was led by the charismatic imam Mehmed Zahid Kotku (1897–1980) and later his son-in-law Esad Coşan

(1938–2001), provided spiritual schooling for leading politicians such as Erbakan and Erdoğan, as well as for Turgut Özal (1927–1993), who served as prime minister and president.

Secular Turkish Kemalists saw the emergence of these populist Islamic political movements as a threat. Since the founding of the Republic, secularists had tried to restrict Muslim beliefs to the private domain and subject it to the control of the state. While after the military intervention of 1980 a controlled form of Islamisation of society was deemed to be preferable to leftist ideologies, overtly religious political movements were relentlessly suppressed. However, as the RP gained increasing support, winning several municipalities in the 1994 elections, including, among other cities, İstanbul and Ankara, its members became more and more audacious. For instance, upon winning the mayoral elections, Erdoğan opened the first session of the municipal council with a prayer instead of paying the usual tribute to the Republic and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938).

In June 1996, Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011), then-leader of the RP, became prime minister, whereupon the military tried to shore up Turkey's secular values by putting pressure on the government. In February 1997, the RP mayor of Sincan organised a rally in support of Hamas and Hizballah, during which the Iranian ambassador asked Turks to help their Muslim brothers on the basis of Islamic prescriptions. The military used the commotion stirred up by the event to justify the issuance of a declaration stating that Islamic movements were the most pressing threat to internal security and issued a memorandum consisting of eighteen points with the aim of securing the predominance of the secular Kemalist ideology. Muslim academics were fired and companies run by Muslims were persecuted. Moreover, newspapers and television and radio stations were closed down, as were İmam-Hatip schools, which were vocational institutions of education for aspiring Muslim religious leaders.

In May 1997, the prosecutor of a supreme court in Ankara demanded the closure of the RP, accusing the party of engaging in anti-secular and illegal activities. The party was banned on 16 January 1998, and several of its members were prohibited from taking part in politics for five years. In the aftermath of the ruling, in April of 1998 a court sentenced Erdoğan to ten months of imprisonment and banned him from taking part in active politics; basing its decision on the lines of poetry he had recited during his speech in Siirt, the court stated that he had been inciting the people to hatred and enmity. Erdoğan served four months of his sentence, and after his release, he became a founding member of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi,* AKP).

However, the lines of poetry that Erdoğan recited that day were not from a poem by Gökalp, but rather a poem that had been written by a rather unknown graphic artist and poet, Cevat Örnek (1907–1980). In order to help untangle the content and structure of the lines Erdoğan recited, the two original poems are presented below in translation.

*The Two Poems**

Cevat Örnek's "The Divine Army"

The minarets are bayonets, the domes helmets,
The mosques are our barracks, the believers our soldiers,
This divine army protects my religion,
On their tongues the unity of Allah, Allah is great.

The believers' army, with the help of God,
Fights superstition for the sake of religion,
From eternity to future times, guided by the Koran,
Allah is great, Allah is great.

The most Generous Messenger is the guide to righteous religion,
Belief always inspires Tradition,
There is nothing Concealed or secret in our religion,
To put it simply, Allah is Great.

Ziya Gökalp's "Soldiers Prayer"

A rifle in my hand, faith in my heart,
I have two wishes: religion and the motherland…
My hearth is the army, my greatness the Sultan …
Oh my Lord, help the Sultan!
Oh my Lord, make his life augmented!

Our road is a holy military expedition, our end martyrdom,
Our religion wants sincerity and service,
Our mother is the homeland, our father the nation,
Oh my Lord, make the homeland prosperous!
Oh my Lord, make the nation happy!

My banner is the unity of God, my flag the crescent,
One of them is green, the other red,
Feel compassion for Islam, take revenge on the enemy,
Oh my Lord, make Islam flourish!
Oh my Lord, ruin the enemy!

The commander, the officer are our fathers,
The sergeant, the corporal are our masters,
Order and respect are our laws,
Oh my Lord, make the army orderly!
Oh my Lord, make the banner superior!

* Translated from the original Turkish in Haluk Seki, "Şairi Arayan Şiir…," *Milliyet Blog*, 14 March 2014, http://blog.milliyet.com.tr/sairini-arayan-siir-/Blog/?BlogNo=453676. The poem was originally published in Cevat Örnek, *7 Dağın Çiçeği* (Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası, 1966), 8, and Cevat Örnek, *Gülün Dikeni*, (Ankara: n.a., 1974), 12. Gökalp's poem was translated from the original Turkish in Muhammer Ferik, *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'lı Yıllar* (İstanbul: E-kitap Projesi, 2015), 67–68.

On the battlefield, how many brave young heroes
Did not become martyrs for religion and the homeland,
Let the hearth smoke, let hope not be extinguished,
Oh my Lord, do not make the martyrs grieve!
Oh my Lord, do not make your descendants helpless!

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During his speech in Siirt, Erdoğan only recited the following lines: "The minarets are *our* bayonets, the domes our helmets, and for the mosques, they are *our* barracks" (the italics indicating additions Erdoğan made to the lines). As this quote demonstrates, the lines were indeed not from Ziya Gökalp's poem, but they do closely resemble the lines penned by Cevat Örnek. The source of the confusion was a school textbook written by Ömer Naci Bozkurt, a retired governor, who ascribed the first stanza of Örnek's poem to Ziya Gökalp and added it to the original poem in a book entitled *Türk ve Türklük* ("Turks and Turkishness") published by the Turkish Standards Institute (*Türk Standartları Enstitüsü*, 1994). The Ministry of Education approved the text and recommended it for use at schools. When he was standing trial in court, Erdoğan stated that he had always known the poem as Bozkurt had presented it, asserting that he had recited the lines on numerous occasions during his speeches. In September 1998, after Erdoğan's conviction, RP chairman Recai Kutan distributed that version of the poem to the press, claiming that during the War of Independence (1919–1923), a member of parliament had suggested to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) that mosques be used as barracks and that the lead of their rooves should be melted down into bullets. Apparently, the link to Mustafa Kemal was deemed a valid enough argument to justify the attribution of the lines to Ziya Gökalp. In 2015, Erdoğan once again started reciting the lines of the poem in his speeches, whereupon it acquired cult status.

Accounts state that Ziya Gökalp published "Soldier's Prayer" in 1913 as a reflection on the traumatic events of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), in which Balkan states conquered almost all of the European territories of the Ottoman Empire. Those losses were a brutal blow for the Ottomans economically, demographically, and intellectually, as the Balkans had been the most prosperous and culturally most developed parts of the Empire. In addition, the war resulted in numerous atrocities carried out against soldiers and civilians alike. For a nationalist philosopher like Gökalp, the war underscored the need to develop a particularly Turkish type of nationalism. In the nineteenth century, the empire had struggled to formulate a response to newly emergent forms of Western nationalism, which gave rise to pressing questions. Should such nationalism focus on Ottoman citizenship or Ottoman Muslim citizenship, or should it emphasise Turkish identity? When Gökalp was formulating his ideas about

nationalism, he focused on the empire's Turkish-speaking, Sunni Muslim Ottoman citizens. In "Soldier's Prayer," Gökalp placed love for the homeland on par with religiosity and called on the military to defend both. The enemies in the poem are the Balkan states that attacked the Ottoman Empire, and Gökalp linked Islam intrinsically with the (Ottoman) state. After the establishment of the Republic, Kemalists developed the idea of Turkish nationalism further into a form in which Turkey's main religion was still Sunni Islam but, under the control of the secular state, it was largely concealed from public life. Turkish secularists nonetheless respected Gökalp as one of the early ideologues of a form of nationalism based on Turkish identity. After the Second World War and the development of a multi-party system, religion gradually returned to public life, whereupon Islamist parties started to garner more and more support. A combination of Turkish nationalism and Islam, known as the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (*Türk-İslam Sentezi*), emerged in the 1970s and became a semi-official state ideology after the military intervention of 1980. For Islamists like Erdoğan, a poem such as "Soldier's Prayer" illustrated the political ideals of a modern nation-state based on Sunni Islam.

Cevat Örnek wrote his poem "The Divine Army" in the 1960s, a period in which a space was opened up for religious expression in public life to a greater extent than ever before since the founding of the Republic. He self-published the poem two times in 1966 and 1974 but never received any recognition among literary circles in those years. "The Divine Army" speaks of the struggle for the right to religion, and in the verses, believers are compared to an army fighting superstition and protecting their true faith. In contrast to Gökalp's poem, absent are the soldiers that save their homeland and religion from ruin.

It is unlikely that Ziya Gökalp himself would have added the lines to the poem because the structures of the poems differ significantly. The stanzas in "The Divine Army" consist of four lines, while the stanzas in "The Soldier's Prayer" contain five. Moreover, Örnek wrote his poem in the syllabic Turkish folk metre of eleven syllables with a break after the sixth, but the poem by Gökalp uses a metre consisting of ten syllables with a break after the fifth.

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The case of these two poems exemplifies the use of cultural products within a political context. A politician takes a few lines from an ostensibly well-known poet and, while changing them at his own discretion, shows no interest in the poem's origin and form. The political message of the lines and the symbolic value of the author's name is what matters. Ziya Gökalp is venerated by both secular as well as Muslim conservatives. By claiming that the poem was authored by Gökalp, Erdoğan thought he would be saved from persecution. Even after numerous journalists and scholars revealed the poem's true origins, Erdoğan continued reciting the lines, referring to them as having been written by Ziya Gökalp. It would seem that the link to the prominent poet Ziya Gökalp, who is respected in Islamist circles because he included Islam in Turkish nationalism, is more valuable to him than literary truth.

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