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The Culturalization of Politics, Religion and Cultural Wars: The Case of Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot Community

Nikos Moudouros

Department of Turkish and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cyprus, 2109 Aglantzia, Nicosia, Cyprus; moudouros.nikos@ucy.ac.cy

Abstract: This article examines the transformation of religion into a structural part of cultural war, as well as the broader process of the culturalization of politics, as a hegemonic strategy. Within this specific context, the article describes the evolution of cultural war in Turkey and how it is transferred in the context of the Turkish Cypriot community. The first part of the article contains a general analysis of the process of the culturalization of politics and its connection with the question of hegemony. The second part focuses on the case of Turkey and, more specifically, on how the Turkish right has instrumentalized religion in cultural war. It places the AKP within the aforementioned context and describes the importance it has placed on the strengthening of religion in the educational structures of the country. The last part of the article focuses on the evolution of cultural war between Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community. It examines the key views of the AKP on the transformation of Turkish Cypriot collective identity and the role religion should play. It also examines the reaction of sections of the Turkish Cypriot community, mainly originating from the historical dimension of Turkish Cypriot secularism.

Keywords: Islam; Islamism; cultural wars; hegemony; Turkish Cypriots

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1. Cultural War and the Question of Hegemony

The process of culturalization of politics is the process during which culture and civilization become the dominant analytical tools for understanding motives and visions that ultimately cause conflict. They are activated so as to record forms of political action, techniques of governmentality, or even forms of violence (Brown 2006, p. 20). Mahmood Mamdani described the culturalization of politics using the term "Culture Talk" and discerned that within the specific context, every culture is presented as carrying a tangible substance, which in turn functions as the basis for explanation of all political and economic processes (Mamdani 2004, p. 25). Culturalization, therefore, refers to an approach that considers culture and civilization as the basis of social structure and as the driving forces of social change (Bora 2024, p. 563). In this context, political differences, inequality, and rivalries are "neutralized" as cultural differences, as differences in lifestyle, values, or mentality. These differences are presented as given and perennial and as something that cannot be overcome (Zizek 2008, p. 660). This is a perception that analyzes culture and civilization in a static way, while the essentialist dimension of these concepts denotes that historical developments which affect cultures and interactions between civilizations are marginalized and thus removed from the forefront (Bora 2024, p. 563). In short, culturalization on the one hand sets culture and civilization as the foundations/basis of social structure, and on the other it proclaims the incompatibility of civilizations.

The process of culturalization of politics is a product, but also a symptom, of the anti-politics that prevailed after the end of the Cold War. In this period, characterized by some as the "end of history", culture and civilization acquired a position that was central to political visions (Arat-Koç 2018, pp. 396–97). This phenomenon has been further intensified since the beginning of the 21st century. It has been mainly expressed through the rise of racist, far-right, and other conservative movements across much of the world, both after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA and after the 2008 global crisis, the consequences of which are reproduced to this day.

In the political movements and ideological currents of the conservative restoration prevailing in recent years, strong importance is given to civilization and culture. The virtue, purity, and authenticity of the nation are elements described mainly through cultural context and reference. The political formula professed for a return to the "glorious past" is based more on a professed cultural homogenization of the nation rather than on ethnic or racial cleansing, as in the case of Nazism (R. Ü. Çınar 2022, p. 656). In a large part of these movements, the invocation of the need to restore a glorious past is at the same time a policy that claims the cultural and ethnic "cleansing" of the nation and the state. In this case, the cultural codes, values, and traditions become tools for the construction of a cultural–religious purity of the national identity (R. Ü. Çınar 2022, p. 656). Culture and civilization are the very soul, the spirit that unifies the nation through the centuries and that constitutes the set of values and religious faith. At the same time, this set of values and faith constitutes the distinctive characteristics of a nation's way of life and its basic differentiation from another (Akçaoğlu 2018, p. 7).

For example, studying the development of the phenomenon of national populism in Europe and the USA, Brubaker (2017, p. 1211) underlined the existence of a relative shift from nationalism, as known until now, towards the phenomenon of "civilizationism". This concept refers to a form of nationalism, but it differs in defining the boundaries of "self" and "other" because of the cultural terms used. Even though the cultural rhetoric used continues to be a description of the nation, the imagined community and utopian homeland are constructed not only in nationalist but also in cultural terms, and thus placed in a different context. This particular whole of visions and perceptions of world divisions constitutes more of a synthesis with nationalism than a rupture.

A dominant feature of the content of culturalization, at least as far as the West is concerned, is the construction and promotion of a specific cultural threat, namely Islam. This particular insistence on Islam as a threat contributed to the rise of identification with Christianity. A number of conservative, racist, and far-right movements in Europe gradually proceeded with enriching their political programmes with the promotion of Christianity, not just as a religion, but as a cultural identity, as a culture and feature of another Western way of life, rival to Islam (Brubaker 2017, pp. 1193–98). Christian revivalism, by extreme political movements, interprets Christianity as a civilization, which it then fully identifies with the West. It thus restores the identification between Christianity and the West by rejuvenating the older concept of "Christendom" as a specific and culturally defined geography (Brubaker 2017, pp. 1199–200). This conservative conceptualization of culture, which has already been recorded since the end of World War II within the framework of anti-communism in the West, has been transformed into the key component of right-wing political programmes across almost all of Europe (Akçaoğlu 2018, p. 7).

As understood by the aforementioned, one of the most characteristic effects of the process of culturalization of politics was the parallel culturalization of conflict (Brown 2006, p. 145). In this context, almost all conflicts and confrontations are interpreted in terms of civilization and culture. The causes and motives of conflicts, instability and transformations, and much more so the search for answers to the complex questions they provoke are based

on culture and civilization. Culture and civilization become the only differentiation lines between people, societies, and states (Brown 2006, p. 145).

One of the most characteristic expressions of an eminently civilizational interpretation of conflicts and confrontations in the period after the end of the Cold War was the theoretical inquiries of Samuel Huntington. In his well-known article "The Clash of Civilizations?", Huntington (1993, p. 31) pointed out that since the end of the Cold War, the iron curtain of ideology has been replaced by the velvet curtain of culture. Some years later, in his book with the same title, Huntington (1996, p. 29) was even more explicit. He declared that the basic differences in the political and economic development of civilizations were the result of their different cultures. Indeed, he declared that the economic success of Eastern Asia had its roots in its culture. According to him, Eastern Asian culture was also the source of the difficulties and obstacles in constructing stable and democratic political systems in these societies. Likewise, he claimed that Islamic culture can largely explain the failure of democracy to emerge in most of the Muslim world. "The Clash of Civilizations" was one of many examples at the level of ideology and political thought which contributed to the revival of the relatively overlooked concept of *Kulturkampf*. This concept is usually used as it is in German without translation. It means "war of culture" or "cultural war". It appeared as a description of Bismarck's policies in 1871–1878, which aimed at the restriction of the influence of the Catholic Church and the monopolization of power by the state. The specific policies are considered particularly harsh and intransigent (Bora 2024, p. 567).

The concept of cultural war gradually acquired content in order to explain conflicts beyond those between state and Church (Çınar and Bora 2022, p. 15). It included the general context of conflict between secularism and religion, but also the perception of a perennial confrontation between ontologically different religions and civilizations. One of the most recent examples of the use of the concept of "cultural war" in the West is the manifesto of neo-Nazi Anders Breivik, known for the murder of 77 people in Norway in 2011. In said manifesto, titled "2083—A European Declaration of Independence", there is clear reference to the existence of a cultural war against Islam and "cultural Marxists" being waged in Europe (von Bromssen 2013).

Essentially, cultural war today refers to the conflict between different cultural values and ideologies and the ways in which this conflict is expressed in various sectors of society. It constitutes part of broader social dynamics, while it differs in duration, content, and intensity, depending on historical and social realities (Doğan 2024). Therefore, the description and analysis of the conflicts as cultural wars cannot be disconnected from the competition for power, nor from the positions and goals of different social classes or class coalitions for the prevalence of their own ideological, cultural, and political values and visions.

Culture is not confined to traditions and cultural production. It is a broader concept which includes all the aforementioned social dynamics and values, but at the same time it is a dynamic concept since the content of culture changes; it is produced and reproduced and thus transformed (Parlak 2025). Because of its fluidity, culture can be converted into a unifying as well as a divisive element of society, while conflicts which focus on the shaping or reshaping of a culture are conflicts that reflect, to a certain degree, class dynamics and power relations (Parlak 2025).

In this sense, symbols, cultural codes, and cultural values are not autonomous and integrated systems. They constitute organic parts of power relations. The activation of symbols and cultural codes by an authority and the content given to them by the same authority are phenomena that can be adopted or rejected by society (Parlak 2021, p. 188). At this point, the dialectic relationship between coercion and consent is important in understanding the polarization produced by cultural war. More precisely, since culture is

neither an innocent nor a neutral concept, the conflict it produces can be subsumed into the broader explorations for hegemony (Bora 2018, pp. 55–56).

The Gramscian perspective of cultural hegemony is useful for understanding the political function and utility of cultural symbols. It clarifies the ways in which ideas can either reinforce or undermine existing social structures. Furthermore, cultural hegemony more fully reveals the contradiction that exists between the civilization and culture the dominant powers seek to establish and the relative cultural autonomy of the subordinate classes (Lears 1985, p. 568).

According to Gramsci's well-known analysis, hegemony is expressed in the "spontaneous consent given by large masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant group. This consent is historically caused by the prestige and concomitant confidence enjoyed by the dominant group because of its position and function in the world of production" (Gramsci 1971, p. 12). On the basis of this perspective, cultural hegemony is a dynamic relationship historically formed by the worldview of the dominant class, prevailing in society through the organization of a large-scale consensus (Parlak 2025). Consensus has a strategic nature in the effort to achieve hegemony. Gramsci emphasizes that the ruling classes do not reproduce their power only through successfully dressing it with an aura of moral authority, or through the creation of legitimizing symbols. They are obliged to claim and win the consent of the subordinate classes in the existing social order (Gramsci 1971, pp. 55–60). Thus, the point of connection between hegemony, civilization, and culture is as follows: hegemony can only be achieved when the dominant classes manage to establish their own moral, political, and cultural values as the conventional norms of the political behaviour of the whole of society (Femia 1981, p. 3).

The fact remains, however, that hegemony may not be fully realized. The granting of consent by the subordinate masses is not always achieved. As a result, hegemony is a dynamic relationship which contains gaps, which in turn reproduce the prospects for the emergence of counterhegemonic tendencies (counterhegemony) (Lears 1985, pp. 570–71). This perspective can therefore intensify the aspects of a cultural war that precisely act as a veil over social and class relations. Imposing an interpretation of confrontations and antagonisms in a society as solely cultural and analyzing the protagonists of these antagonisms solely on their cultural characteristics, constitutes an element of artificial marginalization of class competition (Saraçoğlu 2022).

Based on the above theoretical background, this article seeks to analyze the evolution of a culture war between Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community. The first part of the article describes the evolution of the "cultural war" within Turkey and the structural role of the instrumentalization of religion. This part discusses the ongoing conflict between different cultural values and ideologies within Turkish society. It emphasizes how these cultural conflicts, described as "cultural wars", are intricately tied to broader social dynamics. Furthermore, it highlights how these cultural wars are intertwined with the competition for power and the strategies of various social classes and coalitions to promote their ideological objectives. At the same time, the first part of the article tries to analyze the historical background of the relationship between the Turkish right and religion, and to underline the development of the cultural and religious elements as pivotal mobilizing elements of the Turkish right's political thought. Conservative, nationalist, and Islamic forces have historically initiated cultural conflicts, criticizing the state's founding ideologies and viewing Westernization as a threat to Turkey's core values, particularly religion. This perception has propelled the Turkish right to use religious discourse as a fundamental tool for political organization.

The second section explores the efforts by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to infuse religious education within the Turkish Cypriot community, aiming for a broader

ambition of "de-secularization". This initiative, initiated gradually since 2009, aimed to alter public spaces and the education system in line with trends in Turkey, reflecting a strategic move to reinforce Islam within the societal fabric of Turkish Cypriots. This section of the article also presents the perceptions of a part of the Turkish Cypriot community regarding these policies from Ankara. To a large extent, these changes are perceived as deliberate Islamization and thus prompt strong reactions to preserve the secular identity of the community in Cyprus. The discourse highlights the complex socio-political dynamics, illustrating the community's resistance to external attempts to reshape its cultural and religious landscape, thereby maintaining a distinct communal identity divergent from AKP's political ideology. Finally, the article concludes with some general conclusions on the evolution of Turkey's relations with the Turkish Cypriot community, based on the dispute over the place of religion in the collective identity and the political process.

2. The Past and the Present of Cultural War in Turkey

Cultural war is not unfamiliar as an analytical tool in the study of Turkey's history. Indeed, in many cases, imperial Prussia and republican Turkey are two of the important examples used to analyze the process through which the creation of a particular cultural identity and way of life came to a point of intense conflict (Grigoriadis and Grigoriadis 2018). According to Doğan's study, cultural war in Turkey can be traced back to the period of Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire (Doğan 2024). The major cultural changes produced as a result of Westernization were accompanied by crises that later marked the republican state and were to a great degree reproduced as a fundamental political conflict (Akçaoğlu 2018, p. 9). It is a fact that in Turkish modernity, the concept of modern civilization has gradually developed into a kind of mechanism for the construction of the cultural foundations of society. The instrumentalization of culture by the Kemalist elite was one of the most decisive bases for the construction of a new Turkish national identity and a new ideology for the republican state (Parlak 2025). It is no coincidence that from the early years of the one-party regime, a strong trend was recorded that focused on cultural transformation as the basis for the overall transformation of society. This school of thought within Kemalism predicted that only through the predominance of a new national culture based on secularism could the modernization of the country be established (Bora 2021, pp. 303–7).

Gradually, a critique of the "civilizing" aspects of Kemalism that was also culturally oriented was developed, especially by circles of intellectuals and politicians of the non-Kemalist Turkish right. A key dimension of the criticism was that the construction of a new national identity and culture on the basis of Westernization marginalized and weakened the historical cultural heritage of society. Especially in the anti-communist environment at the end of World War II, the conservative–nationalist intelligentsia of the country perceived traditional culture and civilization as the main means for the protection of the nation and national security. In the face of the communist threat, the restoration and strengthening of true national culture would, according to these circles, be instrumental in ensuring national unity and the survival of the state (Bora 2018, pp. 55–56). In this way, the Turkish right gradually created a theoretical counter-paradigm against the Marxist approach of economy as the structure, as well as ideology or culture as expressions of the superstructure. In this "alternative" analytical framework, culture and civilization were the basis, and indeed had a specific ethno-religious content: the Turkish Muslim culture (Bora 2024, pp. 563–64).

A distinctive characteristic of the aforementioned pursuit was that culture as a concept and political practice constituted an important basis for the mobilization and rallying of the whole spectrum of the Turkish right (Doğan and Özet 2023, p. 11). Conservative, nationalist, and Islamic forces began cultural war, focused their criticism on key aspects of the state's

founding ideology, and viewed the process of Westernization as a threat to the nation's original cultural values, among which religion was the most important (Parlak 2025).

With Turkey's transition to multi-partyism and the rise of the Democratic Party in the 1950s, some steps for conservative cultural restoration were taken, which resulted in religion gaining wider spheres of expression and influence (Akçaoğlu 2018, p. 10). Even though the Democrat elite had no particular differences in lifestyle to the Republican elite, it nevertheless promoted a different conception of secularism, which it did not consider an anti-religious value. Among the most symbolic acts of cultural war at this particular time was the restoration of the call to prayer (*ezan*) in the Arabic language, a development that contributed to the further influence of the Democrat Party among the religious masses. The Democrat Party was not an alternative to the founding philosophy of the state, but it did express to some extent the reaction of broad sections of the population against the cultural qualities of the Kemalist reforms (Özet 2023, pp. 118–21). This was, however, a process that was violently interrupted by the 1960 coup d'état.

The attempt to restore a conservative meaning to culture prevailed from the 1970s, i.e., in a period when this tendency was entrenched in state institutions and became a key component of the strategy against the rise of the left (Akçaoğlu 2018, p. 10). For example, the Intellectuals' Hearth (*Aydınlar Ocağı*) largely succeeded, through the Turkish–Islamic Synthesis, in entrenching the position that the only solution to Turkey's problems was a "return to national culture". "National culture" was understood as a genuine and stable-over-time component of the nation. In other words, the Turkish–Islamic Synthesis perceived political and economic problems not as such, but as cultural issues created by society's departure from the authentic national culture, a key part of which was the Islamic religion. In this way, the aim was to remove political and economic issues from the political and democratic process, i.e., the reversal of popular, pluralistic participation in the political process (Şen 2010, p. 65). Consequently, the confrontation was transferred to the level of identities and cultural codes, which prevented the development of a global and democratic understanding of the real causes of socio-economic problems and impasses. With the 1980 coup d'état, the aforementioned ideological position became the axis for determining the basic orientations of the state itself.

Turkish Islamism has historically been of strategic importance in the question of culturalization of politics and the instrumentalization of cultural war. A dominant perception of Islamism is that the political process constitutes a tool for the realization of a single objective: the salvation of the state and the nation from the moral crisis caused by the process of Westernization and secularization. According to this perception, Westernization was a war against the cultural identity and religion of Muslims, which resulted in their subjugation to the West (M. Çınar 2021, p. 99). Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, one of the important intellectuals of Turkish Islamism, considered that the main denominator in the crisis faced by the country was the Westernization in the Tanzimat era of the Ottoman Empire that led to the total surrender of the nation to imitating the West (Doğan and Özet 2023, p. 9). In exactly the same context, Kemalist reforms such as the abolition of the sultanate and the caliphate, the adoption of the Latin alphabet, the prohibition of *tekkes*, and the imposition of the call to prayer in the Turkish language were treated by Islam as perhaps the most indicative examples of its cultural marginalization and persecution by the founding ideology of the state (Doğan and Özet 2023, p. 9).

The alternative political proposal of Turkish Islamism was also clothed in cultural rhetoric. The political programme of the National Outlook Movement parties emphasized the need for "spiritual development" as the only remedy in dealing with the moral crisis and the general collapse of values in Turkey. Spiritual development, beyond the economic level, involved a kind of religious restoration and could therefore only be realized by

religious Muslim political leaders—the senior political officials, that is, who remained "intact" and unaffected by the prevalence of foreign Western values and attitudes (M. Çınar 2021, pp. 99–100).

The AKP, after all, emerged from the split in the National Outlook Movement. The party leadership at the time made sure to disassociate the new political formation from the Erbakan traditions, initially adopting the programme of "Conservative Democracy". These developments, however, led to different dynamics, caused by complex internal and international changes. From 2010–2011 onwards, the AKP distanced itself from the conservative–democratic identity it had promoted as its founding programme and chose to advance a political agenda with more prominent Islamic sensibilities. This time period coincided with the adoption of a clearly more aggressive discourse on matters of culture and civilization (Doğan and Özet 2023, p. 7).

The AKP's aggressive political discourse came hand in hand with an insistent, moralistic style which disparaged the secular way of life. At the same time, the promoted cultural norms and values aimed at redefining Turkey as a Muslim nation supposedly free from the "contaminating effects" of hundreds of years of Westernization (M. Çınar 2018, pp. 177–78). Thus, the attempt to reshape the identity of the nation and the ideal citizen was characterized by an emphasis on the Muslim Turkish elements as well as the imperial heritage as the genuine local and national elements on which the "New Turkey" should be built (Parlak 2025). At the same time, however, the AKP and Erdoğan were imposed as the reincarnation of the will of the given "genuine nation" and as a result, any voice of opposition was considered as national betrayal (Gürpınar 2023, p. 25).

On the one hand, this situation contributed to the culmination of the polarization of cultural identities, while it featured the field of culture and civilization as a battlefield that the government would have to conquer in order for the "local and national" forces to prevail (Yaren et al. 2022, p. 421). To a large degree, this cultural polarization was the outcome of a conscious strategy by the government, which according to Yörük was reminiscent of the process of the 1930s "Kemali cultural war" but "in reverse". If, at that time, state power was activated to suppress what the state-founding elite perceived as tendencies of religious reaction and regression, so today does the AKP, "in reverse", activate state power to marginalize what it considers as "inappropriate to the religious and spiritual values" of the nation (Yörük 2022).

As Gumuscu (2024, pp. 371–72) remarks, this is a "stealth Islamization" of the country's social and political life, which gradually evolves and influences the social substratum towards conservatism, but is, at the same time, implemented in the secular institutions of Turkey. The dominant powers seek to create a conservative Islamic setting for culture and civilization through the activation of many ideological mechanisms, such as schools, universities, the media, various funds from the state budget, and the bureaucracy itself (Yaren et al. 2022, p. 419). The strategy for "returning to the roots of the nation" as an alternative to Kemalist-oriented cultural changes included the restoration of the Ottoman past, both in the urban landscape and in everyday ideological confrontation; the construction of mosques in areas of former secular dominance; and the production of television series and films aimed at legitimizing a glorious imperial and Islamic past (Bora 2024, p. 567).

Of course, the AKP claim for cultural hegemony did not develop only as a claim for complete control of yet another sector of society. The conception of this attempt was not to leave "in hands of others" the production and reproduction of symbols, rhetoric, narratives and political positions which favoured the mobilization of opposition organizations (Yaren et al. 2022, p. 421). At this very point, the ruling party faced difficulties, which it even expressed publicly. One of the characteristic expressions of anxiety about the question of hegemony at cultural level was the following statement by Erdoğan: "Everyone here

knows the difference between being the government and being in power. Likewise, we know very well that real power is intellectual power... I personally feel sad in this regard. Making an honest appraisal, I think we have achieved historic works and services in every field in the last 18 years, but we have not been able to make progress in education, schooling and culture" (TCCB 2020). The problem described by Erdoğan is the problem of unfulfilled hegemony of power. Despite the long presence of the AKP in all of Turkey's power structures, the party elite feels that at the level of ideas the "spontaneous and active" consent of the vast majority of society is not registered.

The success of such an undertaking, i.e., the effort to fulfil hegemony through the adoption of the ruling elite's ideas as collective social identity, could not but place the issue of education at the centre of the culture war. These are the important institutions that can intervene in the process of identity construction in a more permanent and lasting way. As Hulusi Akar, former minister of Defence and MP of the AKP, said: "the goal of education is not knowledge, but the transmission of the fear of God". Otherwise, as he argued, society will be faced with problems such as atheism, deism, homosexuality, and drugs (*Sol Haber* 2024). Therefore, in the process of the war for cultural dominance, the Islamic identity is the one that acquires strategic importance. For the AKP, this identity constitutes the sign and the dividing line between the "genuine nation" and the minority of alienated, Western-style elites (Gürpınar 2023, p. 48).

According to this rationale, education is cut off from the provision of scientific knowledge and becomes a tool for shaping the standard model citizen, who should in principle be God-fearing. Thus, the propagation of Islamic practices, faith, and values is a goal that should be realized through state institutions which, because of their power, could effectively intervene to favour the envisioned religious orientation (Gumuscu 2024, p. 375). For example, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, schools, and the education system in general gradually emerged as leading pillars of the Islamization of education and the creation of aspects of the new national identity. This policy was of course not entirely novel, since the AKP drew on the traditions created by the previous attempt to further religionize education, the 1980 coup, and the Turkish–Islamic Synthesis (Şen 2010).

In 2012, Erdoğan publicly set the goal for "pious youth generation upbringing, with the computer in one hand and the Koran in the other" (Lüküslü 2016, p. 638). One of the most important structures for the upbringing of this generation was the seminary (*İmam Hatip*), i.e., the structure that historically functioned as a back yard for the creation of political figures of Turkish Islam (Gumuscu 2024, p. 383). The government did indeed give special weight to the policy of strengthening and upgrading İmam Hatip with the aim of establishing them as an integral part of the country's education system. In the school year 2002–2003, 443 İmam Hatip were operating in Turkey, and by 2019 their number had increased to 1623. The percentage of İmam Hatip at high school level in 2002–2003 was only 8%; by 2019, it had increased to 18%. A similar increase was recorded in the percentage of İmam Hatip graduates compared to the total number of new graduates in the country. In fact, in the period 2002–2003, İmam Hatip graduates constituted 3% of the total, while in 2019 they had increased to 14% (TCCB 2019). The trend of increase in the numbers of İmam Hatip peaked notably after 2011, when the government implemented multi-dimensional policies. These were the creation of a de facto situation which forced many families to send their children to these schools; a dramatic increase in their funding from the state budget; and a general attempt to establish them as a kind of new elite educational institution (Gumuscu 2024, p. 384).

The strategic character of İmam Hatip was also reflected in the ideological framework within which the AKP wanted to consolidate its political mission. On the one hand, İmam Hatip symbolized the history of victimization and the barriers that were constructed against

eventual social recognition of the religious masses of the country, according to the history constructed by the AKP. For example, the President of Turkey underlined that the enemies of İmam Hatip schools "did not tolerate the bright children of Anatolia becoming state officials, judges, prosecutors, and diplomats" (TCCB 2019), meaning that these religious educational structures could contribute to the upward social mobility of the conservative masses. The existence and establishment of these schools is presented as the story of a greater resistance against the authoritarian, secular, and Western elite of the state who did not wish for the social advancement of the religiously devout. According to Erdoğan, the persecution of İmam Hatip was part of the attacks against the silent majority, but also part of the efforts to cut off the nation from its roots and sources of life (TCCB 2019). As the President of Turkey remarked, "This story is not just the story of İmam Hatip; it is our story. The story of our nation's struggle for justice and freedom. . . The CHP mentality had always viewed these schools as a threat" (TCCB 2021). On the other hand, the ideological framework in which the mission of the İmam Hatip is placed is characterized by the relation between the nation's existential angst and its religion. As Erdoğan stresses, İmam Hatip and their graduates constitute the safeguard that "minarets will not be without prayer, the army will not be without heroes, the homeland will not be without Muslims. . . Do not forget dear youth, that if you strip these lands of Islam, if you remove prayer, the minaret, the mosque and the Koran, nothing will remain. There will be no nation and no homeland" (TCCB 2024). Therefore, in this ideological axis, İmam Hatip function not only as nuclei for the reproduction of Islamic identity as a structural feature of collective identity, but also as a constituent element of the survival of the nation. They are not just religious educational institutions, but institutions for the ideological reproduction of power and the new national identity that power wishes to impose.

3. "Instilling" Cultural Wars in the Turkish Cypriot Community

> *The only force that will keep Cyprus in our hands is the common civilization, culture and historical consciousness. If these do not exist, even if we are fully sovereign in Cyprus, sooner or later we will lose it. We are now in such a position. We militarily exist in Cyprus, but we do not exist culturally. We must realize that on the cultural level, we have lost Cyprus*. (Kaplan 2020)

This extract from an article by Islamist intellectual Yusuf Kaplan is indicative, in two ways, of the cultural war between Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community. The first way is the angst over the unfulfilled hegemony of power in the context of the Turkish Cypriots. Here, Kaplan is concerned about the ideological "absence" of Turkey from the Turkish Cypriot community's value system. The second way is the indirect concern about the secular dimension of the community. Therefore, the ideological "absence" confessed is not abstract. It concerns the angst of Turkish Islamism over the powerful secular tendencies of the Turkish Cypriots.

Even though in many societies religion has constituted a structural part of national identity, this has never been recorded in the case of Turkish Cypriots. Historically, Islam did not play a determining role in the construction of the modern Turkish Cypriot identity, which particularly stood out in its adoption of key aspects of Kemalism (Latif 2021, p. 806). From the time of British colonialism in Cyprus, secular tendencies already prevailed in the Turkish Cypriot community, resulting in the marginalization of Islam and the creation of obstacles to its politicization (Dayıoğlu and Köprülü 2019, p. 613). Indeed, from the 1930s the Turkish Cypriots adopted the Kemalist reforms with great fervour and applied them with relative ease in almost all spheres of their social life (Uzer 2011, p. 111). Therefore, secularism as a historical characteristic remains to this day particularly strong in the communal identity of the Turkish Cypriots (Nevzat and Hatay 2009).

However, it should be noted that despite the strengthening of secular tendencies in the Turkish Cypriot community, the issue of religion was not absent from the changing relationship of the Turkish Cypriots with Turkey (Dayıoğlu and Köprülü 2019, p. 612). On the contrary, on many occasions, and especially those when increased influence of Turkish Islamism was recorded, the general "absence" of Turkish Islamism from the social life and value system of the Turkish Cypriots was a source of tension and conflict.

Since the early 1970s, many Islamic magazines in Turkey had highlighted the "national dangers" created by the absence of religious education in the Turkish Cypriot community. For example, in an article in *Tohum* magazine, Cahid Baltacı assessed the "state of religion" among Turkish Cypriots and concluded that their distancing from "national culture" constituted a threat of "extinction". Namely, he remarked that the absence of Islamic education opened up the prospects for the adoption of Christianity by the Turkish Cypriot youth and, as an antidote, suggested the immediate intervention of Ankara in the direction of creating İmam Hatip and incorporating Religious Instruction in the school curriculum (Baltacı 1970).

The gradual strengthening of the Welfare Party/Refah Partisi in the 1990s and its short term in office in 1996–1997 were also indicative of the strengthening of Turkish Islamism's "suspicion" of Turkish Cypriots' secularism. The Welfare Party sought to contribute to the strengthening of organized Islamic formations in the Turkish Cypriot community, to create conditions for the strengthening of religious education and Islamic structures in general (Latif 2021, p. 810).

Because of the short duration of the Erbakan rule, this effort was discontinued, but it was a foretaste of certain intentions revived a few decades later with the Erdoğan rule. It is a fact that during the first years of the AKP government, there was no intense confrontation between Turkey and Turkish Cypriots centred on religion. Over time, however, and as a result of the important changes recorded in the coalition government in Turkey, aspects of cultural polarization and "cultural war" were also reflected in the Turkish Cypriot community.

The attempt by the AKP to strengthen religious education—and in fact achieve more than just that—in the Turkish Cypriot community was a gradual process that made the Islamist mobilization visible. This was conceived by large sections of the Turkish Cypriot community as a conscious strategy to transform the religious landscape through a process of "de-secularization" of the community. On the one hand was the attempt to Islamize the Turkishness of the community through the dominance of Islam in the public space; on the other was the strengthening of religion with specific changes in the Turkish Cypriot education system, which had gradually begun to be implemented since 2009, in accordance with the patterns of changes prevailing in Turkey (Michael 2014, p. 25).

The first axis is characterized by the effort to highlight Islam in the public space and, in this sense, its transformation into a political issue (*Havadis* 2016). The attempt to politicize religion and therefore the pursuit of transforming it into a structural element of special and social identity runs through both the reformation of the urban landscape and the reformation of the ideological environment. For example, while, in the period 1974–2002, 9 new mosques were built in the occupied territories and their total did not exceed 150, by 2013, the number of mosques had increased to 199 (Hatay 2013). The vast majority of new mosques were built with the financial intervention of the Turkish state (Ergül 2009). And it was no coincidence that, in the period 2009–2015, Ankara's funding for the "development of religious services" in the Turkish Cypriot community reached approximately TRY 67.6 million (KEİ 2015, p. 107).

A typical example of the pursuit to reform the Turkish Cypriot urban landscape through intense Sunni Islamic presence were the plans for the Near East University Mosque.

This specific mosque, officially inaugurated in January 2024, was designed as the largest in the whole of Cyprus, and in a way, so as to be visible in the southern areas of the island. The amount of the investment was estimated at USD 27 million, and it can accommodate ten thousand people (*Gazete360* 2013). The special emphasis that the mosque "should be visible in the southern territories of the island" is in no way coincidental. The Turkish state seeks to illustrate "spatially and visually" its new ideological identity. It wishes to completely control the reformation of the urban space in a way that would reproduce its own ideological standards in the Turkish Cypriot community. The size, magnificence, economic cost, and transformation of the landscape that will result upon the completion of the project are elements of a "spatial rehearsal" through which the culmination of efforts to give birth to a "new community" and a new state symbolism is sought. This specific mosque, as well as all others imported from Turkey within the AKP context, constitute the perspective of a new political vision for the Turkish Cypriot community. This vision appears through the public expressions of Islam and ostracizes the former nationalist–secular ideological environment.

The second axis is the exercise of pressure for specific political changes in the educational system in the occupied areas, namely changes that would strengthen the position of Sunni Islam. The turning point for this was the period 2007–2008, when the deep political and economic divisions in Turkey led to the formation of a more conservative social alliance in support of the AKP. In Cyprus, just like in Turkey, the gradual Islamization of the educational system was set as the priority. The return of the National Unity Party to the government of the occupied areas in 2009, which coincided with the aforementioned change in the balance of power within Turkey, was ultimately a catalyst for new opportunities to strengthen Islamic orientations in education (*Havadis* 2016).

The political decisions and measures taken by the so-called "government" of the National Unity Party from 2009 were typical of this reality. Specifically, summer Koran courses began in the occupied territories in the summer of the same year. It should be noted that serious efforts to institutionalize Koran lessons were made as early as 2004, but initially these were held in mosques (Dayıoğlu and Hatay 2009, p. 83). According to published figures, in 2009, the Koran classes were attended by about 2000; by 2014, the number had increased to 4500, and in 2015, the figure reached 5000 (*Havadis* 2016). Furthermore, in the school year 2009–2010, the course "Religious Culture and Ethics" (*Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Dersi*) was reinstated as compulsory in the curriculum. This particular change referred to one single-period lesson per week for classes 4–8, i.e., at the end of primary and beginning of secondary education. According to the decision, school units could implement the programme according to the availability of qualified teachers. The lack of trained personnel therefore created many problems in the implementation of the decision. Many classes were taught by unqualified teachers or even by imams who arrived in Cyprus from Turkey for this purpose (Hendrich 2015, p. 22). In the same academic year, the Council of Higher Education of Turkey decided to offer additional places in higher theological schools for "TRNC" citizens.

From early 2011, there was an intense discussion on the prospect of creating a Theological Department at the Haspolat Technical School, something which was finally established in November of the same year (Dayıoğlu 2014, p. 114). In 2012, the issue of the construction of the Hala Sultan Theological School in Mia Milia area came to the forefront (Dayıoğlu 2012). This development is considered of strategic importance considering the priority given to the specific religious educational structure in the AKP political project. The confrontation caused by the decision to create such a religious educational institution in the Turkish Cypriot community is typical of the wider ideological–political dynamics and perceptions which prevail among the Turkish Cypriots (Hendrich 2015, p. 29) and

which affect the content of their relationship with Turkey. An opinion poll published at the time indicated that more than 57% of the participants disagreed with the operation of the Theological School, while the majority of the voters of the National Unity Party also held a negative opinion, with 51% against the operation of the school (*Yeni Düzen* 2012). According to the CTP, the social rejection of such an institution arose from the fact that its design and implementation were an imposition from the outside, that it would operate in a way that would create a single type of religious people, without taking into account the political will of Turkish Cypriots and their identity (*Haber Kıbrıs* 2013).

The foundation stone for the construction of the Hala Sultan Theological School was laid on 20 July 2012, and on 27 September 2013 it was inaugurated by the then Vice-President of the Turkish government, Beşir Atalay. In his speech, he pointed out, among other things, that "This complex will become one of the most important earmarks of the island. It will be one of the most important indications of the existence of Turks on this island" (*Kıbrıs Postası* 2013). The fact that the operation of Hala Sultan İmam Hatip was placed in the wider context of the construction of a complex of buildings (*Külliye*), with the inclusion of the homonymous mosque next to the school, was a development perceived more as an act of intervention, both in the urban space and environment of the Turkish Cypriots, and in the creation of a new religiously defined identity (Parlak 2021, pp. 186–89). The realization of these intentions of Ankara by the organized sections of the Turkish Cypriot opposition acted as a dynamic for reactions that developed both on a political and legal level. The broader Turkish Cypriot left intensified its criticism against such interventions, while its political mobilization was paired with the legal proceedings initiated by the Turkish Cypriot teachers' unions, with the ultimate goal of banning the operation of the Hala Sultan Theological School (Dayıoğlu and Köprülü 2019, pp. 616–18).

Even if the political and legal mobilizations of the Turkish Cypriots did not have the desired result, they nevertheless managed to reopen a wide field of confrontation and expression of different political positions on the issue of relations with Turkey. Due to the strategic nature of the İmam Hatip structures in Turkish Islamism, the operation of such an institution in the Turkish Cypriot community caused reactions, as it was perceived as a policy of imposition of a new value framework that went as far as the definitive cultural assimilation of the Turkish Cypriot identity by Turkey (Latif 2021, p. 811). For example, the Turkish Cypriot teachers' trade union KTOEÖS underlined the need for reaction against these kinds of impositions, saying that "We will continue to struggle for modern, secular, scientific education, against the attacks on our working conditions and rights and against the social transformation in this country. We will resist all pressures, all impositions, and all discrediting. We will continue to struggle" (*Kıbrıs Genç TV* 2023). On a symbolic level, the operation of the Hala Sultan School of Theology was for many Turkish Cypriots an indication of the implementation of a policy for a "God-fearing generation" in Cyprus as well (Özdağ 2016). This development, in turn, led to the conclusion that the government of Turkey had set a goal of weakening Turkish Cypriot secularism as the "last bastion" of resistance against the completion of its hegemony (*Bugün Kıbrıs* 2023).

Therefore, in this context, secularism for a large part of the Turkish Cypriot community was not simply a form of lifestyle, nor just a feature of collective identity. It was more of an existential issue, an issue worth protecting because its loss would symbolize the replacement of the collective secular "we" with something alien. As Sami Özuslu (2017) characteristically points out in *Yeni Düzen*, "The large majority of Turkish Cypriots is worried. The reason for concern is the actions of those who govern Turkey and their associates to change this community… The main expectation is the transformation of Turkish Cypriots into a community of Islam (*İslam cemaati*). I think we have now reached a red line. If we lose our secular and modern structure, there is nothing else left". Therefore,

secularism emerged as the point which should not be crossed, a red line—the last defence of what in the Turkish Cypriots' political vocabulary was historically expressed as "communal existence".

4. Conclusions

The process of the culturalization of the political process at a global level has transformed the concepts of civilization and culture into the sole criteria for evaluating political claims and visions. A practical form of this process is cultural war, which is nevertheless a power strategy. What is essentially claimed through cultural war is the blurring of social and class causes of the more general orientations of the power bloc. In the broader environment of polarization, created by the practice of cultural war, the instrumentalization of religion stands out. This development has in many cases turned religion into yet another platform reasserting the limits of a secular identity and culture. Hence, it functions as the limit not only of inclusion, but also of exclusion of other identities.

The case of Turkey is of course not unique. As in other cases, the emergence of polarization around cultural identities and the issue of culture in Turkey was and remains one of the important issues of debate and the source of much controversy. The culturalization of politics has been a strategic tool for Turkish Islamists, with political processes framed as mechanisms for defending against moral crises attributed to Western influences. This ethos is encapsulated in the works of intellectuals who argued that deferring to Western ways leads to cultural and spiritual degradation. This article highlights that culture, as perceived by the Turkish right, serves as a fundamental basis for mobilization across the political spectrum. Conservative, nationalist, and Islamic factions engage in cultural "warfare", critiquing state ideology (Kemalism) and viewing Westernization as a threat to original cultural values, particularly religion.

The long AKP rule therefore falls into the wider whole of Turkish Islamism, which instrumentalized cultural war as a structural part of the effort to reproduce power. From a certain point in time onwards, the transition of the party's strategy towards the construction of a specific hegemonic policy with more intense conservative–Islamic characteristics was indicated. One of its most basic aspects was the emergence of Sunni Islam as the strongest structural characteristic of national identity in the country. This development was reflected in specific policies and in Turkey's educational system, which was established as a mechanism for the reproduction and propagation of the model new "Muslim Turkish citizen". The AKP's discourse emphasizes moralistic critiques of secularism and seeks to redefine Turkey's identity as a Muslim nation, free from Western influences. This effort includes promoting Muslim Turkish elements and imperial heritage as core to the "New Turkey", portraying any opposition as betrayal. This has culminated in cultural polarization, with the government using state power to marginalize elements deemed incompatible with religious and spiritual values, mirroring historical cultural conflicts but in reverse.

However, the attempt to transfer aspects of the aforementioned hegemonic policy to the Turkish Cypriot community was almost immediately turned into a source of tension in the community's relations with Turkey. Analyzing the externalization of cultural wars, as in the case of Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community, is crucial as it highlights the transformation of culture and civilization into primary criteria for political evaluation on a regional scale. This approach not only reimagines nationalist narratives but also integrates cultural perspectives into geopolitical conflicts, impacting how communities perceive themselves and others. Such analysis reveals the strategic manipulation of culture in broadening ideological battles beyond the national boundaries.

The deeper content of instilling Islamism in Cyprus aimed to marginalize the secular characteristics of the Turkish Cypriot community and to give prominence to the strategy to create a new collective identity. The strengthening of Sunni Islam in the public sphere of the community in Cyprus and the changes in the educational system with the emergence of the Hala Sultan Theological School were some of the important expressions of the pursuit of creating a "religious generation" in Cyprus (Moudouros 2019).

It was precisely the content of these changes that served as the basis for the mobilization of the Turkish Cypriot opposition, which sought to affirm the community's differentiation from the AKP example. The reactions of the secular Turkish Cypriot opposition to Turkey's ruling coalition suggest a strong inclination to preserve a distinct communal identity separate from the AKP's influence. The opposition is rooted in the Turkish Cypriots' secular traditions, which view the increased role of Islam in politics as contrary to their cultural and social norms. Historically, and notably since 1974, some parts of the Turkish Cypriot community have resisted attempts to politicize religion, emphasizing secularism as a core part of their identity. Policies such as establishing Imam Hatip schools were seen as efforts to impose a new cultural framework on the Turkish Cypriot community, perceived as a move toward cultural assimilation.

The Turkish Cypriot left actively criticized these changes, aligning legal and political actions to counter the AKP's policies symbolized by the establishment of the Hala Sultan Theological School. Organizations like the Turkish Cypriot teachers' unions played a crucial role, initiating legal proceedings aimed at banning certain institutions perceived as tools of Islamization. While the immediate goals of these mobilizations, such as halting the operation of specific schools, might not always achieve the desired outcomes, these actions created a broader platform to debate and challenge Turkey's influence in Turkish Cypriot affairs. The reactions of the Turkish Cypriots do not constitute a novel phenomenon. On the contrary, as apparent from the development of a separate political organization of the community, especially after 1974, parts of the Turkish Cypriot community have often in the past attempted to build defences against the politicization of religion through various means. The political reaction underscores the desire to affirm a distinct communal identity from the AKP-led narrative, promoting a stance of differentiation from the broader Islamic political ideology pushed by Turkish organizations. The community's interactions with Turkey are complex and evolving, often driven by a response to the Turkish government's attempts to integrate religious ideology into the cultural fabric. Overall, these reactions underscore a tension between maintaining a secular, independent identity and resisting external pressures from Turkey's current power bloc. These efforts reflect the complex dynamics within the Turkish Cypriot community, striving to uphold secular values against perceived external cultural and religious intrusions.

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