

---

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

The study of ethnic minorities is of vital concern in the context of nations consisting of different groups, some of which are immigrants whilst others are indigenous to the land. While a considerable degree of effort is made concerning studying the real-world situations of minorities in Western Europe and North America, there are generally limited approaches to exploring the situation in the Middle East. Similarly, although there is important work on the experiences of minorities in Turkey being published, few examine minority groups holistically in terms of elaborating on the current state of affairs as well as situating the analysis into a wider discussion on the nature of ethnic and religious differences in contemporary Turkey. This special issue is an attempt to explore the nature and reality of the lived experiences of ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey from different conceptual and analytical perspectives, ranging from the sociological, historical, and anthropological to the political.

Cultural racism highlights cultural differences or differences between *nomos-es*, if we borrow from Peter Berger, between value systems which arbitrarily differentiate between “civilisational” values and between “inferior, barbaric, undemocratic, etc.” Local Middle Eastern societies are not immune to the separation of *who is* and *who is not* “us” or who has “legitimate” ethnicity *and/or* religion and who has not. Such reductions in religion, culture and ethnicity are a manipulation in the service of ideologies that indicate a fear of the consequences that diversity and plurality might bring. They are also most certainly the result of the emergence of nation-states and related nationalisms, which often lead to homogenising processes of defining a common territory, history, culture, language or religion. Although many nations do not form a homogeneous body and are made up of different ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious groups, the rhetoric of nationality treats the nation as an integral unit. This is also the case in contemporary Turkey where multifold minority populations have often been rendered invisible due to powerful waves of Turkish nationalism, exceptionalism and, in more recent periods, neo-Ottomanism.

The formation of the Turkish nation-state involved specific inclusion and exclusion mechanisms vis-à-vis the population of the remaining territories of the Ottoman state at the end of the Great War. During the Ottoman era, different religious groups were granted the capacity to govern their internal affairs as long as they were loyal to the Sultan. In the transformation of the Empire into a secular republic in the early 1920s, only the Greek Orthodox, Jewish and Armenian communities were officially recognised as “minority” and received certain protections under the new Turkish Republic in light of their religious affiliations. However, Kurdish groups, representing at least one-fifth of the population, were denied recognition of their cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritage. They were Muslim by religious classification and therefore not counted as a minority. As other ethnic and religious groups, including the Roma, have continued to suffer at the hands of an exclusivist Turkification project, a Turkish-Kurdish separation remains an ongoing challenge for the future of Turkey.

Ethnic and religious dimensions of Turkish nationalism as reflected in the Turkification policies of the Young Turk government in the final years of Ottoman era were inherited by the republican political elite. This legacy, i.e. the program of creating an ethnically homogeneous nation and national Muslim-Turkish economy and policy, shaped not only the Republic’s assimilationist policies against Kurdish groups, but also the immigration policies and several discriminatory policies against non-Muslim minorities. The coexistence of the ethnic, religious, and civic dimensions of Turkish nationalism, often resulting in contradictory policies concerning minorities, could have very destructive results, as in the case of the Wealth Tax of 1942–1943 or the Pogrom of 6–7 September 1955. In other words, religious and ethnic minorities (legally recognised or not) during the Republican period have been in a tense and precarious relationship vis-à-vis the state. The Republic’s civic nationalist discourse which defined Turkishness on the basis of citizenship in the 1924 constitution, as well as the secularist principle which led to the removal of Islam (as a “state religion”) from the constitution in 1928, were in contradiction with the policies in practice. This very ambiguity of Turkish nationalism could also create manoeuvring space for minorities who have adopted a variety of strategies vis-à-vis

the government ranging from revolt to silent consent or voluntary assimilation (as exemplified in several articles in this issue). The multiplicity of minority experiences continue today as the AKP government has not reversed these defining features of official Turkish nationalism despite its leadership's Islamist ideological background, as well as the democratic reform packages in the framework of the EU inclusion process. The study of minorities in the Turkish Republic both in the past and now offers scholars both the difficulties and challenges involved in the analysis of diverse receptions, responses, and strategies adopted by minority groups. The recent Syrian refugee crisis and the AKP government's handling of the crisis by using Syrian asylum seekers, often as leverage in its relationship with the EU, combined with rising anti-Syrian nationalism within the population has created new challenges for the study of minorities in Turkey. This collection provides historical and contemporary analytical perspectives to these challenges as well as those of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and globalisation in the context of the broader Middle East region and its politics.

*Tahir Abbas, Umut Azak, and Anja Zalta*