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From Gallipoli to Gaza: How Pan-Islamism Took Over Turkey's Secular Education System

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Since the beginning of the Hamas-provoked war in Gaza on October 7, the steady deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations has been in full throttle. Following Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's strong declaration of support for Hamas on October 25,¹ bilateral relations have suffered unprecedented setbacks. The suspension of the airbridge² and tourism, as well as the cutting of bilateral trade relations,³ have significantly damaged people-to-people relations.

However, it seems that none of the harsh steps above will have as long-term of an effect as the latest step taken by the Turkish Ministry of National Education. In an official statement⁴ which was later officially announced in his ministry's website, the Turkish Minister of National Education Yusuf Tekin, stated that he has instructed schools to begin classes on September 9 with an opening lesson titled "From Çanakkale (Gallipoli) to Gaza: Homeland Defense and the Struggle for Independence" to raise awareness of the so-called Israeli oppression.

Considered one of the most important theaters of World War I, the Gallipoli Campaign (April 1915–January 1916) was a crucial turning point in Turkish history. Under the command of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—who later founded the modern Turkish Republic—

the Ottoman army successfully thwarted the Allied naval assault and amphibious landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula. The campaign ended in a significant defeat for the Allies and solidified Ottoman homeland defenses, paving the way for the spiritual backbone of the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1922).

Despite Gallipoli's unique history, Tekin did not hesitate to link this heroic homeland defense with the Hamas-provoked war in Gaza—an obviously unjust historical comparison. On top of this, to emphasize the compatibility of his instructions with his ministry's national education ideology, the minister stated in his official document that the “Gallipoli-Gaza activity” in classrooms aligns with the core ideals of the national education system, referred to as the “Turkey Century Education Model” (Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli). Accordingly, by placing an emphasis on a “virtue-value-action” triangle – which was embraced officially in the 2018-2019 academic year,⁵ the ministry sought to observe students' responses on the subject.⁶

It should also be noted that since its unveiling at the beginning of the year, the model, which was enforced on September 9, has faced harsh criticism from opposition circles. Accordingly, the goals that are specified in the curriculum of raising “right-minded” (akl-i selim) and “pure-hearted” (kalb-i selim) students as well as the “virtue-value-action” model, serve as evidence that the curriculum aims not at universal principles, human rights, and the best interests of the child, but rather promotes the political and ideological objectives of the present government and the ideal citizen model that the single-person regime seeks to create.⁷

This critique also aligns closely with Louis Althusser's famous essay entitled “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in which he emphasizes the state's desire to control individuals through the indoctrination of a dominant ideology. In Althusser's view, religious institutions, families, political bodies, and educational institutions—whether private or public schools—function as the core components of this machinery.⁸

Therefore, in its quest to create its own ideal Pan-Islamist Turkish citizen, Erdoğan's Ministry of National Education had no problem associating Gallipoli with Gaza. By referencing the Gallipoli War Monument, which features the symbolic war helmets of soldiers who joined the Ottoman army from Jerusalem and Gaza, the ministry sought to

emphasize the brotherly relations between Turks and Palestinians. This was done while completely disregarding their betrayal and collaboration with British forces during the Arab Revolt of 1916-1918, which led to Ottoman-Turkish casualties and the loss of the entire Middle East.

In addition, by drawing this parallel between Gallipoli and Gaza, the ministry reiterated President Erdoğan's April 17 speech in the parliament which equated Hamas with the Turkish independence war fighters (Kuvay-ı Milliye).⁹ This comparison implicitly seeks to delegitimize Israel. For instance, in the battle for Gallipoli in World War I, the allied British, French, and ANZACⁱ came as foreign invaders to the Ottoman territory. By comparing these invaders to Israel, this narrative implies that the Jewish state is also a temporary alien entity that has come to occupy a territory that belongs solely to the Palestinians.

It should also be noted that the "Gallipoli-Gaza classroom activity" is not the only step taken by the ministry since the beginning of the war. At the suggestion of the Jerusalem University Foundation (Kudüs Üniversitesi Vakfı), the Ministry of National Education has included "Zionist Movements and the Palestinian Issue" in the national education curriculum. Consequently, this subject will be added to the twelfth-grade "Turkish Revolution History and Atatürkism" teaching program.¹⁰ While the content has not yet been made public, given the Turkish government's pro-Hamas stance, one cannot reasonably expect a balanced presentation of historical facts in the ministry's instruction.

The same one-sidedness was evident in another practice by the Ministry of National Education. Following the Islamic Jihad's failed rocket launch that hit Al-Ahly Hospital on October 17, Ankara directly held Jerusalem responsible for the incident and declared three days of national mourning the next day. After this period ended, to raise awareness of the Palestinian cause, the minister instructed schools on October 20 to hold a ceremony where students were asked to observe a one-minute silence for the Palestinians who lost their lives—allegedly due to an Israeli strike.¹¹

In retrospect, it is possible to state that this Pan-Islamist worldview was paved by the Ministry of National Education in 2017. At that time, former minister İsmet Yılmaz

ⁱ Australia-New Zealand Army Corps - ANZAC

introduced jihad as one of the main guidelines of the curriculum, while significantly reducing the emphasis on Atatürk's legacy and completely removing Darwin's theory of evolution. Certainly, these bold moves were not made abruptly. The ministry capitalized on the political atmosphere following the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, to implement these controversial Islamist steps.¹²

In hindsight, aside from the political atmosphere, the laws and regulations were also adjusted to accommodate the inclusion of jihad among the core guidelines. In 2012, Atatürkism, once the backbone of the entire system, was removed from the core guidelines of the Turkish national education system. It should be noted that the damage was not limited to its removal from the guidelines. The regulations on "Textbooks and Educational Tools" and the "Board of Education Presidency" (Talim Terbiye Kurulu) were also amended. As a result, the criterion of "compliance with Atatürk's principles and reforms, and the secular, social, and legal state" is no longer required when preparing textbooks.¹³

Unsurprisingly, these radical steps were protested by opposition circles at the time. However, this outcry did not stop the momentum. Then, as the country's prime minister, Erdoğan revealed his ultimate agenda to his secular critics by stating that his most important objective was to raise "a pious generation" (Dindar Nesil).¹⁴ In line with this statement, new religion-infused courses such as "Life of Prophet Muhammad" and "Holy Qur'ān" (both introduced in 2012)¹⁵ and Ottoman Turkish language (introduced in 2014),¹⁶ were simultaneously added to the Turkish curriculum.

As the well-known child psychologist Haim Ginott once said, "Children are like wet cement: whatever falls on them makes an impression."¹⁷ Considering Ginott's wise words, the long-term impact of the jihad-based Islamist curriculum, enriched by the above-mentioned courses and classroom activities like "Gallipoli-Gaza," will inevitably lead to a society that is increasingly anti-Israel and conservative.

Today, as in the past, conservatives constitute the majority. According to a 2023 study titled "Turkey's DNA," 45 percent of the population identifies as conservative, 24 percent as pious, and only 31 percent as modern.¹⁸

As far as Israel is concerned, one should not underestimate the negative impact of the current education system and curriculum. In the past, anti-Israel tendencies were primarily

seen in religious or certain conservative circles, as well as in far-left movements. Today, however, due to the ongoing war in Gaza, the situation is worsening. Even the modern segments of society that previously did not hold an inherent anti-Israel stance have turned against the Jewish state.

In this atmosphere, Erdoğan's latest threat of invading Israel¹⁹—similar to Turkey's actions in Libya and Karabakh—combined with his recent call for uniting the Muslim world against Israel,²⁰ are not perceived as irrational or radical ideas by the Turkish mainstream, as they might have been in the past. Instead, even though the constituency may not necessarily support Erdoğan in all aspects, his critical policy against Israel is widely supported, if not his support for Hamas.

In conclusion, unless Turkey changes course and steps back from its current education policy, the next generations will most likely become even more conservative and anti-Israel.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.

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Notes

¹ “Erdoğan ' Hamas terör örgütü değil, kurtuluş ve mücahitler grubudur' dedi, İsrail tepki gösterdi,” *BBC Türkçe*, October 25, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c51xzenk981o> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

² “THY'den İsrail kararı! Seferlere ara verildi,” *Milliyet*, October 10, 2023, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/thyden-israil-karari-seferlere-ara-verildi-7018018> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

³ “İsrail’le ticaret tamamen durduruldu,” *BloombergHT*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.bloomberght.com/israille-ticaret-tamamen-durduruldu-2352057> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

⁴ “Millî Eğitim Bakanı Tekin: Okullarımız Çanakkale'den Gazze'ye bağımsızlık mücadelesi açılış dersiyle eğitime başlayacak,” *AA*, September 6, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/egitim/milli-egitim-bakani-tekin-okullarimiz-canakkaleden-gazze-ye-bagimsizlik-mucadelesi-acilis-dersiyle-egitime-baslayacak/3323332> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

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⁶ “Yeni eğitim dönemi 'Çanakkale'den Gazze'ye bağımsızlık ruhu ve vatan sevgisi" dersiyle başlayacak,” *Ministry of Education*, September 7, 2024, <https://www.meb.gov.tr/yeni-egitim-donemi-canakkaleden-gazze-ye-bagimsizlik-ruhu-ve-vatan-sevgisi-dersiyle-baslayacak/haber/34719/tr> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

⁷ “Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli': Bu yıl ilk kez uygulamaya başlanan program neden tartışılıyor?,” *BBC Türkçe*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cjk442g5zvdo> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

⁸ Luke Ferretter, *Louis Althusser* (London, Routledge, 2006), pp.82-86.

⁹ “Erdoğan: Kuvayı Milliye neyse Hamas da aynen odur,” *Habertürk*, April 17, 2024, <https://tv.haberturk.com/tv/gundem/video/erdogan-kuvayi-millie-neyse-hamas-da-aynen-odur/841098> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

¹⁰ “‘Siyonist Hareketler ve Filistin Meselesi" milli eğitim müfredatına eklendi,” *ILKHA*, June 7, 2024, <https://ilkha.com/filistin/siyonist-hareketler-ve-filistin-meselesi-milli-egitim-mufredatina-eklendi-398241> [Accessed: September 9, 2024].

¹¹ “Okullarda yarın Filistin’deki saldırılarda hayatını kaybeden çocuklar için saygı duruşunda bulunulacak,” *Ministry of National Education*, October 19, 2023, <https://www.meb.gov.tr/okullarda-yarin-filistindeki-saldirilarda-hayatini-kaybeden-cocuklar-icin-saygi-durusunda-bulunulacak/haber/31260/tr> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

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¹³ “Atatürk ilkeleri kitaptan çıkarıldı,” *Hürriyet*, September 15, 2012, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/ataturk-ilkeleri-kitaptan-cikarildi-21459983> [Accessed: September 9, 2024].

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¹⁵ “Kur'an müfredata böyle girdi...,” *CNN Türk*, August 29, 2012, <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/kuran-mufredata-boyle-girdi-383414> [Accessed: September 9, 2024].

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¹⁷ Scott Richmand and et.al, *Successful Teaching* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p.117.

¹⁸ “Türkiye'nin DNA'sı: Yüzde 31'i modern, 45'i muhafazakar, 24'ü dindar,” *Gazete Duvar*, January 29, 2023, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/turkiyenin-dnasi-yuzde-31-i-modern-45-i-muhafazakar-24u-dindar-haber-1600672> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

¹⁹ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Nasıl Libya'ya girdiysek İsrail'e de gireriz,” *Sözcü*, July 28, 2024, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-nasil-libya-ya-girdiysek-filistin-e-de-gireriz-p69416> [Accessed: September 10, 2024].

²⁰ “Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan İsrail’e karşı İslam İttifakı çağrısı yaptı,” *İletişim İşleri Başkanlığı*, September 8, 2024, https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/dis_basinda_turkiye/detay/turkiye-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-israile-karsi-islam-ittifaki-cagrisi-yapti [Accessed: September 10, 2024].