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## The Turkish Republic's Jihad? Religious symbols, terminology and ceremonies in Turkey during the Korean War 1950–1953

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On 25 June 1950, thousands of troops from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (or North Korea) crossed the 38th parallel latitude and invaded the Republic of Korea (or South Korea). The United Nations (UN), led by the United States, reacted quickly and passed resolution 82, which called for North Korea's withdrawal. Two days later, the UN Security Council passed resolution 83, calling on UN members to assist South Korea.<sup>1</sup> As a result, 16 countries eventually sent troops to Korea. Turkey, led by the newly established Democratic Party (DP) government, was one of the first to offer combat units, due to its fear of Soviet demands regarding the Turkish Straits and the inter-bloc tension of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Between 1950 and 1953, about 23,000 Turkish soldiers participated in the war, 721 of whom fell in battle and 2147 were injured.<sup>3</sup> Since up to then most Turks had known nothing about Korea and the reasons for the ongoing war (as evident from contemporary newspapers), various methods and means of propaganda were used to inform them, including religious propaganda.

In a parliamentary session held on 11 December 1950 regarding the Turkish republic's participation in the Korean War, Muhittin Erener, a DP MP from Izmir, vehemently criticized the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) for trying to mobilize the public against the war. According to him, 'petty politicians' (*küçük politikaçılar*) were traveling through the villages criticizing the decision to go to war, comparing it to the Ottoman failure in Yemen during the early twentieth century and questioning whether fallen soldiers would be regarded as *şehits* or not.<sup>4</sup>

Erener's accusation demonstrates one of the most interesting phenomena in the context of the war: the open use of Islamic terminology, symbols and ceremonies by the state, its institutions, the Turkish military and the general public. This phenomenon is even more interesting given the fact that the Turkish Republic, unlike its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, was defined as a secular state. Although some scholars such as Mim Kemal Öke and Çağdaş Üngör mentioned the existence of religious propaganda during the Korean War, they chose not to focus on it and further examine it.<sup>5</sup> Even Gavin D. Brockett, who did refer to the existence of religious symbols during the war and has justly argued that 'Turkish soldiers themselves viewed the conflict very much in religious terms',<sup>6</sup> neglected the role played by the state, which actively prompted the use of religious symbols and terminology by incorporating them in the official war propaganda.<sup>7</sup>

The main argument of this article is that the state continued the Ottoman tradition and practice of using Islam to gain support for the war and to mobilize the nation, mainly via the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). This argument will be examined by a juxtaposition between the Ottoman state's use of religious propaganda in the First World War, which was declared a jihad (*cihad*), and that of the Turkish Republic during the Korean War.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, this article argues that the use of religion in the war also facilitated an increased freedom of religion and its official presence in the public sphere, as well as tolerance of Islam within the ranks of the Turkish military. Moreover, an analysis of the available sources suggests that parts of the public, as well as the soldiers fighting in Korea, understood the war not only as a war between the Western camp and the Communist camp in which the nation supported the first, but also as a religious war against the atheist Communists.

### Public Islam in the early republic

But first, to understand this phenomenon and its implications better one should examine the background and status of religion in early republican Turkey. According to Erik Jan Zürcher, in the 1930s and 1940s, the regime's attitude toward religion had become extremely repressive, but after the introduction of multi-party politics in 1945, both the CHP and the DP (formed in 1946) started to court the Muslim vote and the CHP itself became more tolerant of religion. The CHP government that continued to rule until 1950 re-introduced elective religious education in schools and training establishments for preachers. Ankara University announced the establishment of a Faculty of Divinity that trained future religious staff, and in 1949, Muslim tombs and shrines (*türbeler*) were allowed to reopen to the public.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the CHP tried to guard against any religious reaction in politics by enacting article 163 of the penal code, which strictly prohibited propaganda attacking the secular character of the state.<sup>10</sup> According to Amit Bein, the DP did promise to relax many of the early republic's prohibitions and to allow Islam greater visibility in the public sphere, which made the party much more appealing to Islamists and conservative Muslims.<sup>11</sup> And indeed, after they came to power, the Democratic Party continued the CHP's policy of relaxing restrictions on expressions of religious feeling and making concessions to the feelings of the Muslim population, while at the same time combating anti-secularist tendencies. The *ezan*, the call for prayer in Arabic, was made legal again (and re-adopted overnight in every mosque in the country); religious education was expanded and parents now had to opt out instead of having to opt in (and according to Zürcher, social pressure saw to it that hardly anyone opted out), and the number of preacher schools (*imam-hatip*) was increased. There was also a marked rise in the number of mosques being built (as much through increased wealth in the countryside as through any government policy).<sup>12</sup>

One should note that these steps, taken in order to appease the Muslim conservative electorate, were viewed by parts of the secular elite as a major shift from the secularist character of the state. Ahmed Emin Yalman, for example, the editor of *Vatan* and previously a staunch supporter of the DP, blamed the new government of neglecting its duty to protect the secular regime.<sup>13</sup> However, according to Bein, 'in their decade in power, the Democrats failed to live up to the Islamists' exaggerated expectations'. Bein further argued

that although the DP was considered by Islamists the lesser of two evils in comparison with the CHP, mainly because it allowed more visibility of Islam in the public sphere:

the initial excitement of many in the Islamic circles had waned by the mid-1950s. In retrospect, some Islamic intellectuals even went so far as to describe the DP's electoral victory in 1950 not as a watershed in the modern history of Turkey but rather as little more than a change of power from hard-liners to moderates within the Kemalist camp.<sup>14</sup>

Given that the DP regime is considered in retrospect a secular one, the use of religious propaganda and its reception are even more interesting. The next sections examine the use of Islamic motifs by the state, the military and the public by analyzing official religious publications and pamphlets, oral propaganda such as sermons and speeches given in public religious commemoration ceremonies for the fallen soldiers (*mevlit*), and ceremonies held for the soldiers prior to their departure to the war, as well as the place of religion within the Turkish military and its representation, focusing on the role of military imams and on soldiers' religious life and practices during the war.

### Approaching the soldiers: religious pamphlets

Although a comparison between the Korean War and the Turkish War of Independence (*Kurtuluş Savaşı*) is the more intuitive one due to their chronological proximity, the fact that the Turkish national movement used Islamic terminology and symbols to mobilize the public and that parts of the public perceived the war as a religious war, should not come as a surprise since secularism was only adopted as an official policy after the establishment of the new republic.<sup>15</sup> A comparison between the Ottoman propaganda of the First World War, when the Empire was still a religious state, and the religious propaganda used in the Korean War will serve better to demonstrate the continuation of Ottoman practices and the place allocated to Islam in the public sphere and the ranks of the military during the Korean War in the secular Turkish Republic.

According to Mehmet Beşikçi, many propaganda pamphlets were published during the First World War to explain jihad to the Anatolian public. Such pamphlets, he argued, were written in simple language, cited relevant verses from the Holy Quran and religious traditions (*hadis*) while describing military service as a binding religious duty for all Muslims. These pamphlets also called for the non-combatant public to support and aid the war effort in any way possible.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Beşikçi argued that there was an increase in the number of religious manuals and pamphlets which were usually published under the title of 'religion book for the soldier' (*askere din kitabı*). Such religious manuals were meant to have a double function, to provide Ottoman Muslim soldiers with a basic religious (Sunni Islamic) education, while also aiming to remind potential draftees that military service was also a religious duty and that a good Muslim also needed to be a good soldier and vice versa.<sup>17</sup> While some of these themes were crucial to the First World War, they were ostensibly irrelevant for the Korean War. For example, religion books for soldiers which tried to prevent soldiers' desertion were less relevant to the Korean War. Factors such as the distance from home, the language barrier and the soldiers' national pride (since most of them were volunteers), considerably reduced desertion rates in contrast to the First World War and made these books unnecessary in general. Other elements, however, did appear in religious pamphlets during the Korean War, although religious pamphlets were less

popular than in the First World War. The best example of such publications is a 55-page-long booklet published by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) under the title 'The Political and Religious Necessity of our Participation in the Korean War' in late 1950.<sup>18</sup> The subtitle of the booklet was 'The holy meaning of martyrdom in Korea' (*Kore'de şehitliğin mukaddes ma'nâsı*). Since the *Diyanet* was a state agency under the authority of the Prime Minister, one should see its actions as sanctioned by the government and representing the official view of the state.<sup>19</sup>

Before examining the text, a short discussion about the meaning of the word *şehit* in 1950's Turkish language is required. The title *şehit* (*shahid* in Arabic) first appears in the Quran to describe a Muslim who fell for the sake of Islam (and who is entitled to several rewards in the afterlife). With the passing of time, the word was used by the late Ottoman state, a religious state, in relation to fallen soldiers.<sup>20</sup> This term was also used by the secular Turkish Republic to describe fallen soldiers and dictionaries from the 1940s defined the term *şehit* olmak (or: *şehit düşmek*) as, 'to die for one's fatherland (or for Islam)'.<sup>21</sup>

While the word *şehit* could be understood as a national term (as mentioned above), an examination of the language, terms and motifs, as well as the Quranic verses used in this booklet, determines that the meaning of the word *şehit* here is strictly a religious one. The pamphlet began with similar accusations to those expressed by MP Erener, arguing that some politicians were trying to take advantage of the lack of or insufficient religious knowledge among the public in order to persuade it to object the war. As pointed out by Brockett, the booklet refuted ideas circulated by the opposition CHP, that Turkish soldiers fighting in Korea could not be termed 'holy warriors' (*gazi*) and that those who died were not martyrs (*şehit*) because Turkey had not been attacked and the war was beyond its borders.<sup>22</sup> The justification for participating in the War, based on Islamic traditions revolved around the term 'oppression' (*zulum*). According to the booklet, 'saving the oppressed from the claws of the oppressor is the most holy duty'.<sup>23</sup> The booklet also referred to the Old Testament (*Tevrat*) and quoted from the New Testament, referring to the importance of bowing to God's will, in order to juxtapose the monotheistic religions to the atheist communists and thus legitimizing cooperation with non-Muslim states against the Communists.<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere, the booklet defined this duty as a binding religious duty for every individual Muslim by stating that 'the saving of an oppressed community from whatever nation or race is a religious obligation for every believer. Therefore, those who go to the Korean War are [considered] *gazi*. Those who die are [considered] *şehit*'.<sup>25</sup>

The booklet also reminded the readers not to view those who died in the cause of Allah as dead but as 'alive among their god' by referring to verse 169 of *Surat al-İmrân*. It also mentioned the status and rewards waiting for the *şehit* in the afterlife by referring to *Surat al-İmrân* verses 170–174.<sup>26</sup> The end of the booklet also stated that 'participating in the Korean War; in one sentence, a holy duty in the essence of jihad and *gaza* (holy war)'.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note that the booklet supported the war by calling for the protection of humanity (*insanlık*), truth (*hak*) and freedom (*hürriyet*) on religious grounds, while the government used similar terms on political and moral grounds. The DP Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, for example, said in a message to the Turkish troops that 'the protection of peace (*sulh*) and freedom (*hürriyet*) from all attacks is the most exalted of mankind's ideals'.<sup>28</sup>

This might indicate that the Diyanet tried to give the Western terms and values used by the state a religious legitimization by explaining them to the religious and conservative public in a religious language. That, in turn, made the distinction between secular and religious a blurry one, allowing the public to understand the war according to its own religious, moral and political beliefs. The Diyanet was not the only one referring to the question of whether the war is holy or not. The Turanist journal *Orkun* (edited by Nihâl Atsız) also addressed the subject by publishing an article entitled 'When is a War Holy?' ('Savaş ne Zaman Mukaddestir?') on 29 December 1950.<sup>29</sup> According to the author, Nejdet Sançar, those who argue that only a defensive war is holy and that war of invasion (*istila savaşı*) is an act of barbarity are either secretly trying to undermine the Turkish history and spirit or are gravely mistaken.<sup>30</sup> Sançar further argued that according to this claim the greatest Turkish heroes such as Çingiz [Genghis Khan] and Atilâ [Attila] are nothing but barbarians, Alp Arslan is a savage, Mehmet the Conqueror is a monster (*canavar*) and Süleyman the Magnificent is the enemy of humanity. The author then argued that the (defensive) battles of Plevne (Plevne), Çanakkale (Gallipoli) and Sakarya are as holy as the (offensive) battles of Çaldıran, Mohaç and Manzikert (Malazgirt). Sançar concluded by explaining that 'for us, all wars born of national necessity and interests are holy'.<sup>31</sup> It seems that this article was published as part of the general discussion about the legitimacy of the war and in order to contradict the (previously mentioned) argument that only defensive wars are holy. Since Sançar was secular, he did not use Islamic terminology and referred to the war as holy for the Turks. However his use of a religious term also legitimized the religious argument made by the Diyanet.

Other pamphlets were also reported to reach the troops on their way to Korea. Refik Soykut, who served in the first brigade, for example, recalled in his memoirs that pamphlets dealing with issues relevant to the soldiers such as 'where are we going and why?' were distributed among them. These pamphlets used both national and religious motifs, while also reminding the troops that they were going to 'destroy the communist devil' (*komünizm şeytanını yok etmiye[sic] gidiyorsun*). He recalled that the end of the pamphlet included a reminder for the troops about the importance of Islam, stating: 'AND DO NOT FORGET, ALLAH IS YOUR GREATEST AID...'<sup>32</sup>

Printed pamphlets, however, were not the only or even the primary means of propaganda during the war. Oral propaganda was used at home and at the front in order to gain support for the war and mobilize both the troops and the Turkish public.

### The sound of war: oral propaganda

According to Mehmet Beşikçi, printed religious propaganda during the First World War suffered from several problems and challenges, first and foremost among them the low literacy rate of Ottoman society, as well as difficulties due to poor infrastructure. These difficulties led to the adoption of other means of propaganda as well. Oral propaganda, both modern and 'traditional', he argued, were as important and widely used as print propaganda in the Ottoman Empire and constituted a significant element of wartime propaganda. Oral propaganda included various means such as sermons, religious memorial services (*mevlit*), religious advice, folk songs and even rumors, providing a fertile ground for the transmission of the jihad propaganda.<sup>33</sup>

An examination of propaganda means used in the Korean War suggests that although some challenges had changed since the First World War, the use of oral propaganda was still widespread. For example, although the literacy rate, which constituted a major factor for the use of oral propaganda during the First World War, had increased in the following decades to the rate of about 40 per cent, this still meant that at least one out of every two Turks was illiterate.<sup>34</sup> The problems of infrastructure, which led to the use of local, low-ranking religious functionaries such as imams in order to spread the message across the country in the First World War, were solved by the use of more popular technological means, mainly radio broadcasts of religious memorial services.<sup>35</sup>

Prior to their departure for Korea, the Turkish soldiers participated in religious sermons and religious guidance given by the Diyanet's imams. These sermons, as well as the religious ceremonies, were covered by the printed press. The *Akşam* newspaper, for example, reported on 15 February 1951 that a religious ceremony (*dini tören*) was held in İskenderun for the reinforcement forces sent to Korea, in the presence of the interior minister Rüknettin Nasuhioğlu.<sup>36</sup> *Yeni Sabah* also covered the event and reported that Mehmet Metin Erşadi, an inspector (*müfettiş*) from the Presidency of Religious Affairs, gave a sermon to the soldiers in which he explained the ranks of martyrdom (*şehitlik*) and *gaza* (*gazilik*). At the end of his sermon, the article reported, 'the preacher's hands were kissed by all our weeping soldiers'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the *Hürriyet* newspaper reported on 3 June 1951 that the same inspector, Mehmet İrşadi (sic), spoke before the second brigade in İskenderun prior to its leaving for Korea to replace the first brigade.<sup>38</sup> In some cases, the imams who preached to the soldiers before leaving also accompanied them to Korea. In his memoirs, Colonel Celal Dora, the commander of a regiment in the first brigade to serve in Korea, recalled that a religious service was conducted by the battalion's imam (*tabur imamı*), Muhsin Örtülü, on 23 October 1950, the first day of the Festival of the Sacrifice (*kurban bayramı*) in İskenderun, prior to the brigade leaving for Korea. The service included a joint prayer and a sermon about the war.<sup>39</sup>

### İslam in uniform: military imams

The presence of imams in the military was a known Ottoman practice. According to Beşikçi, after the defeat in the Balkan Wars, each battalion was to have a permanent imam in its personnel. Those were usually referred to as 'battalion imams' (*tabur imamları*) or regimental imams, who were also called 'regimental muftis' (*alay müftüsü*).<sup>40</sup> However, their presence in the military after the establishment of the republic requires further study. At this stage, it is still unclear whether the imams who accompanied the troops were volunteers or whether they were sent by the Diyanet.<sup>41</sup> While Bernard Lewis and Howard A. Reed had suggested that imams were brought back to the army already in May 1940,<sup>42</sup> Ayşegül Komsuoğlu and Gül M. Kurtoglu Eskişar argue that the Turkish military treated its religious staff as temporary, creating their positions *ad hoc* for specific military campaigns and annulling them once the campaigns were completed.<sup>43</sup> According to them, civilian imams were sent to Korea since there were not enough official imams in the military at the time.<sup>44</sup> An article published in *Yeni Sabah* on 16 April 1952 supports this view, stating that the Defense Ministry (*Milli Savunma Bakanlığı*) expressed its intention to train religious personnel for the military.<sup>45</sup> This also suggests that the military acknowledged the necessity of the imams sent to Korea and was satisfied with their actions during the war.

For its part, the military did not accept every imam. According to İbrahim Doğan, imams had to pass an exam given by the Turkish General Staff before being sent to Korea. Even after the war had ended, imams remained with the brigade as part of its peace-keeping mission and served a vital role in converting local Koreans to Islam.<sup>46</sup>

The duties of imams in the Ottoman army in the First World War, which included leading prayers, reciting the Quran and performing other Islamic rituals, as well as promoting the troops' morale, did not change significantly in the Korean War. One of the main differences was that while in the First World War imams were sent in several instances to the front in order to encourage the troops' fighting spirit,<sup>47</sup> it is unclear whether imams in Korea were supposed to participate in the fighting itself or not. According to Muhsin Örtülü, a military imam who served in the first brigade in Korea, he regularly used to serve as a duty officer. He also mentioned that he 'was not a stranger to the Korean front and to the line of fire'.<sup>48</sup> However, according to the memoirs of Hasan Basri Danişman, who served in the third brigade, imams were generally not allowed even to carry weapons. Danişman's memoirs tell the story of the appeal by the brigade's imam, Major Muhiddin, to the commander of the third brigade, Sırrı Acar, asking permission to carry 'at least a pistol' because 'a Turkish officer without side arms looks silly. Some people might think I'm not ready to fight'.<sup>49</sup> According to the author, upon receiving the General's consent, 'every man in the brigade was delighted'. He also stated that 'the Turks knew their imam was a fighting chaplain', since during his time in the first brigade, the imam had participated in fighting in times of need.<sup>50</sup>

The imam's job during the war was usually more mundane, and included leading prayers, conducting Islamic rituals and conducting soldiers' funerals. Nazmi Özoğul, for example, recalled how the brigade's mufti, Muhsin Örtülü, led a prayer for the souls of the Turkish *şehits* at Pusan cemetery.<sup>51</sup> The sermon itself, which was printed in Örtülü's memoirs as well as in those of Tahsin Yazıcı, constitutes a valuable source for the examination of the religious language and motifs used by imams in Korea. In his sermon, Örtülü defined the war as follows: 'This is the greater jihad, the fight of those who believe in Allah against the atheists, the protection of the just from oppression. God, make the armies of the United Nations victorious and triumphant!'<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, Örtülü did not use the phrase 'the greater jihad' in the accepted meaning of a Muslim's inner struggle for self-improvement, but changed it to waging war against atheists. Elsewhere, he also referred to Christians as allies, stating that it was the first time that the Crescent and the Cross collaborated for the same purpose and that 'today, bells and *ezans* call upon the believers for the same cause'.<sup>53</sup>

Most of the sermon was dedicated to the topic of martyrs. In this part, Örtülü used many motifs from Sunni martyrology, for example, he mentioned that the body of the *şehit* should not be washed since his blood is purer than water. Later in his sermon he also claimed that the blood of the *şehit* is holier than water from the Zamzam well near the Kaaba.<sup>54</sup> Örtülü also told the audience of the *şefa'at* of the martyrs (see below), as well as of the perfumed aromas (musk) that rise from the graves of *şehits*.<sup>55</sup> The sermon ended with the call 'long live the brave armies of the United Nations!' and with the reciting of *Surat al-Fatiha*.<sup>56</sup>

Imams also participated in scholarly discussions with their foreign non-Muslim counterparts. According to Örtülü, American curiosity led to an improvised religious conference that took place on board the USNS *General C.C. Ballou* in the middle of the Indian Ocean

on its way to Korea. During the conference, Örtülü elaborated on the fundamentals of Islam and addressed questions relevant to the Americans, mainly the place of Jesus in Islam and Islam's relation to Christians.<sup>57</sup> Another veteran, Tuna Baltacıoğlu, reported in his memoirs that the brigade's imam had participated in a religious discussion with other religious personnel (*din adamları*) from the international force, winning their respect and appreciation. He also mentioned that this meeting was very beneficial but did not elaborate further.<sup>58</sup> It is unclear whether the two referred to the same conference or if more than one was held.

### Commemorating the fallen soldiers: religious memorial ceremonies (Mevlit)

The use of oral propaganda was not limited to the front and was also used back home. During the war, dozens of religious memorial services (*mevlit*) were held across the country and were used to spread oral propaganda. While some of them were organized by the state or local authorities, others were organized by public organizations such as the Turkish Monuments Association (*Türkiye Anıtlar Derneği*),<sup>59</sup> student associations<sup>60</sup> or workers' unions.<sup>61</sup> It is interesting to note that similar memorial ceremonies were also held in the Ottoman Empire by semi-official organizations such as the National Defense League (*Müdâfaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti*) during the First World War,<sup>62</sup> thus serving as a continuation of Ottoman practices. The first *mevlit* was conducted on 26 November 1950, at the historical imperial Süleymaniye Mosque, one of Istanbul's largest and most famous mosques. According to *Yeni Sabah*, close to 1000 people participated in the ceremony, including the famous *hafız* (religious scholar who has learned the Quran by heart) Zeki Altın.<sup>63</sup> But soon, especially after the battle of Kunuri in late 1950, larger ceremonies were held in the presence and with the participation of high-ranking officials.<sup>64</sup> The best example of these memorial services is the one held at the Süleymaniye Mosque, on 10 December 1950, with the participation of Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, the head of the *Diyanet*, and other high-ranking religious functionaries, as well as in the presence of ambassadors representing Muslim countries in the Turkish Republic, in addition to a large local crowd estimated at about 70,000 people. The *mevlit*, which lasted three and a half hours, was also broadcast by Istanbul and Ankara Radio.<sup>65</sup>

The sermon (*hitab*) given by Akseki, printed in both *Yeni Sabah* and *Sebilürreşad*, allows us a rare opportunity to better examine and analyze the religious terminology and messages used in these religious memorial services, in this case, by a speaker who was also a high-ranking public official.

Akseki started his sermon by stating that the Korean War was a religious one:

This war is not an ordinary war. This is a clash between truth (*hak*) and lie (*bâtıl*), between belief (*iman*) and infidelity (*küfür*), between people of the book (*Ehli kitap*) and those who do not have the book (*kitapsızların*), between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

Many of the terms used here were religious ones. The terms *hak* and *bâtıl*, for example, are Islamic terms representing truth or the path of God in contrast to lies or even the devil, respectively. Also, by referring to '*Ehli kitap*', Akseki meant, of course, Jews, Christians and Muslims, while by the phrase 'those who do not accept the book', usually used to describe members of non-Abrahamic religions, he referred to the Communists. Since Akseki had defined the Korean War as a religious war between 'people of the book' and atheists, it is

clear that fallen soldiers should be considered *şehits*. Thus, he sanctioned the government's view regarding the status of fallen soldiers. According to Akseki, this kind of conflict had occurred many times in human history. He then described several instances in which Muslims and Turks were saved from various enemies by following the path of Allah, starting with the prophet Muhammad in Mecca and Medina, followed by a description of Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan's victory against an undisclosed enemy,<sup>66</sup> and the Ottoman victory in the battle of Sırp Sındığı against the Serbs in Edirne in 1364.<sup>67</sup> He also told the story of Muzzafer Bey, a Turkish soldier in the First World War who, with his dying breath, asked to be situated toward the *kibla* and wrote the *şahadet*, the Islamic testimony of faith, with his blood since he was unable to speak. This story led him to address the topic of martyrdom:

Thank Allah over and over again that the spirit of bravery has not died in our nation's heart. From here on, if I die, I will die a *şehid* for the sake of truth [*hak*], if I come back alive, I will be a *gazi*. These two degrees are the closest degrees to Allah.

... Here, we must not forget that a soldier goes to war not to die, but to kill, and if he dies while also killing he becomes a *şehid*. If he dies on duty with this aim he is also considered a *şehid*. All the *şehid's* sins are wiped clean. He also serves as an advocate [*şefaat*] for seventy of his relatives.

Do not say of those who died for truth [*hak*], in the cause of Allah, that they are dead; they are not dead, they are alive; but you do not realize (that superior life).

It is necessary for us to be able to understand the *şehid's* rise in rank. The rank of the *şehid* comes after the rank of the prophets.

Our prophet also [spoke] of the rank of the *şehids*, saying: 'I only wish I could have become a *şehid* in Allah's cause, in the path of truth [*hak*], be resurrected, and become a *şehid* again. And be resurrected again, and become a *şehid* again,' [in order] to express how high the rank of martyrdom is.

As we can see, Akseki's sermon included many elements we have already encountered and referred to in the pamphlet published by the Diyanet and in Örtülü's sermon. First and foremost is the definition of the war as a religious conflict, as well as references to *Surat al-İmrân* elaborating on the rewards for those who fall in the path of God. Akseki also based his argument on a saying attributed to the prophet Muhammad (*hadis*) in which the latter expressed his desire to become a *şehit* again and again in order to emphasize the religious importance of martyrdom.

However, not everyone was happy with the religious language used by Akseki. Hikmet Bayur, a Nation Party (*Millet Partisi*) MP and former minister of education under CHP in the 1930s, criticized Akseki for his use of religious terms as well as the state radio for broadcasting the sermon. According to Bayur, the state is secular (*lâik*) and the principle of secularism is included in the platforms of all major parties, thus a state employee should refrain from using religious language. Bayur especially criticized Akseki's depiction of the war as one being fought between believers (*ehli iman*) and unbelievers (*imansızlar*) and warned against the possible implications such division might give rise to, such as claiming it can be understood that war should be waged against unbelievers (*kitapsız ve imansız*) across the world. He also added that the fostering of religious sentiments may lead to the revival of 'the old fanaticism' (*taassup*).<sup>68</sup>

The publicist Mehmet Râif Ogan attacked Bayur's arguments in a response article published in *Sebilürreşad*. According to Ogan, the head of the Diyanet, as the holder of the

highest religious official position in the state, is obligated to inform the public of the religious point of view regarding recent events. In response to the Bayur's accusation that the use of religious terms is in violation of the principle of secularism, Ogan pointed at the United States as an example. Quoting segments of American president Truman's speech for Christmas he argued that even the secular United States uses religious terminology as part of its struggle with the 'godless communists'. The author also argued that fighting for humanity (*insanlık*) is both a national and a religious duty and concluded his response by declaring that: 'The war that is taking place inside and outside our borders is definitely a holy jihad (*mukaddes cihat*). Those who survive it are *gazi* and those who die in it are *şehids*. May God bestow his *şefaat* upon us'.<sup>69</sup>

### Seeing war: visual propaganda

Another important means of propaganda was the use of photographs, published in the Turkish daily press. According to the historian George Lachmann Mosse, visual means of representation, including photographs, cartoons and postcards, were used for propaganda from the nineteenth century. These representations targeted mainly the illiterate masses by using atrocity propaganda, portraying the sadistic nature of the enemy in contrast to heroic representations of 'us'. Mosse also concluded that 'illustrations were always more effective than the printed word in reaching the population'.<sup>70</sup> The use of visual representations for propaganda purposes was already in use in the late Ottoman period.<sup>71</sup> During the Korean War, photographs of military action and of the Turkish troops appeared on a daily basis in the press. While most of these photographs presented heroic scenes of battle and fighting soldiers, some also presented Islam as an integral part of the war.

One of the more iconic photographs of the Turkish involvement in the Korean War is that of Tahsin Yazıcı, the commander of the first brigade, kissing a copy of the Holy Quran he had just received before boarding the ship headed to Korea (Figure 1). This photo was published in two of the most widespread dailies in Turkey, appearing on the front cover of *Hürriyet* on 28 September 1950 and reprinted in *Cumhuriyet* a day later.<sup>72</sup> Many photographs of religious memorial services were published by the press, as well as some photographs depicting religious ceremonies conducted by the troops such as mass prayers or meetings with imams before leaving for Korea.<sup>73</sup>

Once Turkish soldiers were killed in Korea, newspapers published photographs of their funerals, conducted, of course, by imams. Such photographs were published in *Yeni Sabah*, on 30 December 1950, depicting the joint funeral of two Turkish soldiers, Kâzım Tezcan and Halil Küçük, their coffins covered by both the Turkish flag and that of the UN, in Tamabochi cemetery in Tokyo. The ceremony, the newspaper reported, was conducted by an imam named Şerifullah Muftahittin. No further details appeared regarding that imam.<sup>74</sup> Back in Turkey, many photographs of religious memorial services (*mevlit*) were also published by the Turkish press.<sup>75</sup> Photographs of injured soldiers who had returned to Turkey participating in religious ceremonies were also published in Turkish newspapers.<sup>76</sup>

Throughout the war, photographs of religious aspects related to the Turkish brigade in Korea were also published in the press. Most prominent was a photo, published in *Hürriyet* on 29 September 1952, of a soldier calling his fellow believers to prayer from the minaret

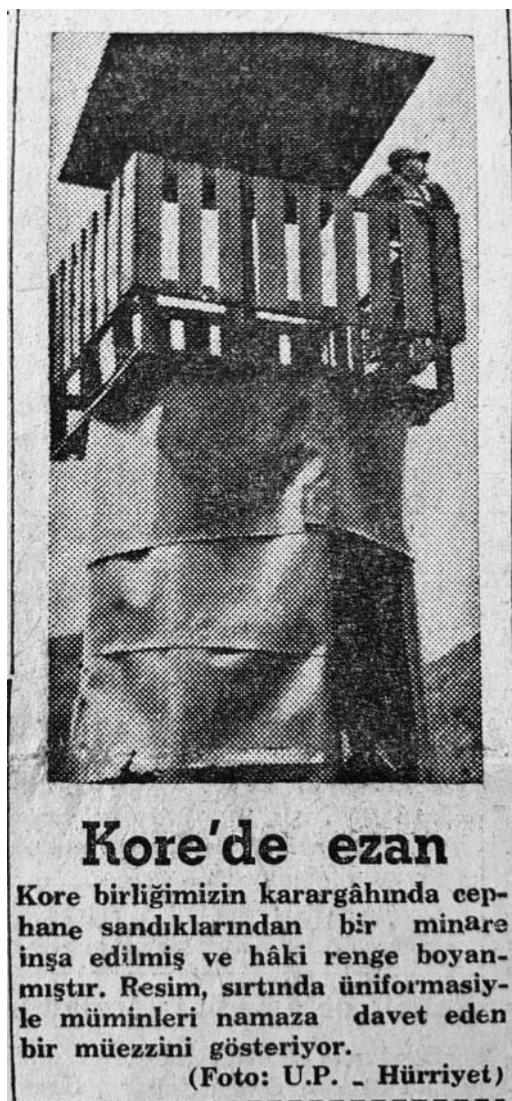


**Figure 1.** Tahsin Yazıcı kissing the holy Quran.  
Source: *Hürriyet*, 28 September 1950.

of a mosque built by the brigade in Korea (Figure 2). The same mosque was also mentioned in Hasan Basri Danişman's memoirs, who depicted it as follows:

This was a squad tent with a few rugs and blankets on the floor, and a rickety platform from which the chaplain could preach. However, in accordance with tradition, the mosque had a minaret. This structure was a wooden tower with a conical cap. It was painted in green, and it had the usual balcony from which the faithful were called to prayer.<sup>77</sup>

Another interesting expression of religion in connection with the war appeared in advertisements for the film 'Mehmetçik in Korea' (*Mehmetçik Kore'de*),<sup>78</sup> published in *Yeni Sabah* on 29 and 30 October 1951. The first ad comprised a few photos, the first of fighting soldiers, the second of Tahsin Yazıcı (the brigade's commander, who was an extremely well-known figure at that time), and the third, a scene of praying soldiers in Pusan cemetery. The ad also mentioned the support and aid given to the filmmaker by the Turkish general staff.<sup>79</sup> The second ad chose to represent the war by using two photos, one above the other. The first depicted the Turkish cemetery in Korea while showing a large Turkish flag, and the other was a wider version of the photo used in the first ad depicting praying soldiers. According to Imam Örtülü, a sermon he gave at Pusan cemetery appeared in this film.<sup>80</sup> The fact that religious scenes were picked for the movie's poster in addition to heroic ones and national symbols, suggests that religious war propaganda was omnipresent and at least somewhat effective.



**Figure 2.** 'Ezan (call for prayer) in Korea'.

Source: *Hürriyet*, 28 September 1950.

### Was religious propaganda effective?

The Scottish historian Lord Kinross, who traveled in Turkey during the early 1950s, noted the religious aspects of the Turkish involvement in the war, stating that: 'The Turkish troops in Korea fought in the name of Islam, attended religious services before going into battle, and were led (at least in the war posters) by officers carrying the Koran.'<sup>81</sup>

While Lord Kinross's description indicates that religious propaganda was visible in the public sphere, it still raises questions regarding its reception. It does not tell us, for example, how effective the use of religious motifs for the Turkish public and soldiers during the War was. Was the religious propaganda's target audience, namely the religious and conservative Muslim public, really convinced and moved by it? While it is difficult to give an



stating that the fighting soldiers earned the title by fighting unbelievers: 'Now the status of veterans (*gazi*) was given to us legally, the state gave us this title. Koran bestows to the state. Fighting against unbelievers, against them. Then the state gives it to us.'<sup>86</sup>

Religious language was not used only by the soldiers or by Diyanet officials. Although most of the representatives of secular state institutions such as the Turkish parliament tried to avoid the use of religious motifs, they were not always successful. An example of this can be seen in a statement published in *Yeni Sabah* on 28 November 1950, where the two MPs of Erzurum and Konya referred to the soldiers as *mücahitler*, a term usually reserved for fighters for the sake of Islam.<sup>87</sup>

The Turkish military also became more lenient toward religion during the war. As we have already seen, the military allowed for the establishment of a mosque in Korea, sent imams to attend the religious needs of the soldiers and even considered the training of additional religious personnel.

Another point worth mentioning is the way the military choose to depict the war in a book published more than 20 years after the war, titled 'The Battles of the Turkish Armed Forces in the Korean War'. In the sub-chapter labeled 'The Turk's national traits in war', some general statements were made regarding the Turks, including the following one regarding fallen soldiers:

Those who lose their lives fighting the enemy are considered *şehit*. A high rank is promised to them in the afterlife. *Şehits* are holy. The *şehit's* family and relatives are respected by the public. Those who flee from the enemy would not be able ever to clean this stain.<sup>88</sup>

As we can see, this statement combined the religious meaning of the word *şehit*, by referring to the religious rights allocated to the family of fallen soldiers in the afterlife, with that of a national martyr, by referring to the public's relation to the *şehit's* family, mainly the fact that they are respected by the general public for their loss and sacrifice for the state. This might suggest that when the book was published in the 1970s, Islam and the Turkish nation were perceived as complementary even by the Turkish military, the 'protector' of the secular state.

## Conclusion

While members of the Turkish parliament tried to refrain from the use of religious terminology during the Korean War, other official institutions such as the Diyanet, the Turkish military and the general public all used Islamic motifs, terminology, symbols and ceremonies during the war. These were conveyed by various means, such as printed pamphlets, oral propaganda including sermons and ceremonies, and visual propaganda such as photographs and films. Religious officials even went as far as to depict the war publicly as a jihad. While current research usually depicts the DP as a secular party, one should ask why, then, was religion used in such a widespread manner during the war?

First, we should acknowledge that the use of religion did not stem from an attempt to promote or enable religiosity from above in the public sphere. In times of need, the DP knew well how to crush Islamic resurgence, such as the *Ticani* dervish order which started smashing busts of Atatürk in early 1950. Their leader, Kemal Pilavoğlu, was arrested, sent to prison and later placed under house arrest.<sup>89</sup> According to Ahmed Emin Yalman, a famous journalist and editor of *Vatan*, the attempt on his life in Malatya on 22 November

1952 deeply affected the Prime Minister Menderes, who adopted thereafter a ‘determined course’ against reactionary activities.<sup>90</sup> And indeed, the *Millet Partisi* (Nation Party) was accused of being reactionary and was banned in July 1953 because of its political use of religion.<sup>91</sup>

Two complementary explanations thus remain. The first is that the government utilized religious propaganda in order to increase the support of conservative and Islamic circles. While the government used Western discourses such as the protection of peace and freedom, the Diyanet tried to provide religious legitimization for these values by explaining them to a religious and conservative public in a religious language and logic. As I stated earlier, that, in turn, made the distinction between the Western-secular and conservative-religious discourse a blurry one, allowing the public to understand the war according to its own religious, moral and political beliefs. The fact that DP members refrained from the use of religious terminology themselves may stem from their attempt to avoid attracting further criticism from the secular public, who already accused them of insufficiently defending the secular character of the state. The second explanation is that the use of religion was an Ottoman legacy. It is possible that in its time of need, the state reverted to past practices, to the propaganda they knew, in this case, Ottoman propaganda which was based – due to the religious nature of the Ottoman state – on the religious sentiments of the Muslim population. Unfortunately, although the religious discourse and propaganda used during the Korean War contributed to the wider process of legitimization of religion in the public sphere, it is impossible to determine its exact impact on contemporary Turkish society. It is safe to say, however, that the war contributed to the re-emergence and legitimacy of the role of Islam in the Turkish armed forces during the early 1950s.

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24. *Ibid.*, pp.7–12.
25. 'Hangi milletten ve cinsten olursa olsun mazlum zümrenin kurtarıcılığı her mü'minin uhdesinde İlahi bir mükellefiyettir. Bu esaslara göre: Kore harbine gidenler gazidir. Harpta vefat edenler şehitdir.' *Ibid.*, p.45.

26. Ibid., pp.47–8.
27. Ibid., p.51. 'Kore harekâtına iştirak; cihad ve gazâ mahiyetinde mukaddes vazife cümlesindedir.'
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37. *Yeni Sabah*, 15 February 1951. 'Hitabin sonunda vaizin elleri bütün askerlerimiz tarafından göz yaşlarla öpülmüştür.'
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53. Ibid.

54. On the Zamzam well, see G.R. Hawting, 'The Disappearance and Rediscovery of Zamzam and the "Well of the Ka'ba"', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* Vol.43 (1980), pp.44–54.
55. According to Meir Hatina, the belief in musk is based on the Prophet's ruling after the Battle of Uhud (625): 'Do not wash the şehids, for on the day of judgment their wound will exude the scent of musk.' Another hadith quotes the Prophet as saying, 'Whoever is wounded for the sake of God – and God knows who was wounded for him – on the day of judgment his color will be the color of blood and his scent the scent of musk.' Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Isma'il Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol.3 (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1987) p.1032, as cited in M. Hatina, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power, and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.184.
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64. See, for example, *Yeni Sabah*, 21 April 1952, *Hürriyet*, 23 November 1953. On the battle of Kunuri, see B. Yalta, *Kunu-ri Muharebeleri ve Geri Çekilmeler (26.XI.1950–24.I.1951)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurunu, 2005); M. Uyar and S. Güvenç, 'One Battle and Two Accounts: The Turkish Brigade at Kunuri in November 1950', *Journal of Military History* Vol.80 (2016), pp.1117–47.
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67. Interestingly, he attributed the victory to an unknown commander named Hacı İlyas, while according to Aşıkpaşazade, the battle was won by Lala Şahin Paşa. On this, see K. Yavuz and M. A. Yekta Saraç (prepared for print), *Aşık Paşazade Osmanoğulları'nın Tarihi* (Anatolia: K Kitaplığı, 2003), chap. 48.
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74. *Yeni Sabah*, 30 December 1950.
75. *Yeni Sabah*, 3 December 1950; *Cumhuriyet*, 11 December 1950; *Zafer*, 22 December 1950.
76. *Yeni Sabah*, 1 February 1951.
77. Danişman, *Korea 1952 – Situation Negative!*, p.121
78. Mehmetçik is a nickname for all the Turkish soldiers.
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84. Dora, *Kore Savaşında Türkler 1950–1951*, p.24.

85. *Cumhuriyet*, 9 November 1950.
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87. *Yeni Sabah*, 28 November 1950.
88. *Kore Harbinde Türk Silahlı Kuvvetlerinin Muharebeleri*, p.220. In Turkish: 'Düşman karşısında hayatını kaybedenler, şehittir. Şehitler için ahirette büyük mertebeler vaat edilmiştir. Şehit kutsaldır. Şehidin ailesi ve yakınları bile halktan itibar görür. Düşman karşısında kaçan, ömrü boyunca bu lekeyi temizleyemez.'
89. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, p.233.
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