

FPC Briefing: Anit Kabir – Battleground over the nation

Dr Marc Herzog¹

Any first-time visitor to Ankara, Turkey's bustling capital of 4 million located in central Anatolia, will be drawn to a select repertoire of notable sites worthy of a visit. Amongst these, in the first tier, one would have to include the striking site of Anitkabir. On a hill in central Ankara from which everyone could see it when it was finished, it was built as a massive and sprawling mausoleum complex for Turkey's most well known historical figure, the soldier and statesman Mustafa Kemal who often equated with the image of the Turkish nation-state itself. The monumental complex is fearfully impressive to behold and easily gathers hundreds of thousands of people on days of national importance. In 2011, close to 4 million people visited it.²

However, the importance of Anitkabir, which literally translates to 'memorial tomb', as a site in the political imagination of Turkey far outweighs its nominal function as a mausoleum for the most important and well-known statesman of the country's history. Increasingly since the 1990s, the site has figured as a central space to many of the on-going debates and struggles about the identity and destiny of contemporary Turkey. This was again visible this year during October 29th, an important date in Turkey marking the founding of the Turkish republic in 1924. Rival commemorative demonstrations took place on the day of the Turkish republic's foundation. One was held at the site and attended by many members of the current government and state establishment. The other was attacked at its rally point in the city by a heavy police presence that temporarily prevented them from marching to Anitkabir. After a brief review of the history of the site, this paper will discuss the central place of Anitkabir within the current debates and struggles over Turkey's national identity and how different political actors and groups, from the state institutions, the military and political parties on one hand to civic movements seek to legitimate themselves and their interests by associating with it.

In paying a visit to the site, which is under the strict control of the Turkish armed forces that are responsible for its upkeep and maintenance, what is very conspicuous is the complete absence to any Islamic references. This is completely in line with the fiercely secularist character of Kemalist nationalism. Coming up a large staircase, the entrance to Anitkabir is flanked by three massive statues on each side, collectively representing the Turkish people. This is a potent reminder that Anitkabir, as Wilson sees it, 'is a collective monument that embodies the whole of the Turkish nation, not just a single man'.³ Proceeding down a wide path of several hundred metres, each of whose sides is flanked by 12 imposing lion statues in Hittite style, the awestruck visitor arrives at a huge square. On one side of it lies the tomb of İsmet İnönü, Mustafa Kemal's successor who was president until 1950. Facing him on the other side of the square is the heart of the entire mausoleum complex, a tall, rectangular building, the Hall of Honours that is strongly reminiscent of a Greek temple. It reaches a height of 17 metres and has a façade of 10 massive columns. Inside is the tomb of Mustafa Kemal who was given the honorific 'Atatürk', father of Turks, by the Turkish parliament in 1931.

¹ Marc's writing reflects his own views and not that of any other organisation.

² Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Genelkurmay Başkanlığı (2012) 'Güncel Etkinlikler', *Anıtkabir*, http://www.tsk.tr/12_anitkabir/guncel/faaliyetler/ziyaretci_2011.htm (Nov. 26)

³ Christopher S. Wilson (2007) 'The persistence of the Turkish nation in the mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk', in Mitchell Young, Eric Zuelow, Andreas Sturm (eds.), *Nationalism in a Global Era: The persistence of nations*, Routledge, p.82

Ruling the country as president in what was a de-facto one-party state until 1946, Atatürk used his rule, which ended with his death in 1938, to launch a radical project of state-led and top-down reforms that sought to transform Turkey into a westward oriented and hyper-modern nation-state. This endeavour has deeply marked the development of Turkey's state and society ever since and gave birth to the term Kemalism as a laicist (secularist) and modern form of state-led nationalism. Following his death, the Turkish state quickly announced its intention to construct a massive monument in his honour. The construction of the mausoleum began in 1943 and took 9 years to complete. Ever since its opening in 1953, it became protocol for all visiting foreign heads of state or government to pay their respects by going to Anitkabir and writing in the Hall of Honour's guestbook. National days of remembrance, celebration and commemoration would see the entire pantheon of dignitaries from the Turkish government and state assemble in tribute of Atatürk and the values of Kemalist Turkey. In this manner, Anitkabir and the memorial rites surrounding it constitute a key symbol in the regular invocation, celebration and construction of Turkish nationhood and state culture. Importantly, it also confers legitimacy onto the state and government as following Atatürk's wishes and thereby representing Turkey's people.



The building that houses Atatürk's tomb, the Hall of Honour

Since the 1990s however, Anitkabir also acquired an additional, bottom-up dimension as it became reinvigorated in public politics in the way its space is interpreted and used in a way that shifted it into the focus of Turkey's main socio-political cleavages. This transformed it into a key site in the contestation over social and national identity in Turkey. This change can be located within greater social and political transformations occurring in Turkey since the 1980s that challenged the validity and authority of Kemalist nationalism and its ideals and principles. One of these changes involved the emergence of a conservative and pro-religious counter-movement in social, political, cultural and economic terms. This emergence was represented in the electoral sphere by the growing popularity of the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (RP), which was equipped with a political rhetoric that blended national pride, religious morality and an appeal for social justice. In the 1995 national elections, the party won 21%, more than any other party.



The rise of the Refah Partisi coincided with a wider shift in mainstream social and political thinking towards issues revolving more around identity and away from social class.⁴ The on-going Kurdish insurgency and the wider international context in which the securities of Turkey's place in the bi-polar Cold War had disappeared and ethno-religious conflict erupted in the neighbouring regions of the Caucasus and the Balkans contributed to this. For many segments of secular society and the Turkish state, it seemed that the Kemalist normative foundations of the republic were under attack, challenged by the twin domestic spectres of political Islamism and Kurdish nationalism and the uncertainties of a new and disconcerting post-Cold War world. This unease therefore linked up with a wider sense of existential anxiety concerning the country's future and its national integrity.

During this period Anitkabir and the figure of Mustafa Kemal began to be re-discovered by large segments of secular civil society as an anchor of certainty and security to rally around as well as a bulwark against the perceived Islamist and Kurdish challenges. Therefore, protest marches increasingly began to direct their grievances towards the site rather than ending up at the national parliament or other political institutions. Öken details how a variety of different groups and figures went to Anitkabir to raise awareness for their causes. These include the pupils of a local school and their parents fighting against the school's closure, workers of state enterprises struggling against privatization, and in one case a grieving parent demanding stricter and better implemented traffic codes.⁵ National days such as the 10th of November, the day of Atatürk's death, or the 29th of October, the founding day of the republic, also started to attract increasing crowds and civic rallies of secular civil society. Groups and individuals would perform and record their protest at the site by laying wreaths and writing in the guestbook in the Hall of Honours in order to address Atatürk with their complaints and grievances.

Similar then to the way that state functions sought legitimacy by associating themselves with Anitkabir and the spirit of Atatürk as well as that of the Turkish nation-state, civic groups aimed to legitimate their causes and complaints by bringing them to the centre of the state. Since then, the site remained a central icon in the imaginary of the Turkish nation used both from above by the state, the military and the political establishment as well as increasingly from below by certain segments of Turkish civic society. Both groups broadly seek to attain public acceptance and credibility for their interests and agenda through association with the persona of Atatürk and the Turkish nation-state. However, moreover, the active involvement of civic movements and the wider public in utilizing Anitkabir to express particular grievances and demands has also been to actively voice its protest and resistance regarding particular socio-political developments and changes. This has been very strong in periods that were perceived as a moment of crisis of Turkey's national identity. Therefore whenever this touches the divide in society and politics between religious and secular norms and values, Anitkabir was activated in this particular bottom-up mode.

In that sense, the election of the Islam-oriented and conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 and its two subsequent re-elections in 2007 and 2011, each time with a higher vote-share, generated an almost constant level of anxiety and tension in the past decade between what could be seen as the Kemalist society and political establishment in the country and its conservative, pro-religious equivalent. The increasing authoritarianism of

⁴ Ali Carkoğlu; Ersin Kalaycıoğlu (2009) *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey*, Palgrave MacMillan, p.4

⁵ Nazlı Ökten (2007) 'An Endless Death and an Endless Mourning', in Esra Özyürek (ed.), *The Politics of Public Memory in Turkey*, Syracuse University Press, pp.101-102

the AKP government after 2007 and the resurgence of the Kurdish conflict have only exacerbated this growing sense of polarization. Therefore, protest marches to Anitkabir continued to be organised often on Turkey's most important national days.⁶ However this atmosphere of polarization, which was termed as a social and political 'kulturkampf' by the political scientist Ersin Kalaycioğlu, really erupted in 2007.

The issue that caused this was the election of the next president of Turkey. Although invested with significant powers, the office of the president is a largely titular one in the political system.⁷ Whereas the previous president had been a staunch secularist who opposed many of the AKP's legislative initiatives, the proposed government candidate for the new term was Abdullah Gül, back then the foreign minister came from the ruling party. This stoked the fears of a sizeable segment of the population, particularly those that could be defined as urban, middle-to-upper-class and secular, as well as the political establishment that the ruling party would come to dominate every institution of representative government and use this situation to supposedly drive forward its agenda of Islamization. In that sense, they saw this as a direct threat to their way of life and the survival of secularism in Turkey.⁸

In response, huge opposition rallies were organised by wide segments of Kemalist and secular civil society often numbering hundreds of thousands to millions of participants. In the Turkish context, nothing of this sort and with these numbers had ever taken place in republican history. In Ankara, the protest march on the 4th of April 2007, which was titled 'Claim your Republic', ended up at Anitkabir with over 400,000 demonstrators being reported. The prevalence of Turkish flags and themes around the notions of the nation, the state and Turkey were used at the rallies as a reminder of how central nationalism is as a basic text in every mainstream movement in Turkey. As 2007 was a most turbulent year for Turkish politics, record numbers flocked to Atatürk's resting place as a sign of political defiance and opposition but also to surround themselves within the secure, familiar and protective narrative of the Turkish nation-state. It drew over 12 million visitors that with hundreds of thousands coming on the most prominent national days.⁹ The prominence of the site in the political and social struggles also seemed to renew its civic dimension as a key protest site for the secular and Kemalist segments of society. Since 2007, Anitkabir's centrality to protest marches and rallies has been maintained. A protest against the lifting of the headscarf ban in February 2008 ending at the site drew over 125,000.

This year, a new twist to the tale was added with rival celebrations of Republic day on October 29th, the day the Turkish republic was founded, taking place, an official one led by the president Abdullah Gül, and a second, alternative celebration in the city center which was organized by NGOs and civil society groups. Although this rally was banned and police used pepper spray and water cannons to disperse the crowd of 50,000, street barriers were eventually removed and people proceeded individually to Anitkabir. Thus once more the site found itself at the heart of Turkey's deeply polarized struggles and debates concerning its identity and what role its Kemalist legacy should be accorded in this. Twelve days after

⁶ For instance, in 2006 25,000 people marched to Anitkabir to protest the killings of two judges of the Council of State, Turkey's highest administrative court, by a right-wing fanatic.

⁷ Ersin Kalaycioğlu (2011) 'Kulturkampf in Turkey: The Constitutional Referendum of 12 September 2010', *South European Society and Politics*, pp.1-2

⁸ Nevertheless, following a constitutional amendment, Abdullah Gül still became president in Autumn 2007.

⁹ Hürriyet Daily News (2007), 'Anitkabir attracts record numbers of visitors in 2007', *Hürriyet Daily News*, Dec. 5 - <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/anitkabir-attracts-record-number-of-visitors-in-2007.aspx?pageID=438&n=anitkabir-attracts-record-number-of-visitors-in-2007-2007-12-05> (Nov. 28)

Republic day, over 400,000 went to Anitkabir on the 10th of November to mark the day that Atatürk died, breaking all previous records.

As seen, it continues to be essential for political actors of all dimensions to associate themselves with Anitkabir as the central site of memorializing Atatürk. Ökten argues that even those groups and actors not traditionally aligned with Kemalist secularism find it necessary to honour the holiest site of the Turkish nation-state in order to acquire mainstream acceptance and legitimacy.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the centrality Anitkabir as a site for top-down celebrations of Turkish nationhood may begin to decline in the future with Kemalism becoming increasingly losing its hegemonic status in Turkey's political and social culture. In that sense, it is perhaps noteworthy that Prime Minister Erdoğan did not attend the yearly remembrance of Atatürk's passing this year and was quite blunt in saying that this was not compulsory. Away in Indonesia to attend a conference it seems that a sudden, surprise invitation to visit the small Sultanate of Brunei did not allow him to return in time. As a site of civic protest for Turkey's secular civil society however, it seems certain that the site will keep its hallowed position. In fact, the ill-prepared and top-heavy attempt to prevent people to go there during the alternative Republic Day celebration may only increase this status. It is also unlikely that the struggles to determine and fix the exact colour and shape of Turkey's national identity will cease in the short-term future but rather become more polarized will less consensus than ever before visible between the various camps in society and politics.

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¹⁰ Ökten 2007: 97