



OBSERVATORY
of Turkey and its
Geopolitical
Environment

THE NEW WAVE OF NATIONALISM AMONG YOUNG TURKS

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PRESENTATION OF THE OBSERVATORY

Directed by **Didier Billion**, Deputy Director of IRIS, the Observatory of Turkey and its Geopolitical Environment aims to contribute to a better understanding of the political, social, economic, cultural and geopolitical developments in contemporary Turkey.

As part of IRIS's Middle East/North Africa Programme, the Observatory on Turkey and its Geopolitical Environment aims to be a vehicle for the necessary debate on ideas concerning this country. Keen to create synergies, the Observatory has already established partnerships with the Centre for Economic and Social Research (BETAM) at Bahçesehir University in Istanbul and with the Club du Millénaire, a think tank created on the initiative of students from French and foreign universities.



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The Middle East/North Africa Programme aims to decipher and put into perspective the evolving political, economic, social, and geopolitical realities of the region. Its goal is to provide key insights, an analytical framework, and decision-making support for the various actors engaged in relations with the countries concerned.

Its areas of focus are diverse, including facilitating strategic debates, conducting studies, reports, and consultancy briefs, organizing conferences, symposiums, and seminars, as well as offering tailored training programs.

As Turkey enters a new chapter in its political history marked by the intensification of authoritarianism, a parallel phenomenon is emerging, driven by a generation animated by a form of nationalism with distinct features. This movement is gradually asserting itself and may reshape the country's political balances in the upcoming years.

Over the recent decades, the nationalist current that has strongly dominated the political landscape has been carried by the MHP (Nationalist Action Party) and, increasingly, by the AKP (Justice and Development Party). Particularly, the latter has progressively hardened its nationalist discourse in order to consolidate and expand its electoral base. The dominant ideological framework of these two parties took shape in the late 1970s with the *ülkücü*¹ movement, which, as it underwent a process of Islamisation, became deeply influenced by the “Turkish–Islamic synthesis” promoted after September 12, 1980 military coup. This doctrine, which asserts Sunni Islam as an essential component of Turkish identity, also influenced the leadership of Turkey's first Islamist party, the MNP (National Order Party), founded in 1970 by Necmettin Erbakan and considered as a precursor to the AKP. Inherently statist, nationalist, and conservative, this ideological synthesis currently constitutes the backbone of the MHP and has, since 2015, also shaped a significant portion of the AKP's electoral base.

NEW DYNAMICS OF NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

While Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP has been in power for 23 years, a different nationalist current, driven by the new generation, has emerged in recent years. Opinion surveys indicate that around 39% of young people define themselves as nationalists, while a separate 44% identify primarily as Kemalist². This “neo-nationalist” current is grounded in distinctly more secular, Kemalist, and Turanist³ references and resonates strongly among urban youth opposed to the current government. A 2022 survey further shows that young people use the labels “conservative” or “Islamist” less frequently to describe themselves than the national average⁴. This transformation of nationalism among the younger generation is largely explained by its urban character: the major waves of migration from geographic peripheries

¹ Known in Europe as the “Grey Wolves,” the *ülkücü* (idealist) movement, which emerged in the 1950s, refers to the Turkish nationalist current based on the ideologies of Turkism and pan-Turkism, as adopted by the MHP.

² Genç Yarınl Araştırma Projesi. (2024) *Gençlerin Politik Tercihleri Araştırması 2024 (The Political Preferences of Young People: Survey 2024)*. İstanbul: Gençlik Örgütleri Forumu (GoFor); KONDA Araştırma ve Danışmanlık (survey conducted from 7 to 18 February 2024 among 18–30-year-olds): <https://www.stgm.org.tr/e-kutuphane/genclerin-politik-tercihleri-arastirmasi-2024>

³ A nationalist ideology advocating the unity of Turkic and Uralo-Altaic peoples, based on linguistic and ethnic ties, unlike Pan-Turkism and Turkism, which rely on a more religious and Islamic dimension of Turkish identity.

⁴ Genç Yarınl Araştırma Projesi, *The Political Preferences of Young People*, Survey 2024, p. 57.

to urban centres in the 1980s, particularly toward Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and Bursa, profoundly reshaped Turkey's demographic sociology and the ideological contours of this nationalist current. However, the AKP and the MHP remain the main ideological carriers of a more traditional form of nationalism, rooted primarily in peripheral areas. Notably, in 2022, 17.3% of the population lived in rural areas and nearly 15% in intermediate-density zones, both of which were largely composed of older populations⁵.

The March 2025 demonstrations, organised in response to the arrest of Istanbul Mayor and CHP (Republican People's Party) presidential candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu, and which drew at least one million participants according to the CHP⁶, constituted a moment of political socialisation for a generation whose nationalist orientation has become increasingly pronounced. One study confirms this dynamic that marked the March protests: 94% of demonstrators were under the age of 35, with 55.6% identifying as Kemalist and 16.9% as nationalist⁷. That same study indicates that in the 2023 elections, 46.9% of these demonstrators voted for the CHP, while the far-right ultranationalist ZP (Victory Party) came second with 15.9%. Notably, 16.4% of participants were under the voting age of 18.

When asked about their preferences for future elections, the CHP remains the leading choice (52.9%), followed by the ZP (23.8%), while 13.4% consider abstaining⁸. While the nationalist dimension of Kemalism has become more pronounced within this generation, these figures point to an electorate driven by a less conservative form of nationalism. More secular and Kemalist reference points, a stronger urban identity than their parents' shaped by rural exodus, higher levels of education, and aspirations toward more Western lifestyles, amplified by social media, largely contribute to this generation appearing significantly less conservative than its elders, notwithstanding certain exceptions. The neo-nationalism currently gaining momentum mobilises a significant share of young people, although a substantial segment remains without partisan affiliation and chooses abstention.

⁵ Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (TÜİK). (2023) *Kent-Kır Nüfus İstatistikleri, 2022* (Urban and Rural Population Statistics, 2022). Ankara: Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, communiqué no. 49755, published on 11 May 2023. Available at: <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/bulten/index?p=kent-kir-nufus-istatistikleri-2022-49755>

⁶ *Medyascope*. (2025) «Özgür Özel duyurdu : Sarayhanede en az 1 milyon kişi toplandı», 22 March 2025. Available at: <https://medyascope.tv/2025/03/22/1-milyon-kisi-sarachanede-sarachanede-kac-kisi-toplandi/>

⁷ Toplum Çalışmaları Enstitüsü. (2025) *Who are these young people? Analysis of participants in the demonstrations in support of İmamoğlu – Ankara case (İmamoğlu Protestoları Katılımcı Analizi – Ankara Örneği)*. Publication no. 07, 28 March 2025. İstanbul: Toplum Çalışmaları Enstitüsü. <https://www.toplum.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Imamoglu-Protestolari-Katilimci-Analizi-Ankara-Ornegi-28-Mart-2025.pdf> p. 5

⁸ Ibid., p.6

As for the parties that primarily embody this neo-nationalism, although many of these young people feel politically underrepresented or believe that no genuine alternative exists on the political scene, the ZP stands out. Founded in 2021 by Ümit Özdağ, the ZP, despite its limited territorial implantation, has emerged as the main organisational vehicle of the neo-nationalism carried by a portion of the youth. At the national level, the ZP is already the third electoral preference among young people in overall, with 5.1%, behind the CHP (24.1%) and the AKP (11.2%). Beyond traditional political figures, a number of Turanist associations and personalities emerging from social media have embodied or contributed to this movement, although these figures remain marginal.

BETWEEN ECONOMIC DISILLUSION AND IDEOLOGICAL RECOMPOSITION

Beyond these findings, one of the central mobilising themes for young neo-nationalists, shared with young people adhering to other ideological orientations as well, relates to economic issues. Since 2018, Turkey has experienced persistent inflation, peaking at an annual rate of 85.5% in October 2022, alongside one of the highest NEET rates (neither in employment, education, nor training) in the OECD⁹, a sharp decline in purchasing power, and soaring rents, all of which reflect the main concerns of a Turkish youth facing increasing precarity. Indeed, more than one third of 18-30-year-olds remain dependent on financial support from their families to meet their basic needs¹⁰. A widely noted perception among Turkish youth is a sense of spatial confinement in their environment combined with an acute awareness of missed opportunities, giving rise to deep frustration. Among young people opposed to the government, these problems are frequently attributed to poor governance, the absence of the rule of law, restrictions on freedom of expression, a lack of meritocracy, and authoritarianism.

Within an entire generation that has known no other government than that led by the AKP since its rise to power in 2002, and that was born and raised in large urban centres, a substantial portion rejects conservatism, embraces more secular and westernised lifestyles, and adheres to Kemalist values, which they believe the government has betrayed. This is also captured in survey data showing that young neo-nationalists hold relatively favourable views

⁹ OECD. (2024) *Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET): % of population (15–29 years)*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/youth-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet.html>

¹⁰ Genç Yarın Araştırma Projesi, *The Political Preferences of Young People: Survey 2024*, p. 142.

toward Turkey's accession to the European Union (57% among those identifying as nationalist and 42% among those close to the ZP). This context fuels profound anxiety and a loss of confidence in the future among large segments of the younger generation. Kemalism and a form of nationalism with secular characteristics, distinct from the ideology of the governing parties thus offer a worldview that is more Western-oriented. At the same time nationalist sentiments are mobilised in circumstances in which opposition voters feel excluded from any form of representation within the state apparatus and perceive their country as having been betrayed. Additionally, it is noteworthy that supporters of the ZP tend to define themselves first as Kemalist, and only secondarily as nationalist.

CHALLENGING THE “FATHER-STATE” AND IDENTITY RECOMPOSITION

In this respect, one of the defining features of neo-nationalism, which distinguishes it from the form of nationalism that has dominated the political landscape since the 1970s, lies in its critical approach to the state. Young people no longer perceive the state as a sacred and infallible authority. The model of the protective “father-state” (*Devlet Baba*) has been replaced by the perception of a state that is incapable of providing social or economic guarantees for its citizens. While this disengagement generates deep disappointment and fuels a critical stance toward authoritarianism and current policies, it also coexists with hostile attitudes toward refugees, as well as xenophobic tendencies.

Returning to the sense of exclusion from political responsibilities, and even from belonging to one's own country, as captured in the frequently repeated claim that “the homeland has been betrayed”, this current is marked by an amplified sensitivity to issues related to refugees. Turkey currently hosts approximately 3.2 million registered Syrian refugees, along with around 222,000 refugees of other nationalities¹¹. According to the ZP, the number of Syrian refugees alone had reached 7 million in 2024. Whereas the conservative and religious constituent of nationalism, aligned with the governing parties, remains relatively tolerant by stressing the Islamic and Sunni character of these refugee populations, the refugee issue occupies a central place for ZP supporters and for the party itself. Presented as a priority in the party's manifesto, the departure of Syrian refugees is framed as a necessary response to inflation, unemployment, and the “loss of sovereignty.” According to this discourse, the refugee issue

¹¹ UNHCR. (2024) Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Türkiye. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/kime-yardim-ediyoruz/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-tuerkiye>

is portrayed as part of an imperialist plot aimed at provoking civil war through population movements and demographic transformations, particularly in the eastern and southern regions of the country, aiming at a separation of these areas from the rest of Turkey. This narrative echoes what is often referred to as the “Sèvres syndrome,” a reference to the treaty imposed by the victors of the First World War that sought to dismantle the Ottoman Empire.

A NATIONALISM ROOTED IN A SENSE OF DISPOSSESSION

One of the most attractive aspects of the ZP for neo-nationalists, who largely share this view, rests on the conviction that Turks are treated as a minority and are becoming the most disadvantaged group in their own country. Frequently cited examples include the belief that Turks work hard, pay taxes, and respect the law, yet are disadvantaged compared with Syrians or other refugees portrayed as benefiting from illegitimate advantages. This sense of dispossession feeds a victim-centred narrative in which young Turkish people are depicted as humiliated, marginalised, and deprived of a future in their own homeland. One of the ZP’s slogans explicitly claims to seek to “liberate Turkish youth from the condition of being tenants in their own land.” This discourse insists on the idea of a direct attack on Turkish identity and accuses Islamist actors of orchestrating a process of “de-Turkification.”

Much like the refugee issue, the Kurdish question has also been progressively integrated into this narrative, particularly since the “opening process” launched by the government in October 2024. According to this rhetoric, Kurds are seen as benefiting from disproportionate political influence at the expense of disadvantaged Turks. Combined with deep mistrust toward both the governing parties and the opposition, this perception reinforces young neo-nationalists’ reluctance toward political expressions of Kurdish identity and toward any form of negotiation between the state and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party). These young neo-nationalists adopt a securitised approach to the Kurdish issue, shaped by concerns over national unity and sovereignty. The demonstrations of March 2025 illustrated this tendency, marked by the visibility of nationalist symbols such as Grey Wolves salutes or slogans targeting Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK. Conservative nationalist groups however, remained relatively silent from the beginning of the peace process, largely as a result of the MHP’s party discipline. Nevertheless, these young people adhere to a logic in which ethnic identities (Kurdish, Circassian, Armenian, and others) are tolerated only as long as they are incorporated

within a framework dominated by “Turkishness.”¹² In this respect, neo-nationalism differs from traditional state nationalism, which simply denied the existence of such identities altogether.

A GENERATION MARKED BY ANGER

Although young neo-nationalists are critical of the government, they also express deep frustration with an opposition perceived as overly moderate. While this current supported the March 2025 mobilisations against İmamoğlu’s arrest and the CHP remains the leading electoral choice among young people, they nevertheless reproach the party, and its leader Özgür Özel, for a perceived lack of nationalist firmness. Similarly, although Ümit Özdağ has recently made positive remarks regarding İmamoğlu or the CHP, his party’s programme remains highly critical of the latter, frequently portraying it as equivalent to the AKP. Nonetheless, one essential characteristic of these urban young people who sympathise with neo-nationalism and contribute to reshaping is this: they are profoundly angry, both at the governing elites and at those of the opposition. This anger was also evident during the March 2025 protests and marks a clear rupture with the youth who participated in the Gezi protests¹³ in 2013. Also, national-level surveys not only confirm the popularity of the CHP and the ZP among young people, but also show that 31.2% describe themselves as undecided, while 14.9% consider abstaining in the next elections¹⁴. This generation, simultaneously nationalist, secularised, and deeply disillusioned, no longer fully identifies with either the government or the opposition. In a country such as Turkey, where voter turnout traditionally remains around 85%, this growing indecision, potential abstention, and search for political could lead to a decisive change of result in future electoral contests.

The frustration of neo-nationalist youth stems from economic and social difficulties, but also from their perceived inability to transform the existing political system. As noted earlier, this is a generation acutely aware of missed opportunities and convinced that it will continue to

¹² Bianet (2025) ‘Gençler arasında yükselen milliyetçilik: anti-otoriter, seküler ve eleştirel’, Bianet, 9 April. Available at: <https://bianet.org/haber/gencler-arasinda-yukselen-milliyetcilik-anti-otoriter-sekuler-ve-elestirel-306290>. The article reports on findings from the research project “Milliyetçiliğin dönüşümü ve ‘genç’ yüzleri” conducted by the İstanbul Gençlik Araştırmaları Merkezi (İGAM) with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, presented on 7 April 2025.

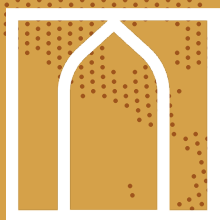
¹³ Initiated in 2013 as an environmental mobilization to protect one of Istanbul’s few remaining parks, Gezi quickly turned into a broad national protest, bringing together a wide range of ideological groups and strong youth participation against the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, following a violent police intervention.

¹⁴ Genç Yarin Araştırma Projesi, *The Political Preferences of Young People: Survey 2024*, p. 13.

lack access to future opportunities. It faces a sustained decline in living standards, increasing interference by political authorities in personal lifestyles, and, unprecedented in the history of the Republic, a sharp rise in the migrant population. Their anger is directed first and foremost at the AKP, but also at the opposition, particularly with regard to CHP's migration policy, its cooperation with the pro-Kurdish DEM (Equality and Democracy Party of the Peoples), and its inability to emerge as a credible alternative over the past two decades.

The rise of neo-nationalism among young people in Turkey reflects a profound generational recomposition of the political landscape. Carried by an urban youth marked by anger toward both the government and, in some instances, the opposition, this current combines social critique, rejection of conservatism, and adherence to a Turkish identity perceived as under threat. Nourished by economic instability, migration dynamics, and deep social polarisation, neo-nationalism is not a transient phenomenon but a force likely to leave a lasting imprint on public and political life in the country.

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