Secular migration from Turkey to the UK

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Since its establishment as an academic discipline, the pioneers of sociology have tended to understand secularisation as an essential aspect of modernisation. This view is now changing. Many scholars and sociologists have started to question the assumption that we can understand secular identities as merely being non-religious or unbelievers, and there is, in fact, a growing scholarship that interrogates such assumptions and has an interest in understanding secularity, and thereby secular individuals and groups, as heterogenous and something that cannot be defined necessarily by a lack of belief only, but also by different forms of believing and behaving (Asad 2003; Voas 2009; Parmaksiz 2018). Furthermore, secular migration has not previously been problematized, as there has been an underlying assumption that secular citizens integrate into their host society without issue.

On the other hand, migration prompted by religious causes and the effect of religiosity on the migration process and integration have been topics of interest for scholars for many years. This interest has resulted in numerous studies that examine the transmission of religiosity between migrant generations and how religious networks provide migrants with social and cultural capital. Within the context of largely secular Europe, academic attention has been paid to how secular host societies react to migrants with strong religious beliefs and the growing salience of religion. This overwhelming interest in religion and migration is understandable, as there is an underlying assumption that cultural group identity and religious commitments form the roots of many issues regarding migrant integration and accommodation in different contexts. Migration of secular citizens on the other hand has not been a topic of specific research, and there are various reasons for this omission.

On a theoretical basis, social science has from its conception understood secularisation as the disappearance of a religious worldview and the institutional structures associated with it. Classical social theorists, such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim, predicted, for different reasons, the gradual decline of the appeal of religion in societies. In these models, secularity refers to the neutral social substratum that remains once religion disappears through rationalisation, specialisation, disenchantment or capitalist development. As a result, secularity has not been understood as forming a distinct and tangible identity.

Secondly, the predominant tendency in migration studies has been to study problematic cases or 'challenges'. With the shift from class to culture, migration studies have focused on cultural challenges and tensions that the migration of people creates in host societies in the form of ethnic or religious

pluralism. As a result, the migration of secular citizens has not generated much interest as there is an underlying assumption that their presence in Western societies does not create issues or problems. As a consequence of these two concepts, secular migration in the form of lifestyle migration has been invisible and largely diffused under the label of economic migration.

My research intends to problematise secular migration from Turkey to the UK. Historically, the migration of Turks and other ethnic groups to the UK has occurred in a number of waves. The first wave of migration of Turks to the UK took place from Cyprus, a Commonwealth country, whereas the second wave consisted of Turks from Turkey, who migrated for economic and political reasons in the 1980s. A third wave occured when many Kurdish activists and nationalists came to the UK as asylum seekers in the 1990s. In more recent years there has been a growing number of Turkish citizens moving to the UK.

My research hypothesises that this ongoing fourth wave of migration of Turks has been prompted by a reaction to the efforts of successive Turkish governments to deepen and extend the reach of, what I call, an islamonormative social and cultural order in Turkey. With Turkey being a highly religious Muslim society, where the level of belief is over 90 percent and an overwhelming majority identify as religious (Inglehart et al. 2014), social and cultural life is determined and conditioned by the expectations of the Muslim majority. This prevalence of the cultural and social presence of Islam in turn creates Islamonormative pressures of conformity on both non-believers and those Muslims whose beliefs and religious practices do not match orthodox expectations. Surveys and studies have demonstrated that being secular in Turkey makes more sense sociologically not as non-belief, but rather as a particular form of believing, in the form of either spiritualised or individualised Islamic interpretations or the exclusion of religious reasoning from everyday thinking (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2014). Hence, within the context of Turkey, there is evidence to suggest that being secular corresponds not merely to a lack of belief, as it is commonly understood within the European context, but also to believing without behaving, or believing in a privatised and individualised manner.

Growing social conservativism over the course of the last three decades (Çarkoğlu, Kalaycıoğlu 2009; Yeşilada, Noordijk 2010) and certain government policies and actions during the past two decades have been points of grievance amongst a large portion of Turkish society. Partly in response to this, in the last decade, being secular in Turkey has been more and more construed and expressed not merely as a defence of

laicism as the separation of state and religion, but also as a lifestyle or way of life that has implications for everyday practices and actions in ordinary contexts. In many ways, the Gezi Park protests were an important turning point in this process. Here, many middle-class professionals took to the streets to protest against what they perceived as attacks on their secular lifestyle, urban renovation projects and environmental destruction. What largely motivated these people was not economic impoverishment, but rather the impoverishment of the social and cultural landscape and relations upon which their secular lifestyle flourished (Tuğal 2013).

This growing dissatisfaction with the politics of Turkey can in turn be understood to have caused a flow of migrants, mostly from middle-class, professional backgrounds with high social and cultural capital, from Turkey to various European countries, including the UK. For the UK, this process has been facilitated by the Ankara Agreement between Turkey and Britain, which provides a means for Turkish citizens to emigrate to the UK by setting up businesses, so bypassing strict government policies that have made it harder to emigrate to the UK over the course of the past decade.

The Ankara Agreement (officially the Agreement Creating an Association between the Republic of Turkey and the European Economic Community) was signed by Turkey and the EEC in 1963 in Ankara with the aim of sustaining economic and then political integration. When the UK joined the EEC in 1973, it became party to this agreement. Provisions of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union about workers' free movement were put under the Free Movement of Services and Capital in Articles 45, 46, 47 and 48. Later on, the clauses about free movement were reinterpreted, with several revisions. This agreement entitles Turkish citizens to apply for a UK residence permit, and in many ways it has provided the most convenient way of emigrating to the UK for many Turkish citizens who could not satisfy the requirements of the more stringent UK visa regime.

In light of the social, political and cultural transformation of Turkey highlighted above, my project, using qualitative research methods, seeks to document the experiences and perceptions of Turkish secular migrants in the UK, to examine the causes of this secular migration and what determined the choice to emigrate to the UK over other countries, to understand the secular migrants' experience of integrating into British society and to assess the relationship of these new migrants to the already present Turkish or other Muslim communities in the UK.

Although the project intends to focus on migrants from Turkey, its findings could aid a better understanding of migration patterns from other predominantly Muslim societies to Western secularised societies. This research will provide valuable empirical evidence to enable these issues to be more effectively brought to the attention of policymakers in the UK and Turkey, and will offer an important basis for further research.

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A Turkish festival in London (photo by Glyn Thomas; https://www.flickr.com/photos/glynthomas/28465354/; CC BY-SA 2.0).