

NATIONALISM AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE:
EXAMINING THE KURDISH-TURKISH CONFLICT

İhsan Kahveci

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Committee:

Zack W. Almquist

Steven Pfaff

Reşat Kasaba

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İhsan Kahveci

University of Washington

Abstract

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İhsan Kahveci

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Zack W. Almquist

Department of Sociology

The limited study of the intersection of nationalism, religion, and ethnicity deserves deeper study in the literature. Existing studies focus mostly on the *boundary-making* function of religion – the creation of in-group/out-group distinction as a basis of collective identity formation. However, religion can also be used to merge different identities and make group boundaries “fuzzier” which we refer to as *boundary-blurring*. To answer the question of why and when sharpening ethnic boundaries is preferred to blurring them, we applied Jared Rubin’s “propagation of rule” framework to modern Turkey. We focused on the Kurdish-Turkish conflict and examined the relationship between the Turkish State and Presidency of Religious Affairs – the biggest religious organization in Turkey. We used Structural Topic Modeling to analyze the religious sermons disseminated in Turkey and found out a positive relationship between the intensity of conflict and the salience of nationalist rhetoric in religious discourse. Furthermore, we showed that religious

rhetoric is used to sharpen boundaries when the economic legitimization capacity of the state is low. Contrary, when there is economic prosperity, religious rhetoric is used to blur boundaries. As the involvement of religion in politics through right-wing populism increases, the insights derived from the Turkish case become even more relevant to the so-called secular states around the world.

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Introduction

The limited study of the intersection of nationalism, religion and ethnicity deserves deeper study in the literature (Gorski and Türkmen-Derrişođlu 2013). Existing studies focus mostly on the *boundary-making* function of religion – creation of in-group/out-group distinction as a basis of collective identity formation (Brubaker 2012). Studies of religiously rooted conflicts (e.g. shia-sunni) are good examples of this line of research (Valbjørn 2019). Religion can also be used to forge “meta-ethnic” connections which we refer to as *boundary-blurring* (Turchin 2003; Türkmen 2021:18). In 7th century AD, Islam helped to unite loose confederations of tribes to an ethnic group called Arabs (Webb 2016). In 1914, the Ottoman Caliph declared a jihad aiming to unite all Muslims in the European Colonies. Yet, it was a failed attempt followed by the Arab Revolt – in 1916, Arabs rose against the Ottoman Empire to establish an independent and unified nation-state (Aksakal 2011). In addition to the possibility of failure, religious boundary-blurring carries opportunity costs. Religious leaders cannot simply modify theological systems too often, otherwise they might lose their legitimacy completely (Rubin 2017). The main quest of this paper is to provide insights into the decision-making process of the religious elite. When and why religion is used for making or blurring boundaries?

We focused on the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict and examined the relationship between the Turkish State and the biggest religious authority, namely the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB). We justify the case selection as follows: (I) Given that uncontested group boundaries tend to remain stable and there is not much room for boundary-blurring, we looked for ethnic conflicts, as they are dynamic in nature. In Bourdieusian terms, ethnic conflict is a field in which group boundaries are under the pressure of exclusionary and inclusionary forces (Türkmen-Derrişođlu 2016; Wimmer 2008). (II) Kurdish-Turkish Conflict is a long-lasting conflict, and two sides are religiously homogeneous.¹ Consequently, ethnic boundaries are not drawn based on religious affiliation which allows us to observe religion as an external factor (Türkmen 2019). (III) From Ottomans to the Turkish Republic, religion has always been a major factor in state-society relations, and influential in politics (Mardin 1973). As a result, we were expecting to find out various forms of religious boundary-blurring. The literature on the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict

¹ There is an Alevi-Kurdish minority population located in the eastern part of Turkey. Following Turkmen (2021:2, footnote 2) we didn't include them in our theoretical framework.

points that both parties attempted to use religion on their behalf (Türkmen 2019, 2021). The detailed discussion with historical examples is saved to the next chapter. (IV) Turkey offers a unique ethno-religious identity, an outcome of amalgamating national and religious identities, a.k.a Turkish Islamic Synthesis (TIS) (Mardin 2005; Türkmen 2021:110). Nationalism naturally becomes an essential part of the case, as religious Kurds find the promotion of nationalist rhetoric in the religious discourse exclusionary.

In this study we analyzed the religious sermons (Khutbas) issued weekly by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı henceforth DIB) over the course of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. Using Structural Topic Modelling (Roberts et. al. 2019), an automated text analysis tool designed for social science purposes, we estimated the saliency of nationalist rhetoric over time to answer two core research questions:

- (1) How does nationalist rhetoric in religion respond to the Kurdish-Turkish conflict?
- (2) Why and when religion is used to blur boundaries, instead of sharpening them?

We found a positive relationship between the intensity of conflict and the saliency of nationalist rhetoric in sermons. We also observed a decrease of nationalist rhetoric during holy days (Ramadan and Sacrifice). Furthermore, we showed that religious rhetoric is used to sharpen boundaries when economic legitimization capacity of the state is low. Contrary, when there is economic prosperity, religious rhetoric is used to blur boundaries.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: (1) a general discussion of religion's role in ethnic conflicts; (2) stating the definitions used in this study; (3) history of the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict and its theoretical importance; (4) background on the Presidency of Religious Affairs and its sermons; (5) building the analytical framework and hypotheses; (6) evaluation of the textual and statistical analysis; (7) presenting the qualitative and quantitative findings; (8) discussion.

Literature Review

The importance of religion is becoming widely accepted among the scholars of nationalism (Brubaker 2012; Gorski and Türkmen-Derrişođlu 2013) and promising studies have been

published in recent years (Jabbarli 2021; Kırmacı 2021; Aturuchi and Okechukwu 2021). Borrowing from this literature, we created the following dichotomy: (I) religion can function as an in-group vs. out-group distinction in which ethnic groups are defined by their religious affiliation which we refer to as *boundary-making* (Brubaker, 2012). Under this category, we also included various ways religion can be used to sharpen or solidify already existing group boundaries and intensify ethnic differences for theoretical simplicity. Henceforth, throughout this paper making, sharpening, contracting, solidifying group or ethnic boundaries indicate the *boundary-making* function of religion. (II) Religion can also be used to forge “meta-ethnic” connections, merging different identities, and making group boundaries “fuzzier” which we will refer to as *boundary-blurring*. (Brubaker 2002; Türkmen 2021:18; Wimmer 2008). To make this distinction clearer, we would like to use the following example: In 1095, when Pope Urban II proclaimed the First Crusade, he was using religious common grounds to unite different European kingdoms (e.g. Franks, Flanders, Normans, Greeks) against a common enemy (e.g. Seljuks, Fatimids). Following the proposed terminology, Pope’s attempt was a form of religious boundary-making among populations that have co-existed for centuries. Emphasizing the religious difference sharpened group boundaries, followed by centuries long wars (Riley-Smith 1986, 2014).

Similar dichotomies of the functions of religion on ethnic boundaries exist in the literature. For instance, numerous studies published on whether religion functions as a “bridge” or a “buffer” in immigrant integration. (Garcia-Muñoz and Neuman 2013; Hirschman 2004). In her book, Türkmen stated that religion can function either: “(1) as a trigger for and an exacerbating factor in the conflict, or (2) as a conflict resolution tool.” (2021:12). As a novel contribution to this literature, we applied Rubin’s (2017) theoretical framework of “propagation of rule” on long-lasting ethnic conflicts, particularly Kurdish-Turkish conflict in order to answer under what conditions the religious elite employs *boundary-making* or *boundary-blurring* strategies.

Ethnic and Religious Nationalism

An empirical study of ethnicity and nationalism requires clear definitions of both phenomena. Yet, the broad literature has not reached a consensus on it. Often, ethnicity is defined as a broad term encompassing racial, religious, cultural differences and relevant literature focused mostly on ethno-religious conflicts. (Türkmen, 2021). The works of (Wimmer 2008, 2013) and (Turchin

2003) are examples of it. The shortcoming of this literature is taking a “generalizing stance” when studying ethnicity (Brubaker 2015:4) and defining various types of group identities (i.e. religion) under the “umbrella term” of ethnic identity (Türkmen-Derrişođlu 2016). By definition, this boundless conceptualization is too simplistic and not helpful to distinguish between ethnic and religious identities. Being able to make this distinction clearly is an analytical prerequisite of this study. Considering that the Kurdish-Turkish conflict is religiously homogeneous as both sides are Sunni Muslims (Türkmen 2019), religion has not been an inherent marker in the conflict but has been used to blurring or making of the Kurdish-Turkish ethnic boundary. Consequently, following Turkmen (2021), we decided to treat ethnic and religious identities as two competing, separate group identities in the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict.

Scholars of nationalism proposed numerous answers to the question of “what is a nation?” Out of all, Benedict Anderson’s received the most attention: nation is "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."(2006). In the forming of nations, shared language, religion, ethnicity, history, culture, and territory play an important role. The main difference of the nation from an ethnic group is “the possession of autonomy, the ability to provide citizenship rights and a unified economy.” (Türkmen-Derrişođlu 2016). Historically, ethnicity played the most-noted role in the formation of national identity, but recently there is scholarly interest in the role of religion (Gorski, Turkmen-Derrişođlu, 2013). This study contributes to the literature by studying a national identity (Turkish) formed partly ethnic and partly religious lines, often referred as the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (TIS). Detailed discussion of the TIS saved to another chapter.

Another major component of studying the functions of ethnicity and religion on nation-making is to accept the dynamic nature of group boundaries. Brubaker pointed out a common misconception in the studies of ethnic groups, nations, and races as he refers it as “groupism”:

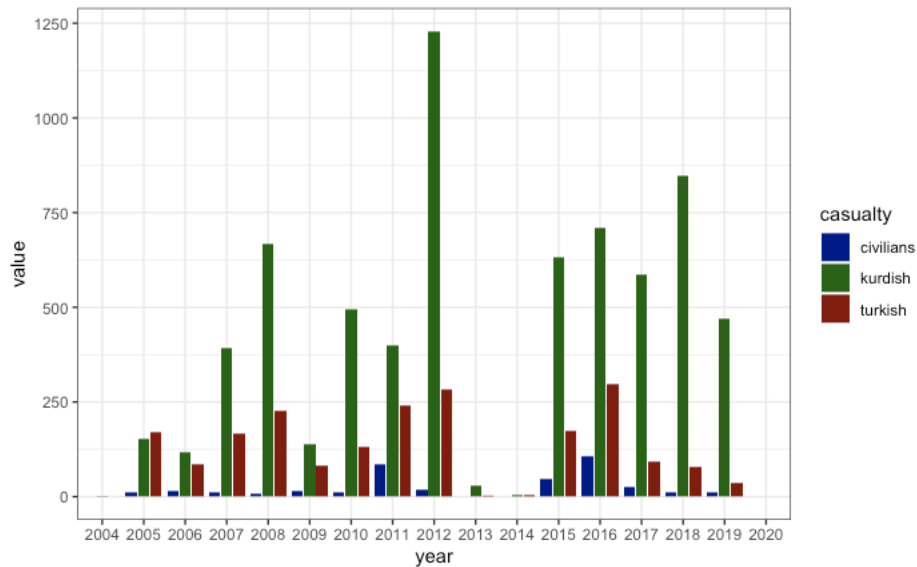
"the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis. In the domain of ethnicity, nationalism and race, I mean by 'groupism' the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed." (Brubaker 2002)

In this paper, we followed the theoretical lenses of Brubaker and did not take ethnicity as consisting of concrete and fixed boundaries. Instead, we define ethnicity as an outcome of an ethnic group-making project in which organizations (political, religious, ethnic) try to transform ethnic categories into ethnic groups or increase/decrease the level of groupness. It is important to note that those organizations do not necessarily represent the entire ethnic group. For instance, the Kurdish Militia (PKK, YPG) is not the representative of all Kurdish population. They are ethnic organizations with certain political interests and their actions should be analyzed in relation to the level of groupness. We would also like to stress out that organizations in the field of ethnic conflicts do not necessarily aim to increase groupness (solidarity). It is equally likely to benefit from merging two or more ethnic categories in certain contexts, a.k.a. boundary-blurring.

A Brief History of Kurdish-Turkish Conflict

The Kurdish-Turkish conflict is an armed conflict between Kurdish insurgent groups (mainly PKK) and the Republic of Turkey. It is one of the longest lasting internal wars in the modern world. Since 1984, more than 40000 have died from both parties, approximately 3000 Kurdish villages were destroyed, and many Kurds forced to migrate². The historical roots of Kurdish Revolts date back to the early 19th century. However, it is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss the periods before the emergence of PKK. For a full review on the historical Kurdish Revolts and its connection to the contemporary conflict please read the second chapter of Turkmen (2021). Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is a Kurdish insurgent organization founded by a group of Kurdish students led by Abdullah Ocalan in 1978. It was initially influenced by Maoist doctrine and Kurdish Nationalism demanding a separate Kurdish state in the region. Since 1984, PKK has been involved in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict through guerilla warfare. The initial reasons for the formation of PKK were the oppression of Kurds in Turkey. At this time, use of Kurdish language and even the words of "Kurd" or "Kurdistan" is banned in Turkey. There have been many arbitrary arrests against people who spoke, published, or sang in Kurdish. Over the 30 years, PKK changed its goals from separate state to autonomous region even to increase cultural and political rights for Kurdish population in Turkey.

² Government of the United Kingdom's Country Policy and Information Note Turkey: Kurds. Feb 2020. Retrieved: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/866094/Country_policy_and_information_note_Kurds_Turkey_February_2020.pdf

Figure I*The Kurdish-Turkish Conflict's Death Toll*

Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program

Figure I display the death toll (Turkish soldiers, Kurdish militia, civilians) of the conflict over the years. There were four periods of ceasefire during the conflict. The longest two are the most important, the first one initiated by the PKK after Ocalan was captured in 1999 and ended in 2004. In 2013, a bilateral ceasefire followed by a Peace Process started behind closed doors then continued publicly under the government of Erdogan (Özpek 2017). However, The Peace Process was ended by the PKK as a result of Islamic State (IS) attacking in Kurdish village Suruc in 2015. PKK blamed the Turkish state for supporting IS and purposefully not protecting Kurdish regions (Hoffman 2019). PKK responded with a killing of two police officers, known as Ceylanpinar Incident which was used as a *casus belli* by Erdogan to officially end the peace process. Whether PKK was officially behind the Ceylanpinar Incident is still unresolved to this date. After 2015, the conflict escalated dramatically, especially after Turkish military forces invaded northern Syria in order to take control of Kurdish regions and break the alliance between PKK and PYD (a.k.a. Democratic Union Party). Currently, Turkish state treats all Kurdish opposition whether peaceful or militant as terrorism³ and detains Selahattin Demirtaş – leader of Kurdish political opposition.

³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/how-is-turkey-answering-its-kurdish-question/>

Turkey as the Melting Pot: Ethnicity, Religion, Nationalism

Studying an ethnic conflict in Turkey, allows a natural integration of nationalism into the scene (Mardin 2005; Türkmen 2021). It is an ethno-nationalist conflict taking place in a country whose political history is shaped by religious conflicts (Mardin 1973). The literature refers to the emergence of the Turkish nation-state as a religious homogenizing project. Kolluoglu stated that “there were no readily available criteria to yield to a lexical ordering of identities after centuries-long coexistence in a non-national order” at the time, so negotiations of the population exchange between Turkey and Greece were based on religious affiliations (2013). For instance, Karamanlis –Turkish speaking, Orthodox– forced to migrate from Turkey to Greece, and Cretan Turks – Greek-speaking, Muslim – were forced to move in the reverse direction. Varlık Vergisi (Wealth Tax, 1942) presents another example of how a nationalist Turkish Government implemented a wealth tax on the basis of religious lines (Aktar 2013). Kuyucu, in his work on the structural and ideological dynamics behind the September Events (a.k.a. Istanbul Pogrom) – organized violence against non-Muslims in Turkey on September 6-7, 1955 – stated that in response to antireligious policies of the Kemalist era, the Democrat Party used religion to gather the masses around populist messages (2005). In other words, religion became the common theme in the construction of Turkish identity (Al and Karell 2016). Expectedly, similar patterns are observed in the case for the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict. Historically, Kurdish rebellions sometimes had a religious tone, sometimes not. In the late Ottoman period, the Sultan's mobilized the religious elite to suppress the Kurdish revolts (Kendal 1980). The first serious revolt against the early Republic was Sheikh Said - a rebellion formed around a religious leader with nationalist demands (Van Bruinessen 2011:8). Later, there was a period of secularization in the Kurdish Movement. For instance, PKK started as a secular-Marxist ethno-nationalist movement that fights against feudal lords in the agricultural regions. During the Peace Process, AKP promoted a supranational religious identity to blur the boundary lines between Kurdish and Turkish populations (Türkmen, 2021:130). This was followed by Civil Fridays, a religious resistance movement against the Turkish State's reluctance on Kurdish sermons in Kurdish regions. In her book, Türkmen studies Civil Fridays, religious resistance activism against Turkish-State. Using data generated by 62 interviews Türkmen lays out the four different religious stances on the conflict:

(1) religio-ethnic; (2) ethno-religious; (3) religious; and (4) secular-ethnic. Using this fourfold typology, I have first demonstrated that Islam is envisioned as a unifying identity only by a handful of elites who embrace the “religious” category. These elites, who deploy ethnic boundary-blurring, accept the implementation of Muslim fraternity as a conflict-resolution tool in the Kurdish conflict and yearn for a Muslim *ummah* that would overcome any divide between Kurds and Turks. (2021:137)

This paragraph shows the underlying reasons why the religious unification strategy failed in the Peace Process. Turkmen’s ethnographic data revealed the multidimensional understanding of Islam across both parties. As Turkmen stated, in addition to the more structural factors (e.g. increasing authoritarianism of the AKP) (Özpek 2017), the ideological (theological) tension between the religio-ethnic Kurdish elite and ethno-religious Turkish elite prevented the possibility of religious boundary-blurring (2021). Borrowing from Bourdieu’s field theory and Wimmer’s (2013) ethnic boundary-making concept, Turkmen defines ethno-nationalist conflicts as a field of competing for symbolic boundaries that are malleable according to the relevant actor’s behaviors and structural dynamics. In her book, Turkmen explains the historical formation of this fourfold typology but fails to provide a theoretical framework for the actions of the religious elite. Defining a sociological field can only be useful if it allows one to model the behaviors of the actors in that field (Martin 2003). This paper focuses on the ethno-religious elite to examine the meso-level dynamics in the field. In particular, the present paper analyzes the strategic uses of nationalist rhetoric in the religious discourse in order to explain the conditions of shift between religion as a boundary-blurring vs boundary-making.

Case Study: Nationalist Rhetoric in Religious Sermons

Presidency of Religious Affairs and Khutbas

Friday Sermons (Khutba) are one-two page long texts that include a weekly agenda for the Muslim majority population of Turkey. These agendas range from daily practices like personal hygiene to political issues like the Syrian War. Sermon texts must be read aloud by official preachers (imam) during the Friday prayer in all the 85000 mosques in Turkey, and it is enacted by law that imams must stay on the text. A state institution provides those texts, the Presidency of Religious Affairs

(Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı a.k.a Diyanet or DIB), founded by the early Turkish Republic on May 3, 1924, as a “non-political state institution to mainly control religion and contain the authority of local religious figures in the newly formed secular republic.” (Aksoy, 2021). One of the main responsibilities of DIB is to prepare and distribute Friday Sermons to the imams of all mosques across Turkey. The widely accepted Islamic doctrines in Turkey dictate that sermon are an essential part of the Friday prayer. A study undertaken by the DIB in 2014 with a sample size of 21.632 individuals and randomly selected based on census data revealed that 56% percent of the male population reported regularly attending Friday prayers. In other words, every week, approximately 22 million people are listening to the same text from their imams in Turkey. This influence creates a situation where the sermons’ content becomes very well-known and popularized across the country, mostly when associated with political ideologies. Friday Sermons in Turkey represent a strong mechanism for understanding the intersection of religion and politics.

Numerous studies have analyzed the production and content of the Friday sermons issued by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB), which sheds light on the various uses of nationalist discourse in the sermons. Kenar shows the dominance of a nation-statist Islam discourse aligned with the Kemalist ideology, dated back to the Turkish Republic's establishment (2011). Another study that substantiates Kenar’s findings is done by Saçmalı (2013) who argues that officials responsible for preparing the weekly sermons are passive actors and employ self-censorship. Instead, they must meet the various political actors’ demands, such as the government, and deliberately refrain from conflict with the current government’s religious ideology. Saçmalı also observed a shift from Kemalist unitary-state discourse to minority inclusive nationalist discourse during the AKP’s mandate. Gürpınar and Kenar (2016) analyzed 1302 sermons between 1962 to 2006 to examine the nationalist discourse’s continuity and representation as compatible with Islam. Contrary to previous findings, the authors showed that DIB has a consistent nationalist agenda independent from the political climate. Lastly, Akalın (2016) used a qualitative approach to examine the shift in 2010, from the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis –formed by the early Turkish Republic that aims to instill a more secular and modern form of Islam compatible with the Kemalist nation-state – to political-Islam that emerged in reaction to immense secularization policies of the early Republic. Akalın (2016) argues that this shift in the nationalist discourse is led by AKP’s rise to authoritarianism, using Karpov’s de-secularization framework (2010). We argue that there are

two things missing in the existing literature: (1) an empirical analysis of the texts accounting for alternative explanations for the observed phenomena, and (2) cross-validation of the findings in order to limit researcher bias. Consequently, a mixed-methods research design will be a major contribution to the literature. Using computational text analysis methods in conjunction with expert judgment and interviews we answered the following question: Given the presence of nationalist discourse on sermons, how does it respond to the intensity of Kurdish-Turkish Conflict?

Ethno-Religious Elite

In this paper, we represented the mainstream ethno-religious elite by a governmental organization named the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB) in Turkey. We analyzed the religious sermons issued by DIB and traced the existence of nationalist rhetoric in those sermons. The next chapter explains the importance of DIB in forming a religious discourse in modern Turkey. Briefly, understanding the DIB's position in the field of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict is essential for the following three reasons: (1) it is the most powerful religious elite in terms of economic and political resources, (2) it controls all of the mosques in Turkey which allows DIB to have a direct channel to public outreach, and (3) as an organization it formally negotiates the demands of religious public with the representatives of Turkish state (military, government) so that it connects the micro and macro-level processes. Moreover, focusing on an (semi) autonomous organization allowed me to bring organizational dynamics into the picture. Assigning agency to DIB is an assumption not just necessary for my case but also supported by the literature (Gibbon 2008; Saçmal 2013) and the findings of the in-depth interviews with the high-level DIB personnel.

A brief summary of the points made so far is as follows: The gap in the literature on the role of religion on ethno-nationalist conflicts needs to be studied for understanding the multifaceted relationship among religion, ethnicity, and nationalism. A religiously homogeneous ethnic conflict (Kurdish-Turkish) that is occurring in a country where nationalism and religion are historically intertwined allows one to separate out the effects of religion as an ethnic-marker vs. meta-ethnicity. Turkmen (2016, 2021) proposed a fourfold typology to study the role of religion in the Kurdish-Turkish conflicts using Bourdieu's field framework with the Wimmer's concept of "fuzzy" ethnic boundaries (2013). Turkmen's typology allows us to understand the actors in the field by focusing on the historical dynamics that shaped the four types of religious elites (2021). However, path-

dependency does not mean that actors in a given field are confined linearly with the historical trend and have no agency to change the dynamics of the field (Rubin 2017). Consequently, this project brings organizational dynamics into the picture borrowing from Rubin's "propagation of rule" framework and studies the relationship between state capacity and regulation of religion to explain under what conditions the most powerful religious elite (DIB) changes its position from boundary-maker to boundary-blurrier (Buckley and Mantilla 2013; Schleutker 2020). Due to the unique nature of Turkey with respect to the relationship between nationalism and religion, we would expect DIB's promotion of nationalist values through the sermons resembles its position in the conflict.

Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (TIS)

The relationship between nationalism and religion is becoming more important as we observe an increase in religious justification for far-right politics. This becomes even more apparent in Turkey, a country whose political history is shaped by religious conflicts (Mardin 1973). From the Ottomans to the Turkish Republic, the social conflicts between society's center and periphery revolved around religion (Mardin, 1973). Under the current political regime, one can easily observe the prevalence of religious justification in political decisions. For instance, the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan frequently uses religious rhetoric in his political speeches, sometimes justifying the decision of invading Syria, sometimes defending his low-interest-rate economic policy to decrease inflation. Although religious rhetoric is widely used by many authoritarian leaders across the world, the Turkish case is different in its ability to merge modern-state nationalism and Islam. This phenomenon is defined as Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (TIS) in the literature (Eligür 2010; Mardin 2005; Türkmen 2021). Amongst these scholars, Serif Mardin coined the term *Turkish-Islamic Exceptionalism* to define the unique nature of Islam in Turkey:

"Turkish history has endowed the Ottomans and the Turkish Republic with characteristics that have worked cumulatively to create a special setting for Islam, a setting where secularism and Islam interpenetrate, which of course is quite different from saying that Islam and secularism have fused." (2005)

Mardin argues that there is a continuum between the Ottoman Empire's experience of modernization and the emergence of religious nationalism in response to the nationalizing Islam

project of the early Turkish Republic. Naksibendi, an Islamic school of thought that against the modernization or secularization of Islam, became radicalized under the religious oppression of the early Turkish Republic. As the democratic participation in Turkey increased over time, Naksibendi engaged in formal politics and publicly supported the Political Islam Movement in 1960s. Consequently, in the 1970s, Turkish Islamic Synthesis (TIS) that unites Turkish nationalism with Muslim brotherhood become a concrete political ideology. Under TIS, Turkishness and Muslimness became an interchangeable identity, and problems of one became relevant to the other. As Turkmen stated TIS created more room for nationalism to intervene in the religious ideology than vice versa.

“By providing a religious alternative to secular nationalism, the TIS gives the Turkish religious elites the opportunity to reject the supranational religious approach while still staying within the confines of an Islamic worldview. As such, the TIS, which originated to make more space for Islam in the Turkish political arena, ironically serves to make space for ethno-nationalism in an increasingly Islamic Turkish political arena, and by doing so it prevents the further flourishing of Islam as a supranational identity.” (2021:129)

The three pillars of TIS are family, mosques, and barracks (Toprak 1999). Expectedly, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB) is one of the central organizations that promote TIS across the country (Mutluer 2014, 2018). DIB controls the mosques, appoints Imams, and oversees the religious education of youth. Under the mandates of Political Islamist parties DIB’s budget, the number of mosques or appointed Imams significantly increased. DIB’s promotion of TIS became more apparent when the heads of DIB strongly opposed the sermons being delivered in the Kurdish language in the southeast of Turkey on two different occasions. As Turkmen (2021) argues, the ethno-religious elite’s promotion of the TIS, mostly in the form of nationalist rhetoric, is seen as an exclusion of Kurds from Muslim unity by the Kurdish religious elite. Therefore, we state the following hypothesis:

H1: The prevalence of nationalistic rhetoric in the sermons will be positively correlated with the increase in conflict.

Sermons are not the only source that DIB uses to promote TIS. DIB has published periodicals or books that represent its religious ideology. However, we argue that weekly delivered sermons in the mosques are the most influential instrument of DIB to reach the mass audience in Turkey.

State Capacity and Religious Legitimation

In his book, *Rulers, Religion and Riches* Jared Rubin introduced the following framework: “First, rulers need to propagate their rule through propagating agents.” Second, the selection of the best propagating agent, given the existence of more than one, is a rational process. Third, the ruler is constrained by institutions that affect the cost and benefits of different actions (37). Consequently, this becomes a strategic decision-making process involving multiple actors rather than a single profit-maximization. In the long-run, the static process above accumulates into a dynamic system with feedback loops, often referred to as path-dependency. In other words, past rulers’ choices create unintended constraints for future rulers. (203). Given these assumptions, Rubin analyzes the historical changes in the incentives of rulers in both Europe and the Middle East and how the incentives change over time according to religious and economic elites to answer the Weberian question “why did capitalism emerge in Europe but not elsewhere?” Rubin did not directly apply his framework to modern Turkish politics. His path-dependent processes are more suitable for explaining macro-historical dynamics in the Middle East.

On the other hand, using Mardin’s (1973) argument of historical continuity of state-society relations from Ottoman’s to Turkish Republic, it is possible to apply a slightly modified version of Rubin’s framework into modern Turkish politics. We argue that governments in Turkey need to legitimize their rule to get reelected. Rubin discusses two types of propagating agents available to the Ottoman Sultans: coercive and legitimizing agents (2017:2). Working with a propagating agent does not have to be a mutually exclusive process meaning that a ruler can leverage the military to gain short-term benefits and religious elite to derive long-term benefits. In this paper, we focused on the legitimizing agents available to the Turkish governments over the course of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. As Mardin (1973) stated, religion dominates the realm of state-society relations unlike the Western democracies where civil society (NGOs, associations etc.) is very prevalent. Mardin’s observation still holds even today, as the size of the civil society sector in Turkey remains relatively small in comparison to other countries (Özer et al. 2016).

In the literature, there is evidence that economic development increases states' regulation of religion by enhancing state capacity to formulate and implement policy (Buckley and Mantilla 2013). The regulation of state on religion can be in the form of both positive reinforcement or negative restriction (Sarkissian 2015). Both authors measured the regulatory capacity of the state through macroeconomic parameters, mostly GDP. However, GDP does not necessarily translate into legitimacy in the eyes of the public. We argue that a more direct measure of the state's capacity for economic legitimization is the unemployment rate (Kim and Gandhi 2010). Especially, in the case of sermons being delivered in the mosques, the unemployment rate can be understood as the percentage of people who are attending the prayer are unemployed. As a result, we would expect governments to be more likely to employ religious legitimization when their economic legitimization capacity is low. Hence the following hypothesis:

H2: The capacity of economic legitimization will be negatively correlated with the prevalence of nationalist rhetoric in the sermons.

An important note is that unemployment is perceptually a negative thing in the minds of the public so we would expect that when there is higher unemployment, the tenure of the sermons will be less nationalistic and more unifying.

Data and Methods



This paper uses “computational abductive analysis” along with a mixed-method approach to the understanding of religion in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict (Karell and Freedman 2019). We started with observations on several mosques across Turkey to understand how sermons are delivered to the public and what are the common reactions to its content. This then followed up with multiple interviews with DIB’s official sermon writers to examine the process of sermon writing and approval within the organization. We used Structural Topic Modelling (Roberts et al. 2017) to test the relationship between the covariates of interest and the salience of nationalist rhetoric in the sermons. Other data on Turkey we have available include the monthly unemployment rate, DIB’s annual budget share of GDP, and temporal variables (religious observances). We have utilized monthly fixed-effects to control for seasonality.

Table I

Descriptive Statistics (Categorical)

		N	%
location	ankara	267	24.9
	istanbul	337	31.4
	turkey	469	43.7
turkish	none	752	70.1
	low	116	10.8
	high	205	19.1

Descriptive Statistics (Numeric)

	Unique (#)	Missing (%)	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max	
budget_share	15	0	1.0	0.1	0.7	1.0	1.2	
unemployment	58	0	10.4	1.7	8.0	10.0	14.3	

Quantitative and Qualitative Data

This dataset includes weekly sermons between 2005-2020, a total of 1073. The sermons are collected from various archives: DIB's website, local religious institutions, DIB's monthly periodicals. Another data source is Uppsala Conflict Data Program's event data on the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. We used proxy measurement, the number of casualties for Turkish soldiers, Kurdish militia and civilians to analyze the conflict's impact on the nationalist discourse. Through the model selection process⁴, we decided to drop Kurdish militia and civilian deaths because they did not provide statistically meaningful information on the prevalence of nationalism. Further, the

⁴ STM package has a built-in function `estimateEffect()` that performs penalized OLS regression on topic prevalence and shrinks the coefficients of non-important features close to zero. Further details can be found in the Appendix.

number of Turkish casualties is encoded as a categorical variable with three levels (none, low, high) based on two criteria: whether the event has deadly outcomes, and if yes, whether it is higher than the median number of deaths (3) or not. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table I.

The interview data showed that it takes approximately two weeks to finalize the content of a sermon. The main themes of sermons are decided three months in advance, but writers only start writing their first draft two weeks before the sermon's publishing date. The first draft is reviewed by the team of sermon writers (3-4 people). Once every team member confirms the text, it moves through the hierarchical system in the DIB. The final word belongs to the head of DIB and interviewees said it is possible that the head of DIB make some changes in the text, although not common. After that, DIB publishes the sermon on its official website usually on Wednesdays, and Imams across Turkey receive it from the website. Before the establishment of internet networks in Turkey, DIB disseminated the sermons through its periodicals. Between 2008-2012 DIB decided to decentralize the sermon production and delegated provincial units (mufti) to write and disseminate their sermons locally. For the decentralized period, we included the sermons produced by Istanbul, the biggest city in Turkey (16 million population), and Ankara, the capital of Turkey. In Ankara, sermon production is tightly aligned with the DIB's main office. The process of Istanbul is almost identical to that in Ankara, with the only difference being the Istanbul office is more autonomous yet employs self-censorship on certain issues (e.g. hijrah, jihad) to comply with the demands of Ankara (Saçmalı 2013).

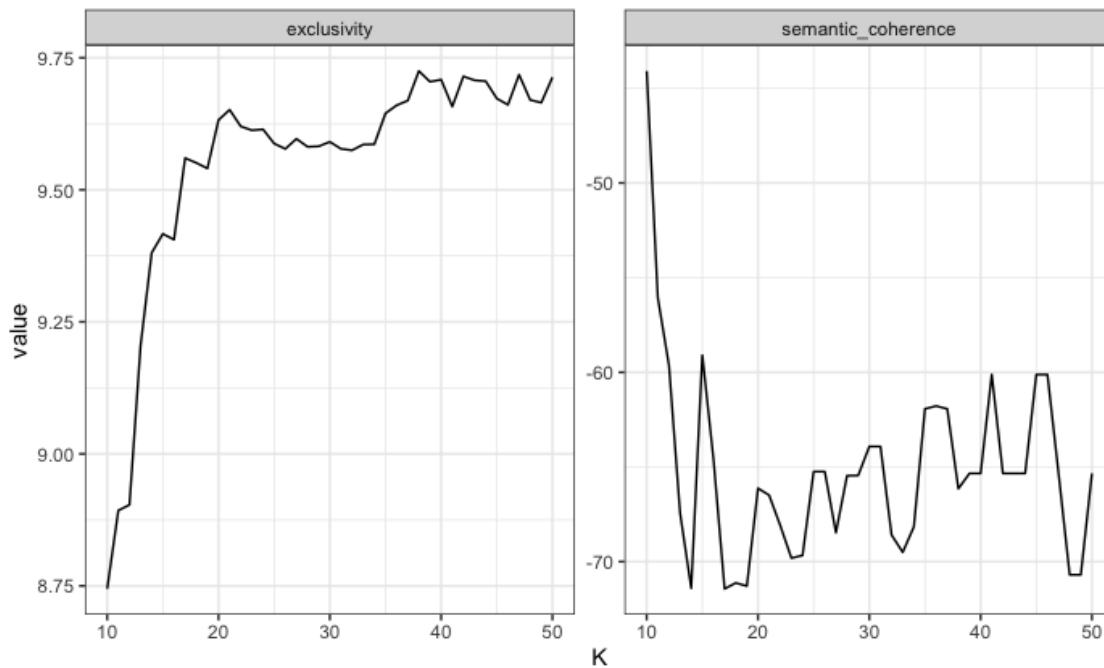
Topic Model Selection

Topic models are essentially unsupervised clustering algorithms in which user specifies the desired number of latent topics (K). As Roberts et al. (2014) pointed out there is no best way to find the optimal number of K. This makes topic modeling significantly subjected to analysis discretion. To overcome this problem, we employed a three-step robustness check: (I) we tested the stability of the topic of interest (nationalism) across models with different K values starting from 3 to 50. Nationalism starts to appear as a distinct topic at K=10 and continues to stably exist after that. Consequently, the appearance of nationalism is not dependent on the user specified number of topics but inherent to the content of the sermons. As stated, the literature on Turkish sermons supports this observation (Akalin 2016; Gürpınar and Kenar 2016; Mutluer 2018; Saçmalı 2013).

More specifically, Aksoy applied LDA topic models to the same corpus and found similar topics in the result (2021). To sum up, the model selection for this study is not finding the topic of nationalism through changing K but determining the model with the least noise. (II) Following Wilkerson and Casas (2017), we chose the final number of topics (K) to perfect the topic of nationalism instead of averaging the goodness-of-measure for all topics in the model. Based on Figure II, we decided for $K=21$ topics since it is the optimal point in the semantic coherence and exclusivity trade-off (Mimno et al. 2011). (III) In order to validate the STM's classification of a text as representative of topic nationalism, we employed expert judgment. The interviewees in this study – also active sermon writers working for DIB – independently analyzed the sermons highly associated with nationalism (See Appendix for details).

Figure II

Goodness-of-Fit measures for the nationalism topic in different number of clusters (K)



Results

To test the both hypotheses, we regressed log-level topic prevalence of nationalism for each sermon on the Turkish casualties, unemployment, budget share of GDP, control variables. Table II presents the summary output of five regression models. Model 1 shows the baseline model with monthly fixed-effects and model 2 includes document-level control variables (location, holy days). Model 3 includes the annual budget share of GDP dedicated to the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB). Interestingly, budget share didn't provide statistically meaningful information to the model, as it increases AIC/BIC. We opted to keep it in the regression model, due to its theoretical relevance. Model 4 includes the Turkish casualty variable (low, high, reference = none). Model 5 adds seasonally adjusted monthly unemployment rate in percentages derived from Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK). As it has the lowest AIC/BIC, we decided to move further with Model 5 as the final model. Figure III presents the log-level coefficients for the final model with 95% confidence intervals. Log-level coefficients (β) can be translated into change in topic probabilities as follows: $\beta e^{\beta} \times 100\%$ (Kennedy et al. 2021). An example interpretation would be that compared to no casualties, having high casualty two weeks before a sermon delivered is associated with 66% [39, 92] increase in log-level topic prevalence (approx. 1.3 when exponentiated). This finding supports the Hypothesis I. The final model also supports the Hypothesis II, as one percent increase in the unemployment rate is associated with 15% [9, 22] increase in log-level topic prevalence. None of the control variables in the model has a statistically meaningful relationship with the prevalence of topic nationalism, as the 95% confidence intervals include zero. However, the variable of holy days which indicate whether the sermon is published either in Ramadan or Sacrifice, has negative association [-49, -1] with the topic nationalism in 90% confidence interval. The robustness of the observed effect is supported by STM's built-in penalized OLS regression and permutation test across many topic models, and assumptions of the final model is tested by several diagnostic plots, all can be found in the Appendix.

Table II*Logistic Regression on Log-Level Topic Probability of Nationalism*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
turkishlow				-0.16 [-0.49, 0.16]	-0.11 [-0.43, 0.22]
turkishhigh				0.55 [0.28, 0.81]	0.66 [0.39, 0.92]
unemployment					0.15 [0.09, 0.22]
budget_share			-0.27 [-0.98, 0.44]	-0.25 [-0.96, 0.46]	-0.18 [-0.88, 0.52]
holy_days		-0.28 [-0.58, 0.03]	-0.28 [-0.58, 0.02]	-0.26 [-0.56, 0.04]	-0.25 [-0.55, 0.05]
locationistanbul		-0.25 [-0.48, -0.02]	-0.28 [-0.53, -0.04]	-0.27 [-0.52, -0.03]	-0.15 [-0.39, 0.10]
locationankara		-0.23 [-0.48, 0.01]	-0.25 [-0.50, 0.00]	-0.22 [-0.47, 0.03]	-0.11 [-0.36, 0.14]
fixed-effects	monthly	monthly	monthly	monthly	monthly
Num.Obs.	1073	1073	1073	1073	1073
AIC	4124.7	4122.0	4123.4	4107.4	4084.1
BIC	4189.4	4201.6	4208.0	4202.0	4183.7
Log.Lik.	-2049.334	-2044.982	-2044.699	-2034.707	-2022.058

Qualitative analysis of the sermons showed that the nationalist rhetoric is quite salient among sermons. The most common words related to the topic nationalism (martyr/martyrdom, homeland, nation, unity) are good indicators of the existence of nationalist themes in a sermon. In a highly nationalist sermon, DIB uses those words frequently in the text. This repetition is a deliberate choice to convey a more effective message (Gibbons, 2008). For example, here is an excerpt from a sermon that talks about martyrdom:

“Martyrdom is one of the highest divine ranks. Martyr is a title given to heroes who sacrificed their lives in the way of Allah, in defense of the homeland. Allah says that the death of the martyrs and the reward they will receive after their death is worthy of a special compliment different from other people: “Do not think that those killed in the way of Allah are dead. On the contrary, they are alive. They are provided with the joy of the blessings Allah has bestowed upon them.” (14.09.2012, Istanbul)

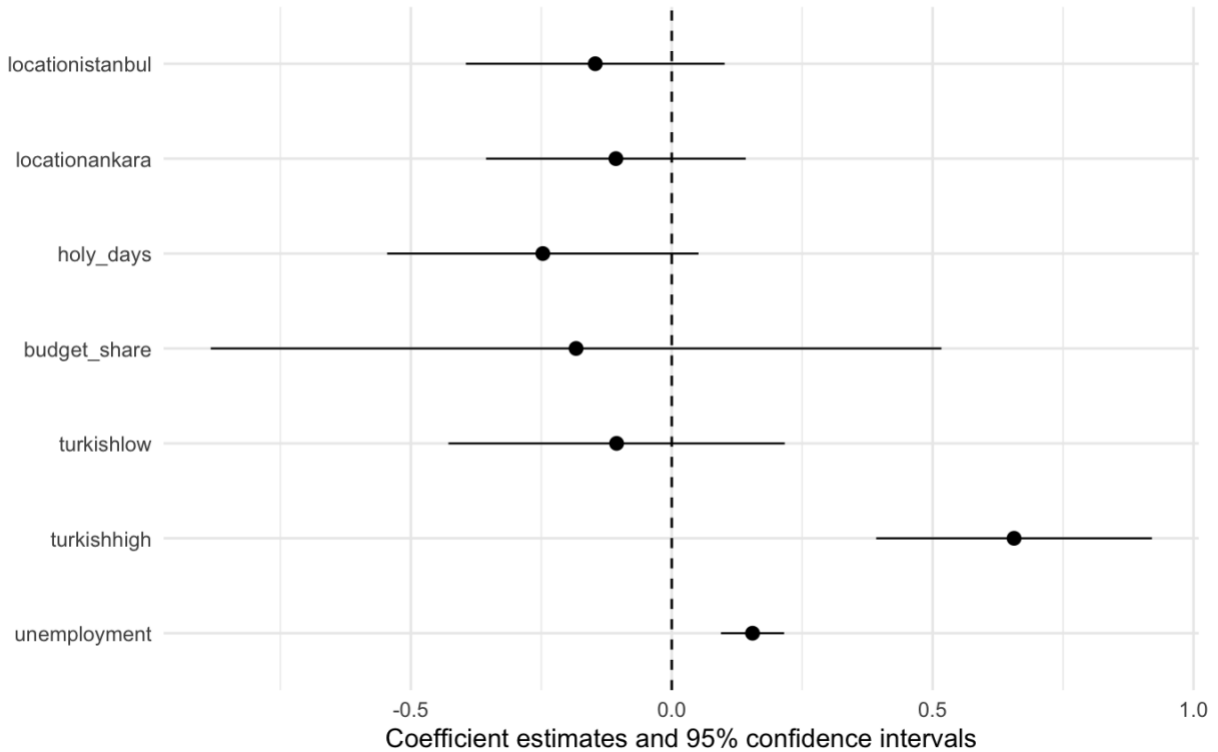
This sermon is published two weeks after the death of 24 Turkish soldiers in a week. In of the attacks, 10 soldiers died which gained a national level attention. Martyrdom has always been a holy status in Islam, but September 14th is not a special day for its promotion. We argue that the sermon shows the promotion of martyrdom as a response to rising intensity of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. In rare instances, DIB uses a more direct language towards the Kurdish militia. Another excerpt from a sermon dedicated to the problem of terrorism:

“The victims we gave to terror in the past days drowned our nation in pain. Protecting a land as a homeland is more difficult than making it a homeland. Our nation, which has sacrificed so many lives for this cause, will show and demonstrate this self-sacrifice and heroism today. We are a nation that has always cherished our homeland, flag, honor and sacred values throughout our history.” (26.10.2007, Istanbul)

DIB shows a direct support to the Turkish side of the conflict, hallowing the Turkish soldiers and nation. Yet, the sermon doesn't include any acknowledgement of the Kurdish problem. We argue that the sermon above aims to sharpen the ethnic boundaries and force the Kurdish minority to choose between their religious or ethnic identity. Furthermore, it is also a clear example of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, as we observe that sacred values, flag and homeland is used together.

Discussion

Our analysis showed that the impact of Turkish casualties on the salience of nationalism in sermons is nonlinear. Compared to having no casualty, a deadly event with three or more Turkish casualties is significantly associated with higher prevalence of nationalism in a sermon that is delivered two

Figure II*Log-level Coefficient Plot for Topic Nationalism*

weeks later. However, the same effect does not exist when the number of casualties less than three as seen in the Figure III the confidence interval for “turkishlow” includes zero. It’s probable that little media attention is devoted to fewer number of casualties, hence not requiring a need for legitimization in the eyes of the public. The impact of unemployment is also positively and significantly associated with the prevalence of nationalism in sermons supporting the argument that their capacity for economic legitimization determines rulers’ need for religious legitimization. Findings also suggest that sermons contain less nationalism in times of religious occurrences like Ramadan or Eid-al Fitr. Noting that the length of a sermon is mostly fixed, and DIB is mainly responsible for educating the public on the importance and requirements of that occurrence. This finding supports our assumption that DIB is an (semi) autonomous organization with its own agenda and its conformity to the Turkish state should not be taken for granted.

Limitations and Future Directions

The impact of budget share is unexpectedly not significant, which might be caused by the small size of our data. Noting that sermons in this paper cover only the period under AKP's rule, there might not be enough variance in the budget share of DIB. Another surprising finding is that the content of the sermons does not respond to civilian or Kurdish casualties through the conflict. It is possible that the changes in the content with respect to other casualties is too subtle to be captured by the structural topic model. Future studies should compare the effects of casualties from different sides of the conflict in longer period. We would also like to inform the reader that making strong causal claims is beyond the aim of the design of this study. Although having a two-week delay between "cause" and "effect" is strong evidence for a directional hypothesis, our proxy measurements of abstract concepts (e.g. state capacity) is prone to researcher bias. Therefore, the findings of present study are meaningful only within the broad literature on religion in Turkey.

Conclusion

Turkey is a country where religion can interfere with the public domain through nationalism, allowing researchers to test the existing theories of religion and nationalism in the Turkish context. The present study examines the Kurdish-Turkish conflict over time to understand the actions of the mainstream religious elite in Turkey, namely the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB). The religious elite promotes nationalist rhetoric through its sermons in response to the rising death rates of Turkish soldiers. This finding is aligned with the literature on Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (TIS), pointing out a particular amalgamation of nationalism and religion. It also lays out the foundations for analyzing the different functions of religion on ethnic conflicts by looking at the salience of nationalism in religious discourse. Using a novel method for analyzing organizational dynamics in ethno-nationalist disputes by examining the temporal changes in the salience of nationalist rhetoric in religious discourse, we presented the positive association between the conflict intensity.

To answer the question of why and when sharpening ethnic boundaries is more advantageous than blurring them, we applied Jared Rubin's (2017) framework of "propagation of rule" on a democratic state. Rubin's theoretical lenses provide the analytical toolkit to study the role of religion on ethnic conflicts as we show that economic and religious legitimization is still negatively associated, even in modern politics. Because making or blurring ethnic boundaries requires an

established legitimacy for the underlying organizations, (Brubaker 2002) relevant actors are incentivized to legitimize their actions. Consequently, the Kurdish-Turkish case shows that when the Turkish-state actively engages in fighting with Kurdish insurgents and loses soldiers on the battlefield, it uses religion for boundary-making – generating Turkish solidarity and loyalty to the state in the name of an embattled Turkish nation. Alternatively, suppose the Turkish state has the economic legitimization capacity. In that case, it prefers to decrease the intensity of conflict and use religion to blur ethnic boundaries under the banner of Muslim brotherhood. As the involvement of religion in politics through far-right nationalism increases, the insights derived from the Turkish case become even more relevant to the so-called secular states around the world.

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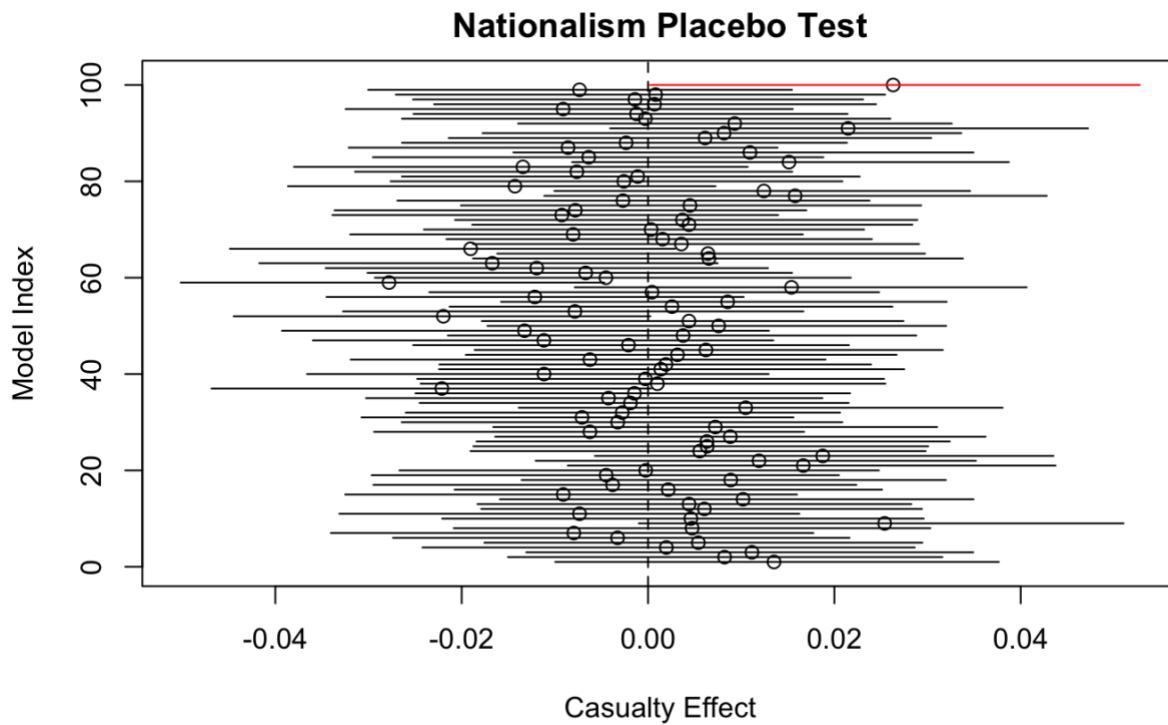
Appendix

Estimated Effects for Nationalism Topic

term	estimate	std.error	statistic	p.value
(Intercept)	0.050	0.050	1.002	0.317
holy_days	-0.012	0.014	-0.839	0.402
budget_share	-0.039	0.036	-1.101	0.271
kurdish	0.000	0.000	-0.962	0.336
civilians	0.000	0.002	-0.083	0.934
turkishlow	0.001	0.016	0.092	0.927
turkishhigh	0.032	0.013	2.393	0.017
locationistanbul	-0.009	0.014	-0.647	0.518
locationturkey	0.001	0.014	0.053	0.958
unemployment	0.004	0.003	1.229	0.220

Note: Estimates are calculated by STM's estimateEffect() function which is basically a penalized OLS regression on topic prevalence.

This plot shows the output of STM's built-in Permutation Test function. It takes a binary version of the Turkish Casualty covariate (reference = zero, one or more) and runs a permutation test where, rather than using the true assignment, the covariate is randomly drawn with probability equal to its empirical probability in the data. After each shuffle of the covariate the same STM model is estimated at different starting values using the same initialization procedure as the original model, and the effect of the covariate across topics is calculated. (Roberts et. el. 2019)



The next plot includes six visualizations often used to determine to what extent any regression model meets its underlying assumptions (linearity, homoscedasticity, normality, independence) and the influence of outliers.

