TURKEY'S BIPOLAR NATIONAL ANTHEM

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 29 March 2020

Photo by Wikimedia

National anthems are, by definition, bombastic, over-the-top, full of braggadocio and glittering generalities. But even in such an unrestrained musical category, Turkey's national anthem stands out as an exemplar of hyperbole, blood-and-guts vows, triumphalism, self-pity, and paranoia.

The Turkish anthem also has the rare distinction of being the only national rah-rah whose title is made up two foreign words—*İstiklal Marşı* ('independence' and '*march*' in Arabic and French respectively.) As well, with forty-one lines, the Turkish anthem must be one of the longest. One can only imagine the cruel imposition on millions of Turks who are expected to remember the rambling and interminable lyrics.

Poet, politician and academic Mehmet Ersoy (1873-1936) wrote *İstiklal Marşı* in 1921. Several years later Ersoy moved to Egypt. During a trip to Lebanon he contracted typhoid and died shortly after.

Almost every line of the anthem is an invitation to disbelief and ridicule because of excesses in expression, absence of logic, or historical truth. Perhaps unsure whether his feverish lines had conveyed his ultra-nationalist bipolar message, Ersoy peppered his lyrics with eighteen exclamation marks. Ersoy also couldn't differentiate between an exclamation mark and a semi-colon. **The English translation of the anthem** has a number of such illogical English phrases as "take shame" and "unhand not".

"Fear not; For the crimson banner that providing ripples in this glorious dawn shall not fade," starts the anthem. It's not clear who is addressing whom. Is it the poet-politician-academic Ersoy addressing Turkey or Turkey addressing the Turks?

The third line refers to the star on the Turkish flag: "For that is the star of my people…It is mine, and solely belongs to my valiant nation." Thus Turkey appropriates a symbol that has been universally in use since at least 1,000 BCE.

Ottoman Turkey adopted the crescent-and-star in the mid-18th century, borrowing it from Christian Byzantium (it was the flag of Byzantine Constantinople). When Ersoy wrote the lines about "Turkey's star", a dozen nations—including the U.S.--had the identical five-point stars on their flags. Now there are at least fifty states—from Angola to Zimbabwe—with the same star on their flags. Tunisia's flag is almost identical to the Turkish flag.

The anthem describes the "Turkish" star as "coy". Coy means simpering, arch, flirtatious, kittenish, and skittish. A simpering star representing a nation? Addressing the star, Ersoy wrote: "Do not frown…please smile upon my heroic nation. Why that anger? Why that rage?" Putting aside the "anger/rage" tautology, "heroic nation" is a humorous description of a nation that had just lost its empire during WWI. Immediately prior to that, it had lost the Balkan Wars and for nearly two

hundred years had been given a bloody nose by Tsarist Russia.

"Freedom is the right of my nation," declares the martial song although Turkey has never experienced freedom—whether under the Ottomans, the Young Turks, Ataturk's dictatorship, or Erdogan's dictatorship lite.

In the next line, Ersoy contradicts himself: "I have been free since the beginning and forever shall be so." It's obvious Ersoy is referring to Turkey. Turkey free from the beginning?

He continues: "What madman shall put me in chains?" Was Ersoy inadvertently referring to dictator Ataturk? President Ismet Inonu? General Cemal Gursel? The various military juntas? Erdogan?

Even when excusing Ersoy/Turkey for the excessive language, one has difficulty swallowing such hyperbole as "I am like the roaring flood, trampling my banks and overcoming my body. I'll tear apart mountains, exceed the Expanses, and still gush out!"

Vividly expressing the innate Turkish hostility to the West and civilization itself, the anthem has this four-line stanza:

> "The horizons of the West may be bound with walls of steel,
> But my borders are guarded by the mighty bosom of a believer.
> Let it bellow out, do not be afraid! And think: how can this fiery faith ever be extinguished,
> By that battered, single-fanged monster you call "civilization"?

The most outrageous stanza is reminiscent of a grotesque scene from "The Night of the Living Dead" movie. After mourning 'martyrs' buried in Turkey, the anthem promises: "Martyrs would burst forth should one simply squeeze the soil!"

Yes, the skeletons of Bloody Sultan Abdul Hamid, genocidiers Talaat, Enver, Jemal, and Ataturk would crack the sod and pop from underground in a scene Stephen King might have imagined. Pity Turkish kindergarten children who have to sing the morbid words **every morning** per government law.

Addressing Allah, Ersoy says:

> "Oh glorious God, the sole wish of my pain-stricken heart is that
> No infidel's hand should ever touch the bosom of my sacred Temples!"

However, it's fine that 2,434 Armenian churches and 450 monasteries in Turkey lie in ruins or are used as bars, for storage, or as dumps.

There's no let-up as Ersoy limns, "Let noble sound prevail thunderously across my eternal homeland… my fatigued tombstone…prostrate a thousand times in ecstasy…my lifeless body shall burst forth from the earth like an eternal spirit…our every last drop of blood may finally be

blessed…noble sound prevail thunderously across my eternal homeland."

The drivel continues:

> "For freedom is the absolute right of my ever-free flag.
> For independence is the absolute right of my God-worshipping nation!"

Was dictator Ataturk **who squelched freedom** aware of this factoid? Does Erdogan who jails journalists and judges, shutters newspapers and blocks social media?

Despite his excesses, Ersoy is circumspect about referring to national origin which is essential for most national anthems. According to Turks, a Grey Wolf was the "mother-creator" of Turks: she was a lactating wolf in Central Asia who nursed the first Turks. Perhaps Ersoy knew the wolf exalted by Turks as their matriarch is scientifically known as the Iberian Wolf--from Spain. Turks are already in denial about their origins. That they got their matriarch's identity and its habitat wrong would shatter their shaky sense of Turkish selfhood.

Comments

Troy – 2026-05-18 04:03:27
The most amusing part of the comments was Vahakn projecting at Krol and twisting his intentions and words desperately trying to invalidate his exceptional asessment and the authors bitter agenda. Vahakn delivered confession after confession disguised as an observation of Krols thoughts and behaviour which is most evident in the part where he accuses Krol of having an ulterior motive and learning to control emotions and outburst frothing at the mouth. What makes it even more comical is the fact that Krol's comment was extremely passive, it was written in a way that calmly highlighted the observation they made about someone's desperate attempts to slander the Turkish national anthem as a result of their butt being hurt. The real frothing at the mouth could be seen in Vahakn hissy fit

Vahakn – 2025-01-23 09:23:51
I am glad the Turk Rip Van Winkle is awake and responds to an article written five years ago.

O.U. – 2025-01-23 02:25:52
How can a human being write with such malice towards the national anthem of another nation. This is beyond ridiculous. This is sick. I pity you.

Mesrob – 2023-10-08 21:33:23
Armen, Would you like an easy laugh? Take a look at at the photo of the clownish Turk marchers which illustrates the article. Now imagine these walking cartoons singing their unintentionally hilarious national anthem. These are the same loud-mouthed specimen whose barbarian empire would have disappeared several times in the 19th century had it not been for British and German protection. Not that the barbarians were loved by the British or the Germans: they wanted to use Turkey as a wall against Russian expansion..

Armen – 2023-10-08 17:56:03
Since people are commenting lately about this old article. Erdogan, just the type of Turk the national anthem glorifies, has said that Muslims discovered Cuba (yes, he said that!) and that Muslims have not committed and could not commit genocide. He said that in regard to a monstrous African leader under indictment. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/nov/11/erdogan-muslims-turkish-sudan-gaza Erdogan - again, the personification of the national anthem and ethos - also sent thousands of terrorists into Azerbaijan (including a former ISIS leader) in 2020 to help out Azerbaijan even as Azerbaijan signed the UN Convention Against the Use of Mercenaries years before. Both Azerbaijan and Turkey denied the use of mercenaries or terrorists even with video proof galore. The lies just never stop. See the following study and more by Columbia University's Dr. David Phillips, a consultant to the State Dept. and presidents: https://www.humanrightscolumbia.org/peace-building/perpetrators These are the sort of lies, bombast, and lack of civilization that the national anthem evinces. You can have your national anthem if it makes you feel better. I could go on and on but why bother?

Pat – 2023-10-07 21:37:42
Here we have a lot of folks bending over backwards to defend the Turkish government who has made a high art of presenting a vice as a virtue.



Vahakn – 2023-10-07 16:39:13

Scholar (I will take his word for it)) Krol took his sweet time to respond to the article which was written three-and-a-half years ago. He has the temerity to expect the author to pore over notes written more than a thousand days ago and to respond to his intemperate and wordy screed. Is this what's commonly known as "chutzpah"? Scholar Krol is blind to a core fact: he doesn't realize that he is embarrassing himself when he defends the blood-soaked yet hilarious anthem of a genocidal race which (not who) butchered 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 and drove the rest into exile. Scholar Krol is immune to the irony of a perennial dictatorship whose anthem has the line "For Freedom is the absolute right of my ever-free flag..." Tell it to every Turkish leader...from drunkard Kemal to the current genocidier Erdogan. Scholar Krol should learn to control his emotions and remember that redundancy is a sin. Here's a partial list of his mouth-frothing outburst against the author of the original article: "remarkably ignorant; biased analysis, baseless; has no understanding of literature; irrelevant; 'piece' of writing; snarky; insubstantial, linguistically baseless; trivial; shameless; unsophisticated; propaganda; inexcusable bad faith; terrible; hyperbolic screed; irrelevant political slogan..." Obviously, Scholar Krol's investment is Thesaurus has been wise but such emotional language is not worthy of a Scholar and is bad for his blood pressure. While praising the literary merit of the blood-soaked race's anthem, Scholar Krol writes the following incomprehensible paragraph: "The poem is a speech and at times a monologue made by a pious and patriotic persons (representing the "Eternal Nation"/"National will") addressed to said first the suffering people and then the flag. The people in this case are the "substance", the nation is the "spirit" possessing and molding them, and the flag is a symbol of fate." Now you know. It's obvious Scholar Krol has an ulterior motive which he doesn't have the talent to hide: he is not defending the cringe-making Turkish anthem. His agenda is to promote Turkey-Israel relations. He wants to demonstrate to Turks that Jews will do anti-Armenian PR on Turkey's behalf free of charge. As well, there's the intense Zionists hatred of Armenians as demonstrated in the 2020 Azeri-Turk-Israeli invasion of Armenia, this month's ethnic cleansing of Artsakh by Israel's ally (armed by Tel Aviv), the Zionist government's attempt to grab the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem, the attacks on Armenian clergy and laymen in Jerusalem, ADL & Zionist associates' lobbying against Armenians in Washington and the whitewashing of Turkey. They are all part and parcel of the same anti-Armenian agenda. Scholar Krol is a badly-disguised operator (hesbara) on behalf of Zionism. Hey, he might get an all-expense paid trip to Turkey for his letter. Scholar Krol inadvertently drops his mask when he writes: "It seems this person, an Armenian living in Toronto, has clearly not been able to let go of his Old World grudges." However, it's kosher for strangers from Russia, Ukraine, Poland, etc. to "return" to the Old World and grab Palestine from the native Arabs.



Eugene Krol – 2023-10-06 23:52:14

This is a remarkably ignorant and biased analysis of what is, in my opinion as a scholar of Middle Eastern literature, an impressive and complex piece of poetry. I have come across the article while searching for alternative translations of this anthem, and I disliked what was written with such great intensity that I am moved to do something I almost never do – make an "argument" while on the internet. I am not at all sure that engaging with this type of provocative content is the better choice but I will at least try to criticize this piece of writing fairly and set the record straight for any future readers. The Istiklal March is not a standard European national anthem. It is rather long (though only the first two stanzas are sung) and relatively complex in its wording, when it is compared to anthems such as Deutschlandlied or the Star-Spangled Banner. It is also musically rather unique. First of all, any reasonable student of poetry would disagree with the characterization of Istiklal March as a confused, barbaric and frivolously hyperbolic screed. Especially among 19th and 20th century nationalist/religious works -- see the Marsellaise, for example. Your point about foreign words too seems quite snarky and insubstantial. This poem is actually quite representative of the “purified Turkish” movement as it refrains from overusing Arabic and Persian words, preferring the “common Anatolian” tongue in general. The assumption that the incorporation of foreign words is something to be ashamed about, or is something that degrades language, is linguistically baseless anyway. English with its broad lexicon of words with Anglo-Saxon, French, Latin, Greek, even Semitic origin benefits greatly from this diversity. The poem is a speech and at times a monologue made by a pious and patriotic persona (representing the “Eternal Nation”/ “National will”) addressed toward first the suffering people and then the flag. The people in this case are the “substance”, the nation is the “spirit” possessing and molding them, and the flag is a symbol of fate. There is no real lack of clarity as to "who is addressing whom" here – it is simply the case that the object of the speech varies from stanza to stanza as we progress through the poem. While reading the translation, the author of this article must have assumed it to be exactly equivalent to its original form --- which is obviously impossible. For example, the argument about the rage/anger tautology does not really stand under scrutiny, because the words are simply not interchangeable in Turkish. Siddet: 1)Violence, etymologically meaning “hardness, the state of being solid, flexed” Celal: 2) Rage, etymologically meaning “greatness, awfulness, the state of being taller, protruding” The object addressed in the second stanza is not the star on the flag as you have claimed, it is the crescent. I’d have thought it would be trivial for even a relatively unsophisticated reader to understand why a crescent can appear to be both frowning and smiling to an observer, thus being “coy”. But I suppose that would require actually reading the poem. The moon being associated with instability, vicissitude, emotions, and fortune/misfortune is of course as old as literature itself. This is not some incomprehensible metaphor that made sense only to Ersoy, it is in fact quite basic and archetypal. It did seem to the Ottomans that they were experiencing their own dark age after a 16th-17th century golden age. This is why it is not at all “humorous” that the nation is referred to as “heroic” -- they saw themselves as “ancient heroes” who conquered three continents, but were now being beat down by fortune. The entire poem is in essence a plea towards Fate, with piety and sacrifice as the justification for final victory. One might argue that reality was quite different, as the Ottomans did not lose all their land and dignity because of a vague series of “misfortunes”, but because they fell behind Europe technologically and stagnated societally and economically. But this is poetry, not sociology! The entirety of criticisms in this article are based on a surface level reading of the text and inexcusable bad faith -- as if the first one wasn’t terrible enough. What the author has not addressed in the poem while spouting various irrelevant political slogans are its beautiful metaphors and impressive rhyming pattern. Read the poem and listen to the anthem for yourself. -- View not the soil you tread on as mere Earth – recognize it! / And think about the shroudless thousands who lie so nobly beneath you It seems this person, an Armenian living in Toronto, has clearly not been able to let go of his Old World grudges. Setting aside the fact that he has no understanding of literature, his claims about anything turn out to be more baseless the more I research. What has an ancient myth have to do with the general sense of identity of Turks today, or this poem, which does not reference wolves even once? Ersoy is not circumspect about anything, this is simply and entirely an irrelevant fact. The author’s claim about the grey wolf being entirely Iberian in origin too is incorrect and ridiculously so. Grey wolf is a general name for wolves – it does not seem to indicate any one subspecies. Grey wolves are therefore found all over the Eurasian steppe. Which clearly includes the lands inhabited by Turks throughout history. In conclusion, I must stress that this article is nothing even close to meaningful literary, or even sociological criticism. This is shameless political propaganda, motivated by ethnic hatred.

Turkish – 2022-11-11 09:41:57
I wish you also had Atatürk's "dictatorship" to have a civilised mind that can respect other cultures.

Hayorti – 2022-07-27 20:15:43
Yusuf and Osman, Out of curiosity, I checked what your letters were referring to. Imagine my surprise upon discovering the article you are attacking was published in March 2020. It's interesting that it took you more than two years to put down your deep thoughts. Were your letters delayed because they had to go through Ankara government channels before approval was granted for the lame rebuttals? Bottom line: the Turkish anthem sounds like something which would excite a knife-wielding juvenile delinquent.

Vahakn – 2022-07-27 12:14:29
Osman, It would be useful to re-read the article. Consider that Turks made an unprovoked invasion of Armenia. Since then, Turks have occupied 90 percent of Armenia which is now called "Kurdistan". It was Sultan Abdul Hamid II who ordered that "Armenia" be erased from maps and be replaced by Kurdistan. Following those events, Turkey persisted massacring Armenians (mid-1890s and in Adana in 1909) with the bloodshed culminating in the Genocide of Armenians in 1915 which the world recognizes as a fact but Turkey denies it. There will never be friendship between Armenia and Turkey unless justice is done. The current agreements between Turkey and Armenia are forced by Turkey and don't mean much to Armenian people although cornered by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia is amenable to the forced friendship.

Osman – 2022-07-26 23:20:19
Turkish anthem is one of the most passionate anthems with rage and aggression as it should be. Has anybody managed to put chains on Oghuz Turks ? none. Turks have concrete track records of showing respect and dignity to all the other ethnic groups they interacted with since they enter the middle east and anatolian regions in 10th century. Except Armenians ? why is that ? I don't see anything special about nor see Armenians as threats.

Yusuf – 2022-07-17 11:47:09
After you translated a poem with google translate, you made comments that seem completely biased. I am calling out to the objective brains who are open to learning something. This article is complete nonsense. The Armenian Genocide never took place. Although the Turkish government repeatedly appealed to Armenian historians to examine the national historical archive, they could not get any results. Kurdish people are brothers of Turks, PKK terrorist organization kills babies, including Kurdish people.

Bedros – 2020-12-13 07:26:06
To Umut, You say the anthem's lyrics are excessive because they were written when Turkey was fighting for its independence against the western powers. Most anthems are written under such circumstances and not in peacetime. As well, by 1921, the First World War had been long over and Turkey was occupied in killing its remaining minorities (Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks) and were sharpening their swords to eliminate the Kurds. In light of recent Erdogan statements that Turkey is part of Europe and should have been admitted into the EU, it's interesting to note one of the anthem's stanzas: "The horizons of the West may be bound with walls of steel, But my borders are guarded by the mighty bosom of the believer. Let it bellow out, do not be afraid! And think how can this fiery faith ever be extinguished, By the battered, single-fanged monster you call "civilization"? If Angela Merkle, Emmanuel Macron, Boris Johnson, etc. heard the above anti-Europe lyrics, I am sure they would embrance Erdogan and all 60 million Turks.

Vahan – 2020-12-12 22:51:58
Umut, ---The Turkish national anthem remained unchanged long after what you call "independence war." If there was an independence war it was that of the people whose homelands had been occupied by the racist, authoritarian, theocratic, and lawless Ottoman Sultanate for hundreds of years. ---The translation is the official one. Google. ---The article's only agenda was to reveal where the hearts and minds of Turks were. ---Since you claim all national anthems can be made fun of, It would be helpful if you provided a funny national anthem.



Umut – 2020-12-12 19:33:27
This anthem was written when Turkey was fighting an independence war against western powers and supposed to lift the fighting sipirits of people. Your translation is terrible and this article obviously has different agendas. You could make fun of any national anthem if you tried hard like this.



Hayorti – 2020-08-02 20:34:24
When it comes to Turkish genocidiers, wonders never cease. Here we have 139-year-old Enver Pasha--who kicked the bucket 98 years ago courtesy of an Armenian soldier, has not only come back to life but has written in English. Perhaps after rotting underground for 98 years the "Bungler of Sarikamish" can't see well unless the letters are in caps. Maybe I should apologize to the murderous cadaver for writing in lower case. Enver, who knew some broken German, must have picked English when he was 8 ft. under. It should return to the worms to learn how to punctuate: his inane comment is free of punctuation, even of a period in the end.



ENVER PASHA – 2020-08-02 06:04:50
HAHA ARMENİAN SORE LOSER TRYING TO MAKE FUN OF A COUNTRY'S NATIONAL ANTHEM BY IGNORING ALL THE LITERATURE USED IN THE MARCH AND TRANSLATING EVERYTHING WRONG LOL HAD MY BEST LAUGH EVER