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The Politics of Emotions and Spectacles: The Case of the Turkish Language Olympiads

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Abstract

This article examines the Turkish Language Olympiads as a political-performative strategy that the Muslim nationalists used to communicate their ideology. I argue that to understand the rise of Muslim nationalism, we also need to understand how emotional appeal is created through spectacles like the Turkish Olympiads. The spectacle was effective in boosting people's sense of national pride and self-confidence by resolving two important tensions of Kemalist nationalism. First, it addressed the tension between Westernization and nationalization. Depicting an image of Turkish national culture that is appreciated and imitated by foreigners, it contested the imitative, Westernist character of Kemalist nationalism. Second, recasting the outside world as friendly to Turks, even Turkophile, it challenged Kemalist nationalism's emphasis on external threats. Turkish-speaking and -acting foreigners communicated a message of nationalist self-empowerment and confidence, calling into question people's sense of fear and distrust of the outside world. How Muslim nationalism was promoted, particularly the performative-symbolic strategies that were used, are important to understand because of their emotional resonance and potential for mass mobilization.

Keywords: Muslim nationalism; Kemalist nationalism; spectacles; performative strategies; the politics of emotions

In June 2009, two little girls from the Republic of Congo, ages 4 and 5, took the stage in one of the sports halls in Ankara, Turkey. Before a large crowd, including members of the government and top bureaucracy, they passionately recited the ten verses of the Turkish national anthem. People in the audience were thrilled. Some cheered out loud while others sobbed out of excitement and national pride.¹ The performance became one of the highlights of an annual competition called the International Turkish Olympiads, for which children from around the world came to Turkey to compete in their Turkish language skills.

The Turkish Olympiads involved performances of foreign children singing Turkish songs, doing Turkish folkloric dances, and reciting Turkish poems. They were organized in Turkey every year from 2003 until 2013 by an Islamic movement formed around a Muslim cleric, Fethullah Gülen. His followers expanded an internationally active religious network with media outlets, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and businesses in Turkey and abroad.² The students who performed in the Turkish Olympiads came from its schools from around the world.³ The movement was allied with the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2000s⁴ and received extensive support from it for the Turkish Olympiads. During the course of those ten years, the spectacles grew to a grand scale, attracting thousands of spectators to stadiums and concert halls. In 2013, the final year they were organized in Turkey, 2,000 children from 140 countries attended the events. Its inauguration ceremony took place in a large stadium in Ankara, and the audience far surpassed the 20,000 spectators that the stadium could officially hold.

The organizers placed large screens and formed seating areas outside the stadiums to accommodate the people who could not enter. In the following two weeks, the children performed in the large stadiums of 55 cities.

The Turkish Olympiads were political spectacles. Fusing Islamism and nationalism, the spectacles were performative manifestations of what Jenny White (2013) calls “Muslim nationalism.” Challenging some of the main tenets of Kemalist nationalism, this new nationalist ideology found greater expression in the public sphere after the AKP, a party with roots in Turkey’s Islamist movement, came to power in 2002. Muslim nationalists emphasize religious identity as the key element in defining Turkishness, conceiving the ideal Turk to have a pious lifestyle and a strong moral character in accordance with Sunni Islamic values. They imagine Turkey to be a major world power, guided by an assertive and ambitious foreign policy that rests on building Turkey’s soft power and economic strength (İnsel 2013). The AKP and the Gülen movement have been the major representatives of Muslim nationalism, albeit with some differences. The Turkish Olympiads propagated this ideology, communicating the idea that the Turkish state could spread its cultural and economic influence globally in defiance of Western hegemony by fostering an image of Turkish national culture that was appreciated and imitated by foreigners.

The high level of public interest that the Turkish Olympiads could attract and its emotional appeal provide important insights about the rise of Muslim nationalism and more generally on Islamist mobilization. There is a large literature looking at the successful strategies Islamists have used to generate mass support. Some scholars call attention to the Islamist political actors’ organizational dynamics and grassroots mobilization strategies. For instance, White (2002) writes about how Islamist political parties have established trust and solidarity within their constituents by building face-to-face relationships, utilizing dense networks at the neighborhood level. Similarly, Sevinç Doğan (2016) shows how the AKP receives support of the urban poor and working classes by integrating them into its intricate web of local organizations based on patron–client relationships. Another group of scholars (Buğra and Candaş 2011; Yörük 2012) underlines that the Islamists’ effective provision of social welfare, such as free health care, education services, and social housing programs for the poor, builds political support. Scholars also underline the AKP’s projection of a mainstream political identity to explain its success. Accordingly, the AKP’s branding of itself as a moderate conservative party, instead of an Islamist one, helped it generate support from broad segments of society (Altınordu 2016; Öniş 2006; Özbudun 2006). Similarly, the Gülen movement’s avoidance of confrontation with the secular state elites (Turam 2007) and its projection of a moderate, civic movement through diverse public relations practices (Watmough and Öztürk 2018) contributed to its rise. Available space does not permit a more comprehensive review here. My objective in this study is not to refute these explanations. In fact, the analysis of the spectacles intersects with these explanations. For instance, the manipulation of nationalist sentiments in the spectacles can be seen as an attempt by the organizers to project a mainstream identity to appeal to broader sections of society. The spectacles can also be seen as a social service, providing people with free entertainment. The objective of this article is to add another layer to the discussion about Islamist mobilization and draw attention to the importance of performative strategies that Islamists use to generate support.

The performative strategies have been understudied despite the fact that Islamists, particularly the AKP government, have frequently organized visually striking and extravagant spectacles such as rallies, state ceremonies, and commemorations to mobilize their constituency.⁵ The politics of spectacles is also a global trend. Doing politics has become more performative around the world, with the growth of communication technologies.⁶ The digital media provide more opportunities to political actors to appeal to mass constituencies directly and through more attention-grabbing and theatrical political styles (Moffitt 2016, 75–78). The intensification of the role of performance and entertainment in politics reinforces the use of spectacles,⁷ such as the Turkish Olympiads, as political platforms.

Political entrepreneurs make use of spectacles to propagate an ideology, legitimize a political authority, assert power, and create solidarity and sense of unity (Klatch 1988). Spectacles can be

highly effective strategies in creating political power if they appeal to people emotionally. Besides objectifying the abstract idea of an ideology, giving it a concrete, visual expression, performative practices help make political identity a “felt identity” (Berezin 2001, 86). In this article I discuss the emotional appeal that the Turkish Olympiads could generate and explore the reasons behind their emotion-evoking impact. The Islamists’ ideological discourses have been subject to many studies. Several scholars, for instance, analyzed what Muslim nationalism means and what it entails (Aktürk 2018; Çınar 2001; White 2013). To understand the rise of Islamism in general and Muslim nationalism in particular, we need to explore how Islamists promote their ideology to generate appeal as much as what they promote.

I argue that the Turkish Olympiads were effective in boosting people’s sense of national pride and self-confidence by resolving two important tensions of Kemalist nationalism. First, the spectacles addressed the tension between Westernization and nationalization or between the imitative character of Turkish nation-building and its claim to revive an authentic Turkish national culture and history. Depicting an image of Turkish national culture that is appreciated and imitated by foreigners, the spectacles contested the imitative, Westernist character of Kemalist nationalism. Second, in recasting the outside world as friendly to Turks, even Turkophile, the spectacles challenged the perception of external threat in Kemalist nationalism. Turkish-speaking and -acting foreigners communicated a message of nationalist self-empowerment and confidence, calling into question people’s sense of fear and distrust of the outside world.

The rest of the article is composed of three sections. The first section gives information on the Turkish Olympiads, and discusses how they came into being and developed as well as what sorts of activities were organized as part of them. In the second section, I discuss the main tenets of Muslim nationalism, its main proponents, and how it differs from the Kemalist nationalism. In the third section, I examine how the strong emotional effect of the Olympiads was created.

The Turkish Language Olympiads

The Turkish Language Olympiads date back to 2003. The first of the contests, which took place under the name of Turkish Language Contest for Foreigners (*Yabancılar için Türkçe Yarışması*), was of a modest scale with a small group of students attending from 17 countries, mostly from Central Asia. The event nevertheless grew exponentially in the following years, adding students from more countries and expanding to cities beyond Istanbul and Ankara. The variety of the contests also increased. While the first few included only Turkish language contests, in later years the events contained contests in folk dances, poetry, songs, and special talents, among others.

The spectacles have become popular over the years. People filled up the stadiums in every city where the student performances took place. The organizers placed large screens and formed seating areas outside the stadiums to accommodate the people who could not enter.⁸ While the majority of the spectators largely belonged to the pious, conservative strata of society, the public discussion of the events was generally highly positive. The media that had an oppositional line to the government and that was outside the Gülen network covered the spectacles less, but its general attitude has still been favorable (see *Hürriyet*, May 27, 2013; *Radikal*, June 16, 2013; *Yeni Asır*, May 26, 2013). Journalists, artists, intellectuals, and politicians from various ideological platforms praised the events. For example, the main opposition party leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, stated that the Turkish Olympiads made a great contribution to helping Turkish become a global language.⁹ Aziz Kocaoğlu, the then-mayor of secularist İzmir, named the Olympiads as the biggest step that opened Turkey up to the world.¹⁰

In 2006, an exhibit called the Culture Festival (*Kültür Şöleni*) was added to the spectacles. In booths allocated to individual countries, children displayed items from their countries and chatted with the visitors. The fanfare surrounding the Olympiads also became more elaborate. Popular artists, including pop singers, actors, and comedians, attended the spectacles as jury members in the finales, where special light effects and a big live orchestra accompanied the kids’ performances.

During their stay in Turkey, children traveled across the country, performing in stadiums in different cities. Local reporters interviewed them about their experiences in Turkey. The festive and joyous experience of the Olympiads was reinforced by the AKP government's support, which provided the events more publicity and pomp.

Seeing it as an opportunity for its own public diplomacy, the AKP government integrated the spectacles into its political-symbolic repertoire. It was the then-head of the parliament, Bülent Arınç, who first pushed for official support of the events after attending the spectacles in 2003. In the following years, the organizing committee of the Turkish Olympiads began to include AKP parliamentarians (Hendrick 2013, 198–199). Several Turkish state institutions became sponsors for the events. The Prime Ministry's Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), as well as the Promotion Fund of the Prime Ministry, were special sponsors of the events. Turkish Airlines provided discounts up to 50 percent for the children's plane tickets. Municipalities under the control of the AKP provided the stadiums for the events, buses for free transportation of people, and billboards for the events' advertisement. Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) broadcast the spectacles. Starting in 2004, state dignitaries, including members of the government, top bureaucrats, governors, and mayors, began to attend the opening and the closing ceremonies. Children who performed in the Olympiads were taken to the headquarters of almost every state institution in Ankara as well as the local state institutions in different cities (see, for instance, *Yeni Şafak*, May 28, 2007; *Hürriyet*, June 10, 2009). The engagement with the state brought more financial sources and higher publicity to the events, increasing the number of private sponsors. In addition to companies affiliated with Gülen movement, other business groups, such as Koç Holding and Doğu Holding, began to sponsor the events (*Internet Haber*, May 22, 2013).

Situating Turkey at the center of global economic interactions and propagating the image of a "Turkish-speaking and -acting foreigner," the Turkish Olympiads acted as a showcase for Turkey's growing global influence under the AKP government. The spectacles were also a show of power and a public relations campaign for the Gülen movement, which has been a controversial group in the eyes of the Turkish public. It was often accused of Islamicizing the Turkish society and the state covertly. In response, the movement meticulously developed a "civic face," which publicized a positive image of itself (Watmough and Öztürk 2018, 44). Incorporating public figures, such as popular artists and journalists who are outside the movement, the spectacles were an attempt by the Gülenists to legitimize themselves within the general public. The spectacles also helped create publicity of the movement's global success and mobilization capacity.

The official spokespeople of the Turkish Olympiads emphasized that it was an apolitical venue for socialization, promoting norms of diversity, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Its official slogans, like "Come and Let's Get Acquainted," "Humanity Hand in Hand," and "Towards a Universal Peace," advertised the events as a space for the engagement of different cultures. The spectacles' discourse on multiculturalism, however, was overshadowed by their heavy emphasis on the value of the Turkish language and culture. The spectacles conveyed a strong nationalist message that underlined how foreigners have been increasingly learning the Turkish language and adopting elements of Turkish culture. Children were not only praised for speaking Turkish fluently; they were also expected to act like Turks. The media focused on children who imitated local Turkish accents or Turkish gestures. For example a Tanzanian student who explained how to eat baklava in the local accent of Gaziantep became famous during the ninth Olympiads.¹¹ Children imitated the gestures of famous Turkish singers while singing their songs. They were interviewed on what Turkish food they liked, which Turkish TV shows they watched, and which Turkish soccer team they supported. On stage, they acted out comedy skits that only Turks would understand and find funny. In the Turkish Olympiads of 2013, Tanzanian and Kenyan children wearing their traditional clothes performed a well-known Turkish folk dance while a Tanzanian student sang a Turkish folk song, but with modified lyrics.¹² An American student from Texas wore a large cowboy hat while singing a Turkish pop song.¹³ It was the incompatibility between what children looked like in their traditional or national outfit and how they talked and behaved like Turks that reinforced the

audience's excitement. The spectacles celebrated Turkish national identity, repeatedly confirming the value of the Turkish language and culture through the foreign participants' expressions of admiration. "How will they eat their food when they return back home after tasting the Turkish cuisine?" asked a TV anchor, alluding to the unsurpassed qualities of Turkish culture.¹⁴ Rather than cherishing multiculturalism, the Turkish Olympiads were highly nationalist spectacles, promoting Turkish national identity and the Turkish culture's potential for global expansion.

In addition to their highly nationalist message, the spectacles also projected an eclectic and multivocal rhetoric and imagery. As Kertzer (1988, 11) underlines, political symbols that contain some ambiguity and diversity of meaning are more successful in achieving wide appeal. The performances were kaleidoscopic. Children sang popular Turkish songs, sometimes with the famous pop stars. While they generally recited poems by religious-nationalist poets, poems by famous leftist poets, such as Nazım Hikmet and Atilla İlhan, were also in the performances' repertoire.¹⁵ Pop stars, like Ajda Pekkan, Serdar Ortaç, and Ebru Çündeş, and mainstream journalists like Mehmet Ali Birand, served as jury members. The entertainment-centered and eclectic nature of the spectacles could strike a chord with people beyond the constituencies of the Gülen community and the AKP. For example, Bülent Eczacıbaşı, a prominent secular businessman, praised the spectacles and said that he watched them with admiration.¹⁶ A staunch Kemalist intellectual, Toktamış Ateş, commented that Turkish Olympiads could not be praised enough. "If Atatürk lived today, he would have kissed the organizers' forehead," he said.¹⁷ This image of consensus was partly a construct of the Gülen movement's promotion strategy that advertised the spectacles as a bipartisan national event (Hendrick 2013, 199). However, the narrative about the global desirability of the Turkish language and culture also found appeal across different ideological constituents. In that sense, the spectacles can be seen as an attempt by Islamists to broaden their political appeal by using Turkish nationalism. As Bora (2011, 62) argues, nationalism has been the common ground of contending political ideologies in Turkey and as such "manifests itself as the real Turkish fundamentalism." At the very least, the nationalist message of the spectacles shielded them from serious criticism.

Muslim Nationalism

Despite their eclecticism and multivocality, the Turkish Olympiads largely expressed the ideas of Muslim nationalism. The AKP and the Gülen movement have been this ideology's major representatives. Muslim nationalism emerged as a reaction to Kemalist nationalism, a major component of Turkey's founding ideology. Kemalist nationalism imagines the Turkish nation as a unitary, ethnically homogenous, and Westernized society. It depicts the Ottoman/Islamic culture as traditional and backward, against which the Turkish national identity should be positioned (Çınar 2010, 98). Its rhetoric and symbolism are strictly secular. It is a well-known paradox that despite its highly secularist discourse, Kemalists have conceived Turkishness to be primarily a Muslim identity, setting the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian citizens of Turkey apart from this category. However Kemalists imagine the ideal Turk to have a secular lifestyle and expect the public space to be devoid of religious expressions. They also exalt the military as the guardian of the state and conceive it as the main engine leading social modernization. In the early years of the Republic, Kemalist nationalism provided the ideological justification for a wide range of authoritarian policies that aimed to transform and modernize the society. Westernizing and secularizing people's outward appearance, lifestyles, values, and tastes, as well as homogenizing them linguistically, were the main objectives of this social-engineering project.

Like other ideologies, Kemalist nationalism also evolved and changed over time. With the rise of the Islamist movement in Turkey in the 1990s, a new nationalist discourse emerged from among Kemalists. This neo-Kemalist approach, also called *ulusalcılık* in Turkish, is alarmed by the rise of political Islam and contains a strong nostalgia for early Republican secularism. Unlike the earlier Kemalist elite, who aspired Turkey to be a close Western ally, neo-Kemalism is anti-Western, as it

identifies Turkey's problems, particularly the Kurdish conflict and the rise of Islamism, as consequences of Western intervention in Turkey's domestic affairs. Neo-Kemalists are highly skeptical of Turkey's integration into the European Union, interpreting it as an imperialist project trying to weaken Turkey's independence. They advocate an isolationist foreign policy, seeking complete independence from the West (Bora 2011, 65–67; Çınar and Taş 2017, 667). Until the AKP came to power, these different strands of Kemalist nationalism largely dominated Turkey's bureaucratic, judicial, and military establishment.

Challenging the Westernist character of Kemalist nationalism, the Muslim nationalists conceive the ideal Turk to be a pious Sunni Muslim. For them, Ottoman-Islamic history, culture, and imagery are integral to Turkish national identity. As White (2013, 9) underlines, they “have developed and implemented an unorthodox alternative definition of Turkishness and the nation that imagines Turkey not as a nation embattled within its present political borders but as a flexibly bounded Turkey that is the self-confident successor to the Ottomans in a rediscovered (and reinvented) past.” They criticize Kemalist nationalists for being elitist and imitative, forcing people to change their authentic selves in the name of Westernization, thus creating a sense of inferiority among them. They have a populist style that endorses a strong discourse of victimhood and presents themselves as the real representatives of the Turkish nation. Building on this sense of victimhood, they hold Kemalist nationalists responsible for Turkey's loss of status in the international arena, attributing it to the imitative character of Kemalist nationalism (Aslan 2015). They want Turkey to endorse its Ottoman cultural and political legacy, which Kemalist nationalism denied, and to exert soft power on former Ottoman territories.

Like Kemalists, Muslim nationalists have not been a coherent group. Its two major representatives, the AKP and the Gülen movement, have had some significant differences. While the latter has advocated a more ethnocultural understanding of Turkishness, the AKP has portrayed itself as prioritizing Muslim identity over ethnic identity (Aslan 2015). Fethullah Gülen has been a leading advocate of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis¹⁸ and perceived Turkish Islam to be unique and superior in the Muslim world (Koyuncu-Lorasdağı 2010, 227–228). He has prioritized Turkey's cooperation with the Central Asian countries to create a strong Turkic world. The AKP, on the other hand, has had a more universalist-Islamic perspective. While it has imagined a Turkey-centered Muslim world and praised the Ottoman-Islamic history, it has not emphasized a hierarchy of nations within the Muslim world. Apart from these differences, the AKP and the Gülenist movement shared the broad tenets of Muslim nationalism, and the Turkish Olympiads manifested both of these strands.

While Islamic symbols did not dominate the performances, they were present, distinguishing the Turkish Olympiads from the secular Kemalist imagery. Some performers wore headscarves. The poems recited by children were predominantly by Islamist-nationalist intellectuals, such as Mehmet Akif Ersoy, Sezai Karakoç, and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, along with Fethullah Gülen.¹⁹ Some of these poems emphasized the victimization of devout Muslims by the West or the Turkish secularist state. Many performances in the spectacles displayed cultural elements of Turkish Anatolia, from dress to music, praising the Muslim morality that emerged from Anatolian culture.²⁰ Kids sang popular songs, representing a wide range, including Turkish pop, classical Turkish, arabesque, and folk music (*türkü*). Representation of various local cultural expressions and dialects on stage conveyed the populist character of Muslim nationalism. Separate spectacles, called the Naat Nights, were organized on religious holidays, such as the Holy Birth Week, commemorating the birth of Prophet Muhammed, or the Islamic holy nights. These performances followed the same style of the Turkish Olympiads, with completely religious content. It was only Muslim students who performed in the Naat Nights, singing religious songs and reciting religious poetry in Turkish.²¹

Given the absence of strict secularism on stage, the Turkish Olympiads represented a break from the older Kemalist celebrations, which also took place in large stadiums. As a result of their repetitive, formulaic, and state-controlled nature, these older forms of official celebrations gradually lost their popular appeal (Öztürkmen 2001, 47; Özyürek 2006, 132–133). In the mid-1990s, with the electoral victories of the Islamist Welfare Party, celebrations of national holidays turned into a

highly contentious topic between the Islamists and the secularists. Responding to Islamists' critiques that national celebrations were authoritarian and didactic, the secularists began to transform the way national holidays were celebrated. Street celebrations, pop concerts, and different activities by civil society groups supplemented stadium performances in an attempt to increase their appeal by making them more entertaining, participatory, and voluntary (Zencirci 2012). The Islamists, on the other hand, began to commemorate different anniversaries, such as the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul, revealing an alternative national identity that stressed Turkey's Ottoman and Islamic heritage (Çınar 2001). Symbolic contestations over national identity increased after the AKP came to power. Coming from outside the Kemalist tradition, the AKP government gradually transformed the cultural-symbolic repertoire of the Turkish state, incorporating the Ottoman and Islamic imagery into state celebrations and ceremonies. For instance, it started to celebrate the birth of Prophet Mohammed in more elaborate fashion and with more activities. It changed the order of precedence in state protocol making the Director of Religious Affairs more visible in state ceremonies (Karaaslan 2012). It scaled down official celebrations of national holidays that are associated with secular Republican history (*Hürriyet Daily News*, May 7, 2012). The Turkish Olympiads fell in line with the AKP's desire to change the official symbolic repertoire, portraying its "new Turkey" to the masses.

The AKP government used the Turkish Olympiads to connect with its constituents. The members of the government attending the spectacles with their families showed an intimate portrait of themselves. They enacted an image of closeness and equality with fellow citizens as they played and sang with them. These were performances of ordinariness (Moffitt 2016), key to the populist style signaling the message that the leaders are the embodiment of the people. Particularly then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's attendance in the Turkish Olympiads received a lot of coverage in the media.²² His interactions with performing children as well as his speeches in the closing ceremonies became news items constructing an image of a compassionate and approachable leader. In his speeches, he praised the global expansion of Turkish businesses and the Turkish language, drawing parallels between the Ottoman Empire's expansion and the AKP's Turkey.²³ The spectacles sought to constitute power for the government through propagating the AKP's international and economic successes, as well as by connecting people and state leaders in an emotional way. It is this affective aspect of the Turkish Olympiads that I turn to in the next section.

Emotional Work of the Spectacles

Émile Durkheim (2001) has argued that the basic function of collective rituals, including mass gatherings and spectacles, is social integration. Collective gatherings create a sense of unity and group belonging because they coordinate collective behavior and generate a strong emotional atmosphere. When emotions are shared, they become more intense. Various empirical studies have confirmed Durkheim's suggestions, linking the political consequences of spectacles to their emotional impact (Páez and Rimé 2014). Kertzer (1988, 5) writes that the spectacles' emotional outcomes can affect people's perceptions of reality, rendering a political movement success through legitimation and popular mobilization. Collins (2001, 29) attributes the relative success or failure of collective mobilization to the emotional energy it creates. The celebratory aspects of spectacles like music, entertainment, companionship, food, and drink create feelings of happiness and pleasure, constructing collective memories and the sense of togetherness (Skey 2006, 153). Positive emotions like enthusiasm create political interest and stimulate participation (Brader 2005; Groenendyk 2011). In short, the extent to which spectacles succeed depends on their ability to elicit strong emotions within their audience, and such emotional effects can have significant impact on political appraisal, participation, and collective mobilization. Recent scholarship on emotions in political science suggests that people's political evaluation and engagement do not solely rely on utility calculations but also on emotional triggers (Groenendyk 2011; Pearlman 2013).

My contention is that the organizers of the Turkish Olympiads used the spectacles successfully to build and reinforce the emotional appeal of Muslim nationalism. The promotional material of the

spectacles was laden with an emotional language. It referred to the Turkish language as the “language of love” and the students attending the schools of the Gülen movement as the “youth dreaming in Turkish” (*Türkçe Olimpiyatları Dergisi*, May 2013). Prominent invited guests gave emotional speeches during the spectacles. For example, the then–Deputy Prime Minister, Bülent Arınç, brought some people in the audience to tears during his speech, underlining the sacrifices of teachers living in foreign lands teaching Turkish, with dramatic music playing in the background.²⁴ Performers recited poems with religious or nationalist content passionately, shouting out loud and sometimes in tears, as if they were carried away with strong emotions. The media and the Turkish Olympiads’ websites frequently covered the emotional moments of state dignitaries, celebrities, and businessmen. For example, the then–Minister of Transport, Maritime, and Communication, Binali Yıldırım, got teary-eyed while listening to a Mehmet Akif Ersoy’s poem recited by an Azerbaijani student (*Milliyet*, May 26, 2013). The cameras zoomed in on the then–Prime Minister Erdoğan and his wife during the performances, showing when they laughed or got emotional. Emine Erdoğan’s crying during a performance of an Afghani girl was shared in the social media and covered by newspapers.²⁵

The spectacles were successful in creating a highly emotional atmosphere. An American student who attended the spectacles as a contestant was startled by the emotion-producing effect of a Turkish nationalist poem she recited in Erzurum. When she finished, the crowd erupted into cheers and she saw men stamping their feet and slapping each other on the back (Skype interview with the author, September 10, 2014). In 2012 I attended the Turkish Olympiads at Istanbul’s Fair Center and observed how emotional spectators became watching the performances. Many sang along with the performers, took videos and photographs, and cheered and applauded loudly. The media coverage of the events highlighted this emotional aspect frequently. The headlines such as “Pakistani Kid Moved Everyone to Tears” (*Yeni Şafak*, June 4, 2009), “The Children of Turkish Made Thousands Cry,” and “Emotional Moments in the 7th Turkish Olympiads”²⁶ called attention to the spectacles’ touching impact.

Such emotional appeal of the spectacles stemmed not only from the joyous experience they created. I argue that it also was generated by the spectacles’ resolution of two important tensions that exist in Kemalist nationalism. First, they questioned the tension between Westernization and nationalization or between the imitative character of Turkish nation-building and its claim to revive an authentic Turkish national culture and history. Second, they contested the concept of outside threat, which formed one of the key tenets of Kemalist nationalism. By constructing an image of a Turkophile world, the nationalist discourse of the Turkish Olympiads questioned people’s sense of fear and distrust of the outside world. By communicating the idea that these two assumptions of Kemalist nationalism are reversible, the spectacles served as an “emotional persuasion tool” (Hegghammer 2017, 16) for the Muslim nationalist discourse.

Kemalist nationalism contained an important paradox, as Ayşe Kadioğlu (1996) underlined. On one hand, construction of Turkish national identity required the definition of a distinctive and authentic national culture. On the other hand, the founders of the Republic associated development and modernization with Westernization and defined the ideal Turk as someone who thinks, lives, and acts like a Westerner (Çınar 2010). In other words, the national culture that was imagined by the state elite had an imitative character. Achieving a balance between Westernization and formulating a distinctive Turkish culture, nevertheless, was a difficult task. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) underlines, this dilemma has been common to “Eastern nationalisms.” Post-colonial and Eastern nationalisms have tried to resolve the tension by making a distinction between the material and the spiritual domains. The former represented the domain of science and technology, where Western superiority could be accepted and imitated. The spiritual domain, however, was essential to the definition of national culture and should be preserved.

The founders of the Republic tried to resolve this apparent conflict between Westernization and nationalization by emphasizing the compatibility between them. For instance, the Turkish History Thesis formulated in the 1930s attempted to prove the congruity between Western and Turkish

history. It claimed that the Turks were the ancestors of Western civilization and that all civilizations originated from Central Asia where Turks lived thousands of years ago. In a similar vein, the Turkish Language Congress asserted that most major languages originated from Turkish (Çağaptay 2004).

These attempts also stemmed from the Kemalists' desire to build a sense of national pride within society, countering the Orientalist assumptions of the West about the Turks. Turkish nationalism began to be formulated at the end of the Ottoman Empire among a group of intellectuals, military officers, and statesmen, as a reaction to the gradual disintegration of the Empire. Their sense of inferiority, insecurity, and humiliation as a result of military defeats and territorial losses at the hands of the Western powers, as well as the negative image of the Turks prevalent in the West, directly informed the nationalists' imagining of Turkish national identity (Akçam 2004). The state elite sought to make Turkey part of the Western world, which did not see Turkey as part of Western culture. As a result, Kemalist discourse took on a highly defensive character. Refuting the West's negative portrayals of Turkishness and developing a strong sense of national pride became major objectives of the Turkish state elite. The purpose of mottos like "Happy Is the One Who Calls Himself a Turk," "Turk, Be Proud, Work, Have Confidence," and "A Turk Equals the World," which were extensively used in the educational system as well as in public spaces, was to instill a sense of pride and self-confidence in people. Despite these efforts, the tension between Westernization and defining what is distinctively and authentically Turkish remained.

The Turkish Olympiads offered a visual manifestation of a new understanding of national identity. The spectacles' narrative emphasized Anatolian Muslim morality and Turkish pop culture as the spiritual domain providing Turkish national identity with its unique characteristics. This new understanding called into question the relationship between Westernization and national pride. Kemalist nationalism saw the main source of national pride in making Turkey part of Western civilization. Western lifestyles, tastes, values, and outward appearance were prestige symbols of Turkishness. The Turkish Olympiads, however, communicated a message that reversed this assumption. The performances of foreign children speaking Turkish or acting like Turks promoted the idea of an assertive and culturally expansionist national identity, giving the impression that Turkish culture is the model to be imitated and appreciated by foreigners. A commentator from the Gülen movement's newspaper named the spectacles as Turkey's "morale Olympiads": "The people of Anatolia, the quiet and profound Turkey, are delighted by a universal success, which is concrete and visible, perhaps for the first time," he wrote (*Zaman*, June 2, 2007). "We were emulating other languages before but now we see that students from different countries emulate us thanks to the Turkish Olympiads," said the head of Turkish Language Association.²⁷ A businessman whom the students visited commented that nothing could make him more proud than the Turkish Olympiads: "We used to be envious of schools established by Americans or Europeans in Turkey. Now they look up to our schools," he added (*Zaman*, June 17, 2012). In his column, titled "Bravo to Germans Who Adjusted to Us," a writer who attended the auditions for the Turkish Olympiads in Germany congratulated the teachers of Gülen schools for teaching German kids how to dance Turkish folklore, emphasizing its importance in a context where Turks are excluded from German citizenship unless they leave Turkishness behind and adopt the German language and culture (*Bugün Gazetesi*, May 3, 2012). While the Muslim nationalists instilled national pride among the spectators of the Turkish Olympiads by reversing the model/imitator relationship, ironically they also sought the Westerners' attestation of the Turkish culture's value like the Kemalists. The persistent concern with Western approval shows that even when the Muslim nationalists challenge the Kemalist discourse, they still share some of its deeper convictions.

The depiction of African countries at the fairground of the so-called Culture Festival was another attempt to demonstrate Turkey as a model. The African countries were put in a separate hall, setting them apart from other countries. Life-sized plastic elephants, giraffes, and crocodiles were distributed across the hall. Each country's booth was made in the shape of a hut covered with thatch, exhibiting similar tourist souvenirs, from African baskets to wooden animal figurines. The exhibit

presented the Africans as a homogenous whole, rural, underdeveloped, poor, and living in the wild.²⁸ The discourse of the organizers contained racist implications. In a TV interview, the general art director of the Olympiads, Cemil Özen, referred to African students as “they have black skin but their hearts are white.”²⁹ Turkish schools were expected to change the “dark African destiny,” helping Africans overcome conflict and poverty through education. The implication was Turkey’s civilizing role in Africa, bringing socio-economic development to the region through schools, businesses, and charity organizations. Starting in 2005, the Turkish government began to take significant steps in improving its relations with African countries in cooperation with the businessmen affiliated with the Gülen movement. It opened new embassies in Africa, eased travel restrictions, supported commercial initiatives, and provided humanitarian and development assistance to various African countries (Özkan and Akgün 2010). The depiction of African cultures also had an ironic side. While the Turkish Olympiads presented Turkey as a model of development to be emulated by Africans and a civilizing power, it was Western colonialism that was mimicked. In other words, in their attempts to challenge the imitative character of Kemalist nationalism, the Muslim nationalists were similarly imitative.³⁰

The Turkish Olympiads’ assertive conception of Turkish nationalism struck a chord with people, particularly at a time when Turkey’s economic expansion and growing prosperity under the AKP government concurred with the loss of momentum in Turkey–European Union (EU) relations. The decline in relations strengthened public opinion that Turkey would never be accepted in the EU, regardless of its compliance to EU membership criteria. As a result, the Turkish public’s support for the EU has declined steadily since the mid-2000s (Çarkoğlu and Kentmen 2011; Yılmaz 2011). People’s frustrations with the EU process along with the AKP’s multifaceted and assertive foreign policy that increased Turkey’s relations with the Middle East and Africa have given more credence to Muslim nationalism. The Turkish Olympiads boosted people’s sense of national pride because it served as a visual confirmation of Turkey’s self-sufficiency and independence from the West, as well as its potential for cultural expansion.

The Turkish Olympiads also challenged Kemalist nationalism’s notion of outside threat, which constitutes another tension within Kemalism. On one hand, Kemalist nationalists desired Turkey to belong to the West and advocated close relations with Western countries. On the other hand, they have shared a strong skepticism of the West, as well as countries that are beyond the West, perceiving them as a constant threat against Turkey. Also called “Sèvres Syndrome,”³¹ this discourse of outside threats and enemies has constituted one of the key themes of Turkish nationalist talk. Particularly the neo-Kemalists’ (*ulusalcılar*) anti-imperialist, anti-globalist, and anti-Western discourse reinforced this notion of external threats. According to this narrative, Turkey is surrounded by external powers that fear its strength and aim to hurt its integrity and unity. Domestic problems, such as the Kurdish issue, have been perceived as consequences of external conspiracies aiming to weaken Turkey. This perception arose from the memories of the Ottoman Empire’s disintegration and later was reinforced by the Cold War era and the uncertain relations with the EU (Bora 2011, 58). The theme of the “outside threat” has been extensively promoted by school textbooks and has informed state officials’ and politicians’ discourses whenever they confronted a domestic challenge. As Bora (2004, 63) argues, “The topic of ‘national security’ is covered in all humanities and/or social studies courses, where the ‘enemy’ has been imagined as the realized form of foreigner.” The textbooks warn Turkish citizens to be aware of these external intentions and fight against them.

Public opinion surveys indicate that such perceptions of external threats and distrust of the outside world are in fact quite widespread in Turkey. In the last two waves of the World Values Survey, 68 percent (wave 5: 2005–2009) and 60 percent (wave 6: 2010–2014) of the sample of Turkish respondents stated that they did not trust people of another nationality.³² Another study based on databases of several surveys, such as the World Values Survey, Pew Global Attitudes, GMF Transatlantic Trends, and BBC Globescan, also shows that the majority of the Turkish public perceives other countries negatively and skeptically (Erdoğan 2013). This negative perception does

not only relate to Western countries but also to many other countries in the world, such as Brazil and India. Similarly a survey by Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu (2014) indicates that a high proportion of the Turkish public has high levels of xenophobia and does not feel close to either the Middle East or Europe. They conclude that the perception of Turks having no friends but themselves is widespread in the Turkish public psyche.

The Turkish Olympiads communicated a different message, visually depicting the possibility of a Turkey-friendly, even a Turkophile, world through foreigners' Turkish performances. The narrative of the spectacles emphasized that the broader objective was to create Turkish-speaking elites abroad, who would be familiar with and sympathetic to Turkish culture. Accordingly, the students attending Turkish schools would become the successful businessmen, professionals, intellectuals, and statesmen in their countries and act as "Turkey's volunteer ambassadors," cultivating stronger economic and political relations with Turkey (*Akşam*, June 18, 2013). The expectation was that they would combat the prejudices against Turkey and create a more Turkey-friendly public in their own countries. The performance of Turkophilia on stage via nonthreatening and innocent children objectified the idea that the animosity of the outside world against Turkey was reversible. The switch from seeing the outside world as threatening to the possibility of a Turkophile world signified a major revision of Kemalist nationalist understanding. The spectacles generated a sense of self-confidence and pride by calling into question people's anxieties and distrust of the outside world.

Conclusion

In this article, I call attention to the performative and affective dimension of politics to understand Turkish Islamists' success in creating broad appeal for their ideology of Muslim nationalism through an analysis of the Turkish Olympiads. Spectacles are important for political movements and states because they can generate strong emotional energy and be effective tools for political manipulation and mass mobilization. This research does not allow me to make broad generalizations about the extent to which such spectacles manage to unify the constituency of Muslim nationalism or increase support for it compared to other strategies of mobilization. Assessing the durable political effects of spectacles is extremely difficult, and my objective in this study is more limited. Given the ability of the Turkish Olympiads to generate strong emotional appeal and the amount of support the AKP government provided for it, I underline that the emotional and aesthetic strategies of ideological mobilization should be taken into account to understand the rise of Muslim nationalism.

I argue that the spectacles created strong emotional energy in the spectators by promoting a new understanding of Turkish nationalism that boosted people's sense of national pride and self-confidence. Turkish-speaking and -acting foreigners generated these feelings as they propagated an assertive, culturally expansionist, and populist nationalist rhetoric, challenging Kemalist nationalism's elitist and imitative character and its emphasis on outside threats. The AKP government tapped into this new nationalist imagery and rhetoric to connect with and mobilize its constituency through emotional means. The spectacles were venues of public diplomacy for the government. The top state cadres' interactions with children and their responses to the performances constructed an intimate and affectionate state image and advertised the AKP's international successes to the public.

The disintegration of the alliance between the Gülen movement and the AKP brought the Turkish Olympiads to an end in March 2014. In December 2013, the prosecutors who were believed to belong to the Gülen movement started a corruption investigation that involved three ministers of the AKP government. The corruption allegations later included the then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The investigation made the conflict between the AKP and the Gülen movement public, after which purges of suspected Gülenists from the state cadres began. The rift ended the organization of the Turkish Olympiads in Turkey after Erdoğan announced that the movement would not be able to organize the spectacle anymore (*Radikal*, March 21, 2014). The organizers'

requests to rent stadiums were turned down. The sponsorships from the state as well as non-Gülenist businesses discontinued. After the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, the government declared emergency law and accelerated its crackdown on the movement with full force. It accused the Gülenists organized in the military to be behind the coup attempt, declaring the movement a terrorist organization. Since then it has been going after the movement, expelling suspected Gülenists from the state cadres and confiscating the movement's property (Taş 2018). After their rift, the ideological stances of both groups have begun to shift in accordance with their political interests. Seeking support from the nationalist constituency in its efforts to establish the presidential system, the AKP government has intensified its nationalist tone. It endorsed a belligerent stance toward Kurdish activism and a strong anti-Western, populist rhetoric. The Gülen movement toned down its nationalism and began to emphasize liberal values of human rights, pluralism, and democracy more, in search for international support.³³ The Turkish Olympiads' organized abroad were renamed as "the International Festival of Language and Culture," removing its heavy Turkish nationalist discourse. The spectacles have taken an internationalist-pluralist character as the kids sing popular songs from their countries in their own national costumes along with Turkish songs. The movement advertises the spectacles as an event that promotes cultural diversity, universal human values, and peace. This change in the content and emphasis of the spectacles can be attributed to the multivocality and hybridity of the Gülen movement's image-making strategies that accommodate to different contexts. The pluralist and cosmopolitan image of the spectacles is more likely to bring more sympathy and support for the community's schools and other activities abroad at a time when it is under heavy attack from the Turkish state.³⁴

Although the Turkish Olympiads have come to an end in Turkey, the AKP government has continued to make use of the symbolic and performative forms of politics. Particularly after the Gezi protests, when the government became aware of the extent of social dissatisfaction with its rule, it has communicated a louder Islamist and nationalist rhetoric in highly theatrical and emotional ways. Different forms of mass spectacles, such as political rallies, opening ceremonies, and official celebrations, have taken a more pompous and grandiose character with expensive light and sound effects, gathering thousands of people. Such spectacles have aimed at sustaining the coherence of the AKP constituency and demonstrating its power to the opposition. For example, Erdoğan's gigantic presidential palace in Ankara, with its lavishly decorated and colossal interior, has become a venue of many flamboyant ceremonies. The first anniversary of the attempted coup was declared a national holiday, called "Democracy and National Unity Day," and was commemorated with massive rallies and marches, unveiling of monuments to coup victims, and sermons in mosques marked with emotional speeches, bringing thousands of AKP supporters together (Kingsley 2017). Channeling of resources to such pageantry confirms their continuing political-symbolic value for the government.

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Notes

- 1 The research of this article is based on the publications, websites, and online videos of the Turkish Olympiads, on-site observations in 2013, interviews, and newspapers. The performance of the Congolese children can be watched at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1ar1fa_istiklal-marsi-mizi%20okuyan-kongolu-minikler (accessed June 27, 2017).
- 2 For detailed discussions of the movement, see Turam (2007), Hendrick (2013), Yavuz (2018), and Watmough and Öztürk (2018).
- 3 A report by *Wall Street Journal* on January 20, 2014, put the number of Gülen's educational institutions to be over 2,000 in 160 countries. The Gülen schools were known by their high-

- quality education, particularly in math and sciences. Turkish teachers were expected to be role models to their students, familiarizing them with Turkish-Islamic morality and culture outside the classroom through extracurricular activities (Koyuncu-Lorasdağı 2010, 226). Many taught the Turkish language as an elective class.
- 4 Gülenists have portrayed themselves as members of an apolitical, civil movement that works toward democracy and interfaith dialogue. The nonpartisan and apolitical image portrayed by the movement, however, was misleading. Gülen has encouraged his followers to enter the bureaucracy, exerting their influence from within the state. Its alliance with the AKP government led Gülen supporters to join the state bureaucracy, the military, the police, and the judiciary (Watmough and Öztürk 2018, 45–47), leading to ending the influence of the secular establishment in Turkish politics (Yavuz 2018).
 - 5 There are a few exceptions. For instance, Alev Çınar (2001) discussed the Islamists' construction of an alternative national identity and history through an analysis of the commemoration of the Conquest of Istanbul. Gizem Zencirci (2012) called attention to the differences between the commemorative practices of secularists and Islamists. More recently Ateş Altınordu (2016) argued that the AKP government could stay in power and circumvent the secular military and judiciary's obstructions over its exercise of power by projecting a mainstream identity through performative practices. These are important studies that inform this work. But my objective is to show how emotional appeal is created through the use of such performative practices.
 - 6 The new media technology might have strengthened the importance of spectacles by political actors, but their use is not new. There is a vast literature on the central role spectacles play in politics in various contexts such as the French Revolution (Ozouf 1988), Nazi Germany (Mosse 1975), and the Middle Eastern states (Podeh 2011).
 - 7 By spectacles, I refer to choreographed, large-scale, public, and visually striking shows.
 - 8 TRT Haber, June 10, 2013, <http://www.trthaber.com/haber/kultur-sanat/turkce-olimpiyati-on-binleri-costurdu-88867.html>.
 - 9 Haber7com, June 12, 2010, <http://www.haber7.com/siyaset/haber/548809-kilicdaroglu-tankin-onune-ben-cikarim>.
 - 10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-RLeXRSSMg>, accessed June 17, 2014.
 - 11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnfPx0X7psE>, accessed July 12, 2018.
 - 12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1cKX9U1qas>, accessed July 12, 2018.
 - 13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sbg4mIMU18>, accessed July 16, 2018.
 - 14 <http://vimeo.com/45576561>, accessed June 19, 2012.
 - 15 For instance, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62QyWMN-4Ps> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7eYbzkUuio>, accessed July 15, 2018.
 - 16 Samanyolu Haber, May 25, 2013, <http://www.samanyoluhaber.com/web-tv/bulent-eczacibasindan-turkce-olimpiyatlarina-ovgu-dolu-sozler-1730-video-haberi/>.
 - 17 Haber7com, June 3, 2009, <http://www.haber7.com/yasam/haber/408689-turkce-olimpiyatlaricin-ne-dusunurdu>.
 - 18 Turkish-Islamic synthesis is a doctrine that developed in the late 1970s by a group of right-wing intellectuals. They advocated that Turkish national culture was based on pre-Islamic Turkic culture and Sunni Islam. The military government after the 1980 coup utilized this ideology to counter the threat of leftist movements and Kurdish separatism.
 - 19 For some examples see, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyMcyJXXuE>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpKPbn72CsY>; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU97o-l4tW4>, accessed July 15, 2018.
 - 20 For some examples see, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdfPnF4MC6E>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDtGbK0l6PY>; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHkkyBT3D9c>, accessed July 15, 2018.
 - 21 See the Naat Night performances in 2012 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KS3wy9wsjg>, accessed June 23, 2016.

- 22 See T24, July 1, 2011, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/turkce-olimpiyatlarina-buyuk-final,154167>; Anadolu Ajansı, June 15, 2012, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/pg/foto-galeri/erdogan-turkce-olimpiya-tinda/0/138795>; and *Milliyet*, June 16, 2013, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/basbakan-erdogan-turkce-siyaset-1723864/>.
- 23 For example, he compared the teachers of Gülen schools to Ottoman raiders (Osmanlı akıncıları) in his speech at the 7th Turkish Olympiads. To watch the speech, see http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9iut5_7-turkce-olimpiyatları-basbakan-rec_shortfilms, accessed May 15, 2014.
- 24 For the whole speech see, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9ia39_7-turkce-olimpiyatları-bulent-arinc_shortfilms, accessed May 15, 2014.
- 25 <http://www.ensonhaber.com/afganli-kiz-emine-erdogani-aglatti.html>, accessed July 6, 2017.
- 26 Haber7com, June 17, 2006, <http://www.haber7.com/kultur/haber/164739-turkce-nin-cocukları-binleri-aglattı>; Mynet, July 4, 2009, <http://www.mynet.com/haber/yasam/7-turkce-olimpiyatlarında-duygulu-anlar-405072-1>.
- 27 <http://www.turkceolimpiyatları.org/Basin/Haberler.aspx?Haber=1348>, accessed February 10, 2013.
- 28 The account of the exhibits is drawn from author's observations of the 2012 Culture Festival as well as reports and photographs that appeared on the Turkish Olympiads' websites.
- 29 <http://vimeo.com/45576561>, accessed July 1, 2018.
- 30 Gülenists do not acknowledge such parallels with the Western colonial discourses. In their promotional material, they portray themselves as selfless, heroic volunteers who bring education and healthcare to poor and conflict-ridden societies (Tee 2018: 118).
- 31 This argument refers to the Treaty of Sèvres, which was signed in 1920 by the Allied powers and the Ottoman Empire. The treaty, which became invalid after the Turkish War of Independence, carved up the Empire into different spheres of influence by Allied powers and decided on the establishment of an independent Armenia, an autonomous Kurdistan, and Greek control over the Anatolian West coast and Eastern Thrace.
- 32 See the online data analysis of the World Values Survey at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>. In wave 5 (2005–2009), 41 percent of the respondents stated that they do not trust people of another nationality very much, and 27 percent stated that they do not trust people of another nationality at all. The percentages changed to 35.7 and 24.3, respectively, for the years between 2010 and 2014.
- 33 See his op-ed after the coup attempt, Gülen (2016).
- 34 See the websites of these new form of spectacles at <http://www.intflc.org/>, accessed June 15, 2016 and at <http://internationalfestival.us/>, accessed July 5, 2017.

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