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Iran and Turkey's Secularisation of Education and the Enduring Influence of Clerics

Abstract

The social and cultural foundations of Iran and Turkey have long been rooted in Islam, expressed through their respective Shia and Sunni traditions. During the early 20th century, however, Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944) and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) initiated modernisation and secularisation reforms aimed at curbing clerical authority, particularly through education. While Atatürk replaced Ottoman Islamic institutions with a secular framework, Reza Shah's efforts were constrained by resistance from Iran's entrenched Shia clergy. Despite these differences, traditional religious values largely persisted and, over time, reasserted themselves. By comparing the education-focused secular policies of both governments their attempts to reduce the influence of Islamic traditions, and the role of clerics, the present research seeks to explain why, despite extensive cultural reforms, Islamic culture and values remained resilient in both societies.

Keywords: Iran, Turkey, Islam, education, secularisation, Shi'a, Sunni.

Introduction

Islam has long shaped social and cultural norms in Iran and Turkey, where Shia and Sunni traditions, respectively, provide the dominant religious frames. In the early 20th century, secular reformers, Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941) in Iran and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (r. 1923–1938) in Turkey, treated education as a principal instrument for curbing clerical influence and reshaping public culture. By centralising schooling, narrowing or removing religious instruction from public curricula, and restricting clerical control over educational content, both governments sought to marginalise traditional teachings and cultivate a modern citizenry aligned with state-led projects of national development.

Despite the political transitions in both countries during the late 1970s, religious groups regained significant influence—even though secularism remained a constitutional principle in Turkey. Although Turkey's constitutional secularism and the comparatively limited autonomy of Sunni clerics might seem to reduce the likelihood of a revolutionary outcome comparable to Iran's 1979 Revolution, religious politics nonetheless revived there, gaining momentum

by the 1980s. These trajectories indicate that institutional secularisation, especially through education, did not necessarily translate into durable cultural secularisation.

The central question, therefore, is why, despite policies intended to secularise the state and restrict religious discourse within educational institutions, Islamist currents and traditional religious orientations persisted, and in some cases strengthened, in both settings.

Addressing this question requires shifting attention from constitutional design and formal policy statements to the social and educational conditions under which secularisation was pursued. Two dimensions are especially important. The first concerns the limited societal groundwork for secularisation at the time these reforms were introduced, a constraint closely tied to the education system itself. Prior to state-led secularisation, both societies were predominantly religious and shaped by traditional modes of socialisation, while levels of mass illiteracy remained high. In this setting, secularisation could not rely on widespread public understanding of secular ideas or on a broad reading public capable of engaging with new political and cultural concepts. This makes it essential to examine how the state attempted to generate the social and educational conditions through which secularism could become intelligible and persuasive to the majority.

The second concerns the institutional endurance of clerical influence during and after reform: the extent to which clerical networks retained moral credibility, continued to shape everyday religious learning outside schools, or re-entered education through informal or regulated channels. Together, these dimensions indicate where the main problem is likely to be located: secularisation may have altered educational governance and reduced overt clerical control, while leaving intact the deeper mechanisms through which religious authority and Islamic traditions were reproduced across society.

This paper argues that short-term modernisation and educational reform do not necessarily produce cultural transformation when clerical actors retain social authority and when schooling does not replace religious instruction with sustained forms of critical inquiry about religion. The analysis adopts a comparative historical approach informed by modernisation theory. It examines education reforms and subsequent religious revival in Iran and Turkey by asking parallel questions in both cases. The study evaluates the extent of educational secularisation through legal change, curriculum design, clerical control, and enforcement practices, and then traces how these policies related to outcomes in religious authority and political mobilisation.

Review of Literature: Secularisation and Education

A substantial line of scholarship interprets both Iran and Turkey as cases of authoritarian modernisation in which secularisation was pursued primarily through state power, legal redesign, bureaucratic centralisation, and cultural regulation, rather than through sustained social deliberation on religion. In this reading, the decisive limitation was not merely the persistence of belief, but the way state secularisation restricted the very forums that could have normalised critical discussion of religion (universities, press, voluntary associations, and schools).

In the Turkish case, Niyazi Berkes in *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (1964) frames early Republican secularism as a state-building project that reorganised public authority and education while leaving religion culturally durable. The implication developed in later historiography is that republican secularism did not cultivate a broad culture of critical religious reasoning; instead, it reorganised institutional religion and public visibility under strict political supervision. Erik Jan Zürcher in *Turkey: A Modern History* (first published 1993; later editions revised) similarly describes the breadth of Kemalist reforms and the one-party political environment that accompanied them.

The "state-management" dimension becomes central in work on Turkey's religious governance. Ahmet T. Kuru in *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion*: *The United States, France, and Turkey* (2009) develops a framework that helps clarify why an assertively secular state may still not disenable long-term religious vitality: the state does not only exclude religion; it regulates and channels it. This point resonates with scholarship on the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) as an institution that consolidated state authority over Sunni Islam rather than creating conditions for independent religious critique. The broader inference across this literature is that when religion is treated as an administrative object, something to supervise, rather than as a domain for open contestation, "deep" secularisation in value terms is less likely.

In Iran, comparable arguments appear in major accounts of the Pahlavi period and revolutionary mobilisation. Nikki R. Keddie in *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (2003) emphasises that rapid top-down modernisation did not translate into legitimacy or cultural realignment; political closure and uneven development shaped oppositional possibilities. Ervand Abrahamian in *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (1982) similarly highlights how modernisation can coexist with intensifying opposition where political incorporation is blocked and alternative moral authorities retain credibility.

Regarding the education system and secularisation, Janet Afary in her work *Foundations for Religious Reform in the First Pahlavi Era* (2015) argues that modern secular schooling aimed to produce loyal subjects rather than foster critical thinking. That argument is crucial, given that when the state curtails public religious authority, but simultaneously discourages critical inquiry, it can weaken traditional institutions without replacing them with durable habits of questioning and evaluation. In such contexts, religious authority may revive later through networks outside the state's preferred arenas.

Finally, comparative education scholarship that explicitly pairs Iran and Turkey by Reza Arjmand in *Inscription on Stone: Islam, State and Education in Iran and Turkey* (2008) treats education as a mechanism for reproducing dominant values under different state–religion settlements. Even though Arjmand's primary emphasis is not limited to the early Pahlavi and early Republican periods alone, the comparative structure strengthens the notion that education policy can function as ideological socialisation while leaving underlying value attachments intact, particularly when political conditions constrain critical exchange.

A second group of literature focuses more specifically on education systems, curricula, and textbooks to show that secularising reforms often replaced clerical control with state ideology, nationalism, developmentalism, and disciplined citizenship, rather than with critical engagement with religion as a historical, social, and philosophical phenomenon. For Turkey, detailed work on schooling in the early Republic shows that educational reform was extensive but tightly bounded by state doctrine. Barak A. Salmoni in *Ordered liberty and disciplined freedom: Turkish education and republican democracy 1923–50* (2004) treats early Republican schooling as a project of disciplined citizenship: education sought to shape the desired republican citizen and regulate civic morality. More directly on religion and schooling materials, Salmoni in *Islam in Turkish Pedagogic Attitudes and Education Materials: 1923–1950* (2000) examines how Islam was handled within educational discourse and materials during the formative decades of the Republic. This type of analysis matters because it addresses not only whether religion was removed institutionally, but how the state's education apparatus represented religion when it appeared, often as culture, morality, or a managed tradition rather than an arena for contested interpretation.

Textbook-based research deepens this point. Şefika Akile Zorlu Durukan in *The Religion of Muhammad: Early Turkish Republican Ideology and the Official View of Islam in 1930s History Textbooks* (2015) shows how official history education reframed Islam within a national narrative. Complementary scholarship on history textbooks, including Büşra Ersanlı's *History Textbooks*

as Reflections of the Political Self: Turkey (1930s and 1990s) and Uzbekistan (1990s) (2002), supports the broader idea that textbooks functioned as instruments of state self-construction, shaping what kinds of questions were legitimate.

For Iran, education historians have documented how Pahlavi schooling advanced national integration and state legitimacy. David Menashri in *Education and the Making of Modern Iran* (1992) details the building of modern education as part of state formation. Secular schooling did not prioritise critical thinking of religious authority or tradition.

Existing research on state-led modernisation focuses heavily on institutional reforms, centralisation of schooling, removal of clerical control, curriculum standardisation, and the introduction of secular subjects, but pays far less attention to whether these reforms created the intellectual conditions necessary for deeper cultural secularisation.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Change, Religion, and Secularisation

This study applies Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel's theory of value change to examine the relationship classical modernisation theory holds that socio-economic development leads to secularisation and, ultimately, democracy. Inglehart and Welzel's value-change theory refines this claim: modernisation as socio-economic development does not necessarily yield democracy or deep secularisation. Instead, outcomes are path dependent. While economic growth and education tend to produce predictable shifts in worldviews, a society's religious and historical legacies leave a lasting imprint. Hence, contrary to early modernisation theorists who expected religion and ethnic traditions to wither away, these identities have persisted and, in some contexts, regained salience (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010, p. 552).

Inglehart and Welzel argue that industrialisation can accompany a wide range of regimes, fascism, communism, theocracy, or democracy. What alters the probabilities is the transition to a post-industrial "knowledge" society, which brings socio-cultural changes that make democracy more likely. Knowledge economies rely on highly educated, articulate workers accustomed to independent judgement. As existential security rises, publics place greater emphasis on self-expression values—autonomy, voice, tolerance, which elevates demand for rights and accountability. Mass publics thus become both more inclined to want democracy and more capable of securing it (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010, pp. 552–553).

In this framework, secularisation means not the disappearance of religion but its shift from public authority to private belief. As existential security

increases, individuals are more likely to challenge clerical control, demand freedom of conscience, and adopt pluralistic norms. This transformation enables religion to evolve in ways that align with democratic and human rights values.

This theoretical framework helps explain why secularisation may remain incomplete or contested in countries undergoing modernisation. It is not the reforms themselves, but the underlying cultural shifts, that create the social foundation for enduring secularism and the redefinition of religion's role in society.

This research compares secularisation in Iran and Turkey – two cases that underwent modernisation in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Modernisation in Iran and Turkey: An Overview

Reza Shah Pahlavi and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk rose to power during periods of significant turmoil in their respective countries, following the chaos of World War I and the collapse of empires. In Iran, the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925) had ruled since the late 18th century but faced mounting challenges, including foreign intervention, economic instability, and widespread dissatisfaction, especially after World War I. The 1919 Anglo-Iranian Agreement further weakened the Qajar regime and fuelled unrest (Abrahamian, 2008). In 1921, Reza Khan, a military officer, staged a coup; by 1925 he had deposed Ahmad Shah Qajar and established the Pahlavi dynasty. Reza Shah aimed to modernise and secularise Iran, centralising power and strengthening the state to break with the Qajar legacy; reforming education to curb clerical influence was central to this project (Matthee, 1993). Many intellectuals supported Reza Shah, arguing that only a strong, centralised state could drive comprehensive modernisation (Keddie, 2003).

Similarly, in Turkey, the end of World War I marked the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which had suffered internal strife and territorial losses. Allied occupation of Istanbul and partition plans provoked a nationalist response (Zürcher, 2004). From 1919, a coalition of military officers, intellectuals, and local notables around Mustafa Kemal organised resistance under the Association for the Defence of the Rights of Anatolia and Rumelia (*Anadolu ve Rumeli Müdâfaa-i Hukuk Cemiyeti*), leading to the establishment of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara in 1920 (Zürcher, 2004). Mustafa Kemal's leadership in the War of Independence (1919–1923) culminated in the Republic of Turkey (1923) and the end of the Sultanate. He then launched radical reforms – Law No. 431 (1924) abolishing the Caliphate and the religious ministries, Law No. 430 (1924**)** unifying and secularising education, and Law No. 677 (1925**)** clos-

ing dervish lodges – to embed a secular legal-constitutional order and redefine national identity.

Both leaders sought to reshape their nations in response to crisis, moving away from traditional rule and promoting modernisation and secularisation as foundations for stability and strength. In Iran, these efforts included curbing the clergy's role in schooling and the courts, expanding state schools, and founding the University of Tehran; yet clerical authority persisted and often blunted reform. In Turkey, unifying education under the Ministry of Education produced concrete, historically specific changes: the madrasas (religious schools) were closed or converted into state schools, parallel religious boards were dissolved, and curricula, textbooks, and teacher training were centralised around secular civics, history, and science. Turkish became the medium of instruction, aided by the alphabet reform (1928), which accelerated literacy campaigns and standardisation. The university reform (1933) replaced the *Darülfünun* with Istanbul University and dissolved the theology faculty, signalling that religious instruction would no longer shape higher education. At the primary and secondary levels, religious courses disappeared for over a decade and *imam-hatip* training withered until limited reintroductions after 1949. Together, these measures achieved a state monopoly over schooling, sharply reduced clerical influence on curricula, and embedded a secular, centrally administered system – even as social religiosity endured outside the classroom (Karkazis, 2021).

Modernisation in Iran, 1923–1979: Secularisation Plans and Education: 1923–1979

Under Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941) and later his son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, modernisation was a central goal of the state. Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944) initiated the modernisation process by establishing a strong state in 1925, promoting economic development alongside profound social change. A key aspect of his agenda was the secularisation of the legal and educational systems, aimed at diminishing the power of the clergy, who had historically held considerable influence in governance.

As part of this effort, the Ministry of Justice underwent reform, and in 1927, new European-educated personnel replaced the clerical officials who had previously dominated the institution (Ameli, 2015, p. 141). Clerics were removed from their positions of authority, losing not only political influence but also a crucial source of revenue when the registration of legal documents related to property was transferred from religious (Sharia) to secular courts (Gods, 1991, p. 225).

The Civil Code drew heavily from European legal systems, particularly those of France and Belgium. While some areas of family law retained traditional Shi'a legal principles, reforms were introduced, such as the 1931 legislation that granted women the right to request a divorce under specific conditions. Additionally, new procedures for marriage and divorce registrations reduced the administrative control of the clerical establishment (Article 1041 of the Iranian Civil Code).

In 1936, Reza Shah banned the wearing of the hijab (veil) in public for women, which was a direct challenge to Islamic traditions. He also encouraged Western-style clothing for men, including banning the traditional clerical attire and mandating European-style suits and hats for civil servants and professionals.

Reza Shah's nationalism was anchored in a deep admiration for ancient Persia, but his secular outlook was shaped by modernist intellectuals who had been active in the Constitutional Revolution (*Mashruteh*), 1908, and hoped to establish a modern Iranian state. These thinkers, like Mohammad Ali Foroughi, Hasan Taqizadeh, Ali Akbar Davar, Abdolhossein Teymourtash influenced by the political and social transformations after the Constitutional Revolution and World War I, shifted away from democratic ideals toward a focus on modernisation and reform, guided by nationalist and secular ideologies. This ideological shift played a crucial role in the modernisation of the educational system during the first Pahlavi era (Rezaei, 2020). The government actively worked to reduce the influence of religion in education, which had been a fundamental part of the traditional education system of the country since the Safavid dynasty.

During the Safavid period (1501–1736), Shi'a clerics significantly strengthened their influence over Iran's traditional education system, which evolved to reflect an Islamic character. This system was divided into two main forms: *maktab* and *madraseh* (school). *Maktabs* provided elementary education for young children, teaching the Persian alphabet, basic arithmetic, and Quranic literacy. In contrast, *madrasahs* were intended for older students, focusing on religious studies and sciences through traditional methods rooted primarily in Islamic thought. Initially, clergymen managed *maktabs* within mosques, but over time, they transitioned to teaching in separate venues known as *makhtabkhaneh*. Under clerical control, the traditional education system became a vehicle for transmitting the Shi'a tradition to successive generations (Yousefvand, Hormoz, Begdeli, 2018, p. 751).

During the Qajar dynasty, despite increasing exposure to Western culture, the introduction of modern schools by Westernised elites and intellectuals like Haji-Mirza Hassan Roshdieh (1851–1944) did not diminish religion's

importance within the educational system. Resistance from Shi'a clerics against modern education persisted even after the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), which sought to reform and modernise the country. Additional challenges, including poor infrastructure and widespread poverty, hindered educational reforms. Data from 1918–1919 reveals that, over a century after the initial contact with Western education, there were only a few dozen elementary schools (serving 24,033 pupils) and a handful of secondary schools (with 2,392 students), most of which were privately operated (Menashri, 1992, p. 60).

Under Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign, the state began taking control of education by divesting *maktabs* of their traditional role. The government replaced these with elementary, secondary, and teacher-training schools, emphasising a Western-modelled curriculum over religious instruction. By 1940, there were 670 elementary schools for boys, with 114,116 pupils; 117 for girls, with 21,790 pupils; and 1,524 mixed schools, with 60,169 girls and 70,830 boys. Between 1936 and 1940, over 467,000 adults attended literacy classes (Wezarat-e Farhang, 1940). The new curriculum prioritised modern subjects like science and mathematics, relegating religious studies to the margins.

Between 1927 and 1931, a series of laws and regulations gave the Ministry of Education oversight of admission and graduation processes for students of religious sciences and the qualifications of instructors. The "Unified Clothing Law" mandated European-style clothing, exempting only those in recognised religious education. Students wishing to avoid military service or comply with the law had to pass exams administered by government-appointed committees. Subsequent years saw attempts to bring religious seminaries under government control (Shabani et al., 2018, p. 115).

From 1932, textbooks for madrasas were standardised, and a board of examiners from the Ministry of Education was tasked with testing students and teachers. The Ministry introduced a permanent academic curriculum for madrasas, which included non-religious subjects such as composition and history for middle levels. Subjects like Qur'anic exegesis and the lives of religious leaders were removed from higher levels. The government confined religious teachings in textbooks to moral and ritualistic topics, aligning with its secular agenda. It is noteworthy that, during this period, religious education institutions received less attention compared to state-led education reforms. However, given the population's deep-rooted religiosity and the clergy's influence, the curriculum still incorporated foundational religious content and selected Qur'anic verses. Reports and meeting minutes from the Supreme Council of Education discuss the inclusion of religious content in textbooks (Shabani et al., 2018, p. 115).

Starting in 1931, madrasas curricula were further restructured, reaching a peak in 1933. The Ministry of Education introduced a permanent curriculum for non-religious subjects, such as composition and history, at intermediate levels, while topics like "Biography of Great Figures of Religion" and "Tafsir (Quranic Exegesis)" were removed from higher levels. This campaign led to a decline in students attending traditional *maktabkhanehs* (religious schools), significantly reducing enrolment. By 1934, there were only 404 religious instructors and 2,100 students; by the 1936–1940 academic year, this had decreased to 124 teachers in such schools (Shabani et al., 2018, pp. 133–134).

However, studies of Pahlavi education describe extensive efforts to expand and centralise modern schooling, yet they also emphasise that curricular priorities were often oriented toward nation-building, developmentalism, and political loyalty, rather than cultivating critical debate about religion as a contested domain of knowledge (Matthee, 1993). Textbook-based work on the First Pahlavi era highlights how official educational materials promoted patriotism and attachment to state authority, indicating that the school system's core pedagogical work focused on political and national formation rather than on developing interpretive and argumentative capacities for engaging religious authority (Shakoor Ghahari, Akbari, 2014). Where religion appeared, research suggests it was frequently framed through managed moral instruction or a controlled historical narrative, not through sustained, academically rigorous examination of Islamic traditions in ways likely to weaken clerical legitimacy in society (Afary, 2015; Karamipour and Shannon, 2021). Taken together, this scholarship supports an interpretation in which educational secularisation reduced clerical control over formal institutions while leaving broader religious socialisation largely intact, especially given uneven access to extended schooling and the continuing vitality of religious learning outside the state system (Menashri, 1992; Arjmand, 2008).

Reza Shah's government, recognising the clergy's enduring power, sought to modernise religious studies through the university system. In 1934, the Faculty of Theology was established at the University of Tehran, aiming to integrate religious studies within a secular academic framework. This initiative sought to promote a controlled, secularised version of Islam, aligning with the state's nationalist and modernisation goals. However, the traditional power of the clergy could not be easily dismantled, and the limitation of religious studies to the Faculty of Theology highlighted the challenge of fully integrating modernised religious education into the broader academic system (Moniri, 2024).

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–1980) continued the modernisation and secularisation of Iran's education system, aligning curricula, teacher training, and university expansion with Western models while keeping schools

firmly under the Ministry of Education (Menashri, 1992; Abrahamian, 2008). His secular agenda progressively marginalised clerical influence in public life and schooling (Menashri, 1992; Sabahi, 2002). Yet his approach to the clergy was not as abrupt or uniformly coercive as his father's.

In the 1940s and the 1950s, especially during Ayatollah Borujerdi's (1875–1961) leadership over Shia clerics institutions, Shi'a clerical organisations maintained a significant degree of independence from state control. During this period, Ayatollah Borujerdi emerged as a central figure, leading the religious establishment and orchestrating systematic resistance to government-led reforms. His tenure marked a consolidation of clerical authority, which enabled the clergy to safeguard religious traditions and educational practices against rising secularisation efforts.

The crown struck a tacit *modus vivendi*: religion classes were introduced in state schools, licensed private Islamic schools such as *Alavi* operated, and the Qom *hawza* expanded – signalling early accommodation within a broadly secular framework (Karamipour and Shannon, 2021). After 1963 the balance tilted toward selective confrontation: university building and technocratic curricula accelerated (e.g., Aryamehr/Sharif; Pahlavi/Shiraz), civic socialisation became more tightly orchestrated (especially after the 1975 Rastakhiz turn), and family-law reforms moved personal-status matters into secular courts—further reducing clerical leverage around education and social policy (Abrahamian, 2008; Keddie, 2003). Even then, the regime did not abolish seminaries or ban religious instruction outright; instead, it ring-fenced clerical activity and kept it under surveillance and regulation while the state system became the dominant pathway for schooling and credentialling (Menashri, 1992; Abrahamian, 2008).

But the Shia clerics resistance to the Shah's reforms intensified during the "White Revolution," a programme aimed at economic development, land reform, and educational advancements. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989) opposed the plan from the outset. Shi'a clerical organisations, independent of state control, systematically resisted the reforms. The Islamic Education Society *(Jāmeʿeh-ye Taʿlimat-e Eslāmi* – established in the 1940s), propagated religious modernism through a national network of private schools. In 1960s, cultural foundations used this model to create schools such as *Alavi*, *Kamāl*, and *Refāh* in Tehran. These schools combined religious teachings with standard curricula, nurturing a generation grounded in Islamic principles that later played significant roles in the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Tebyan, 2014).

Despite the government attempts for modernisation of education, the domination of religious authorities over the interpretation of Islam tradition prevented new approaches from being presented publicly to the people. The

government aimed to curtail the power of Shia clerics by proposing an Islamic university to counteract seminaries such as *Feyziyeh*. Government documents described the plan to "limit the seminaries, which have become centres of anti-government agitation, and to strictly control such activities" (Tebyan, 2014). Opposition from scholars and public outcry stalled the initiative.

Meanwhile, the government was unable to prevent the spread of Islamic ideas: between 1954–1963, only 1.10% of published books were religious, but by 1972 this figure had risen to 25.82% (Azmoudeh, 2018).

Despite urban youth literacy rates reaching 85% by the mid-1970s, the overall adult illiteracy rate remained at approximately 63% for adult above 15 (Kishi, Azar-Chehr, 2019). These figures illustrate the limitations of state-led secularisation efforts, as deep-rooted religious traditions and clerical influence persisted. By 1979, Shia culture reasserted itself, uniting various ideological groups into the revolutionary movement that ultimately established the Islamic Republic.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: Secularisation Plans and Education

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the first president of Turkey, established a new republic grounded in the principles of nationalism, secularism, and modernisation, with the aim of transforming the nation into a sovereign and progressive state.

Atatürk's vision for Turkey centred on secularism. One of his earliest and most significant reforms was the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, which effectively separated religious authority from the state. This was followed by a series of legal reforms that replaced Islamic laws with secular civil and criminal codes, heavily influenced by European legal systems. These reforms laid the foundation for a legal framework that supported a secular state (Giunchi and Melis, 2024).

Cultural reforms were another cornerstone of Atatürk's secularisation agenda, aimed at reducing religion's public authority. The Hat Law (1925) banned the fez for men, and 1934 clothing regulations restricted the wearing of religious garments in public to authorised clergy (there was no blanket legal ban on women's veiling). Sufi *tekkes* and *zaviyas* (religious lodges) were closed and dervish titles banned (1925); madrasas and sharia courts were dismantled (1924) as education and justice were unified under the state. The Civil Code (1926) replaced Islamic family law with civil marriage and inheritance. In the 1930s, the *adhan* (call to prayer) and parts of worship were rendered in Turkish, and Sunday became the weekly rest day (1935). Collectively, these measures curtailed clerical influence and recast public space in secular-national terms (Azak, 2008).

In modernisation of education, reform efforts were initiated by the Ottoman Empire. However, they were interrupted by World War I and the invasion of Anatolia, which necessitated the continuation of educational reforms under challenging conditions. Atatürk aimed to create a unified, secular national education system that would modernise the state.

His earliest reforms included the 1924 Law on the Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*), which abolished religious schools (*madrasas*) and integrated them into a secular national education system. This reform was intended to curtail the influence of religious authorities over education and align schools with the secular principles of the new Turkish Republic. Atatürk also introduced co-education, enabling boys and girls to study together, and stressed the importance of educating women.

One of the most transformative reforms was the adoption of a new Turkish alphabet based on the Latin script in 1928 (Ekici, 2023, p. 951). The primary motive for this reform was to modernise and Westernise Turkish society and culture. The government actively promoted language reform, replacing the Arabic script with the Roman alphabet as a step toward Europeanisation. By eliminating the Arabic script, which was deemed unsuitable for Turkish phonology, Atatürk irrevocably severed a major link to the nation's Islamic heritage and ties with the broader Islamic world (Yilmaz, 2011, p. 71).

Textbooks were extensively revised to emphasise nationalistic and secular values, reducing religious content and fostering a unified Turkish identity. The curriculum focused on instilling civic values and loyalty to the state, consistent with Atatürk's vision of shaping a new generation free from traditional, religious influences.

Primary education was made compulsory and free, significantly increasing literacy. Between 1923 and 1938, primary-school enrolment rose from 342,000 to 765,000. Middle-school enrolment grew from 6,000 to 74,000, and high-school enrolment also increased markedly. These figures underscore the reach of Atatürk's education reforms in building a more educated society (Karkazis, 2021, p. 4).

Universities were similarly restructured to prioritise secular subjects and ensure academic independence from religious institutions. Modern sciences and humanities were emphasised to cultivate an educated workforce capable of advancing Turkey's modernisation (Fındıklı, 2022).

These educational reforms fundamentally altered the role of religion in public life and education, creating the foundation for a secular state. By 1932, religious instruction was removed from the school curriculum (Karkazis, 2021, p. 6). However, the Hanafi school of jurisprudence remained unchanged.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's reforms profoundly redefined the relationship between the state and religion, especially regarding the role and influence of the Sunni clergy, aligned with the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, which was the primary Islamic tradition in Turkey (Golan-Nadir, 2022, pp. 4–7).

Historically, the Sunni clergy, particularly the Sheikh al-Islam, played an integral role in the Ottoman Empire. The Sheikh al-Islam served as the highest religious authority in the empire, responsible for interpreting Islamic law and issuing religious edicts. This position was appointed under the supervision of the Ottoman state and was closely aligned with the authority of the Caliph. Additionally, the Sheikh al-Islam held the power to appoint other clergy members in various cities, establishing a network of religious governance that linked local practices to the central authority (Nassaj and Bahrani, 2015, p. 9).

However, with the abolition of the Ottoman Sultanate in 1922 and the Caliphate in 1924, Atatürk effectively dismantled the existing religious authority structure. The removal of the Sheikh al-Islam created a significant void in the management and organisation of religious matters. No substitute institution or figure emerged to fill this gap, further weakening the Sunni clergy's position in society (Guida, 2008). It should be considered that financially, the Sunni clergy were heavily dependent on the state for their sustenance. During the Ottoman era, they received salaries and support from the state, enabling them to perform their religious duties. This financial dependence continued into the early years of the Republic, where state funding played a crucial role in maintaining the clergy's livelihoods. By controlling the financial resources allocated to religious institutions, the government exerted influence over the clergy's activities and decisions. This arrangement restricted the clergy's autonomy and aligned religious functions more closely with state objectives, marking a decisive shift in the role of religion within Turkish society (Nassaj and Bahrani, 2015, p. 9). In essence, religious affairs were controlled by different branches of the state to prevent the emergence of an autonomous religious sphere, as exemplified by the Ministry of Education's responsibilities.

In 1924, Atatürk established the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) to oversee religious matters. This institution was designed to ensure that religion remained under state control and aligned with the principles of secularism. The historical formation of *Diyanet* illustrates that the Turkish conception of secularism (*laiklik*) represents the state's control of religion rather than a strict separation of state from religion. Frequently, *Diyanet* acted as the guardian of the existing regime, providing Islamic legitimacy to it. As a state apparatus, *Diyanet* securitised government policies and made them undebatable matters of high politics (Öztürk, 2019, p. 4).

Atatürk went further by closing religious orders and institutions, such as Sufi lodges (*tekkes*), in 1925. This weakened the influence of religious leaders over educational and social life, as religious orders often maintained their own schools and played significant roles in local communities (Fabbe, 2019, p. 85).

Atatürk also initiated the translation of the Qur'an into Turkish, making it more accessible to the general population. These measures were part of Atatürk's broader vision to modernise Turkey and reduce the influence of religion in public life, promoting a secular national identity (Wilson, 2009). However, there is no evidence to suggest that Atatürk planned to establish institutions or an Islamic university to transform traditional Islam into a modern and secular version. Instead, his reforms included closing religious schools (*madrasas*) and establishing a unified national education system that was fundamentally secular. Atatürk's emphasis was on promoting a secular education that aligned with his vision of modernisation rather than fostering a reformed Islamic education (Berkes, 1964).

Only a few specialised institutions were allowed to continue Islamic education, specifically for training religious leaders. Even these institutions operated under strict government oversight to ensure their curricula aligned with secular principles, contrasting sharply with the autonomy enjoyed by religious education under the Ottoman Empire. Atatürk's goal was not merely to diminish Islamic influence in public life but to ensure that Turkey's future leaders, including religious leaders, would be educated within a state-controlled, secular framework supporting his vision of a modern Turkish identity (Bellafiore, 2016, p. 7).

It can be argued that secularisation in education system operated mainly through institutional centralisation and state-directed civic narration, rather than through the systematic teaching of Islam as an academic field open to interpretive plurality and structured critique. Analyses of early Republican history textbooks show that Islam was commonly presented through a single authorised historical account aligned with nation-building aims, which limited opportunities for students to encounter competing interpretations or to practise reasoned debate about religious authority (Zorlu Durukan, 2015; Ersanlı, 2002). Studies of citizenship and civic-education materials similarly underline that the curriculum prioritised disciplined republican subject formation and loyalty to the state, displacing clerical influence in formal schooling without institutionalising sustained critical inquiry into religion (Salmoni, 2004). Scholarship on later decades also shows that religion did not disappear from the educational field but was reintroduced and channelled through state-recognised formats, including religious schooling pathways and regulated religious instruction, which could preserve religious socialisation while keeping critical engagement bounded (Pak, 2004; Özgür, 2012).

Thus, Atatürk's secularisation reforms led to the marginalisation of religious institutions primarily in urban areas, where new courts, schools, and state offices were concentrated and where the secular elite was socially and professionally rooted. The Hanafi school's emphasis on social peace and compromise may have eased the accommodation of these changes in cities, especially among educated middle classes who benefited from republican reforms. In rural regions, however, traditional social structures remained strong: religious authorities were central to everyday life, state institutions were weakly present, and people had little voice in shaping the reform agenda. Secularism was introduced from above, under strict military oversight and with limited public participation, creating a secular urban elite that struggled to connect with rural and religious constituencies. As a result, many villagers and conservative segments came to perceive secularism not as a shared democratic project but as an elitist imposition. They continued to follow Islamic norms, rely on local religious leaders, and keep their distance from state institutions. This pattern helped sustain higher levels of religiosity in rural areas and reinforced the contrast with the more secularised urban centres, laying a social basis for later political and cultural polarisation (Koberidze, 2024; Yapp, 1991).

Moreover, in 1940, Turkey's rural population constituted approximately 80% of the total population, amounting to around 17.8 million people (Statista, 2020). In 1960s, Turkey's adult literacy rate was approximately 40% and by end of 1970s, 62%, according to World Bank data (World Bank, 2025). It can be inferred that the rural literacy rate would have been significantly lower than the national average, as rural areas historically lag behind urban areas in education and literacy due to less access to schooling and other resources.

Despite Atatürk's secularisation policies, the transition to multi-party politics after 1946 allowed religious constituencies to re-enter the political arena. The Democrat Party's victory in 1950 marked a turning point: it relaxed strict Kemalist controls, including restoring the Arabic *adhan* and expanding religious activities, thereby opening space for religiously conservative voters to mobilise (Azak, 2008; Dokupil, 2002).

In this context, Necmettin Erbakan's *Millî Görüş* (National Outlook) movement emerged in the late 1960s as the main ideological platform for Turkish political Islam, combining a distinctly Turkish–national outlook with Sunni-Hanafi moral renewal, social justice and economic independence (Mammadov, 2020; Yang and Guo, 2015). On this basis, Erbakan founded the National Order Party (MNP) in 1970, followed by the National Salvation Party (MSP) in 1972, the first explicitly Islamist parties to gain parliamentary representation and participate in coalition governments during the 1970s (Mammadov 2020; Yavuz, 2003). These parties laid the organisational and

electoral groundwork for the post-1980 Welfare Party, which became the principal vehicle of political Islam in Turkey in the 1990s (Yilmaz 2012).

Islamist movements like *Millî Görüş*, often inspired by or aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, began influencing political discourse and society, with growing connections to pan-Islamic movements, including those in Egypt. These groups, supported by networks like the *Naqshbandi* and other Sufi orders, helped integrate Islamist political ideologies, aligned with Hanafi jurisprudence, into broader political movements (Yavuz, 2003).

The rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP further solidified this Islamist connection, which has continued till current time. In the 21st century, Turkey has also hosted conferences and meetings where Muslim Brotherhood figures and sympathisers have discussed questions of Islamic governance and political participation, reinforcing intellectual and political exchanges between Turkish Islamists and Brotherhood-oriented networks. (Anadolu Ajansı, 2022).

Comparative Analysis of Religion and Secularisation in Iran and Turkey

Both the Pahlavi government in Iran and Atatürk's government in Turkey pursued assertive secularism, most visibly through restructuring education to curtail clerical authority and delimiting religion's role in public institutions. In theoretical terms, these reforms reflect functional differentiation, the separation of religious and state spheres, highlighted by secularisation theorists, but their mixed outcomes also show that legal-administrative change does not straight forwardly produce durable secular norms. Inglehart and Welzel's culture theory (often called the Human Development or Values Change theory) helps explain this gap. According to them, socio-economic modernisation is necessary but not sufficient for democracy unless it is accompanied by shifts in cultural values (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010, p. 33). Democratisation correlates with the rise of self-expression values, autonomy, tolerance, freedom of choice, and civic participation, which supply the normative foundation for pluralistic institutions (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010).

It can be argued that while modernisation typically reduces religious authority, this effect can be muted or reversed when there is little opportunity for critical engagement with religious ideas. Thus, state's policy in marginalising religion excluding religious discourse from public education can prevent the natural evolution of religious thought, preserving traditional beliefs in their original form.

In both Iran and Turkey, religious discourse was either strictly controlled or completely excluded from educational settings, hindering the development

of a modern understanding of religion. However, the dynamics in Iran were notably different due to the significant influence of the Shi'a clergy.

In Iran, the state faced a powerful and resistant Shia clergy that opposed secularisation, prompting the government to make more direct attempts to modernise religious studies. While secular schools advanced nationalism and modern science, religious education remained largely under clerical control and continued to transmit traditional Shia doctrine. Reza Shah, and later Mohammad Reza Shah, were unable to fully integrate or discipline the principal Shia institutions, which therefore retained significant autonomy and authority. As noted above, state efforts to build university-level programmes in Islamic studies did little to displace clerical influence. In this context, Shia tradition regenerated within seminaries and religious networks; combined with persistently high illiteracy rates in the mid-20th century, this preserved a reservoir of religious mobilisation that collided with state-led reforms and contributed to the revolutionary rupture.

In Turkey, Atatürk's policies centralised religious authority under state institutions rather than liberalising it. Following this, religious education in modern contexts was removed, and Islam was redefined within the framework of a secular-nationalist agenda.

After Atatürk's death in 1938, religious education was gradually reintroduced in state schools, but it was carefully regulated by the government. The curriculum promoted a controlled, standardised version of Islam that aligned with the secular state's values. This was different from a secular, non-denominational approach, which allows for a broader, more comparative study of religion. In modern societies, religious education served to expose students to the religious heritage of their society, and over time it broadened to cover a variety of world religions. Turkey's state-sanctioned religious education (when it returned) focused on Sunni Islam, with limited discussion of other religions or branches of Islam. This latent influence later contributed to the re-emergence of Islamist political movements in the 1980s, as traditional religious beliefs, preserved by families and communities, became influential in the public sphere once more. Consequence relegating religion to the private sphere.

In both Iran and Turkey, state policies sought to marginalise religion, especially by restricting its public expression and relocating it to private or tightly managed domains. Such containment insulated belief from revision, because doctrines shielded from open debate adapt more slowly to modern, pluralistic norms. The strategy modernised parts of the state apparatus, but it left popular religiosity largely intact. In Iran, the privatisation of religion enabled Shia institutions to retain traditional authority while limiting the

emergence of new, publicly contested interpretations, conditions that later facilitated the Islamic Revolution. In Turkey, the state incorporated Islam into a controlled framework aligned with secular nation-building; yet this administrative redefinition did not generate a substantively modernised theology, and traditional currents persisted, reappearing in the political arena from the 1980s onward. What was missing in both countries was a public discourse on Islam: broad, inclusive debate that engaged society and ended the clerical monopoly over religious interpretation.

Conclusions

In conclusion, state-led secularisation by authoritarian governments pursued through modernisation did not produce lasting cultural change in how religion was viewed or placed in social life. In both Iran and Turkey, religion re-emerged in politics, revealing the limits of these policies. The core problem was that reforms were largely from above and embedded in restrictive law, without the wider value change that Inglehart links to sustained modernisation. Secular and modernised schooling did expand, but not broadly or deeply enough to reach the whole population, and policy changes in education often clashed with entrenched value structures.

Moreover, by marginalising religion and restricting religious discourse in public education, both states also unintentionally preserved traditional beliefs: insulated from critical inquiry, they did not adapt. They later returned with force when state control weakened. This amounted to a conservative modernisation—administrative and legal change without commensurate cultural transformation. The cases suggest that durable modernisation requires public engagement and space for critical religious debate in schools and the public sphere.

The outcomes diverged in form but not in logic. In Iran, shrinking public religious discourse under the Pahlavis created a vacuum in which Shia clerics reasserted authority, culminating in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In Turkey, while a revolution did not occur, the absence of a public culture of religious pluralism enabled the resurgence of political Islam from the 1980s onwards. Overall, without broad-based shifts in values, especially towards self-expression and secular-rational orientations, top-down secularisation remains vulnerable to reversal.

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