



A geopolitics of drinking: Debating the place of alcohol in early republican Turkey



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ABSTRACT

Following contemporary shifts in geopolitical scholarship that interrogate perspectives on identity, culture, and everyday life, this article confronts contestations over the place of alcohol in early republican Turkey. Debated today in terms that mirror the headscarf question, our study establishes a basis for scrutinizing this topic by focusing on the nation-state's first deliberations over prohibition, transpiring in the first session of the Grand National Assembly. Like the current push to intensify regulation of alcohol, 1920s prohibitionism brought together an array of narratives that included but also exceeded Islamism. In particular, progressive public health advocates provided crucial support for the narrow passage of a prohibition law that lasted until Kemalists consolidated their rule. Amid this discourse, competing players interpreted differently the ongoing American prohibition experience and deployed conflicting narratives to bolster their positions. Relying upon proceedings from the early parliament and other primary sources, this article about the place of alcohol contributes both to analyses of ongoing affairs within Turkey and to progressive geopolitical engagements with matters of governance and public space, regulation and prohibition, public health, and secular-religious rivalries.

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Beyond Winston's hiccup: towards a geopolitics of drinking

Illicit or licit, intoxicants are geopolitical. Implicated in foreign affairs, in the conduct of governance, and in the biopolitics of our daily lives, alcoholic beverages are a medium for observing international relations, expressions of national culture, and matters at other scales down to that of the individual citizen. In other words, despite the seeming ubiquity of alcohol in the histories and folklore of geopolitics as practiced (e.g., as the purported cause of either Churchill's hiccup/sneeze while drawing the Jordanian-Saudi border or another British official's mapping of the Indo-Bangladesh enclaves and exclaves, or as "America's secret weapon" in the 1943 meeting of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin at the Tehran Conference), its past and present consequence has been substantial. At localized scales, the presence/absence of alcohol is a decisive factor in societal and individual perceptions of legality,

morality, and safety, with highly varied contrasts along lines gendered, racial, and class-based, to name but a few. State engagements with alcohol also differ and fluctuate through time; prohibited by some states, it is consumed openly within the territories of others. However, even where drinking seems ever-present, regulatory measures exist as mechanisms of moral authority, as means to safeguard wellness or maintain order, as instruments for taxation, or as some combination thereof.

In his geopolitics primer, Klaus Dodds identified "two distinct understandings" of the term. The first is enmeshed in histories of policy-making limited to a global system of states and strategic exercises of power therein (2007, p. 4; see also Sidaway, Mamadouh, & Power, 2013), and associated works inform intoxicant studies—apart from the above-noted anecdotes, as with the significance of rum in accounts of Europe's seaborne empires, Britain's nineteenth-century Opium Wars, and America's ongoing war on drugs. Within this 'classic' geopolitics gaze, both Ottoman and republican Turkey long constituted focal points as key objects and objectives, figuring prominently in constructs like the Great Game, the Eastern Question, the Straits Question, and in the Truman Doctrine's definition of a Cold War landscape. Likewise, policy-driven and Kissingeresque traditions of research about Turkey centered on 'geopolitical' concerns like Turkish/Turkic identity (e.g., Landau, 1981, 1995) and the republic's posture in foreign affairs (e.g.,

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Fuller, 2008; Fuller & Lesser, 1995; Fuller, Lesser, Henze, & Brown, 1993).

In marked contrast, Dodds' second view reflected an approach charted out as early as the mid-1980s. It promoted social analysis and critical theory (e.g., Hepple, 1986; ÓTuathail, 1986) and came to be known as critical geopolitics, though it has come to encompass more broadly inquiries known as popular, feminist, banal, radical, and progressive geopolitics. Initially concerned principally with challenging the origins and steadfastness of the first tradition (Jones & Sage, 2010; cited by Dodds, Kuus, & Sharp, 2013, p. 5), over time, this perspective evolved to consider perceptions and representations of the world and how these images vary by place and by cultural, political, religious, and other orientations and agendas. Attempting to progress beyond the traditional geopolitical encounters with Turkey, we would see works like those of Secor (2001), Bilgin (2007), and others either taking the early approach to task to innovating new questions and trajectories of analysis. An approach that facilitates inquiries of identity, popular cultures, and both state and non-state actors (Dodds, 2007, pp. 5–17), we employ this reckoning of geopolitics to analyze the religious, socio-medical, economic, and political arguments surrounding alcohol in the early Turkish republic. Indeed, the geopolitical import of alcohol—and of its production, branding and marketing, and consumption—is such that, concluding an earlier geopolitics text, Dodds provided a “quiz” interrogating readers' capacities to decipher a Keo beer bottle's nationality and cartographic significance (i.e., from its label), a product of Cyprus (2000, pp. 159–160).

Linking place, power, and identity, we identify alcohol and its consumption as vital factors in Turkey's geopolitical past and present. Addressing histories of the republic, anthropologist Jenny White noted two “key symbols were drinking alcohol and the open display of women's hair” (2009, p. 5). Dimensions of the cover/headscarf/veil issue—to include its (counter-)geopolitical relevance—have been researched by political geographers (e.g., Gökarksel, 2012; Gökarksel & Secor, 2010, 2012; Secor, 2001, 2002), but alcohol's geopolitical significance remains an untapped project (except in one recent study confronting both covering and alcohol within a post-secular Turkey; Gökarksel & Secor, 2015). As we demonstrate in this article, a geopolitics of alcohol was implicated in the Eastern Question, in debates over Anatolia's ethno-religious minorities, Turkish nationalism, and the place of Islam, and in the politics of public health and demography. Moreover, as revealed by current events in Turkey, the alcohol question is still central within religious-secular tensions and thus provides unique opportunities to engage with today's geopolitics of public health and population, regulationist/prohibitionist policies, taxation, civil liberties, and rights to public space (i.e., essentials of governance and biopolitics; cf. Evered & Evered, 2015a).

Indeed, these issues were forefront in May and June 2013, when international attention focused on Turkey, ruling PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). This scrutiny arose from protests over plans to demolish green space in Istanbul's Gezi Park and redevelop it into an Ottoman-styled shopping mall. Symbolisms of the park—and ensuing protests and state reactions—came to represent a range of reasons why broad (yet disparate) segments of Turkey's population object to Erdoğan and the AKP. Among issues coinciding with this experience, state proposals to limit the place of alcohol within the ostensibly secular nation-state's public sphere were divisive. Viewed by many Turks as an Islamist incursion upon civil liberties, this affair also alarmed observers in the West and elsewhere. While AKP politicians contend their laws constitute no absolute prohibition, statements by Erdoğan conveying that *rakı* (Turkey's anise-flavored alcohol, similar to *arak*, *ouzo*, and *sambuca*) and beer were not the country's national beverages (instead proclaiming that alcohol-free, yogurt-based *ayran* is the

nation's drink of choice) did little to assuage suspicions (Evered & Evered, 2015a). Yet this debate (prompting T-shirt sales that featured beer mugs and proclaimed, essentially, “Cheers Tayyip!”; see Fig. 1) is only the most recent of many regarding the place of alcohol. As Secor established over a decade ago with regard to the “local channels” that constitute a “feminist counter-geopolitics of Islamism” in the face of secularism (2001, p. 208; cf. commentary on Secor's thesis in Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 173, and note broadly comparable works on the notions of anti-geopolitics, resistance in geopolitics, and a geopolitics of counter-narratives, as in ÓTuathail, 1996; Routledge, 1996; Evered, 2011), today's acts of drinking, producing, or advertizing alcohol—or even referencing it at demonstrations through shouts, signs, or T-shirts—render collectively a particular geopolitics of discontent and dissent in opposition to the alleged authoritarianism, Islamism, and/or neoliberal populism of Erdoğan's Turkey.

The geopolitical significance of alcohol, however, is no recent manifestation. As we reveal in this study of 1920s Turkey, its contested place is a crucial lens for viewing historically the state's interactions with its population and the wider world, interrogating the nation-state and its limits in governing, and scrutinizing how the republic framed its conduct. Identifying social and political positionings of alcohol, we also discern its relevance as both symbol and commodity (themes underscored in afore-cited geopolitical scholarship on Islam and headscarves). Thus expanding our notion of geopolitics “beyond how and with what consequences states use force against each other” (Kearns, 2008, p. 1599; cf. Dixon, 2014), we continue a tradition of moving past a “Middle East” as framed by policymakers and scholars in post-9/11 terminologies of political Islam and discern issues not dissimilar from those contributing to the “Arab Spring” (cf. Swyngedouw's linking of popular geopolitics in Egypt's Tahrir Square and those in Taksim Square/Gezi Park; 2014). Compelled to consider the “progressive” geopolitics of contemporary everyday life (cf., Bayat, 2013), we address related imperatives to turn to the historical record and analyze *past* popular geopolitics, society-state engagements, and alternative political narratives both as matters of significance unto themselves and as relevant in constituting today's geopolitical concerns.

Beyond providing a progressive Middle East geopolitics, our study contributes to alcohol scholarship generally and within geography (e.g., DeVerteuil & Wilton, 2009; Holloway, Jayne, & Valentine, 2008; Holloway, Valentine, & Jayne, 2009; Jayne, Holloway, & Valentine, 2006; Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2011; Lewis, 2007; Valentine, Holloway, & Jayne, 2010; Valentine, Holloway, Jayne, & Knell, 2007; Wilton & Moreno, 2012). While existing geographies contend largely with Western societies and states—omitting generally many of the considerations connecting alcohol with broader scales (e.g., nation-state or global), we engage with a geopolitics of alcohol both as variously constructed *and* contested in an Islamic society and as influenced by national and international agendas and processes. Though works on alcohol and Islam exist, these typically concern Muslim immigrants in the West (e.g., Pakistanis in England; Valentine et al., 2010; Jayne et al., 2011; Valentine et al., 2007), derive from other disciplinary perspectives (e.g., Georgeon, 2002; Matthee, 2005, 2014; Deeb & Harb, 2013; Powell, 2004), or function as applied studies of alcoholism, substance abuse, and related issues, like treatment or domestic violence (e.g., Al Marri & Oei, 2009; Abu Madini, Rahim, Al-Zahrani, & Al-Johi, 2008; Albrithen, 2006; cited in Hames, 2012). Moreover, other studies acknowledging drinking among Muslims treat it more so as religious transgression or as linked with criminality (e.g., Zarinebaf, 2010, pp. 100–105, 122–140). In short, few studies situate alcohol's everyday place in Muslim societies; doing so, however, reveals intriguing contrasts *and* continuities with other, better-known historical cases. For example, in America's early twentieth-century

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