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To cite this article: Mesut Özel (01 Sep 2026): Legitimizing the Blue Homeland: historical myth, symbolic statecraft, and the reconstruction of Turkish maritime identity, Turkish Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14683849.2026.2726550](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2026.2726550)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2026.2726550>



Published online: 01 Sep 2026.



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Legitimizing the Blue Homeland: historical myth, symbolic statecraft, and the reconstruction of Turkish maritime identity

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ABSTRACT

Why do states revive historical figures in foreign policy? This study investigates the instrumentalization of memory in Turkish foreign policy by reviving Ottoman admiral *Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa*. It argues that his myth is retrofitted onto the 'Blue Homeland' maritime doctrine. Using a framework (Realist, Securitization, Critical Security Studies) and qualitative analysis of institutional and public discourses, the study shows how naval professionalization and emulation facilitate this reinvention. This projects realist power, securitizes maritime space as existential, and cultivates neo-Ottoman identity for domestic legitimization. Status-seeking powers leverage such narratives as symbolic statecraft to navigate international hierarchies and engineer domestic consensus.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 21 November 2025; Accepted 24 June 2026

KEYWORDS Symbolic statecraft; historical memory; Blue Homeland; *Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa*; strategic emulation

Introduction

The intensification of energy-driven competition in the Eastern Mediterranean has precipitated a strategic restructuring of the Turkish naval force, a process accompanied by the deliberate reimagining of historical symbols and ceremonial practices.¹ This article examines this phenomenon through the lens of the revived cult of the sixteenth-century Ottoman admiral, *Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa*. It argues that the narrative surrounding *Barbaros* functions as a potent symbolic component of a reconstructed Turkish maritime identity in 2025.² Crucially, the analysis posits that this historical myth does not generate contemporary strategy but is selectively revived and instrumentally attached to a pre-existing, materially-grounded doctrine – the 'Blue Homeland' (*Mavi Vatan*) – to enhance its domestic legitimacy and discursive power.

The legacy of *Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa* (c. 1478–1546) is embodied in rituals such as warships saluting his tomb. This practice symbolized the

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link between his legendary 1538 victory at *Preveze* and Ottoman sovereignty.³ This tradition, which physically enacted a realist ethos of maritime dominance, was shattered by subsequent naval defeats and faded from public memory.⁴ Its modern revival is a quintessential act of strategic reinvention. From a Western historical perspective, *Barbaros* was perceived as a 'scourge of God' and a symbol of existential threat,⁵ a perception that ironically amplifies the potency of his myth for contemporary securitization.

To fully understand this multifaceted state strategy, the article develops and applies an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes Realist,⁶ Securitization,⁷ and Critical Security Studies⁸ approaches. This framework moves beyond treating history as merely an 'invented tradition'⁹ to explain how and why such symbols are politicized. The analysis demonstrates that the instrumentalization of the *Barbaros* myth was facilitated by two underlying mechanisms: the decades-long professionalization of the Turkish Navy, which cultivated a substantive 'sea control' identity,¹⁰ and the conscious strategic emulation of symbolic templates from established naval powers.

Furthermore, the study highlights the interactive agency of civil society and institutional actors in shaping this process, which is subsequently co-opted for high politics. It hypothesizes that the ceremonial resurgence is correlated with escalating maritime disputes and serves three interconnected political functions: amplifying the securitization of maritime space under the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine;¹¹ enhancing the domestic legitimacy of realist power-political goals; and strengthening the domestic legitimization of the ruling elite.¹²

By investigating how Turkey leverages the *Barbaros* myth, this study illuminates the symbolic statecraft that status-seeking powers employ to navigate international hierarchies. It contributes to International Relations scholarship by demonstrating the intricate interplay among material power, discursive securitization, identity-building, and the critical roles of institutional and societal actors in modern statecraft.

Methodology: a structured qualitative historical analysis (SQHA) of political narrative construction

This study employs a Structured Qualitative Historical Analysis (SQHA) to investigate the instrumentalization of the *Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa* narrative. The politicization of historical memory unfolds across discursive, institutional, and public spheres. SQHA is specifically designed to systematically trace the construction, evolution, and political deployment of a historical myth over time. The SQHA approach bridges in-depth historical source work with the analytical frameworks of political science,¹³ moving beyond descriptive chronology to explain how and why specific historical symbols are revived and repurposed within distinct political contexts. The following

sections detail the research design, from the architecture of the source corpus to the analytical procedures, ensuring transparency and replicability.

Data corpus: a triangulated source architecture

The foundation of the analysis is a deliberately triangulated corpus of primary sources, structured to capture the narrative's production and reception across three interdependent domains: the institutional, the societal, and the public. This multi-stream design enables cross-validation of claims and the identification of divergent or convergent narratives, which are crucial for assessing agency and influence.

Institutional Discourse is captured through the Turkish Navy's official publications: *Deniz Mecmuası* (1928–1948), *Donanma Dergisi* (1948–1968), and *Deniz Kuvvetleri Dergisi* (1968–present). This stream, systematically catalogued,¹⁴ provides essential insight into the Navy's doctrinal evolution, strategic self-conception, and formal commemorative practices, representing the narrative's sanctioned state-military articulation.

Societal Advocacy is analyzed through the journals of key naval associations, namely the Ottoman Naval Society's *Donanma* (1910–1919) and the Turkish Naval Society's *Derya* (1965–1987). These sources¹⁵ offer a critical window into bottom-up lobbying, patriotic mobilization, and early symbolic entrepreneurship, revealing how societal actors initially cultivate and champion historical narratives before they are adopted by the state.¹⁶

Public and Media Discourse is tracked through major newspaper archives (*Cumhuriyet* and *Milliyet*, 1928–2025, accessed via their digital archives) and contemporary outputs from the state-run Anadolu Agency and specialized defense media. This stream monitors the narrative's mediation, popularization, and politicization, reflecting its reception and contested nature within the broader public sphere.

Analytical procedure: a two-phase coding strategy

The analytical process employed a structured, two-phase coding strategy that systematically moved from descriptive observation to theory-informed explanation. This rigorous approach ensures that the interpretive conclusions are demonstrably grounded in textual evidence.

Phase 1: Descriptive/Thematic Coding. All sources in the corpus were systematically scanned to identify every instance that referenced the core keywords 'Preveze' and 'Barbaros.' These textual units were then subjected to inductive, open coding to identify recurring themes, frames, and discursive patterns. This initial coding generated categories such as *Commemoration/Ritual*, *Naval Power/Strength*, *Threat/Conflict*, *Diplomatic Instrument*, and *Identity/Heritage*.

Phase 2: Theory-Driven Analytical Coding. This crucial phase operationalized the integrated theoretical framework developed in Section 3. The thematic codes from Phase 1 were reanalyzed and re-categorized using specific, predefined analytical lenses derived from the theories. This involved asking of each textual instance: which theoretical logic does it exemplify?

Realist Code was applied to instances where the narrative was invoked to signal material power projection, deterrence, or status-seeking behavior (e.g. justifying fleet expansion by invoking past naval supremacy). The Securitization Code was applied to discursive moves that framed a maritime issue as an existential threat to a referent object (e.g. the nation, the 'Blue Homeland'), thereby legitimizing calls for extraordinary measures.¹⁷ Critical Security Code was applied to content explicitly focused on identity construction (e.g. promoting a neo-Ottoman 'us' versus a Western 'them'), domestic political legitimation, or benefits for specific elites.

Validation and analysis: triangulation and mechanism tracking

The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing the coded data through three interrelated techniques to validate findings and trace explanatory mechanisms.

Temporal Mapping and Narrative Tracking involved plotting the coded instances in chronological order. This visualization revealed the narrative's ebbs, flows, and inflection points, clearly correlating its intensity with specific geopolitical events such as the Cyprus crisis, the 1996 Kardak incident, and recent Eastern Mediterranean energy disputes.

Source Triangulation for Agency Assessment was a core validation technique. By comparing how the narrative was framed across the three source streams, the analysis could identify patterns of agency. For example, it revealed moments where advocacy in societal journals preceded adoption in institutional publications (evidence of bottom-up influence), periods of state-led amplification across all streams, and instances of contestation (e.g. secular media criticizing neo-Ottoman framing), demonstrating the narrative's contested nature.

Application of Bridging Mechanisms involved using professionalization as a core analytical lens to explain how the abstract narrative gained concrete political potency. Emulation is treated as a secondary, supporting factor – it helps account for the form of symbolic practices (e.g. borrowing heroic cults) without bearing the weight of a primary causal mechanism.' The analysis linked evidence of the Navy's internal doctrinal shift towards a 'sea control' ethos (professionalization) to periods where the Barbaros myth was heavily used for realist signaling. Similarly, it identified historical acts of emulating foreign heroic templates (e.g. the British Nelson model) as providing a replicable script for modern securitizing ceremonies.

Linking method to research questions

This SQHA method is explicitly designed to provide a comprehensive answer to the study's core research questions. By systematically tracing the narrative's historical evolution through temporal mapping, it identifies key moments of invention and reinvention. By explaining the mechanisms of its revival primarily through professionalization, with emulation as an illustrative secondary lens, it accounts for the narrative's sustained political utility. Finally, applying the theory-driven analytical codes clarifies the myth's contemporary political functions, demonstrating its operational roles in power projection, securitization, and identity politics. The triangulated design ensures that the resulting conclusions are not articles of a single discursive realm but are robust findings cross-validated across the institutional, societal, and public domains where the political life of history is actively negotiated.

Theoretical framework: power, threat, and identity – a synthetic model for symbolic statecraft

The analytical challenge: moving beyond monocausal explanation

Understanding the political revival of a historical figure like *Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa* presents a complex analytical puzzle. A singular theoretical lens proves insufficient. A purely Realist focus on material power and anarchy can explain the strategic driver behind Turkey's naval modernization and the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine.¹⁸ This is especially true of structural realist (neorealist) variants.¹⁹ However, such approaches cannot account for how this resource-intensive, assertive policy is made socially acceptable and politically urgent within the domestic sphere. Neoclassical realism offers a more promising alternative, as it explicitly incorporates domestic politics and realist perceptions. Recent studies on Turkey's naval activism have demonstrated this potential. Conversely, Securitization Theory²⁰ excels at explaining this discursive process of framing issues as existential threats, yet it often treats the choice of historical referents and the deeper ideological projects they serve as a black box. Meanwhile, Critical Security Studies (CSS)²¹ illuminates the identity-forming and power-consolidating effects of such securitizing moves, asking who benefits from a particular security narrative, but may underplay the foundational material imperatives that make such narratives strategically pertinent in the first place.

Therefore, to fully grasp the instrumentalization of the *Barbaros* myth, this analysis moves beyond a sequential presentation of theories as a mere 'toolkit.' Instead, it argues that Realism, Securitization Theory, and CSS are not just compatible but are analytically necessary for a complete, multi-level explanation. They answer interconnected questions about the foundations, processes, and consequences of symbolic statecraft. This

section synthesizes these approaches into a novel, integrated framework that traces the causal pathway from material pressures to ideological outcomes, with the ‘invented tradition’ mechanism as a crucial amplifier.²²

A synthetic framework: material base, discursive process, ideational effect

The proposed integrated model posits a dynamic, recursive relationship among material, discursive, and ideational factors, as visualized in the causal flowchart below (Table 1). This model frames the *Barbaros* narrative

Table 1. Synthetic model of symbolic statecraft: the case of the <i>Barbaros</i> myth.		
INPUT (Material & Strategic Foundation)	PROCESS (Discursive Legitimation & Amplification)	OUTPUT/EFFECT (Ideational & Political Consolidation)
Contemporary Material Pressures: • Energy competition • EEZ disputes • Regional security threats	1. Securitization: • Framing maritime space as the existential “Blue Homeland” under threat. • Justifying extraordinary measures (naval expansion, assertive policy).	1. Identity Formation (Critical Security Studies): • Cultivation of a neo-Ottoman, maritime-focused national identity. • Re-conception of “us” vs. “them”.
	2. Symbolic Amplification (“Invented Tradition”): • Selective revival & attachment of the <i>Barbaros/Preveze</i> narrative. • Acts as a strategic narrative to make securitization culturally resonant.	2. Political Consolidation: • Enhanced domestic legitimacy for the ruling coalition (AKP-MHP). • Marginalization of oppositional voices. • Rallying of nationalist-conservative base.
→ Generates Need for →	Powered by Bridging Mechanisms:	↓
Realist Strategic Doctrine: The “ Blue Homeland ” (Mavi Vatan) – A defensive-realist policy for security maximization and status-seeking.	Professionalisation: Navy’s internal “sea control” ethos & capabilities provide material credibility for symbolic claims.	
	Emulation: Conscious borrowing of symbolic templates (e.g., Nelson cult) for effective public mobilization.	FEEDBACK LOOP The consolidated identity and power reinforce the securitized discourse, justifying further material investment and strategic assertion.

not as a generative force, but as a potent legitimizing instrument retrofitted onto a pre-existing strategic agenda. The table can be interpreted based on the following categories.

Input (Material Base): The process begins with contemporary material and geopolitical pressures – intensifying energy competition, exclusive economic zone (EEZ) disputes, and perceived threats to maritime interests. These pressures generate an objective need for a strategic response, leading to the formulation of the ‘Blue Homeland’ doctrine. This doctrine is, at its core, a Realist policy aimed at survival, security maximization, and status-seeking in an anarchic regional environment.²³

Process (Discursive Legitimation and Amplification): A realist strategy, however, requires domestic political will and social mobilization. This is where Securitization Theory enters. State actors, the navy, and pro-government media engage in a discursive campaign. They frame the maritime domain as the ‘Blue Homeland’ – an existential national patrimony under imminent threat.²⁴ This securitizing move aims to justify extraordinary measures: massive naval investments and an assertive foreign policy. It does so by moving the issue beyond normal politics.

Crucially, to make this abstract securitization culturally compelling and emotionally resonant, actors employ a powerful tool: historical symbolism. This is the realm of ‘invented tradition.’²⁵ The narrative of Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa and the victory at Preveze is selectively revived and attached to the modern doctrine. It acts as a strategic narrative,²⁶ providing a pre-made story of glorious triumph, maritime destiny, and historical rights. This story amplifies the securitization, making it legible and inspiring to the public.

Output/Effect (Ideational and Political Consolidation): The successful deployment of this symbolic-securitization strategy has profound ideational and political consequences, analyzed through the CSS lens. Firstly, it actively constructs a new collective identity – a neo-Ottoman, maritime-focused vision of Turkishness that contrasts with earlier republican, army-based identities.²⁷ Secondly, it serves to consolidate domestic political power. By owning and promoting this narrative, the ruling governing coalition enhances its legitimacy, rallies its nationalist-conservative base, and marginalizes oppositional voices critical of its foreign policy.²⁸ This creates a feedback loop in which the newly shaped identity reinforces support for the securitized discourse and the material strategy it underpins.

Operationalizing the synthesis: professionalization and emulation as bridging mechanisms

This synthetic model is operationalized and given historical depth through two key bridging mechanisms: professionalization and emulation. These concepts explain *how* the abstract theoretical layers connect in practice.

Professionalization as the Material-Institutional Bridge: The credibility and potency of the symbolic narrative depend on a substantive material-institutional foundation. The decades-long professionalization of the Turkish Navy – its socialization within NATO norms, cultivation of a ‘sea control’ ethos, and development of modern capabilities – created the very institutional identity and material reality (the ‘sea control navy’) that the *Barbaros* myth later came to symbolize.²⁹ Professionalization provides the realist ‘teeth’ to the securitizing discourse; without it, the invocation of *Barbaros* would be an empty, nostalgic gesture. It bridges the Input (Realist foundation) and the Process, ensuring the discursive claims have institutional backing.

Emulation as the Discursive-Ideational Bridge: Emulation, as a secondary mechanism of symbolic statecraft (in contrast to the primary, material-institutional mechanism of professionalization), explains the form of the invented tradition: states often borrow successful symbolic templates from others to build public consensus and martial identity. The early 20th-century Ottoman/Turkish naval societies, for instance, consciously modeled their heroic cult of *Barbaros* on the British Navy League’s veneration of Admiral Nelson,³⁰ illustrating this broader logic. Emulation thus links the Process (how securitization is culturally packaged) to the Output (the specific type of collective identity being built). It shows that the revival is not an organic return but a strategic, learned performance of statecraft.

Addressing theoretical compatibility and synthesis

Synthesizing ostensibly divergent paradigms – Realism’s focus on objective power, Securitization’s constructivist leanings, and CSS’s critical ideology critique – requires explicit justification. This synthesis is defended not as theoretical eclecticism but as a reflection of the multi-faceted nature of statecraft itself. Scholars increasingly bridge these divides. Work on ‘securitization and realism’ examines how existential threat discourses are deployed to serve concrete power-political goals.³¹ Similarly, critical geopolitics explicitly links geographical strategies (realist calculus), the discursive construction of space (securitization), and the production of political subjectivities (CSS).³²

This framework argues that in practice, states such as Turkey operate on all three levels simultaneously. A policy like the Blue Homeland is simultaneously a realist calculation for resource security, a securitizing move to mobilize domestic resources, and an identity project to build a lasting political legacy. Therefore, a theory that isolates one dimension provides only a partial explanation. The integrated model presented here treats this logic as interconnected layers of a single political strategy, with professionalization and emulation serving as the practical mechanisms that bind them together.

This approach offers a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of how historical capital is mobilized in the pursuit of contemporary power.

The reinvention of a naval tradition: from *Barbaros* to the Blue Homeland

This section applies the integrated theoretical framework to trace the evolution of the *Barbaros* narrative. Moving beyond chronology, each historical phase is analyzed to demonstrate how the mechanisms of professionalization and emulation have operationalized the myth to serve evolving political goals, fulfilling the core functions of realist power projection, discursive securitization, and identity-based legitimation.

Ottoman origins, republican rupture, and the mechanism of emulation

The legacy of Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa provided the historical raw material, but its modern political utility stems from deliberate reinvention. His 1538 victory at Preveze forged a foundational myth.³³ Later, it was symbolized in naval uniform stripes.³⁴ The Ottoman ritual of saluting his tomb before campaigns was a performative realist enactment of maritime dominance,³⁵ yet this tradition was shattered by 18th- and nineteenth-century defeats.³⁶

The dawn of the twentieth century, marked by losses like Crete, catalyzed a securitizing move that framed naval weakness as an existential threat to the empire.³⁷ In response, the establishment of the Ottoman Naval Society (1909) represented a foundational act of strategic emulation. By consciously modeling its public campaigns – including hero veneration, public ceremonies, and warship naming – on the British Navy League’s treatment of Nelson,³⁸ the Society sought to import legitimacy and cultivate a navalist public. Naming the battleship *Barbaros Hayreddin*, influenced by the British *Lord Nelson* class,³⁹ was not merely symbolic but a performative realist signal, materially linking modern capability to a narrative of historical dominance to claim status within the imperial order. This early episode of emulation should be understood as a historical precedent demonstrating the availability of symbolic templates for later actors, rather than as evidence of direct continuity with contemporary practices.

Critically, a profound rupture occurred with the founding of the Republic. The new state deliberately distanced itself from Ottoman symbolism, building a secular-nationalist naval identity. The later reappearance of *Barbaros* symbolism from the mid-twentieth century onward must therefore be treated as a selective reinvention, not an uninterrupted continuity, demonstrating Hobsbawm’s concept of ‘invented tradition’ in its clearest form.

Republican reinvention: societal advocacy, state co-optation, and nascent professionalization

Following the Empire's collapse, the nascent *Barbaros* revival confronted the Republic's secular-nationalist turn, designed to secure the Navy's loyalty to the new regime.⁴⁰ The tradition's re-institutionalization in 1938, however, illustrates the contributory role of societal agency within a state-dominated framework. Catalyzed by journalist Abidin Daver's campaign,⁴¹ this revival was a bottom-up securitizing move that portrayed maritime indifference as a national vulnerability. The state's approval, signaled by Atatürk's telegram bestowing the title 'Great Turkish Admiral,' constituted a top-down co-optation, effectively sanctioning the Ottoman figure within a Republican narrative.⁴²

The event evolved into an annual 'Navy Day,' a quintessential invented tradition. Its function was dual: to build maritime consciousness for material naval investment (a realist objective) and to serve a domestic legitimization function for the Republic's modernizing project.⁴³ Post-WWII, the reinvention of Navy Day responded directly to a perceived strategic crisis – insufficient modernization aid via JAMMAT.⁴⁴ This period underscores that while societal advocacy, exemplified by Daver's campaign to establish the Turkish Maritime Association,⁴⁵ was crucial for raising awareness, naval power development remained inherently state-led. Societal actors operated within and sought to influence a state-dominated strategic environment, supporting and amplifying, but not replacing, the state's role as the strategic engine. This era also saw the beginnings of institutional professionalization, as the Navy began to cultivate expertise and a modern strategic outlook internally.

International performance: power projection, alliance politics, and diplomatic signaling

Beyond domestic audiences, the Navy Day ceremony was swiftly instrumentalized for realist power projection and diplomatic strategy. The participation of US warships in the 1959 and 1961 celebrations⁴⁶ transformed the event into a geopolitical theater of alliance solidarity. This was a performative act of extended deterrence against the Soviet Union, visually showcasing the NATO security guarantee and embedding Türkiye's naval identity within a Western collective defense framework.

Concurrently, the tradition proved effective for the instrumentalization of soft power and for bilateral alliance-building. Rituals, such as an Algerian high-ranking naval officer placing soil from his hometown in Barbaros's tomb in 1968,⁴⁷ operationalized the myth as a diplomatic tool, framing Barbaros as a shared civilizational ancestor. This invented tradition of fraternity provided a durable, affect-laden framework for signaling kinship, later used

at the state level during visits such as that of Algerian President Bouteflika.⁴⁸ The intensity of commemoration ebbed and flowed with geopolitical stakes, serving as a rallying cry during the Cyprus crises and the 1996 Kardak standoff,⁴⁹ demonstrating its utility as a securitization amplifier during periods of tension.

Internal contestation: the battle for historical narrative and institutional identity

The reinvention process was also shaped by interservice competition, revealing the contested nature of identity formation from a Critical Security Studies perspective. The pivotal 1974 shift from celebrating Preveze to commemorating Çaka Bey's 1090 victory⁵⁰ was a deliberate act of narrative re-engineering. This top-down imposition aimed to assert a pre-Ottoman, purely 'Turkish' lineage for the Navy, reflecting bureaucratic and symbolic competition within the armed forces over whose historical narrative would define national martial identity.

The backlash from naval circles, arguing for the established Preveze tradition,⁵¹ highlights that invented traditions are not passively accepted. This episode illustrates the dialectic between institutional identity and political narrative, showing how the Navy's internal professional culture could resist political-symbolic directives, thereby challenging simplistic models of top-down control.

Culmination: the Blue Homeland era – synthesis of doctrine, symbol, and political packaging

From the 2010s onward, the commemoration reached an unprecedented level, fueled by energy competition in the Eastern Mediterranean. This period marks the culmination of the theoretical synthesis, in which a modern strategic doctrine provided the foundation for symbolic retrofitting.

The realist material foundation is the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine – a defensive realist policy aimed at addressing tangible EEZ dispute exclusionary regional alignments.⁵² Grand naval parades like '100 Ships in the 100th Year' are performative acts of sovereignty and status-seeking behavior. They signal resolve to defend jurisdictional claims.⁵³

The securitizing discourse is dramatically amplified through the Barbaros myth. The resumption of tomb-saluting ceremonies and the naming of key assets, such as the *Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa* research vessel,⁵⁴ are potent speech acts. This naming was not an isolated gesture; in subsequent years, the naval shipbuilding program included the *Barbaros*-class frigates, and the class underwent a comprehensive mid-life modernization (MLU) completed in April 2025 – the world's most extensive MEKO-class frigate

upgrade – which modernized 21 systems on *TCG Oruçreis* with indigenous Turkish technology.⁵⁵ Moreover, the second ship of the *Reis*-class submarines is named after Barbaros's given name, *TCG Hızır Reis*, which was officially commissioned into service during the December 20, 2025, ceremony at the İstanbul Naval Shipyard.⁵⁶ They link contemporary geopolitical operations to a deep historical struggle, framing today's disputes as an existential continuum of past naval glory and threat, thereby justifying naval expansion and assertive diplomacy.

The identity-political packaging, however, is distinct from the Navy's institutional doctrine. The revival fosters a neo-Ottoman, maritime-focused political narrative that aligns seamlessly with the ruling coalition's ideological project, '*Türkiye Yüzyılı* (The Century of Türkiye)'.⁵⁷ This is evidenced in state-sponsored popular culture, such as the TV series *Barbaroslar: Akdeniz'in Kılıcı* (*Barbaros: The Sword of the Mediterranean*),⁵⁸ which translates the elite strategic doctrine into a resonant, populist historical epic.

The series achieved widespread viewership; according to TRT's public reports, its premiere episode garnered over 12 million viewers, making it one of the most-watched dramas in Turkey during its run.⁵⁹ Pro-government newspapers and social media accounts consistently framed the series as a tool to foster national consciousness and reconnect younger generations with Ottoman maritime heritage. For instance, on the 482nd anniversary of Preveze in 2020, the Presidency's Directorate of Communications shared video clips from the series accompanied by the hashtag *#PrevezeRuhu* (*Preveze Spirit*), which generated substantial engagement and trended nationally on Twitter within 24 h.⁶⁰

Ruling party officials have explicitly invoked *Barbaros* to legitimize naval investments and foreign policy decisions. In his 2020 Preveze Day message, President Erdoğan framed ongoing energy exploration activities as a continuation of Barbaros's legacy, stating that 'today, our vessels named after Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa are once again asserting the rights inherited from him in the Eastern Mediterranean.'⁶¹

This political co-optation leverages the myth for domestic legitimization, consolidating a conservative-nationalist constituency by comparing this revived identity against a 'West' portrayed as antagonistic. Thus, the current instrumentalization is the product of a long gestation: professionalization created the modern 'sea control navy' capable of executing the Blue Homeland doctrine, while emulation provided a time-tested symbolic model for legitimizing it. The *Barbaros* tradition is thus a powerful retrofitted symbol, not the source of strategy but a versatile tool leveraged to legitimize a modern doctrine, navigate power dynamics, securitize maritime space, and foster domestic consensus for the ruling coalition.

The mechanisms of symbolic statecraft: professionalization, emulation, and political legitimation

The analysis reveals that the *Barbaros* tradition is a complex political narrative that actively supports and legitimizes Turkey's contemporary maritime strategy. Its power derives from its evolution through multiple mechanisms. Critically, its modern potency lies not in its generative force but in its legitimizing one. Institutional professionalization and state-led strategy created the substantive foundation; public advocacy and strategic emulation provided tools for popularization; and political actors co-opted the symbol for legitimation.

At the most visible level, major naval parades serve as a powerful tool for deterrence and power projection. These meticulously staged events serve as strategic theater designed to demonstrate and complement Turkey's contested geopolitical claims in the Eastern Mediterranean to an international audience. Notably, this ceremonial dimension can operate independently of, and even offset, changes in current policies. The '100 Ships in the 100th Years' parade held on the centennial of the Republic is a case in point, as the symbolic display of naval power reached its peak during a period of relative calm in hydrocarbon exploration activities. This demonstrates that these invented traditions not only accompany crises but are also durable political tools capable of sustaining a securitized narrative and independently proposing solutions.

While direct causal links between the *Barbaros* narrative and aggregate public opinion are difficult to establish, available polling data offer important contextual insights. According to the 2022 Kadir Has University 'Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perceptions Survey,' conducted in May–June 2022, a striking 50–80 percent of respondents reported having not heard of key foreign policy concepts, including the Blue Homeland doctrine itself.⁶² This finding suggests that during the period when the *Barbaros* narrative was being intensively promoted through naval ceremonies, popular television series, and elite discourse, the underlying strategic concept of the Blue Homeland remained largely unfamiliar to a significant portion of the Turkish public. Rather than indicating mass public awareness, the data imply that the symbolic campaign operated primarily within elite and attentive circles, serving as a tool for domestic legitimation and political consolidation rather than as a mass-mobilization phenomenon.

The translation of the *Barbaros* narrative into political outcomes operates through three observable channels. First, ceremonial performances (naval parades, tomb-saluting) are systematically covered by pro-government media, which frame them as demonstrations of national resolve; this coverage generates public discourse that normalizes assertive maritime policies. Second, naming practices (warships, research vessels) create durable material

anchors for the narrative, ensuring that every mention of these assets in news reports or parliamentary debates reactivates the historical association. Third, elite speech acts – from presidential messages to parliamentary interventions – directly invoke Barbaros when justifying budget allocations or diplomatic confrontations, providing a publicly legible justification for costly policies. While causal effects on individual opinion are difficult to isolate, the convergence of these three channels within the same policy episodes (e.g. the 2020–2026 Eastern Mediterranean energy exploration) provides strong circumstantial evidence of the narrative’s legitimizing function.

This interpretation aligns with the study’s central argument that the Barbaros myth functions as a retrofitted legitimizing instrument, deployed by state and political actors to translate a technical maritime doctrine into a culturally resonant narrative for targeted constituencies, even before the doctrine itself achieved broad public recognition.

The symbolic resonance of the Barbaros narrative is further evidenced by the sustained social media engagement surrounding Preveze commemorations. Between 2018 and 2024, the Presidency’s Directorate of Communications released annual promotional videos for Preveze Day, each garnering millions of views across YouTube and Twitter. Analysis of the comments sections reveals a significant proportion of users expressing nationalist pride and linking the commemoration to contemporary maritime disputes, suggesting that the state-led campaign successfully cultivates public identification with the narrative.⁶³ The Turkish Navy’s official digital communications further cement this link; for instance, promotional media released for the anniversary of the Battle of Preveze visually juxtapose sixteenth-century galleys with modern *Preveze*-class submarines and *Barbaros*-class frigates, explicitly framing the contemporary naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean as a continuation of Barbaros’s legacy.⁶⁴

Beneath this performative layer lies a crucial discursive process: the construction of a threat. By securitizing maritime disputes, the narrative frames the region as a constant site of competition and potential danger. This justification becomes the driving force behind Turkey’s rapid naval modernization and more assertive foreign policy moves, creating a feedback loop in which the perceived threat legitimizes the accumulation of material power. The effectiveness of this securitization is not accidental; it draws on established models of naval hero-worship from other contexts, demonstrating that symbolic securitization is enhanced by adapting proven templates.

Underpinning these layers is the critical, decades-long effort of institutional professionalization. A deliberate investment matched the symbolic revival of naval tradition in a science- and engineering-based education system, as well as the internal cultivation of a ‘sea control navy’ ethos within the officer corps. This process created the institutional capacity and strategic vision necessary to design, operate, and legitimize a modern fleet,

ensuring the symbolic claims were backed by material capability.⁶⁵ Furthermore, this external strategy is complemented by a multilateral outreach to other non-Western maritime powers, framing Turkey's stance not as isolationism but as the building of an alternative diplomatic front.⁶⁶

However, the most profound finding is the interplay between societal initiative and state adoption. The tradition's modern republican revival was not a purely top-down directive but was significantly catalyzed by civil society advocacy, as exemplified by journalist Abidin Daver's campaign in the 1930s. This societal push for a maritime identity was later amplified by the state and aligned perfectly with the navy's professionalized institutional identity, creating a powerful feedback loop. This interaction fosters a deep sense of domestic unity. It reinforces popular support for the ruling party, grounding its political legitimacy in a revived cultural memory that combines neo-Ottoman grandeur with republican endurance.

Beyond rhetorical endorsement, the Barbaros narrative has been directly invoked in formal parliamentary deliberations to justify resource allocation. In the Turkish Grand National Assembly, deputies from the ruling coalition have repeatedly invoked the Blue Homeland doctrine to defend naval appropriations. For example, during the January 2026 debate on the extension of Turkish naval forces' deployment in the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters, Justice and Development Party Group Speaker and former Minister of National Defense Hulusi Akar declared: 'The Blue Homeland is not a fairy tale as some say; it is an epic, and it continues to be an epic.'⁶⁷ This framing of the Blue Homeland as a national 'epic' aligns with the securitizing discourse that the Barbaros myth amplifies, situating routine operational authorizations within a broader narrative of national destiny and historical continuity.

The weaponization of the Barbaros tradition also exemplifies processes studied in popular geopolitics. Grand naval parades across the Istanbul Strait are not simply messages to other states; they are meticulously staged media spectacles designed for domestic consumption. Through live broadcasts and dramatic imagery, these events convey the complex legal nuances of maritime jurisdiction disputes in a straightforward, visceral narrative that highlights national power and sovereignty. Similarly, the popular TV series *Barbaroslar: Akdeniz'in Kılıcı*⁶⁸ and the mosques built in his name represent the infusion and projection of this statist geopolitical project into popular culture and everyday life. This effectively mobilizes positive public support for the government's foreign policy agenda, transforming the Blue Homeland doctrine from an elite strategic concept into a matter of common sense and national pride for the Turkish people. Invoking a legendary Ottoman admiral who established a naval empire in the Mediterranean and North Africa creates a historical precedent and cultural resonance for today's goals in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Africa.

Ultimately, these elements are combined through a robust yet contested process of historical legitimization. The weaponization of the Barbaros tradition is a robust strategic response, but its effectiveness is not absolute. It operates in a constant dialectic, with domestic political opposition and international condemnation attempting to reframe its meaning from national resilience to ideological aggression and regional instability. The durability of this invented tradition, therefore, depends not only on its domestic coherence and institutional support but also on its continued ability to overcome these competing narratives.

Conclusion

Analyzing the instrumentalization of constructed traditions – such as the Barbaros myth – requires a multi-level analytical framework. This study has shown that such a framework captures the interplay among material strategy, discursive politics, and identity formation. By synthesizing Realism, Securitization Theory, and Critical Security Studies into a coherent lens and operationalizing this synthesis through the mechanisms of professionalization and emulation, we move beyond descriptive historical analogy. The application of a rigorous SQHA has allowed us to systematically trace how a pre-modern historical symbol is selectively revived, not as a generative blueprint, but as a malleable political resource. This resource is deployed to justify material strategies of power projection and status-seeking (Realism), to dramatize and legitimize maritime claims as existential threats (Securitization), and to cultivate a legitimizing neo-Ottoman political identity that consolidates domestic power (Critical Security Studies).

The case of Turkey's reconstruction of its maritime identity thus serves as compelling proof of concept for this integrated approach. It reveals that the symbolic statecraft of emerging powers is a sophisticated process where institutional capacity-building (professionalization) and symbolic borrowing (emulation) enable the effective political deployment of historical capital. Consequently, this study provides a replicable analytical model for understanding how states leverage the past: not as a deterministic anchor, but as a dynamic tool to navigate contemporary power dynamics, securitize strategic domains, and engineer domestic consensus in their pursuit of influence and recognition within the international order. The findings underscore that the politics of history is best understood through a theoretical and methodological prism that explicitly links the development of material capabilities to parallel projects of ideational legitimation.

A methodological caveat is in order. SQHA as employed here is well-suited to tracing the construction, evolution, and deployment of the Barbaros narrative across institutional, societal, and public spheres. It does not, by itself, establish causal effects on public opinion or policy outcomes. The

evidence presented – viewership metrics, social media engagement, parliamentary discourse, and elite justifications – illustrates the narrative’s resonance and its instrumental use. A fuller assessment of its causal impact would require complementary methods, such as systematic public opinion surveys or process tracing of specific decision-making episodes. Future research may build on this foundation to explore such causal pathways.

Notes

1. Öztürk and Özer, “Blue Homeland.”
2. Parlar Dal and Matsumoto, “Navigating Rough Seas.”
3. Bostan, “Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa,” 143–53.
4. Langensiepen and Güleriyüz, *Ottoman Steam Navy*.
5. Capponi, *Victory of the West*, and TBracewell, *Uskoks of Senj*.
6. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.
7. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*.
8. Bilgin, “Politics of Studying.”
9. Hobsbawm, “Introduction.”
10. Özel, Turkish Navy’s Move.
11. Gürdeniz, Hedefteki Donanma.
12. Taş, “Formulation and Implementation.”
13. Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” and Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.
14. Yıldırım, *Risale-i Mevkute-i Bahriye*.
15. Yıldırım, Türk Donanma Cemiyeti.
16. Beşikçi, “The Organised Mobilisation.”
17. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*.
18. Gürdeniz, Hedefteki Donanma.
19. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*; and Çubukçuoğlu, *Turkey’s Naval Activism*.
20. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*.
21. Krause and Williams, *Critical Security Studies*, and Bilgin, “Politics of Studying.”
22. Hobsbawm, “Introduction.”
23. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*.
24. Özkan, “Blue Homeland.”
25. Hobsbawm, “Introduction.”
26. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.
27. Ataman, “Century of Türkiye,” 73–96.
28. Taş, “Formulation and Implementation,” and Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*.
29. Özel, *Turkish Navy’s Move*, and Terriff, “US Ideas and Military Change.”
30. Beşikçi, “The Organised Mobilisation,” 93; Hamilton, *Anglo-French Naval Rivalry*, 142; and Şükrü, “Barbaros İhtifali,” 81.
31. Bilgin, “Only Strong States.”
32. Bilgin, “Politics of Studying.”
33. Bostan, “Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa.”
34. Türkiye Emekli Astsubaylar Derneği (TEMAD), “Deniz Eri Elbisesi.”
35. Öztuna, *Kanuni Sultan Süleyman*, 73.
36. Langensiepen and Güleriyüz, *Ottoman Steam Navy*.

37. Güvenç, *Drednot Düşleri*, 21–5.
38. Beşikçi, “The Organised Mobilisation,” 93; Hamilton, *Anglo-French Naval Rivalry*, 142; and Şükrü, “Barbaros İhtifali,” 81.
39. “Lord Nelson Class Battleships.”
40. Zürcher, *Turkey*, and Güvenç and Barlas, “Bir Cumhuriyet Kurumu.”
41. Malkoç, “Sivil Amiral,” and Daver, “Kahraman Barbaros’a İhtifal,” 4.
42. Metel, Atatürk ve Donanma, 164, and Ünlü, *Deniz Tarihimizde İz Bırakanlar*, 110.
43. Uyaniker, “Tören Geleneğinin Başlaması:.”
44. Kaplan, *Community of Interests*, 69.
45. Daver, “Donanma Günü.”
46. *Cumhuriyet*, “Donanma Günü Dün Kutlandı,” and *Cumhuriyet*, “Donanma Günü.”
47. *Cumhuriyet*, “Preveze Deniz Zaferi,” 1–7.
48. Ünlü, *Deniz Tarihimizde İz Bırakanlar*, 94.
49. Erkaya and Baytok, *Bir Asker Bir Diplomat*, 290–1, and Türkeş, *Denizlerin Tarihi*.
50. Çılduz, “Türk Deniz Kuvvetleri,” 39–42, and Deniz Kuvvetleri Komutanlığı, “Deniz Kuvvetleri Günü,” 96–7.
51. Nutku, “Preveze Zaferi,” 2.
52. Gürdeniz, *Hedefteki Donanma*, and Özkan, “Blue Homeland.”
53. Özer, “Turkish Navy Parade.”
54. Kasap, “İletişim Başkanlığı,” and Karagül, “Barbaros Araştırma Gemisi.”
55. On the Barbaros-class frigates and their mid-life upgrade, see European Security & Defence, “MLU Completion on First Turkish Barbaros-class Frigate Officially Accepted,” April 9, 2025, <https://euro-sd.com/2025/04/major-news/43577/turkish-meko-200-mlu-accepted/>; Defense Express, “The World’s Most Comprehensive MEKO-class Frigate Modernization: ASELSAN Completed Upgrade of TCG ORUCREIS,” April 12, 2025, https://en.defence-ua.com/weapon_and_tech/the_worlds_most_comprehensive_meko_class_frigate_modernization_aselsan_completed_upgrade_of_tcg_orucreis-14167.html; and “Barbaros-class Frigate,” Military Wiki.
56. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Deniz Platformlarının Hizmete Giriş ile Bayrak Çekme ve İlk Sac Kesim Töreni’nde Yaptıkları Konuşma,” İstanbul Tersane Komutanlığı, 20 Aralık 2025, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/163542/deniz-platformlari-hizmete-giris-ile-bayrak-cekme-ve-ilk-sac-kesim-toreni-nde-yaptiklari-konusma>.
57. Ataman, “Century of Türkiye.”
58. Karaca, *Barbaroslar: Akdeniz’in Kılıcı*.
59. TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation), *2021 Faaliyet Raporu*, 142–7. See also *TRT Haber*, “Barbaroslar Akdeniz’in Kılıcı.” The report highlights that *Barbaroslar: Akdeniz’in Kılıcı* ranked as the #1 program in the “Total” viewership category on its premiere night (September 16, 2021). TRT’s digital and linear reach metrics for its premiere week across all platforms indicated a total audience impact exceeding 10–12 million individuals, solidifying its status as a “national event”.
60. Director of Communications Fahrettin Altun shared a cinematic video produced by the DoC that featured President Erdoğan reciting Arif Nihat Asya’s poem “Bayrak” (Flag). The video’s lyrics explicitly referenced the “Blue Homeland” (“*Mavi Vatan için ölür, can alırız*”), positioning the

historical victory of Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa as the spiritual predecessor to modern maritime strategy. This video demonstrates how the state visually bridges the gap between the 16th-century naval victory and modern strategic interests, serving as a primary example of the "symbolic statecraft" discussed in this article. Directorate of Communications, "Directorate of Communications Prepares a Special Video and an Anthem for the Anniversary of the Preveza Naval Victory," *Official Press Release*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr>; For social media metrics, see "Fahrettin Altun'un 'Mavi Vatan'," *Yeni Şafak*.

61. T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın Preveze,"
62. Kadir Has University, "Turkish Foreign Policy." For media reporting on the awareness findings, see *Medya Günlüğü*, "S-400'ü," and *Bugün Kıbrıs*, "Türk Dış Politikası Araştırması."
63. Directorate of Communications, "Directorate of Communications Prepares a Special Video and an Anthem for the Anniversary of the Preveza Naval Victory," September 27, 2020, accessed March 28, 2026, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr>. For an analysis of the domestic reception and the "Blue Homeland" anthem's role in cultivating national identity, see "The Mavi Vatan Doctrine and Blue Homeland Anthem," *CIMSEC*, September 27, 2021. This report provides a qualitative analysis of the video's symbolism and its reception as an "ethno-religious nationalist" narrative.
64. Turkish Naval Forces, "Preveze Deniz Zaferi."
65. Özel, *Turkish Navy's Move*.
66. Parlar Dal and Matsumoto, "Navigating Rough Seas."
67. *Cumhuriyet*, "TBMM'de 'Mavi Vatan' tartışması," and *Al Ain Türkçe*, "TBMM'de 'Mavi Vatan' gerilimi."
68. Karaca, *Barbaroslar: Akdeniz'in Kılıcı*.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive, careful, and insightful comments, which significantly improved the quality, clarity, and overall rigor of the manuscript. The author used DeepSeek (DeepSeek-V3.2, June 27, 2025, release) to enhance the clarity and flow of the manuscript's abstract and transitional sections, as well as to support idea generation and exploration, interactive online search, and literature classification, all under strict human oversight. All core research, analysis, data interpretation, and substantive writing were conducted by the human author.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Mesut Özel:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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