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Syed Ahmet Arvasi's Alternative Model of Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights Syed Ahmet Arvasi's ideas on an alternative model of nationalism that integrates Islam and ethnic peculiarities without discriminating against minority groups. It also explains the profound importance of Islam in Turkish society and how Islamic identity is interwoven with Turkishness. It reveals that Turkey has taken very concrete steps towards Westernisation, and as a result, it has lost the characteristics of traditional Turkish and Islamic culture. It also reveals, based on Arvasi's ideas, that the ethnocentric European nationalism ideology is foreign to the Turkish people, who for centuries have adhered to multi-ethnic Islamic identities and values. The ideology of modern Turkish nationalism demanded a secular approach, creating a nation based on material and Western values, consequently causing social discord and tensions. This study accordingly suggests, based on the ideas of Arvasi, that there should be a more inclusive alternative model of national cohesion for the Turkish nation. Also, Arvasi suggested that the basic ideology of the Turkish government was Islam. Therefore the Turkish nation's concept of nationalism must be inherently linked to Islam. In summary, for the Turkish nation to live in social harmony, Turkish nationalism should be based on social race and Turkish-Islamic culture.

Keywords: *Nationalism, Turkish Nationalism, Syed Ahmet Arvasi, Turkish Islamic Idealism, Social Race.*

INTRODUCTION

The 18th century was the period of the birth of nationalism in Europe and the end of the traditional importance of religion in European society. With the French Revolution in 1789 and its far-reaching consequences, the concept of the nation replaced the importance of religion in political and social lives, and this model was subsequently disseminated to the Muslim world. The concept of the nation became the instrument of modernity and secularism (Benedict Anderson, 2006). With the transformation of the Ottoman Empire, an Islamic form of government, into a secular nation-state, the Republic of Turkey was one of the most successful modern and secular nation-states that emerged from the Islamic world (Carter V. Findley, 2010).

Having initially considered maintaining a ceremonial caliph, Turkey ultimately abolished the institution (in 1924) and became a modern secular nation-state following the Treaty of Lausanne, when the Republic of Turkey officially declared its sovereignty on 29 October 1923. The first President of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, made radical changes in Turkey to make it a secular state within a short period (Suna Kili, 2008). Following these radical changes, the Turkish state thought itself meaningful in a Western and non-religious civilisational path (Hayati Tüfekçioğlu, 1992). In the newly established Republic of Turkey, religious identity was gradually replaced by nationalist elements (Aydın Erdoğan, 2018). Most importantly, the new national identity of the Turks was planned to be

formed by separating them from the affiliation with the East and Islam while attempting to establish growing connections with the West (Korkut Tuna, 1991). Consequently, official Kemalist nationalism formulated a new definition of the identity of Turkish citizens of the Republic of Turkey as those who “have adopted the ideals of the Republic, westernised, bound to the Turkish culture, as anyone who has Turkish and Turkish-speaking origin” (Ahmet Yıldız, 2001).

This new definition of national identity is inherently exclusive to the “Turkish,” openly imitating the European nationalist cultures and secularism while ignoring the traditional Islamic legacy of the Ottoman Empire. As a result of this new Western approach adopted by the Turkish government, various problems occurred gradually between the state and society. For instance, a Turkish religious scholar of that time, İskilipli Âtif Hodja, thought that this blind imitation of the West would be a disaster in the long run. In 1924 he published *Frenk Mukallitliği ve Şapka* (Westernisation and the (European) Hat). İskilipli Âtif Hodja consequently was arrested on charges of opposition to Hat Law, which came into force one year after the publication of this book, and was executed (Ethem Erkoca, 2016). The “Hat Law” No. 671 was adopted in Parliament on 25 November 1925. It obliged members and officers of the Turkish Grand National Assembly to wear Western hats. See, Seçil Akgün, “Şapka Kanunu,” Ankara Üniversitesi Dergisi, Vol.14 (1981), 50.

As a result, the Turkish people, who lived as Muslims for centuries under the Ottoman Empire, were deprived of their Islamic identity with the establishment of the new state (Republic of Turkey). The official policy of this new nation-state was nationalism. However, Turkey has numerous ethnicities, mainly Kurds, Circassians, and Laz. Thus, the official Kemalist nationalism of Turkish ethnic exclusivity is inherently irrelevant to the demographic nature of the population of Turkey itself. Moreover, until the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, Islam could unify all Anatolian Muslims around a common belief, culture, and identity regardless of ethnic, linguistic, or cultural differences (Soner Cagaptay, 2006). Unfortunately, this inclusive structure and tradition were actively destroyed in the scramble to assemble a Western European-style nation-state. In short, The scope of this ideology of nationalism, which emerged in the European model, has been a foreign model for the Turks, who have adhered to Islamic identity and values for centuries. Due to its non-inclusive nature, nationalism has caused problems of inequality, discrimination based on ethnic origin, and social hatred in Turkish society. Therefore, there was a need for a universal nation model that could unite society around religious ties, regardless of different ethnic, racial, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds.

METHOD

The purpose of this research is to highlight the methodology adopted by Syed Ahmet Arvasi and to understand how his method differs from the methodology of other Turkish nationalists. This article also tries to explain the reasons behind Arvasi’s methodology. The aims of this article were achieved through thematic content analysis of the author’s works. The primary sources of this research are the original books of Arvasi in the Turkish language, which are utilised to analyse his ideas and views on nationalism through a contextual, analytical method. This study uses Arvasi’s most significant books, including *Türk İslam Ülküsü I* (Turkish-Islamic Idealism I), *Türk İslam Ülküsü II* (Turkish-Islamic Idealism II), *Türk İslam Ülküsü III* (Turkish-Islamic Idealism III), *Doğu Anadolu Gerçeği* (Southeast Reality), and *İleri Türk Milliyetçiliğinin İlkeleri* (Principles of Advanced Turkish Nationalism). Causal and textual analysis methods are used to generate the research results and analyse these primary sources. Secondary sources, including books and journal articles, are also used to understand the thinker’s methodology.

TURKISH /KEMALIST NATIONALISM

In Asian and African countries, colonies of European states, nationalism emerged in response to Western imperialism, whether because these states did not want to accept the culture and civilization of the West or because national formations were more conducive to the colonial projects. However, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's nationalism differed from nationalism in Asian and African states as he aimed to obtain the advantages of Western civilisation without conceding to foreign domination. He wanted to raise the Turkish people to a commensurate level of modernity and civilisation. Atatürk turned Turkish nationalism from an ideological concept into a political movement during the Turkish War of Independence (19 May 1919 – 24 July 1923). Atatürk's idea of nationalism was considered rational and contemporary. Kemalist nationalism aimed to make Turkish society parallel and harmonious with modern states (İsmail Giritli, 1997). According to Atatürk, the ideology of nationalism was the solution to being in harmony with modern realities, nations, international contacts, and relations and protecting the Turkish nation's unique character and independent identity (Afet İnan, 2010). A politician Turhan Feyzioğlu (1922-1988) explained Atatürk's idea of nationalism accordingly:

We can describe Kemalist nationalism as a modernization nationalism or national modernization ideology. Kemalist nationalism tries to make the Turkish people modern and civilized. Thus, Atatürk has reformed many areas, from education to politics, to create a secular and contemporary nation. In addition, Kemalist nationalism is firmly attached to secularism. Individuals may have religious freedom in secular states, but the state cannot have a religion. The state is responsible for removing all obstacles to secularism and modernity. (Turhan Feyzioğlu, 1985).

The basic Ideology in the Idea of nationalism that developed with the Republic was the state's determination to its nation. Thus, the Turkish nation's definition was created by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as follows: unity in political existence, unity of language, unity of the country, unity of race and origin, historical kinship, and moral kinship (Afet İnan, 2010). Religion is conspicuous by its absence from this definition of nationalism. For Atatürk, the only fundamental elements necessary for the state not to break up was nationalism. According to him, the most crucial reason for the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire was related to the factor that the understanding of nationalism (i.e., Turkish supremacy) was lacking. He expressed these thoughts as follows:

Various societies within the Ottoman Empire always rescued themselves by embracing national beliefs and with the strength of the ideal of nationalism. When they kicked us out, we realised we were a nation separate from and foreign to them. They despised us at the moment when our strength weakened. We realised that our fault was that we forgot about ourselves. If we want the world to respect us, we must respect our nation (Gökmen Kantar, 2019).

The culture was emphasised as the most critical element in Turkish nationalism. Religion had to be redefined as a private matter of conscience between God and the servant, with no social aspect. Moreover, religion was removed from social life and actively suppressed in public life to the extent that men and women were compelled to don specific Western garments to attain Western civilisation. Thus, the basic nationalistic policies of the Republican period and understanding were established on the principles of what the Kemalists perceived as Westernisation and modernisation (Erol Güngör, 1987). The government has taken the following steps to implement the policies of nationalism:

1. Religion, a personal matter of conscience, should be withdrawn from the life of the state and society.

2. Institutions related to religion should not be effective in national life. To achieve this, it must be public that all evil is caused by what the clergy has done in the name of the religion.
3. It should be explained to the Turkish nation that we lagged behind Europe due to the dominance of the Ottoman sultans in the past.
4. Education must be secular and clear of religious elements (Erol Güngör,1987).

As a result, information about Islam in the courses taught in public schools was taught quite differently from traditional Islamic teaching and was based on something other than Islamic literature. For example, Islamic history textbooks of the 1930s described the Qur'an as "the book written by Muhammad himself." This understanding became common in these years and has removed the Quran's status from being a Holy Book revealed by God to an ordinary book written by a historical figure, Muhammad. Also, it was stated in the textbooks that the provisions of the Quran are not eternal but are subject to change. (İlker Küçükali, 2018).

Such changes confused a society that had been governed by religious rules and principles for centuries and was devoted to Islam. The destruction of religious symbols in society also caused a conflict between the public and the state, but the regime's violent repression stifled dissent.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF KEMALIST NATIONALISM ON TURKISH SOCIETY AND POLITICS

The results of Kemalist nationalist policies extend far beyond Atatürk's rule, and the problems that began during his regime have continued to the current day. The most obvious manifestation of these simmering tensions is the intermittent military and attempted coups (1960,1971, 1980, and 1997). Thus, attempts by the Turkish people to change their governance by democratic means were stifled over the decades.

The Republican People's Party formed by Atatürk added the principle of nationalism to the Constitution in 1937, just before the death of Atatürk. Thus, Kemalist nationalism became an official policy without any controversy. Atatürk died on 10 November 1938, and the next day, İsmet İnönü was appointed as his successor. (Kemal Karpat, 2009). During the İnönü period, Atatürk's ideas of republicanism and nationalist approach continued, and reforms became stricter, with a more fanatical interpretation of laicism. Any religious behaviour and speech have been deemed an action against secularism, and thus the state and many people were prosecuted due to anti-secular attitudes or utterances (Kemal Karpat, 2012). The public was unsatisfied with the government and its oppressive policies, reflected in the Presidential elections in 1950 when the Kemalist Republican People's Party lost its majority to the Democratic Party, founded by Celal Bayar (1883-1986). As a result, in 1950, the multi-party government period started in Turkey after the 27-year Republican People's Party regime founded by Atatürk (Bernard Lewis,2001). The 1950 election was thus a turning point in Turkish politics and society, and the Republican People's Party led by İsmet İnönü was transformed from the ruling party into an opposition force. However, the will of the society was not respected. On 27 May 1960, soldiers organised the National Unity Committee and staged a successful military coup, a triumph for secular nationalists. According to them, a new understanding of Turkish nationalism based on their religious and historical features would disappear with a coup, and the idea of Kemalist nationalism would again prevail in society (Kemal Karpat, 2009). In an interview with the *Cumhuriyet* (Republic) newspaper, dated 17 July 1960, Colonel Alparslan Türkeş (1917-1997), a member of the National Unity Committee, said that:

Atatürk's reforms declined during the Democrat Party period. Have you ever been to Anatolia recently? Women with Kara Çarşaf (black abaya) are everywhere. Turkish women wander everywhere with these embarrassing clothes. Turkish nationalism and the Turkish language also declined in the society. The Turkish language is one of Atatürk's greatest and most valuable gifts. The Quran should be read in Turkish, not Arabic. The Democratic Party betrayed Turkish nationalism and the Turkish language by allowing the Quran to be read in Arabic in the Turkish mosque (Rıfat Atay, 2018).

As a result, the Democratic Party was banished after the coup, and its chairman Adnan Menderes and his ministers, Fatin Rüştü Zorlu (1910-1961) and Hasan Polatkan (1915-1961) were executed. The army defended the idea that the Democratic Party and its members could not rule the country due to their anti-democratic, anti-secular, reactionary, and conservative perspectives. With the coup of 1960, the military showed that it would intervene in any power ruled by not secular parties. By carrying out the change of government using military force, it restored the Republican People's Party to power (Kemal Karpat,1959). The Republican People Party supported the coup because the party members knew they might not be able to win in elections and come to power in legal and democratic ways (Abdulvahap Akıncı,2014).

In the 1961 elections, the Republican People's Party won 173 deputies, with only 36.74 percent of the vote, which was insufficient to form a government. Two other parties, the Justice Party and New Turkey Party, claiming to be the continuation of the Democratic Party, also participated in the elections, and, despite military pressure on voters, they achieved good results. The Justice Party had 158 deputies, and New Turkey Party had 65 deputies. In such circumstances, usually, these two parties had to form the government, but the army would not allow this, and they commissioned the Republican People's Party to form a government. As a result, İsmet İnönü became the Prime Minister again. After that, all Democratic Party laws that allegedly opposed Atatürk's thoughts were cancelled. The army and the Republican People's Party achieved their goal (Kemal Karpat,1959).

In the 1980s, religious and ethnic conflicts caused by Kemalist nationalism became intensified. These conflicts were also reflected in politics. Turkey was in complete chaos at the parliamentary and public levels. In September 1980, the army made another military coup and took over the government. The military coup regime imprisoned those who raised alternative ideas to Atatürk's version of nationalism and society's problems related to ethnic problems. One of them was Syed Ahmet Arvasi (Oğuzhan Bilgin, 2018).

In sum, the social conflict and ethnic tensions caused by Kemalist nationalism continued after Mustafa Kemal's term. The Kemalist nationalism established by Atatürk was incompatible with the multi-ethnic Turkish society. As a solution to these problems, there was a need for a more harmonious concept of nationalism that encompasses everyone, regardless of their ethnicity, language, or religion.

SYED AHMET ARVASI'S ALTERNATIVE NATIONALISM MODEL AND POLITICAL THOUGHTS

Arvasi was a writer and philosopher of Kurdish origin. His title of "Syed" denotes that he was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammed (ﷺ). Arvasi's ancestors were Arabs who came to Anatolia from Baghdad during the reign of the second Ottoman Sultan Orhan Gazi (1281-1362). His ancestors settled in Arvas village south of Lake Van; therefore they were known as Arvasiler (those who are from Arvas). See, Cemalettin Perçemkaya, "Seyit Ahmet Arvasinin Eğitim ve Din Eğitimi ile İlgili Görüşleri ve Önerileri," (M.A. Thesis, Atatürk Üniversitesi, Turkey, 1999). He was one of the most influential

writers who looked for an alternative understanding of Turkish nationalism. He saw being a Turkish nationalist as a matter of faith and lived this way throughout his life. The basic philosophy of his life was to fight against the enemies of his religion and nation. Integrating the Islamic faith and morality with the nationalistic idea for him was the foundation to ensure the nation's happiness in this world and the hereafter (Syed Ahmet Arvasi, 2008a).

Arvasi argued that there is biological, racial, and ethnic diversity in the world and that Islam does not deny this. Although people are divided into different races and colours, all human groups are equal. He thus stated that it is wrong to see races as separate species in a hierarchy based on the differences in colour, skeleton, and skull shapes; he considered such superficial differences to be a cosmetic reality that enriches the human species. However, he strongly opposed the idea of racial superiority. According to Arvasi, race and lineage unity he played a significant role in forming nations. However, it is only possible and necessary for some nation members to be of the same race. Based on these facts, Arvasi refused to base Turkish nationalism on biological racism. He introduced the concept of social race, which consisted of a national community sharing a common history and cultural consciousness. According to him, a social race emerges as a sociological necessity from social, cultural, economic, and political unions. The Turkish social race has formed very quickly in history and is getting stronger gradually. Thus, he believed that Turkish nationalism should be evaluated with the concept of social race (Syed Ahmet Arvasi, 2008b).

Arvasi explained the concept of nationalism as the will of a nation to make itself strong and happy in terms of social, cultural, economic, and political organisation and independence. Nationalism addresses existential challenges for nations to exist and survive, but it is not a monopoly for certain privileged groups lording over other nations. It is a critical path drawn by national history, culture, and ideals. Policies and attitudes contradict the nation's conscience and national history, culture, and ideals and thus cannot constitute nationalism. There is no nationalism built by individuals or groups. Instead, nationalism is eponymously attributed to the entire nation, including its ethnic communities. Also, according to Arvasi, there is no culture and civilisation without religion. However, as he observed, a dominant perspective exists in Turkey that a person cannot simultaneously be a Muslim, Turkish, and civilised. Turkish nationalists devoted to their national and religious values as a part of their identity were seen as racist and reactionary. Warning the Turkish officials against this destructive, divisive, and alienating approach, Arvasi reminded Turkish nationalists that Islam and Turkishness are inseparable values in every aspect. Arvasi repeatedly argued that one of the basic principles of Turkish nationalism was the religion of Islam, and it is impossible to separate between Turkishness and Islam. Thus, a Turkish nationalism separated from Islam cannot be considered a real Turkish nationalist. Arvasi believed that Islam was the most significant factor that connected the members of the Turkish nation to other nations. Thus, The Turkish nation protected and glorified Islam and was its flag-bearer and defender for centuries. According to Arvasi, Islam rises whenever Turkishness rises too (Syed Ahmet Arvasi, 2008b).

For Arvasi, the Turkish nation has adopted Islam as a religion and an ideology for centuries and has kneaded its culture and civilisation with this spirit and faith. In this context, Turkish nationalism was seen as a movement that sought to glorify the faith and consciousness of Islam and create happiness for all Turks. Since Turkish nationalism was a national movement that originated in the history, culture, conscience, and needs of the Turkish nation, it should be considered as a worldview that must inevitably integrate the whole nation. The essential task of Turkish nationalism was to unite the nation with its faith, according to Arvasi. He argued that the approach towards nationalism determines the mindset by which nationalism is understood; thus, if we do not define Turkish nationalism according to the Turkish

religion, history, and culture, then Arvasi argues that all these concepts will be dissolved from Turkish society. In the worst case, if we define Turkish nationalism according to the Western mindset, then Turkish society will become a Western secular society (without the historical, cultural, and ethical roots of genuine Western nations), and will gradually forget about its Turkish Islamic culture (Syed Ahmet Arvasi, 2008c).

CONCLUSION

During the Republican period, Islamic elements were destroyed, and the new Turkish society was built based on Western and secular values. The phenomenon of nationalism officially created by the state was deliberately distanced from Islam and became an ideology utilised to transform Turkey into a modern Western state. Arvasi's idea of nationalism is an alternative to the official Kemalist concept of nationalism. The primary approach of Arvasi towards this issue was that the Republic of Turkey should create an identity based on Turkish national and spiritual values. According to Arvasi, Turkish nationalism must be within the framework of the Turkish-Islamic ideal. Arvasi claims that "Turkishness," in which national values are expressed, and "Islam," in which spiritual values are expressed, are the essential elements of Turkish society. Thus, the national identity of Turkish society (i.e., Turkish nationalism) should be based on Turkish Islamic Idealism.

When we look at the other types of nationalism in Turkey, it turns out that Arvasi is a more reasonable model whose understanding of nationalism is more compatible with Turkish society. For example, when we consider the nationalism idea of Nihal Atsız, well-known among nationalists in Turkey, the suitability of the model proposed by Arvasi emerges directly. According to Atsız, only those who believe in the superiority of the Turkish lineage can be Turkists. He also claims that a Turkish nationalist can only be from a Turkish ethnicity. However, this idea of Nihal Atsız is inherently problematic due to its overt doctrine of Turkish racial superiority, discriminating against and devaluing Turkish citizens who are from other minority ethnicities but who nevertheless are essential and active members of life in Turkey (Nihal Atsız, 2015). Syed Ahmet Arvasi is an example of this, as an ardent Turkish nationalist and an ethnic Kurd. Syed Ahmet Arvasi did not believe in the superiority of any race. Instead, he emphasised that there is no concept of a master race and sub-race among the races. Still, superiority can only be due to the level of *taqwa*, as per fundamental Islamic doctrine. As biological racism is divisive and disintegrating, Syed Ahmet Arvasi preferred to use the concept of "İctimāī Irk" (social race), based on the Islamic understanding and celebration of ethnic diversity and unity among all people.

In addition, this study explained Arvasi's recommendations on how the state, politicians, politics, and democracy can function to enable life with peace and justice. Arvasi explained these concepts by associating them with Islam because each state sets a policy according to its historical background and cultural values. The Republic of Turkey has its customs and traditions; it inhabited its lands due to the activities of its ancestors in the historical process, and the resultant inherited national and moral values must play a key role in creating a common Turkish identity. Islam gives a necessary form to this identity. In sum, many ideas presented by Arvasi are still relevant to modern times and can provide solutions to many problems in modern Turkish society. Also, Arvasi's alternative version of nationalism creates a new model of social cohesion that integrates Islam and ethnic features without discriminating against any minority group. Thus, these ideas should be studied thoroughly and made known to broader circles of local and international scholarship.

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