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# A Turkish Muslim Between Islamism and Turkish Nationalism: Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi [1932–88]

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**ABSTRACT** *Notwithstanding his enormous influence on the grassroots of the Turkish nationalist movement in its Islamic turn in the 1970s, Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi, a staunch nationalist and a pious Muslim at the same time, has remained an understudied intellectual. His oeuvre is left largely unexplored. He is either too simply associated with Türk-İslam Sentezi [Turkish-Islamic Synthesis] or treated as if the sole outcome of his intellectual labor was his three-volume Türk-İslam Ülküsü [Turkish-Islamic Ideal]. This article seeks to remedy this situation by studying critically his views on the particular issue of Turkish nationalism and Islam nexus based on his writings in their entirety.*

## Introduction

When Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) was criticized by a newspaper columnist for racism, a leading Turkish nationalist tried to counter the charge by referring to Seyyid [Sayyid]<sup>1</sup> Ahmet Arvasi, who claimed that he rejected racism and professed to be, at one and the same time, a fervent Turkish nationalist and a Muslim.<sup>2</sup> Arvasi, however, is scarcely known outside nationalist circles in Turkey. Overwhelming portion of what has been written about him is biographies and eulogies.<sup>3</sup> The dearth of scholarly work on Arvasi<sup>4</sup> is striking given the acknowledgment of the influence he wielded through his *Türk-İslam Ülküsü* [Turkish-Islamic Ideal, TII] formulation on the Turkish nationalist movement in the 1970s and the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The scant attention paid to Arvasi can be explained by the uneven emphasis accorded to Turkish-Islamic Synthesis [TIS] developed and propagated by the *Aydınlar Ocağı* [Intellectuals' Hearth]. This lopsided focus subsumed Arvasi under the all-too-easy rubric of TIS. In the only monograph on Arvasi, for example, Copeaux treated the TII and TIS as identical and regarded Arvasi as a TIS ideologue.<sup>6</sup> The unwarranted reliance in occasional writings on solely his book *Türk-İslam Ülküsü*, a collection of Arvasi's newspaper columns, at the expense of the sizable rest of his entire

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intellectual labor does not help the case either. Hence, the first objective of this paper is to unearth the TII from the deadweight of TIS. This would help dispel the monopoly TIS clamped on variations of Turkish nationalism and Islam nexus in Turkey in the second half of the 20th century.

The following objective of this paper emanates from Arvasi's dilemmas as an ideologue with loyalties to both the nation and the *ummah*, which appear to be more competing than complementary.<sup>7</sup> Trying to keep his allegiances to both entities Arvasi put himself in a situation where he had to answer the question a Muslim Arab nationalist had posed some decades earlier: Is it possible for one of us to be a loyal nationalist and a sincere Muslim, at one and the same time? Is there a fundamental contradiction between Arab nationalism in its precise scientific sense and true Muslim feeling? Does a contradiction and opposition lie in our saying "This man is a nationalist Muslim" or "This man is a Muslim nationalist," as when we say, "This man is an atheist believer" or "He is a religious atheist' ... ?"<sup>8</sup> Arvasi did not hesitate to answer this question in the negative. But did he experience any tension between these loyalties? If he did, how did he resolve the conflict between Islam as a universal religion and nationalism as a particular phenomenon? Did he fall into any contradiction while demonstrating compatibility between Islam and nationalism? Did his loyalty to the *ummah* amount to Islamism?

The overall discussion around these questions has significant bearings on the latest debates on the issue of religion and nationalism nexus in nationalism studies. A growing number of scholars argue against the replacement model today, which describes the relationship between religion and nationalism as one wherein nationalism replaces religion.<sup>9</sup> Instead, researchers in this field opt for adopting a more nuanced approach and seek modes of religion and nationalism connection.<sup>10</sup> One of these modes common to both Turkish nationalism and Arab nationalism (to its both *qawmiyya* and *wataniyya* varieties) is parochialization of Islam. "Much of the emotional power of nationalism in the Muslim world comes from the capacity of national movements to parochialize Islam and channel the force of Muslim faith into national commitments."<sup>11</sup> Because Arvasi follows the same path and Turkifies Islam, albeit for the second time and on religious ground this time, this paper cautions against discarding the replacement model.

### Arvasi and Islamic Turn in Turkish Nationalism

Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi was born in 1932 in Doğubeyazıt, Ağrı in Eastern Anatolia. His father Abdülhakim Arvasi, a public servant at the Turkish customs, should not be confused with famous Naqshbandiyya muse Sheikh Seyyid Abdülhakim Arvasi (1865–43), a later spiritual guide to famous Turkish poet and Islamist thinker Necip Fazıl Kısakürek.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding his ethnic Arab origins, Arvasi was an ardent Turkish nationalist. His unofficial affiliation with the MHP must have been a few years before the 1969 General Convention of the Republican Villager Nation Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi*, CMKP), a precursor to the MHP. He was involved in the intra-party debate concerning the new official emblem of

the party before that convention and picked the three crescents when Alparslan Türkeş, the party's leader, asked his opinion.<sup>13</sup> His very first book, *The Principles of Advanced Turkish Nationalism (İleri Türk Milliyetçiliğinin İlkeleri)*, was published in National Action (*Milli Hareket*) in 1965. More important was Arvasi's contribution to the expansion of the Islamic tone in Türkeş's doctrine of Nine Lights (*Dokuz Işık*). He wrote columns under the title "Türk-İslam Ülküsü" in *Hergün*, the party's official print, as well as in *Ülkücü Kadro*.<sup>14</sup> Teaching at İstanbul Atatürk Institute of Education (*İstanbul Atatürk Eğitim Enstitüsü*), a then Idealist stronghold, had put Arvasi inside "the first circle of the movement."<sup>15</sup> Arvasi officially joined the MHP in 1979 after being selected to MHP's General Executive Board (*Genel İdare Kurulu*) upon his nomination by his Islam-leaning fellows without his prior knowledge.<sup>16</sup> With these facilitators at his disposal, though, Arvasi was mostly influential at the grassroots level.<sup>17</sup>

When Arvasi joined the MHP, Islam had already started to become publicly more visible in Turkey. As is well known, the early Republican elite wanted to create a national identity on secular foundations, namely common language and history.<sup>18</sup> Islam, by the same token, was to be pushed back to the absolute privacy of individual conscience.<sup>19</sup> The early Kemalist elite, partly in the footsteps of nationalist ideologue Ziya Gökalp,<sup>20</sup> sought a nationalized religion à la Protestant nations of the West after the Reformation. Gökalp had wanted the Qur'an and the *adhan* (Islamic call for prayer) to be read in Turkish. If not the actual prayer, he wished that *hutbas* (sermons) and invocations read in the mosque would be in Turkish.<sup>21</sup> Following only some of Gökalp's suggestions, the Republic upended the Caliphate, adopted the Latin alphabet, founded the Directorate of Religious Affairs in order to Turkify and "etatise religion"<sup>22</sup> solicited Turkish translations of Qur'an and made Turkish the language of call for prayer and sermons. The ultimate objective of this essentially top-down exercise in nation building was to construct a *secular* Turkish nation,<sup>23</sup> whose citizens would believe in a "personal religion."<sup>24</sup> After Atatürk's death, the hitherto suppressed or marginalized groups started to come to the fore. One of these groups, the Racist-Turanist stream in Turkish nationalism dominated the nationalist discourse in the 1940s and the 1950s. Their criticism of official nationalist position was not directed against the secular nature of Kemalist nationalism though; they only wanted to make it more radical and more exclusionary against non-Turkish races.<sup>25</sup>

The multiparty democracy period of the 1950s marked the era of Islamic revival.<sup>26</sup> In the face of a mighty opposition after the transition to multiparty system in 1946, the ruling CHP reevaluated its policy on religion. The Democratic Party government following the 1950 elections allowed pilgrimage and the call for prayers to be read in Arabic again. Qur'an readings over the state radio started and formerly elective religion courses became mandatory unless the parents filed a petition for exemption. The budget allocated for the Directorate of Religious Affairs increased. The number of İmam Hatip schools rose.<sup>27</sup> This made at least some Turkish nationalists realize that Turks blended so well with Islam for the last 12 centuries that secular nationalism of either the early Republican era or the racist/Turanists failed to win hearts of ordinary Turks.

The trajectory of the “National Doctrine: Nine Lights” (*Milli Doktrin: Dokuz Işık*) as expressed first in 1960 by Alparslan Türkeş might give an interesting way to follow this momentous discursive shift in Turkish nationalism. When Türkeş first announced this doctrine as guidance for Turkish nationalism, Moralism (*Ahlakçılık*) as one of its nine principles was very brief and lacked a single reference to Islam.<sup>28</sup> The more Islamic-oriented nationalists inside the party such as Ahmet Er, Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi, Erol Güngör, and Ahmet Büyük Karabacak considered the doctrine as unsatisfactory to be a moral compass for the Idealist Youth.<sup>29</sup> With contributions by these names, Moralism principle accentuated Islam’s role in the formation of Turkish morals in later editions.<sup>30</sup> There were other manifestations of the Islamic turn in the MHP. In a preelection speech delivered on radio on behalf of the CKMP, Ahmet Er called the Turkish nation, the Army of God, which had always “commanded the good and forbidden the evil,” to awaken and re-fulfill its historic mission.<sup>31</sup> Only four years after taking over the CKMP in August 1965, Türkeş and his friends changed the name of their party to Nationalist Action Party as well as its emblem from gray wolf to “Three Crescents” in its 1969 Convention. In the run up to the 1977 elections, Türkeş announced “Turkish nationalism with a spiritual content” as the MHP worldview. Nationalism, it was claimed, was subordinate to Islam.<sup>32</sup> Türkeş himself performed the Hajj little before the 1977 general elections. One of the promises the party made in its 1977 election declaration was “saving the ‘Turkish pride and consciousness and Islamic morality and virtues’ from any abuse and damage and letting it live in men’s hearts.”<sup>33</sup>

### Uneasiness with Arvasi Inside the MHP

When Türkeş seized control of the CMKP he was yet distant toward Islam.<sup>34</sup> Despite the increasing tone of Islam in his rhetoric, in the following years, Türkeş still thought that even though they are not against the idea of a religious ideal per se, Islam is not the cause of their struggle.<sup>35</sup> It should be kept in mind that, in contrast to Türkeş and the MHP, Arvasi was already writing poems with Islamic tones years before becoming known around nationalist circles.<sup>36</sup> Arvasi’s Islamic orientation created some troubles for him inside the party administration. The cold shoulder Arvasi is said to have been given inside the party elite in the wake 1977 elections<sup>37</sup> might have been due to his support for the publication of *Nizam-ı Alem* weekly. Şura (Consultation), an Islamist weekly, condemned all nationalisms, whether it is Kurdism, Turkism or Arabism. It suggested the *Sharia* as the only path to salvation.<sup>38</sup> *Nizam-I Alem* came out in 1979 with a near-Islamist discourse to respond to these and other anti-nationalist denunciations expressed by *Sebil* (the Path) and *Şura* weeklies by the motto of “Müslümanların İttihadı” (the Union of Muslims).<sup>39</sup> Its second issue announced Idealists’ opposition to the interest rate.<sup>40</sup> It also issued a call for contributions to the weekly from all Muslims. Among the intellectuals and writers pieces solicited from were Mehmet Şevket Eygi (an Islamic writer/columnist), Necip Fazıl Kısakürek [arguably the most influential Islamist of the time, also a big influence on Arvasi], Ahmed Davudoğlu (an *Alim* educated at Al-Azhar), and

Sezai Karakoç (a famous Islamic poet and a major influence on Idealists).<sup>41</sup> The weekly became a stage where pieces by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, some local sheikhs from the Southeast and, of course, Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi were published. The impact of the weekly was enormous.

Upon its publication some *Akıncıs* expressed their euphoria because the separation between the *Akıncıs* and *Ülkücüs* would end now.<sup>42</sup> However, the MHP Tribunal Commission [MHP Divan Kurulu] closed down *Nizam-I Alem*. This caused a serious discord between Arvasi and Türkeş.<sup>43</sup> Arvasi decided to resign from the party but was persuaded to stay.<sup>44</sup> Given the gradual deepening of the rift between the Islamizing grassroots and the statist and more secular party elite, the trouble *Nizam-I Alem* caused for the MHP was not surprising. When the party elite realized that they could no longer contain the degree of Islamization among the Idealists, they started a process of internal cleansing.<sup>45</sup> This assessment is supported by the fact that Türkeş had also banned other weeklies with a similar emphasis on Islam.<sup>46</sup> After the 1980 coup d'état, Arvasi became one of those prosecuted in the MHP and Idealist Foundations Case (*MHP ve Ülkücü Kuruluşlar Davası*). He continued to root for the MHP after he exited the jail but he tellingly wrote not in an Idealist outlet but in more nationalist-conservative *Türkiye Gazetesi* until his death in 1988.

### Turkish-Islamic Synthesis

Islam's return to Turkish nationalism was partly a consequence of changes in the international system. With the dawn of the Cold War and the looming communist threat, the Turkish right deemed Islam a dear asset to tap into. Against the bourgeois communist/atheist threat that they perceived nationalists of various stripes held on to Islam so as to make a common front. The institutional backdrop to "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" rested on this conjuncture. One of the first associations founded was Association of Turkish Nationalists (*Türk Milliyetçiler Derneği*) founded in 1950–51 and the Club of the Enlightened (*Aydınlar Kulübü*) in 1961. *Aydınlar Kulübü* became a platform for discussion between nationalists and the more Islam-oriented nationalist.<sup>47</sup> Turkish Hearths (*Türk Ocakları*) was founded in 1965. Scientific Seminary of Nationalists convened in 1967 and sought ways to find common ground between nationalists. In 1968, the Idealist Hearts (*Ülkü Ocakları*) was established. The Second Scientific Convention of the Nationalists (*Milliyetçiler İlmi Kurultayı*) gathered in 1969 at the MTTB's (*Milli Türk Talebe Birliği*-National Turkish Students Union) Hall.<sup>48</sup> The declaration of that convention laid out some groundwork of themes that a decade later would come to characterize the TIS: "Turkish nation was picked by God to shepherd all other nations and Turks embraced Islam because it was most congruent with their national character."<sup>49</sup> Finally, Hearth of the Enlightened (*Aydınlar Ocağı*), the loci of the TIS, was founded in 1970. The aim of the Hearth was to unite the nationalists against the "rampant left." In order to reach a compromise among Turkists and more conservative-minded nationalists, TIS based on a watered down version of Islam was developed.<sup>50</sup>

In an attempt to create a common ideology in Turkey, Turkish-Islamic Synthesis aimed at achieving solidarity between conservatives and Turkish nationalists, gathering all ethnic groups in Turkey under the umbrella of Turkish nationalism. The TIS rested on the idea that “Turkish Islam” was one of the foundations of national unity.<sup>51</sup>

The Hearth expanded its sphere of influence at the state level after the 1980 coup d'état. It was privileged enough to present its draft constitution to the National Security Council in 1982 when no outside institution was allowed to make any proposals for the new Constitution. It issued a call for “National Consensuses” in 1986 and was able to have its ideas accepted in the “National Culture Report” the State Planning Organization prepared. Thus, the Hearth managed to influence national education and national culture policies through their affiliated bureaucrats at the State Planning Organization (*Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı*) and the Supreme Institution of Atatürk Culture, Language and History (*Atatürk Kültür Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu*).<sup>52</sup> An official report on national culture program stipulated that state's culture policy should re-rest on and protect “national culture” formed by true Central Asian values and Islam.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, neither Islamists nor Leftists were happy with the official sanction given to TIS ideology.<sup>54</sup>

TIS maintained a basic argument: Islam became an inseparable element of Turkish identity over ages. Since pre-Islamic Turks had a monotheistic religion, they believed in the aftermath, were fond of justice and order and respected moral codes and family, Islam provided the “perfect dress for the Turkish body.”<sup>55</sup> However, the role cut for Islam in the TIS remains subject to the charge of instrumental use of religion by nationalists as expressed by Greenfeld.<sup>56</sup> Although Çetin-saya claimed that “Intellectuals' Hearth” followed Ziya Gökalp's thinking on religion and İbrahim Kafesoğlu and Muharrem Ergin [as two leading exponents of the TIS] considered Islam as indispensable in thinking about Turks' national culture,<sup>57</sup> Kafesoğlu and Ergin's writings say otherwise. İbrahim Kafesoğlu, the first President of the Intellectuals' Hearth, argued back in 1957 *Türkler ve Medeniyet* that the kind of Islam Turks needed in the future was an Islam shorn of some worn-out ideas and *hurafas* (“unlawful” religious innovation).<sup>58</sup> Islam can satisfy Turks' need for a religion as long as it remained a “matter of individual conscience.”<sup>59</sup> He is also careful to point out that since the time Turkishness and Islam began to synthesize Turks never founded an Islamic State because Turks kept their pre-Islamic Turkish understanding of sovereignty, social rights, and toleration in religious life, land regime and the military character for their states.<sup>60</sup> According to Muharrem Ergin, after the past ages of religions, it is now the age of cultures. “In the age of nationalisms, religions' pressure on other elements of culture disappears... Religions now take their true place as *one* [but not the dominant] of elements of Turkish culture.”<sup>61</sup> The proponents of TIS quickly argue that some pre-Islamic practices of Turks were major contributions to Islam. In terms of women rights, for instance, they maintain, “Islam learned from Turks' more advanced principles.”<sup>62</sup> One therefore feels that Islam in the TIS is accommodated only as “an additional motivation” for nationalism.<sup>63</sup>



### Arvasi and Turkish-Islamic Ideal

Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi shares the view of the TIS on the historical roots of the Turkish nation and inseparability of Islam and Turkishness. After all, despite all his objections to the usage of the word “Synthesis” Arvasi continued to use *Türk-İslam Sentezi*, even if only for strategic reasons.<sup>64</sup> Arvasi leaves no doubt that he had a primordialist view of origins of nationalism and nations. For him, “history is a history of nations.” Maps showing nations all around the world are not a modern phenomenon; they have been so since the ancient ages.<sup>65</sup> Arvasi does not think that nations are constructed, invented or imagined entities. “Nations have always been around and history consists of nations’ adventures and relations. Both history, ethnology, and sociology have proved that nations and nationalisms are objective realities.”<sup>66</sup> Arvasi finds the origins of the Turkish nation in Central Asian steppes, where a nation with “small bodies and wide foreheads were riding horses around 2500 or 1700 BC.”<sup>67</sup>

Notwithstanding these similarities between the TIS and Arvasi, there remains some significant nuances between them. To start with, the Intellectuals’ Hearth started as an elite club. It did not connect with the grassroots nationalist movement. “The grassroots was so at odds with the members of the Hearth over their elitism and political fickleness that, in some protests, copies of *Ortadoğu* [Middle East] newspaper, wherein members of the Hearth wrote, were set on fire.”<sup>68</sup> Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi, nevertheless, was a modest teacher for many years in distant corners of the country, held in high esteem in the eyes of the grassroots. Arvasi allocated a great amount of time and space to spread Islamic morality and Islamic prayers among the Ülkücü youth.<sup>69</sup> It is not for nothing therefore that Arvasi was neither one of the founders of the Aydınlar Kulübü [Intellectuals’ Club] nor among those who frequented it upon its founding.<sup>70</sup> The fact that secularism was kept intact and never compromised in the TIS<sup>71</sup> increased its acceptability at the state level after the 1980 coup d’état. However, Arvasi never praises Turks for contributing to Islam in terms of secularism. In his view the sole yardstick whereby the rest of the components of Turkish culture are either allowed or rejected can be Islam. He argues that everything, secular and sacred, inherited from the pre-Islamic Turkish customs must go through the filter of Islam’s higher commands and prohibitions. Only then, for instance, Turkish *töre* can be maintained.<sup>72</sup> In brief, unlike Kafesoğlu and Ergin, who took Islam as auxiliary to Turkish nationalism, Arvasi declares Islam as *the superior-system (üst-sistem)*.

Arvasi embraced Islam as a total lifestyle.<sup>73</sup> He even wrote *İlm-i Hal*, a Muslim’s guide for an everyday life, the knowledge of correct Muslim behavior. In major opposition to Kafesoğlu, who argued that “Turkish nationalism is not racism but it is not about a religious cause either,”<sup>74</sup> Arvasi made Turks’ *raison d’être* defending the cause of Islam on earth. Arvasi’s usage of the word *Ülkü* [Ideal] in “Türk-İslam Ülküsü” already points at a holy Ideal for the Turks. This Ideal consists of two inter-related missions: *İ’lay-ı Kelimetillah*, defense of the superiority of the Qur’an, and *Nizam-ı Alem*, making God’s commands and standards of measure reign supreme in the world.<sup>75</sup> It may be claimed, however, that these missions Arvasi assigns the Turkish nation is what a nationalist would do. It only marks a “missionary



chosenness” for the Turkish nation. In other words, Arvasi does not stray from the nationalist credo when he suggests that the Turkish nation is entrusted with the religious task of protecting and expanding the Islamic realm.<sup>76</sup> As correct as this interpretation is we should still bear in mind that neither the MHP nor the chief proponents of the TIS ideology could ascribe a religious ideal to Turkish nationalism.

### Arvasi, an Islamist?

If Arvasi’s emphasis on Islam went way beyond the limited role cut for Islam in the TIS formulation, would it then be right to consider Arvasi an Islamist, as many came to be suspicious of him inside the top MHP elite? Here too Arvasi’s views do not allow an easy answer. While he sounds like an archetype Islamist in certain aspects, his staunch nationalism, views on racism and objection against intermarriages among Turks and non-Turks make it hard to describe him an Islamist.

It is consensus that though Islamism is a modern ideology.<sup>77</sup> Islamism is a “political ideology articulating the idea of the necessity of establishing an Islamic government, understood as government which implements the shari’a (Islamic law).”<sup>78</sup> It is claimed that what distinguishes “Islamists” from “Muslims” is that they are not satisfied with Islam playing a role only at the individual level. They want religion to be a factor at the community and state levels as well.<sup>79</sup> Thus, Islamists declare absolute sovereignty of God and demand the implementation of Shari’a, God’s law, as the Constitution of the state. They also view nationalism as a Western contrivance to divide and rule Muslims, hence an obstacle before the revival of the Caliphate.<sup>80</sup>

Truly, Arvasi impresses his readers as an Islamist when he argues that Islam already defended modern human rights such as religious freedom, safety of life and property XIV centuries ago during the Prophet’s lifetime and that Prophet’s farewell sermon was already a declaration of human rights.<sup>81</sup> Then, he too declares that sovereignty belongs to God. Yet, he does not deem democracy as a breach of God’s sovereignty. For God’s sovereignty realizes itself on earth through popularly elected officials. Popular sovereignty is the medium for God’s sovereignty to reign on earth. As long as “the believers elect their own government officials based on their own will, in the light of higher principles that they believe, exalt and want to live under” democracies create no trouble in front of God’s sovereignty. If both the ruled and the ruler obey the commands and principles God revealed, there will be no hegemony or sovereignty of either over the other.<sup>82</sup> Yet, Islamists rarely, if they ever do, defend nationalism. For most Islamists, nationalism is the means to partition the ummah into nation-states.<sup>83</sup> Yet again, Arvasi was a proud nationalist as fervent as to declare that “he would have been a Turkish nationalist even if he was born with the same mental faculties in North Africa.”<sup>84</sup> And like most Turkish nationalists he too felt as compelled as other nationalists in the Muslim world to establish his bona fides with Islam.<sup>85</sup> Arvasi pursued a three-pronged approach to prove *Islamicity* of nationalism: he presented “evidence” from an array of verses in the Qur’an, selected *Hadith* and Prophet’s companions. Arvasi assumes the mantle of authority to interpret some ayahs in Surah *Hujurat*<sup>86</sup> and Romans to justify nationalism.<sup>87</sup>

Arvasi adds to aforementioned *ayahs* some such sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad that “a person cannot be reproached for loving his tribe,” “*hubb al-watan min al-iman*” (Love of one’s native land is a part of one’s Faith), and “the leader of the tribe is he who serves his tribe best.”<sup>88</sup> Finally, according to Arvasi, the fact that Prophet’s companions were referred with their ethnic origins such as *Bilal al-Habashi* [Bilal the Abyssinian] and *Salman al-Farisi* [Salman the Persian] also indicates that nationalism is not forbidden in Islam.<sup>89</sup>

Another reason that makes one hesitate to categorize Arvasi as an Islamist is that he rebukes all Islamists in his time in and outside Turkey. He does so not because these men were not Islamists enough but because they did exactly what the essence of political Islam is: they politicized religion. It is remarkable, for instance, that Arvasi scolded the leader of Turkey’s first Islamist political party Necmeddin Erbakan although the latter ran a nationalist rhetoric.<sup>90</sup> Arvasi thought that Islamist politicians sought to exploit the appeal of Islam on Turkish people. Arvasi condemned them as “parasites who try to stay alive by sucking religion’s blood.”<sup>91</sup> Arvasi’s biting criticism of Turkey’s Islamists went hand in hand with his salvos against Islamists abroad. Arvasi deplored non-Turkish Muslims’ understanding and practice of Islam. He reprimands the followers of Wahhabism and such “religious perverts” as Ibn Taymiyyah, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, Ayatollahs of Iran for their abandonment of “*Sünnet ve Cemaat Yolu*”<sup>92</sup> (People of the Sunna and the Community) represented by *Sirhindi*, *Abu Hanifa*, *Jalal al-Din al-Rumi*, and *Ahmad Ibn Hanbal*.<sup>93</sup> Although at least some of these “ancestors” were non-Turkish, Arvasi, deeply mired in the nationalist mindset, accorded praise to the Turkish nation for bringing them up.<sup>94</sup> Here, Arvasi admittedly took up the attitude of the TIS.<sup>95</sup> Whenever Turks declined from power, the Islamic world got miserable.<sup>96</sup> Apparently, Arvasi, a fervent Turkish nationalist, could not find any merit in any other Muslim nation.

It is very important to note that the novelty of the Turkish Islam Arvasi inadvertently ended up recreating vis-à-vis the Turkish Islam project of the early secular Republic. For whereas the aim of creating a Turkish Islam during the Republic was not to give the fledgling nation a religious cause to unite around and mobilize behind for, Arvasi renationalized Islam just for that purpose: to distinguish the Turkish nation primarily from all other Muslim nations on a religious, not secular basis by raising a claim in the name of Turks’ to the best and most accurate understanding and practice of Islam. While the secular Republic sought to cut ties with Muslims abroad based, for instance, on a secular reason—the alleged Arab treason during the WWI Arvasi explicitly rejected this secular ground.<sup>97</sup> Instead, Arvasi founded a religious ground for Turks’ superiority in relation to other Muslims: Turks’ unparalleled understanding of Islam as opposed to woeful practices by all the rest. He denied as utterly false the interpretation and practice of Islam in Qaddafi’s Libya, in Egypt, in Iraq<sup>98</sup> and longed for the day to come for the Turkish nation, “the natural leader” and “the greatest hope of the Muslim World”<sup>99</sup> to teach the rest of the Muslims once more the “true”, “bid’ah free” Islam.

Furthermore, Arvasi would hardly qualify as an Islamist when he proposes “national interests” as the guide for Turkish foreign policy. Arvasi wished more

communication and cooperation between Muslim nations, “brothers in religion,” so that they would protect each other.<sup>100</sup> Yet, Arvasi says elsewhere that nations do not have permanent enemies and friends and they think only their own social, cultural, economic, and political interests.<sup>101</sup> Arvasi seems to be caught in a dilemma of an Islam-sensitive Turkish nationalist that, on the one hand, he says that he wishes for closer ties between Muslim nations but, on the other hand, he advises each Muslim nation to pursue their own “national interests,” which more often than not means pursuing national policies at the expense of other Muslim nations’ interests.

Finally, it is hard to imagine an Islamist who would discourage intermarriages among different Muslim nations for fear of sullyng his nation’s physical characteristics. Arvasi, a nationalist, however, does. Surely, Arvasi rejects racism because racism, he believes, is forbidden in Islam.<sup>102</sup> However, one has to bring in what Arvasi has called the concept of *içtimai ırk* (social race) to get to the core of his thinking on racism. He explains how *içtimai ırk* emerges

... From cultural, economic, and political unification, a “social race” emerges as a sociological necessity ... like it or not, today there is a French, British, German, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese type in the world. Even if you do not realize, there is on earth today a “social Turkish type” as well.<sup>103</sup>

In fear of losing the purity of typical Turkish social race, Arvasi takes a step forward and discourages marriage with non-Turks

Children of a nation should, as much as possible, marry among themselves. The children of mixed marriages remain bewildered among two different cultures ... Our bureaucrats, technocrats and workers, who went abroad for various reasons, have returned Turkey with “foreign wives.” This way, in our country broke/untypical generations such as “Turkish-German,” “Turkish-Anglo-Saxon,” “Turkish-Persian” and “Turkish-Arab” have been increasing.<sup>104</sup>

The importance of nationalist ban on intermarriages cannot be exaggerated. As Hastings pointed out, “freedom to marry across boundary lines is anti-nationalist ... intermarriage across ethnic borders strengthens territorial nationhood but threatens ethnic nationhood and is anathema to ethnic nationalists. Intermarriage and nationalism remain practical contraries.”<sup>105</sup> Arvasi’s wish to limit marriages between Turks and non-Turkish Muslims hardly makes him an Islamist. On that particular issue, he remained an untainted nationalist.

## Conclusion

Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi is one of the most significant yet of the least studied nationalist intellectuals in Turkey. His views on various issues surrounding Turkish nationalism remain unexplored primarily due to the TIS straitjacket. From an analysis of his views in a systematic and critical way based on the entirety of his writings, Arvasi, a

passionate Turkish nationalist and a devout Muslim, emerges as a strange bedfellow with not only the MHP he unceasingly supported but also the TIS he tried to break away from. As much as his nationalism in the orbit of Islam seems to have left him at unease with the MHP, it did not allow him to become a blind exponent of TIS either. Yet, Arvasi was neither an Islamist; he found his way out of the tension between his two fealties, one to the nation and the other to the ummah, by recreating a Turkish Islam on a *religious* ground. Therefore, Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi's *Türk-İslam Ülküsü* added a *religious layer to exclusive loyalty to the nation* that nationalism demands. This may bear testimony to the fact that the Islamic turn in Turkish nationalism in the 1970s was neither a compromise between Islam and nationalism nor Islamization of Turkish nationalism, as some would like to have us believe.<sup>106</sup> It seems that even in the hands of a devout Muslim the combination of Islam and nationalism inadvertently ends up rendering religion only another ground to exalt a particular nation.

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### Notes

1. The title *Sayyid* denotes a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.
2. Laçiner, "Türk Milliyetçiliği'nin Farkı"; Özdağ, "Biz Herşeyiz".
3. Such as Kuvancı, *Bir Gönül Dostu Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*; Onur, *Asrın Yesevisi Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*, Kuvancı, *Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*; Özdemir, *Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi'nin Hayatı*; and Onur, *Aydınlığın Gözüyle S. Ahmet Arvasi*.
4. An exception is Uzer, "The Kurdish Identity of Turkish Nationalist Thinkers."
5. Çetinsaya, "Rethinking Nationalism and Islam," 372; others concur on Arvasi's influence: Yanardağ, *MHP değişti mi?*, 395; Öznur, *Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*, 196; Ayvazoğlu, "Tanrıdağ'dan Hıra Dağı'na Uzanan İnce Yollar," 576; Dural, *Pratikten Teoriye Milliyetçi Hareket*; Bora and Can, *Devlet-Ocak-Dergâh*, 257; and Can, "Ülkücü Hareketin İdeolojisi," 676.
6. Copeaux, "Ahmet Arvasi, Un Idéologue De La Synthèse Turco-Islamique."
7. Carmichael, "Islam and Arab Nationalism"; Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, 115; Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 35; and Aruri, "Nationalism and Religion in the Arab World."
8. Al-Bazzaz and Haim, "Islam and Arab Nationalism," 202–203.
9. Greenfeld, "The Modern Religion?"
10. Smith, "The Sacred Dimension of Nationalism," 791; Zubaida, "Islam and Nationalism," 407–420; and Brubaker, "Religion and Nationalism."
11. Lapidus, "Between universalism and particularism," 48.
12. Özdalga, for instance, commits this mistake in her very important article on Turkish Islam in "The Hidden Arab," 551–570; Yanardağ repeats the mistake in *MHP Değişti mi?* Both Ayvazoğlu and Bora and Can claim that Ahmet Arvasi was a relative of Sheikh Abdülhakim Arvasi; Ayvazoğlu, "Tanrıdağı'ndan Hıra Dağı'na: Milliyetçilik ve Muhafazakarlık Üzerine Yazılar, 159; and Bora and Can, *Devlet, Ocak . . .*, 256. Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi's son, Murat Arvasi, said to the author in

- their interview that his family comes from the same lineage as Nakshibendi Sheikh Abdülhakim Arvasi, which suggest only a distant relation between the Sheikh and Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi's father Abdülhakim Arvasi. The relation of Arvasi's father to the reputable Nakshibendi Sheikh is confirmed in Semerci, *Hatıraların Aydınlığında Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*.
13. Semerci, *Hatıraların Aydınlığında Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*, 118.
  14. Karabacak, *Üç Hilal'in Hikayesi*, 89–90.
  15. Bice, “Ülkücü Kimliği Yitirmeden . . .”; and Bora and Can, *Devlet, Ocak . . .*, 254–255.
  16. Karabacak, *Üç Hilal'in Hikayesi*, 95–96.
  17. Bice, “Ülkücü Kimliği Yitirmeden . . .”
  18. Aytürk, “Turkish Linguists against the West.”
  19. Heper, “Islam, Polity and Society in Turkey,” 351.
  20. Cündioğlu, *Türkçe Kuran ve Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi*, 19, 31; although Atatürk was influenced by Gökalp, he did not extensively draw on his ideas. Hanioglu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*.
  21. Gökalp expressed these views in his poem titled “Vatan” [Homeland] in 1918. For Gökalp's poem ‘Vatan’ see Wilson, “The First Translations of the Qur'an,” 421.
  22. Brubaker, “Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches,” 11.
  23. Cündioğlu, *Türkçe Kuran ve . . .* 28, 31–33.
  24. Thomas, “Turkish Islam,” 182.
  25. Aytürk, “The Racist Critics of Atatürk and Kemalism.”
  26. Reed, “Revival of Islam in Secular Turkey”; and Bernard Lewis, “Islamic Revival in Turkey.”
  27. Toprak, “Religion and Politics,” 218.
  28. Türkes, *Dokuz Işık*. These principles were: Milliyetçilik (nationalism), Ülkücülük (idealism), Ahlakçılık (morality), İlimcilik (scientific mentality), Toplumculuk (populism), Köycülük (Peasant Care), Hürriyetçilik (support for freedom), Gelişmecilik ve Halkçılık (developmentalism and populism), and Endüstricilik ve Teknikçilik (industrialism and technology).
  29. Er, *27 Mayıs'tan 12 Eylül'e Hatıralarım*, 146–147.
  30. Türkes, *Dokuz Işık ve Türkiye*, 180.
  31. Er, 199, 206–207.
  32. Bora and Can, *Devlet-Ocak-Dergâh*, 285.
  33. ‘Türk Milleti Uyan!’ 1977 Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi Seçim Beyannamesi, 4.
  34. Landau, “Alparslan Türkes.”
  35. “Bizim Muhsin . . .” *Haberiniz*, March 2, 2012, [http://www.haberiniz.com.tr/yazilar/koseyazisi50368-Bizim\\_Muhsin%E2%80%A6.html](http://www.haberiniz.com.tr/yazilar/koseyazisi50368-Bizim_Muhsin%E2%80%A6.html)
  36. One of such poems can be found in Onur, *Aydınların Gözüyle S. Ahmet Arvasi*, 55.
  37. Bora and Can, *Devlet-Ocak-Dergâh*, 256.
  38. ‘Kürtçülük Belası’, *Şura*, no. 28 (July 24, 1978).
  39. Interview with Lütfü Şehsuvaroğlu, May 1, 2013.
  40. *Nizam-ı Alem*, no. 2 (October 12, 1979),
  41. Öznur, *Ülkücü Hareket*, 295.
  42. Interview with Şehsuvaroğlu; *Nizam-ı Alem*, no. 3 (October 19, 1979).
  43. Can, “Ülkücü Hareketin . . .,” 678; Öznur, *Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*, 29; Öznur, *Ülkücü Hareket*, 291–297; and Şehsuvaroğlu, “Kendini Arayan İnsan ve Arvasi Hoca'yı Anlamak,” 586–588.
  44. Interview with Lütfü Şehsuvaroğlu.
  45. Interview with Burhan Kavuncu, April 16, 2013.
  46. Lütfü Şehsuvaroğlu mentions ‘Genç Arkadaş’ as one of those journals. Şehsuvaroğlu, *Ashab-ı Kehfın Delikanlısı*, 73.
  47. Copeaux, *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında (1931–1993)*, 57.
  48. Yalçın, “Türkiye’de Fikir Hareketleri ve Kültür Hayatımızda Aydınlar Ocağı,” 19–20.
  49. *Milliyetçi Türkiye’ye Doğru*, 19, 34, 191–195.
  50. Yalçın, “Türkiye’de Fikir Hareketleri . . .,” 9–23; Yalçın, “Türkiye’nin harp gibi bir buhrana ihtiyacı var,” 95; and Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History*, 288.
  51. İnalçık, *Rönesans Avrupası Türkiye’nin Batı*, 377–378.

52. Kaplan, "Din-ü Devlet All Over Again?", 119–121; Timuroğlu, *Türk İslam Sentezi*.
53. Copeaux, *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında (1931–1993)...*, 59.
54. Timuroğlu, *Türk İslam Sentezi*; Güvenç, *Türk İslam Sentezi*; and İnalçık, *Rönesans Avrupası...*
55. Kafesoğlu, *Türk-İslam Sentezi*, xi; Boyunağa, *Dost ve Düşman Gözü ile Türk/İslam Sentezi*. The ideological argument about Turks' peaceful conversion to Islam en masse is debatable; Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 20, 27; Şerif Mardin, *Din ve İdeoloji*, 92.
56. Greenfeld, "The Modern Religion?" 186.
57. Çetinsaya, 373–374 (brackets are mine).
58. Kafesoğlu, *Türkler ve Medeniyet*, 79.
59. Kafesoğlu, *Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Meseleleri*, 89.
60. Kafesoğlu, *Türk-İslam Sentezi*, 164.
61. Kafesoğlu, *Türk-İslam Sentezi*, 8–9.
62. Kafesoğlu, *Türk-İslam Sentezi*, 198.
63. Nieuwenhuijze, *Paradise Lost*, 75; Arıkan, "The Programme of the Nationalist Action Party: An Iron Hand in a Velvet Glove," 126; and Bora and Can, *Devlet Ocak . . .*, 145.
64. Öznur, *Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*, 151; Arvasi, *Medenileşme ve İslamiyet*, 101–104, 107; Arvasi, *Fikir Sefaletine Örnekler*, 78–79; and *Medenileşme ve İslamiyet*, 101, 109, 167–168.
65. *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v.1, 143.
66. Öznur, *Ülkücü Hareket*, v. IV, 343.
67. *Medenileşme ve İslamiyet*, 84.
68. Alper and Göral, "Aydınlar Ocağı," 585. Burhan Kavuncu told the author of this paper that the nationalist grassroots nurtured strong negative feelings for the Intellectuals' Hearth but Türkes had some connections to it. When the Idealist Hearth came up with the slogan "yıkılın düzen yaşasın devlet" [down with the order, long live the state], the Intellectuals' Hearth complained to Türkes, who then ordered the young Idealists to modify the slogan.
69. Alparslan Türkes quoted in Öznur, *Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi*, 189; Interview with Metin Kaplan, a close friend of Arvasi, October 15, 2011; and Interview with Barutçu, October 7, 2011.
70. Yalçın, "Türkiye'de Fikir Hareketleri."
71. Alper and Göral, s. 583; and Ortaylı, "Türk-İslam Sentezinde Batılı Olan Nedir?," 46.
72. *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v. I, 95; *Medenileşme ve İslamiyet*, 10.
73. *Türk-İslam Ülküsü*, v. II; "Rahmetli S. Ahmet Arvasi'nin En Son Konferansı," 7–8.
74. Kafesoğlu, *Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Meseleleri*, 15, 274.
75. Arvasi, *Davamız*, 26, 27.
76. Smith, "The Sacred Dimension of Nationalism," 804.
77. Gencer, *İslam'da Modernleşme*; Lawrence, "Muslim Fundamentalist Movements," 32.
78. İsmail, "Being Muslim," 616.
79. Heper, "Does Secularism Face a Serious Threat?," 420.
80. Jalal al-Azm, "Islamic Fundamentalism Reconsidered."
81. "Rahmetli S. Ahmet Arvasi'nin En Son Konferansı", *Ufuk Çizgisi* 1, no. 4 (Ocak 1990), 7–8.
82. *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v. II, 329.
83. Rabi, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence*, 53–61.
84. Bice, "Ülkücü Kimliği Yitirmeden İslam'ı Yaşamak," <http://hayatibice.net/?p=704>.
85. Salt, "An Islamic Scholar-Activist," 104; Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation 1930–1945*, 80; Salem, "Nationalism and Islam"; and Zubaida, "Islam and Nationalism," 408.
86. The particular verse in Surah Hujurat (49:13). *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v.II, 460.
87. The particular verse in Surah Romans (30:22). *Türk-İslam Ülküsü*, v.II, 460. It is very important to know that Arvasi did not know Arabic; neither did he study Islamic sciences such as *tafsir* and *fiqh*, etc. Interview with Arvasi's son Murat Arvasi, January 1, 2012.
88. Arvasi, *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v.II, 461.
89. Arvasi, *Türk-İslam Ülküsü*, v.I, 153.
90. Çetinsaya, 373.

91. Arvasi, *Emperyalizmin Oyunlari*, 48; and for a similar harsh treatment of ‘charlatans of religion’ see *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v.II, 457–459.
92. Arvasi, *Türk-İslam Ülküsü*, v.I, 72.
93. Arvasi, *Emperyalizmin Oyunlari*, 10–12; and Arvasi charges that the Muslim Brotherhood (in Egypt and later elsewhere in the Middle East) was controlled by Masons, *Türk-İslam Ülküsü*, v.I, 96–97.
94. Arvasi, *Türk-İslam Ülküsü*, v.I, 11, 96.
95. Kafesoğlu, *Türk-İslam Sentezi*, 179–195; Copeaux, *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında*, 157, 225; and Ergin, *Aydınlar Ocağı’nın Görüşü*, 208.
96. *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v.III, 140; and *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v.I, 237–238).
97. “How could these Muslim nations, which were under subjugation, help us? They still tried.” Arvasi, *Devletin Dini olur mu?* 168–169, 144–146.
98. “Arvasi ile yapılan son röportaj,” in Öznrur, *Seyyid Ahmet . . .*, 161.
99. Arvasi, *Milletlerin İtibarı*, 35, 141.
100. *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v.II, 461, 67–68.
101. *Türk İslam Ülküsü*, v.II, 279–280.
102. Arvasi, *Türk-İslam Ülküsü*, v.III, 118.
103. *Kadın ve Erkek Üzerine*, 155–156.
104. *Kadın Erkek Üzerine*, 156–158.
105. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*, 206.
106. Waxman “Islam and Turkish National Identity,” 13; Yavuz, “Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux,” 19–41.

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