Muslim Modernism in Turkish: Assessing the Thought of Late Ottoman Intellectual Mehmed Akif

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Abstract

Late Ottoman intellectual Mehmed Akif (1873–1936) was for decades depicted in Turkish public discourse in generic terms as an Islamist radical opposed to the secular nation state. Through Akif’s poetry, articles, translations, correspondence from his exile in Egypt, and biographical detail revealed in the scattered memoirs of students and colleagues, this article offers a reappraisal of his thought as a leading Muslim modernist who adapted the thinking of Egyptian religious scholar Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) to an Ottoman and then Turkish audience in the formulation of an early, prescient compromise between religion and nationalism. The article also notes remarkable similarities between Akif and Indian thinker Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877–1938), whom Akif was instrumental in introducing to Arab audiences, and suggests that, once political Islam had later gained currency across all fields of public life, Akif became an alternative to nationalist icon Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) as an intellectual symbol of the republic.

Keywords

Introduction

Poet Mehmed Akif Ersoy (1873–1936) has for long been a figure of surprising controversy in Turkey for someone of such a humble persona.1 The leading advocate of Muḥammad ʿAbduh’s (1849–1905) ideas in the Late Ottoman public sphere, Akif agreed to produce a Turkish translation of the Qurʾān for the republican religious affairs administration known as Diyanet, despite going into self-imposed exile in Egypt from 1925 as regime violence against its critics intensified. Akif never delivered the text, out of concern that it would be used by Kemalist radicals at the height of their influence to further the project of severing Islam in Turkey from the Arab sphere following their success in imposing the call to prayer in Turkish. Even on his deathbed in Istanbul, where he had returned to die in 1936, Akif resisted the entreaties of emissaries from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) to hand over a Turkish Qurʾān that only a poet of Akif’s mastery in Arabic, Persian, and the rich registers of Ottoman Turkish was seen as capable of rendering authoritative, claiming he had destroyed those parts he had finished. Akif’s act of apparent treachery to Turkish nationalism was double-edged. It has emerged in recent studies that he had entrusted at least two copies to Mehmed İhsan Efendi (1902–61), a religious scholar who also settled in Egypt. İhsan Efendi revealed their existence to his son Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, to Ibrahim Sabri – the son of Late Ottoman Grand Mufti Mustafa Sabri (1869–1954), who had also fled to Egypt – and to three other Turkish students in Cairo as they gathered around his deathbed in June 1961. At İhsan Efendi’s request, the group honoured Akif’s wish for the text to be destroyed – burned in a laundry basin on a balcony in the district of ‘Abbāsiyya – for fear that the previous year’s military coup signalled a return to the project of Turkicizing Islam.2

Yet it would be wrong to understand Akif’s actions as reflective of a religious radical’s rejection of secular nationalism. Akif was the central figure among an intellectual circle of Late Ottoman Muslim reformers who in the period 1908–23 began to advance a novel conception of Islam as an ideology with prescriptions for all aspects of modern life,3 while embracing Enlightenment

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1 The early republic obliged citizens to adopt Turkish surnames. Since the name Ersoy was applied to him posthumously, I use the name Akif on second reference, which is the convention in most of the literature.
3 For example, wartime prime minister Said Halim Paşa published İslamişmak (Istanbul: Dar il-Hilafe, 1918) in collaboration with Akif, who translated it from the original French.
ideas on the sovereignty of reason and value of non-religious forms of knowledge on the one hand and engaging with contemporary Western theological and philosophical trends on the other. Leading nationalist intellectual Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) would dub this group as adherents of İslamiyet (Islamism) and impute to them a paramount concern for pan-Islamic authority beyond the state’s borders. But the kernel of their position could better be stated as defending inasmuch as was possible the juridical, educational, and pious estate (evkaf) administrative functions of the Ottoman religious establishment (İlmiye) since they considered those institutions to be vital for protecting the faith of the believer and strength of the nation. By this measure, they were not fundamentally different from the conservative şulema associated with the journal Beyanülhak (1908–12), who focussed their rhetorical energies far more on what they called the dinsizlik (atheism) of increasingly dominant cadres within the ruling Committee for Union and Progress (CUP). The fault lines between these two groups became clear in 1919/20, when Mustafa Kemal mobilized army units in eastern Anatolia and established a Turkish national parliament (Türkiye büyük millet meclisi) in 1920: reformist intellectuals such as Akif left for Ankara, while conservatives such as Mustafa Sabri stayed loyal to the sultan-caliph in Istanbul. During this period, Akif shifted from outright opposition to Turkish nationalism to a cautious supporter who adopted some of its terminology, yet he did so as a Muslim modernist capable of synthesizing nationalist thought. Reviewing Akif’s poetry, articles, translations, sermons, and letters, this article argues that, however local the context in which Akif operated and his work was subsequently received, he needs to be understood within the wider framework of transnational Islamic modernism. It compares his thinking on key theological questions of the era regarding the ontological status of the modern Muslim subject to that of ʿAbduh and Indian poet-intellectual Muḥammad Iqbal (1877–1938), both of whom were inspirational to his thought. It notes that, as someone whose work traversed the categories of Turkist, Islamist, Ottomanist, and Westernist usually applied to Turkish-language thinkers in

4 For example, İsmail Hakki, Yeni İlim-i Kelam (Istanbul: Evkaf-ı İslamiye Matbaası, 1920).
5 Ziya Gökalp, Türklesmek, İslamlaşmak, Muasılaşmak (İstanbul: Yeni Mecmu, 1918), 9. 34. passim. The book was based on eight articles in Türk Yurdu in 1913, titled collectively “Üç Cereyan”.
the transformative period during which he was active, Akif has presented something of a conundrum to modern scholarship, with its tendency to order knowledge along national lines. Republican historiography for decades remained cold to him, despite his prominence as the millî şair (national poet) who authored the national anthem, while Akif’s location within the field of Ottoman-Turkish studies effectively hampered his recognition as a major figure of early twentieth-century modernism – the context within which he can be more effectively read. For the Islamic movement which gathered force in Turkish political and cultural life in the later twentieth century, Akif came to represent a more worthy intellectual mascot of the republic than Turkist icons such as Gökalp who dominated the official narratives.

Mehmed Akif: a Biography

Mehmed Akif grew up in the Sarıgüzel quarter of the Fatih district in central Istanbul to a Kosovo Albanian father and an Uzbek mother. Born three years before the aborted constitutional experiment of 1876, Akif had the education of a typical reform-minded Ottoman functionary. Graduating in 1893 from the veterinary boarding school (Mülkiye Baytar Mektebi), he entered the Ministry of Agriculture’s animal husbandry bureaucracy, where he worked as an inspector until 1913, affording him the opportunity to experience the empire from Rumelia to Damascus. The son of a religious scholar who taught at the Fatih medrese (Islamic school), his own knowledge in the field was largely informal. His father taught him Arabic, Qurʾān memorization, and creed (akide). But his education extended from the Islamic tradition, with a typical Ottoman focus on Persian and Şüfi literature, to nineteenth-century French novelists and poets such as Hugo, Lamartine, Zola, and Daudet. Akif’s emergence as a leading poet and intellectual of the Muslim reform movement came suddenly with the publication of Sırat-ı Müstakim in August 1908, under the ownership of Akif’s friend Eşref Edib and Ebû’l-Ula Mardin (its name changed to Sebilürrüşad in 1912). With Akif as editor and lead writer, it became the main outlet for the devout intellectuals, advancing the vision of the Young Ottomans Namık Kemal (1840–88) and Ziya Paşa (1825–89) of a multi-ethnic Ottoman state in

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8 Dücane Cundioğlu, Bir Kur’an Şâiri: Mehmed Akif ve Kur’an Meddî (İstanbul: Birun, 2003), 17.
9 Both names are Qur’anic terms referring to the righteous path of God.
10 Term used by Brett Wilson, Translating the Qur’an in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), passim.
which Islam remained the unifying element but grappling with the fact of its increasing Muslim demographic due to territorial losses.

Modelling itself on *al-Manār*, the journal was a vehicle for Akif to promote the ideas of ‘Abduh and the latter’s early collaborator Jamāl al-Dīn Afghānī (1839–97). Describing ‘Abduh as Afghānī’s “greatest and most lasting work” (*en büyük, en kalıcı eseri*), Akif took up ‘Abduh’s theme of rejecting *taqlīd* in both juridical and theological matters and mobilizing the Muslim community to meet the challenge of Europe through overcoming what both considered to be a cultural propensity for fatalistic inaction – a trope of European Orientalism articulated in their work. This meant that both were effectively advocating a reform of the dominant Ash‘arī-Māturīdī theology of Cairo and Istanbul, though they were shy of declaring this in direct terms. While ‘Abduh tended to frame his views in terms of stagnation, or *jumūd*, particularly in later works, Akif preferred to talk of *say ve amel* (labour and action). ‘Abduh and Afghānī broached the topic explicitly in their anti-colonial journal published in Paris in 1884, *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqā*. The journal’s inaugural editorial declared in its first paragraphs that Muslims must rid themselves of the illusion of constant divine intervention in the smallest detail of human affairs, otherwise their societies risked being overwhelmed by the greater forces of the era. In an article on predestination, they wrote: “We do not deny that creed in the souls of some Muslims has been spoiled by the belief in *al-jabr* [predestination], which could be the cause of some calamities they have faced in recent times.” In his own journal’s early issues, Akif translated this article and authored his own work outlining these modernist concepts under the literary name Saʿdī; indeed, he appears to have articulated these ideas as early as 1895 in the journal *Maarif*. Famed journalist Ahmed Midhat (1844–1912) had

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16 Ibid., 87.
engaged the question of mobilizing the nation to *amour de travail* in *Sevda-yı Say ve Amel* (Passion for Labour and Action, 1880), citing Qur’ānic usages of *say* (Ar. *sa’y*), but he stopped short of formulating the issue as a problem of Muslim theology.\(^\text{18}\) By 1912 Akif had issued forty-five articles and three books of ‘Abduh in translation,\(^\text{19}\) including the debate in 1900 between ‘Abduh and French diplomat Gabriel Hanotaux (1853–1944), as well as Akif’s own thirty-five short works of *tafsīr* inspired by ‘Abduh’s commentaries that Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935) would publish as *Tafsīr al-Manār*, and translations in article and book form of the early works of ‘Abduh acolyte Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī (1875–1954). Akif took his own intellectual endeavours in new directions, however, with the first instalment of his great poetic collection *Safahat* (Phases) in 1912.

Although he celebrated the hybrid nature of Ottoman Muslim identity and his father had belonged to a Khālīdi-Naqshbandī Ṣūfī *tarikat*, Akif had an ambiguous approach to Ṣūfism typical of the revivalists. Like ‘Abduh and Arab reformers close to him, he saw in its complex of saint figures a multivocality that weakened Muslims in their effort to meet the political and cultural challenge of the Europeans and establish the rationalization in religion that Enlightenment thought posited as a requirement of modernity. In Akif’s first published poem in 1895, *Kur’ana Hitab* (Address to the Qurʾān), he displayed a scripturalist attitude towards Islam as a European category of world religion that in typical modernist fashion configured the Qurʾān as the prime locus of Muslim faith. The scripture was “my companion of shared language in the world/My help and place of support in the next” (*Dünyada refik ü hemzebānım/'Ukbāda muin ü müste‘ānım*), he wrote.\(^\text{20}\) At the same time Akif embraced Ṣūfism as a theosophical system whose monist elements he knew commanded respect in European intellectual circles, although he was irritated by the tendency among pro-West Ottomans to dismiss Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought (known popularly as *waḥ-dat al-wujūd*) as merely “pantheism”.\(^\text{21}\) His later poetry in particular is suffused with emanationist Ṣūfī references and imagery, if shorn of the libertine elements that characterize the traditional canon.

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\(^\text{19}\) This included material from *Risālat al-tawḥīd*, *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqā*, and *tafsīr* published in *al-Manār*.


In a similar vein, Akif eschewed not only the elaborate language and *topoi* of the Ottoman tradition, as had become the convention in late nineteenth-century Ottoman literary circles, but also prevailing notions of poetry as “art for art’s sake”. Emulating the French realist writers Hugo and Zola, he argued art had both to reflect society and offer new directions for its improvement. Thus when he first came to publish in book form (as *Safahat-ı Hayattan*) his series of poems issued in *Sırat-ı Müstakim* up to 1911, Akif wrote an introductory verse in which he positioned himself as the conscience of the nation revealing social truths, rather than as a writer reveling in clever artifice: “Ask me, dear reader, so that I may tell you/Of what nature my verses here are/A mass of words whose sole craft is sincerity/Since being not an artist, I know no artifice.”²² The language Akif deployed throughout this first collection displayed a mastery of the *aruz* metre (Ar. ‘arūḍ), along with a sprinkling of vernacular in a simplified yet formal Ottoman Turkish to describe the lives of the subaltern classes of Istanbul, and in doing so it broke conventions and marked new directions.

Ömer Rıza (1893–1952), a Cairo-based Turkish writer who was to marry one of Akif’s daughters, described Akif’s *Fatih Küresüsünde* (At the Fatih Mosque Pulpit), published in 1914 as the fourth volume of what Akif now marketed as the *Safahat* cycle, as flowing “like scenes from a cinema reel” (*levhalar bir sinema şeridi gibi*).²³ In this manner, Akif was challenging the ethnic nationalism of the Turkists, who were advancing a new syllabic metre in poetry as a further rejection of all things Arab and Persian seen as distorting the Turkish mind.²⁴

Akif joined the CUP in 1908 after its success in leading the Young Turk revolution, before its capture by Turkish nationalists had become apparent. He was forced out of his post at Darülfünun (later, Istanbul University) in late 1913 due to CUP irritation at his *Sebilürreşad* criticism of how the disastrous Balkan wars were handled.²⁵ Despite his status as an intellectual rather than scholar of the *ulema* class, Akif had given three sermons in Istanbul mosques in February 1913: his theme was that Muslims of different ethnic-linguistic backgrounds have a duty to overcome division in order to save the Ottoman state as “Islam’s

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²² Akif, *Safahat* [Ottoman script] (Istanbul: Çağrı, 2015), 3: *Bana sor sevgili kari sana ben söyleveyim/Ne hüviyette şu karşısında duran eşârım; Bir yığın söz ki, samimiyeti ancak hüneri; Ne tasannu biliyım, çünkü, ne sanatkârım.* The introduction recalls the Qur’an’s opening verse, especially in its use of the imperative “Oku”.


last hope” ( Müslümanlığın son ümidi). The same themes inflect the rush of poetry he authored in the period 1912–14: the second Safahat, which consists of one epic titled Sıleymaniyê Kürsüsünde (At the Sıleymaniyê Mosque Pulpit), was serialized in Sebiliurreşad in 1912 and issued in book form later that year, then his tafsir intended as poetic commentary on the Ottoman condition and titled Hakkın Sesleri (Voices of God) was published in the same manner in 1913, and in 1913 and 1914 his second epic, Fatih Kürsüsünde.

This commitment to the CUP-run state deepened in a remarkable manner in 1914 when Akif began working as a government propagandist with the secret operations apparatus known as Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa. He was involved in two projects, a trip to Berlin in 1914–15 to help turn Muslim prisoners from French and British-held territories into Ottoman collaborators, and a second to Najd to secure the support of the Rashīdī and Saudi polities vis-à-vis the anticipated British effort to win the Hijazis over against the Ottomans. Though the latter mission was top secret at the time, Akif gathered material for the poems Berlin Hatalar (Berlin Memories, 1915–18) and Necid Çollerinden Medine’ye (From the Deserts of Najd to Medina, 1918) in the subsequent Safahat collection titled Hatalar (Memories), which also included work from a 1914 vacation he took in Egypt and the Hijaz (El-Uksur’dâ, 1915). The origins of the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa and its activities have been a topic of great controversy because of its role in the wartime deportation and massacre of Armenians. One of its most important leaders was Eşref Kuşçubaşı Sencer (1873–1964), son of a Circassian refugee who became the chief falconer at the sultan’s court. Sencer lived the life of a brigand for some time in İzmir and the Hijaz before drawing the attention of İsmail Enver Paşa (1881–1922), the minister of war from 1914 to October 1918, who gave him an assignment to lead a group smuggling junior officers from Egypt into Libya during the 1911–12 war with Italy. This group included a Tunisian shaykh called Şâlih al-Sharif, and it was al-Sharif and Sencer who approached Akif to travel to Germany in 1914. How Akif first came into contact with them is not clear, but it is possible that Akif’s Egypt trip was in fact an undercover mission. The Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa was tasked with spreading Ottoman propaganda to Muslim communities around the world to accompany the sultan’s declaration of jihād in November 1914. Pamphlets were prepared by al-Sharif in Arabic and rendered in Turkish by Akif, including responses to

26 Given 2 Feb. 1913, Bayezid mosque; Sebiliurreşad, 6 Feb. 1913, 92, 373–76.
speeches by British prime minister Lloyd George (in office 1916–22) and French Resident-General in Morocco Hubert Lyautey.29 Between 1914 and 1923 Akif also translated Islamic material by Egyptian ʿālim and pro-Ottoman anti-British activist ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Jāwīsh (1876–1929), as well as wartime prime minister Said Halim Paşa (1865–1921).

Akif only spoke of his Berlin and Najd experiences through his poetry and further sermons he gave in 1920, but his views are scattered throughout the memoirs of his friends Esref Edib and Midhat Cemal and, in considerably more detail, Sencer’s recollections and private papers made available to journalist Cemal Kutay. Akif’s second mission covered some five months from late 1915: a posse of Akif, al-Sharif, Sencer, and Enver’s aide-de-camp Mūmtaz Bey took the Hijaz railway to Medina, then travelled through the desert with a twenty-five-man armed camel corps to Ḥāʾil. Gifts were delivered to Saʿūd ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, the Ottoman Rashīdī emir of Ḥāʾil, and left with the local ruler of Burayda for ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, the Saʿūdī emir of Najd, who had apparently skipped town for al-Aḥsāʾ to avoid the risk of Britain discovering any meeting with an Ottoman delegation.30 As they were returning via the Hijaz railway station at al-Muʿaẓẓam, news came from Enver by telegraph of the Ottoman victory at Gallipoli (around 9 January), inducing a rapturous reaction in Akif.31 Some details given by Kutay are likely embellishments if not fabrications, stemming from a desire to cast the desert trip as curing Akif of romantic notions of the Islamic East. But Akif’s friendship with Sencer was apparently warm and enduring, as Akif’s exchange of letters from Egypt in 1930–31 demonstrates.32

Although Akif initially worked with the sultan’s government in occupied Istanbul following the war, like many other ulema and devout intellectuals he was stirred by the renegade Ankara government’s resistance to Allied plans to carve up the empire. He left Istanbul in April 1920 to establish Sebilürreşad’s operations in Ankara, with brief sojourns in Kayseri and Kastamonu when Greek armies were close, until the journal was closed down following the

30 Kutay, Necid, 35. Fortna, Circassian, 140, 169.
31 Kutay, Necid, 11–21.
Shaykh Said rebellion in 1925. Akif was at the peak of his fame and powers during this period. He gave a series of mosque sermons and addresses between February 1920 and February 1921 in Balıkesir, Konya, and Kastamonu to rally the population against the Treaty of Sèvres and in support of the forces of Mustafa Kemal, who made a point of meeting Akif after his arrival in Ankara and arranging a seat for him in the national assembly. The speeches were widely distributed by the government to provinces and warfronts. His poem Aşım – sixth in the Safahat cycle, serialized in Sebilürreşad between 1919 and 1924, and issued in book form in August 1928 – met with critical acclaim for its mix of metre, language, and message of hope for the coming generation. His poem İstiklal Marşı (Independence March) was chosen by parliament in 1921 as its national anthem, and he was appointed in 1922 to the publications committee of the şeriat and evkaf ministry established by Mustafa Kemal to shore up support among Islamic opinion in the ongoing conflict with Istanbul, Greece, and the Western powers. Akif quit the assembly in the aftermath of opposition leader Ali Şükrü Bey’s assassination in March 1923, and Sebilürreşad moved operations back to Istanbul.

Akif was vacationing in Edirne in September 1923 as the British were preparing to withdraw following the Treaty of Lausanne when a telegram arrived from Abbas Halim Paşa (1866–1934), brother of Akif’s friend Said Halim, inviting him to spend the winter at his residence in Ḥilwān just south of Cairo. Akif returned to Istanbul in spring and left again to spend the winter in Egypt in late 1924. He would leave a third time in October 1925 in what was to become a permanent stay that only ended in 1936 with his deteriorating health. Government propagandists claimed he quit the country in objection to a November 1925 law forcing men to wear hats in public space and government departments, but with government agents trailing him, the closing of Sebilürreşad, and trial of intellectuals including Eşref Edib in 1925, as well as denunciations of Akif by Kemalist partisans, he had in fact little choice.
Hagiographical writing about his Egypt years has revolved around certain themes – that he was desperately unhappy, broken by rejection in Turkey, incapable of matching his previous output, or lacking money. From his letters to family and friends, his poetry composed at the time, and comments in various memoirs, it appears Akif was at first happy to withdraw to a country he fetished in his writing as “the Great East” (Koca Şark). The poetry of his Egypt years – his final Safahat collection was published in Ottoman Arabic script in Cairo in 1933 as Gölgetter (Shadows), spanning material from 1919 to 1933 – includes his most lyrical and rapturous work. The life of seclusion he adopted in Ḥilwān was one he often celebrated in his letters, and his wife and sons Emin and Tahir were with him. What did cast a huge shadow over his life in Egypt was the commission he had reluctantly accepted before leaving: to produce a definitive Turkish version of the Qurʾān. It was not until 1931 that Akif had concluded he was being exploited to provide the Kemalists with what would be the jewel in the crown of their revolutionary project. Viewed as someone with the unique skills to rally pan-Islamic opposition, Akif came under the surveillance of Turkish diplomats, and the government even had a shipment of Gölgetter that Akif had sent ahead of his return in 1936 destroyed over fears of subversive content. His letters throughout thirteen years in Egypt are sparing in their political content, giving the impression he was wary of their being read by censors and his being banned from ever returning home as a result. Indeed, his biographer Ertuğrul Düzdağ argues republican bureaucrats should be thanked for keeping Akif off the blacklist of 150 enemies of the state issued in 1924, otherwise the İstiklal Marşı would have been replaced and “it would be an issue even to talk about him today.”

Hakimiyet-i Milliye ran an article at the time telling Akif to “go play in the sand” (hadi git artık, sen kumda oyna), a line Akif used in his Gölgetter poem Bir Arıza (1929). Cited in Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti, “M. Akif”, Yeni Istanbul, 31 Dec. 1967; and Cündioğlu, Bir Kur'an Şairi, 133.

Ersoy, Babam, 103. See El-Uksur’də (1915), in Akif, Safahat, 420.

40 Ersoy, Babam, 103. See El-Uksur’də (1915), in Akif, Safahat, 420.
41 He revoked the Diyanet contract in 1931; Yusuf Turan Günüaydın, Mehmet Akif Ersoy: Mektuplar (İstanbul: Atlas, 2016), 30. In May 1931, he described Ankara as engaging in “all forms of fearless excess” (her türlü ifratı biperva kabul eden) in the name of renewal; Günüaydın, Mektuplar, 90. In 1931 he denounced the regime as a “Freemason cabal” (farmason dolabı); Edib, Mehmed Âkif, 172.
42 Muharrem Coşkun, Kod Adı: İrtica – 906, Mehmed Akif Ersoy (İstanbul: Gaziosmanpaşa Belediyesi, 2014).
Treatment of Akif in Scholarship

A vast amount has been written in Turkish on Akif but little in English. His death in 1936 provided an occasion for early debate about the Turkish republic and the radical secularist direction it had taken. His collaborator at Sebiliürreşad Eşref Edib launched a cottage industry in Akif hagiography, which added to the alarm in Kemalist quarters over the public revival of religious sentiment and fueled the effort by his admirers to establish Akif as an intellectual icon of the republic. Edib quickly published his biography of Akif, with contributions from a host of figures, organizing a conference at Istanbul University in 1938, such that one writer rued that nationalist intellectuals such as Ziya Gökalp and Yusuf Akçura (1876–1935) were “yet to find their Eşref Edib” who would eulogize them so effectively. In the view of Kemalist writers, Akif’s gift with language, and in particular his occasional use of colloquial registers, gave his work the ability to manipulate popular psychology with Islamic messaging. “Akif worship” (Akif-perestlik) should be set aside to ensure that Turkist figures such as Gökalp remain Turkey’s national heroes, one writer said.

The few Turkish historians who discussed Akif in English also tended to present him in monochrome terms as an Islamic reactionary (mürteci). In The Development of Secularism in Turkey, first published in 1964, Niyazi Berkes lumped together diverse Muslim thinkers and ulema as “bigots” attached to the past. Although he saw Akif as the most enlightened of the genre, Berkes could not forgive Akif’s sleight of hand in withholding his Qurʾān translation. It was not until the 1980s that historians came to a less politicized understanding of Late Ottoman religious thought, starting with İsmail Kara’s three-volume Türkiye’de İslamcılık Düşüncesi (Islamist Thought in Turkey, 1986). The industry in Akif writing found further impetus in the 1990s with the revelations of what had happened to Akif’s Qurʾān translation and subsequent discovery of extant parts of the text. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued a series of publications celebrating Akif in Turkish and English from 1986 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his death, though historian Fahir İz could still describe him in one article as “unable to adjust his ideas to the new secular nationalist Turkey.”

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44 Edib, Mehmed Âkif, 723.
45 Cumhuriyet, 14 Feb 1939; cited in Edib, Mehmed Âkif, 793–95.
Berkes’ theory that Akif sabotaged the Kemalist plan to nationalize Islam at the behest of Arab radicals was to appear one last time in 1999 in a speech by Professor Brigadier General Yağış Işımer before the 1999–2000 cohort of the prestigious Gülhane Military Medical Academy in Ankara, titled “Atatürk’üm ve Türkçem” (My Atatürk and My Turkish). Işımer embellished the story with details such as that Akif went to Egypt in a huff over the state-mandated hat to consult with Rida on establishing a Turkish university that would produce “Azhar-minded people” (el-Ezher kafalı adamlar).49 Işımer’s statement, which provoked considerable media coverage at the time, came after the military had forced Necmettin Erbakan’s Welfare Party from office in 1997. Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which took office in 2002, public interest in Akif continued to rise.50 With Islamist thinking now challenging decades of Kemalist hegemony in numerous fields of intellectual life, Akif became the poet who successfully challenged secular radicalism through his “resistance translation” (direnen meali), to quote the title of one recent volume analyzing Akif’s Qur’ān.51 This new environment even opened the door to criticism of Akif from Islamic opinion over both his denunciation of Sultan Abdülhamid and some elements of his reformism, the latter of which is examined in the next section.52

Der Wille zur Macht: Akif’s Modernist Theology

Akif was roused from his reclusive life in Egypt through the friendship he established in 1929 with ʿAbd al-Wahhāb ʿAzzām (1894–1959). A young professor of Persian literature who had studied at the School of Oriental Studies in London,53 ‘Azzām came to know about Akif’s presence in Ḥilwān by chance.
during a trip to Istanbul in the company of his uncle ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Azzām (first secretary general of the Arab League). ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām arranged for Akif to teach Turkish at the Egyptian University and drew him into his Ḥilwān circle.⁵⁴ As well as a shared passion for Arabic and Persian literature, on the one hand, and French literature, on the other, they were both troubled by European representation of Muslim culture. Akif was scathing about German Orientalists after an encounter with professor of Islamic Studies Martin Hartmann (1851–1918) during his wartime sojourn.⁵⁵ He also talked of the anti-Muslim sentiment he encountered in Germany, from politicians to the literati. “The country’s ideas had become so poisoned against us over centuries by journalists, novelists, and those so-called Orientalists, who claimed to be knowledgeable about Eastern languages, Eastern sciences and arts, Eastern morals and customs, that there was no possibility of an understanding or peace between us,” Akif said in one of his 1920 sermons.⁵⁶

Akif and ‘Azzām also discovered a common admiration for Muḥammad Iqbāl. In an obituary, ‘Azzām explained his debt to Akif for introducing him to the Indian writer.⁵⁷ Akif showed him a copy of Iqbāl’s Persian-language poetry collection Payām-i mashriq (Message of the East, 1923), after which they obtained Asrār-i khūdī (Secrets of the Self, 1915) and Rumūz-i bīkhūdī (Mysteries of Selflessness, 1917) from Indians in Cairo. ‘Azzām would make Iqbāl’s work widely available to Arabic reading audiences in the 1950s, translating Payām-i mashriq and others during his time as Egypt’s ambassador in Pakistan. When Iqbāl was hosted by the Muslim Youth Association in Cairo on his way to attend the Islamic conference in Jerusalem in December 1931, it was an opportunity for them all to meet. Iqbāl was feted in Egypt over five intense days, during which he met with intellectuals on several occasions; yet while ‘Azzām gave an address in his honour, there is no record of Akif having attended.⁵⁸ It is possible that he drew no attention from the Egyptian journalists, or was too shy to insert himself into the mix, since he did not know English and was not confident of his spoken Arabic. He also knew that Iqbāl did not read Turkish and may not have had a chance to become familiar with his work.

Parallels between Akif and Iqbāl have attracted almost no attention among scholars outside Turkey, reflecting disciplinary conventions that tend to define writers and historical fields along ethnic, linguistic, and national lines, not

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⁵⁴ Edib, Mehmed Akif, 451.
⁵⁸ Ḥāfiẓ Maḥfūẓ and Nabīla Isḥāq, Iqbāl wa-l-Azhar (Cairo: Dār al-Bayān, 1999), 25–27.
least with reference to Turkey and Islam. During her five years teaching at Ankara University in the 1950s, Annemarie Schimmel recognized Akif as one of the first Muslim intellectuals outside India to appreciate Iqbal’s importance and noted the impact of Late Ottomans on Iqbal. Iqbal’s poem \textit{Tarāna-i Hindī} (1904) became popular in Turkey as an anti-colonial anthem, and Iqbal subsequently referred to Ottoman losses in the Balkan and Libyan wars in a number of works. The parallels encompass age, life span, social background, and belief in art’s role in the construction of nation. The fate of their choices in language is also similar: G.S. Sahota notes that Iqbal’s Persian was reduced after his death to a national language belonging to neither India nor Pakistan, but Akif also laboured over a language whose form and substance was subjected to radical overhaul through the reforms enacted from 1928. They shared too a direct, if contrasting, experience of Europe: Iqbal spent three years studying for his doctorate in Persian metaphysics under the guidance of British and German Orientalists and had as a result a more positive view of European claims to expertise than Akif. Iqbal even managed the trip to Andalusia that Akif discussed in December 1925 during his early Egypt years. But the similarities extend further, to an Enlightenment-inflected understanding of wrong turns taken in the trajectory of Muslim history and hope for renaissance.

As Sahota argues, \textit{Payām-i mashriq} undercut the Western notion of civilization’s mono-directional flow from Europe to Oriental satrapies. It was heavily influenced by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s \textit{West-östlicher Divan} (West-Eastern Divan, 1819), which was partly inspired by Persian master Ḥāfiz. Iqbal talks of the “Eastern influence” Goethe channelled from his professor Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who was interested in the poetry of Sa’di, and Austrian diplomat Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856), who in 1812 published the first translation of Ḥāfiz’s \textit{Dīvān} in a European language. Goethe
in turn inspired a series of Persianists in German literature of the time, including August Platen (1796–1835), Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866), and Friedrich von Bodenstedt (1819–92). Ḥamdānī noted that Goethe borrowed from the poetic style and structure of Persian literature without embracing its content, with the implication that he could do the same with the Ṣūfī and German traditions. The Islamic East must wake up from centuries of slumber – the “ease and indolence” of Persian thought – to reassert itself at a critical juncture in world history that had witnessed the moral chaos of the First World War but also the new possibilities revealed in the physics of Albert Einstein (1879–1955) and philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859–1941).

So frank was Ḥamdānī’s engagement with Western thought that he was accused of mimicking many of its elements, in particular the concepts of the superman (Übermensch) and the will to power (der Wille zur Macht) in Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) system. The phrase “der Wille zur Macht” appeared in Also Sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spake Zarathustra, 1883) and Jenseits von Gut und Böse (Beyond Good and Evil, 1886), and Nietzsche’s notes on the concept were published posthumously under the same title in 1901. Nietzsche was inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer’s (1788–1860) concept of the will to live, as well as Darwinian evolutionary theory, but the lack of a systematic explication of his thinking allowed it to be interpreted by many admirers and detractors in political and/or racial terms. Nietzsche developed the will to power in the context of his critique of German culture and nationalism as outlined in essays published in the 1870s, and more broadly in light of the diminished status of religion as a metaphysical system explaining creation. He was reacting to what he saw as the naive and presumptuous notion of progress in history advanced by Hegel and his followers. Rather than engage in modernity’s detached historicization of knowledge, the truly creative and independent man of action should produce knowledge himself in the present through the arts. Out of this thinking emerges Nietzsche’s Übermensch, the ideal type developed in Also Sprach Zarathustra who rejects Platonic and Christian ethics and metaphysics for a new understanding of man in a post-God world. Ḥamdānī made no secret of his interest in Nietzsche: both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer are

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66 Ibid., 55–56.

67 Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Use and Abuse of History”, in Nietzsche (trans. Anthony M. Ludovici and Adrian Collins), The Untimely Meditations (Thoughts Out of Season Parts I and II) (Lawrence, Kansas: Digireads.com, 2009), 96–133.
addressed directly in *Payām-i mashriq*. Nietzsche is compared to the Ṣūfī martyr Maṅsūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922) in his *Jāvīdnāma* (1932), and Nietzsche is often brought up in Iqbāl’s speeches and articles. In his public comments, Iqbāl also related his concept of selfhood to Freud’s ego (*Das Ich und das Es* was published in 1923).

Iqbāl aligned himself with these ideas not because he accepted the Nietzschnian trope that ‘God is dead’ (*Gott ist tot*) but because they were useful for his task of addressing the condition of contemporary Muslims. They had for the most part fallen under the yoke of European powers because of problems in their theological, juridical, and intellectual culture that were an impediment to progress—an idea Nietzsche would have scoffed at. He was blunt in the lectures which became the basis of his book *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930). Here, Iqbāl outlined the Muslim modernist understanding of, on the one hand, excessive intellectualization within the Ṣūfī tradition that had diverted attention from more pressing tasks of communal guidance and, on the other, rigid adherence to the established juridical and theological traditions that crushed the creative spirit of individual and community. As for Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, Iqbāl’s concept of the mard-i muʾmin draws equally if not more on the mystic ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī’s *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, on which Iqbāl wrote an essay in 1900. Indeed, as Schimmel argues, Iqbāl was advocating neither post-God materialism nor absorption of the ego in the infinity of the divine, but the human personality’s full embrace of God.

Akif’s thought can also be located inside this cluster of ideas. How influenced was he by Iqbāl? Firstly, reading ʿAzzām offers some insight into Akif’s understanding of Iqbāl, given their extensive discussions about *Payām-i mashriq*. In the preface to his translation, ʿAzzām writes of the lesson he learned from

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69 “There was a Ḥallaj who was a stranger in his own land” (*būd ḥallājī bih shahr-i khūd gharīb*); see Iqbāl’s translation, in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, ed. Latif Ahmad Sherwani (Lahore: Iqbāl Academy Pakistan, 1995), 187. Al-Ḥallāj is also “the free man who knows good and evil” (*mard-i āzādī kih dānad khūb ve zisht*). See Iqbāl (trans. A.J. Arberry), *Javid-Nama* (Ajman, UAE: Islamic Books, 2000), 93, 112.
Akif in what he calls instinctive translation (*bi-l-fars*), retaining the obscurity of meaning that Iqbal often conveys as well as the metre.74 ‘Azzām gives an explanation of Iqbal’s philosophy based on his reading of Iqbal’s first collection, *Asrār-i khūdī* (1915), and then applies these ideas to *Payām-i mashriq*. The key to Iqbal’s thinking, ‘Azzām says, is *khūdī* (Ar. *al-dhātiyya*), which is equivalent to selfhood.75 Men must be true to their innate character in order to express this selfhood through independent thought and creativity, since imitation (*taqlīd*) weakens the self;76 descriptions of animals such as the self-reliant and independent hawk are examples in nature of the free agent man should be.77 Thus, Iqbal believed men were free, yet under the illusion of divine direction (*hurr muktār yatawahham annahu mujbar*).78 ‘Azzām says Iqbal’s notion of the primacy of passion over reason (*ʿishq* over *ʿaql*) also expressed this rejection of standard (Ash‘ari-Māturidi) creed on human agency and secondary causes.79

Secondly, we know of how aware Akif was of Iqbal. Akif wrote to a friend on 8 March 1925 that he had just received by post two of Iqbal’s works, one of which was *Payām-i mashriq*.80 Akif adds he had come across a short work that he does not name while in Ankara and found Iqbal similar to himself (*sahibini kendime benzetmiştim*).81 He talks of Iqbal’s familiarity with the Şüfi masters while “thoroughly digesting Western philosophy through going to Germany” (*Almanya’ya giderek Garp felsefesini adamakallı hazmeden İkbal*), and notes approvingly that Iqbal wrote in Persian but had strong Arabic. Akif also says he gave copies of the *Safahat* collection to Indian Muslims who visited him at Sebilürreşad offices in Istanbul for them to pass on to Iqbal. Akif’s friend Mahir İz talked in his memoirs of reading *Payām-i mashriq* in his Istanbul home with Akif,82 and, in a letter dated 1 February 1927, Akif asked İz to send him Akif’s copy of *Payām-i mashriq* which he had once left there.83 Unsubstantiated claims have been made that Iqbal and Akif engaged in direct correspondence

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75 Ibid., 14–16.
77 Ibid., “Naṣīḥat ṣaqr li-farkhihi”, 40–41.
78 Ibid., “al-Ṭāʾira”, 76.
81 Ibid., 203.
82 Mahir İz, *Yılların İzi* (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 1990), 141.
from 1930. Researcher Mehmet Önder says Akif’s son-in-law Ömer Rıza read out a letter from Iqbāl to Akif at a conference he organized in Konya on Iqbāl and Rūmī at some point during Rıza’s time as a member of parliament in the 1950s. However, the text published by Önder, which is not cited elsewhere, talks only of love for modern Turkey and a desire to visit Rūmī’s tomb in Konya, without any mention of Akif.84 In his Reconstruction of Religious Thought (1930) and Jāvīdnāma (1932), Iqbāl cites by name Mustafa Kemal, Gökalp, his disciple Halim Sabit, and Akif’s collaborator Said Halim, but not Akif himself.

So while it is possible that Akif’s pantheistic turn in the Gölgeler collection, including Firavun ile Yüz Yüze (Face to Face with Pharaoh, December 1924), Gece (Evening), Hicran (Separation), and Secde (Prostration in Prayer, all January 1925), was influenced by Payām-i Mashriq, his earlier work containing his thinking on issues such as human agency, the good and bad of the Şūfī tradition, art and the nation, and so forth, shows Akif writing along similar lines to Iqbāl but independently. Sanatkâr (Artist), the very last poem of Gölgeler, and written in August 1933, makes explicit reference to the Indian thinker. The poem is an homage to Turkish oud player and composer Şerif Muhiddin, who Akif hugely admired, and dedicated to Archibald Roosevelt, son of the American president Theodore Roosevelt, in recognition of what Akif says in a footnote was the kindness he had showed Muhiddin during his time in New York. In that spirit, Akif pieces together various tableaus of high cultural achievement from East and West to highlight cross-flows between them. Muhiddin marvels at urban Americana observed from the window of the train he boards in Boston, then is surprised to see someone prostrating in prayer, which act is the apparent reason for describing him as an artist (sanatkâr). Muhiddin’s romantic partner tells him his own artistry reflects the pinnacle of Eastern sensitivity (Şark’a en temiz heyecan).85 But Akif’s narrator explains that this East is today suffering “the despair of an afflicted nation” (hāsir bir ümmetin yeʾsi),86 then cites “the poet of India, that philosopher Iqbāl”: “Their hearts were ecstatic/The ecstatic sounds of my heart/So ecstatic am I from that music/That I cannot sing.”87 The poem ends on a note of ambiguous optimism, blind hope for a bright future.

85 Akif, Safahat, 701.
86 Ibid., 702.
87 Ibid., 703: Heyecana verdi gönülleri,/Heyecanlı sesleri görünümün;/Ben o nağmeden müteheyyicim:/Ki yok ihtimali terennümün. The quatrain is from verse twenty-five of the
Akif’s interest in European thought and questioning of Şüfism evolves in a clear progression. In Süleymaniye Kürsüsünde (1912), touring the mosque, which was completed by the architect Sinan in 1558 under Suleyman the Magnificent, Akif describes it as a superlative human achievement transcending nations and ideologies: “One day courts and temples would be destroyed/The purist of places soiled by the filthiest feet/Mankind would know a new religion, atheism/God’s name erased from man’s memory,” he writes, but “not one stone from this home of God will fall” (yine tek bir taşı düşmez şu Hüda lânesinin), since it is destined to remain “the only home of truth on earth” (doğruluğun yerdeki tek yurdu). In Berlin Hatıraları, German urban planning is commended for its functionality: “What of the streets they talk of? Space without end/No chance of wandering on crooked bends.” While Germany was able to recover from its Napoleonic defeats, the Ottomans could not benefit from the positive sciences as Europe did, Akif says – an argument that Iqbal and Akif each made in their work. Akif’s subsequent Asım is his most forthright in advocating European knowledge in the construction of the modern nation, but with memorialization of wartime battle at Gallipoli as its foundational event. Akif intends the figure of Asım as representative of the new generation that will emerge stronger for the failures of its forebears, Akif’s generation. Asım transforms religious and nationalist zeal in war into a quest to attain the positive sciences (müsbet ulum) from Europe so that he can return for the nation-building project, because of the sacrifice and success of Gallipoli, he can engage Europeans now on an equal footing. Towards the end of the poem, viewed by admirers as his most significant, a fictional conversation takes place between Afghānī and ʿAbduh over the nature of the revolutionary action they seek. The character who represents Akif agrees with ʿAbduh’s gradualist approach, focussed on education rather than political violence.
lines, Asım’s father too counsels a quiet revolution (inkīlab), one that bridges Islamic and European knowledge.\(^95\)

This call to action, derived from ‘Abduh and shared with Iqbal, is also elaborated in Fatih Küürsüsünde (1914). Beginning with two friends marvelling over the Fatih mosque and the state of contemporary Ottoman society,\(^96\) it moves into a second section in which a preacher gives an extended exposition on creation that draws on the Şūfi, philosophical, and kalām traditions, in particular Neoplatonic emanation (fayḍ) and Ibn ‘Arabi’s divine archetypes (al-a’yān al-thābita). “The sea of [divine] power’s lasting work has no beginning/\(^97\) The call of bounteous eternity is manifest in every drop [Beliğ sayidir umman-i kudretin ezelî/Hurüş-i feyz-i ezel her kuteyresinde celi],” the preacher says. “Will, if considered, is always its eternal striving/\(^98\) But whose? That of the pure divine power, of the veiled secret/It neither rests nor remains idle for even a second/From stirring the affairs of creation.” He goes on to say that the creative power in the world could be articulated in terms of material (madde) that takes on different forms through say,\(^99\) but he also uses the more familiar kalām term zerre, the smallest forms of matter which exhibit the same life force as the harmony of the seas and skies.\(^100\) The Ash’ari-Māturīdī terminology of kasb/tafwīḍ to refer to the human acquisition of divine authority to act is effectively replaced here by Akif’s concept of say.

Akif then elaborates on the ecological system of the natural world as an “endless chain” (bir bi-nihâye sîsîle) of dynamic energy – a rejection of the kalām principle (known as butlân al-tasalsul, or burhân al-tatbîq) that divine action in the world renders continuous material causality, or infinite regress, impossible. This iconoclastic position was argued in clear terms by Afgâni and ‘Abduh in their commentary on the standard Ash’ari theological text of Jalâl al-Dîn Dawânov (d. 1502) that itself explicates ‘Aḍud al-Dîn al-Ijî’s Mawaqîf.\(^101\) Titled al-Ta’lîqât ʿalâ Sharh al-ʿAqâʾid al-ʿAḍudiyya (Comments on ‘Aḍud al-Dîn’s Creed), it was written in 1876 but not published until 1904, and, partly because of its controversial theology, its authorship is disputed.\(^102\) At numerous points

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 609–10.
\(^{96}\) Ibid., 306–07.
\(^{97}\) Akif, Safahat, 318.
\(^{98}\) Ibid., 319: İrade hep ezelî sayidir, bakılsa, onun/Kimin? O kudret-i mahzın, o sr-i meknûnun/Ne dinlenir, ne de atîl kalâr, velev bir an/Şuun-i hilkati kesif edip yaratmaktan.
\(^{99}\) Ibid., 319.
\(^{100}\) Ibid., 328.
they make comments such as: “Thus far no proof has been posited of finitude to any chain whose parts are in existence, let alone one that is indisputable.”

Mustafa Sabri, who died in Egypt in 1954, wrote a blistering critique of ʿAbduh’s creed, describing it as a form of Islamic materialism that accepted modernity in the universalist terms posited by European rationalist and empirical knowledge. For Sabri, it made no sense to question the epistemic framework of the Islamic tradition – which is what he viewed the modernists as doing – simply because the modish positivism of the era, which underpinned the thinking of the Turkist movement, was opposed to religion as an institutional power, and in some cases as faith too.

The sermon in Fatih Kürsüsünde uses this discussion of divine power and causality to make Akif’s polemical point regarding “the West that is active” (mücahid olan Garb) and “the East that is stagnant” (atıl olan Şark). A nexus of popular beliefs has garbled the creedal concepts of kader (fate) and tevekkül (trust in God) for an understanding of God’s intervention in human affairs that deviates from the intention as outlined in kalām and Şûfism. Believers must know that there are possible entities that exist as archetypes, but their realization in the real world requires the effort of responsible men. Through placing faith in the guiding hand of God, Muslim tevekkül has become a form of tahakküüm, Akif declaims – a prejudging of God’s intent that in effect places God in a subordinate relationship to man (Hüdayı kendine kul yapıtı, kendi oldu Hüda). These passages recall Ibn ʿArabī’s Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam (Gems of Wisdom) and its section on God’s act of enabling the existence of entities (in the form of aʿyān) that demonstrate the desire for existence, regardless of their function or intent in the world. Akif’s preacher continually returns to the refrain throughout the poem: “Those who survive know that striving is a duty/Keep working to deserve survival through your effort.”

106 Akif, Safahat, 332.
107 Ibid., 341: Kader: Şeraiti mevcud olup da meydanda/Zuhura gelmesidir mümkünün aʿyānda.
108 Ibid., 341: Niçin nasıl gelyormuş... O büşbüttün mecbül/Biz ihtiyarmızın suretindeniz mesul.
109 Ibid., 340.
111 Akif, Safahat, 318, 320, 325, 328, 329, 331: Bekayı hak tanyan, sayî bir vazîfe bilir/Çalış çalıç, ki beka say olursa hakkedilir.
Despite their considerable points of intersection, it is only Turkish scholars who cite Iqbal and Akif together. Through his English and German connections, Iqbal had a voice in the West that Akif did not, and it was probably as a result of this fact that he acquired a status in Arabic that Akif did not. Indeed, Akif remains largely unknown in Arabic writing on modern Islamic thought.  

‘Azzām followed his obituary in the leading literary journal al-Risāla with some translations of Akif’s poetry, and Mustafa Sabri’s son Ibrahim translated Gölgener into Arabic as al-Ẓilāl in 1953. But Akif’s audience was largely his own community, something that could not be said of Iqbal. Despite his columns in Sebilürreşad and sermons in time of national crisis, Akif did not engage in theory or politics outside his poetry. He never endeavoured a reconstruction of religious thought, and exile prevented him from playing a bigger role in the national project during his lifetime, while Iqbal’s renunciation of the Ahmadiyya movement in 1935 meant that the early institutionalization of his memory in Pakistan would not suffer once ostracization of the Ahmadiyya began. Ultimately, Akif’s poetry operates within intellectual boundaries a degree narrower than those of Iqbal, less flamboyantly damning of the Sufi tradition, less dialectically engaged with European thinkers. Yet a tension permeates the work of both, in that they elaborate a metaphysics of existence situated in the very tradition they seek to reformulate. What both Akif and Iqbal represent is a final effort by modernist intellectuals to preserve something of the edifice of Sufism from the purificatory wave of Islamic rationalization of which they were an intrinsic part.

Akif’s Compromise with Turkism

The second major element in Akif’s thought was its embrace of Turkist vocabulary when Istanbul was occupied after the war. Previously, Akif had rejected ethnic chauvinism in the context of the secession of Albania in November 1912. 

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114 Sherwani, Speeches, 197–241.

115 Iqbal later supported ending the caliphate and other elements of the Kemalist revolution. Ibid., 232–35.
In a column published in *Sırat-ı Müstakim* in March 1910, he became one of many to take issue with *ÇUP* intellectual Abdullah Cevdet’s Ottoman translation of Dutch Orientalist Reinhart Dozy’s (1820–83) *Essai sur l’histoire de l’Islamisme* (1879), published in Cairo in 1908 as *Tarih-i İslâmiyet*. The translation was the first major Ottoman book publication openly critical of Islam, including the suggestion that the Prophet had suffered from epilepsy or a psychogenic muscular disorder. Akif attacked Dozy’s discussion of whether the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Muslims could be a factor in loosening pan-Islamic solidarity, reflecting his fear that the Ottoman unity of Albanian, Turk, Arab, Laz, Kurd, and Circassian Muslims could dissolve. Akif took up the same theme following the loss of Albania in a *ḥadīth* commentary dated to March 1913 that appeared in the third *Safahat* collection. He depicts both *kavmiyet* (ethnic nationalism) and *medeniyet* (European modernity) as ideologies that will cause the disintegration of the realm, adding his father would have been appalled at the failure to save Albania. The final section of *Fatih Kürsüsünde* (1914) was a paean to the Balkans as a lost Andalusia. More attention to Islamic education through establishing Qur’anic schools for children could have firmed the Albanians’ commitment to Istanbul and prevented rebellion, it suggested. Akif repeated the same point on preserving Islam’s community of ethnic groups in his Bayezid mosque sermon of February 1913 and in two of his Qur’anic commentaries published in 1912–13, when *Sebilürreşad* became the leading outlet for the expression of anti-Turkist sentiment.

In *Süleymaniye Kürsüsünde* (1912), Akif’s mosque preacher rails against *kavmiyet* as a device for creating the division that enables colonial rule, “the earthquake that will destroy Islam at its base” (*İslamı/Temelinden yıkacak zelzele*). In contrast to *kavmiyet*, *milliyet* is held up as a concept of nationhood.
that embraces different ethnicities (akvam), a sort of Islamic nationalism. But positivist intellectuals, who he implies are those associated with the cup through his use of the word terakki (progress), have gone too far in their attempts to craft nationalism as a set of characteristics for each people (her millet için ancak o mahiyettür), with religion a secondary or even regressive element. Akif’s preacher, who is modelled on Abdürreşid İbrahim, the Tatar ʿālim who travelled in the Far East, concludes with the example of Japan. Akif/İbrahim argue that Japan has advanced – defeating China in 1895, Russia in 1905, and annexing Korea in 1910 – through staying true to its own values while taking from the West only its technology (“To push through all stages of progress/Let your own ‘spiritual identity’ be your guide/Since hope of salvation without out is futile”). Ottoman interest in the Japanese model was not unique to the Islamists, but Akif was at the forefront in framing the Japanese case in Islamic terms, serializing Ibrahim’s book Alem-i İslam ve Japonya'da İntişar-ı İslamiyet (The Islamic World and the Spread of Islam in Japan, 1912) from 1909 as part of his project to nativize Ottoman knowledge of Asia. Akif glossed over Japan’s ethnic and linguistic homogeneity and its Confucian, Buddhist, and shamanistic traditions to present the Japanese in typically modernist terms as Muslims in all but name: a conscientious, hard-working, moral people who in his telling only allowed in as much of Western method as necessary. “Let me say this much: there the clear religion [Islam]/And its bounteous spirit have spread, only its form is Buddha,” his preacher declares. Speaking in the Zağnos Paşa mosque in Bahkesir province in February 1920, Akif again attacked nationalist ideology, this time as kavmiyetçilik, in his first act of propaganda against the Allied plans for Anatolia, which were formalized in the Treaty of Sèvres in August 1920. In April he slipped out of Istanbul – where his sermon had caused friction with the authorities – for the resistance

124 Ibid., 241.
125 Ibid., 245; Bütün edвар-и terakkiyi yarıp geçmek için/Kendi ‘mahiyet-i ruhiyeniz’ olsun kılavuz/Çünkü beyhudedir ümid-i selamet onsus.
127 Further studies on Japanese culture were made by Samızade Süreyya, Büyük Japonya (Great Japan, 1917).
stronghold of Ankara, which had broken with the sultan’s government by establishing its national assembly. By kavmiyetçilik, Akif intended a community so partisan that it could easily fall prey to internecine dispute, his example being the feuding Aws and Khazraj tribes of Medina before the Prophet established his system of government there. Such a kavmiyetçilik he equates with fırkacılık (partisanship), but it is a term he appears to have deployed as a foil to kavmiyet, so that kavmiyet could then take on an Islamic cast as a Turkish nationalism he could embrace. Akif’s sermons carefully maintained this ambiguity over the question of nationalism: for example, he would tell his audience they faced “a national task, a religious obligation” (bir vazife-i vataniye, bir fariza-i diniye) in which there could be no dereliction of duty.129

This miasmic Turkish-Islamic mix pervades a further four sermons Akif delivered between November 1920 and February 1921, having fully committed to the nationalist cause with an Islamic twist, but now expressed in bellicose language somewhat at odds with his humanist demeanour. Speaking at the Nasrullah mosque in Kastamonu on 21 November, Akif set out to answer the question, should we be compassionate towards non-Muslims? He proceeded to detail his experiences with Europeans that would militate against such a position, focussing on the months when he was on “an important mission” (mühim bir vazife) in Berlin during the war. Akif states at the outset that he has come to his senses now that he has seen with his own eyes “the injustice, treachery and contempt that the nations we call European see as appropriate for helpless people they took into bondage and ruled”. Western culture may be non-religious as a general characteristic today, but they in fact inculcate a deep anti-Muslim sentiment; they cannot consider as equal in humanity those who do not belong to their ethnic group, religion, or colour, and this shows in their art, poetry, novels, and newspapers, which “continue to provoke these feelings”. Others can attain European technical achievements through the same hard work they put in, Akif said, but Muslim nations must be internally

130 Ibid., 186.
131 This sermon was also delivered in Diyarbakır at an unclear date; see Abdülkadiroğlu, Mev’iza, 144, asterisked footnote. Akif said in Kastamonu he had travelled to many parts of Anatolia.
133 Ibid., 250.
134 Ibid., 251: kendi cinslerinden, kendi dinlerinden, kendi renklerinden.
135 Ibid., 251: bu hislerini canlandırır dururlar.
united if they are to succeed – stoking division is how the British managed to maintain an empire on minimal military resources.

Referring to his audience as both "Muslims" and "Turks", Akif now addressed the threat at hand: that Greek forces were massing and the British could allow them into Istanbul. The immediate task was thus to end infighting in order to face the threat from the Greek army, which had occupied Izmir in May 1919 and began pushing inland towards Ankara after consolidating its hold of the Aegean coast. To this end, western Anatolia must do what eastern Anatolians had done and take the fight to the enemy. He cited the specific example of Kars, which Ankara's forces had retaken from the Republic of Armenia the previous month: "Let God grant success to our heroic fighters; may He inflict on this base enemy in Western Anatolia the fate the Armenians rightly suffered," Akif said. "Now the task of our coreligionists on this side of Anatolia is to rip up this filthy rag [Treaty of Sèvres] by throwing the enemies on the other side of Anatolia into the sea." In the sentences preceding these words, he had referred to the Yunan ordusu (Greek army) rather than the Rum, which would refer to Greeks under Ottoman rule, and he contextualized his citation of the Armenian akibet with mention of the battle of Kars. Yet his audience could well have understood Akif's words as a call to evict Greek Ottomans as Armenian Ottomans had been evicted during the war. The issue was hardly far from public awareness. With the cooperation of the sultan's government, British authorities in Istanbul established a military court in April 1919 focussed largely on the Armenian question, and in July 1919 the court found the CUP and its wartime leaders guilty of intent to eliminate the Armenians through the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa. Many administrators, officers, and intellectuals were exiled to Malta while the British tried to gather evidence against them from Ottoman documentary material before Ankara obtained their release in 1921.

The further three published sermons Akif gave during this critical period of the Greek war pursue his themes of the need for unity and his notion of an Islamic nationalism, a readiness to “defend the nation of Islam” (vatan-ı İslamı müdafaa) through attention to all obligations of faith, including that of jihād. For Akif these sermons were an opportunity for an intellectual to transform abstract theory into a concrete plan of action, to discuss the ideas

136 Ibid., 258–59.
137 Ibid., 259: Cenab-ı Hak o kahraman mücahidlerimize teyifikler ihsan buyursun; Anadolumuzun garbındaki bu sefil düşmanı da Ermenilerin bihakkın uğradıkları akibete uğratsın.
138 Ibid., 259.
animating his oeuvre directly with ordinary people outside the parameters of poetry. Now was the moment for Muslims to cast aside sloth and resignation in the fight for survival. He impressed upon his audience the argument from his Safahat – such as “Azimden Sonra Tevekkül” (After Resolve, Faith in God), written in November 1919 – that tevekkül should be understood as the belief that God will support the believer in realizing the goals of his resolute action (azim).\(^{140}\) The specific aim of these exhortations was to convince the Anatolian peasantry that Ankara’s National Forces were not a reconstituted CUP movement, that supporting them was a religious duty incumbent on each person (farz-i ayn), and that if they were to lose, Muslim Turks would have nowhere else to go.\(^{141}\)

Akif’s use of language in this period provides further evidence that he was more accepting of Turkish nationalism than has been assumed, often using terms notably more ideological than the neutral, jurisdictional vatan or memlekет to refer to the nation.\(^{142}\) Around 1921–22, he composed a poem for a military march called “Ordunun Duası” (Call of the Army), praising the institution in both ethnic and religious terms: “We are Turkish men of heroic descent/ Muslims who worship God,” it declares in one stanza.\(^{143}\) In his letters from Egypt, he displayed a strong sense of belonging with Turkish speakers, bewailing the absence of communal spirit that Akçura and Gökalp had predicted would lead to Turkish assimilation: “Even strong communities like Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Italians have difficulty finding work, so compare that to Turks who have no community organization,” he wrote.\(^{144}\) He praised his son-in-law Ahmed’s decision to vacation in the east of Turkey, since “the nation is a unity that cannot be divided [vatan bir külldür ki tecezzi kabul etmez]: its east, west, north, south must be completely one in our thinking”,\(^{145}\) and for carrying out his sacred national duty in performing military service (vazife-i mukaddese-i vatanıyeniz).\(^{146}\) He told his daughter not to complain about life in eastern Anatolia, where they had moved, noting that officials of the British empire did

\(^{140}\) Akif, “Ye’se Düşenler Müslüman Değildir”, Sebilürreşad, 3 Feb. 1921, 18:467, 294.

\(^{141}\) Düzdağ says Akif gave an unpublished sermon to this effect in Hacı Bayram mosque shortly after arriving in Ankara in 1920; “Introduction”, xxix.


\(^{143}\) In Akif, Safahat, 493: Biz Türk eriyiz, silsileyiz kahraman/Müslümanız, Hakk’a tapan Müslüman.

\(^{144}\) Letter to Asım Şakir Gören, 2 Mar. 1925, in Günaydın, Mektuplar, 134: hiçbir teşkilatı olmayan Türklerin maruz kalacağı siktınları artık bir kayas edin.

\(^{145}\) Letter to Ahmed, 11 Jun. 1932, in Ömer Hakan Ölzalp, Firaki Nâmeleр Âkif’in Gurbet Mektupları (İstanbul: Timâş Yayınları, 2011), 70.

\(^{146}\) Letter to Ahmed, 31 Dec. 1933, ibid., 106–07.
not hesitate to travel the world for the sake of nation (vatanı uğrunda). In a letter of 29 April 1935, Akif wrote to his friend Şefik Kolaylık: “May God give power and strength to you, so you can keep on working for the good of the nation [vatanımızın hayrı için uğras dur].” And in a letter dated 19 July 1935 he recalled a recent trip to Antakya, his first visit to the republic in a decade, writing rapturously of “a lush Turkish land [yemyeşil bir Türk yurdu] with trees, gardens, olive groves, vineyards staring upon the Taurus mountains, running down to the Asi river.”

Akif also used the phrase Allah büyük in place of the Ottoman Arabic-origin phrases Allah kebir and Allah kerim (“Let us rely on God”) in some of his later letters, Tanrı for God in his Kastamonu sermons (1920–21), and irk for ethnic group in both Asım (1919–24) and his national anthem. The latter example counters earlier usages of irk that were clearly pejorative. The word millet also served Akif’s purpose. Gökalp sought to claim the term for Turkish nationalism, consistent with the Young Turk usage of millet as a non-religious racial community, by which definition the Germans or the Turks could be a nation. Feroz Ahmad has noted, however, that the word retained its sense of religious community well into the republican period; indeed, Erbakan’s Millî Görüş (National Vision) movement – the ideological base from which he formed his successive political parties from 1969 onwards – embraced the term millî as a codeword for the lost religious unity of the caliphate, while the republic continued to enforce its meaning in public fora as “national”. Akif could, then, freely deploy millet with all its ambiguity, knowing it meant different things to different audiences. Ethnic and religious concepts are fused in the “İstiklal Marşı”, in which he talks of independence as the right of a God-worshipping nation (Hakkıdır, Hakk’a tapan, milletimin istiklal) and “my hero people” (kahraman ırkım).

150 Letter to Eşref Sencer, 18 May 1931, ibid., 91.
152 Akif, Safahat, 504; see the use of arkan torunu for a Turkish wrestler.
153 See his reference to ark davaları in his tefsir of Q 8:25; Akif, “Tefsir-i Sure-i Enfal 25”, Sebilü’resad, 3 Oct. 1912, 231 (9:232); 82. Kayalı’s suggestion that Akif was not aware of the implications of irk is unconvincing; “Islam”, 328–29.
155 “İstiklal Marşı”, Akif, Safahat, 709.
category of ethnic nationalist – in a poem written in December 1918, after the CUP collapse, he denounced pan-Turkic Turanism (extolled by Gökalp) as a fruitless myth\textsuperscript{156} and praised Said Halim’s \textit{İslamlaşmak} (To Islamize, 1918) as more satisfying than other ideological offerings\textsuperscript{157} – but they were noted all the same by a few of his nationalist contemporaries.\textsuperscript{158}

### Conclusion

Mehmed Akif seized the opportunity presented by the end of Hamidian restrictions on public debate to bring the modernist thought of Muhammad ʿAbduh into the Ottoman Turkish sphere and, like Iqbal, craft a contemporary Islamic reasoning that he hoped would enable Muslim society to meet the challenge of European power. Akif did this in an Ottoman Turkish language at once national and Islamic. This national-linguistic focus limited his influence among Egyptian peers but helped establish him as the Late Ottoman/early republican intellectual of choice for the Islamic movement which gathered force in Turkish political and social life in the later twentieth century. With the explosion in Islamic publishing following the return of multiparty elections after 1945, Akif was heavily promoted in two of the main journals of the period, the revived \textit{Sebilürreşad} (1948–66) and \textit{Hilal} (1958–91). Describing a literary salon in Erzurum in 1963 during which Akif was attacked as worthless for Turkish national poetry, \textit{Hilal} defended him as “the greatest and most thoughtful poet of Muslim Turkism” (müslüman Türklüğün en büyük ve mütefekkîr şairidir) and, in implicit criticism of Gökalp, the intellectual with the most effective ideas on national culture (ulusal kültür diye uydurulan millî hars).\textsuperscript{159} Philosophy professor Mehmet Emin Erişirgil, who served as a government minister in the 1940s, saw striking parallels between Akif and Gökalp, publishing biographies of both in the 1950s. Erişirgil noted the commonalities, from their social and educational background – origins on the imperial periphery, losing fathers at a young age, learning French, studying at veterinary college – to the goal of harmonizing Western and Islamic knowledge. During the First


\textsuperscript{157} Akif, “İslamlaşmak”, \textit{Sebilürreşad}, 10 Apr. 1919, 16:404, 133.

\textsuperscript{158} See Halim Sabit, in Edib, \textit{Mehmed Akif}, 546.

\textsuperscript{159} Semaheddin Cem, “Akifimiz”, \textit{Hilal} 5:56, Mar. 1966, 23–24.
World War, Minister of the Interior Talat Paşa even tried to effect a reconciliation between them that Akif politely brushed aside.160

Indeed, recent scholarship has stressed that Gökalp’s engagement with religion came from a place of respect that undercuts the Durkheimian calque that inhabits much of the literature.161 Yet the contrast between Gökalp and Akif’s treatment of Ibn ‘Arabī and his theory of divine archetypes is instructive. While Akif’s intent was to encourage human agency and liberate society from the notion of God’s eternal guiding hand, Gökalp’s early writing aimed to establish Şûfi thought as an equal to philosophical idealism, or what he called mefkûrecilik.162 Thus, the archetypes of Ibn ‘Arabī’s system could be considered as the elements (ideals/mefkûreler) of reality that human perception can never grasp in Western idealism, particularly the Kantian version. Gökalp took this thinking in a nationalist direction when writing his major work Türkçülüğün Esasları (The Principles of Turkism, 1923). Developing Alfred Fouillée’s notion of the ideals made real (idées-forces) through mass psychology and social action, he argued that popular culture – its rituals, celebrations, and gatherings – is the arena where the most vital human existence obtains (içtimai vecd).163 Communal vecd is such that prayers and sermons ought to be rendered in the people’s tongue, Turkish.164 Religious practices are to be celebrated as an intrinsic part of Anatolian folk culture (hars), the locus of Turkishness that Gökalp champions contra the defective civilization (medeniyet) of urban elites who include the ulema.165 Ending theocracy means restricting the role of the İlimiye to purely faith-related functions and ending monarchy.166

The different approaches to religion here are revealing of the reluctance of early Kemalism to embrace Akif despite his manifest willingness to engage on

160 Erişirgil, İslâmcı bir Şairin, 197–201; Erişirgil, Bir Fikir Adamının Romanı: Ziya Gökalp (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1984 [1951]), 71–82.
164 Gökalp, Türkçülüğün Esasları (İstanbul: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1976), 170.
165 Ibid., 42, 170–71.
166 Ibid., 168–69.
the question of national identity. While Akif retained his intellectual coordinates in the polyvalent Arabic-Persian-Turkish heritage of Ottoman culture, Gökalp shoehorned only the parts he liked into his nationalist paradigm. Similarly, Gökalp could argue that a core of Arabic and Persian words was acceptable in Turkish, but only if they operated according to Turkish language rules. Akif believed it was only the mindset of the *ulema* that required reconfiguring, not the institutions they controlled. At the same time, Akif’s views on questions of secularism only appear rejectionist if secularism is understood in the specific format adopted by the early republic, which included, insofar as possible, excising outwards signs of faith from public space, the Turkification of Islam, and overhauling the language to conform with a view of the West as the touchstone of modernity. Some of the reforms would perhaps have been disconcerting even to Gökalp had he lived, though they came to be associated with his name. Early republican policies followed the French model, though only acquired the terminological framing of *laïcité* later when *laiklik* was cited in the Republican People’s Party programme in 1931 and the constitution in 1937, while Turkey was a one-party state for almost the entire period. In 1922, Akif could challenge both nationalist and Islamist circles in translating and publishing Said Halim’s ideas for an Islamic republic of elected president, elected legislature of *ulema*, and elected supervisory assembly, but sitting in the Ankara parliament until May 1923, Akif never articulated such views himself. In other words, while Akif accepted the principle of republican nationalism, the particular early republican nationalism on offer would not accept Akif. Yet in channeling the thought of ʿAbduh and Iqbāl, Akif presented an alternative intellectual model for the post-Ottoman state whose stature was only to grow in time.

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170 Said Halim, *Les institutions politiques dans la societe musulmane* (Rome, 1921); published in *Sebilîreşad* from 26 Feb. 1922 (19:493) to 13 May 1922 (20:501) as *İslâm’da Teşkilât-ı Siyasîye*.