Mehmed Akif Ersoy (1873–1936)

Life

Mehmed Akif was born in Istanbul in 1873. His father, Mehmed Tahir Efendi, was an Albanian émigré who became an instructor at the Fatih Medrese; his mother was from a Bukharan family. At the age of four, the young Akif began his education at the neighboring school of Emir Bukhari. He later studied at the Fatih Rüşdiye (Ottoman junior high school) and at the high school division of the Mekteb-i Mülkiye (School of Political Sciences). Following his father’s death and the loss of the family house in a fire, he was unable to pursue his higher education in the advanced division of the Mekteb-i Mülkiye. Instead, he registered at the veterinary boarding school, which offered free tuition, from which he graduated in 1893 with distinction. That same year, he began his career as a veterinary inspector and served in Anatolia, Macedonia and Hejaz, after which he taught at the Halkalı School of Agriculture in 1906 and at the School of Farming Machinery in 1907. In 1908, Akif was appointed as professor of literature at the Darülfünûn (university). Following the reinstatement of the Turkish Constitution that same year, Akif joined the editorial board of the famous Islamist journal Sırat-ı Müstakim, and began publishing his writings there. After the end of the Balkan Wars in 1913, Akif resigned from his position in the Ministry of Agriculture, and again travelled to Hejaz and also to Egypt. After the outbreak of the First World War, he was invited by the German government to assess the condition of Muslim prisoners of war in Germany. In the interim, he was employed by the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa (the Ottoman secret service) and sent to Shammar on a diplomatic mission. After the end of the First World War and at the beginning of the Greek occupation of Western Anatolia in 1919, he joined the nationalist resistance. In the town of Balıkesir, in northwestern Anatolia, he began his sermons calling upon the public to resist the enemy. On 9 May 1920, he travelled to Ankara to participate in the national liberation movement. Later that year, on 25 December, the collaborationist Ottoman government dismissed him from his teaching position in Dar-ul Hikmet (Islamic University) in Istanbul. During the war of national liberation he served in Parliament in Ankara as a deputy of the Burdur province. In that same period, he also went on a mission to Konya to call upon the rebels not to revolt against the Ankara government but instead to join the nationalist cause. He also gave many sermons in the Nasrullah Mosque, in the northern Anatolian
town of Kastamonu, in support of the nationalist resistance. After his return to Ankara, he lived in the Taceddin Dergahi (sufi lodge), where he penned the words that were to officially become the Turkish national anthem on 12 March 1921. In 1922, Mehmed Akif was appointed to the Council of Islamic Studies and Publications. He returned to Istanbul in 1923 following the victory of the national liberation movement. Nevertheless, disappointed and disheartened by the Westernizing reforms undertaken by the Kemalist regime, he decided to leave Turkey for Egypt upon the invitation of Abbas Halim Pasha, brother of Said Halim Pasha. Akif returned to Istanbul every summer until 1926, but as the secularizing reforms of the Ankara government continued at full speed, he then decided to remain in Egypt. He was a fierce opponent and well-known critic of the Westernization and secularization of the state and society, the path now followed by the new Turkish regime. In Egypt, Mehmed Akif taught Turkish literature at the Egyptian University in Cairo and worked on a translation of the Quran. In 1935, he became seriously ill; afraid of dying far from his homeland, he returned to Turkey in the early summer of 1936. He died on 27 December 1936 in Istanbul, and was buried next to his beloved friend Ahmed Naim Baban.¹

### Ideas

The following writings are taken from an article written by Mehmed Akif that appeared in the Islamist periodical *Surat-i Müstakim, I*. The article was also published in Latin transcription by İsmail Kara in *Türkiye’de İslamcılık Düșüncesi* (Islamist Thought in Turkey) vol. 1. pp. 405–410.

**The Importance of Work in Islam**

In this world, only those nations that have liberated themselves from apathy and are made up of industrious and resourceful citizens will progress quickly and leave other nations behind. Therefore, it is only by embracing hard work and an industrious lifestyle that a society can attain modern levels of civilization. Some social and political writers argue that religion prevents people from adopting such a productive lifestyle, causing languor and indolence among people. Here, I am going to argue just the opposite. Islam, far from being the cause of laziness among its followers, encourages and in fact orders them to work hard in this world. The prophet of Islam says, “You have to work for the

¹ İsmail Kara, *Türkiye’de İslamcılık Düșüncesi*, Istanbul: Kitabevi, pp. 401–403 (hereafter cited as Kara, *Türkiye’de*).