Chapter 6

Archaeology of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis: Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization as the Pillars of the Modern Ottoman Identity[1] 🔓

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Abstract

This study investigates the historical foundations of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, a threefold discourse combining religion, nationalism, and modernization in the form of Westernization, which was systematically indoctrinated by nationalist intellectuals in Turkey during the 1970s. The argument of the study is that Young Ottomans were the first voices of the discursive orientation to unite and synthesize all three elements, as part of the quest to construct a modern Ottoman identity to save the state in the last period of the Ottoman Empire. At the official level, this discourse gradually became institutionalized and officialized during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II with the expansion of modernization policies aimed at transforming society and the state and formed the basis for state policies in many areas. To this end, the writings and statements of Young Ottomans are analyzed in detail, followed by a comprehensive evaluation of the policy implementations in the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Abdül Hamid II and their reflections on education, also including the Sultan's own expressions, in terms of ideological attempts to articulate Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization.

1. Introduction

"Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" is the name of an (ideological) discourse[3] that was indoctrinated in the 1970s under the roof of an organization known

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1   This article is a revised and extended version of one of the sections of my Phd dissertation (Babahan 2014).

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3   In the study, I use the concept of "ideology" as "a form of a social cognition, shared by the members of a group, class, or other social formations" (Van Dijk 1989: 24); and "discourse" as "a specific 'textual' form of language use in the social context" to correspond to the linguistic

in Turkey as the Intellectuals' Hearth (*Aydınlar Ocağı*), comprising an intelligentsia from Muslim Turkish nationalists. Shortly after its emergence, it received a collective interest and widespread recognition after becoming the state's official discourse following the military coup in 1980 (Güvenç et al., 1994; Dursun, 2002). The founding argument of this discourse, which considers ethnicity and religion to be indispensable components of national identity and official ideology, is that Turkishness and (Sunni) Islam complement each other (Bora et al., 2000: 161). Accordingly, Turks are assumed to have an essential contribution to Islam's prevalence and the development of the Islamic civilization. At the same time, Islam, as a religion, refers to an adhesive force that unites Turks (Copeaux, 2000: 56). Still decisive at the official level in Turkey, this discourse also recognizes "modernization,"[4] or "Westernization,"[5] to the extent that it involves a modern economic, legal, social, and organizational model with industrial-technological progress. Thus, modernization (or Westernization), which officially never existed in the celebrated title of the synthesis possibly due to nationalist concerns, always remains implicitly as one of the three founding dimensions of this discourse with Islam and Turkishness (Güvenç et al., 1994; Dursun, 2002).

Although Turkish-Islamic Synthesis has been indoctrinated recently, several researchers claim that the ideas and attempts to articulate Turkishness, Islam, and Westernization within the same discourse may be dated back to the 19th century. (See İnalcık, 2016: 189; Özdalga, 2009; Turan, 1993; Toprak, 1981; Bora, 2008; Zubadia, 1996; Çetinsaya, 1999; Parla, 2002).

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expression of ideologies (Van Dijk 1989: 19, 22). Therefore, pursuant with this approach, the discourse layer which is related to what a person says and how it is said consists of the "overt or covert" ideological traces that enable understanding of what this person believes in, thinks of and how he perceives/interprets the world. (Van Dijk 1989)

4   Modernization originally refers to the new form of social life and organization that emerged in Europe from the 18th century onwards. (Tekeli, 2005: 137). In this sense, the concept defines to follow the radical transformation process that lasted for centuries in the Western world and brought about the change of the entire social structure. This process, briefly, is identified with the emergence of the concepts and institutions including "social mobility, modern state, bureaucratization and centralization, industrialization or capitalism and secularism [and nationalism]" (Greenfeld, 2006: 160). Tekeli (2005: 138) stated that the modernization process, which was born in Europe, tended to spread all over the world due to both its claim of universality in the field of thought and the structural nature of capitalism, one of its components. Accordingly, the non-Western world could not remain unresponsive to this process and, over time, modernization has become a global model for transformation and it has influenced the whole world..

5   Westernization (Tr. *Batılılaşma*; *Garplılaşma*) is usually considered in Turkey to be the Western way of modernization; thus used as a synonym of modernization (Çiğdem, 2001; Göle, 2001). Since the concept of Westernization, rather than modernization, was widely used in the historical period covered by this study, I prefer to use the latter in this study.

Nevertheless, since it was not the main concern of their work, they did not provide a comprehensive analysis of such discursive formations in this period. In this study, I intend to comprehensively conduct the historical archaeology of this discourse and systematically figure out the historical foundations of this synthesis by evaluating the documented statements of the late Ottoman elites.

My basic assumption at this point is that the orientation that is addressed, as it combines Turkishness and Islam in addition to Westernization within a collective identity[6] discourse, requires the emergence of modernization policies in the Empire and, more decisively, even if not at the level of political nationalism, at least the appearance of an ethnic awareness on Turkishness, among the Ottoman elites. Therefore, I take the second half of the 19th century, particularly as the starting point within the scope of the modernization process which took place in the late period of the Ottoman Empire when Islam and Turkishness started to be discussed among some of the Ottoman power elites[7] as the basis of the (modern) Ottoman socio-cultural identity to keep the society together. Karpat (2001: 356) also considers this period the first stage of "the evolution of Turkish ethnic consciousness and the crystallization of Turkish identity."

In this context, I argue that, in the history of Turkey, Young Ottomans, the leading intellectual group of the period, were the pioneering voices of a discursive orientation that is contemporarily entitled as Turkish-Islamic synthesis. Besides, institutional adoption of their ideas took place in the era of Abdul Hamid II, who was significantly influenced by the Young

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6   "'Identity' denotes the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities." (Jenkins, 2008: 18) Identity, first and foremost, related with a private search about the position of individual in this world, which is generally pursued by considering his/her qualities, resources and objectives in terms of their similarities and differences with other individuals. (Brubaker, 2012: 4; Jenkins, 2008:17-18) However, this search is also a social quest in nature, as it inevitably requires the determination of the position of the individual in the social context he/she lives in. Therefore, the question, "Who am I?", initially asked at the individual level, tends to turn into "Who are we?" in the next step, by taking a collective quality (Smith, 1991: 3-4; Jenkins, 2008: 12-13, 16). In this level, the self-identification is usually made on the basis of a mixture of genealogy, kinship, spoken language, belief, the tradition followed, the place of residence, or the community in which individual lives. On the other hand, collective identities could also become the base of political claims and perform a constitutive function in terms of providing the very foundation of political sovereignty and organization. Thus, at this level, the cultural and the political are intertwined (Brubaker, 2012: 5)

7   The reason for focusing on "power elites" in the study is that this group is accepted to be the agents of dominant social discourses (See. Van Dijk, 1989). These groups who are accepted to consist of political, military, economic and socio-cultural power circles in a certain society are defined as "the manufacturers of public knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, norms, values, morals, and ideologies" due to their powers on the society (Van Dijk, 1989: 22).

Ottomans' ideas despite his apparent conflict with them. For this purpose, a detailed analysis of the statements of Young Ottomans, Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and some other ruling elites of the period is carried out regarding their thoughts on Turkishness, Islam, and Westernization. As a supportive source for stating the characteristics of the official discourse, I also use Alkan's (2000; 2009) analyses of the textbooks of the period.

2. Religion, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as the Pillars of Collective Identity

Religion can be defined as a socio-cultural institution through which the social values, rules, and interactions (and therefore beliefs, thoughts, and activities) of a community of believers are systematically arranged concerning a (supposed) superhuman source (Spiro, 2004: 96-98). Ethnicity, on the other hand, is related to human collectivities in which members mostly have a (subjective) sense of possessing lineage ties, sharing a common history, land, culture, religion, tradition, institution, lifestyle, and/or livelihood activity (Smith, 1991: 20). Both of these served as the traditional sources of social order and collective identity to some extent (Brubaker, 2012: 4). However, since pre-modern states were based on multi-religious and multi-ethnic social formations, and there were explicit and well-protected socio-cultural divisions between the governing classes and their subjects, neither religion nor ethnicity could be the ideological ground for a claim of political integration and sovereignty till modern times (Gellner, 1983, Hobsbawm, 1992, Anderson, 1991).

Nationalism, as one of the by-products of modernization, however, is commonly defined as a political doctrine suggesting a congruence between the cultural and the political units (Gellner, 1983: 1-5). According to this understanding of nationalism, "[it] consists of political activities that aim to make the boundaries of the nation -a culturally distinctive collectivity aspiring to self-governance- coterminous with those of the state... [which is] refer[ed] to the set of specialized institutions that is responsible for producing order, justice, social welfare, and defense in a territorially bounded society" (Hechter, 2000:7).

As a modern phenomenon, nationalism first appeared in the Western part of Europe in the 18th century, but over time it has become an ideology-social movement influencing almost all parts of the world (Greenfeld, 2006). Some authors, such as Kohn (1946), distinguished between different types of nationalism, taking into account the political varieties due to different economic and socio-political settings in other parts of the world. In this

context, the most widely accepted distinction is between political or civic nationalism, which emphasizes political and legal aspects, and ethnic or cultural nationalism, which emphasizes culture and lineage.

Still, modernists like Gellner (1983), as mentioned above, take "the existence of political demand for self-determination in a distinct territorial unit" as the crucial criterion to separate nations from other kinds of social collectivities including ethnic groups. Hobsbawm (1992: 46-47), for this reason, distinguishes other modes of collectivities that lack politically oriented pursuits, including pre-modern religious and ethnic formations, as "proto-nationalist" orientations. He also emphasizes this doesn't mean that all of these modes of ethnic awareness will ultimately bring nationalist desire and endeavor. In this study, I adopt this approach to differentiate between nationalism and other forms of collective identity and belonging; and consider the discursive integration of Islam and Turkishness with Westernization as the basis of collective identity rather than taking this as a political-ideological formation. For this aim, in the following sections, I first examine the specific role of religion and ethnicity in Ottoman society and politics; and then explore the new forms and functions they acquired in the discourses of the intellectuals of the period and state policy, with the emergence of modernization.

3. The Emergence of the Ethnic Awareness of Turkishness as a Collective Identity Discourse in the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century

Religion was the principal referential source in the traditional Ottoman social life, state-society relations, and mutual affairs of different communities in the society, until Empire's late periods, like in the rest of the world. So, Islam, both for the governing elite and the Muslim Ottoman subjects, was generally before all other socio-cultural identities. Besides, the Imperial rule and law were regulated and operated concerning religious congregational differences among the subjects (İnalcık, 2005). Nevertheless, similar to the previous Muslim Turkish states, the Ottoman Empire had a dual government and legal system that combined religious law based on Islamic resources (*Sharia*) and temporal law (*Orf*) consisting of customary rulings and practices. Within such a framework, in politics, the weights of temporality and spirituality (mainly in the form of Sunni Islam) varied regarding the changing context for six centuries. And the researchers have a consensus that the Caliphate authority, which is accepted to be transferred to the dynasty during the reign of Selim I, rarely had a decisive effect on politics in the subsequent periods (İnalcık, 2005, 2016; Mardin, 2005; Ocak, 2011; Karpat, 2001).

On the other hand, the significance of Turkishness in traditional Ottoman society is more ambiguous than religion. Indeed, "Turkishness," as the name of an ethnic group, was not commonly used even by Turkish-speaking urban and rural classes for defining themselves until the late Ottoman Empire (Aydın, 2012: 156-159). There was a common tendency to limit Turkishness mostly to the Qizilbash-Alevi Turkomans almost until the War of Liberation (Aydemir, 1993: 113). And particularly the Ottoman elites, similar to their counterparts in pre-modern European societies, viewed themselves as different from the ordinary people so their ethnic and social identities could be distinguished from the rest of the community. For Aydın (2012: 156), "this made them culturally and mentally as well as actually a part of the ruling class and enabled them to confirm the sharp distinction between the identities of the people who ruled and who were ruled."

However, in the second half of the 19th century, a particular interest emerged among the Ottoman elites in Turkishness as an ethnic category and Turkish language and history (Kushner, 1977). There are various reasons underlying this development. The first reason is related to the effect of other nationalist movements developing in both the Western world and among the non-Muslim subjects of the Empire on several Ottoman elites (Özdoğan, 2006: 41). Accordingly, the Christian population of the Empire, also with the contribution of recent political and economic problems of the state, "became aware of their national origins and started to riot against the central authority represented by the Ottoman state" (Georgeon, 2006: 1-2). This process was pioneered by the Greeks and Serbians and followed by the Bulgarians, Macedonians, and Armenians with the support of the European states. The ideas guiding these movements spread to the Muslim people of the Empire over time and influenced Albanians, Arabs, Kurds, and finally, Turks, respectively (Georgeon, 2006: 2).

The second reason behind the mentioned development could be the emergence of a quest for a new identity as a (modern) social-cultural cement in the eyes of the Ottoman elites, at least to keep the remaining peoples of the Empire together. Indeed, this search can be dated back to the reign of Mahmud II. However, the initial intention was to unite the subjects of the Empire under the roof of "Ottomanism" rather than any ethnic or religious emphasis. But, in parallel to severe territorial loss and the acquisition of Turks as the majority within the Imperial population, it held on to the idea of a new identity based on Turkishness as a uniting factor over time (Göçek, 2002; Erdoğdu, 2008; Somel, 2009; Alkan, 2009; Georgeon, 2006).

From a third aspect, this interest can be evaluated as "a defense mechanism against humiliation before Western expansionism". The Ottomans, whose military power had struck great fear into their rivals in the past, were indeed losing the wars for a long time and even becoming economically dependent on foreign debt (Özdoğan, 2006: 41).

Thus, various cultural and scientific studies of some European researchers on Turks, notably those mostly having positive statements, gradually received more and more attention and significantly impacted the emergence of self-awareness among the Ottoman intelligentsia. Indeed, the works of Joseph de Guignes, Arthur L. Davids, Kont Borzecki, Arminius Vambery, Léon Cahun, A. I. De Sucy, W. Radloff, E. D. W. Gibb, and V. Thompson started to flatter the pride of the Turkish readers due to their praising content about Turks (Kushner, 1977: 9-11). These works paved the way to start using the word "Turk," which included less than positive evocations until then, with more comprehensive content containing historical, racial, and socio-cultural references to name certain people (Kushner, 1977: 20-26).

Nevertheless, as mentioned before, it has to be reminded that the ethnic awareness shaped by the search for a socio-cultural identity developing among some elites in this period cannot be taken as a nationalist movement in the modern sense since it was not based on a systematic political agenda aiming at combining the nation and the state. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to define the steps in this period, which only consisted of an identity discourse rather than arising from a systematic and consistent political goal, to be a "proto-nationalist" movement (Poulton, 1997: 58-64; Hanioğlu, 2012: 22; Bozarslan, 2015: 141; Bora, 2008: 16), in the way Hobsbawm (1992: 46-79) defined. Designating the bases of collective unity and identity, this discourse consisted of references to Turkish history, culture/language, and ethnicity and even had racial implications to some extent (Özdoğan, 2006: 41).

In this context, ethnic consciousness and emotions gradually developed in the eyes of a group of Turkish intellectuals and bureaucrats. They assumed a duty "to study their own history, to inquire into the affairs of their brothers outside the Ottoman borders, and to develop the Turkish language and culture" (Kushner, 1977: 26). Meanwhile, the writings and studies on pre-Islamic Turkish history, which didn't get much attention in the traditional Ottoman historiography, started to proliferate in this period. The first examples were written by Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, Ahmed Vefik Pasha, Ahmed Hilmi, Süleyman Pasha, and Ali Suavi in the second half of the 19th century. They mainly emphasized the positions and roles of the Turks in history

(Kushner, 1977: 27-29). The increase of studies in this field allowed gradually more inclusion of the ideas such as "Turks are a nation with a crucial place in history," "the ancestors of the Ottomans originated from the Turkish tribes in Central Asia," "Bulgarians and Crimeans are Turkish tribes in origin," "the Huns were the first Turkish people who migrated to Europe," "Turks are an old nation dating back to Prophet Abraham," "Turks established great states long before the emergence of Islam including the Oghuz Khan state," or "Turks and Mongols are relatives" in the history books of the period (Kushner, 1977: 28-30). In this manner, new historical narratives generated in this context included an emphasis on the naturalness and perenniality of Turkishness and the frequent repetition of the expression that Turks were a community with superior qualities (Kushner, 1977: 31-33).

Along with this, the religious and ethnic identities were intertwined in this pioneering wave (Özdoğan, 2006: 42; Karpat, 2001: 21; Kushner, 1977: 40; Bora, 2008: 16), like in the nationalist movements of the non-Muslim subjects of the Empire (Göçek, 2002). The characteristic feature of such a tendency was that Islam, Turkishness, and even Westernization were considered the essential elements of the remaining Ottoman population, as complementing each other (Deringil, 2009: 263-296; Karpat, 2001: 353-407). At this point, this process should be evaluated in detail.

4. Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization and the Search for an Ottoman Identity

The formation of a modern Ottoman identity combining Islam with Turkishness could be possible through the advocacy of Turkishness as one of the leading elements of the Ottoman identity within the process mentioned above. In this early period, those who defined (Sunni) Islam, Turkishness, and some Western elements (peculiar to the capitalist/bourgeois societies) as the essential components of the (new/modern) Ottoman identity were the section among the power elites who had envisagement of a "conservative" kind of modernism (Babahan, 2021). This conservative modernist group, which can be positioned between the anti-modernist wing of the *Ulema* (religious scholars and bureaucracy) and the pro-modernist elites, suggested a synthesis between modernity and tradition as an alternative route in a period of serious discussions about the question of "how to save the state?" (Hanioğlu, 1995: 13-16; Ülken, 2014: 8-9; Tunaya, 2010: 25-34; İrem, 1999; Güngörmez, 2014; Babahan, 2021).

According to this group of conservatives, which regarded the power of the West as consisting only of its technical, economic, and financial (i.e.,

material) superiority and considered the co-existence of two separate worlds (old and new) to be possible, the solution was "to equip oneself with the attractive sides of the East and West" (Ülken, 2014: 276). This refers to the expression of the "ideal to benefit from the technique/science of the West and manage to remain to be Eastern in spirit" by separating civilization and culture (more precisely, the material and moral elements of culture) (Ülken, 2014: 9, 26), which is still accepted by the present conservatives who argue for the harmonization of traditional values and beliefs with modern developments.

The importance of this ideological orientation concerning our subject derives from the fact that Turkishness, Islam, and Westernization were considered to be the elements supporting each other regarding their political-social agendas of conservative modernists to save the state in the late period of the Empire. The order of significance among these elements involved variance even within conservative circles. However, it is noticed that these "three elements that are used as the play blocks of children" were found in all attempts of such a "synthesis" generated as a response to the "250-year quest of the cultural identity of the Turkish society" (Parla, 2002: 206-208). In this regard, it wouldn't be wrong to consider these attempts of conservatives to unite Turkishness, Islam, and Westernization for their cultural identity constructions as the archetypal form of the current "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" discourse in history.

5. Young Ottomans and the Foundations of Turkish-Islamic Synthesis

When we look at the founding fathers of the said synthesis attempt in the history of the Ottoman Empire, we can include the members of the "New/Young Ottomans" (*Yeni/Genç Osmanlılar*) who were the first voices of conservative modernism, as well as Sultan Abdul Hamid II and several ruling elites of his period within this cluster for their ideas and practices. I assert that the nuances between them stem from the differences in attitudes about which of the three elements discussed here should take primacy in particular and how the relationship between the new and the old elements of the synthesis would be structured in general.

As mentioned earlier, Young Ottomans were the pioneers of the group of intellectuals who envisioned combining Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization for a modern Ottoman identity during a time when ethnic awareness unfolded among Turkish elites in this period (Mardin, 2000; Findley, 1980; Karpat, 2001; Tunaya, 2010). This group, which came

to the fore between 1867-1878 and led by names including Ziya Pasha, Namık Kemal, Mustafa Fazıl Pasha, İbrahim Sinasi, and Ali Suavi were "at one and the same time the first men to make the ideas of the Enlightenment part of the intellectual equipment of the Turkish reading public and the first thinkers to try to work out a synthesis between these ideas and Islam" Mardin (2000: 4).

Young Ottomans, who had a modern education and most of whom worked in various levels of bureaucracy, were the actual products of the modernization process of the Empire. They had an opposing attitude against the "cultural alienation" process caused by the pro-modernist *Tanzimat* policies on the one hand and against the absolutist tendencies of the senior administration (Mardin, 2000). Mardin (2000: 47) summarizes the political goals embraced by the group as a response as follows: "the establishment of a national representative body, the elimination of foreign interference in the domestic affirs of Turkey, the solution of the problem of reform along with Ottoman and Islamic lines."

At this point, it should be stated that their significantly similar class positions were decisive in the ideas they embraced. According to Tiftikçi (2003: 83), Young Ottomans "were the first voices at the political stage of the bourgeoisie of Turkey who would proclaim the constitution and the republic." With a similar argument, Karpat (2001: 96) also stated that the emphasis on the "(proto-)nationalist-Islamic" theme in the discourse of this group was directly related to the anger and discontent of the newly developing Muslim bourgeoisie against the political-economic privileges granted to the Christian subjects by the Reform Decree (1856).

According to Ülken (2014: 91), the person among Young Ottomans who "first argued that a modernized Islam, Westernization, and Turkishness are three views that complement each other" was Ali Suavi (1839-1878). Suavi held offices in the bureaucracy of education and law following his madrasah education, and then went to Europe and published various newspapers like *Ulûm* (Eng. Sciences) and *Muhbir* (Eng. Informer). In the foreign lands, on the one hand, he had the opportunity to be fed from many different intellectual sources he could access, and on the other hand, he tried to bring his own perspective on how the issues of Turkishness, Muslimness, and Ottomanness should be treated (Çelik, 2021).

While evaluating Ali Suavi's intellectual orientation, Çelik (2021: 389) states that he, like the other members of Young Ottomans, prioritized Islam in his solutions to the political and social problems of his time and addressed many worldly issues within the framework of the principles of this religion.

Therefore, even when he advocated Western concepts like "constitutionalism", "parliamentary government", "liberalism", or "rationalism", or reforms in social and political life, he sought to legitimize and validate them through Islamic law and tradition. (Ülken, 2014; Çelik, 2021). For him, "Christians have the tradition of preserving the old method and turning against the new, not the Muslims" (Ülken, 2014: 112). In this regard, what needed to be done was "to sort out the misinterpretations of Islam, what merged into Islam afterward, and the loose [humanly] ideas that interrupt progress" (Ülken, 2014: 112-113).

It should be noted that Ali Suavi also followed many writings (negative or positive) about Turks, especially during his stay in Europe, and developed a certain interest in this issue. In some of his writings, he used the term Turk as a synonym for Ottoman or Muslim, rather than implying an ethnic or racial belonging. For this, evidence can be found in his article titled "*Osman*" (Eng. Ottoman) published in the *Muhbir* newspaper on June 12, 1868. In this text, Ali Suavi (1869a) stated that the main difference between the Ottomans and the Europeans was that the latter had racism, whereas in the "Turkish State" (i.e. the Ottoman Empire), the main thing was "*tawhid*" (i.e. unity), and for this purpose, Islam as a religious bond, not ethnic belonging, was prioritized. In this context, he wrote, in the Ottomans, regardless of their origins, talented people among Croats, Greeks, Franks, or Albanians could reach high positions in bureaucracy or other circles (and are called Turks) if they convert to Islam (Ali Suavi, 1868a). Therefore, here, Ali Suavi gives the impression that it is not race or ethnicity but religious affiliation that determines Turkishness. In support of this, the author identifies all the two hundred million Muslims he assumes to be living in the world at that time as Turks (Ali Suavi, 1868a).

However, in one of the other articles entitled "*Turk*" which was published in the same issue of *Muhbir*, Ali Suavi (1868b), in particular, adopted an ethnicist approach while responding to the claim of some contemporary Europeans that "there was not as much Turkish population in Anatolia as was thought, and that Ertugrul Gazi and the families who came to Anatolia were assimilated by other tribes over time" (Çelik, 2021: 437-38). In this context, with the information he obtained from various sources, the author stated that Turks, Turkmens, Huns, Mongols, Tatars, Uighurs, Avars, Hungarians, Uzbeks, and Yakuts are all from the same family and that they are all descendants of Oz Khan (or Oguz Khan), whom he claimed lived in the same period with the prophet Abraham at least 3200 years ago (Ali Suavi, 1868b).

Ali Suavi (1868b) then argued, citing Herodotus, that the Huns were present in both Europe and Anatolia in the 4th century AD. He went on to write that since the Seljuks, there had been an intense Turkish migration to Anatolia from Central Asia and the Caucasus, which he called Turkistan, and that Osman Bey had established his own principality as a successor to them and expanded this population (Ali Suavi, 1868a).

Besides, Ali Suavi (1868a) argued that (ethnic) Turks made significant contributions to civilization, especially after they became Muslims. According to him, while Europeans considered the Turks as a community ignorant of sciences because they mistook many Turkish scholars to be Arabs, "Turks had universities in Nishapur when Europeans were in the age of ignorance" (Ali Suavi, 1868a). In another article published in *Ulum*, the author listed Farabi, Ibn Sina, Abu Mansur Maturidi, Bukhari, Mergivani, Jawhari, Ishaq, Qazvini, Ulug Bey, Ilhani, Shamsettin Fenari, Qadizade, Ali Kuşçu, Ibni Kemal, Kınalızade and some others as the outstanding Turkish scholars of their time (Çelik, 2021: 442). And, that Ali Suavi did not intend to refer to all Muslim scholars as Turk(ish) and he used it as an ethnic term is evident from the fact that in the same article, he wrote: "It is difficult to prove that scholars such as al-Ghazali, Tusi, Zamakhshari, Taftazani, and Jurjani were Turks, but they wrote with the patronage and encouragement of Turkish rulers" (Çelik, 2021: 442). Therefore, considering his ambivalent attitude, it is possible to say that Ali Suavi, on the one hand, used the term "Turk" as a broad expression to include the Muslim and even the Ottoman population of his time, while on the other hand, with an ethnic awareness, he started to see it as a racial-ethnic term.

In particular, one of the indicators of the increase in his awareness of Turkishness is his efforts in the use and dissemination of the Turkish language. He indeed made the first etymological comparison between Turkish and the Indo-European languages (Ülken, 2014: 102) and defended plain Turkish other than the eloquent Ottoman expression (Çelik, 2021: 447-8). He wrote,

> Our aim in saying that it was necessary to write in Turkish was to write in the writing style of early Turks like Mir Ali Shir [Nevai], instead of using vulgar or obsolete words. Th[at] style… was to keep the speech short, that is, not to… [lengthen the sentence] unless necessary. By writing in this style, the subject can be very clearly expressed and utilized [by people of all levels]" (Ali Suavi, 1869: 479 cit. Çelik, 2021: 449).

Nevertheless, even when Ali Suavi proposes the simplification and reform of the language, he warns that to maintain cultural ties between the living society and the past, this must be done with such care that individuals are not

deprived of reading books written over many centuries (Ali Suavi, 1869: 1 cit. Çelik, 2021: 450). Another critical element of his thoughts on language was about the Turkification of the language of prayer and the Qur'an. he attempted to bring evidence for this from the Islamic jurisprudence (Ülken, 2014: 94).

Another leading Young Ottoman intellectual was Namık Kemal (1840-1888), who had a "modern" ideology shaped by Muslim-Turkish qualities in the sense as it presented "as a means of mass mobilization and identification" (Karpat, 2002: 55). Just like many of his contemporary intellectuals, he held offices in bureaucracy in addition to being a poet, writer, and publisher. Ülken (2014: 120) states that Kemal was initially closer to the traditional Ottoman mentality, but his ideas developed particularly under the effect of French romantics following his stay in Europe.

Namık Kemal saw the Turkification of all Ottoman Muslims as the recipe for the salvation of the Empire (Karpat, 2001: 358). Mardin (2000: 286-287, 293) mentions that Namık Kemal, whom he described as the name creating the unique, remarkable political philosophy among the works of his time, had two separate sources in political philosophy: Islamic and Western. In fact, concerning the fundamental issues of political theory, in particular, such as power/authority, sovereignty, legitimacy, and representation, his thinking contains traces from traditional Islamic law and political philosophy on the one hand, like Ali Suavi, but also from the Western enlightenment ideas of the time on the other (Mardin, 2000: 287-336; Karpat, 2002: 55).

A typical example of this matter is the combined use of concepts from different political-intellectual traditions in his statements about patriotism, including "homeland," "Ottoman," "*ummah*" (Islamic community), "nation," "Turk," "race," and "sect" (Mardin, 2000: 327-329). Therefore, the articles of Namık Kemal primarily address Ottomanness, Turkishness, and Islam as indispensable components of collective identity like in his statement that asks "Are not the Turks that nation… in whose *medresses* [(Eng. Islamic schools)] Farabis, Ibn Sinas, Gazalis, Zemahşeris propagated knowledge?" (Namık Kemal, 1868 cit. Mardin, 2000: 328). Mardin (2000: 331) and Karpat (2001: 330-335) agreed on the fact that the author's play *Vatan yahut Silistre* (1873) (Eng. Homeland or Silistra) is an example with historical value as it is a pioneer work that combines various themes, particularly on Turkishness and Islam. According to Karpat (2001: 333), this play was propaganda done for the idea of an Ottoman homeland to root among Muslims and mainly Turks. Like Ali Suavi, for him, "'Ottoman,' in Namık Kemal's thinking, was already synonymous with 'Muslim' and 'Turk' and excluded the non-Muslims" (Karpat, 2001: 332).

On the other hand, it is significant for our subject that Ibrahim Sinasi (1826-1871), a journalist, and a member of the same group, was the first person to use the concept of nation, which used to describe different religious congregations according to the Islamic terminology until then, as "the Ottoman nation" in a manner corresponding to its modern use in the West (Lewis, 1969: 336). Yet, the Ottoman intellectuals used the concept mainly at least until the beginning of the 20th century, in a dual sense, including both religious and ethnic references (Karpat, 2001: 126).

At this stage, it would be appropriate to mention the concrete examples of the approach that combined Turkishness with Islamic themes, which started to develop among some elites of the time, particularly in the works of Young Ottomans. In this respect, one of the patterns that are most frequently seen in various articles is the pride that Turks are Muslims and have contributed to Islam. A detailed quote from Kushner (1977: 33-36) can be given as an example on this subject:

> Great as the Turkish contribution to ancient civilization was, so were the services rendered by the Turks to Islam. The Turks, according to the writers, are to be credited with the spread and defense of Islam, as well as its internal revival, especially since decadence and disintegration began to threaten the Islamic world in the later centuries of Abbasid rule… The Arabs, says an article in *Basiret* [newspaper], were, with all their virtues, prone to internal strife, disregard of law and order, and hasty action. The Turks, on the other hand, were characterized by organizational ability, concern for law, and calm consideration before acting, and it was in these traits that their contribution to strength and unity in Islam lay….

> The writer Ebuzziya Tevfik (1848-1913) who, in his views on language and language reform was accused of striking at Arabism, argues that…: "Moreover, the ones to protect the Arab nation, whose national power suffered weakness and injury for many reasons, were Turks. No Arab poems were recited in the wars about these soldiers, but rather Turkish poems. Those who waved the Ottoman banner on the Indian Seas were not Arabs but Turks. Those who bound hundreds of different peoples to the Ottoman sultanate were not Arabs, but Turks. Those who revived justice and virtue turned into corruption and feud with the emergence of the Umayyads, were not Arabs, but Turks…"

> The Turkish role in Islamic history was not confined to their contribution to re-establishing Islamic political power in the world but included their part in Islamic civilization. As in pre-Islamic Turkish history, the authors try to discard the notion of the Turks as nomads or warriors and to stress their cultural and religious achievements...

> Given the service of Islam to the world, and given the place of the Turks in the creation of Islamic civilization, it was clear to the Turkists that the Turks were among the founders of modern civilization. This notion is brought out in an article on the contribution of the Turks to medicine, written by the head physician of a hospital: "The Turks, who for centuries ruled in Transcaspia and Trans-oxania, spread the light of science from Asia, the cradle of civilization, to the four continents of the world. Those who produced Muslim scholars such as the Ibn Sinas, al-Farabis, Muhammad Ibn Abi Bakr al-Razis, and others… and helped to establish the foundations of modern civilization are the Turks… Those who for six hundred years lived under the wing of justice of the eternal Ottoman State… and rendered outstanding service to civilization and medical progress are, again, the children and descendants of the Turks."

Mehmet Emin (Yurdakul) (1869-1944), holding offices at various levels of bureaucracy in addition to his poetry, may also be included in the names that adopt the idea that defines Turkishness and Islam as the critical components of Ottoman identity (Karpat, 2001: 361). Ülken (2014: 295) states that this orientation of Mehmet Emin was significantly influenced by his close friend Jemaleddin Afghani (1836-1897), who was hosted in Turkey at the invitation of Abdul Hamid II. Afghani, one of the leading names of Islamic modernism, considers religious and linguistic unity to be founding elements that connect people. For him, "each Muslim nation needs to wake up and gain national awareness separately to realize Islamic union" (Ülken, 2014: 295). The poem *Anadolu'dan Bir Ses yahut Cenge Giderken* (A Voice from Anatolia or on the Way to Battle), which Mehmet Emin wrote in 1897 under this influence, is a poetic piece that is still one of the foremost recited among the contemporary Muslim nationalist groups. Two stanzas of this poem, where the word "Turk" was also used for the first time as the name of the nation according to Yıldız (2001: 67), can be given as an example as it includes a concrete expression of these thoughts:

> I am a Turk; my religion and race are supreme;
>
> My chest (and) my essence are full of fire,
>
> Who is human is the servant of his homeland.
>
> Turk's child doesn't stay home; I go!
>
> I won't let the book of the Creator be removed,
>
> I won't let the flag of little Osman be taken,
>
> I won't let my homeland be attacked by the enemy.
>
> House of God won't be ruined; I go! (Tevetoğlu, 1988: 142)

6. The Reign of Abdul Hamid II and the Institutionalisation of the Official Discourse Combining Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization

The era of Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) was the period when the discourse combining Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization was officially institutionalized and officialized under the umbrella of the collective Ottoman identity. During this period, mass broadcasting and educational services, which were rapidly expanding especially in large cities as part of the comprehensive modernization program, became the most prominent instruments of institutional activity to disseminate this discourse. Thus, with the modernization of society and the state, it can be argued that there was a shift from a process of awakening the ethnic consciousness of Turkishness to a political process in which the Muslim Turkish population, which was to become the majority of the population, gradually began to be identified with the state.

To begin with the characterization of the ideological orientation of the era of Abdul Hamid II, it is striking that a kind of conservative modernism was adopted in state affairs (Koloğlu, 2009: 276). In this context, according to Irem (2011: 30), the modernization policies during this period had two aspects. They included the aspect of administrative-technical innovation and technology transfer that would allow controlling the economy and society, while excluding the liberating aspect of the Western version of modernity, which was based on the principles of political liberalism and parliamentary democracy, as well as the cultural aspect, which was seen as indoctrinating values.

The Sultan himself was described to be a person, concerning his personality and lifestyle, who was both "religious" on the one hand, and "modern-minded" and "attaching great importance to progress and science" on the other hand (Karpat, 2001: 175; Alkan, 2009: 386). According to Karpat (2001: 155-156), "he appears to be conservative from the religious point of view, but he was the most European Sultan about his daily life, lifestyle, and habits. His reforms in the fields of education, administration, communication, and transportation had a deeper effect on the internal texture of the Ottoman society than the reforms of Tanzimat." Therefore, it seems reasonable to claim that the political and intellectual orientation of the Sultan was much different from the newly emerging middle-class elites of the Empire, for instance, from Young Ottomans, despite the difference in their social ranks. Essentially, as noted by Akçura (2007: 22), one of the prominent intellectuals of the time, "although Abdülhamid II mercilessly

opposed Young Ottomans, he was a student of their politics to some extent
[…] His politics showed considerable similarities with the ideas of Young
Ottomans."

In this context, the Islamism of the period was a discourse maintaining
the new Ottoman identity and the idea that the Muslim Turks were the
dominant element (Landau, 2001; Karpat, 2001; Kara, 2011; Tunaya,
1998; Mardin, 2005). Similarly, Karpat (2001: 229) states that Abdul
Hamid II "subtly nationalized, idealized and Turkified" history and therefore
state apparatus and society through a series of Islamic and Turkic-originated
traditions that were re-shaped in this period. For him, the Sultan began to
describe himself, especially in the late period of his reign, "to be both Turkish
and Muslim" (Karpat, 2001: 29). Still, accepting that religious and ethnical
references were intertwined in this discourse, Alkan (2000) underlines that
the emphasis on Islam was more dominant/decisive than Turkishness. For
him, this synthesis, as the general characteristics of the official discourse of
the era of Abdul Hamid II, was based on the idea that Turkishness, as an
ethnic identity, bears a reserved, secondary emphasis that finds meaning with
Islam (Alkan, 2000: 76).

Nevertheless, such a political initiation could seem paradoxical at a time
when the legal status of non-Muslims was being equalized with that of
Muslims through various official regulations and implementations, notably
the Constitution (*Kanun-i Esasi*) (1876), in this period. In practice, however,
Bozarslan (2018: 169) claims that an official Ottoman identity based on
the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, which already had historical roots, would
henceforth be expressed and recognized in legal terms, also taking advantage
of the changing domestic and international conjuncture. His perspective on
this issue allows us to see how official attitudes that have remained at the
level of ethnic consciousness to this day began to be politicized henceforth:

> The policy of integrating Muslim communities into the empire through
> oppression and privileges was not only a response to the politicization of
> identities of the Christian faith but also provides the means for the construction
> of a Turkish or Turkish-Muslim political majority that is recognized as the real
> sovereign of the state, the sole holder of the legitimate ownership over its
> history and territory, and the sole owner of the right to self-determination.
> In this sense, the Abdülhamid regime cannot be regarded as a simple re-
> centralization of the post-Tanzimat state in a conservative sense. This regime,
> by drawing a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially
> Christians, gradually turned this distinction into a fundamental basis of
> hostility. [Thus] [b]eyond being a symbolic template, the "Turkish-Islam"
> essence of the state was something that was being actively mobilized against

non-Muslims, expressed in political and then military terms (Bozarslan, 2018: 169).

Still, it has to be noted that those steps taken in this direction would gradually become more obvious and systematic beginning from the government of the Party of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Fırkası*), the leading political actor after the fall of Abdül Hamid II, and would be further embodied with the ideal of a nation-state that recognized Muslim Turks as the main element during the establishment of the Turkish Republic.

At this point, it would be appropriate to evaluate some of Sultan's writings and statements to support the previous assessments of the dominant discourse of the era of Abdül Hamid II. In this context, we can quote from the memorandum of the Sultan himself as one of the concrete examples of such a discourse where Islam and Turkishness were combined to form the Ottoman identity at the official level:

> The great Ottoman State was founded on faith after Yavuz Selim absorbed the Caliphate. But since the original state was established by Turks, in reality, this is a Turkish state… Since the exalted Osman established this sublime state, it has stood on four principles: the ruler [dynasty] is Ottoman, the administration is Turkish, the faith is Islam, and the capital is Istanbul. The weakening or dismissal of any of these principles will affect the foundation of the state (Abdul Hamid II, 1900 cit. Karpat, 2001: 336).

The political memoirs of the Sultan also include important hints on this matter. For example, in one part of his memoirs, Abdul Hamid II (1975: 179-180) stated that the Ottoman Empire consisted of different *millet*s (Eng. nations), and that was Islam, which matters, not the element of the nation. However, in the same memoirs, in another statement he made in 1893, possibly after territorial losses and an intense wave of migration, he developed an exceeding tendency that revealed Turkishness, as well as Islam, as a vital determinant:

> It is no longer the period to put those from other religions into ourselves, our own flesh like a splinter. Within our state's borders, we can only accept those from our nation and those who share the same beliefs as ours (Muslim Turk, i.e., Ottoman). We should pay attention to strengthening the Turkish element. We need to bring the exceeding ones of the Muslim population in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria and let them settle here regularly… It is a must to strengthen the Turkish element in Rumelia and particularly in Anatolia, and before everything else, we need to cast the Kurds among us in the same mold and arrogate ourselves. The biggest mistake of my predecessors on the Turkish throne was that they failed to Ottomanize the Slav element. Of course, this was not an easy job. Nevertheless, blood relations with the

Anatolian Greeks and Armenians took place easier. But, thank God, our blood maintained its superiority (Abdul Hamid, 1975: 73-74)

Mainly based on the last quote, it is understood that only Muslim Turks were considered Ottoman, and a cultural assimilation process was necessitated for Kurds and Slavs to be taken as an Ottoman since Kurds were Muslims but not Turks, and Slavs were neither Muslims nor Turks. In addition, taking into account the emphasis on "blood" at the end of the quote, it can be noted that the word nation began to exceed a cultural meaning and expand gradually to include a reference based on race.

In a memorandum (1885), Osman Nuri Pasha, the governor of Hejaz and one of the leading bureaucrats of the same period, likened the Ottoman population to a tree. According to him, the Muslims were the principal element and Turks were the "root and trunk of the tree," while other Muslims like Arabs, Kurds, and Albanians were the "branches and knobs" (Deringil, 2009: 99).

The complementary component of configuring and disseminating the official discourse combining Islam and Turkishness was the reforms that were implemented to re-structure, even partly, the state and society within the framework of a Western social organization. Indeed, Abdul Hamid II "accepted several Western originated implementations from the education system to the modern state structures in return for its contribution for the increase of supervision and control capacity of the state on society and economy" (İrem, 2011: 29). At this point, it would be appropriate to discuss the contribution of the reforms, which are the yield of the modernism of Abdul Hamid II, regarding our topic.

In the Ottoman Empire, "[t]raditionally, all the state territory, all the objects, and living creatures on it were considered to be the property of the dynasty, with all rights embodied to the incumbent sultan" (Karpat, 2001: 224). However, Karpat (2001: 168-172, 223-233, 239-240) argues that, during the reign of Abdul Hamid II, the state achieved autonomy by acquiring an institutional entity separate from the sultanate/dynasty and even from the religious authority and was redefined based on territory (i.e., within the framework of a particular idea of the homeland). This became possible through the reforms that transformed the institutional structure of the state with the bureaucracy and secularized it to some extent, such as the limitation of the power areas of the clergy, revision of judicial institution, and professionalization of civil-military bureaucracy, together with the invention of various authority symbols and rituals such as arms, anthems, and medals. This, following the record of the state as an authority per se, also enabled the

subjugation of (even) the Sultan and dynasty to the state on the one hand and allocation of the state as an institutional organization that performs various public services that it didn't embrace before within its area of sovereignty on the other (Karpat, 2001: 225). As a result, the word "Ottoman" started to represent the country, people, and collective political identity, rather than the state being the Ottoman family's property like before (Karpat, 2001: 239).

In this period, education was one of the leading areas affected by the transformation in the institutional structure and functions of the state. As can be understood by the remarkable increase in the schooling ratio in this period, Abdul Hamid II expanded and strengthened the modernization and dissemination of education, which started to be institutionalized during the period of *Tanzimat* (Alkan, 2000: 68). Education was the primary instrument for the Sultan, "to create a modern society through a cultural pattern that still was based on traditional values" (Alkan, 2000: 76). Newly emerging Muslim middle classes, who discovered that education was an essential tool of class-based mobility (and of wealth increase), also pressured the administration of Abdul Hamid II to open intermediate and high-level modern schools and send teachers (Karpat, 2001: 98). Therefore, said groups didn't refrain from providing financial support and land to build and maintain schools when necessary (Karpat, 2001: 98).

Another critical step in the field of education taken by Abdul Hamid II's regime was "the compulsory use of demotic Turkish" to generate a population mostly sharing a common culture (Poulton, 1997: 61). For this purpose, an official initiative promoted to make Turkish compulsory in the schools of the Empire in 1894; and the schools were required to use a clear and straightforward language purged from the uncommon Arabic and Persian words (Poulton, 1997: 61).

The importance of these developments, particularly for our subject, is related to the remarkable transformation that they brought to the cultural and intellectual life of the Empire. There was a rapid increase in the number of printed materials like it was in the West, together with the standardization of Turkish in the field of literature and the possibility for more accessible and cheaper access to printed material, also in parallel to the increase of the educated population (Karpat, 2001: 117-119). This, in addition to the reforms in education, paved the way for the emancipation of information and ideas from the monopoly of the religious field and the clergy and dissemination to a broader population (Karpat, 2001: 133). As a result of this development, a public community in modern terms started to appear, at least in Istanbul. This community consisted of individuals who indeed

imagined the soil where they lived as a homeland, the people who lived in this homeland as a nation (Karpat, 2001: 136, 149-153).

Perceiving the public composed of subjects with their own identities and different political choices who were autonomous (even partly) from the Sultan, instead of a passive mass who were unconditionally tied to him, caused the power circles of the period to start attempts to provide the control of the cultural/intellectual field to pull the public opinion to their sides (Karpat, 2001: 119). Another complementary component of this process, in particular concerning our subject, was the structuring of an official discourse on collective identity that was designed to be reproduced through mass education and textbooks, in particular within the framework of an official understanding of history for the first time in the Ottoman history (Alkan, 2000: 52).

This way, various religious-ethnic themes with the above examples from the conservative modernist intellectuals of the time were seen to become prominent in the "textbooks that were published for the first time and drafted according to the curriculum determined by the relevant authorities" (Alkan, 2009: 391). Alkan (2000: 76), who started to examine the textbooks of the period, determined that a version of Turkish-Islamic synthesis became dominant, particularly in the history of Islam, Ottoman history, and general history textbooks, with religion being more prominent than ethnic references. One of the two remarkable themes in the textbooks based on this discourse, which was based on "a loose and pragmatic ideology," is that "the Ottomans are attributed to Turkish race," and the other theme is the primary function the Ottomans assumed as "the bearer of Islam" Alkan (2000: 76, 83). The findings of the author are as follows:

> [The books on the history of Islam]… began with the mythological and the religious sources of the political regime's in the "Turk's descent from Noah via Yafes, then indicated that the Ottoman state began with Islam and narrated the state's foundation with emphasis on the Turkic roots of Ottomans. In this account based on Islam, The Turks were a rebellious disloyal tribe in the pre-Islamic period but became civilized with the adoption of Islam. The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and the assumption of the Caliphate and thus the leadership of Islam were attributed to religious motives (Alkan, 2000: 76).

Alkan (2000: 53, 86) adds that the emphasis on nationalist themes in general and Turkishness, in particular, was more frequent in the textbooks at the military schools than those in the civilian schools. For him, that was the main reason why ethnic awareness spread more and faster among the youth of military schools rather than the students of the other schools.

As a final note on the dominant discourses in the textbooks of this period, the social identity that brought Turkishness and Islam together under the roof of Ottomanism involved Sunnism, in conformity with the official understanding of Islam in the classical period. According to Deringil (2009: 96), Hanafism, as the official religion of the state, was highlighted as a dominant component of the official discourse during the reign of Abdul Hamid II. Alkan also states that the Islamic themes in the textbooks of the periods included mainly Hanafi-Sunni references. For him, the "cleansing" of Shiites in Anatolia by Sultan Selim the Grim via sword is presented as a "sacred war" against " 'demonic' Sufis," which is appraised and deemed to be done "to eliminate the divisions among Muslims and permit control of the Muslims from one center" (Alkan, 2000: 84).

7. Conclusion

The doctrine of the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" emerged in the 1970s as an ideological discourse in Turkey. It became the official discourse of the state after the 1980 military coup. The synthesis argues that Turkishness and Sunni Islam are essential components of national identity and ideology, with Islam serving as a unifying force for Turks. While not explicitly stated, modernization or Westernization is also recognized as part of the discourse. Although the Turkish-Islamic synthesis has recently gained prominence, some scholars argue that the foundations of those discursive initiations linking Turkishness, Islam, and Westernization date back to the 19th century. However, none of those scholars provide a comprehensive analysis of those discursive formations during that period as it was not the main focus of their works. In an attempt to fill this gap in the literature, this study analyzes the historical foundations of this synthesis, focusing on the debates in the leading intellectual and bureaucratic circles of the late Ottoman Empire, especially during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the politics of modernization came to the fore.

This period was an era of intense debates within the elite circles for how the state could be saved due to the problems the Ottoman Empire was facing, and how the remaining Ottoman population could be kept together. Islam was still a principal source of reference for many of them in their socio-cultural and political pursuits while some had a growing interest in Turkishness as an ethnic category with Turkish language and history. In addition to these, in an environment where the implications of modernization had reached all spheres of society, it could be noted that Western-originated institutions, concepts, ideas, and ideologies also began to adorn these debates.

In this context, a group of conservative modernists advocated a form of synthesis between tradition and modernity. This group mostly saw the power of the West primarily in its technical and material aspects and aimed to adopt attractive elements from both Eastern and Western cultures. So, Turkishness, Islam, and Westernization were considered interrelated and supporting elements within their political and social agendas. These attempts to combine these three elements can be seen as the historical archetype of the current "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" discourse.

The Young Ottomans are the first generation of those conservative modernists who offered a modern Ottoman identity that combined Islam, Turkishness, and elements of Westernization. Educated in modern schools and holding positions in the bureaucracy, they opposed both the cultural alienation caused by pro-modernist policies and the absolutist tendencies of the Imperial administration. They sought to establish a national representative body, eliminate foreign interference, and pursue reform within an Ottoman and Islamic framework. Among the Young Ottomans, Ali Suavi played a significant role in advocating for a modernized Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization as complementary views. He emphasized the importance of Islamic law and tradition in legitimizing Western concepts and reforms. While he used the term "Turk" broadly to include Muslims and even the Ottoman population, he also showed an ethnic awareness, considering Turkishness as a racial-ethnic term. Namık Kemal, another prominent figure among the Young Ottomans, had a modern ideology shaped by Muslim-Turkish qualities. He saw the Turkification of all Ottoman Muslims as crucial for the Empire's salvation. Kemal's thinking incorporated elements from both traditional Islamic law and Western Enlightenment ideas, particularly regarding power, sovereignty, legitimacy, and representation. His writings emphasized Ottomanness, Turkishness, and Islam as essential components of collective identity.

Moreover, it was during the reign of Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) that the discourse combining Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization gradually became institutionalized and officialized. The Sultan embraced a form of conservative modernism that focused on administrative-technical innovation and technology transfer while downplaying Western concepts of political liberalism and cultural values. Although he was conservative in religious matters, he adopted European habits and lifestyle and implemented reforms in administration, education, communication, and transportation that had a profound impact on Ottoman society.

As a result of these reforms, the state politically gained autonomy, separate from the sultanate and religious authority, and became defined by territory and a particular idea of the homeland. The cultural and intellectual life of the Empire also underwent significant changes during this period, with a rise in printed materials, standardization of Turkish in printed materials and education, and the emergence of a public community. Education played a crucial role in this transformation, with an expansion of schools and the promotion of initiatives to make Turkish the compulsory language, fostering a shared public culture and a more accessible dissemination of information and ideas.

Power elites sought to control the cultural and intellectual field and shape public opinion, leading to the development of an official discourse on collective identity which combined Islam, Turkishness, and Westernization as the founding dimensions of the Ottoman identity. The official promotion of such a discourse was expressed and recognized especially in legal terms, distinguishing Muslims, especially Muslim Turks from non-Muslims by identifying the Muslim Turkish population with the state. Nevertheless, while religious and ethnic references were intertwined, the emphasis on Islam was more significant than Turkishness. This synthesis was based on the belief that Turkishness, as an ethnic identity, was secondary to and found meaning within Islam. As a consequence, this distinction also gradually became a basis of hostility and a means to construct a Turkish-Muslim political majority that saw itself as the rightful sovereign of the state.

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