

# Shaping Turkish Conservatism: *Aydınlar Ocağı* and the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis

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## SUMMARY

The aim of the article is to reflect on the interaction between ethnic nationalism and Islamism in the formative phase of conservative Turkish thought in the second half of the 20th century. Particular attention will be paid to the role played by the intellectuals gathered in *Aydınlar Ocağı* (Intellectuals' Heart), a highly influential conservative think tank active since the early 1970s.

**Keywords:** *Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, Conservatism, Islamism, Nationalism*

A key moment in the history of Turkish political thought is represented by the spread of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (*Türk-İslam Sentezi*), which constituted the most organic and complete attempt to marry Turkish secular nationalism with Islam and exerted a decisive influence on the political and social evolution of Turkey. The Turkish-Islamic synthesis basically consists of a system of ideas, formulated in the second half of the 20th

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century, functional to the integration of nationalists and Islamists into a broader political identity of the Turkish right.

At the heart of this doctrine is a historiographical theory according to which the civilization of Turkey is the result of the synthesis between Islam and the national culture already present among the ancient Turks. An attempt was thus made to establish a link between the national state and the imperial past, re-evaluating the Seljuk and Ottoman heritage as an integral part of national identity. In this way, the foundations were laid to create a symbolic imaginary in which ethnic nationalists, Islamists and other conservatives could recognize themselves in equal measure.

An absolutely central role in these developments was played by *Aydınlar Ocağı* (Intellectuals' Hearth), a conservative think tank active since the early 1970s. The association counted among its ranks a large part of the Turkish conservative intellectual elite, both from nationalist and religious circles. The association's cultural and editorial initiatives were instrumental in establishing the ideological boundaries of the political right in Turkey. A considerable part of the ideologues of the Turkish state came from its ranks, especially in the period following the coup of 12 September 1980. For this reason, the influence of *Aydınlar Ocağı* went beyond the very borders of the conservative environment to mark the contemporary history of Turkey. In addition to tracing the events that led to the founding and development of the association, the aim of this essay is to reflect on the way in which nationalists and Islamists coexisted and interacted within *Aydınlar Ocağı*. To this end it will be necessary to analyze its composition and the cultural profile of its members. The Turkish-Islamic synthesis developed precisely as a response to the practical needs of this fruitful but somehow difficult coexistence.

### 1. *The origins: Aydınlar Kulübü (1961-1965)*

The *Aydınlar Ocağı* has played a role of undisputed importance in the evolution of Turkish political thought in the contemporary age. For this reason, its foundation in 1970 can legitimately be seen as a central step in the history of Turkey in the second half of the 20th century. However, it must be borne in mind that in that historical context the birth of a right-wing cultural association was not a revolutionary event or an absolute novelty. The origins of *Aydınlar Ocağı* must be sought in the previous decade, and contextualized in that political and cultural climate.

Among the various right-wing associations that arose between the 1950s and 1960s, the *Aydınlar Kulübü* (Intellectuals' Club) is worth mentioning. Founded in 1961 by a small group of conservative academics, it can be regarded as the predecessor of *Aydınlar Ocağı*<sup>2</sup>.

The first president and main animator of *Aydınlar Kulübü* was Süleyman Yalçın (1926-2016), professor of medicine at the University of Istanbul<sup>3</sup>. Yalçın was a classic example of a right-wing intellectual born between the two world wars, who had reached adulthood during the crisis of the Kemalist regime and the transition to the multi-party system. During his cultural training, Yalçın had been influenced in equal measure by nationalism and Islamism. The son of a muezzin, he was born and raised in the rural and patriarchal context of a Thracian village. As a teenager, he made friends with the ultra-nationalist ideologue Nihal Atsız, his high school literature teacher<sup>4</sup>. Later he approached religious circles, bonding in a particular way to the Islamist author Necip Fazıl Kısakürek.

<sup>2</sup> Iulia Alexandra Oprea, *State-led Islamization: The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis*, in "Studia Universitatis 'Petru Maior'. Historia", Vol. I, 2014, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Prof. Dr. Süleyman Yalçın vefat etti [Prof. Dr. Süleyman Yalçın passed away], in "Milliyet", December 18 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Prof. Dr. Süleyman Yalçın ile... "Ne Yaptınız Siz, Kur'an'ı Süpürdünüz" [Prof. Dr. With Süleyman Yalçın... "What did you do, you swept the Quran"], in "Altınoluk Dergisi", n. 158, April 1999, p. 10.

According to Kısakürek<sup>5</sup> and as confirmed by Yalçın<sup>6</sup>, it was Kısakürek who suggested the name of the association. The use of the term *aydın*, which literally means ‘enlightened’ was by no means accidental. This word spread in the twilight of the Ottoman Empire to indicate men of letters who referred to the European Enlightenment culture. *Aydın* as a Westernized intellectual was therefore opposed to the *münevver*, the traditional figure of the Islamic scholar<sup>7</sup>. In the 20th century the use of the term *entelektüel*, an evident cast of the French, over time was associated above all with left-wing authors who supported progressive demands. During the preparation of the association’s statute, the founders considered the possibility of using the term *münevver*, but on the advice of Kısakürek the *aydın* option prevailed, more reassuring for the secular ideology of the state and easier and more immediate to understand. By appropriating this word, the conservatives contributed to giving it a new meaning, very different from the original. In *Aydınlar Kulübü*, the term *aydın* is used as a label to identify oneself as ‘right-wing intellectual’ and differentiate from left-wing culture. Therefore it is no longer opposed to *münevver*, but rather to *entelektüel*<sup>8</sup>.

İsmail Dayı (1926-2008), a follower of the Islamist-nationalist philosopher Nurettin Topçu and future parliamentarian of ANAP, was chosen as the general secretary of the association. Two friends and close collaborators immediately appeared alongside Yalçın, who would share his political and intellectual experiences in the following decades: the psychiatrist and official of the ministry of health Ayhan Songar (1926-1997) and the linguist Faruk Kadri Timurtaş (1925-1983). Both were university professors

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<sup>5</sup> Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Rapor 3/4*, İstanbul, Büyük Doğu Yayınları, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Fatma Yurttaş Özcan, *Bir Aydın Hareketi Olarak Aydınlar Ocağı ve Türk Siyasetine Etkileri* [Intellectuals Hearth as an Intellectual Movement and Its Effects on Turkish Politics], unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Sakarya Üniversitesi, Sakarya 2011, p. 287.

<sup>7</sup> Murat Belge, *Tarihi Gelişme Süreci İçinde Aydınlar* [Intellectuals in the Historical Development Process], in Murat Belge (ed.), *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 1, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 1983, p.126.

<sup>8</sup> Özcan, *Bir Aydın Hareketi...*, p. 84.

and were part of the Kısakürek circle<sup>9</sup>.

Even more interesting – and revealing the ideological orientation of *Aydınlar Kulübü* – is the presence of the brothers Necmettin and Kemalettin Erbakan. Absolute protagonist of Islamist politics in Turkey, the future premier Necmettin Erbakan was going to become one of the best known and most influential figures in Turkish political history.

The economist Sabahattin Zaim (1926-2007) is another figure destined to play an important role in Turkish cultural life in the following decades. Zaim was a Muslim of Turkish ethnicity originally from North Macedonia (then Yugoslavia) who had moved to Turkey as a boy with his family. He distinguished himself for a particularly brilliant academic career. His works on labour economics and on the relationship between Islam and modern economics would have allowed him to establish himself on the international scene. Zaim was one of those conservative intellectuals who thus managed to gain recognition far beyond the circles of the Turkish right. In 2010 a university in Istanbul was named after him.

Among the animators of *Aydınlar Kulübü* a lesser known, but not negligible name is that of Asım Taşer (1923-2016), very active in religious and nationalist cultural circles since the 1950s. A pupil of Topçu – who had been his philosophy professor in high school<sup>10</sup> – Taşer helped establish a very strong network of personal contacts between the exponents of the conservative right in Turkey.

*Aydınlar Kulübü* met in a rented premises in the Çarşıkapı district of Istanbul<sup>11</sup>. The association's activities mainly consisted of organizing meet-

<sup>9</sup> Umut Uzer, *An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism*, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 2016, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> Mehmet Erken, *Kelimenin tam anlamıyla bir vakıf insanı: Asım Taşer* [Literally a foundation person: Asım Taşer], in “Dünya Bizim”, December 9 2015.

<sup>11</sup> A. Tan/Ö. Çakkal, *Prof. Dr. Süleyman Yalçın: Devrin Edebiyatçıları Önce Öğretmenlerim, Sonra Hastalarım Oldu* [Prof. Dr. Süleyman Yalçın: The Writers of the Age First Became

ings, conferences, lectures and debates on various cultural and political issues. The leaders of *Aydınlar Kulübü* managed to involve some of the most important figures of the conservative cultural world in their initiatives, such as the aforementioned Kısakürek and Topçu, or the jurist and former parliamentarian of the DP Ali Fuat Başgil<sup>12</sup>. Among the speakers at the conferences and debates, there was no shortage of figures linked to ethnic nationalism, such as Nihal Atsız or İsmail Hami Danişmend.

In general, however, it must be admitted that the original group of *Aydınlar Kulübü* was more religiously oriented than strictly nationalist. If one imagines the political culture of the Turkish right as a spectrum between two extreme poles, represented respectively by ethnic nationalism and Islamism, the founders of *Aydınlar Kulübü* almost always placed themselves closer to the Islamist pole. The influence of Kısakürek and the presence of the Erbakan brothers leave little doubt about it. However, the internal composition of the group would undergo a certain transformation in a nationalist sense in the following years.

In 1965, Yalçın had to move to the United States for work and study reasons, and was therefore forced to temporarily abandon his engagement with *Aydınlar Kulübü*. Secretary İsmail Dayı was also forced to leave the group's activities to do military service. The sources do not agree on what happened at that point in the association. According to one version, Yalçın and Dayı were replaced by Zaim and Taşer in their respective functions as president and secretary<sup>13</sup>. Elsewhere, it is argued that *Aydınlar Kulübü* was closed with the departure of Yalçın<sup>14</sup>. Regardless of whether it was official-

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My Teachers, Then My Patients], in "Sağlık Düşüncesi ve Tıp Kültürü Dergisi", n. 22, spring 2012, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> İlhan Egemen Darendelioğlu, *Türkiye'de Milliyetçilik Hareketleri* [Nationalist Movements in Turkey], İstanbul, Toker Yayınları, 1968, p. 336.

<sup>14</sup> Çiler Dursun, *Türk-İslam İdeolojisi ve Öznesi* [Turkish-Islamic Ideology and Its Subject], in "Doğu Batı", n. 25, november-december-january 2003/2004, p. 61; Sema Basmacı,

ly closed or not, it is still evident that starting from 1965 the activities of the association underwent a sharp downsizing if not a total cessation.

## 2. İbrahim Kafesoğlu and the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis

The second half of the 1960s was a time of great ferment for the right-wing culture, in which the foundations were laid for the creation of the *Aydınlar Ocağı* and for the formulation of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis. Nationalist circles were experiencing a moment of great dynamism. In those years many congresses were organized, in which the exponents of different groups and different currents could meet to compare their ideas and develop common strategies. Among these congresses and seminars organized by the nationalists, two major events stand out in particular, which contributed significantly to shaping the conservative right in the following decades. The first Great Meeting of the Nationalists (*I. Milliyetçiler Büyük Kurultayı*) was organized between February 10th and 11th 1967, followed by the more formal and academic *Milliyetçiler İlmî Semineri* (Scientific Seminar of Nationalists) on May 9-10, 1969. These seminars, in which intellectuals from different groups (including *Aydınlar Kulübü*<sup>15</sup>) participated, helped to reformulate Turkish radical nationalism on a cultural basis. They therefore distanced themselves from the ethnic – if not openly racist – conception that had characterized the thought of the Turanist far right in the 1930s and 1940s, that was animated by personalities such as Nihal Atsız and Reha Oğuz Türkkan. In this new cultural version of radical nationalism, Islam – ignored or underestimated by the radical nationalists of the previous generation – was given significant weight as an essential component of Turkish identity. This constituted a further incentive for the

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*Aydınlar Ocağı ve Türk-İslam Sentezi: 1980'lerden 2000'li Yillara Devreden Milliyetçi-Muhafazakar Bakiye* [Intellectuals' Hearth and the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis: The Nationalist-Conservative Balance Carried over from the 1980s to the 2000s], unpublished MA thesis, Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Ankara 2009 p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>Özcan, *Bir Aydın Hareketi...*, p. 90.

ideological and political rapprochement, which has already been going on for some time, between ethnic nationalists and Islamists. However, it should be borne in mind that this process would never have produced a total merger between the two groups.

A central figure in this process of transformation of nationalist thought was the medievalist historian İbrahim Kafesoğlu (1914-1984), president of the *Kurultay* of 1967 and one of the promoters of the seminary of 1969. A war orphan from a village in the Aegean region, Kafesoğlu was trained at the University of Ankara under the prestigious guidance of the great historian Fuad Köprülü. Among his teachers and mentors were the Bashkir folklorist Abdülkadir İnan and the Hungarian Turkologist László Rásonyi<sup>16</sup>. The profiles of these two characters can be interesting for understanding the cultural and ideological environment in which Kafesoğlu was formed and to which he referred. Both were in fact supporters of Pan-Turkic and Turanist ideas, and İnan had contributed to the far-right publications directed by Atsız and Türkkan<sup>17</sup>. After completing his studies, between 1943 and 1944 Kafesoğlu was sent to Hungary to carry out a doctorate on the culture and history of the peoples of the steppe in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. However, the devastating development of the war in Hungary led to the cancellation of his scholarship and forced him to return to Turkey. After returning to his homeland, Kafesoğlu's career developed mainly at the University of Istanbul, where he obtained his doctorate in 1949 and the qualification to teach in 1952. Following a brief experience in Erzurum, in 1962 Kafesoğlu was definitively incardinated as professor at the faculty of literature in Istanbul. Here he found himself collaborating closely with Zeki Velidi Togan, one of the historical leaders of pan-Turkic nationalism

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<sup>16</sup> Abdülkadir Donuk, *Prof. Dr. İbrahim Kafesoğlu'nun Hayatı ve Eserleri* [The Life and Works of Prof. Dr. İbrahim Kafesoğlu], in "Tarih Enstitüsü Dergisi", n. 13, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Jacob M. Landau, *Pan-Turkism. From Irredentism to Cooperation*, Hong Kong, Hurst & Company, 1995, pp. 90-91.



and one of the greatest scholars of Turkic medieval history. Upon Togan's death in 1970, Kafesoğlu would inherit his role as full professor of Turkic history at the Istanbul University<sup>18</sup>.

The research undertaken by Kafesoğlu between the mid-1940s and the 1960s (with a particular focus on the ancient Central Asian Turks and the Seljuks) led him to develop a personal interpretation of Turkish history. At the origin of Kafesoğlu's thought there was the idea of a substantial continuity between the different eras of Turkic history. This was made possible above all by the affinity between the ancestral culture of the peoples of the Eurasian steppe and the religious morality they adopted after their conversion to Islam. On this basis, a definition of national identity could therefore be formulated giving equal importance to Turkic ethnic origins on the one hand and the contribution of Islam on the other. Kafesoğlu's theories – further refined during the 1970s – are the basis of the ideology of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, and have therefore had a tremendous impact on the developments of political culture in Turkey. Kafesoğlu's identity proposal was a solid core around which to build a broader convergence of views between the various conservative groups of nationalist or religious inspiration.

The themes that converged in the doctrine of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis did not suddenly burst into the 70s, but slowly emerged through a long process of revision of national historiography. In the context of the Cold War and the growing climate of ideological clash between right and left, an interpretation of Turkish history began to spread in Turkish conservative circles as a polemical alternative to Kemalist historiography. This alternative historiography was heavily indebted to the work of influential historians such as Togan and Köprülü. Conservative authors such as

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<sup>18</sup> Donuk, *Prof. Dr. İbrahim Kafesoğlu'nun...*, p. 3.

Nurettin Topçu<sup>19</sup> and İsmail Hami Danişmend helped extend the debate beyond academic circles.

Nevertheless, Kafesoğlu is almost universally credited as the creator of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, which to a certain extent actually corresponds to the truth. If the central themes of the Synthesis had already emerged in the alternative historiography of the previous twenty years, it is Kafesoğlu who coined the expression *Türk-İslam Sentezi*, used for the first time during a conference in 1972<sup>20</sup>. In his work, the conservative interpretation of national history found the coherence and systematicity of a real historiographic paradigm alternative to the Kemalist one.

The central pillar of Kafesoğlu's interpretation of Turkic history is the continuity between the pre-Islamic period and the one following the conversion. Before knowing Islam and accepting it as a national religion, the society of the ancient Turks was already structured on values that coincide with Islamic ones: sense of justice, monotheism, faith in the immortality of the soul, the sacredness of the family, social solidarity. Therefore the conversion to Islam did not constitute an element of rupture such as to alter and 'pollute' the Turkish identity, as the suspicious attitude towards this religion on the part of the ethno-nationalists linked to Nihal Atsız's circle seemed to suggest. At the same time from Kafesoğlu's perspective it is not even possible to say that Turkish identity originates from Islam, as the Islamists argued. Islamization does not create the Turkish identity, which pre-exists it, but strengthens it and makes it more authentic and coherent. It can be said that with the conversion to Islam the Turks confirmed and crystallized their own Turkishness.

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<sup>19</sup> Michelangelo Guida, *Nurettin Topçu: The Reinvention of Islamism in Republican Turkey*, in «Alternatives. Turkish Journal of International Relations», Vol. 12, n.2, Summer 2013; Michelangelo Guida, *Nurettin Topçu and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek: stories of 'conversion' and activism in Republican Turkey*, in "Journal for Islamic Studies", vol. 34, n. 1, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Oprea, *State-led Islamization...*, p. 133.

At the same time, while the conversion to Islam marked a fundamental moment in Turkish history, Kafesoğlu underlines that also the entry of the Turks into the Muslim world was a decisive event also for the fate of Islam and its historical destiny<sup>21</sup>. The Turks had found their religion in Islam, but Islam too had found its most faithful and authentic interpreters in the Turks.

Perhaps the most characteristic and original idea proposed by Kafesoğlu was also one of the most questionable: he argued that the Turks were already monotheists in the pre-Islamic age<sup>22</sup>. In this sense, Kafesoğlu distanced himself from the teaching of his teacher Fuad Köprülü, since he rejected the idea that animism and shamanic practices were characteristics of the original Turkish religion, but rather borrowings derived from the influence of the surrounding populations<sup>23</sup>. This theory is difficult to sustain from a historical and factual point of view, but it responds to an ideological necessity that is functional to the conservative project.

Kafesoğlu's idea, according to which Islam came to confirm and strengthen the characteristics already present in Turkish ethnic identity – and by virtue of this the Turks were the most authentic interpreters of the Islamic religion – therefore played a decisive role in promoting co-optation of Islam as a central element of ethnic nationalism. Kafesoğlu was therefore driven by primarily ideological reasons to deny or to downplay the fractures in Turkish history, highlighting only the continuities. This led him to minimize or completely deny fractures, traumatic innovations, resistances,

<sup>21</sup>İbrahim Kafesoğlu, *Türkiye Bugünkü Şartlara Getiren Tarihi Gelişme – Ülkemizi 12 Eylül'e Getiren Sebepler ve Türkiye Üzerindeki Oyunlar* [The Historical Development That Brought Turkey to Today's Conditions - The Reasons That Brought our Country to September 12 and the Games played on Turkey], İstanbul, Aydınlar Ocağı Yayınları, 1984, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> İbrahim Kafesoğlu, *Türk Milli Kültürü* [Turkish National Culture], İstanbul, Boğaziçi Yayınları, 1993, pp. 295-301; İbrahim Kafesoğlu, *Türk-İslam Sentezi* [Turkish-Islamic Synthesis], İstanbul, Ötügen, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Kafesoğlu, *Türk Milli Kültürü*, pp. 284-289.

compromises.

The transition from paganism to Islam is not the only historical fracture that needed to be healed: conservative thinking remained problematic in dealing with the Westernizing and secularizing reforms on which the Turkish national state was based. Kafesoğlu forced the hand of the sources at his disposal to provide very bold interpretations, in an attempt to highlight in medieval and pre-modern Turkish history characteristics that would have been typical of Kemalist Turkey. In his works it is argued that the Turks were the first people to have developed a national conscience, therefore the first and original nationalism would be the Turkish one – a belief that was already widespread in the Turanist circles. Kafesoğlu also attributed to the Seljuk Turks many of the innovations that would mark the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern age, in advance of Western Europe. He went so far as to affirm that humanism had roots in the Seljuk Turkic civilization and that therefore it was the Muslim Turks who laid the foundations for the Italian Renaissance and the start of European modernity. Kafesoğlu implicitly meant to suggest that Atatürk – like the reforming sultans before him – was fully in line and continuity with the Turkish-Islamic civilization of Anatolia. Claims that are too naive and bizarre for a professional historian of his experience and intellectual stature – such as the emblematic one according to which the secular state was a Seljuk creation – evidently underlie a very specific political agenda, which was intended to pacify Turkish conservatives with the secular republican state and co-opting Atatürk into the pantheon of Turkish-Islamic heroes<sup>24</sup>.

The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis – presented by Kafesoğlu as a scientific and objective reconstruction of the origins of the civilization of Turkey – was actually part of a very specific political project, aimed at laying the foun-

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<sup>24</sup> See Gary Leiser (ed.), *A History of the Seljuks: İbrahim Kafesoğlu's Interpretation and the Resulting Controversy*, in "Speculum 67", n. 1, January 1992, pp. 180-182.

dations for building a common vocabulary between ethnic nationalists and Islamists, and make it as compatible as possible with the republican state and with a strongly westernized society.

### 3. *The foundation of Aydınlar Ocağı (1970)*

At the end of the 1960s great developments also took place from external or opposing political and social forces with respect to religious and nationalist circles. The transformations in Turkey's conservative right were largely characterized by the reaction to what was perceived as a dangerous cultural hegemony of the left. According to Süleyman Yalçın<sup>25</sup>, the founding of *Aydınlar Ocağı* was a response to the turmoil of 1968 and the spread of the student movement in Turkey. In the nationalist congresses of 1967 and 1969 the foundations were therefore laid for the creation of a new association, in part heir to *Aydınlar Kulübü*, but in which exponents of other groups would also converge, including the *Kültür Ocağı*, the *Milliyetçiler Derneği* and the *Muallimler Birliği*.

*Aydınlar Ocağı* was founded in Istanbul on May 14, 1970. There were fifty-six founding members, including thirty-one academics. The remainder was made up of journalists, writers, teachers, and even some entrepreneurs and freelancers<sup>26</sup>. Interesting and significant as there was not even a woman among the founders. İbrahim Kafesoğlu was elected as president.

Süleyman Yalçın loved to emphasize the continuity between the experience of *Aydınlar Kulübü* and the founding of *Aydınlar Ocağı*, almost as

<sup>25</sup> Mehmet Umur/Tanıl Bora, *Türk-İslam 'Masonları'* [Turkish-Islamic 'Freemasons'], in "Yeni Gündem", February 22-28 1987, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Mustafa Özcanbaz, *Çağdaş Türk Düşünce Tarihinin Oluşumunda Aydınlar Ocağı'nın Yeri* [The Place of Intellectuals Association in the Formation of Contemporary Turkish Intellectual History], unpublished master's thesis, Hitit Üniversitesi, 2013, pp. 201-205.

if it were the same organization that had changed its name<sup>27</sup>. In reality, things are not that simple and the transition between the two associations does not seem to be as direct and natural as Yalçın intended to make it appear. The main difference is that in 1970 the weight of the properly nationalist component had greatly increased compared to the substantially Islamist character of the old association. This emerges quite clearly from a brief examination of the intellectual biographies of the founding members, starting with President Kafesoğlu. Among the animators of *Aydınlar Kulübü*, the Erbakan brothers and Taşer were no longer present in the new association. On the other hand, several exponents with a decidedly ethnic nationalist profile took over, generally linked to Kafesoğlu and often admirers and disciples of Nihal Atsız.

A very clear example of this category is represented by Altan Deliorman (1935-2012). A scholar of the culture and mythology of the ancient Turks and contemporary Turkish history, he was born in Sofia to parents belonging to the Turkish minority of Bulgaria. He was ideologically trained in ultra-nationalist circles, and throughout his life he regularly contributed to the Turanist press and journalism. He was a pupil and follower of Atsız, who had been his high school teacher, and to whom he dedicated two monographs. He was among the creators and the first organizers of *3 Mayıs Türkçülük Günü* (May 3, the day of Turkism), an annual event in which ultra-nationalists still commemorate the anniversary of the 1944 trial against Atsız and the other exponents of the Turanist far right. Deliorman was also an assistant, friend and very close collaborator of Kafesoğlu.

Kafesoğlu's pupil and collaborator was also Mustafa Kafalı (b. 1934). Medieval historian and university professor, he mainly dealt with pre-Ottoman Anatolia and the Tatar civilization of the Golden Horde. Like other members of *Aydınlar Ocağı*, Kafalı was a great admirer of Atsız.

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<sup>27</sup> Tan/Çakkal, *Prof. Dr. Süleyman Yalçın...*, p. 98.

Another prominent figure of ethnic nationalism involved in the founding of *Aydınlar Ocağı* is that of the linguist Necmettin Hacıeminoğlu (1932-1996). Deeply involved in the Turanist circles, he too was an admirer of Atsız. Among the members of the association, he was distinguished by his proximity to Alparslan Türkeş's MHP, contributing with his articles to the party's publications<sup>28</sup>.

Muharrem Ergin (1923-1995), perhaps the figure with the greatest media exposure in *Aydınlar Ocağı*<sup>29</sup>, also had a past linked to nationalist circles. Belonging to the Turkish minority of Georgia, he had emigrated to Turkey at a young age along with his family. As a boy he had been a pupil of Nejdet Sançar, brother of Nihal Atsız and also an important ideologue of the ethno-nationalist right. At the trial of 1944 he had appeared as a witness in favor of the accused<sup>30</sup>. Trained as a linguist, Ergin established himself as a university lecturer and scholar of Turkish literature. He wrote some very popular Turkish language manuals, both for high school and university courses. In the 1970s and 1980s he would have distinguished himself as one of the major ideologues of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis.

Perhaps the most sensational manifestation of the link between *Aydınlar Ocağı* and ultra-nationalist circles is the very active membership of Reha Oğuz Türkkan<sup>31</sup>, who was, together with Nihal Atsız, the most radical exponent of Turanism between the two world wars. The massive presence of intellectuals who referred to ethnic nationalism – some examples of which have been provided – does not mean that all members of the association adhered to this ideology. First of all, it should be remembered that most of the 'old guard' closer to religious positions and largely linked to Kısakürek

<sup>28</sup> Landau, *Pan-Turkizm...*, p. 169.

<sup>29</sup> Umit Kurt, *The Doctrine of "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" as Official Ideology of the September 12 and the "Intellectuals' Hearth-Aydınlar Ocağı" as the Ideological Apparatus of the State*, in "European Journal of Economic and Political Studies", n. 2, 2010, p. 114.

<sup>30</sup> Uzer, *An Intellectual History...*, p. 160.

<sup>31</sup> Altan Deliorman, *Uzun Bir Ömür* [A Long Life], in "Orkun", n. 169, March 2012.

remained within the association (Yalçın, Songar, Timurtaş...). In addition, other personalities of the same orientation joined the new association for the first time.

Among the founders of *Aydınlar Ocağı* there were also intellectuals born at the beginning of the century, thus belonging to the generation preceding that of the majority of the other members. They were peers of the ‘masters’ such as Atsız and Kısakürek, and at that time they could already be considered historical figures of the Turkish conservative world.

One of the most prestigious names was certainly the famous sociologist Ziyaeddin Fahri Fındıkoğlu (1901-1974). A true cornerstone of conservative culture in Turkey, Fındıkoğlu is to be considered among the most important social scientists in his country, and at the same time a ‘godfather’ of the conservative right in the political sphere. Between 1930 and 1935 Fındıkoğlu had completed his doctorate at the University of Strasbourg<sup>32</sup>, where he was fascinated by the thought of conservative intellectuals such as the sociologist Frédéric Le Play. In the years he had spent in France he had also been profoundly influenced by the ideology of the French right and in particular by *Action Française* and his ideologue Charles Maurras. When he returned to Turkey and became a professor at the University of Istanbul, he worked hard to «support this ideology [...] with the attitude of a missionary»<sup>33</sup>. While he could not be classified as either an ethnic nationalist or an Islamist, Fındıkoğlu was politically close to both groups and often involved in their initiatives. In 1944 he had spoken publicly in defense of the defendants in the trial against Turanists<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup>Mustafa E. Erkal, *Fındıkoğlu, Ziyaeddin Fahri (1901-1974)*, in “İslâm Ansiklopedisi”, vol. 13, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup>Aykut Kansu, *Ziyaeddin Fahri Fındıkoğlu, ‘Sosyal Mesele’ ve ‘İçtimai Siyaset’* [Ziyaeddin Fahri Fındıkoğlu, ‘Social Issue’ and ‘Social Politics’], in Ahmet Çiğdem (ed.), *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasî Düşünce. Cilt 5. Muhafazakârlık*, Istanbul, İletişim, 2006, p. 119-120

<sup>34</sup>Uzer, *An Intellectual History...*, p. 153.



Belonging to the same generation were the art historian Ekrem Hakkı Ayverdi (1899-1984) and the writer Nihad Sami Banarlı (1907-1974), both followers of the great poet Yahya Kemal Beyatlı. Inspired by their teacher, they were supporters of a romantic and intellectual conservatism, profoundly influenced by the thought of authors such as Henry Bergson and imbued with the themes of spiritualism and existentialism.

In *Aydınlar Ocağı*, personalities of different ideological orientations and also from different generations had converged, however, who identified themselves in a common culturally conservative and politically right-oriented identity. This awareness was the mature fruit of a process of convergence that had begun at least two decades earlier.

#### *4. Political factionalism and cultural hegemony (1970-2000)*

Kafesoğlu formally abandoned the association's presidency in 1974, while continuing to be its main ideologue and leading figure. Süleyman Yalçın replaced him, thus returning to the role he had already covered in *Aydınlar Kulübü*.

In 1979, Salih Tuğ (b. 1930), a university lecturer and scholar of the history of law, was elected president. At the beginning of his academic career, Tuğ had been under the guidance and protection of pan-Turkist Zeki Velidi Togan<sup>35</sup>. Later he specialized in particular on the history of Islamic law. He was one of those figures with a background and an intellectual profile that brought together nationalist and religious elements. In 1982 Ayhan Songar took over as president of the association.

For the ideologues of *Aydınlar Ocağı*, the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis was not only a description of the origins of Turkish civilization, nor was it

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<sup>35</sup> Mustafa Uzun, *Prof. Dr. Salih Tuğ*, in "İslam Hukuku Araştırmaları Dergisi", n. 12, 2008, pp. 11-18.

a mere interpretative scheme of national history. It also had a prescriptive character with respect to the way of dealing with the issues of the present and the future. In the interpretation of Turkish history proposed by Kafesoğlu, a harmonious and efficient society would develop from the synthesis between Islam and the civilization of the ancient Turks, which revolved around the three symbolic spaces of the home, the mosque and the barracks. It was also to be a model for contemporary Turkey.

The problems of modern civilization, according to the members of *Aydınlar Ocağı* and the majority of conservative intellectuals, stemmed from the dominant materialistic mentality in social relations, a consequence in the first place of the spread of Enlightenment universalism and positivism. The blame for these developments in Turkey was largely attributed to the wrong and superficial approach of the 19th century reformers of the Ottoman Empire, who had passively imported Western models without delving into their philosophical and ethical aspects, and had at the same time caused the decline of morality and of local religious values. The solution to Turkey's problems was therefore identified in the return to the Turkish-Islamic synthesis which stood at the origins of Turkish civilization. Nationalism and religion were to provide the cement with which to rebuild a harmonious and supportive society, where authentic moral values would triumph over materialism.

If all the developments of the Enlightenment and positivist philosophical culture were in the dock as responsible for the decline of Turkish civilization, there is no doubt that the conservatives identified Marxism as the main enemy. All socialist thought – identified as such with anarchy and communism – was represented in a caricatured form as a sort of oncological disease that would lead with its metastases to the destruction of all ethical values and national culture.

The members of *Aydınlar Ocağı*, despite having no formal connection with any party, were strongly active in politics during the 1970s. Their action was cloaked in the desire to make an academic and scientific contribution to the public debate, but in fact, it resulted in a very violent ideological crusade against the left – not only the radicals but also Ecevit's CHP.

Ahmet Kabaklı, a member of *Aydınlar Ocağı* and one of the most important voices of the conservative intellectual world, used the confrontation between the Ottomans and Tamerlane as an example of the clash of identities and values between the right and the left in modern Turkey. On the one hand, the Ottomans represented the right: a force carrying order and culture, oriented towards moral purposes, aimed at building and not destroying. On the other hand, «The left is always Tamerlane. Therefore looting, corruption, lack of culture, vandalism, bullying, theft»<sup>36</sup>. History teaches that Sultan Beyazıt – nicknamed *Yıldırım* (Thunderbolt) – was defeated by Tamerlane in the battle of Ankara in 1402. However, the victory of the Tamerlane hordes was only momentary, since the Ottoman state had survived and grew to become the greatest power in the world, while Tamerlane's ephemeral empire disintegrated completely in a few generations. The cultural and spiritual values and foundations upon which the state was built were worth far more than the outcome of a single battle. Indeed, the defeat of Ankara was providential because «if Tamerlane had not come, the sons of [Beyazıt] Yıldırım would not have woken up and would not have taken control of their country»<sup>37</sup>. The comparison is clear: in the same way the 'red horde', which was crashing down on Turkey in the 1970s, had achieved only partial victories, which would have led to the rebirth and definitive triumph of nationalism and traditional values.

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<sup>36</sup> Ahmet Kabaklı, *Devlet Felsefemiz* [Our State Philosophy], Istanbul, Türk Edebiyat Vakfı Yayınları, 2003, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Turkish conservatives often loved to portray themselves as the last line of resistance against the power of the ‘anti-national’ left in society and especially in the world of culture. In a country like Turkey in the 1970s it was unrealistic to talk about a hegemony of the left, but exaggerating the importance and destructive force of one’s opponent was a winning strategy because it compacted the conservative forces of society in the idea of having to unite for to perform a heroic deed in the name of the nation and of the Islamic religion.

Muharrem Ergin, the most active member on the public scene and in some respects considered the ‘political spokesperson’ of *Aydınlar Ocağı*, wrote many articles in support of the formation of the Nationalist Front on the pages of *Ortadoğu* (Middle East), the reference newspaper of MHP. Between December 5th and 8th 1974, *Ortadoğu* published a series of four editorials signed by Ergin in which nationalists and conservatives were invited to unite to save the country from the danger of communism, the cultural revolution and the harmful policies of Ecevit<sup>38</sup>. The contribution of Ergin – and other conservative intellectuals linked to *Aydınlar Ocağı* – played a role in inspiring and providing an ideological framework for the formation of the first Nationalist Front government in March 1975. The articles published by Ergin on *Ortadoğu* between 1974 and 1975 in support of the Nationalist Front were later collected in the volume with the eloquent title *Milliyetçiler Kormayınız Birlişeniz* (Nationalists do not be afraid, unite).

With the advent of the Nationalist Front, the members of *Aydınlar Ocağı* achieved their first successes in the project to be accredited as ideologues of the government and the state. In 1975 Nevzat Yalçıntaş (1933-2016) – political scientist and future president of *Aydınlar Ocağı* – was appointed

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<sup>38</sup> Muharrem Ergin, *Milliyetçiler Kormayınız Birlişeniz* [Nationalists Do Not Be Afraid, Unite], Ankara, Ekonomik ve Sosyal Yayınları, 1976, pp. 187-205.

general manager of the public broadcaster TRT. A high school textbook written by Kafesoğlu and Deliorman was published in 1976 and adopted by many schools across the country<sup>39</sup>. The experiment of the Nationalist Front was doomed to fail, in a country in economic crisis and now hostage to political violence between radical left and right groups, but the events would have further favored the rise of the conservative intelligentsia.

The coup of 12 September 1980 marked the culmination of the most difficult period in all of Turkish history, but also the heyday of *Aydınlar Ocağı*. Military junta turned the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis into a sort of state ideology, and in the 1980s the members of the association reached prominent positions in politics and bureaucracy. It was precisely the exponents of *Aydınlar Ocağı* who benefited most from the new course inaugurated with the coup, forming the core of what has been defined as «the ideological apparatus of the state»<sup>40</sup>. Süleyman Yalçın and Salih Tuğ – two of the leaders of the association – were the authors of a proposed constitutional charter that was submitted to the attention of the National Security Council<sup>41</sup>. It was noted that the final text of the constitution coincided 80% with the proposal of Yalçın and Tuğ<sup>42</sup>. Moreover, there were members of *Aydınlar Ocağı* within the same constitutional commission<sup>43</sup>.

The main objective for conservative intellectuals was to gain control of the media apparatus and above all of the education system. The reform of the school system was a real obsession for conservatives, because they were convinced that the alleged ‘humanist’ hegemony within schools and

<sup>39</sup>Ibrahim Kafesoğlu/Altan Deliorman, *Tarih, Lise, I, II, III*, Ankara, Millî Eğitim Basımevi, 1976.

<sup>40</sup>Kurt, *The Doctrine...*

<sup>41</sup> Süleyman Yalçın, Salih Tuğ, *T. C. Anayasası İçin Teklif* [Proposal for the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey], Istanbul, Unal Matbaasi, 1982.

<sup>42</sup>Oprea, *State-led Islamization...*, p. 137.

<sup>43</sup> Binnur Toprak, *Religion as State Ideology in a Secular Setting: the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis*, in Malcolm Wagstaff (ed.), *Aspects of religion in secular Turkey*, Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1990, p. 14.

universities lay at the root of many problems in Turkish society.

In this crusade to control public education, representatives of *Aydınlar Ocağı* were naturally in the front row. In 1981 Salih Tuğ wrote bluntly that the main reason for the crisis that Turkish society was going through was to be found in the ‘wrong education’ given in Turkish schools and universities. The 19th century reformers and above all the Kemalists had turned their backs on centuries of Islamic Ottoman civilization, rejecting and hiding a fundamental part of Turkish national culture from school curricula and university studies. This had pushed Turkey into a «new age of *cahiliye*» – the condition of ignorance and barbarism prior to the Islamic revelation – and created a vacuum of values in which radical and anti-national ideologies were inserted<sup>44</sup>. A part of the Turkish youth, culturally uprooted and devoid of authentic spiritual and moral values, was thus attracted to Marxism and its insidious variants. For this reason, the ‘national culture’ had to return to being at the center of school programs and of the whole world that revolved around elementary and higher education.

In February 1982, the education ministry published a report – intended to lay down guidelines for the following years – which substantially reiterated what Tuğ and other conservative intellectuals argued. It explicitly claimed that Turkey was facing a ‘psychological war’ that had been waged against it by the enemies of the nation (Marxists, separatists, ‘provocateurs’ of various kinds...). It was recommended that nationalism and religious sentiment be brought back to the center of school programs and initiatives of the ministry of education, in order to counter these dangers that threatened public morality and national identity<sup>45</sup>. The reintroduction

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<sup>44</sup> Salih Tuğ, *Revivification of Islamic Teaching and Education in Turkey*, in “Al-Ittihad”, vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 10-22.

<sup>45</sup> Sam Kaplan, *Din-u Devlet All over Again? The Politics of Military Secularism and Religious Militarism in Turkey Following the 1980 Coup*, in “International Journal of Middle East Studies”, vol. 34, n. 1, 2002, p. 119.

of religious education in public schools is also part of this context, an element of clear discontinuity with the Kemalist ideology of the early Republican age. Also in 1982, a new subject called ‘Religious Culture and Moral Education’ (*Din Kültürü ve Ahlâk Bilgisi*) was in fact included among the compulsory courses in schools of all levels.

The influence of *Aydınlar Ocağı* in shaping the government’s ideological orientations did not diminish with the return to parliamentary politics. Turgut Özal – the undisputed protagonist of Turkish political life between the 1980s and the early 1990s – was also very close to *Aydınlar Ocağı*. It was during a conference organized by the association that he presented for the first time the ‘new vision’ (*yeni görüş*) that was the basis of his political and economic concepts<sup>46</sup>. Alongside the policies of economic liberalization, the governments of Özal continued the conservative orientations in the world of culture and education along the lines dictated in principle by the members of *Aydınlar Ocağı*.

After a new interlude under the leadership of Yalçın, between 1988 and 1998 the presidency of *Aydınlar Ocağı* was occupied for an uninterrupted decade by Nevzat Yalçıntaş, that was not a founding member of the association. In the second half of the 1990s, *Aydınlar Ocağı* was somehow involved in the clash between the Islamist movement and the military and bureaucratic elites, losing the favor of the latter. Even the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis seemed momentarily in crisis, especially after the ‘postmodern coup’ of February 28, 1997 which established an ephemeral season of apparent progressive hegemony. In 1998, Yalçıntaş, disliked by the ruling class of the moment, left the presidency of *Aydınlar Ocağı*. In 2001 he

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<sup>46</sup> Turgut Özal, *Kalkınmada Yeni Görüşün Esasları*, in M. Barlas (ed.), *Turgut Özal’ın Anıları* [Memories of Turgut Özal], Sabah Kitapları, İstanbul 1994; A. Yıldız, *Liberalizm-Muhafazakârlık Sarkacında “İnformel” Bir Demokrat: Turgut Özal’dan Kalan* [An “Informal” Democrat in the Liberalism-Conservatism Pendulum: The Legacy of Turgut Özal], in “Muhafazakar Düşünce”, vol. 15, n. 55, September-October 2018, p. 50-51.

was among the founding members of the current ruling party AKP. The presidency of the association has since been occupied by the sociologist Mustafa E. Erkal (b. 1944). Although still active, *Aydınlar Ocağı* has never again held an importance comparable to that which it reached between the 80s and 90s.

##### *5. A 'hearth' for two families: nationalists and Islamists within Aydınlar Ocağı*

*Aydınlar Ocağı* was therefore characterized by the coexistence of ethnic nationalists and Islamists. It was certainly not an absolute novelty, but perhaps it is the first time that the symbiosis has manifested itself in such an organic way. This did not mean, however, that the two groups abandoned their respective convictions and converted to a new ideology that synthesized or surpassed the traditional political identities of reference. Simplifying as much as possible, it is possible to clearly identify two groups within the association. On the one hand, we find an ultra-nationalist wing close to İbrahim Kafesoğlu and who had his tutelary deity in Nihal Atsız, while distancing itself from the latter on some relevant aspects. Most of the exponents of this group appeared for the first time with the founding of *Aydınlar Ocağı* in 1970. On the other hand, there is a group of intellectuals with a decidedly religious (if not openly Islamist) profile whose most relevant exponent is Süleyman Yalçın. These are generally personalities who were already involved in *Aydınlar Kulübü* and who were under the direct influence of Islamist thinkers such as Nurettin Topçu and especially Necip Fazıl Kısakürek.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify some aspects regarding the distinction presented here. First of all, it must be taken into account that not all members of the association necessarily had to fall into one of the two categories. Within the association there were those who had both influences and therefore developed ideas in a certain sense intermediate between eth-



no-nationalist and Islamist extremes. Still others had come to conservative positions following different and personal approaches and did not fit into either group. It is even more important to underline that the possibility of identifying these two ‘groups’ does not imply that they were in conflict with each other. The proposal to distinguish ethnic nationalists and Islamists has the function of categorizing some of the leading intellectuals of *Aydınlar Ocağı* on the basis of their ideological background. This operation has a necessarily illustrative and schematic character, which reduces the complexity of reality and puts in brackets the differences, even important ones, existing between the personalities included in the same category. Strange as it may seem for such a conservative association in Turkey, *Aydınlar Ocağı* was a composite and plural group, in which intellectual personalities with very different profiles coexisted.

Identifying ethnic nationalists and Islamists within the association is useful for understanding the relationship between nationalism and Islam in the context of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. In this regard, different interpretations have been given, essentially summarized in three alternative positions:

1) The Turkish-Islamic synthesis as a form of nationalism: *Aydınlar Ocağı* is seen as a nationalist organization that has used religion with an instrumental approach<sup>47</sup>.

2) As a form of Islamism: the ideology of *Aydınlar Ocağı* turns national vocabulary and symbols into a substantially religious project, in which Turkic identity is subordinated to Islamic one<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>47</sup>Erkan Akin/Ömer Karasapan , *The “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”*, in “Middle East Report”, n. 1, July-August 1988, p. 18; Kurt, *The Doctrine...*, p. 114.

<sup>48</sup>Çiler Dursun, *Türk-İslam Sentezi İdeolojisinin Failini Tanımak* [Knowing who theorized the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis], in “Radikal Gazetesi”, May 28, 2006; Ali Çağlar/Mustafa Uluçakar, *Günümüz Türkçülüğünün İslamla İmtihani: Türk-İslam Sentezi ve Aydınlar Ocağı* [The Test of Contemporary Turkish Nationalism with Islam: Turkish-Islamic Synthesis and the Intellectuals’ Hearth], in “Hacettepe Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi”,

3) As a synthesis of Islamism and nationalism: according to this point of view, the convergence of nationalist and Islamist themes would have given rise to a new ideology aimed at synthesizing and overcoming ethnic nationalism and Islam<sup>49</sup>.

The question of the nationalist or Islamic essence of *Aydınlar Ocağı* and of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis has therefore not received a single answer and is open to interpretation. To respond adequately, it is possible to momentarily shift attention from the theoretical contents of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis to the intellectual biographies and political and ideological backgrounds of the individual personalities involved in its elaboration and dissemination.

As we have seen, the names that recur several times in the intellectual and political formation of the members of *Aydınlar Ocağı* are those of Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Nihal Atsız. Perhaps the most obvious difference within the conservative Turkish world concerns the role of ethnic origins and the Islamic religion in defining national identity. In this regard, Atsız and Kısakürek emerge as two radically opposed figures, whose conception of the nation appears completely irreconcilable. Kısakürek was to all intents and purposes an Islamist thinker. Although Kısakürek sometimes used an apparently nationalist vocabulary, he identified Turkish nationality exclusively with Ottoman heritage and Islam. He, therefore, did not place any value on ethnic origins and pre-Islamic Turkish culture. For his part, Nihal Atsız had developed a form of nationalism that was not only ethnic, but openly racist. Atsız held the ancient pre-Islamic Turkish civilization in the highest regard, while he was completely indifferent to Islam. Within the framework of the Turkish right, Kısakürek and Atsız thus represented

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n. 26, spring 2017, pp. 124-125.

<sup>49</sup> Gökhan Çetinsaya, *Rethinking Nationalism and Islam: Some Preliminary Notes on The Roots of "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" in Modern Turkish Political Thought*, in "The Muslim World", n. 3-4, July-October 1999, pp. 350-376.

opposite extremes regarding the conception of the nation and the role assigned to religion and ethnic origins.

Kısakürek's influence on *Aydınlar Ocağı* – and earlier on *Aydınlar Kulübü* – is an explicit and evident fact. As we have seen, Kısakürek was in fact involved in the foundation of the association, of which he chose the name and was in a sense a sort of 'godfather'. In general, it can be said that Kısakürek wanted to be an active protagonist in the process of convergence between the ultra-nationalist and religious world and also pushed for the alliance between these groups and the state. To achieve these goals, he often proved willing to reach ideological compromises that allowed him to be appreciated and create networks of followers even in environments other than the Islamist ones from which he came. As evidenced by the 1950s correspondence between Kısakürek and prime minister Adnan Menderes<sup>50</sup>, the Islamist ideologue was able to occasionally set aside his religiosity for the sake of political opportunity.

Totally different is the case of Atsız, who on the contrary was not inclined to compromise and did not give his blessing to any initiative that was not of a totally ethno-nationalist nature. Atsız never regarded religious conservatives as his comrades. For Nihal Atsız, only nationalists – obviously ethnic nationalists, because that was the only way he conceived nationalism – could call themselves 'right-wing'. On the contrary, the Islamists, supporters of the Ummah and the Caliphate, were the bearers of an internationalist vision and an enemy of national values on a par with the socialists. So the idea of uniting nationalists and Islamists within the right was not a viable project<sup>51</sup>. Atsız's ideological hostility towards religious circles had even intensified very much in the last years of his life, paradoxically at the moment of maximum convergence between nationalists and Islamists (and perhaps

<sup>50</sup> Alattin Karaca, *Necip Fazıl'dan Menderes'e Mektuplar*, İstanbul, Kopernik Kitap, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Nihal Atsız, *Sağcı kimdir?* [Who is Rightist?], in "Ötüken", n. 50, February 1968.

also in reaction to this phenomenon). In 1970 – just as *Aydınlar Ocağı* was founded – Atsız threw himself furiously from the pages of his newspaper *Ötüken* against ‘religious bigotry’ (*yobazlık*), an anachronistic ideology opposed to nationalism<sup>52</sup>.

The extremely hostile positions held by Atsız towards the Islamists in the late 1960s and early 1970s were also the reflection of a fierce confrontation within the ethno-nationalist world itself. In those years, a rift developed between Nihal Atsız, ideologist and intellectual guide of the ultra-nationalist movement, and its political leader Alparslan Türkeş. The latter was trying to moderate the ethnic radicalism of Turkish ultra-nationalism and to re-embrace Islam as part of the national identity, with the aim of approaching Islamists and more moderate nationalists for political opportunity. Atsız saw all of this as a real betrayal on the part of his old protégé, and led him to further harden his anti-Islamic positions. Already on the occasion of the MHP congress held in Adana in 1969, Türkeş managed to have his standpoint imposed within the ultra-nationalist party. This shows that Atsız’s extremism and ideological intransigence were in the minority even in the relatively small environment of Turkish ethno-nationalism<sup>53</sup>.

The refusal of any compromise with religious conservatism and other forms of nationalism that diverged from his ethnic ideal led in fact to Atsız’s self-isolation during the decisive phases for the construction of the political and ideological identity of modern Turkey. This circumstance has led some scholars, such as Umut Uzer, to underestimate the importance of Atsız’s contribution in shaping the ideology of the contemporary Turkish right.

Yet there is incontrovertible evidence of the profound influence that Atsız’s

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<sup>52</sup> Nihal Atsız, *Türkçülüğe Karşı Yobazlık* [Religious Bigotry against Turkish Nationalism], in “*Ötüken*”, n. 3, 1970, pp. 3-6.

<sup>53</sup> İlker Aytürk, *Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69*, in “Middle Eastern Studies”, vol. 50, n. 5, pp. 710-712.

thought and work exerted on the most important and influential authors of the next generation, and especially on the members of *Aydınlar Ocağı*. İbrahim Kafesoğlu, first president of the association and main ideologue of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, in one of his last public speeches on an official occasion, described Atsız as one of the two main influences on his intellectual formation. The other came from Ziya Gökalp, who however was the founder of the social sciences in modern Turkey and is an almost obvious reference<sup>54</sup>. The reference to Atsız, as well as surprising for the context, is instead significant from an ideological point of view.

Kısakürek, and especially Atsız, have generally been identified with their most original and divergent ideas from standards. Hence Atsız was characterized by his scientific racism, which led him to consider Turkishness first of all as a fact of blood, of which culture was, if anything, a consequence. On the other hand, Kısakürek is known above all for his rejection of ethnic identity and for his uncompromising Islamism. This has led some to underestimate the influence that an author like Nihal Atsız had in the evolution of Turkish nationalism, since racism – often perceived as the main idea of his thinking – did not pass on to subsequent generations. Kısakürek's total rejection of the pre-Islamic cultural heritage of the ancient Turks has often led to him seeing him as an exception and a peripheral figure to the mainstream right in Turkey.

To understand the influence these authors had on younger generations, it is necessary to shift attention to less striking and apparently less original aspects of their thinking. The idea of a continuity between the imperial and republican ages, hostility towards progressive social classes, extreme anti-communism and the obsession with the purity of national culture: here are some examples of the conceptions that were shared by characters such as Kısakürek and Atsız and which would have formed the core of ideas

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<sup>54</sup> Donuk, *Prof. Dr. İbrahim Kafesoğlu...*, p. 5-6.

characteristic of the Turkish right in the second half of the 20th century. The different perspectives of Atsız and Kısakürek on the nature of national identity must be seen as borderline cases, which influenced many authors of younger generations but were rarely embraced in their entirety. Conservative nationalism in Turkey can be represented as a spectrum between two extreme poles, represented respectively by the ethnic nationalism of Atsız and the uncompromising Islamism of Kısakürek. On this issue, the majority of right-wing intellectuals would have positioned themselves somewhere within this spectrum, whose limits should be considered more as extreme points of a continuum than as two alternative and mutually exclusive proposals.

Despite the desire to converge in a common project and the many underlying similarities, the positions of Islamists and ethnic nationalists within *Aydınlar Ocağı* remained however different with regard to some aspects of great importance. In particular, the difficulty in finding a relationship between ethnic identity and religious confession should be emphasized. To highlight the differences on this issue, the particularly clear-cut views of the ultra-nationalist Altan Deliorman can be compared with those of the more Islamist Süleyman Yalçın.

A follower of Atsız and a close associate of Kafesoğlu, Deliorman maintained an uncompromising ethno-nationalist position throughout his life. In December 2007, Avni Doğan, a deputy from the ruling AKP party, argued in a public debate that «defining Turkey as a cultural mosaic is wrong. There is only one culture and it is Islam»<sup>55</sup>. Doğan's statements, in addition to arousing scandal in the more secular sectors of society, provided Deliorman with the pretext to set out his point of view very clearly once again. In an article published in the Turanist periodical *Orkun*<sup>56</sup>, Deliorman

<sup>55</sup> "Kültür tektir ve İslam'dır" [There is Only One Culture and That's Islam], in «Hürriyet», December 6 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Altan Deliorman, *Tek Kültür İslam Mıdır?* [Is Islam the Only Culture?], in "Ötüken",

responded in a rather articulate way to the statements of the deputy Doğan. Taking up the distinction introduced in Turkey by Ziya Gökalp<sup>57</sup>, the author invited the ‘kind deputy’ to keep the concept of religious community (*ümmet*) separate from those of culture and civilization, which in turn do not coincide. Deliorman also made it clear quite explicitly that religious affiliation was for him subordinate to national affiliation. «Religion – concluded Deliorman – is only a part of culture» and therefore is confined to a substantially ancillary role with respect to an identity conceived above all in ethnic and linguistic terms.

The point of view of Yalçın was decidedly opposite, following the teaching of Kısakürek according to which only thanks to Islam is a Turk really a Turk. Islam is therefore not a component in support of national identity, but its deepest basis. This position essentially coincides with that of the deputy Doğan. In a 2012 interview, Yalçın criticized those who, within the center-right political and cultural area, denied the central role of Islam. On that occasion he explicitly referred to Deliorman – defined as «a pupil of Nihal Atsız» – and to Nevzat Yalçıntaş<sup>58</sup>.

On the same occasion, Yalçın tried to give an image of Atsız more compatible with his own pro-Islamist point of view. While admitting that Atsız was not personally religious, Yalçın argued that the father of radical ethnic nationalism respected and held Islam in high regard as the ‘religion of the Turks’. In this regard, he reported an episode in which Atsız, overwhelmed by the magnificence of Istanbul’s religious architecture, allegedly admitted that «Turks are nothing but Muslims who speak Turkish»<sup>59</sup>. However, this dialogue is highly unlikely, since it contradicts what Atsız wrote throughout his life and confirmed by contemporary witnesses. This is in all

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<sup>57</sup> Ziya Gökalp, *The principles of Turkism*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1968, pp. 22, 48.

<sup>58</sup> Tan/Çakkal, *Prof. Dr. Süleyman Yalçın...*, p. 99.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

likelihood a posthumous attempt to arrange a narrative more in line with developments in nationalism and conservatism in recent decades.

Yalçın and Deliorman were two important personalities of *Aydınlar Ocağı* and more generally of the conservative intelligentsia that supported the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis. Yet still, in the last years of their lives they expressed such conflicting opinions that they identified them respectively as an Islamist and an ethno-nationalist. The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis was therefore not a synthesis of nationalism and Islamism, but an interpretation of Turkish history and identity with which Islamists and ethnic nationalists could identify while maintaining separate identities. The construction of this identity narrative was the work of professional academics and historians, starting with Kafesoğlu himself. The overlap of political militancy and scientific rigor has been an essential feature of the work of *Aydınlar Ocağı* and the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis. This has contributed to giving a credible and apparently objective character to the ideological construction on which the political vision of the Turkish right has been based in recent decades.

## *6. Conclusions*

The process that led to the formulation of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis therefore largely coincides with the construction of the political right in contemporary Turkey. It is a story of ideas, but above all a story of men in flesh and blood: people who are different from each other, often coming from different experiences and schools of thought, but who have recognized themselves in a common political identity. These intellectuals referred to ideological models based on apparently distant principles – such as ethnic nationalism and Islamism – yet they could recognize themselves as part of the same group or, in other words, of the same faction.

The synthesis of nationalism and religious fervor that characterizes contemporary Turkish conservatism is the result of a long process of progres-



sive convergence between the different realities of what has been defining itself as the Turkish right in the second half of the 20th century. The formulation of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis can be seen simultaneously as an effect and as a cause of the process of convergence between the different souls of the Turkish conservative world. The development of common doctrines and a shared imaginary between nationalists, Islamists and conservatives was certainly favored by the rapprochement between these different groups in the 1960s. In the following decade, the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis matured as an organic system of ideas at the center of a «conservative project»<sup>60</sup> which had the conscious and explicit objective of «integrating Islamists and nationalists»<sup>61</sup>. It was not just a question of uniting them among themselves within the framework of the Turkish right, but of promoting their integration into the state apparatus, making at least part of their principles penetrate within the republican ideology. The Turkish-Islamic synthesis, assumed at the center of the ideology of the Turkish state in the 1980s, would have reached a hegemonic position in the culture – not just politics in the strict sense – of the country. However, the coexistence between the different ideological orientations within Turkish conservatism was not without contradictions and difficulties.

*Aydınlar Ocağı* represented the spearhead of the conservative movement in contemporary Turkey, and for this reason it can legitimately be taken as an example of its internal dynamics. The political convergence between Islamists and nationalists has never meant a mutual assimilation between the two groups. Turkish rightist movement have always shown overlaps between Islamism, secular conservatism and ethnic nationalism, but these groups have always maintained a distinct identity throughout the history of

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<sup>60</sup> Yüksel Taşkın, *Muhafazakâr Bir Proje Olarak Türk-İslâm Sentezi* [Turkish-Islamic Synthesis as a Conservative Project], in Tanıl Bora, Murat Gültekinil (ed.), *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasî Düşünce. Cilt 5. Muhafazakârlık*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2006, pp. 382-401.

<sup>61</sup> Toprak, *Religion as State Ideology...*, p. 10.

modern Turkey, even when they have been active within the same political parties.

Those familiar with the studies on Turkish political culture might have in mind the now-classic image evoked by Tanıl Bora, according to which nationalism, conservatism and Islamism constitute the ‘three states of matter’ in which the Turkish right manifests itself<sup>62</sup>. The powerful image is useful for representing the symbiosis between these different ideological currents, but it risks overshadowing their differences and peculiar identities: while coexisting as elements of the Turkish right, they still exist as distinct realities.

At the basis of Turkey’s political culture, there is therefore no construction of a common ideology that could truly overcome and synthesize nationalism, secular conservatism and Islamism. Rather, it is a history of alliances, convergences and compromises between distinct ideological identities. The role of cultural associations such as *Aydınlar Ocağı* has been to provide a theoretical basis on which this process could develop. Considering the historical parable of contemporary Turkey, and bearing in mind what has been said up to this point, it can be said that the efforts of conservative intellectuals have been crowned with substantial success.

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<sup>62</sup> Tanıl Bora, *Türk Sağının Üç Hali: Milliyetçilik, Muhafazakarlık ve İslamcılık*, Birikim Yayınları, İstanbul 1998.