

THE EMERGENCE AND RISE OF RELIGIOUS  
NATIONALISM IN THE ÜLKÜCÜ DISCOURSE, 1969-1980

A Master's Thesis

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Bilkent University  
2025





*To my family, my friends, and Sena*

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1980

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences  
of  
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THE EMERGENCE AND RISE OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM: THE ÜLKÜCÜ  
DISCOURSE 1969-1980  
By Mustafa Ceyhun Tufan

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Political Science and Public Administration.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE EMERGENCE AND RISE OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN THE ÜLKÜCÜ DISCOURSE, 1969-1980

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This dissertation investigates the ideological evolution of the Ülkücü movement from 1969 until 1980, emphasizing its gradual evolution from Turkish nationalism enriched with instrumental Islamic sources to a fully articulated religious nationalist discourse. Through a discourse analysis of core Ülkücü-affiliated journals published between 1969 and 1980, this dissertation argues that Islam, which initially functioned as a legitimizing repertoire of nationalist ideology, increasingly became the primary frame for thinking politics, society, and identity. Adopting Barbara-Ann Rieffer’s typology of “instrumental pious nationalism” and “religious nationalism,” the dissertation identifies that the Ülkücü movement evolved from the strategic use of Islamic symbols to an Islamic social and political order drawn from divine sources. This reorientation did not have any top-down or purely strategic character. Even as Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Alparslan Türkeş embraced Islamic themes for electoral legitimacy, Islamic content proliferation remained largely at the initiative of grassroots *Ülkü Ocakları* (Idealist Hearths)

actors. These actors, often very devout, reinterpreted the ideological confrontation with the left as a sacred cause—a cihad—with fallen members as martyrs and communism as part of an international materialist front ranged against Islam. By the late 1970s, Islam had become the ideological foundation of Ülkücü identity and vision, defining the movement as vanguard of Muslim Turkish revivalism. This dissertation makes a contribution to religious nationalism scholarship as it provides a complex example of how nationalist and religious discourses become entangled at times of political crisis, ideological division, and mass mobilization.

Keywords: Instrumental pious nationalism, MHP, religious nationalism, Ülkücü movement, Cold War Turkey.

## ÖZET

### ÜLKÜCÜ SÖYLEMDE DİNİ MİLLİYETÇİLİĞİN DOĞUŞU VE YÜKSELİŞİ, 1969-1980

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Bu tez, 1969'dan 1980'e kadar olan dönemde Ülkücü hareketin ideolojik dönüşümünü incelemekte ve Türk milliyetçiliğine enstrümantal İslami kaynakların eklenmesinden, bütünüyle ifade edilmiş bir dini milliyetçi söyleme doğru geçirdiği kademeli evrimi vurgulamaktadır. 1969-1980 yılları arasında yayımlanan temel Ülkücü dergilerin söylem analizine dayanarak, tez İslam'ın başlangıçta milliyetçi ideolojinin meşrulaştırıcı bir repertuarı işlevi gördüğünü, zamanla ise siyaset, toplum ve kimliği düşünmenin başat çerçevesi haline geldiğini ileri sürmektedir. Barbara-Ann Rieffer'in "işlevsel dindar milliyetçilik" ve "dini milliyetçilik" tipolojisini kullanan tez, Ülkücü hareketin İslami sembollerin stratejik kullanımından, ilahi kaynaklara dayalı bir İslami toplumsal ve siyasal düzene doğru evrildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu yönelim ne tepeden inme ne de bütünüyle stratejik bir karaktere sahiptir. Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) lideri Alparslan Türkeş seçimsel meşruiyet için İslami temaları benimsese de, İslami içeriğin yaygınlaşması büyük ölçüde tabandaki Ülkü Ocakları aktörlerinin inisiyatifinde gerçekleşti. Çoğu oldukça dindar olan bu aktörler, sol ile ideolojik karşılaşmayı



kutsal bir dava—bir cihad—olarak yeniden yorumladılar; hayatını kaybeden üyeleri şehit olarak tanımladılar ve komünizmi İslam’a karşı konumlanan uluslararası materyalist cephenin bir parçası olarak gördüler. 1970’lerin sonuna gelindiğinde, İslam Ülkücü kimliğin ve vizyonun ideolojik temeli haline gelmiş, hareketi Müslüman Türk dirilişinin öncüsü olarak tanımlamıştır. Bu tez, milliyetçilik ve dini söylemlerin nasıl birbirine dolanabileceğini, özellikle siyasi kriz, ideolojik bölünme ve kitlesel mobilizasyon dönemlerinde nasıl iç içe geçebildiğini göstererek dini milliyetçilik literatürüne önemli bir katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dini milliyetçilik, işlevsel dindar milliyetçilik, MHP, Soğuk Savaş Türkiye’si, Ülkücü Hareket.

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I realize that this thesis, to an extent, is a collaborative effort. The discussions I had and the help I got from the dearest of my friends, M. Furkan Küçükmeral, Onur T.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                                                  |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| ABSTRACT .....                                                                                                   | i   |
| ÖZET .....                                                                                                       | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....                                                                                            | v   |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS .....                                                                                          | vii |
| LIST OF TABLES .....                                                                                             | ix  |
| LIST OF FIGURES .....                                                                                            | x   |
| <br>                                                                                                             |     |
| CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .....                                                                                    | 1   |
| 1.1 Conceptual Framework: Religious Nationalism and Instrumental Pious Nationalism .....                         | 4   |
| 1.1.1 <i>What is Religious Nationalism?</i> .....                                                                | 7   |
| 1.1.2 <i>Religious Nationalism: Two Typologies</i> .....                                                         | 8   |
| 1.2 Historical Background: the Ülkücü Movement in the 1960s and 1970s .....                                      | 13  |
| 1.2.1 <i>1969 Adana Congress, Ülkü Ocakları, and the Islamic Turn in the Ülkücü Movement</i> .....               | 15  |
| 1.2.2 <i>The Rise of Islamic Discourse and the Rift between Ülkü Ocakları and the MHP</i> .....                  | 19  |
| 1.2.3 <i>Selection of Sources and Plan of the Dissertation</i> .....                                             | 23  |
| CHAPTER II: CIHAD AGAINST ISLAM’S ENEMIES: FROM ANTICOMMUNISM TO<br>ANTI-MATERIALISM .....                       | 25  |
| 2.1 Islam, Anticommunism, and New Avenues for Collaboration on the Turkish Right .....                           | 26  |
| 2.2 Ülkücüs and Leftists through the Islamic Lens .....                                                          | 32  |
| 2.3 Religion as a Weapon in Ideological Conflict .....                                                           | 41  |
| 2.4 Conflict Against Global Materialism and Imperialism .....                                                    | 45  |
| 2.5 Conclusion .....                                                                                             | 51  |
| CHAPTER III: CONTESTING THE SECULARIST STATE: THE ÜLKÜCÜ<br>MOVEMENT’S ISLAMIC VISION OF TURKISH MODERNITY ..... | 54  |
| 3.1 Turkish Nationalism, Islam, and Modernity .....                                                              | 56  |
| 3.2 Criticism of the “Wrong” Implementation of Laïcité .....                                                     | 58  |
| 3.2.1 <i>Toppling Laïcité and Establishing an Islamic System</i> .....                                           | 60  |
| 3.2.2 <i>Atatürk and Islam</i> .....                                                                             | 63  |
| 3.3 “The Order of Muhammed”: Islam as a Blueprint for Politics .....                                             | 65  |
| 3.3.1 <i>Changing Institutions: Islam as the Basis of Law and Education</i> .....                                | 68  |
| 3.3.2 <i>Islam as a System and a Civilization</i> .....                                                          | 72  |
| 3.4 The “Ideal of Greatness,” Islam, and Ülkücü Cadres: Building “Great Turkey” .....                            | 75  |

|                                                         |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 3.4.1 <i>Islam, “Greatness,” and the Cold War</i> ..... | 76 |
| 3.4.2 <i>Ülkücü Ruling Cadres and Democracy:</i> .....  | 80 |
| 3.5 Conclusion.....                                     | 85 |
| CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION.....                             | 88 |
| REFERENCES.....                                         | 94 |
| <i>Primary Sources</i> .....                            | 94 |
| <i>Secondary Sources</i> .....                          | 98 |



## LIST OF TABLES

1. Number of Deceased Ülkücüs 1968-1980 ..... 34



## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Image from *Hasret* Journal issue 22, p. 2, taken with the courtesy of *Milliyetçi Dergiler Projesi*.....78



## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

At its moment of foundation in the late 1960s, Ülkücü ideology—rooted in Turkish nationalism and organized politically through the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP)—engaged with Islam primarily as a crucial and yet a subordinate component of Turkish national identity. However, by the late 1970s, this relationship had changed dramatically. Islam was no longer merely one element among others of national identity; it became the lens through which the Ülkücü movement understood and interpreted politics, society, state, and the global order. In the pages of Ülkücü journals and pamphlets, fallen members of the movement were described as martyrs (*şehit*), their passing sanctified as part of a broader struggle against the left, which was increasingly branded in religiously charged terms—as atheistic, materialist, and infidel. The ideological battle between right and left was cast as a *cihad*, a holy war, with Ülkücüs portrayed as modern heirs to Turkic-Islamic warrior traditions. The imagined role of Turkey was similarly elevated: as the vanguard of the Islamic world in the Cold War struggle, uniquely positioned by its national and religious destiny to repel both Western capitalist and Eastern communist imperialism.



How did such a transformation in the discourse of Ülkücü ideology occur? And to what extent did Islam come to shape not only identity but also political and social visions within this nationalist movement? This dissertation addresses these questions by analyzing how Islam was used, transformed, and institutionalized in Ülkücü discourse between 1969 and 1980. Focusing on the Islamic content of Ülkücü journals published in this period, I argue that there was a marked shift in the way Islam functioned within the movement: from a discursive repertoire—comprising historical allusions, moral symbols, and legitimizing narratives—towards a systematic vision of politics and society grounded in Islamic principles. This evolution reflected not only the ideological adaptations of the movement in the face of changing political dynamics, but also the growing influence of grassroots actors within the Ülkücü base, particularly in the *Ülkü Ocakları* (Idealist Hearths).

The empirical basis for this argument is a discourse analysis of journals affiliated with the Ülkücü movement. The journals analyzed in this dissertation are *Milli Hareket*, 1966-1971; *Ocak*, 1968-1975; *Türkiye Ülkücü Gençlik*, 1970-1971; *Töre*, 1971-1984; *Bozkurt*, 1972-1977; *Genç Arkadaş*, 1975-1979; *Büyük Türkiye'ye Hasret*, 1975-1979; *Ülkücü Kadro*, 1976-1977; and *Ülkü Ocağı*, 1979. In this way, the dissertation contributes to the literature on religious nationalism by demonstrating that Ülkücü ideology, which in its initial stages was, to use Barbara-Ann Rieffer's (2003) terminology, an example of *instrumental pious nationalism*, by the late 1970s, had evolved into *religious nationalism*: one that mobilized Islamic categories for its political and social vision, while remaining anchored in a nationalist framework.

The study also challenges the common interpretation that the Ülkücü movement's turn to Islam was primarily an electoral tactic orchestrated by party leader Alparslan

Türkeş. While such instrumental considerations were undoubtedly present—particularly in the face of rising Islamist competition from parties like the National Order Party (MNP) and its successor, the National Salvation Party (MSP)—the Islamic discourse produced within the Ülkücü movement went beyond mere vote-seeking. Indeed, one of the findings of this dissertation is the relative absence of references to the MHP or Türkeş in much of the Islamic content. Rather than legitimizing the party leadership, Islamic references were used to frame broader ideological visions, including critiques of materialism, blueprints for an Islamic political order, and calls for moral regeneration rooted in Islamic values.

Thus, the dissertation aims to demonstrate that the increasing Islamicization of Ülkücü discourse was both quantitative—in the growing frequency of Islamic references—and qualitative—in the way Islam was used to define social structure, political institutions, and global alignments. By the end of the 1970s, Islam was no longer peripheral to Ülkücü thought: it was its organizing framework. The movement’s discourse envisioned an Islamic social order, defended by a vanguard of Muslim Turkish warriors, situated at the moral center of a polarized world.

To better conceptualize this transformation, the first section of the dissertation introduces Rieffer’s (2003) typology of nationalist movements that employ religion, between *instrumental pious nationalism* and *religious nationalism*. While the former refers to the rhetorical deployment of religious symbols, narratives, and metaphors in legitimizing a nationalist project, the latter denotes the use of religion as a coherent source of prescriptions for political and social organization. This distinction is particularly useful for understanding the trajectory of the Ülkücü movement, which

initially employed Islam as a repertoire of symbols and narratives but gradually came to integrate Islamic principles into its ideological infrastructure.

In this dissertation I argue that the Ülkücü movement's engagement with Islam was not static, tactical, or superficial. Rather, it evolved into a substantive ideological project that imagined an Islamic national order under the moral leadership of the Turkish nation. This evolution offers a unique case for understanding how religious and nationalist ideologies can become deeply intertwined—especially in contexts of political crisis, ideological competition, and social mobilization.

Overall, this dissertation contends that the Ülkücü movement's relationship with Islam was neither fixed, merely strategic, nor superficial. Instead, it developed into an ideological vision that sought to construct an Islamic national order, guided by the moral authority of the Turkish nation. This trajectory provides a distinctive example of how religious and nationalist currents can become profoundly interwoven, particularly amid periods of political turmoil, ideological rivalry, and mass mobilization.

### **1.1 Conceptual Framework: Religious Nationalism and Instrumental Pious Nationalism**

One strand of scholarly studies on nationalism posits that the rise of nationalist ideology went hand in hand with the processes of secularization (Zubrzycki, 2010: 606). According to Talal Asad, “nationalism, with its vision of a universe of national societies, in which individual humans live their worldly existence, requires the concept of the secular to make sense” (Asad, 1999: 186). Indeed, as Friedland and Moss underline, for all scholars of nationalism between the two world wars, those who

studied nationalism in the 1970s and 1980s, and the latest generation of scholars of nationalism, they largely operate through the view that “nationalism is a product of secularization and an ideology particularly suited to secular needs, secular modes of thought, and secular discontents” (Friedland and Moss, 2016: 420). For the latest generation of scholars of nationalism, “efforts to twin it with religion were either purely instrumental or at most an oddity, a side-show to the real story” (Friedland and Moss, 2016: 421).<sup>1</sup> For scholars like Asad, nationalism has been identified as modern and secular, but the endurance—and, in most contexts, resurgence—of religious nationalism calls into question this classic opposition (Barker, 2009: 1). I analyze one of these cases of the relationship between religion and nationalism and aim to show that the relationship between the two phenomena runs deeper than what scholars of nationalism who support the secularization dissertation argue.

According to Steven Grosby, the relationship between religion and nationalism is muddled to such an extent that studies of it either obscure this intricate relationship or disregard the role of religion in its influence on nationalism altogether (Grosby, 2002: 235). Both nationalism and religion aim to order society, and there is a level of interaction between them that result in, in Smith’s words, the “politicization of religion” and the “messianization of politics” and the spectrum of mutual influence is as wide as antagonism and “complete symbiosis” (Smith, 2000: 792). In terms of origins, nationalism is seen as a secular ideology that aims to replace the old meaning order provided by religion and that it is “a totally new kind of belief-system, which by its very nature is subversive of all religious belief” (Smith, 1973: 25). But even in its

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<sup>1</sup> This is interesting given the fact that scholars of Turkish nationalism largely supported what Aytürk calls the “harmony thesis”, that Turkish nationalism and Islam were inextricably linked from its inception and that secular forms of nationalism like Kemalist and Racist nationalisms were “aberrations from the norm” (Aytürk, 2014: 712). This is the opposite trend of nationalism studies in general.

advent and after the creation of a nation-state, religion and the repertoire it provides nationalists sustain its importance. At certain times, it can become more than a repertoire, i.e. tools to achieve a political goal, but rather as principles and blueprints for structuring politics and society.

Religion and nationalism cannot be simply analyzed through the dichotomy of the secular and the religious. Critical religion studies and the works of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd challenge the entrenched dichotomy between the religious and the secular by exposing how both categories are historically constructed and politically mobilized. Asad argues that secularism is not the absence of religion, but a political formation that redefines religion through statecraft, legal systems, and ethical norms. He shows that the secular is deeply entangled with the formation of the modern nation-state and cannot be understood as an ideologically neutral sphere (Asad, 2003: 1–7: 181–183). Mahmood builds on this by showing how secular governance actively reshapes religious practices and ethical subjectivities. Her ethnographic work on the women’s mosque movement in Egypt reveals that liberal assumptions about agency and autonomy are inadequate for understanding how religious life is experienced and embodied (Mahmood, 2005: 1–2: 14–18). Hurd further complicates the secular/religious binary by critiquing global religious freedom discourse. She argues that policies designed to protect “religion” often enforce Protestant-inflected norms, privileging certain forms of belief while excluding others (Hurd, 2015: 3–9). Together, these scholars demonstrate that religion and nationalism cannot be comprehended through a simple opposition to secularism, but must be seen as co-constituted through historical, legal, and political processes.

An important body of scholarly work on the relationship between nationalism and religion focus on the origins of nationalism and the influence religion had on its rise

(Barker, 2008: 12). Nationalists used religious symbols and narratives to mobilize a populace to form nation-states. But what of the relationship between religion and nationalism in established nation-states, in which religion is no longer required to realize the nationalist ideal of a “national state?” The interaction between religion and nationalism warrants a deeper understanding that goes beyond strategic use of religious symbols by nationalist leaders.

### ***1.1.1 What is Religious Nationalism?***

So, precisely what is “religious nationalism”? The very name covers a multitude of things, but at its simplest, religious nationalism describes the blending or reciprocal reinforcement of religious and national identifications. Religious nationalism has, in the words of Brubaker, at least four different modes of conceptualization: a) as a parallel phenomenon to nationalism, b) as a causal influence in the formation of nationalist ideologies, c) as a constitutive component in nationalist movements, and finally d) as a distinct type of nationalism characterized by religious discourse, symbolism, and authority (Brubaker, 2011: 2-3). The foregoing type—characteristically religious nationalism—is referred to political ideologies that imagine the nation in explicitly religious terms and often invoke divine endorsement for the policies, borders, or culture priorities of the nation-state.

Philip Barker observes that as the relationship between religion and nationalism is not studied extensively, consequently there are very few definitions of religious nationalism (Barker, 2008: 13). Barbara-Ann Rieffer defines it in a parsimonious way: “Religious nationalism is the fusion of nationalism and religion such that they are inseparable” (Rieffer, 2003b: 225). Barker also argues that religious nationalism is not

simply a nationalist movement with a few religious undertones. Nor is it a nationalist movement that may include aspects of religion in the national identity. The concept is stronger than that. Religion must be central to national identity and to conceptions of what it means to belong to the given nation. If religion is not the central feature of national identity, it is at least one of several features. In addition, these other features will nearly always be coterminous with religious identity. (Barker, 2008: 13).

Roger Friedland, on the other hand, suggests that religious nationalism is a “particular form of collective representation” (Friedland, 2001; 126). He further argues that religious nationalism represents a “distinct ontology of state power”—a framework wherein divine authority is projected onto the national body, fusing spiritual and political sovereignty (Friedland, 2002: 399). This challenges the assumption that religion and nationalism occupy separate domains of the sacred and secular. Indeed, Friedland argues that religious nationalism undermines the secularism embedded in modern theories of civil society and democratic citizenship (Friedland, 2002: 393). Additionally, Friedland outlines religious nationalism as a type of collective representation in which the symbolic power of the divine is utilized to find solidarity in religious rather than in abstract concepts of citizenship or civic responsibility (Friedland, 2001: 125). This type of nationalism frequently puts family, gender, and moral order at its core and consequently infuses political institutions with religious significance.

### ***1.1.2 Religious Nationalism: Two Typologies***

Studies on religious nationalism suffer from what Yıldız and Çengel see as “problems of seriousness” in identifying its national and religious components as well as

neglecting to clearly define and delineate the concept (Yıldız and Çengel, 2024: 383). One side of the problem is stretching religious nationalism to an extent that political movements that do not have a fundamental link with the nation are seen as examples of nationalism. Brubaker, for example, criticizes those who consider Islamism as a form of nationalism, saying that if indeed Islamism is nationalism, it is “nationalism without a central role for ‘the nation’” (Brubaker, 2011: 14). He further argues that “there is no compelling reason to speak of ‘nationalism’ unless the imagined community of the nation is widely understood as a primary focus of value, source of legitimacy, object of loyalty, and basis of identity” (Brubaker, 2011: 14). One problem of defining religious nationalism is, then, the centrality of the nation.

Mark Juergensmeyer, in describing his typology of religious nationalism, overlooks this significant factor of the centrality of the nation. He provides a typology of religious nationalism that distinguishes three primary forms: “ethnic religious nationalism,” “ideological religious nationalism,” and “ethno-ideological religious nationalism” (Juergensmeyer, 1996).

In ethnic religious nationalism, religion is firmly ingrained in a particular ethnic identity. Here, religious identification is not foremost in matters of theological beliefs but rather as a cultural indicator of group affiliation. The ultimate aim for such movements often lies in the attainment of political autonomy or control over territory for a given ethno-religious group. Religion becomes a dominant component of a larger ethnic identity that ties a group to a common history and particular homeland. The religious component here heightens the conflict by infusing it with a sense of moral authority and group unity but serves ultimately in the background to the supreme aim of ethno-political autonomy (Juergensmeyer, 1996: 11–13).



Ideological religious nationalism, by contrast, has its grounding less in ethnicity than in a religious and moral vision for social order. Such forces offer an alternative ideological vision to secular nationalism, often aspiring to replace secular states in favor of a political regime grounded in religious law and authority. The hallmark of this type is its quest to religionize politics, inverting the secular template in which religion remains solely in the private sphere. Politics here becomes in itself a sacred activity, while religious institutions are the fountainhead for political legitimation.

In this model, religion is not just a symbol of identity but the very blueprint for the state's structure, legal system, and policy-making process. Ideological religious nationalists often view secularism as not merely neutral but actively hostile to religious values, portraying secular leaders as enemies of divine law. This sentiment has been echoed in various Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and Christian movements that seek to establish theocratic or semi-theocratic regimes (Juergensmeyer, 1996: 13–16). The problem with this type of religious nationalism is that it immediately brings to mind Brubaker's caution of conceptual stretching. Juergensmeyer considers Islamist movements as examples of nationalism, while these movements do not have the nation at the center of their ideology (Brubaker, 2011: 14).

The third type, the ethno-ideological religious nationalism, has aspects of the ethnic and the ideological types. Such religious nationalisms thus experience a dual set of enemies, namely external ethnic or colonial challengers, and internal leaders in their own religious community who are perceived to be violating the religious as well as the ethnic values (Juergensmeyer, 1996: 7). Juergensmeyer gives Hamas in Palestine as an example of this hybrid type. As it stands in opposition to the Israeli state in the guise of an ethnic-religious enemy, so it stands too in opposition to the secular Palestinian

Authority leadership, most critically to leaders such as Yaser Arafat, who are perceived to be compromising Islamic values (Juergensmeyer, 1996: 18–20).

Juergensmeyer does not provide an explanation as to whether these so-called nationalist movements propose the implementation of religious principles to politics and society, just like ideological religious nationalism does. As a hybrid type, ethno-ideological religious nationalism remains underdefined by Juergensmeyer, and the only point the other two types of religious nationalism converge in this hybrid type is on the questions of the enemies of nationalism. As it stands, while pointing to an important convergence, Juergensmeyer fails to provide an operationalizable concept for what he terms ethno-ideological religious nationalisms. His identification of Islamist movements as forms of nationalism also casts doubt on the general validity of this typology.

While Juergensmeyer's typology is valuable in that it explains certain aspects of religious nationalism, in this dissertation I will use Barbara-Ann Rieffer's typology of *instrumental pious nationalism* versus *religious nationalism* (Rieffer, 2003b).

According to Rieffer, *religious nationalism* is characterized by a deep fusion of religious and national identity, such that the two are inseparable (Rieffer, 2003b: 225). In these movements, religion is not merely a cultural backdrop but a foundational element of the nationalist agenda. Religious symbols, leaders, language, and doctrines are integral to the political and ideological construction of the nation (Rieffer, 2003b: 225). Moreover, religious nationalism often results in institutionalized religious governance—as seen in Iran post-1979 and Ireland's Catholic nationalism (Rieffer, 2003b: 227).

By contrast, *instrumental pious nationalism* uses religion strategically rather than devoutly. Here, religion serves as a tool of cohesion and legitimacy for political leaders seeking to consolidate national identity or retain power (Rieffer, 2003b: 229). Religion is invoked not because of theological conviction, but rather for its mobilizing potential, since it is “a means to an end” (Rieffer, 2003b: 229). Leaders like Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic employed religious rhetoric to unify fragmented societies or maintain control, without embedding religious doctrine into law or governance (Rieffer, 2003b: 230).<sup>2</sup> In this model, religion is not institutionalized, and leaders may later sideline it once their power is secured.

On the one hand, then, religious nationalism is more than just the use of religious symbols by nationalist leaders. But on the other, it must have “the nation” at its center. Religious nationalism is a type of nationalism that puts the nation at its center, uses religious symbols, and proposes change informed by religious principles. This is how religious nationalism “religionizes politics,” i.e. politics is seen through the sacred lens religious nationalism has, it becomes part of the struggle to bring God’s order down to earth (Juergensmeyer, 2001: 468).

Both typologies recognize the difference between the instrumental use of religious symbols and narratives and seeing religion as a blueprint to restructure politics and society. Rieffer’s typology highlights the difference between these two ways religion appears in nationalist ideologies. For the purposes of this dissertation, Rieffer’s typology has greater explanatory potential for understanding the Islamization of

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<sup>2</sup> Rieffer argues that one way to see if religion is used pragmatically by nationalist leaders is whether they “have national leaders always respected and followed the dominant religion” (Rieffer, 2003a: 81). Rieffer gives the examples of Saddam Husein and Slobodan Milosevic, neither of them were religious at the beginnings of their poltical careers (Rieffer, 2003a: 81). Alparslan Türkeş also entered politics as a proponent of a “corporatist, secular, and developmentalist nationalism within the framework of Kemalism” (Bora & Can, 2000: 53).

Ülkücü discourse in the late 1970s. Ülkücü writers did not only use Islam as a repertoire of symbols and narratives, they also proposed systemic changes to Turkish politics and society based on the principles informed by Islam. Using Rieffer's typology, I propose to identify Ülkücü discourse between 1969 and 1977 as instrumental pious nationalism, where Islam was used as a repertoire of symbols. Between 1977 and 1980, on the other hand, I will argue that Ülkücü discourse exhibited characteristics of religious nationalism, where Ülkücü writers considered Islam as a blueprint to change Turkish society and politics.

## **1.2 Historical Background: the Ülkücü Movement in the 1960s and 1970s**

On May 27, 1960, a group of military officers—motivated by concerns over authoritarianism, economic instability, and growing unrest—overthrew the Democrat Party (DP) government led by Adnan Menderes. The National Unity Committee (NUC) led by General Cemal Gürsel justified the intervention as a necessary correction to protect the principles of Kemalism, particularly secularism and republicanism (Aydın and Taşkın, 2018: 66). The DP had increasingly clashed with opposition forces, particularly the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party, CHP, but also students and intellectuals, and had begun restricting freedoms and civil liberties (Yaşlı, 2019: 133). A junta within the military, perceiving itself as the guardian of Atatürk's legacy, toppled the DP government. One member of the army officers who made the coup was Colonel Alparslan Türkeş. Türkeş and a group of army officers around him formed a clique in the NUC. They differed from the majority of the NUC, which opted to transition to democracy as soon as possible. Türkeş and the hawks within the NUC considered it best that the military should govern as long as

possible before leaving power to the politicians (Sanlı, 2017: 43). On 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1960, as a result of growing friction between these two groups, Türkeş and 13 other members of the NUC were exiled to distant diplomatic missions (Aydın and Taşkın, 2018:79). Türkeş would return to Turkey in 1963 and, after testing the waters and failing to join the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP), he entered the Republican Peasant National Party, CKMP, in 1965 (Bora & Yanık, 2017: 299). He would soon be elected the party chairman.

The 1960 coup Introduced several new Institutions to Turkey and influenced Turkish political life deeply. Primary among these was the 1961 Constitution drafted by the Constitutive Assembly (Ahmad, 1977: 166). It introduced three new factors to Turkish political life that affected the advent of the Ülkücü movement in the second half of the 1960s. First, the right to establish unions by the workers provided an electoral base for the newly established Turkish Workers' Party, TİP, and enabled leftists to organize in a much stronger way through the unions (Aydın and Taşkın, 2018: 91). Second, the autonomy given to the universities helped left-wing and right-wing ideologies to organize and more easily find a base within the campuses (Aydın and Taşkın, 2018: 91). Third factor was the change in election law. Throughout the 1950s, election law was the majoritarian, which helped the DP hold power with very large majorities in parliament. It was the aim of the NUC to adopt a new election law that will “stop the emergence of a tyranny of the majority and stop the degeneration of politics” (Aydın and Taşkın, 2018: 67). So, they opted for the proportional representation that was first observed in the 1961 elections. While this was relatively better than first-past-the-post vis-à-vis parties with fewer percentages of votes, in 1965 election system would become even more favorable to small parties. On July 14<sup>th</sup> 1965, a new election law passed that enabled small parties to have more chairs in parliament because the

percentage of votes they got nation-wide also became a factor (Landau, 2016: 11).

This played a role in Türkeş' choice to join the CKMP in 1965 and soon after he and his political allies took over the party (Yaşlı, 2019: 152).

### ***1.2.1 1969 Adana Congress, Ülkü Ocakları, and the Islamic Turn in the Ülkücü Movement***

Initially, Türkeş and some members of the Fourteen such as Rıfat Baykal and Muzaffer Özdağ advocated a “corporatist, secular, and developmentalist nationalism within the framework of Kemalism” (Bora & Can, 2000: 53). *Dokuz Işık* (Nine Beams of Light), Türkeş' primary work that elucidates his nationalist views, first published in 1965 bore no reference to Islam, reflecting Türkeş's earlier stance that Islam had no fundamental role in the definition of Turkish nationalism (Poulton, 1997: 156).

However, in the late 1960s the CKMP shifted away from the secular nationalism of the ex-military officers to a nationalism imbued with Islamic elements. The 1969 Adana Congress of the CKMP marked a turning point in the ideological trajectory of Turkish nationalism. Under Alparslan Türkeş's leadership, the congress formalized a transformation in party discourse by adopting the *Nine Beams of Light* doctrine (*Dokuz Işık Doktrini*) as its official ideology and renaming the party as the MHP. Most significantly, the congress inaugurated a deliberate shift towards integrating Islamic symbols and narratives into the party's nationalist rhetoric. Whereas the 1965 version of *Dokuz Işık* made no mention of Islam, by 1972 the revised edition had introduced religious references that emphasized Islam as a moral and national strength (Poulton, 1997: 157).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the party emblem now incorporated three crescents,

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<sup>3</sup> The revised edition included an introductory chapter titled “New Spirit” (*Yeni Ruh*) that underlined piety and spirituality and quoted the slogan “the pride and consciousness of

symbolizing Islam, on the one hand, and the Ottoman rule over three continents, on the other.

Around the same time, the ideological conflict between the Turkish right and left in the 1960s produced the main anticommunist actor in the “civil war” context of the 1970s: Ülkü Ocakları (Ülkücü Hearths). Founded initially in universities and academies across Turkey, the Hearths became a country-wide organization in 1969 when the Ülkü Ocakları Birliği (Union of Ülkücü Hearths) was founded (*Milli Hareket*, 1969a: 5). These organizations were student associations with the aim of countering leftist activity in universities and promoting nationalist and Ülkücü sentiments (Yaşlı, 2019: 210). The Ülkü Ocakları, conceived by Dündar Taşer as a counter to leftist activity in universities, had no legal and financial relationship with the MHP (Aytürk, 2020: 454).<sup>4</sup> The Ülkü Ocakları and the MHP’s official youth branch were not acting in harmony and there was some competition between the two organizations; what held them together primarily was loyalty to Türkiye’ (Aytürk, 2020: 454). The leaders of the Ülkü Ocakları, though unable to control fully the whole of the Oaks due to the fact that each Ocak leader had a tenure of one year, were nevertheless important and to an extent autonomous actors within the Ülkücü movement (Aytürk, 2020: 456). This ideological revision reflected more than rhetorical change—it signaled a new vision of nationalism wherein Islam was no longer marginal or incidental. Türkiye described Islam’s “true face and high principles” as a source of renewed energy for Turkish identity, explicitly stating that “raising the profile of

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Turkishness and the morality and virtue of Islam” that characterized the Turkish-Islamic synthesis adopted in 1969 (Türkeş, 1975a: 10).

<sup>4</sup> Ülkü Ocakları appeared under different names throughout the 1970s as Ülkü Ocakları Birliği until its closure in 1971, Ülkü Ocakları Derneği between 1973 and 1977, Ülkücü Gençlik Derneği between 1977 and 1980, and Ülkü Yolu Derneği in 1980 (Aytürk, 2020: 453).

religion” was now a doctrinal priority (Poulton, 1997: 157). By doing so, the MHP began to forge a distinct political symbiosis—Turkish-Islamic nationalism—positioning Islam not as an end in itself, but as a means to galvanize the party's base and confront the perceived communist threat.

The turn toward religious discourse was not purely organic but was informed by several strategic considerations. First, the emergence of mass left-wing activism and labor militancy—marked by the rise of the Turkish Workers’ Party (TİP), the 1968 student movement, and the founding of the Revolutionary Workers’ Union Confederation (DİSK)—significantly heightened the MHP’s anticommunist anxieties (Yaşlı, 2019: 215). TİP's 1965 electoral success, securing more seats than the CKMP, underscored the left's growing parliamentary presence and pushed Türkeş to respond more aggressively.

At the same time, the establishment of the Islamist National Order Party (MNP) in 1970 signaled the growing electoral power of religious conservatism, particularly in central Anatolia. To remain electorally viable and ideologically relevant, the MHP sought to position itself as the nationalist alternative that could also appeal to devout but patriotic voters. The party’s youth base—largely composed of conservative, rural-origin students migrating to urban centers—brought with them a value system steeped in Islam, further encouraging this realignment (Bora & Can, 2000: 65-69).

The recruitment of Islamic-leaning but nationalist right-wing figures like Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti further catalyzed the party’s Islamization. These new members represented a nationalist-conservative faction that saw Islam as vital to national unity and moral rejuvenation (Poulton, 1997: 174). Türkeş, who “wanted to harness [Islam’s] continuing emotional appeal... to the large sectors of the population,” thus



made a calculated decision to reshape the party's ideological framework (Poulton, 1997: 156).

From a tactical standpoint, Islamic discourse served to frame anti-communist struggle in sacred terms. The proliferation of *Ülkü Ocakları* after 1968, particularly in universities, created a mass platform where nationalist youth were socialized into a worldview that saw leftists not merely as political adversaries but as enemies of the nation and faith. The vocabulary of struggle now included concepts like *cihad* (holy war) and *şehitlik* (martyrdom), blurring the lines between political activism and religious obligation (Yaşlı, 2020: 221; Bora & Can, 2000: 55).

The party's shift toward Islamic discourse provoked serious internal dissent, especially among its original secularist-nationalist cadres. Nihal Atsız, the prominent Pan-Turkist thinker and Türkeş's former mentor, condemned the move as a betrayal of true Turkish nationalism. Accusing Türkeş of opportunism, Atsız severed all ties with the MHP and refused reconciliation until his death. The party, in turn, banned the reading of Atsız's books among *Ülkücüs* during this period, and an Atsız sympathizer was reportedly killed during a clash in Ankara in 1970 (Erken, 2021: 129; Yaşlı, 2020: 221).

This schism extended beyond Atsız. Several ex-military figures within the MHP, including prominent members like Muzaffer Özdağ and Rıfat Baykal, who had entered politics with a strictly secular Kemalist orientation, viewed the party's Islamicization with discomfort. While some, like Taşer, accommodated the new direction pragmatically, others such as Özdağ openly criticized the ideological drift and eventually distanced themselves from active politics (Poulton, 1997: 156; Gourisse, 2023: 45–47).

These figures had envisioned Ülkücülük as a corporatist, modernist nationalism rooted in rationalist state-led development. For them, Islam held at most a moral or cultural function and certainly not the political prominence it was beginning to assume. Their opposition, however, was gradually eclipsed by the demographic and ideological shift within the party base. As the 1970s progressed, new youth cadres—some of them graduates of *imam-hatip* schools—became the dominant ideological producers within Ülkücü publications and organizations, further marginalizing the secularist voices within the MHP and the Ülkü Ocakları (Bora & Can, 2000: 55–56).

Despite Türkeş’s attempts to frame Islam as subordinate to Turkish identity—asserting that Islam should be “assimilated into Turkishness”—the internal consensus moved increasingly toward a synthesis in which the two elements were intertwined and mutually reinforcing. This created a new ideological terrain: a nationalist movement where Islam no longer served merely as an electoral tool, but as an essential pillar of identity and legitimacy.

### ***1.2.2 The Rise of Islamic Discourse and the Rift between Ülkü Ocakları and the MHP***

After 1975, the *Ülkü Ocakları*, the grassroots youth and activist base of the MHP, grew at such a pace that the party leadership, despite formal control mechanisms, struggled to exert full authority over their activities. The coalition government formed in 1977 between the MHP and the AP provided the MHP with state resources and bureaucratic access, particularly through Gün Sazak’s appointment as Minister of Customs and Monopolies (Aydın and Taşkın, 2018: 284).<sup>5</sup> This allowed the MHP to

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<sup>5</sup> Şerif Mardin identifies this “parcelling out of state institutions... among the right-wing coalition” also in the Ministry of Education and State Teacher Training Schools (Mardin, 1978: 234).

institutionalize stronger ties with the Ocaks and other nationalist organizations. Yet, the very success of this expansion created centrifugal forces within the movement that exceeded the party's ability to coordinate or discipline.

Between 1974 and 1978, the Ülkücü movement underwent a phase of rapid massification (*kitleselleşme*), but this numerical growth was not matched with a parallel development in cadre quality or organizational discipline (Gourisse, 2023: 52). The MHP leadership, that is Türkeş, attempted to maintain authority through the so-called Education Secretariat—primarily by appointing local representatives, managing resource flows, and determining the ideological education within Ocaks (Gourisse, 2023: 51). Still, a deepening tension emerged between the party's formal structures and the increasingly autonomous actions of Ovak members on the ground. (Aytürk, 2020: 455)

The 1977 elections demonstrated that, despite holding government portfolios and expanding influence within the bureaucracy, the MHP with its 6.5% remained a minor party. This electoral disappointment marked a turning point. From 1978 onward, the party and the Ocaks moved toward a more militant strategy aimed at raising social polarization and deepening anti-communist confrontation, often with religious undertones. Islam was now central in framing their struggle: martyrdom (*şehitlik*) and jihad were increasingly used to justify political violence, drawing even prominent Islamic figures like Necip Fazıl into the MHP's orbit (Yaşlı, 2020: 221).

Despite formal connections, the Ocaks began acting in ways that deviated from party discipline. By 1978, although the MHP had established what Gourisse calls a “stable mechanism of control and liaison” with the movement, informal and sometimes competing networks operated within the Ocaks, responding not only to the party but

also to local leaders, spiritual mentors, or militant groupings (Gourisse, 2023: 52).

Some Ülkücü instructors were deployed to contain these centrifugal forces by training cadres, managing coordination, and serving as intermediaries (Bora & Can, 2000: 73).

However, the rise of Islamization among youth—some of whom had roots in rural Anatolia—exceeded the expectations of the original party elite, many of whom had secular, military, or urban backgrounds.

While the MHP still formally controlled finances, appointments, and training, local Ülkücü units increasingly followed their own trajectories, especially as confrontations with the left escalated (Bora & Can, 2000: 74). This disconnect was not merely organizational but ideological. By the late 1970s, Ülkücü writers, most of whom were members of the Ocaks, articulated a highly Islamic discourse that deviated from the official party line. Despite attempts to centralize command via training programs, appointment of loyal cadres, and the use of *Hergün* newspaper as a shadow coordination mechanism (after Sazak's resignation in 1978), Türkeş's efforts were often reactive rather than proactive (Gourisse, 2023: 52). Many field actions and violent incidents were initiated spontaneously by Ülkücüs or by factions within the movement, highlighting the limitations of Türkeş's authority. Although the party bureaucracy and leadership continued to claim unity, it had become clear that the base was no longer fully under command.

As Ali Erken notes, the ideology of the movement had become increasingly fragmented, with multiple currents vying for influence—some still secular-nationalist, others Islamist-nationalist (Erken, 2014: 204). In this fragmented structure, discipline was hard to impose, especially as local commanders gained authority through street credibility rather than party loyalty. The MHP's continuing reliance on state alliances

and political respectability clashed with a grassroots movement that had become both more radical and more Islamic. Furthermore, as part of this rising tendency towards Islam within the Ülkücü movement in the late 1970s, members of the Ocaks and the MHP were initiated into *Menzil* membership (Bora & Can, 2000: 286).<sup>6</sup>

In sum, the years after 1975 illustrate a paradox: the more the MHP expanded into society and the state, the less it could control its growing and ideologically evolving base. The Ülkü Ocakları were never entirely separate from the MHP, but by the late 1970s, their activities and beliefs often exceeded or defied the party's intentions.

This rift between the party and the Ocaks on the organizational level could also be seen on the political discourse they conveyed. As this dissertation argues, in the late 1970s members of the Ülkü Ocakları deviated from the MHP's official line on the role of Islam in their nationalism. In fact, Türkeş had on several occasions was critical of the Islamization of Ülkücü discourse in the movement.<sup>7</sup> Ülkücüs also found sympathizers within the party's leading members, such as Ahmet Er, Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi, and Namık Kemal Zeybek.<sup>8</sup> These Ocak members, in journals such as *Genç Arkadaş*, *Ülkü Ocağı*, *Nizam-ı Alem*, *Büyük Türkiye'ye Hasret*, and *Ülkücü Kadro*,

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<sup>6</sup> In 1979 and 1980, party officials such as Namık Kemal Zeybek and Alparslan Türkeş set up close ties with the Nakşibendi leader Şeyh Muhammed Raşid Erol, and many Ülkücüs became followers (*mürid*) of this Şeyh during these years (Bora & Can, 2000: 286). Aytürk explains this link between Ülkücüs and the Menzil tarikat because of the rising deaths and violence in the 1970s and as a way Ülkücüs found meaning amidst the chaos on the streets (Aytürk, 2020: 460).

<sup>7</sup> Besides the deviations from the official line the party took in terms of Islamic discourse, Türkeş found this highly Islamic discourse problematic because of a possible reaction from the army (Akpınar, 2005: 125).

<sup>8</sup> Er and Arvasi, who were members of the general executive board of the MHP objected to Türkeş' decision to shut down *Nizam-ı Alem* due to its highly Islamic discourse in 1979. During that same year Namık Kemal Zeybek, whose *Ülkü Yolu* (1979) characterized the Islamization of Ülkücü discourse in the late 1970s, was overseeing matters of publication and media (Akpınar, 2005: 126). It is possible that the journals with high Islamic content were published under his aegis.

produced highly Islamic discourse that further distanced themselves from the party. Most importantly among these writers were the leader of the Ülkü Ocakları Birliği in 1979, Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu; Ahmet B. Karabacak who oversaw the publishing of *Ülkücü Kadro*; Mümtaz'er Türköne, who was the editor-in-chief of *Genç Arkadaş*; Burhan Kavuncu, Lütfi Şehsuvaroğlu, and Sakin Öner, who wrote in these journals.<sup>9</sup>

Several studies on the Ülkücü movement overlook this fundamental change in Ülkücü discourse, while studies that trace Islamization of Ülkücü discourse fail to provide a conceptual framework through which the change can be explained. These studies also do not analyze the journals published by Ülkücüs in which Islamization occurs. This dissertation aims to fill this gap in the literature on the Ülkücü movement, by both providing Rieffer's (2003b) conceptual framework and basing the study on extensive analysis of the articles published in journals of the Ülkücü movement.

### ***1.2.3 Selection of Sources and Plan of the Dissertation***

I chose the primary sources which I analyzed in this dissertation based on three criteria: a) that they are published between 1965 and 1980, the timeframe of this dissertation, b) that they are periodical publications (i.e. not daily newspapers), as these periodicals contained material that included intellectual writings rather than articles that dealt with daily political matters, and c) that these publications' editor-in-chief or owner is a member of the MHP or the Ülkü Ocakları. Thus, I analyze in this dissertation the articles published in *Milli Hareket*, 1966-1971; *Türkiye Ülkücü Gençlik*, 1970-1971; *Töre*, 1971-1984; *Bozkurt*, 1972-1977; *Genç Arkadaş*, 1975-

1979; *Büyük Türkiye 'ye Hasret*, 1975-1979; *Ülkücü Kadro*, 1976-1977; *Ülkü Ocağı*, 1979.

The plan of this dissertation is as follows. Following the introduction, in the second chapter, I will explain how ideological conflict against the left in Turkey was framed through Islamic terms, i.e. how communists were branded as infidels, atheists, and materialists; how Ülkücüs were seen as modern equivalents of *alp-erens*, Turkic-Islamic warriors; and how the ideological conflict at hand was seen as a *cihad*. The third chapter will describe how Islam was seen as a spiritual, anti-materialist morality, and a blueprint to order society, state, and politics, underlining that the Ülkücü movement towards the 1970s when this discourse was most used, shifted from “instrumental pious nationalism” to “religious nationalism.” The dissertation will end by pointing to further study areas and the implications of the arguments given.

## CHAPTER II: CIHAD AGAINST ISLAM’S ENEMIES: FROM ANTICOMMUNISM TO ANTI-MATERIALISM

Anticommunism was articulated in Islamic terms during the early years of the Ülkücü movement. Ülkücüs were depicted as Muslim warriors serving the interests of Muslim Turks and preserving the Islamic way of life in Turkey. Communists were portrayed as atheistic and immoral foreign agents determined to undermine Islam in the country. Ülkücü writers presented the ideological struggle between communists and Ülkücüs as *cihad*, a religious duty. Ülkücüs who were killed in this conflict were described as martyrs. However, as ideological tensions escalated in the late 1970s and new Ülkücü publications with strong Islamic content emerged, the perception of this conflict changed. In Ülkücü discourse, communists became associated with capitalists, Western civilization, Zionists, and Freemasons, forming a single front representing a materialist philosophy seeking to destroy Islam and its spiritual way of life. The worldview reflected in these publications became increasingly influenced by Islam, which began to override the nationalist framework that saw the world as composed of competing nations. This shift marked the transition from “instrumental pious nationalism” to “religious nationalism” in Ülkücülük toward the end of the



1970s (Rieffer, 2003b). In this chapter, I will explain how anticommunism, expressed through an Islamic vocabulary, evolved into anti-materialism in Ülkücü discourse.

## **2.1 Islam, Anticommunism, and New Avenues for Collaboration on the Turkish Right**

One of the most prominent figures of Turkish nationalism, Ziya Gökalp, saw the October Revolution in Russia as presenting a “red danger” to the Ottoman Empire, emphasizing one of the principal themes in Turkish anticommunist thought: the threat of communist revolution (Yıldırım, 2014: 47). However, it was through the “racist” variety of Turkish nationalism that anticommunism became a central component of nationalist discourse. In journals published by two of the most fervent ideologues of Racist nationalism, Hüseyin Nihal Atsız and Reha Oğuz Türkkan, in the 1930s, communism was depicted as the embodiment of evil. Communists were described as immoral, lacking any sense of national identity, working against the interests of the nation, and being of mixed ancestry (Yaşlı, 2016: 190). This perspective became even more prominent as the Racists associated communism with Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union—historical enemies of the Turks. In this way, anticommunism was made a core tenet of Turkish nationalism by linking it to the fear of Soviet influence and the possibility of a socialist revolution under Soviet control (Koca, 2017: 553). Turkish nationalists thus equated communism with the threat of foreign invasion by the Soviet Union.

The success of this framing depended heavily on the position of the Turkish state and its relationship with Soviet Russia. Due to the close relations between the Soviets

and the Turkish government until the end of the Second World War, societies and publications promoting Turanism were suppressed in Turkey (Aytürk, 2011: 328). The 1944 Racism-Turanism trials were an example of this, reflecting the İnönü government's attempt to signal to the Soviet Union that they were controlling anti-communist ideologies domestically (Aytürk, 2011: 317). The Turkists, who were also staunch anticommunists, did not enjoy the full backing of the Turkish state. However, anticommunism eventually became a foundational element across the entire Turkish right as relations with the Soviets soured and Turkey aligned more closely with the United States after the Second World War (Örnek & Üngör, 2013: 5).

Anticommunism became the shared characteristic among the various right-wing nationalist movements in Turkey during the Cold War. The common denominator across the Turkish right was a shared defense against communism and its potential spread to Turkey (Bora, 2014: 14). While anticommunist sentiment had been present in print prior to the Second World War, it developed into a “systematic movement” after the war (Meşe, 2017: 25). Within this movement, we see early examples of nationalist youth mobilizing at higher education institutions, including protests that led up to the 1944 trials, the “Tan” incident in 1945, and the funeral of Fevzi Çakmak in 1950 (Karpat, 2016: 372; Taşkın, 2008: 629). Following the war, anticommunism became an explicit “state policy” that aimed to monitor and contain any form of political action perceived as communist while also shaping citizens to adopt an anticommunist mindset (Yıldırım, 2014: 48). This state-sponsored stance was bolstered by the influence of American foreign policy, which promoted anticommunism globally as a containment strategy against the Soviet Union. This contributed significantly to the establishment of anticommunism as a trademark of

Turkish nationalism during the Cold War (Örnek, 2022: 301). In this context, nationalists who had previously been marginalized, such as those prosecuted in the 1944 Racism-Turanism trials, were transformed into a “proverbial firing squad” against communist activity in Turkey (Aytürk, 2014: 701).

With the transition to multi-party democracy and the rise of *milliyetçi-mukaddesatçılık*<sup>10</sup> in the 1940s, anticommunist discourse within Turkish nationalism began to incorporate Islamic elements. This development coincided with the heightened Cold War atmosphere in Turkey, where “religion and antireligion also provided the Cold War’s contestants with their ideas, values, and motivations” (Preston, 2012: xiv). While in the 1930s communism was viewed by Racists such as Atsız and Türkkan as a foreign ideology threatening the nation, conservative nationalists in the second half of the 1940s began to frame communists as not only alien and stateless but also as atheists (*kafirs*) working to undermine Islam’s influence in Turkish society (Meşe, 2017: 116).

Anticommunism also served other purposes for the Turkish right. It provided conservative nationalists with a pathway to political legitimacy in a Kemalist context that was otherwise ideologically hostile to them. Anticommunism became a symbolic “olive branch” they extended to the Kemalist elite, despite their Islamic inclinations (Taşkın, 2007: 73). For the secular Kemalist elite, communism was a more pressing threat to the project of nation-building than conservative nationalism, as communism’s class-based interpretation of society posed a direct challenge to the ideal of a unified national identity (Taşkın, 2007: 62). Conservative nationalists also

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<sup>10</sup> Aytürk says that this term “would roughly translate as nationalists who respect and uphold sacred Islamic values” (Aytürk, 2014: 698). According to Tanıl Bora, *milliyetçi-mukaddesatçı* denoted a wide section of the Turkish right that included Nurettin Topçu, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, and Ali Fuat Başgil (Bora, 2017: 390).

used anticommunism as a dual-purpose tool—to reinforce their ideological stance and to conceal their Islamic leanings (Uzer, 2016: 220). Thus, anticommunism served as a unifying platform for right-wing political parties and intellectuals to align themselves with the Kemalist establishment. The struggle against communism became “the constant of the republic” (Örnek, 2022: 57). Furthermore, Ülkücü writers connected anticommunism with criticism of the ultra-westernization of the early Republican nation-building project (Mardin, 1974: 403). For them, communism was not only a political threat to the corporatist society envisioned by the Kemalists but also a byproduct of the cosmopolitanism, hedonism, and “immoral materialism” brought about by Westernization (Bora, 2014: 16).

Political actors on the Turkish right and the Kemalist state elite collaborated in efforts to suppress communism in Turkey. This collaboration contradicts the widely held notion that Turkish politics are defined by a rigid divide between two perennial and opposing camps: the center and the periphery. Şerif Mardin, who proposed the center–periphery model to explain Turkish political history, argued that this dichotomy played out as a confrontation between a Westernizing state elite (the center) and a coalition comprising the liberal bourgeoisie, conservative-Islamist movements, and ethnic and religious minorities (the periphery). He stated that “the confrontation between center and periphery was the most important social cleavage underlying Turkish politics” (Mardin, 1973: 170). This framework was adopted by many academics and subsequently by liberal, Kurdish, and Islamist intellectuals as a lens to critique the Kemalist state elite and the military (Aytürk, 2015: 36). The Turkish right, known for its defense of conservative values and its critique of Kemalist secularism, was generally seen as a representative of the periphery, voicing the grievances of those alienated by Westernization (Bora & Can, 2000: 65).

However, the alliance between the Kemalist elite and the Turkish right under the banner of Cold War anticommunism complicates this picture and adds a further nuance. Indeed, a key criticism of Mardin's center-periphery thesis is its failure to capture the fluid and evolving alliances and conflicts among social groups. As Bakiner notes, the Mardin's model "misses the changing dynamics of cooperation and conflict between social groups" (Bakiner, 2018: 506). Cooperation between right-wing actors and the Kemalist state in promoting anticommunist discourse and policies during the Cold War is a significant dimension of Turkish political life that the center-periphery model overlooks. Between 1945 and 1980, the Turkish state tolerated—and to some degree, supported—many far-right organizations and political parties. The Nation Party, founded in 1948, stands out as an early example of this cooperation (Aytürk, 2020: 446).<sup>11</sup> Post-Kemalist literature fails to fully explain this phenomenon on two critical points: first, these peripheral actors, such as far-right groups, were clearly not champions of democratic values or civil liberties; second, the Turkish far-right, while promoting the religious and conservative values of provincial populations, frequently acted in collaboration with or under the guidance of the Turkish state.

Following the 1960 military coup, socialism emerged as a visible and increasingly influential political force in Turkey. The founding of the Turkish Workers' Party (TİP) and the rise of labor activism rendered communism an imminent threat in the

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<sup>11</sup> Apart from the NP, Aytürk lists as examples of these organizations the CKMP/MHP, MNP, Mücadele Birliği, Ülku Ocakları, Aydınlar Ocağı, Kubbealtı Cemiyeti, Milliyetçi İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (MİSK), the takeover of Milli Türk Talebe Birliği (MTTB) by the Islamists, the heightened activity of Komünizmle Mücadele Derneği and Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü (Aytürk, 2020: 446). The organizational architecture of the far-right in Turkey was thus established in the span of just five years (1965-1970) and these organizations and the actors operating within them would dominate far-right politics throughout the 1970s.

eyes of Turkish nationalists. As a result, nationalism became increasingly “reactionary” in the post-1960 era (Bora & Can, 2000: 56). The radicalization of university politics propelled nationalism into a new role—as both an ideological and paramilitary defense against an anticipated communist revolution (Landau, 2016: 229). The Justice Party government saw anticommunism as a strategic tool for constructing a “grand rightist confederation,” uniting conservative and liberal factions that were reacting against the left. At the same time, this ideological orientation was aligned with the United States’ “unconventional warfare doctrine,” which promoted anticommunism as a method of suppressing resistance in developing countries (Bora & Can, 2000: 57). The Ülkücü movement became an integral part of this resistance front, playing a pivotal role in linking anticommunism to violent street-level activism throughout the second half of the 1970s. Between 1975 and 1980, the frequency and intensity of street activism, attributed to Ülkücüs increased so significantly that even the MHP and its leader, Alparslan Türkeş, were unable to fully control the movement’s lower ranks (Aytürk, 2020: 455). Around this time, the nature of Ülkücü discourse began to evolve.

Beginning in 1966, Ülkücü journals adopted Islamic anticommunist rhetoric, portraying communists as infidels. However, as ideological tensions reached their peak in the late 1970s, Ülkücü writers expanded this framing. They began to situate the fight against communism within a broader global struggle against materialism. This expanded struggle was conceptualized in two ways: first, as an internal struggle against one’s own *nefs*—or worldly desires—and second, as a religiously motivated *cihad* against the enemies of Islam in the contemporary world. This interpretation paralleled Sayyid Qutb’s Islamic philosophy, particularly his notion of “Lesser Cihad” (Calvert, 2013: 222). Ülkücü writers in the late 1970s increasingly identified

“global materialism” as the primary adversary, signaling a departure from the earlier Islamic anticommunist discourse that had defined the movement throughout the decade. They also introduced a new interpretation of global politics, no longer based on competing nation-states but instead on a universal confrontation between materialism and Islam. This marked the transition from instrumental pious nationalism to religious nationalism.

## **2.2 Ülkücüs and Leftists through the Islamic Lens**

The ideological conflict between the Turkish right and the left in the 1960s gave rise to the main anticommunist force of the 1970s “civil war” context: Ülkü Ocakları (Ülkücü Hearths). Initially established in universities and academies throughout Turkey, these Hearths became a national organization in 1969 with the founding of the Ülkü Ocakları Birliği (Union of Ülkücü Hearths) (*Milli Hareket*, 1969a: 5).

These organizations functioned as student associations with the goal of countering leftist activities on campuses and fostering nationalist and Ülkücü sentiments among youth (Yaşlı, 2019: 210). In the late 1960s, the conflict was largely limited to campus premises and student dormitories, characterized by physical altercations and occasional group violence, but with very few fatalities.

In July 1969, the Ülkücü movement experienced its first fatality in the struggle against communism. The deceased Ülkücü was immediately declared a “martyr,” and the response from the Hearths demonstrated how dramatically death in ideological conflict intensified Islamic rhetoric: “The sides are now clear... This is not a fight between political parties. This is a fight to the death between those who

believe in God and those who don't. This is a struggle by Muslim Turks against those who seek their destruction... God says that those who believe will be victorious... Those who believe in God should also believe in the victory of Ülkücü Grey Wolves" (Kılıç, 1969: 6). Although Ülkücü writers would continue to frame each fallen member using Islamic terminology, this discourse became much more prominent and consistent with the rising number of fatalities after 1975.

Martyrdom became one of the primary ways in which Islamic content manifested in Ülkücü discourse. Although the first example occurred in July 1969, it grew to be one of the most frequent Islamic motifs through 1980. Anthony Smith identifies "national sacrifice" as a central component of nationalism's sacred dimension (Smith, 2000: 808). In Ülkücü discourse, the martyrdom of fellow members—particularly after 1975—necessitated an increasingly religious and divine justification for the violence of the streets (Aytürk, 2020: 460). One of the results of this necessity was a significant rise in Islamic content in journals such as *Genç Arkadaş*, *Hasret*, *Ülkücü Kadro*, and *Ülkü Ocağı*, especially after 1977.

Although not every Ülkücü death inspired the same level of Islamic rhetoric prior to the late 1970s, the example cited above illustrates how anticommunism—and specifically the conflict with the left—was consistently framed using Islamic language. This gives us the basic framework that the Ülkücü movement employed to understand its confrontation with the left: Ülkücüs were Muslim Turks; leftists were atheists and *kafirs*; and the conflict was a life-and-death struggle for the preservation of Islam in Turkey. This framing persisted until the late 1970s, when the struggle expanded into one between materialism and Islam. At that point, Muslim Turks were portrayed not just as Turks who are Muslim, but as the embodiment of Islam itself,



facing a unified global enemy comprising capitalists, Zionists, Freemasons, and cosmopolitans alongside communists. This transformation highlights how Ülkücülük shifted from “instrumental pious nationalism” to “religious nationalism,” as the movement’s worldview came to be fully articulated through Islamic concepts.

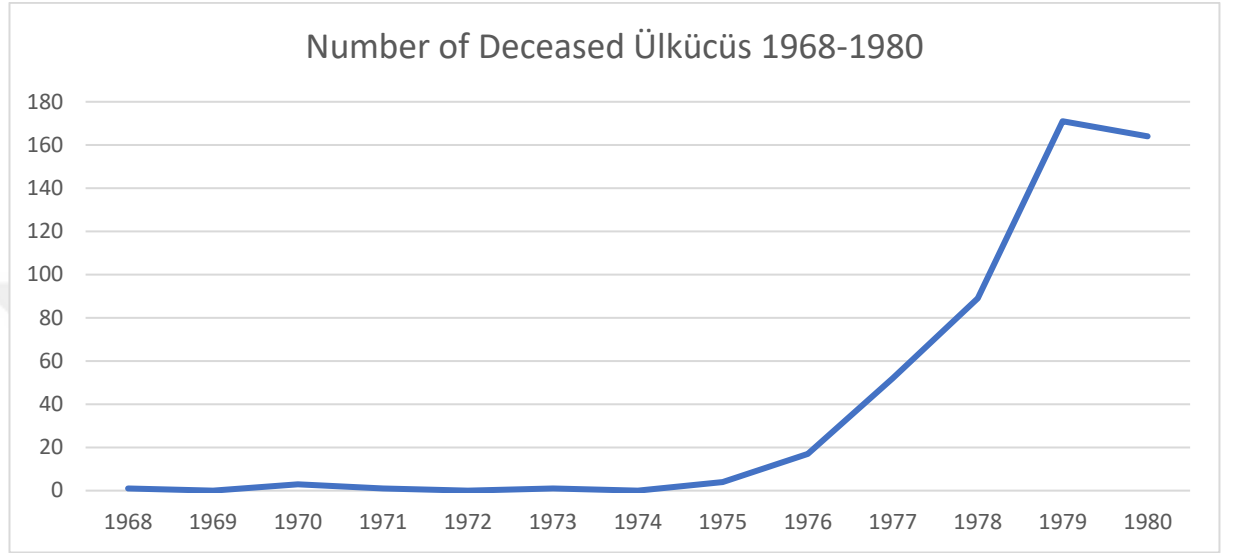


Table I: *Names and dates of Ülkücü martyrs extracted from <https://www.bozkurtlarfn.com/genel/ulkucu-sehitlerimiz-tam-isim-listesi.html> and turned into this chart by the author.*

Martyrdom continued to be a recurring theme in Ülkücü discourse. While the first reference appeared in 1969, it remained one of the most dominant categories of Islamic content until 1980. In fact, one of the reasons for the rise in Islamic discourse in the Ülkücü movement towards the late 1970s may be the dramatic increase in the number of Ülkücü members passing as a result of street fighting. Smith also argues that acts of self-sacrifice serve to purify and regenerate the nation, while allowing individuals to emulate ancestors who had made similar sacrifices to ensure the survival of the nation (Smith, 2000: 808). In the Ülkücü movement, the sacrifices of fallen members were framed as both acts of emulation and as salvific for the Turkish nation. The use of Islamic symbolism in connection with martyrdom hinged on how

these two functions—emulation and salvation—were interpreted. For example, Birol Emil draws a parallel between the Ülkücüs’ battle with the left and the Turkish War of Independence. In both cases, internal enemies complemented external threats, with the former conflict led by Mustafa Kemal against the Greek army being equated to the ideological conflict of the 1970s (Emil, 1972: 15). Similarly, the Ülkücüs were said to be fighting external enemies like the Soviet Union—and by the late 1970s, capitalist imperialism—as well as internal enemies like communists, Freemasons, and Zionists within Turkey. Gün Güzel connects the Ülkücüs’ martyrdom with nationalist imagery by citing the “Independence March” of Turkey and the idea that “God should not let me see red”—in other words, communism (Güzel, 1975: 47).

Ülkücü writers framed both their ancestors and national sacrifice using Islamic rhetoric. This association between Muslim Turkish ancestors and contemporary Ülkücü youth became so strong that, in a series of articles published in the journal *Töre*, Evliya Çelebi was invoked to contextualize the events of 1970s Turkey. Through his imagined voice, Ülkücüs were described as “armed with the pride and consciousness of Turkishness and the morality and virtue of Islam,” an Ülkücü slogan, and as “cracking the heads of some groups from Moscow [i.e., communists] with the fist of Turkishness” (Çelebi, 1976: 35). History itself was being resurrected in the battle against communism.

Ülkücüs were also likened to the *alp-erens*—the warrior-saints of the eleventh century. Just as the *alp-erens* spread Islam across Anatolia, the Ülkücüs were spreading nationalism and leading Muslim Turks in the fight against the left (Hacıeminoğlu, 1974: 26). This association became so entrenched that Ülkücüs were called to war like the Muslim Turkish armies of old. Those “who shed blood for

Turkishness and by following God's word" were instructed to "rally around the flag" and await the "call for attack" (Oral, 1969: 7). Those who died for "God, religion, state, nation, homeland" were martyrs, and in Turkish history, millions had become martyrs, whose sacrifices shaped the nation (Öner, 1977c: 14). Ülkücü martyrs had purified, Turkified, and Islamized the homeland through their blood, to the point that they were said to "prove the word of God" (Etçioğlu, 1977: 5). The Ülkücüs were seen as the most recent generation in this sacred lineage, continuing the tradition of shaping the nation through sacrifice. Those who died in the ideological struggle against the left were incorporated into a historical continuity of martyrdom, their deaths forming the latest chapter in the holy struggle for the nation's survival.

The motif of shedding blood for the nation's survival is a defining feature of the Islamic content in Ülkücü discourse. According to Arvasi, the Ülkücü movement had initiated a struggle to revive the Turkish-Islamic civilization. The "holy bloods they shed are the first heralds" of this revival, which would ultimately save the Turkish nation, the Islamic world, and, eventually, all of humanity from "inner and outer enemies" (Arvasi, 1977c: 7). This imagery reaches its most extreme form in the words of Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, who declared that Ülkücü martyrs had died for the cause of Islam: "Every Ülkücü who has passed from this world will be carried on the shoulders of their comrades, and a set of Ülkücü corpses will surround Islam. Any evil attempted against Islam will drown in these martyrs' blood" (Yazıcıoğlu, 1977b: 2). In this context, the glorification of death and violence becomes a central theme of Ülkücü discourse especially after 1977. As ideological tensions escalated after 1977—the same year this article was published—Islam became not just a vocabulary for framing Ülkücüs, communists, and ideological conflict, but also the primary influence shaping and defining Ülkücülük as a discourse.

The cause of salvation and the path to greatness for Islam began to take precedence over nationalist concerns like sovereignty and communist threats. Although Turks and Turkishness continued to hold a privileged status in this struggle—as the agents of Islam’s revival—the central objective shifted from saving the nation to saving the Islamic world from materialist ideology.

In this framing, the Ülkücüs and their movement were viewed as intrinsically Islamic. A true Ülkücü had to be a devout Muslim. The movement served the interests of Muslim Turks and their faith, and Turkish nationalism was inseparable from Islam. The previous chapter examined how the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was constructed and how interpretations of Turkish-Islamic history contributed to the development of the “Muslim Turk” identity upheld by the Ülkücüs. Alongside this identity, the Ülkücüs and Turkish nationalism as an ideology came to be seen as the protectors, saviors, and warriors of Islam within Turkey and beyond.

In a declaration issued by the Türk Milliyetçiler Birliği in 1969, their vision of Turkish nationalism was defined as “loving the Muslim Turkish nation,” emphasizing that Turkish nationalism was inseparable from Islam (*Milliyetçi Türkiye’ye Doğru*, 1969: 190). Following this definition, a nationalist must also be a devout Muslim, someone who sets an example for the nation, remains incorruptible in the face of foreign ideologies, and is prepared to sacrifice his life for the cause. Ahmet Kabaklı, a leading conservative nationalist of the time, asserted that there was no distinction between Turkists and *milliyetçi-mukaddesatçıs* (nationalist-sacredists). In his view, there was only one form of nationalism—one that had Islam at its center. A nationalist could only be true to his cause if he were also a pious Muslim (Kabaklı,

1968: 9). Consequently, both Turkish nationalism and the ideal nationalist figure were expected to conform to Islamic principles.

Ülkücüs were distinguished from other nationalists by their unwavering devotion to their cause and their steadfast opposition to foreign ideologies. Ayhan Tuğcugil (a pen name for İskender Öksüz) argued that although there are many levels of identification—such as family, religion, region, and nation—only nationalists prioritize the nation, and only Ülkücüs believe in the national cause so deeply that they are willing to sacrifice even their familial bonds (Tuğcugil, 1976: 7). This notion sets the Ülkücü apart from other forms of nationalism; the intensity of his nationalism surpasses all other social ties, including those of family.

This understanding of the Ülkücü as a Muslim nationalist devoted to the cause of the Muslim Turk nation was mirrored in the way communists were depicted—as atheistic and immoral. While this had long been a staple of Ülkücü rhetoric, the condemnation intensified toward the end of the 1970s. For instance, the poet Abdurrahim Karakoç labeled leftists as *kızıl kafir* (“red infidels”), employing the language traditionally associated with Ottoman military campaigns (Karakoç, 1976: 7). The Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad were frequently quoted to condemn communists, often through creative reinterpretations. For example, one Ülkücü writer claimed: “Those who curse at our word are the leftists themselves,” while those who protect their fellow believers are “rightists” (Töre, 1978: 53). Although the cited verse (Qur’an 90:18–19) refers to “the right-hand and the left-hand sides,” the Ülkücü writer manipulated this to mean “rightist” and “leftist,” repurposing sacred scripture for ideological purposes.

Ülkücü writers also referenced the Prophet Muhammad to further discredit communists. They claimed that during the Islamic “Golden Age” (*asr-ı saadet*), the enemies of Islam fell into three categories: those who disbelieved in God, those who pretended to believe in God, and finally, adherents of Christianity and Judaism (Küçükibrahimoğlu, 1977b: 9). Küçükibrahimoğlu drew a parallel between this historical categorization and the modern ideological struggle, identifying communists, other right-wing political actors (such as Islamists and center-right parties), and the West as the Ülkücüs’ three main adversaries (Küçükibrahimoğlu, 1977b: 9). The Ülkücü movement claimed to uphold the cause of God in its fight against communists in Turkey. The Prophet Muhammad was also cited in support of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis championed by the Ülkücüs: “Loving one’s homeland arises from faith,” he was quoted as saying. Betraying the nation, state, or homeland was considered a grave sin against God’s will (Özdemir, 1980: 4). This was precisely what “red imperialism” was accused of doing—failing to treat the nation as a sacred entity protected by divine decree. The Prophet was quoted again: “It is *haram* to disrupt the peace of the country and to incite anarchy” (Özdemir, 1980: 4). Just as Qur’anic verses were manipulated to condemn communism, the Prophet’s sayings were also selectively quoted, misinterpreted, or sometimes even fabricated by Ülkücüs for ideological ends. The perceived severity of the communist threat justified these distortions, as ideological language took precedence over the sanctity of Islam’s sacred texts.

We can observe anticommunism expressed through an Islamic vocabulary as a recurring theme in the Turkish far-right. For example, Fethi Tevetoğlu, a leader in the *Komünizmle Mücadele Derneği* (Association for the Struggle Against Communism), referred to those who fought communism as “nationalist cihadists”

(Meşe, 2017: 231). Ertuğrul Meşe summarizes the ideological foundation of Islamic anticommunism as the idea that “being Muslim means being anticommunist,” citing Fehmi Cumalıoğlu, who stated, “true Muslims... hate those who curse at their God and Prophet. They abhor Godless communism” (Meşe, 2017: 232). However, journals such as *Hasret* went beyond the typical anticommunist rhetoric. According to Tanıl Bora, *Hasret* was one of the platforms where the Ülkücü base diverged from the official Turkish-Islamic synthesis advocated by the MHP towards a more Islamic-leaning discourse (Bora, 2017: 315). Although the notion that nationalists were Muslim and communists were atheist was a commonplace of conservative nationalism after World War II, Ülkücü writers added new layers to this discourse, especially the concept of martyrdom. During the first congress of the Ülkücü Gençlik Derneği in the late 1970s, which was heavily influenced by Islamic teachings, new slogans emerged, such as: “Muslims a single fist against infidels,” “our call is rebirth in Islam,” and “our struggle is holy and our victory certain” (*Hasret*, 1978c: 15).

Why did Islamic rhetoric increase so much in the Ülkücü publications in the second half of the 1970s? A significant reason for this internal shift within the Ülkücü movement’s discourse was the psychological impact of street violence. Ali Erken identifies this as having “a profound psychological impact on young militants and some nationalist ideologues” (Erken, 2013: 95). Similarly, İlker Aytürk argues that the intensification of political violence compelled Ülkücüs to rationalize death and the anxiety surrounding it, which manifested in increasingly Islamic rhetoric during the late 1970s (Aytürk, 2020: 460). Thus, the evolution in Ülkücü discourse was partly a response to the unprecedented experience of street-level terror.

## 2.3 Religion as a Weapon in Ideological Conflict

Ülkücü writers regarded Islam and its accompanying faith as weapons in the war against communism. Islamic belief served two main functions:

1. It provided a moral and religious foundation for national unity in the face of internal and external enemies such as communism and materialism.
2. It inspired the resolve and bravery necessary to confront death in the violent conflict against the left—who, lacking faith, were presumed to be inherently weaker and destined to lose.

The first function of Islam in this ideological battle was to reinforce social cohesion and offer protection against foreign ideological incursions. The “spiritual side” (*manevi yön*) of Islam was viewed as a crucial element for maintaining the existence of Turkey and safeguarding its youth from degeneration through foreign ideas and cultures. The root of Turkey’s problems, according to this view, was not economic but moral and spiritual. The materialist perspective was dismissed as a smokescreen employed by those who “worship Lenin or Mao” to obscure the true issue—moral decay and religious decline in Turkish society. In contrast, Ülkücü youth were presented as the vanguard of a future “virile Muslim Turkey” (*Türkiye Ülkücü Gençlik*, 1970: 4). Religion was therefore seen as a vital source of societal unity, strength, and morality. However, Turkey was portrayed as under siege by atheist communists attempting to sever the youth from Islam. An editorial warned that if Islam were successfully eradicated, another foreign religion—such as Christianity, via missionary work—would inevitably take its place (Dinçer, 1972: 22). For this reason, it was imperative that Turkish youth be educated in the purest interpretation of Islam, modeled after the Muslims of the *asr-ı saadet* (the “golden age”) and the



Prophet Muhammad himself (Dinçer, 1972: 22). The *iman* (faith) provided by Islam was believed to have made the Turkish nation great in the past and capable of achieving greatness again (Tunalı, 1980: 32). Islam, then, was the antidote to foreign cultural infiltration and the ideological weapon capable of neutralizing communist efforts to manipulate and mislead Turkish youth. It endowed Muslim Turks with the spiritual strength to resist and overcome their enemies (Dinçer, 1972: 23).

The second function of Islam in this conflict was its capacity to instill individual courage—particularly the fearlessness required to face death. Belief in the afterlife gave Ülkücüs an edge over communists in this regard (Özbilici, 1977: 2). A frequently cited Qur’anic verse, “those who believe are superior,” was used throughout Ülkücü discourse to highlight the critical advantage Islamic faith gave them in ideological and physical confrontations (Serdengeçti, 1968: 10). The courage and fearlessness conferred by Islam allowed Ülkücü youth to meet death without hesitation. This argument was extended further to claim that faithless communists lacked the bravery and spiritual strength required to endure conflict and face mortality (Lelik, 1977: 13).

Although Ülkücüs began framing their conflict with leftists in Islamic terms as early as 1966, the terminology of *cihad*, and its associated religious justifications for violence, became more prevalent after 1975—coinciding with the escalation in street violence. The ideological battle with the left came to be seen as “a fight as holy as the one Prophet Muhammad waged against false believers in his time,” and it was asserted that God Himself upheld the cause of the Ülkücüs (*Milli Hareket*, 1969b: 5). In 1970, the Prophet was even cited as saying, “if you do not have a better weapon than your enemy, use your enemy’s weapon,” in order to justify violent retaliation.

Ülkücüs believed that communists had initiated the violence, and their own acts of aggression were merely reactive (*Milli Hareket*, 1970: 11). The ideological conflict was bluntly characterized as one between “those who believe in God and those who curse Him... between those who speak of the Qur’an and the Prophet, and those who speak of *Das Kapital* and Marx” (*Hasret*, 1976b: 12). The justification for using the enemy’s tactics was reiterated six years later, in the context of increasingly bloody and widespread conflict. It was argued that the reason communism had spread so far was the absence of a nationalist movement that had adopted a fully developed counter-ideology capable of using the left’s own tools against it (*Hasret*, 1976b: 12).

The Ülkücü movement distinguished itself from Islamists, too, in both the Ülkücü readiness to engage in violent struggle and also its interpretation of *cihad*. Islamists were often criticized by Ülkücüs for their passivity. They were mocked for invoking *hicret sünnettir* (“migration is the Prophet’s tradition”) rather than participating in the active *cihad* against communism, a struggle led by the Ülkücüs and their “greatest leader” (*en büyük başbuğu*), the Prophet Muhammad himself (*Hasret*, 1978b: 3).

This criticism reflected the Ülkücüs’ understanding of conflict and violence through an Islamic lens. In a theatrical piece written by Alper Aksoy, titled “Cihatsız Mücahitler” (“Mujahids Without Cihad”), an Islamist young man engages in a conversation with an Ülkücü about the growing ideological struggle on university campuses. The Islamist asserts that their version of *cihad* involves no violence and that communists should be invited to Islam through dialogue and peaceful means. “The commandos only know fighting. There is no fighting in our *cihad*... Why fight when one can crack the heads of communists with belief in Islam?” the Islamist says.

The Ülkücü immediately interrupts: “with guns” (Aksoy, 1976: 6). The Ülkücü then ridicules this peaceful approach by referencing Turkish-Islamic history: “Didn’t our Ottoman ancestors wage *cihad*? Did they do this with pretty words?” According to him, the situation could not be fixed with words, and communists were like “a corrupted tree that cannot bloom again,” incapable of being returned to the righteous path (Aksoy, 1976: 6). For the Ülkücü, the correct method of ideological conflict—here defined as *cihad*—was violence. Nationalism and religious piety were not to be proven through rhetoric, but through direct confrontation with communism and imperialism.

Nevzat Kösoğlu, a leading Ülkücü thinker in the 1970s, described the struggle against the leftists as an expression of *tevekkül* (resignation to God’s will). However, he emphasized that this resignation did not mean passivity or waiting, but rather “an active spirit and boldness” (Kösoğlu, 1974: 56). For Kösoğlu, Turkish armies had always demonstrated this form of *tevekkül* since converting to Islam. Now, in 1974, as Muslim Turks had once again “picked up their swords,” a new yet familiar struggle was unfolding (Kösoğlu, 1974: 57). In this way, ideological conflict was recast as a religious act, an embodiment of obedience to divine will.

Şefik Kantar also criticized the Islamists in Turkey for their inaction, contrasting them with pious believers who actively fight against infidels. He lamented that “those who once prayed for God to send them a prophet to guide the non-believers are now replaced by pious believers who fight infidels, while others consider it a virtue to remain silent against them” (Kantar, 1976: 13).

This ideological conflict was seen as *cihad in the name of God*, and those who died for the cause were revered as martyrs. The term *cihad* was defined as “fighting both

against our desires and our enemies in the name of God and our homeland” (Önen, 1976: 8). This understanding of ideological struggle reached apocalyptic proportions in Ülkücü rhetoric. The arrival of Ülkücüs was said to blow “from all sides” against the communists, who would then “put aside their tools of torture” when the “horn of apocalypse” sounded—an event that Ülkücüs themselves were likened to (Dönderici, 1974: 16).

Despite these dramatic interpretations, the Islamic framing of the ideological conflict with the left remained largely consistent from 1966 through 1977. Ülkücüs were portrayed as devout Muslims; communists as atheists; and the conflict was described as a battle for the survival of Islam, which in turn was integral to the survival of the Turkish nation. Islam provided not just ideological vocabulary, but a moral and social foundation for the nationalist cause.

However, by the late 1970s, Ülkücü writers began to move beyond treating Islam as a symbolic framework. Instead, they began to use Islam as a blueprint for restructuring Turkish society and politics. The nationalist struggle was redefined as a mission to save the Islamic world and, ultimately, all of humanity. The fight against communists was reframed as a global war against materialism, interpreted through the dual concepts of “Greater and Lesser Jihad” found in Islamist ideology and the writings of Sayyid Qutb.

## **2.4 Conflict Against Global Materialism and Imperialism**

Ülkücü discourse underwent a noticeable transformation after 1977, coinciding with the intensification of street violence and the increasing number of Ülkücü martyrs.

Islamic-leaning journals such as *Büyük Türkiye'ye Hasret* (1975–1979), *Nizam-ı Âlem* (1979) and its successor *Ülkü Ocağı* (1979), *Genç Arkadaş* (1975–1979), and *Ülkücü Kadro* (1976–1977) began to reflect this shift. The ideological production in these publications was heavily influenced by Islam. In these journals, Islam served not only as a reservoir of narratives and symbols, but also as a comprehensive model for reimagining the state, politics, and society. This evolution signaled a deeper transformation in the ideological framework of Ülkücülük—from “instrumental pious nationalism” to what this dissertation terms “religious nationalism”, borrowing from the works of Barbara-Ann Rieffer (2003b).

Post-1977, Ülkücü publications such as *Hasret*, *Ülkücü Kadro*, *Ülkü Ocağı*, and *Töre* emphasized the salvation of Islam from a global force identified as materialism—encompassing Western civilization, capitalism, and communism. This global confrontation was also portrayed as a deeply personal one, reflecting the tension between the material and spiritual dimensions of existence. It was framed as a universal, timeless struggle. According to Ülkücü writers, the conflict “between believers and non-believers has begun with the creation of the world” (Yazıcıoğlu, 1977b: 2). Within this cosmic battle, the Turkish people had played a central role. “Since the Turks have converted to Islam, all of their struggles have been for the sake of the Crescent,” and the battles between the “Crescent and the Cross” that characterized Turkish-Islamic history were now being waged domestically (Yazıcıoğlu, 1977b: 2). The enemies of Islam, according to this narrative, were both external and internal. Their aim was to “extinguish the light of Islam,” and the Ülkücü movement was charged with preventing them from succeeding.

In this transformed worldview, the nationalist cause of the Turkish people became synonymous with the cause of Islam. “The Turkish nation is the cause of God and His Prophet, and the name of this cause is Islam,” one writer declared. If Islam were to be eradicated from Turkey, a wave of “bloody and radical philosophical movements” would fill the void (Karabacak, 1977: 2). The salvation of the Turkish nation—and indeed of humanity—was believed to depend on Islam and its spiritual vision of life. The West, by contrast, was depicted as the domain of a “robotic people enslaved by materialism and machines,” while the East (i.e., “the millions in Asia and Africa”) was portrayed as a region populated by peoples who had lost their material and spiritual balance, as well as their freedom and dignity (Yazıcıoğlu, 1977c: 3). This division created a new religious understanding of global politics—one that divided the world into the Christian West and the Muslim East, and situated global conflict as a struggle between materialism and Islam.

According to Ülkücü writers, “the dark capitalist thought of the materialist Zionist crusader West” controlled the global left. In this narrative, communism and capitalism were not enemies, but two sides of the same materialist coin. The education of Turkish communists in Western institutions was seen as further proof of this alliance. What emerged was a conspiracy theory in which capitalist and communist forces were united in a single materialist front against Islam. Communists were no longer portrayed solely as Soviet agents devoid of national identity—they were part of a larger global plot. Nonetheless, the primary agent of resistance to this materialist conspiracy was not the broader Muslim world, but the Turkish nation. Communism was described as “a bloody weapon of the West” that facilitated the massacre of the Turks under Soviet rule (Anadol, 1977: 14). For Ülkücü writers in the late 1970s, “the cause of the revival of the Turkish-Islamic ideal was the

confrontation of Islam with the materialist West” (*Ülkü Ocağı*, 1979a: 6). As this vision aligned with the principles of “religious nationalism,” it saw the world through an Islamic lens, while also elevating Turks as the primary actors in the global conflict between Islam and materialism (Rieffer, 2003b).

The materialist ideologies identified in this narrative—capitalism and communism—were condemned for reducing human existence to material terms and disregarding the spiritual side of life. Ülkücü writers argued that these ideologies had caused global instability and chaos, which served the interests of Great Powers. The wars and conflicts brought about by materialist ideologies—“the First and Second World Wars, Vietnam, Lebanon, etc.”—were framed as “brotherly conflicts” analogous to those being fought by Ülkücüs in Turkey. In these wars, “the Great Powers” always emerged unscathed, while others suffered (Yazıcıoğlu, 1977c: 3). The overarching aim of these materialist forces was to sow global anarchy (Arvasi, 1977b: 3). If left unchecked, the Turkish-Islamic civilization would be replaced by the Western materialist order, and Turkish national culture would be overtaken by the cultures of the crusader nations (Koçak, 1977: 11). The absence of Islam as a moral compass was blamed for widespread social disorder, alienation, and misery (Yazıcıoğlu, 1977b: 2). In this context, the Turkish people were cast as having a divine mission: to restore global order by reawakening the Islamic moral system and spreading it to others—just as they had done in the past (Yaprak, 1975: 4). This belief exemplifies what Anthony Smith calls the “myth of ethnic election” in nationalist ideology, wherein the nation views itself as chosen for a sacred historical role (Smith, 2010: 38).

In accordance with this myth, Ülkücü writers asserted that saving Islam in Turkey from materialism would eventually lead to the salvation of the entire Islamic world—and ultimately the entire globe (Kantar, 1977: 13). The movement’s stated goal was to “bring order to the world” (*nizam-ı âlem*) and to defeat imperialism, which preyed upon both the Islamic world and humanity at large. Ülkücüs described themselves as fighting for “the cause of the universal order of Islam” (Hasret, 1978b: 3).

According to Ülkücü writers, the Turks—seen as God’s chosen nation—were assigned the sacred mission of establishing the *nizam-ı âlem* (order of the world), a phrase elucidated by historian and far-right intellectual Osman Turan in his *Türk Cihan Hakimiyeti Mefkuresi Tarihi* (Turan, 2003: 263). Turan joined the MHP in the late 1960s, and his interpretation of Seljuk and Ottoman history, in which Turkishness was imbued with Islamic meaning, became deeply influential (Erken, 2013: 83). His most notable contribution was the idea that the Turks possessed a sacred, global mission to bring about universal order (Turan, 2003: 357). In this interpretation, both pre-Islamic and Islamic Turks were capable of ruling over diverse religious communities while maintaining peace and justice—but certainly under Turkish leadership (Turan, 2003: 356–357). According to Beşir Ayvazoğlu, Ülkücüs who read Turan’s book came to believe that “bringing order to the world” was not only a historical imperative, but also a contemporary mission of the Ülkücü youth (Ayvazoğlu, 2008: 575). Turan’s notion that the Turks were the *cund-Allah*—the army of God—was quickly adopted by Ülkücü writers (Turan, 2003: 286). They believed that “Islam was the only way to save humanity, and that *nizam-ı âlem* can only be established by the Turks” (Sucu, 1979: 6). One writer even claimed that God chose the Turks specifically “to be kind to the believers and upright and formidable against the infidels” (Sucu 1979: 6). This concept of *nizam-ı âlem* was also fused



with an anti-imperialist discourse that became increasingly prominent in the second half of the 1970s.

The Ülkücü youth were thus envisioned as the vanguard of Turkey's revival, entirely purified of personal ambition and worldly desires—a conception of character referred to as the “suicide of worldly desires.” This idea aligned with the Islamic principle that political struggle must also be accompanied by internal purification. A Qur'anic command that “the things that are entrusted must be given to those who are capable” was cited to argue that the Turkish state should be handed over to a capable Ülkücü cadre (Öner, 1977b: 11). The term *nefs*—denoting worldly desire or ego—is central to Islamist ideology and underscores the two categories of *cihad* recognized in Islamic thought: “Greater” and “Lesser Cihad.” While 19th- and early 20th-century Islamic thinkers emphasized “Greater Cihad” as the internal struggle of a Muslim against his own desires, Sayyid Qutb rejected this passive interpretation. In his writings, Qutb argued that Islam is “essentially expansionist” and that *cihad* should be understood as “an instrument of the universal Islamic revolution” (Calvert, 2013: 222).

Ülkücü writers echoed this view. For example, Ayşe Özdemir described Muslims infected by materialism as “rotten apples,” requiring immediate attention and purification (Özdemir, 1980: 29). In her analysis, Islam's internal enemies—and the individual struggle against one's own *nefs*—formed the core of the Ülkücü mission (Özdemir, 1980: 29). Similarly, Küçükibrahimoğlu emphasized that inaction against the enemies of Islam was unacceptable and that active participation in *cihad* was a form of worship in itself. Every Muslim was obliged to engage with all their means (Küçükibrahimoğlu, 1977d: 9).

This emerging perspective among Ülkücü writers marked a departure from traditional nationalist thought, which saw the world as a collection of competing nation-states. In the late 1970s, the primary arena of struggle was no longer national sovereignty or territorial defense. Instead, it lay in defending the Muslim world and confronting global materialism. Although references to Sayyid Qutb appeared as early as 1966 in the journal *Milli Hareket* (Yazgan, 1966: 15), the full-scale adoption of an Islamic-leaning worldview—and the framing of global conflict as a binary between Islam and materialism—was a new phenomenon for Ülkücülük. This transformation is evidence of a significant ideological shift in the final years of the 1970s.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

By the late 1970s, the Ülkücü movement's anticommunist discourse had undergone a substantial transformation. What initially emerged as a nationalist defense of the Turkish state evolved into a broader religiously framed struggle against global materialism. Beginning as a Cold War-aligned opposition to communism—framed around preserving national sovereignty and protecting Muslim Turks from an atheistic, foreign ideology—the discourse gradually expanded to include a range of perceived enemies: capitalism, Zionism, Freemasonry, and cosmopolitanism. In Ülkücü journals of the late 1970s, these forces were recast as components of a singular materialist front seeking to extinguish Islam's spiritual and moral order.

This ideological shift marked the movement's transition from “instrumental pious nationalism,” in which Islam was seen as a foundational pillar of Turkish identity, to

“religious nationalism,” in which Islam itself became the ultimate cause. In this new framework, Turkishness was not only defined by Islam—it was entrusted with the divine responsibility of preserving and spreading it.

Political violence and martyrdom were increasingly framed within the Islamic vocabulary of *cihad* and martyrdom. Although the term *cihad* had been employed by anticommunist writers as early as the 1960s, its meaning deepened significantly in the later decade. It now offered a divine framework for interpreting both political death and violent activism. Martyrdom gained prominence as a symbolic category, linking fallen Ülkücüs to the Turkish-Islamic tradition of *alp-erens* (warrior-saints). In this framework, political violence was not only legitimate—it was sanctified as a religious duty.

These acts of violence were not merely tactical responses to leftist threats or Soviet influence. They were framed as sacred interventions in a global conflict between materialism and Islam. The Ülkücüs were no longer merely defenders of the Turkish state; they were portrayed as the vanguard of a universal Islamist struggle.

Communism was reframed not as a threat to the nation, but as a manifestation of world materialism. In this reframing, the Ülkücü mission expanded dramatically.

The Turkish nation was cast in a central, sacred role—imbued with a “myth of ethnic election,” as Anthony Smith describes (Smith, 2000: 808). Turks were not only the chosen defenders of Islam but the agents of salvation for the entire Islamic world—and ultimately, for all of humanity. The ideological evolution of Ülkücülük culminated in the belief that Turkish leadership would bring about the revival of Islamic morality, the defeat of global materialism, and the reestablishment of a divinely sanctioned Turkish-Islamic order.

In the final years of the 1970s, a significant number of Ülkücü journals and thinkers redefined the movement. No longer was it a purely nationalist initiative—it had become a spiritual and political vanguard for a universal cause. This cause fused the fate of the nation with the *ummah* (global Islamic community), and the *ummah* with the fate of all mankind.



### CHAPTER III: CONTESTING THE SECULARIST STATE: THE ÜLKÜCÜ MOVEMENT’S ISLAMIC VISION OF TURKISH MODERNITY

The Ülkücü movement’s engagement with Westernization and laïcité reveals an ideologically complex synthesis of anti-communism, Islamic content, and nationalism. Emerging from a predominantly conservative background rooted in small towns and rural communities, the Ülkücüs framed their vision of the Kemalist modernization project as a continuation of a centuries-long process that began with the Tanzimat reforms—a process they argued alienated the Turkish nation from its cultural and Islamic roots. While not openly opposing Atatürk’s legacy, Ülkücü writers tactically reinterpreted him as a devout Muslim, a nationalist, and an anti-communist, thereby claiming his symbolic authority to support their own political agenda.

Most of these writers published in journals such as *Büyük Türkiye’ye Hasret*, *Genç Arkadaş*, *Ülkücü Kadro*, and *Ülkü Ocağı* in the late 1970s. The Islamic component of their discourse exemplified what Rieffer (2003b) terms “religious nationalism,” distinguishing them from other Ülkücü writers who used Islam merely as a repertoire

of narratives, symbols, and motifs. These authors placed greater emphasis on Islam's role in Turkish politics and society.

Initially, Ülkücü writers differentiated between laïcité as an ideal and its problematic application by the Kemalist elite. They condemned the state's repression of religion and the political instrumentalization of Islam. However, by the late 1970s, their critique expanded beyond the application of laïcité to a broader rejection of laïcité itself as an institutional obstacle to establishing an Islamic socio-political order. This shift reflected the movement's evolving view of Islam—not merely as a moral guide, but as a holistic system encompassing law, education, economics, and politics.

Thus, the Ülkücü discourse came to see Islam as a remedy for the moral decay, cultural alienation, and socio-economic divisions produced by Westernized institutions. Within the Cold War context, this vision supported the aspiration to create a “Great Turkey,” a strong and economically independent nation capable of resisting both capitalist and communist domination. The Ülkücü writers rejected Western-style democracy as an alien and corrosive system, instead advocating for a centralized, powerful state governed by an “Ülkücü cadre.” They described this Islamic reorientation as a “rebirth” and a “re-establishment of Turkish-Islamic civilization.” Their reinterpretation of Turkish history was rooted in the belief that 150 years of modernization—starting with the Tanzimat—had deviated from the “core” of Turkish-Islamic civilization. Correcting this “grave error” required a return to the “essence” of Turkish-Islamic identity. As a result, Islam should assume a greater role in Turkish society, with institutions restructured to align with or be inspired by Islamic principles. By combining critiques of Kemalist reforms with a vision of Islamic order, the Ülkücü writers formulated an alternative modernity

grounded in Turkish-Islamic civilization, seeking to revive Islam as the source of the nation's moral and political cohesion.

### **3.1 Turkish Nationalism, Islam, and Modernity**

The Turkish Republic was founded on the principles of nationalism and secularism. These principles were initially presented as solutions to save the newly formed state following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and to put an end to its repeated defeats at the hands of Western powers. They were envisioned as blueprints for modernizing Turkey (Berkes, 2012: 438; Karpas, 2016: 251). Among the early Republican intelligentsia, one dominant view held the *ulema* and other Islamic interpreters of the Ottoman period responsible for the Empire's decline (Mert, 2015: 198). According to Feroz Ahmad, Mustafa Kemal and his supporters categorically rejected the idea of a state based on Islamic principles, arguing that Islam—when controlled by the *ulema*—had contributed to the collapse of the Ottoman state (Ahmad, 1993: 53).

As part of their modernization reforms, the Kemalists limited the role of Islam in public life. Following the War of Independence, Islam as an element of national identity was replaced by language and history as defining components of Turkishness (Çetinsaya, 1999: 362). In line with Ziya Gökalp's view that Islam played a subordinate role in reinforcing Turkish identity and could be used as a tool for modernization (Nefes, 2017: 6), the Republic restructured religion to align with the Westernizing agenda of the Kemalist elite. One method of incorporating Islam into the new national framework was through state institutions like the Directorate of

Religious Affairs and the appointment of bureaucratic cadres who promoted state-sanctioned versions of religious sects, *fiqh*, and practices. For the Kemalists, Islam was not inherently a barrier to modernization, provided it remained under state control. However, it was not considered a sufficient vehicle for modernization on its own. Religious beliefs or traditions not endorsed by the state were often dismissed as remnants of Arab influence—a culture viewed as foreign and incompatible with Turkish modernity (Mert, 2015: 206).

Conservative nationalists such as Osman Turan and Ali Fuat Başgil criticized the Kemalist interpretation of *laïcité*, arguing that it conflicted with the principle of freedom of conscience and was misapplied by the Republican elite (Mert, 2015: 208).

Building on such critiques, Ülkücü writers targeted the Kemalist elite on two primary fronts: (1) their flawed interpretation of *laïcité* and (2) their role in what was seen as a misguided 150-year modernization trajectory beginning with the Tanzimat reforms, which, according to the Ülkücüs, eroded Turkish national culture and Islamic values. Rarely did Ülkücü writers criticize Atatürk directly.<sup>12</sup> Instead, they re-appropriated his image, portraying him as an anti-communist, nationalist, and devout leader.

According to Tanıl Bora & Kemal Can, the Ülkücü movement drew much of its support from individuals of conservative backgrounds, particularly from small towns and villages. These communities were skeptical of the “Westernist-Kemalist tradition

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<sup>12</sup> Muhammed Nezi̇h Kerimođlu, for example, writes about how some who supported the crackdown on those who caused political anarchy argued that “a good-hearted, just, and merciful dictator should rule, just like Atatürk... and gallows should be set up from *Ulus* to *Kızılay*, hanging anyone who reared their heads” (Kerimođlu, 1977b: 10). The author goes on to say that “from this brief exchange, one is provided with a concise explanation of the republican period (!) and the successes of Atatürk (!)” (Kerimođlu, 1977b: 10).



and urban cosmopolitan culture” and regarded Islam as a source of moral and spiritual identity (Bora & Can, 2000: 65). The economic crises of the 1970s created fertile ground for reactionary sentiments. The MHP channeled this reaction toward cultural, religious, and moral values shaped by the historical tension between Eastern and Western identities in Turkey (Bora & Can, 2000: 45). This sense of *ressentiment* toward Westernization among the conservative lower middle classes helped produce the cadres and militants of the Ülkücü movement. However, the MHP alone was not sufficient to mobilize or transform this social base. Instead, individuals joined Ülkü Ocakları for their own reasons and under their own conditions, rather than through direct leadership guidance (Bora & Can, 2000: 64).

### **3.2 Criticism of the “Wrong” Implementation of Laïcité**

Like their social base, the intellectuals of the Ülkücü movement identified flaws in the Kemalist elite’s approach to laïcité and their broader Westernizing agenda. For example, Erol G ng r critiqued the Kemalist understanding of laïcité on multiple fronts. He argued that although the Kemalist elite dismantled the traditional moral order of the Ottoman system, they “did not establish another system in its place” (G ng r, 1979: 6). According to G ng r, both politicians and institutions were responsible for the misinterpretation and misapplication of laïcité in Turkey. While laïcité in theory calls for the complete separation of religion and state, in practice, the Turkish state controlled and contained Islam under the guise of secularism (G ng r, 1973: 13). This contradiction was tolerated during the single-party period, when politicians had no need to seek public approval. After the transition to multi-party

democracy in 1945, however, Islam was increasingly used by politicians to gain votes (Güngör, 1973: 17).

Güngör characterized pre-democratic Turkey as composed of two opposing groups: a "police state" represented by the CHP's single-party rule, and the "innocent masses" who sought religious freedom (Güngör, 1973: 18). For him, the Kemalist application of laïcité imposed control over religion rather than ensuring its independence from state affairs.

Ülkücü writers such as Galip Erdem similarly condemned the use of *irtica* (reactionism) as a political accusation. He argued that such claims were groundless and that those who raised alarms about reactionary threats—primarily the Kemalists—did so for political purposes (Erdem, 1970: 7). Erdem redefined the concept of *irtica* in a way that altered its traditional meaning. For "anticommunist and generally nationalist circles," *irtica* denoted an effort to reverse progress and return to a previous age (Erdem, 1970: 7). However, Erdem challenged the assumption that returning to an earlier system was inherently regressive. He cited the Renaissance as a positive example of such a return, which revived intellectual traditions and scientific thought from 2,000 years earlier (Erdem, 1970: 7).

By invoking the Renaissance, Erdem implicitly critiqued the Kemalist reforms, suggesting that revisiting the Ottoman or Turkish-Islamic past could be a valid and progressive endeavor. He also identified two alternative interpretations of *irtica*: one held by communists and another by Kemalists (Erdem, 1970: 7). According to Erdem, communists viewed belief in God, Islamic practice, patriotism, and family values as reactionary. Kemalists, on the other hand, considered any worldview that

rejected Western civilization in its entirety—or that dared to suggest that certain Eastern or Islamic values were worth preserving—as *irtica* (Erdem, 1970: 8).

To illustrate the dogmatism of this Kemalist view, Erdem cited Peyami Safa's term *devrimbaz*—meaning a “reactionary of revolution”—to describe those who rigidly enforced revolutionary ideals (Erdem, 1970: 8). Although Ülkücü writers frequently criticized Kemalist secularization efforts, they stopped short of proposing that Turkey's secular institutions be entirely replaced with ones grounded in Islamic principles. This changed, however, toward the end of the 1970s. Writers in journals such as *Hasret*, *Ülkücü Kadro*, and *Ülkü Ocağı* began advocating for the replacement of Turkey's secular order with a system based on Islamic values.

### ***3.2.1 Toppling Laïcité and Establishing an Islamic System***

For Ülkücü writers, a fundamental division existed between the state elite and the Turkish people, a divide that emerged during the Tanzimat period due to Westernizing policies and an education system detached from national and religious values (Cemal, 1975: 4). This alien education system, lacking a foundation in Turkish culture and Islam, was seen as vulnerable to communist influence (Cemal, 1975: 4). Similarly, Yahya Yüzgeç argued that false modernization and the Western institutions imposed by the ruling elite subjected the Muslim Turkish population to an alien regime. In response, he called for a new system founded on what he termed “Islamic and national sources” (Yüzgeç, 1979: 2). He approached the issue holistically, asserting that the Turkish people, who had lived under Turkish-Islamic

civilization for centuries, were now ruled by political institutions alien to their history and values (Yüzgeç, 1979: 2).

Yüzgeç directly challenged the understanding of modernization held by the late Ottoman and Republican elites—that to be modern, Turkey must adopt Western institutions, and for these institutions to function, society must undergo wholesale Westernization. In contrast, he insisted that such institutions could not simply be imported, as the Turkish nation had not undergone the same historical developments as the West. Therefore, a truly viable political and social order must be grounded in the Turkish people's own Islamic and national heritage (Yüzgeç, 1979: 2).

In an editorial in *Ülkü Ocağı*, the anonymous author declared that the goal of the Ülkücü movement was to bring order to the world, beginning with the struggle against “the laicist, capitalist, Western, and exploitative order in our country, which is the outgrowth of the global civilization of oppression” (Ülkü Ocağı, 1979d: 2). According to the editorial, the laicist and capitalist elite of Turkey had imposed a system of religious “denial” on the Muslim Turkish population. The writer asserted that the Ülkücü movement would replace this exploitative order with one based on “the values of our belief” (Ülkü Ocağı, 1979d: 2). This rhetoric reflects a broadening of the Ülkücü critique—from a focus on Turkish secularism and Westernization to a larger confrontation with what was portrayed as a global oppressive civilization. In this framework, the Ülkücüs took on the task of establishing an Islamic order that the Turkish ruling class had actively suppressed.

One expression of this suppression was the imprisonment of Ülkücüs, but in the movement's discourse, even imprisonment was reframed as noble. According to an anonymous writer, Ülkücüs in “the dungeons of the order” were in fact in “cocoons,”

preparing to emerge as “the butterflies of the Islamic cause” (Ülkü Ocağı, 1979b: 14). The promise of their eventual release symbolized the coming establishment of an Islamic order and the fall of the secular Kemalist regime.

By the late 1970s, criticism of *laïcité* reached such intensity that Ülkücü writers began to frame their struggle against it as a form of *cihad*. Burhan Kavuncu, vice chairman of the Ülkücü Youth Association, described an ongoing conflict between those who follow God and those ruled by their *nefs* (ego or base desires) (Kavuncu, 1978: 6). For Kavuncu, this Islamic struggle was central not only to philosophy, ethics, and religion but also to sociology, economics, and politics (Kavuncu, 1978: 6). He characterized *laïcité* as an “affliction” that isolated Islam from both politics and society, and included the fight against *laïcité* as part of the ideological mission of the Ülkücü youth (Kavuncu, 1978: 6). He framed this conflict as a battle between “God’s will and false belief,” likening it to what the Prophet Muhammad called the “Greater Cihad” (Kavuncu, 1978: 6).

An article in *Hasret* echoed this sentiment, criticizing Article 163 of the Turkish Penal Code—which penalized acts deemed reactionary (*irtica*)—as a tool of Kemalist oppression. The article quoted the Prophet Muhammad: “To defend justice and righteousness in spite of cruel rulers is the greatest of *cihads* for God” (*Hasret*, 1977: 8). This quote was used to justify Ülkücü resistance to Kemalist secularism.

Similarly, Mehmet Ali Kalkan, a university student in the Adana School of Engineering, wrote in 1978 that a “rightist” must also reject the separation of religion and state. He cited the Qur’anic principle that “whosoever does not rule with the law God sent them, they are *kafirs* themselves” (Töre, 1978: 53). This view reflects a broader transformation within Ülkücü thought: while early criticisms of *laïcité*

focused on its misapplication by the Kemalist elite, by the late 1970s, an increasingly religious segment of Ülkücü writers viewed laïcité itself as a structural barrier to the establishment of an Islamic political and social order in Turkey—one they now regarded as a religious obligation to overcome.

### ***3.2.2 Atatürk and Islam***

Ülkücü writers generally avoided including Atatürk in their criticisms of laïcité. His figure became a contested symbol for the Ülkücüs, who largely reimagined him as, above all, a nationalist and an anti-communist. A characteristic example of this reinterpretation is the fabricated quote widely circulated by Ülkücü writers, in which Atatürk supposedly declared, “Communism is the greatest enemy of the Turkish people and must be crushed wherever it is seen” (Bora, 2014: 14). This appropriation of Atatürk’s image was instrumental to the Ülkücü discourse, allowing them to align their ideological stance with the symbolic legitimacy of the Republic’s founder.

Another way Ülkücüs integrated Atatürk into their worldview was by emphasizing his religiosity and arguing that his understanding of laïcité differed from the flawed version implemented in Turkey during the 1970s. Dündar Taşer played a prominent role in this reinterpretation. He emphasized Atatürk’s religious side by quoting him as saying, “The goal of creating a soul for our nation was assigned to us by God and the Prophet of God who lies in Medine-i Münevvere” (Taşer, 1975b: 9). In this framing, the Kemalist nation-building project itself was interpreted in Islamic terms. Taşer also rejected leftist portrayals of Atatürk as a secular reformer, asserting

instead that Atatürk's policies were not leftist, especially regarding laïcité (Taşer, 1975b: 9).

According to Taşer, Atatürk's approach to laïcité did not treat Muslims in Turkey as a "minority." For evidence, he pointed out that those who migrated to Turkey through population exchanges with Greece and Bulgaria were identified as "Muslims," and that Atatürk did not employ a single non-Muslim in the bureaucracy or the military (Taşer, 1975a: 13). He concluded that, if one adopts the left's definitions, Atatürk could be classified as a "rightist" because he was a landowner, possessed financial capital, and was pious (Taşer, 1975a: 13). Thus, for Taşer, Atatürk did not associate laïcité with anti-Islamic sentiment, precisely because he himself was a devout Muslim.

Ülkücü writers did not just contest Atatürk's image with the leftists; they also challenged the Islamists. Hüseyin Mümtaz, a military officer, argued that Atatürk was an *ümmetçi*—that is, someone who supported the unity of the *ummah* (Mümtaz, 1979: 3). In response to accusations from Islamists that Atatürk was an atheist or even the anti-Christ, Mümtaz cited Atatürk as saying: "They call us nationalists, but we are such nationalists that we respect all nations that cooperate with us...

Especially since we are Muslim, by following the principles of this religion, we support the ummah" (Mümtaz, 1979: 3). An article in *Hasret* also presented Atatürk as a devout Muslim. Quoting him during the early days of the War of Independence, the article cited: "God is great... and our Prophet Muhammad was sent to us as God's messenger... The constitution of Islam is the Qur'an... The Turkish nation must be more devout... I believe this as I believe in God" (*Hasret*, 1979: 14).

Cherry-picking quotations from a vast repertoire of Atatürk's aphorisms, which

happen to be overwhelmingly secular of course, was an Ülkücü strategy during this period to create a more palatable image of Turkey's founding leader.

The Ülkücü movement's appropriation of Atatürk as a pious Muslim served three main purposes. First, given that Atatürk remained the central symbol of the post-1960 political atmosphere and retained significant symbolic importance within the Turkish military, aligning with his image lent legitimacy to the Ülkücü position. Second, Atatürk had been revered by the Ülkücü movement from its inception—both Türkeş and the leadership cadre of the MHP, as well as members of the Ülkü Ocakları, regarded him as a nationalist.<sup>13</sup> Third, Atatürk was also in the process of being appropriated by the left, which made his legacy a contested site of ideological rivalry. Ülkücü writers responded to this challenge by reclaiming Atatürk through a religious-nationalist lens. Atatürk was just too important a national symbol to be turned over to the leftists.

### 3.3 “The Order of Muhammed”: Islam as a Blueprint for Politics

The concept of *düzen* (order) became a central issue in Turkish politics following the 1960 coup, as competing political actors sought to define the foundations of a just

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<sup>13</sup> Sakin Öner, in his *Ülkücü Hareketin Meseleleri*, published in 1975, says that “Turkists such as Ziya Gökalp influenced the nationalism of the founder of our republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who considered being a Turk the greatest happiness possible (Öner, 1975: 45). For Necmettin Hacıeminoğlu, Atatürk transformed the “Ottoman *umma* to Turkish nationalism” (Hacıeminoğlu, 1971: 9). In 1974, the Berlin branch of the Turkish Hearths argues that “Atatürk's reforms were informed by Turkish culture and the dignity of Turkishness” in an article titled “Bozkurt Atatürk” (*Genç Arkadaş*, 1975: 2). Alparslan Türkeş, while arguing that nationalism should be a central aspect of a new constitution, says that “for some reason, those who declare that they respect the reforms of Atatürk on every occasion have forgotten the principle of ‘nationalism’ that constitute the core of Atatürk's ideas” (Türkeş, 1975b: 174).



and sustainable system. Ülkücü writers contributed to this debate with their own proposals for political and economic reform, which they largely framed under the term *milliyetçi-toplumculuk* in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>14</sup> One line of argument within the Ülkücü discourse emphasized economic mismanagement rather than cultural decline as the root cause of Turkey’s problems. For instance, Orhan Pekin, head of the Chamber of Civil Engineers, claimed that Turkey’s underdevelopment stemmed not from moral decay but from flawed economic policies (Pekin, 1969: 10).

However, culturalist perspectives also emerged in Ülkücü journals during the same period. An editorial in *Türkiye Ülkücü Gençlik* criticized the left for focusing solely on economic backwardness. According to the author, the true crisis in Turkey was the “decomposition of morality and the decline of spirituality,” a crisis the Ülkücü youth would solve by preparing a future for a “virile Muslim Turkey” (*Türkiye Ülkücü Gençlik*, 1970: 4). These two divergent positions—economic versus moral-cultural decline—reflected an internal debate within the Ülkücü movement during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. At the time, ideological competition existed between the *milliyetçi-toplumcu* and *milliyetçi-mukaddesatçı* factions within the movement. One of the key fault lines in this conflict was the role of Islam in political discourse (Aytürk, 2020: 457–458).

Some Ülkücü writers, particularly those aligned with the *milliyetçi-mukaddesatçı* camp, framed the issue of *düzen* in Islamic terms. Ahmet Er’s speech, broadcasted on Turkish public radio as part of party propaganda on the eve of the 1969 elections,

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<sup>14</sup> References to *milliyetçi-toplumculuk* decreased in the second half of the 1970s as the Islamic content of Ülkücü discourse increased. However, while the use of the term was banned by Türkiye in 1971, the economic policies *milliyetçi-toplumculuk* proposed were still argued in seriousness in the journal *Genç Arkadaş* as late as 1976 (Bora, 2017: 311). The journal had very few Islamic content until its editors changed in 1976 and 1978, with Burhan Kavuncu and Mümtaz’er Türköne becoming editors-in-chief, respectively.

was for instance called “The Order of Muhammed”, one of the earliest examples of this approach (Er, 1970: 12). In his speech, Er says that the current political system of Turkey is ridden with corruption and amorality, and the way out of this corrupt system to salvation is the moral dictums of Islam (Er, 1970: 12).

By the late 1970s, however, Ülkücü discourse on Islam and *düzen* had become increasingly radical. Ülkücü responses to the issue of social order and underdevelopment shifted. In *Ülkü Ocağı*, an anonymous author wrote: “Since we reject the order that is based on worldly principles, we are compelled to establish the order we deem true” (*Ülkü Ocağı*, 1979b: 14). This alternative order was identified as the Islamic religion, practiced by Turks for centuries but now replaced by a system grounded in *beşeri* (human-made) principles rather than divine ones (*Ülkü Ocağı*, 1979b: 14).

Unlike Er’s earlier formulation of the “Order of Muhammed,” which emphasized moral values such as justice and honesty in line with Islamic teachings, Ülkücü writers in the late 1970s began advocating for institutional transformation. Changing Turkey’s *düzen* no longer meant a return to morality alone—it entailed a concrete reordering of political, educational, and legal institutions based on Islamic principles. Articles published in *Hasret*, *Ülkü Ocağı*, *Töre*, and *Ülkücü Kadro* proposed such transformations, including changes to school curricula, the establishment of an Islamic legal system, and a full departure from secular codes.

Rather than merely invoking Islamic morality to correct societal decay, Ülkücü writers began to argue for institutional reform. Their vision of “changing the order” now demanded legal and educational systems grounded explicitly in Islamic values, to replace the secular laws inherited from Europe with those derived from divine

authority. Contributions to journals such as *Hasret*, *Ülkü Ocağı*, *Töre*, and *Ülkücü Kadro* went beyond rhetoric, calling for Qur’anic instruction in schools, the inclusion of Islamic law in university curricula, and a rethinking of Turkey’s entire legal framework.

This transformation marked a shift from Islam as a moral compass to Islam as a political blueprint. The following sections will examine how *Ülkücü* writers further developed this blueprint by proposing to restructure Turkey’s institutions, legal foundations, and civilizational ideals around Islamic principles.

### ***3.3.1 Changing Institutions: Islam as the Basis of Law and Education***

*Ülkücü* writers strongly criticized the secular foundations of Turkey’s legal system. Yümni Sezen, an educator with a degree in Divinity from Ankara University, argued that institutions—particularly legal institutions and schools—had been degraded due to “officials lacking morality, a lack of qualified personnel, or politics interfering in everything” (Sezen, 1977: 3). Up to this point, Sezen’s argument echoed Ahmet Er’s 1969 call for a moral order, attributing the nation’s crisis to moral decline rather than to the secular and non-Islamic nature of its institutions. However, Sezen pushed this argument further: he claimed that the true source of institutional decay was the absence of a transcendent, divine moral foundation. Around the world, he asserted, materialist philosophies—Marxism and capitalism alike—were eroding this holy basis (Sezen, 1977: 4).

According to Sezen, the foundation of law was “neither nature nor society—it is only God. If God does not exist—perish the thought [Hâşâ]—then law does not exist

either” (Sezen, 1977: 4). This divine origin of law was key to the Ülkücü argument against secular legal codes. Ülkücü writers also denounced Turkey’s Civil Code, which was modeled on the Swiss Civil Code (Berkes, 2012: 530). Selahattin Şenliler, writing from Ulucanlar Prison in 1978, described the Civil Code as fundamentally incompatible with the Islamic culture of the Turkish people. He wrote, “Today, the laws which are in effect and which penalize actions termed as crimes are completely at odds with the Turkish national character” (Şenliler, 1978: 14).

Şenliler also targeted Turkey’s Penal Code, which had been based on the Italian model. He claimed that, within Muslim Turkish culture, acts such as killing in defense of one’s mother, sister, or wife were not only understandable but laudable (Şenliler, 1978: 14). Because Turkey’s legal framework did not reflect these cultural and moral values, he argued that “the laws by which we are to be judged must be ours,” meaning they must originate from Turkish-Islamic traditions (Şenliler, 1978: 14).

While Ülkücü writers condemned secular legal codes, they also engaged critically with Islamic law’s use in contemporary Muslim-majority states. In 1977, Muhammed Nezih Kerimoğlu, a bureaucrat in the State Planning Organization, critiqued Arab leaders such as Muammar Gaddafi, Hafez al-Assad, and Anwar Sadat for exploiting the Qur’an to legitimize authoritarian practices. He warned that implementing the Qur’an as a constitution required a profound understanding of its message and principles (Kerimoğlu, 1977a: 4). For Kerimoğlu, Islam had been misrepresented by those who twisted its meaning for political gain—both abroad and within Turkey. To establish a genuine *Sharia*-based regime, he argued, qualified and competent Islamic legal scholars were essential (Kerimoğlu, 1977a: 4).

Vehbi Ecer, another Ülkücü writer and graduate of the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University, referred to the Qur'an as "the constitution of Islam," emphasizing that Islam was not merely a personal religion but a comprehensive political and social system (Ecer, 1978: 32).

Ülkücü writers approached education reform through a focus on curriculum rather than systemic overhaul. Although they did not advocate for fully restructuring the education system along Islamic lines, even in the late 1970s when their discourse saw Islam as a blueprint for social organization, they emphasized the importance of Islamic education for youth. This, they believed, would shield them from communism and strengthen national unity.

Necmettin Hacıeminoğlu argued that the popularity of *İmam-Hatip* schools stemmed from a widespread feeling among Turks that their religious identity was under attack. In response, they demanded more institutions that could provide religious education (Hacıeminoğlu, 1976: 6). He contended that such schools should produce devout and honest religious leaders, and that any perception of Arabs as more devout than Turks should be rejected. Instead, he called for a revival of Turkish self-confidence based on the historical role of Turks as the leaders and protectors of the Islamic world (Hacıeminoğlu, 1976: 6). Likewise, Aysel İzgi, chair of Ülkü-Han, an Ülkücü women's association, proposed that even nurseries should be structured to educate children in line with Turkish-Islamic values (Demirtepe, 1979: 35).

Just as they advocated for religious education in *İmam-Hatip* schools and nurseries, Ülkücü writers proposed more Islamic content in universities. Mehmet Aksoy argued that law faculties in Turkish universities should offer "Islamic Law" courses, since Islamic jurisprudence was a core element of Turkish-Islamic cultural heritage

(Aksoy, 1980: 27). He grounded his recommendation in Article 21 of the Turkish Constitution, which guarantees the right of every individual to learn and teach science and the arts (Aksoy, 1980: 26).

Likewise, Mehmet Narin, head of the Istanbul branch of Ülkü-Bir, the nationalist teachers' union, invoked the Constitution to argue that middle schools should include Qur'an courses. Since the Turkish population was "98% Muslim," he said, the state had a duty to support both material and moral development through religious education (Narin, 1977: 4). According to Narin, these courses were essential to national unity and would help counter the spread of communism by providing students with a moral foundation rooted in Turkish-Islamic culture. The Qur'an, he argued, would instill a sense of conscience in youth and help them resist "the weight and domination of materialism" (Narin, 1977: 4). Similarly, a 1977 article in *Hasret* argued that the early Republican state's disruption of religious education had produced impious generations who were then vulnerable to foreign ideologies—ultimately leading to the moral and ideological crisis of the 1970s (Alptekin, 1977: 14).

Ülkücü emphasis on law and education as targets for reform was no coincidence. Education had long been politicized in Turkey, especially after the founding of the Village Institutes, which were accused of being breeding grounds for communist ideology (Bora, 2016: 176, 440). Education was also one of the most effective tools available for the Ülkücü movement to expand its base, as well as a key site of ideological conflict with the left.

Legal institutions were equally important. By the late 1970s, many Ülkücüs had been imprisoned for participating in street violence. In response, the movement

established “legal desks” to provide legal counsel and financial support to imprisoned members (Gourisse, 2023: 53). The secular legal system was increasingly seen as an impediment to their political activities—another front in the broader ideological battle.

### ***3.3.2 Islam as a System and a Civilization***

For Ülkücü writers, Islam could not be confined to the private sphere; it offered a complete system. One of the most prominent advocates of this view within the movement was Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi.<sup>15</sup> He argued that Islam stood “above and beyond all struggles,” describing it as “an original and divine thought system that explains the secrets of living things with the guidance of the holy word” (Arvasi, 1977a: 3). In this conception, Islam was not simply a religion—it was a worldview, encompassing a philosophical, moral, and political order. Arvasi presented Islam as the antidote to the materialist ideologies of the modern world. Both capitalism and communism, he asserted, were rooted in materialism, while Islam offered a perfect balance between the spiritual and the material (Arvasi, 1977a: 3).

This emphasis on balance extended to technology and scientific progress. In a Cold War atmosphere dominated by the achievements of the superpowers, Arvasi and other Ülkücü writers believed that Islamic morality and scientific advancement must

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<sup>15</sup> Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi (1932-1988) was an ideologue of the Ülkücü movement, whose ideas pertaining to the relationship between Turkish national identity and Islam was influential over the young members of the Ülkü Ocakları (Erken, 2013: 95). He named his version of the relationship between Turkishness and Islam as *Türk-Islam Ülküsü*, which “added a religious layer to exclusive loyalty to the nation that nationalism demands” (Aslan, 2014: 529).

go hand in hand. Alparslan Türkeş similarly argued that “the corridors of technical universities and faculties of science must be linked to the corridors of High Academies of Divinity,” advocating for a synthesis of technical knowledge and spiritual wisdom (Türkeş, 1979: 50). He claimed that the mission to reconcile science and morality was “the path of truth and justice (*hak*),” and predicted that the Ülkücüs would “be victorious, if God wills it” (Türkeş, 1979: 50).

Namık Kemal Zeybek echoed this idea in his book *Ülkü Yolu*, first published in 1979, where he emphasized the importance of a “balance of material and morality” (Zeybek, 1980: 68). He envisioned a future in which Ülkücü cadres, “armed with piety and science,” would lead Turkey into an era of technological prowess, including nuclear energy and space exploration (Zeybek, 1980: 64). This vision of national greatness—grounded in Islamic principles and scientific advancement—reflected Cold War notions of global power, reframed through a Turkish-Islamic lens.

İsmail Hakkı Ünal, a student at Ankara University’s Faculty of Divinity, likewise asserted that Islam was “the true system.” He wrote that Islam “provides humanity with a prescription of salvation,” and that all of Turkey’s material and moral problems stemmed from turning away from its Islamic roots (Ünal, 1975: 1).

Islam, for the Ülkücüs, was not simply a faith but the system needed to resolve Turkey’s crises. Muhip Alp (a pseudonym for Lütfü Şehsuvaroğlu) argued that Turks were living in an age dominated by ideologies, superstates, corporations, and oppressive systems. Only “a total understanding and a worldview that implements, in the name of God, the principles of Islamic *tasavvuf* and the rules of *şeriat*” could liberate Turkey from this tyranny (Alp, 1978: 13).



Sinan Nacak also emphasized the political and worldly relevance of Islam. He argued that “the forces of evil” had for years—or even centuries—spread the false belief that Islam was concerned only with the afterlife. A close reading of the Qur’an, he contended, disproved this notion (Nacak, 1975: 7). For Nacak, Islam offered a comprehensive alternative to both capitalism and communism. It was an ideology, like those systems, but superior because it united the material and spiritual dimensions of life (Nacak, 1975: 7).

Ülkücü writers believed that Islam also provided an economic system fundamentally opposed to the class-based framework of communism. In an article in *Hasret*, the author wrote that “the Qur’an does not just contain religious practices. It contains decrees on complex matters such as modern economy, birth control, usury, the black market, individual-state and state-private enterprise relations, tax systems, insurance, and social order” (*Hasret*, 1976a: 12). Avni Şahin argued that while capitalism reduced individuals to machines, Islam regarded humans as moral beings who share the resources granted by God and should be fairly compensated for their labor (Şahin, 1977: 12). Osman Nuri Küçükibrahimoğlu claimed that the Islamic obligation of *zekat* (almsgiving) provided a solution to poverty and social inequality (Küçükibrahimoğlu, 1977c: 9). Islam, he explained, did not privilege any socioeconomic class but required the rich to help the poor, while also encouraging personal effort and productivity (Küçükibrahimoğlu, 1977c: 9).

Beyond economics, Islam was presented as a source of moral and social cohesion. Küçükibrahimoğlu described a deep moral crisis in Turkish society and argued that the only remedy was *tevhid*—the belief in the oneness of God and the rejection of all ideas that contradict it (Küçükibrahimoğlu, 1977a: 8). He asserted that Turks would

endure these turbulent times through their devotion to God and their rejection of ideologies like communism, which denied divine authority (Küçükibrahimoğlu, 1977a: 8).

For Ülkücü writers, both the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad offered not only religious salvation but a comprehensive political, economic, and social system. Islam, as interpreted by the Ülkücüs, was not just the moral foundation of Turkish-Islamic civilization—it was the only viable blueprint for the country's future. This is evidence of a shift from instrumental pious nationalism to religious nationalism in Ülkücü discourse in the late 1970s by a group of Ülkücü writers that come from the Ocaks and their like-minded supporters within the higher echelons of the MHP.

### **3.4 The “Ideal of Greatness,” Islam, and Ülkücü Cadres: Building “Great Turkey”**

Ülkücü writers viewed Islam as a source of political power capable of guiding Turkey's economic and social development, ultimately enabling it to become a “great” nation. They rejected the widespread belief that Islam was incompatible with technological or scientific progress. Instead, they argued that “Great Turkey” could only be realized through a social and political order rooted in Islamic principles. For the Ülkücüs, Islam was not an obstacle to modernity but the very path toward achieving it—an argument they grounded in a specific interpretation of Turkish-Islamic history.

Odd Arne Westad offers a relevant explanation for this view by discussing how anti-colonial movements often turned to idealized images of the past as blueprints for modern transformation:

[Anticolonial leaders] wanted to conquer new technologies and new organizational methods for their own purposes. Even those who saw the word of God as the basic message of liberation—such as the powerful Islamic anticolonial resistance—did not want to return to a society without the material advances that were available to increasing numbers of people within the colonial centers. In many cases, just as in the European and American phases of intense social transition in the nineteenth century, idealized images of the past became a framework for envisioning new and thoroughly modern societies, in which the return to ‘the roots’ (or ‘the scriptures’) showed a new preoccupation with social justice, ‘national’ organization, or racial uniqueness (Westad, 2005: 81).

Similarly, Jacob Landau noted that Islamic literature of the 1960s often framed greatness as achievable only through a return to the original message of Islam, a revival that would restore “past glories” (Landau, 2016: 178). The Ülkücü discourse should be understood within this broader ideological and historical pattern: Islam, in their view, was the key to building a powerful and modernized nation, especially within the global context of the Cold War.

### ***3.4.1 Islam, “Greatness,” and the Cold War***

The Cold War strongly influenced how Ülkücü writers understood modernity, world politics, and Turkey’s place in the international order. Responding to criticisms from

Metin Toker, who argued that Turkish nationalists and Turanists were out of touch with contemporary global realities, Ayhan Tuğcugil claimed that the world had become more dangerous than ever. He emphasized that history was “changing most rapidly, and will change more rapidly in the future” (Tuğcugil, 1972: 6). Tuğcugil pointed out that while the United States had risen from fifth to first place and the Soviet Union from fourth to second, Turkey had plummeted from seventh to “somewhere in the seventies” in global power rankings (Tuğcugil, 1972: 7).

Likewise, Cengiz Aldemir argued that although Turkey had once been great, the Turkish nation was now “hungry, parched, worn out, and is being robbed and exploited” (Aldemir, 1977: 5). He warned that imperialist powers—including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union—were drawing up plans to invade and colonize Anatolia, preventing Turkey from reclaiming its historical greatness (Aldemir, 1977: 5).

For Ülkücü writers, Cold War geopolitics required Turkey to become militarily powerful and self-sufficient. Turkish history, they claimed, demonstrated that the nation had always been strong. Emine Işınsu, a prominent Ülkücü author, declared that “the Turkish race that burst out from Central Asia like a pure and fertile spring was always great—with short intervals—throughout its five-thousand-year history.” According to her, the Turks had “imprinted the divine shadow of God on other nations, became the savior and defender in His name, and ruled the world as the emissary of God or Gök Tengri” (Işınsu, 1973: 2). Işınsu dismissed the idea that Turkey was underdeveloped and “backward,” accusing leftists of internalizing Western superiority and fostering self-deprecation (Işınsu, 1973: 2).

In Ülkücü discourse, the concept of “greatness” combined Cold War logic, technological advancement, national strength, and Islamic morality.<sup>16</sup> From the mid-1970s onward, Ülkücü writers increasingly emphasized Islam as essential to this vision of greatness.



Figure I: Image from *Hasret Journal* issue 22, p. 2, taken with the courtesy of *Milliyetçi Dergiler Projesi*.

A 1974 article illustrates this perspective, quoting the Prophet Muhammad: “The Persian has no superiority over the Arab, nor the Arab over the Persian; superiority is only in *taqwa* [devoutness]” (Avcı, 1974: 13). The author concluded that a nation’s greatness depended on its belief in Islam and argued that Turkish history proved this:

<sup>16</sup> In the *Hasret* journal, there is an image of a mosque with a single *minaret*, and the top of this *minaret* is a hand that holds a spacecraft. The image appears under Yazıcıoğlu’s article titled “Islam’s banner rises with our blood” in 1977 (Yazıcıoğlu, 1977a: 2). The idea that becoming a modern and great nation is tied to Islam is conveyed with this characteristic visual.

“As long as the Turks were devout, they acted in unity and were always superior”  
(Avcı, 1974: 13).

Ülkücü writers strongly rejected the idea that Islam hindered progress. They blamed the Islamic world’s contemporary weakness on *şekilcilik*—a shallow, dogmatic approach to religion (Şanlı, 1975: 7). Mustafa Karahan similarly argued that although Islam was fully compatible with modern needs, “modern heretics” who believed in superstitions and rejected Islam had taken control of religious discourse in Turkey (Karahan, 1975: 4).

According to these writers, the Islamic world had once achieved greatness by following the “true Islam” of the Prophet’s *asr-ı saadet* (Golden Age). Once that model was abandoned, the Islamic world fell into decline and became vulnerable to Western domination (Şanlı, 1975: 7). In Turkey, ideological division and political fragmentation had replaced religious unity. The people still shared material signs of Islam—“imam, mosque, prayer, and *namaz*”—but not its spiritual essence. To reclaim this essence, Muslims needed to realize “the revolution of truth... an eternal and noble revolution” (Şanlı, 1975: 7).

Ülkücü writers thus argued that Turkey’s moral and cultural crisis was caused by abandoning Islam and embracing foreign ideologies. By returning to Islamic principles, Turkey could again become a united, powerful, and modern nation.<sup>17</sup> In

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<sup>17</sup> Osman Turan’s works on Seljuq and Ottoman history are of importance here regarding the notion that national history was testament to future greatness. Turan emphasizes that the Turks had once established “the order of the world” (*nizam-ı alem*) and no “empire in history and the ineffective United Nations of today had reached the harmony and justice the Ottoman Empire established between numerous races, cultures, religions, and sects over three continents” (Turan, 1979: 228).

addition to Islam, they also rejected Turkish democracy, which they viewed as corrupt and incompatible with Islamic morality.

### **3.4.2 Ülkücü Ruling Cadres and Democracy:**

Ülkücü writers claimed to represent the resentment of the Muslim Turkish population, which had accumulated during the single-party era in opposition to what they called an “un-national order”—a sentiment also observed by Bora & Can (Bora & Can, 2000: 65; Ülkü Ocağı, 1979c: 3). In their view, the transition to democracy merely served as a mechanism for the Kemalist elite to pacify this growing dissatisfaction through “the smoke and mirrors of democracy” (Ülkü Ocağı, 1979c: 3).

By the late 1970s, Ülkücü writers had become increasingly critical of Turkish democracy. An article in *Hasret* described democracy as “the art of possibilities and opportunities.” The author claimed that politicians were expected to lie, asserting that “politicians who do not lie and do not make demagoguery must leave politics” (*Hasret*, 1978a: 14). The article argued that catch-all political parties, in their pursuit of popular votes, compromised their programs and ideals. Democracy, therefore, was portrayed as a system that created the illusion of popular sovereignty while preventing real change (*Hasret*, 1978a: 14).

In *Ülkücü Kadro*, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek traced the corruption of Turkish democracy back to the adoption of Western political models. He argued that political parties were a Western invention, introduced into Turkish life by the Young Ottomans, and that he did not believe in them (Ülkücü Kadro, 1977a: 3). Similarly, Ahmet B.

Karabacak criticized the Turkish elite for attempting to impose a Western-style democracy, which he believed opened the door to communism (Karabacak, 1977c: 2). He identified “the rotten institutions of democracy” as the source of political chaos and anarchy in the country (Karabacak, 1977c, 2). These critiques sought not only to reject the democratic framework but to contrast the MHP with other parties. While mainstream parties were portrayed as morally compromised and ideologically inconsistent, the MHP was described as a party of principle—unwilling to make ideological concessions.

The electoral success of the CHP in 1977 further intensified Ülkücü writers’ criticisms. They accused Bülent Ecevit and his party of political opportunism. One article sarcastically paraphrased Ecevit: “He once said, ‘Find me eight MPs without gambling debts and I will topple this government.’ Now he says, ‘Find me thirteen who have gambling debts’” (*Ülkücü Kadro*, 1977b: 3). Karabacak went further, claiming that the 1977 election was manipulated by the “Bilderberger Group,” which he called “an off-shoot of Zionism” (Karabacak, 1977a: 2). He alleged that major industrial conglomerates—Koç, Sabancı, and Eczacıbaşı (the latter described as “reportedly Jewish”)—intervened in the elections to secure Ecevit’s victory (Karabacak, 1977a: 2). For Karabacak, if the Turkish people insisted on retaining democracy, then at the very least, political parties must be led by individuals loyal to the nation (Karabacak, 1977a: 2).

Nevertheless, on the eve of the 1977 elections, Necip Fazıl publicly endorsed the MHP, stating: “Among the emptied-out... tin-can parties of Turkey, the MHP has a completely different meaning and value for me. I see it as a society chosen to give the reverence due to Turkishness and Islam” (*Ülkücü Kadro*, 1977a: 3). This



endorsement followed Türkeş's own proclamation—ghostwritten by Necip Fazıl—in which Türkeş declared that the MHP's worldview was based on “Islamic belief coupled with a nationalism tied to morality (*ruhî muhtevaya bağlı milliyetçilik*)” (Ülkücü Kadro, 1977a: 3). In that same article, Necip Fazıl stated: “Neither a seat in parliament, nor a ministry, nor a place in the senate compares to the divine office God bestows upon me” (Ülkücü Kadro, 1977a: 4).

These statements revealed a core tension in Ülkücü discourse: while the movement engaged in electoral politics, it simultaneously elevated ideological struggle above party politics. Politics was viewed as tainted by self-interest, whereas the Ülkücü cause was portrayed as a sacred mission. In a *Hasret* article, party politics was framed as a means to an end: “organizing as a party, connecting with the masses via the party, gradually severing the state's institutions from the *düzen* [the establishment], and producing a qualified ruling cadre in state offices” (*Hasret*, 1978a: 15). Yet this strategy was only valid if subordinated to the ideological cause: “The positions and advantages must be placed under the authority of those engaged in ideological struggle” (*Hasret*, 1978a: 15).

For Ülkücü writers, politics was a corrupt vocation. Ideological commitment took precedence over electoral competition. Namık Kemal Zeybek described the ideal Ülkücü youth—the modern *alp-eren*—as one who followed God's path and had cleansed themselves of base desires (*nefs*) (Zeybek, 1980: 36). These individuals did not “worship the world” or succumb to ambition, pride, personal hostility, or jealousy—traits associated with conventional politics (Zeybek, 1980: 36).

This anti-political stance was symptomatic of growing tensions between the Ülkü Ocakları and the MHP leadership. Bora & Can attribute this divide to the self-

perception of *Ocak* members, who saw themselves as the true core of the movement—more radical, more committed, and more effective than the party bureaucracy (Bora & Can, 2000: 73). The intensification of street violence in the late 1970s also contributed to this rift. Even Alparslan Türkeş struggled to exert full control over the *Ocaks* after 1977 (Erken, 2013: 141).

Nevertheless, Türkeş remained a unifying figure. He maintained direct oversight of *Ocak* leaders and kept former *Ocak* heads close as advisors to monitor their activities (Erken, 2013: 140). Still, the increasingly Islamic tone of Ülkücü discourse in the journals created friction. Türkeş even ordered the closure of the journal *Nizam-ı Âlem* in 1979 due to its overtly Islamic content, which diverged from the party's official line (Akpınar, 2005: 125).<sup>18</sup>

Despite this divergence, Türkeş continued to be revered as the leader of the movement. In *Ülkü Yolu*, Namık Kemal Zeybek repeatedly emphasized Türkeş's leadership: "The ear of the Ülkücü awaits the *ezan*, while their eye watches the *Başbuğ's* index finger" (Zeybek, 1980: 18). The book can be read as an attempt to bridge the growing divide between the increasingly Islamic tone of the journals (*Hasret, Nizam-ı Âlem, Ülkücü Kadro*) and the official discourse of the MHP. Zeybek depicted Türkeş as the latest in a long tradition of Ülkücü *Başbuğs* (Zeybek, 1980: 12). As someone who wrote for *Ülkü Ocağı* and *Genç Arkadaş*, Zeybek served

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<sup>18</sup> This was not the first time *Nizam-ı Âlem* was cause of friction between Türkeş and the *Ocaks*. In one issue of the journal, Türkeş' photograph is put next to Erbakan's. Türkeş reprimands the editor of the journal and the head of the *Ülkü Ocakları Derneği*, Hasan Çağlayan, saying that the photos create ambiguity as to who the leader of the *Ocaks* are (Erken, 2013: 139). One reason why Türkeş perceived this ambiguity could be the increasing proximity of Ülkücü discourse with that of the Islamists in the late 1970s.

as an ideological liaison between the party and the *Ocaks*.<sup>19</sup> He emphasized Türkeş's leadership and upheld the importance of the "Nine Lights Doctrine," portraying Türkeş not as a career politician but as a visionary statesman burdened with the pain of Ülkücüs and martyrs (Zeybek, 1979: 9).

After the MHP became a coalition partner in the AP government in July 1977, with Gün Sazak appointed Minister of Customs and Monopolies, Ülkücüs gained influence within the ministry (Gourisse, 2023: 52). Some who were appointed to key positions later became *eğitimciler* (educators), acting as liaisons between the party leadership and Ülkü Ocakları (Gourisse, 2023: 52). The distinction between political strategy and ideological mission became even more pronounced during this period. As the MHP participated in coalition governance from July 1977 to January 1978, Ülkücü writers increasingly emphasized the necessity of controlling the state through a dedicated cadre while continuing to criticize party politics as inherently corrupt.

They believed that Turkish democracy suffered from three fundamental flaws: it lacked Islamic morality, it encouraged political corruption, and it failed to produce a strong state. The solution, according to Ülkücü writers, was the establishment of an "Ülkücü cadre" to lead the country. As Mehmet Ali Ağaoğulları explains, the MHP's ideology promoted equality among members of the nation, but also emphasized hierarchical distinctions—arguing that a just social order required recognizing differences in ability and character (Ağaoğulları, 1987: 196). For Ülkücüs, God had

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<sup>19</sup> These articles were published in these journals mostly in 1979 and with the *nom de plume* of "Çağrı Zeybek" and were later published as a book titled *Ülkü Yolu* in 1979 (Özkul, 2022: 171).

created people with differing talents, which justified the rule of a nationalist elite over the broader population (Ağaoğulları, 1987: 196).

Karabacak similarly argued that success would not come through policy reforms but through the presence of the right people in power—namely, the Ülkücü cadre (Karabacak, 1977c: 2). Sakin Öner added that for young Ülkücüs to be part of this future ruling cadre, they must adopt a lifestyle consistent with Turkish culture and Islamic morality (Öner, 1977a: 3).

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed how Ülkücü journals published between 1965 and 1980 constructed an increasingly Islamic vision for society. In contrast to the existing scholarly literature, which often portrays Islam as merely a legitimating ideology for Turkish nationalism, in this chapter I attempted to demonstrate that Islam came to constitute the very core of Ülkücü political imagination in the late 1970s. I describe this shift in Ülkücü discourse, using Rieffer's typology (2003b), as one from instrumental pious nationalism to religious nationalism. Ülkücü writers used Islam as a repertoire of symbols and narratives up to the late 1970s and this was also condoned by the party elite and Türkeş. But in the late 1970s there was a change in Ülkücü discourse among a group of writers both from the Ocaks and the party that put a greater role on Islam as a blueprint for restructuring politics and society in Turkey. This new kind of Ülkücü discourse was an example of religious nationalism.

In Ülkücü thought, Islam was not relegated to the private sphere. It served as a comprehensive ideological system that offered answers to the political, economic, and moral problems of the modern world. Ülkücü writers constructed this Islamic vision by redefining key political concepts such as *order*, *law*, *education*, *system*, and *civilization* in Islamic terms. This project reflected a rejection of both laicist republicanism and the dominant secular ideologies of the Cold War era—namely, capitalism and communism.

Initially, Islam was invoked by Ülkücü writers as a source of moral values: a foundation of justice, honesty, and self-restraint that would help Turks overcome the chaos of the 1960s. However, over time, Islam was increasingly framed as a political system that should replace Turkey's secular institutions. By the late 1970s, Ülkücü writers were no longer simply calling for Islamic morality in politics—they were demanding a complete transformation of Turkey's political and legal institutions along Islamic lines. Islamic law and Islamic education were proposed as replacements for European codes and secular curricula. Islam was framed as a system—indeed, the *only* viable system—in contrast to Marxism, capitalism, and Kemalism.

Islam was also central to the Ülkücü ideal of national greatness. Ülkücü journals consistently argued that Turkey had declined due to the abandonment of Islamic values and that national unity, strength, and technological progress could only be achieved through a return to “true Islam.” This return was imagined not as a regression into dogma, but as the foundation for a new political order guided by an enlightened Ülkücü cadre. That cadre would be formed not through electoral

competition or party politics—which were viewed as corrupt and self-serving—but through moral and ideological struggle.

Although the Ülkücü movement participated in parliamentary democracy and even entered government in the late 1970s, its long-term objective was to cultivate a devout and disciplined cadre of leaders who would eventually transform the Turkish state from within. In this sense, democracy was not the endpoint of the Ülkücü project, but a temporary means to an Islamic-nationalist end.

In sum, this chapter has shown that the Islamic turn in Ülkücü discourse during the 1970s represented not merely a cultural shift but a comprehensive ideological reorientation. Islam became the organizing principle of Ülkücü thought: a moral compass, a political system, a civilizational blueprint, and the key to national resurrection.

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

This dissertation has analyzed the evolution of Ülkücü ideology from 1969 to 1980 through a systematic analysis of journals published by Ülkücü intellectuals and organizations. Its guiding question was the growing integration and eventual prominence of Islamic discourse within Ülkücü rhetoric and thought. The research, more particularly, aimed at determining how and why Islam, which was initially secondary and largely instrumental within Ülkücü discourse, became by the late 1970s one of its underlying political and social structures. By this analysis, the dissertation has proposed that the involvement of the Ülkücü movement with Islam was no mere rhetorical device aimed at garnering votes in elections, but rather some deeper ideological development. This development redrew the movement's vision of identity, social hierarchy, and political power, and turned it from instrumental pious nationalism to religious nationalism.

The evidence shows a sharp pattern: from a developmentalist, corporatist secular nationalism to a fully formulated religious nationalism by the late 1970s. This development is reflected in the shift of language, topics, and concerns in publications by the Ülkücüs. Islam, which initially was a repertoire of symbols and stories used

essentially to oppose communism and appeal to conservative values, slowly became the very framework through which politics, history, identity, and world order were seen by the Ülkücüs. Interestingly, such a shift was neither accompanied by a greater identification of Islam with the MHP nor with its founder, Alparslan Türkeş. Rather, Islamic discourse became increasingly autonomous of the party leaders, indicating discursive independence among the intellectuals of the Ülkücüs and youth organizations like the Ülkü Ocakları.

At first, as the dissertation has illustrated, Islam played in Ülkücü discourse largely an auxiliary role to its nationalism. It was a mobilizational tool, particularly effective within the framework of Cold War anticommunism. As the Turkish left became powerful—via Workers' Party (TİP) parliamentary gains, formation of the left-oriented Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DİSK), and vigorous student movement—Ülkücüs turned to Islam to mobilize support and moral authority. The language of *cihad*, martyrdom, and religious struggle increasingly bracketed political violence.

But by classifying the Islamic material of Ülkücü journals into social, political, historical, and world subcategories, the current study found that Islam was not just used for the repertoire it provided the Ülkücüs. The increase in the number of frequencies of Islamic material during the latter part of the 1970s was accompanied by a qualitative movement: Islam was no longer legitimating politics but dictating it. Islamic values were proposed as solutions to Turkey's perceived moral, political, and economic deterioration. Rather than employing Islam to garner votes, the Ülkücüs utilized it to redefine what Turkey ought to be—its institutions, values, and place among nations.



This shift required a different kind of analytical lens, which this dissertation offered through Riffer's (2003) typology of *instrumental pious nationalism* and *religious nationalism*. By differentiating between the use of religion as a symbolic repertoire and a blueprint for systemic change, it became possible to identify the moment when religion ceased to be a discursive supplement and became an ideological base for the Ülkücü movement. This conceptual distinction is key to understanding how and why Ülkücülük evolved into a religious nationalism that fundamentally reimagined the Turkish nation-state.

The Islamic content in Ülkücü discourse had three main functions by the end of the 1970s.

First, Islam furnished a moral system that was strikingly at odds with communism's and leftist ideology's materialism, atheism, and perceived decadence. This moral distinction was the foundation of violence justifications by Ülkücüs. The denunciation of the leftists as "infidels" and dead Ülkücüs' elevation as "martyrs" granted political strife spiritual meaning. The political debate became more than mere defense of nationalism, but rather, it became a struggle of good versus evil at the cosmic plane. Second, Islam was used to situate Turkey in the global Cold War context. In contrast to both capitalist imperialism and communist atheism, Ülkücüs envisioned Turkey as the vanguard of a resurgent Islamic world. This vision emphasized Turkey's unique historical and cultural position—both Western and Eastern, secular and Islamic—and used it to claim leadership over a transnational Islamic awakening. This perspective both legitimized Ülkücü activism domestically and gave it a broader geopolitical relevance. Finally, Islam furnished the basis for detailed institutional and political reform. Magazines began discussing the

shortcomings of secular liberal democracy and proposed Islamic counterparts of government, justice, economies, and education. These proposals were not Islamist, of course; they called for no sharia, no theocratic government. Rather, they offered an Islamic modernity—an Islamic modernity that was one of a strong but centralized state, but one that was guided by religious values and traditions.

One of the striking findings of this dissertation is the disjunction between the Ülkücü movement and the MHP leadership in terms of Islamic discourse. Even in journal issues from the late 1970s, direct references to Alparslan Türkeş or the MHP were minimal when discussing Islam. This suggests that the Islamization of Ülkücü ideology was not strictly orchestrated by the party but was instead driven from within the movement—particularly among the younger cadres and local organizers in the Ülkü Ocakları. This independence had organizational ramifications. As documented by this dissertation and secondary literature, the explosive growth of Ülkü Ocakları after 1974 overtaxed the MHP's power of control over the movement. Though the party implemented mechanisms of influence—particularly via ministries won through coalition parties—there were always centrifugal tendencies. These played out through ideological disagreements, local power-bases, and even unsanctioned acts of violence by individual units of the movement. However, the party frequently positively ratified such activity after the fact or was unable to punish it, indicative of the tension between control by the party and local initiative.

Moreover, by 1978 the MHP began a more concerted effort to institutionalize its influence over the movement. Through the appointment of trusted officials, use of newspapers like *Hergün* as cover for political coordination, and the training of cadres in political indoctrination, the party attempted to restore coherence in the Ülkü

Ocakları. But the ideological direction of the movement—especially regarding Islam—had already been set. The rank-and-file, particularly those from rural Anatolia, had embraced a version of Ülkücülük where Islam was not merely one aspect of Turkish identity but its very foundation.

The effects of this evolution, therefore, extended beyond the 1970s. As the dissertation pointed out, certain of the thoughts nurtured in Ülkücü publications—chief among them related to Islam as a stabilising political influence—found expression in the policy recommendations of the 1980 military coup. The generals’ recourse, in the cultural sphere, to a Turkish-Islamic synthesis as a national identity initiative paralleled the formulation, by Ülkücüs, of such discourse in the late 1970s (Kaplan, 2002: 113). The significant difference in Islamic discourse between the party and the *Ocaks* manifested itself in the rupture within the Ülkücü movement in the 1980s between the more Islamic-leaning Ülkücüs and those loyal to Türkeş.<sup>20</sup> Its long-term legacy is also seen in recent Turkish politics. The blurring of nationalist-Islamist lines, the appeal to moral argument to support authoritarianism, and the redefinition of Turkish history as some sort of holy narrative all have something of the 1970s’s Ülkücü discourse about them.

This dissertation has three primary contributions to the literature. First, through the exposition of the conceptual difference between the symbolic and systematic uses of religion by nationalism, it explains Ülkücü discourse through a conceptual lens.

Second, through analyzing the venues in which the Islamicization occurred, i.e.

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<sup>20</sup> Those who distanced themselves from the MHP founded the *Büyük Birlik Partisi* (Great Unity Party), in the 1990s (Erken, 2013: 240). The founder and leader of this party was none other than Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, who played a central role in the Islamicization of Ülkücü discourse in the late 1970s.

journals published by the Ülkücü movement, I closely tie my analysis to the primary material that is a manifestation of the change I am describing.

There are several potential avenues of future research that result from this paper.

First, comparative research could examine if other nationalist movements—specifically, movements of the Middle East or South Asia—underwent comparable ideological shifts. Second, research could concentrate on the post-1980 development of Ülkücü ideology, particularly regarding the ascent of political Islam and the AKP. Third, interviews could explore how the Ülkücü writers writing for the 1970s journals thought about the significant changes they were making. The study of Ülkücü discourse can also be conducted to produce quantitative data, measuring the extent of Islamic content, and be supported by closer reading of the journals.

Ülkücü ideology's evolution from 1969 through 1980 demonstrates how political movements adjust, mature, and become more extremist due to both internal and external demands. What had originated as secular, elitist nationalism with modernization through state direction turned into mass movement based upon Islamic moralism, anticommunism, and geographic aspiration. This evolution was no accident, nor merely strategic. It was due to ideological work—performed through journals, youth groups, and public campaigns—by individuals who felt that Islam could deliver moral definitions, and even political deliverance. By the end of the 1970s, Ülkücülük had ceased to be a nationalist movement that used Islam for support. It had become a religious nationalism that saw Islam not just as identity but as destiny. And in doing so, it reshaped the political imagination of an entire generation of Turkish nationalists.

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