

Research Article

Modern Foundations of Islamist Thought in Turkey¹

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Abstract

This study examines why the concept of Islamism should be regarded as a distinctly modern phenomenon, despite the pre-modern historical foundations of Islam. Additionally, considering the prevalent critique of modernity within Islamist circles, the study aims to reveal the inherent paradox in categorizing Islamism as modern. Through a contextual discourse analysis within Türkiye's context, the study demonstrates that these critiques are, in fact, articulated within a modern intellectual framework. By analyzing key themes such as the 'Secular Positioning of Religious Understanding', 'The Notion of Superiority and the Idea of Progress', 'Anti-Imperialism', the study ultimately argues that despite its critique of modernity, Islamism constitutes a thoroughly modern expression of Islamic thought.

Keywords: Modern, Islamism, anti-imperialism, secular, laicity

JEL Classification Codes: Y4, Y9

Türkiye'de İslamcı Düşüncenin Modern Temelleri

Öz

Bu çalışma, İslam'ın modern öncesi tarihsel temellerine rağmen İslamcılık kavramının neden özgün bir modern olgu olarak ele alınması gerektiğini tartışmaktadır. Aynı zamanda, İslamcı çevrelerde yaygın olan modernite eleştirisini göz önünde bulundurarak, İslamcılığın modern bir kategori olarak değerlendirilmesindeki içkin paradoksu açığa çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Türkiye bağlamında gerçekleştirilen bağlamsal söylem analizi yoluyla çalışma, söz konusu modernite eleştirilerinin aslında modern entelektüel çerçeve içinde formüle edildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. 'Dini Anlayışın Seküler Konumlanması', 'Üstünlük nosyonu ve İlerleme Fikri', 'Anti-Emperyalizm' gibi temel temalar üzerinden yapılan analiz, İslamcılığın moderniteye yönelik eleştirilerine rağmen nihayetinde modern bir İslami düşünce biçimi olarak şekillendiğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Modern, İslamcılık, anti-emperyalizm, seküler, laiklik

JEL Sınıflandırma Kodları: Y4, Y9

¹ This study is derived from the doctoral dissertation titled "Türk Düşüncesinde Bir Nevabit: İsmet Özel; Ontoloji Üzerinden İslamcılık (A Salient Figure in Islamic Thinking in Turkey: İsmet Özel; Islamism Through Ontology)", prepared under the supervision of Prof. Dr. H. Aliyar Demirci at Graduate School of Social Sciences, Pamukkale University in 2022.

Geliş Tarihi (Received): 16.10.2024 – Kabul Edilme Tarihi (Accepted): 10.06.2025

Atıfta bulunmak için / Cite this paper:

Odacılar, A. (2025). Modern foundations of Islamist thought in Turkey. *Çankırı Karatekin Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 15(3), 795-813. doi: 10.18074/ckuiibfd.1568675

1. Introduction

The idea of Islamism originated in the modern period. Cemaledin Efganî (b.1838 - d.1897) and his student Muhammed Abduh (b.1849 - d.1905) are considered the fathers of Islamism. The idea of Islamism in Türkiye emerged in the mid-19th century, with the first terminological use of the concept dating back to the first quarter of the 20th century, when Yusuf Akçura used it for the first time in 1904. The idea of Islamism, as the majority of thinkers working on it are in agreement (Tunaya, 2007; Bora, 2008; Türköne, 2011; Bulaç, 2014; Çiğdem, 2014; Kara, 2014; Kurtoglu, 2014; Mert, 2014; Aktay, 2014; Ülken, 2015), is a modern idea. There is no doubt that Islamism is modern, despite the fact that the meaning of modernity is defined differently by each author. For example, according to Mardin (1996: p.142), Islamism should be understood as filling an ethical void within the project of modernity, which was regarded as a necessity of the time. On the other hand, Bora suggests that Islamism is a modern ideology that emerged as a demand for religious-cultural restoration concerning how the modern regime ought to be structured (Bora, 2008). The fact that Islamism emerged as a movement in modern times can also be considered a phenomenon that renders Islamism inherently modern. Despite the fact that emerging in the modern period cannot be considered a prerequisite to being recognized as modern, it is important to explain why ideas regarding Islamism developed in the modern period with respect to their relevance to modernity. The absence of identification of the connection points between these interests may lead to ambiguity as to what Islamist thought entails. Furthermore, it can be contended that the emphasis of Islamism on Islam as a religious ideology poses challenges in comprehending the undeniably modern adjective under consideration. This complexity arises due to the historical precedence of Islam as a religion, which predates the modern era and has been ingrained within the Muslim community for more than a millennium. At this juncture, the inquiry can be articulated as follows: How can Islamism, as a modern ideological movement, reconcile its claim to center a religion with over a thousand years of historical continuity within the framework of modernity, which inherently signifies a rupture or transformation from traditional paradigms?

Beyond this seemingly contradictory scenario, the complexity of understanding the modern nature of Islamist thought is further compounded by the existence of critical discourses on modernity within certain Islamist circles. This paradox can be elucidated by framing it within the context of the dominance of modern perspectives as a specific mode of comprehension. In essence, if modernity is construed as a paradigmatic framework dictating a valid mode of understanding, then the Islamists' critique of modernity can be interpreted as a critique within this particular modern framework. However, what merits closer examination is the fact that these critiques, while challenging modernity, are often articulated using the conceptual tools, language, and intellectual frameworks that are themselves products of modernity. This shows a paradox wherein Islamist thought critiques

modernity while simultaneously operating within its epistemological and discursive boundaries. Put differently, if modernity fundamentally shapes the boundaries of understanding, the question arises as to within which conceptual or epistemological framework the critiques advanced by Islamist thinkers against modernity are situated. To encapsulate this query, Islamism, as a concept, can be characterized as a modern manifestation of Islam. Consequently, Islamism encounters no inherent contradiction with modernity in terms of comprehension and expressive modalities. In this context, the contention may be posited that critiques of modernity are more closely tied to the content conveyed through discourse rather than the structural framework of discourse itself. In essence, the critique of modernity by Islamists can be interpreted as aimed at other contemporary outcomes generated through a modern lens of comprehension and articulation. This investigation principally seeks to illuminate this phenomenon by engaging in discussions on diverse topics within Islamic thought, particularly in Türkiye, which has an important place in the debates on Islamism. To explore these themes, this study employs a *contextual discourse analysis* as its methodological framework. Contextual discourse analysis is a qualitative research approach that examines how language and discourse are shaped by and, in turn, shape social, political, and historical contexts. This method is particularly suited to understanding the interplay between Islamist thought and modernity, as it allows for a nuanced examination of how ideas are articulated, contested, and transformed within specific socio-historical settings. In this study, contextual discourse analysis is applied to key texts, speeches, and debates within Türkiye's Islamist intellectual tradition, focusing on how these discourses engage with and critique modernity while simultaneously being embedded within modern frameworks of thought. By situating these discourses within their historical and cultural contexts, the analysis reveals the ways in which Islamist thought appropriates, negotiates, and reinterprets modern concepts and categories. This methodological approach not only highlights the content of Islamist critiques of modernity but also underscores the structural and epistemological conditions that make such critiques possible.

The purpose of this study will be delineated through an exploration of the following themes: (1) 'Secular Positioning of Religious Understanding', (2) 'The Notion of Superiority and the Idea of Progress', (3) 'Anti-Imperialism'. These themes have been selected due to their centrality in understanding the complex interaction between Islamist thought and modernity. In other words, these topics have been chosen with the expectation that they will more effectively illustrate how Islamist thought appropriates and engages with modern modes of understanding.

2. Secular Positioning of Religious Understanding

Secularism or secularization holds a central place in the processes of modernization. The concept of secular has two referents: time and space. The temporal referent of the concept is very similar to the notion of modernity. Etymologically, the Latin

term *saeculum*, from which the concept of secular is derived, in one sense, like the term *modernus* from which the word modern originates, signifies ‘the present time’ and ‘this age’ (Berkes, 2010: p. 18). However, the spatial referent of the concept of secular, we might say, provides its distinguishing and defining characteristic. This dimension can be summarized as worldliness or being related to the world. Here, worldliness and being related to the world denote a particular approach. This approach signifies the decline of religious references in the explanation of events and phenomena (Ertit, 2014: p. 106). In this respect, the concept of secular also represents a negation, in that any explanation should not be otherworldly or religiously based. We can better understand this by examining the context in which the term first emerged. The term secular was initially used to distinguish civil law from ecclesiastical law shortly after the religious wars. Similarly, Christian clergy attributed the meaning of *saeculum* to “*this world we live in, characterized by sin and the rejection of God*” (Ertit, 2020: p. 100). In this regard, just as modernization signifies a shift, secularization can be said to represent the path through which this shift unfolds in the process of modernization.

The ideology and movement of Islamism can be fundamentally interpreted as a response, challenge, or alternative proposition to the processes of secularization and modernization. To understand this dynamic, it is essential to explore how Islamist thinkers engage in what might be termed as the secular positioning of religious conception. This refers to the reinterpretation of Islamic concepts and belief systems within a framework that accommodates or responds to the secular logic of modernity. According to Arslan (2015, p. 9), Islamism can be understood as the intellectual and practical orientations that Muslims, navigating the complexities of the modern world, strive to formulate within the context of modernity. It is not merely a rejection of secularism but also an attempt to adapt and harmonize Islamic principles with the realities of contemporary life.

In this context, Islamism distinguishes itself from the inherent attribute of religion, namely (God's) guidance, by adopting a more worldly and pragmatic approach. Analogous to other ideologies such as Turkism, Fascism, and Communism, Islamism seeks to induce transformative changes in society or individuals, grounded in an idealized truth. However, the utilization of the concept of imaginary truth and transformation in this context carries a secular undertone. It posits that truth can be apprehended through human cognition, thereby equating the comprehension of sacred knowledge with the interpretation by the transmitter. This approach reflects a world-centric orientation², where foundational principles are

² The concept of world-orientedness that we employ bears significant parallels to Heidegger's notion of *being-in-the-world* (*In-der-Welt-sein*). For a detailed exploration of Heidegger's conceptualization, see Ökten (2008, p. 167). From a religious perspective, the idea that truth within the divine realm or the sacred more broadly can manifest in the world in a form that is comprehensible and communicable by humans poses significant challenges. These challenges arise from the complex interplay of language, time, space, and meaning. Any expression of the sacred is inevitably constrained by the limitations of human frameworks. This dynamic underscores the

rooted in worldly considerations rather than purely transcendental or otherworldly frameworks. In this regard, it can be argued that Islamism, as a result of the necessity to employ a modern language, is grounded in a practical discourse that extends to include theological language. The blending of theological and modern discursive frameworks in this way enables Islamist thinkers to maintain their ties to traditional Islamic heritage while articulating their vision through a narrative that resonates with the modern world. It can be claimed that the bidirectional interaction between Islamic tradition and modernity, due to the use of modern language, reflects the secular positioning of religious understanding within Islamist discourse. In other words, this process involves the reinterpretation of traditional concepts through a world-centered and rational lens, as well as the adoption of modern discursive strategies to express Islamic ideals.

As Türköne (2011, pp. 19-36) and Gencer (2017, p. 230) contend, the concept of Islamism serves a dual function. On one hand, it reintroduces religious sensibilities to society through diverse manifestations. On the other hand, influenced by prevailing ideas and movements in the contemporary world, it is rooted in scriptural sources that highlight human reason and action as guiding principles for behavior. This departure from Islam's classical behavioral norms, such as *tawakkul* (reliance on God), obedience, fate, and consent, underscores the evolving nature of Islamist perspectives. One of the factors enabling this transformation can be attributed to the participation of groups outside the traditional religious scholars (*ulema*) in the debates concerning the role of Islam in the modern world. It can be argued that individuals within these groups act with Islamic sensitivities, yet they also produce content of a secular nature regarding the changes occurring in the world. The New Ottomans, who emerged in the post-Tanzimat period, which can be considered the early phase of Islamism, can be evaluated within this context. Odacılar (2022) argues that such individuals occupy a significant place in the discourse of Islamism by enabling the simultaneous consideration of the modern and the traditional. Nonetheless, it is of utmost importance to sidestep misconceptions that suggest a fundamental divergence in understanding between the *ulema* and these groups. The collaborative involvement of both the *ulema* and the intellectual class (*udaba*) during the initial phases of Islamism, particularly in cooperation and consultation on religious matters, underscores the fallacy of such a distinction. Furthermore, the secular structures within educational and organizational institutions responsible for the training and development of the *ulema* in the republican era demonstrate that the situation cannot be solely attributed to the intellectual class. Consequently, it is more accurate to interpret the secularization of religious conceptions as an outcome of evolving comprehension, rather than a deliberate direction. In other words, the

compromised nature of the sacred's existence within the worldly domain. As a result, when humans assert that they are expressing sacred truths, these expressions cannot be considered inherently sacred due to the ontological limitations of meaning. In other words, humans are incapable of fully encapsulating the sacred; they can only approximate partial aspects of it, and what is articulated about the sacred does not itself possess sacredness.

shared understanding of the world and its phenomena by the ulema, intellectual class, and Muslims at large can be identified as a significant factor contributing to the secular positioning of religion.

Islamism emerged as a syncretic ideology aiming to reconcile modernity with Islam, rather than as a purely theoretical self-disclosure. It is crucial to underscore that the emergence of Islamism was shaped by the prevailing conditions of the real world. In essence, the engagement with modernity, facilitated by interactions with the external world, served as the driving force behind the formulation of such a synthesis. Particularly for the Ottoman Empire, grappling with modernity on multiple fronts, the imperative of modernity loomed large. Consequently, Islamism can be comprehended as a response necessitated by this imperative. As a result, the primary endeavors of Islamism were directed towards establishing modern educational institutions, including military schools, and adopting alternative languages of instruction, perceived as essential to address these demands (Kara, 2016). The principle of acknowledging the significance of contemporary realities and endeavoring to harmonize with them has consistently wielded influence throughout the history of Islamist thought. In this context, Bora (2008, p. 8) regards Islamism as a dynamic manifestation of the Turkish Right, possessing the ability to adapt and discover channels of expression as potent as modernity itself. This characteristic becomes even more evident in instances where the imperatives and crucial elements of the real world are seamlessly integrated into Islamic ideology, consequently transforming Islamism. An illustrative example in this context is the implementation of the interest-free banking system in the 1980s. It can be argued that the field of Islamic economics and the endeavors towards interest-free banking, which can be seen as a form of defense and a construct of Islamic Capitalism, have, both mentally and in practice, propelled Islamist circles into the realm of liberal politics and economics. These efforts have garnered support and received fatwas (religious rulings) from scholars of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) (Kara, 2013, p. 37). Some scholars also refer to this phenomenon as 'fiqhist modernization' (Gencer, 2013). By "*fiqhist modernization*", it is meant the approach of seeking sharia rulings on various matters and obtaining fatwas in the process of modernization (Gencer, 2013, p. 86). Irrespective of the terminology employed, the secular positioning of religion as a vehicle to attain harmony between the tangible and the metaphysical constitutes a conceptual framework with profound implications for Muslims, encapsulating their concerns.

Whether Islamist thought attributes necessity to religious ideas or extracts meanings from religious sources regarding the exigencies of the real world, it consistently situates its conception of religion as secular, recognizing that humans are the agents responsible for constructing meaning. In this context, science can be regarded as the pivotal domain for this conception, as it can be argued that science functions as both the catalyst and sustainer of the exigencies present in the tangible world.

Therefore, Renan's lecture on Islam and Science³ can be considered a distinct starting point for elucidating this particular positioning. As noted by Cündioğlu (1996), the discourse on the relationship between Islam and science has been a subject of direct or indirect discussion in various texts since the conference. The secular positioning of the understanding of religion, arising from the pursuit of harmony between the demands of the tangible world and religious beliefs, has facilitated the influence of science on the fundamental comprehension of religion. One potential consequence of this influence is the reinforcement of belief through scientific causality. This impact can be illustrated through a debate that transpired during the Second Constitutional Monarchy. In his article titled 'Tarih-i İstikbal' (History of Future), Celal Nuri Bey articulated the role of religion as follows:

"We have only one means to reach the truth: Ilm. Religion, on the other hand, is the instrument that informs us about the existence of a truth that is unattainable or symbolically represents it. Any statement that discusses the mystery of the universe, or claims that this mystery has been solved, through any theory, knowledge, science, or philosophy, is empty" (Cited from Celal Nuri, Kam, 2014, p. 573).

Ferid Kam, one of the Islamists during the Second Constitutional Monarchy, responded to Celal Nuri Bey's statements in a manner that clearly illustrates the mentioned influence:

"The author's words constitute a claim. Every claim must be substantiated by evidence. Claims lacking evidence are deemed abstract statements. Just as in scientific matters, abstract statements carry no value, even in ordinary issues. Ideas are refuted by ideas, and evidence is invalidated by evidence. If the author of Tarih-i İstikbal possesses supporting evidence to validate this claim, it should be presented; if unable to do so, it should be acknowledged that abstract statements lack scientific merit, and grand claims should not be ventured without substantiation." (Kam, 2014, p. 573).

The secular positioning of the conception of religion has given rise to the creation of a direct synonym between the authority of religion and the authority of the state. Although a religious significance was associated with the state as an authority after the death of the Prophet, the amalgamation of worldly power and the power of religion has unmistakably surfaced as a natural consequence of the secular positioning of the conception of religion in modern Islamist thought. The response given by Sheikh-ul-Islam Musa Kasım (2014, p. 133) to the question "Can this world be given so much importance?" can exemplify this situation: "Yes, it can. Because if it is not given importance, we would perish. Especially, this century is the era of progress. ... Moreover, if our world is not prosperous, the country will

³ In this conference, Ernest Renan, a positivist, attributed the underdevelopment of Muslim countries to Islam (Renan, 1946: p. 184), thereby introducing certain questions into the agenda of Islamist thinkers, such as *Is Islam an obstacle to progress?* or *Does religion conflict with science?* In his speech, Renan argues that Islam shackles the minds of Muslims and that those who seek progress must first free themselves from these constraints (Cündioğlu, 1996: pp.5,7; Renan, 1946: p. 210).

sink. Then, neither religion, nor honor, nor faith will remain." The question posed by İsmet Özel for the first time in his column in Yeni Devir in 1977 and subsequently expressed in his book 'Üç Mesele- Teknik, Medeniyet, Yabancılaşma' in 1978, "*Shall we strive to reach a strong society and its Islamization, or shall we strive to reach a Muslim society and strengthen it?*" is significant in this regard. This question both challenges the secular positioning of religion in relation to the real world and suggests directly addressing religion itself. It can be argued that within the Islamic thought tradition in Türkiye, there is a generally accepted tendency to favor the first option.

It is conceivable to position the concept of returning to the sources (kaynaklara dönüş düşüncesi) as a cornerstone of Islamist thought and central to the secular positioning of religious conception. The foundational assumptions of the concept of returning to the sources seem ample for this central role. Firstly, the concept assumes that there exists a state of backwardness in Islamic countries and that this backwardness stems from Muslims rather than Islam itself⁴. Secondly, it believes in the possibility of reaching the essential principles of religion that are applicable in the modern world by purging deviations caused by culture and history. The tendency of Islamists who turn to sources in line with these assumptions is inherent to a modern mind. Kara (2014b, p. 53) has illustrated this situation as follows:

"The inclination of Islamists towards returning to the sources carries modern appearances. It is known that they are more inclined to perceive the world they have envisioned or will envision in a way that supports their ideas, rather than intending to grasp the scriptures as they are. They are at least inclined towards rationalizing, and it is known that they frequently employ the method of "ta'wil" - which is intertwined with interpretation and explanation - in this regard, as much as they criticize scholars who utilize it."

This tendency can be interpreted as the integration of religion into the modern secular world. This becomes particularly evident in the Islamists' approach to miracles and supernatural phenomena. According to Kara (2014b), Islamists have attempted to reconcile their faith with the secular world by either denying miracles—particularly those mentioned in the hadiths—or by rationalizing them. Furthermore, they often regard supernatural phenomena, especially those associated with Sufism, as mere superstitions. This perspective aligns with the foundational principles of the modern secular worldview, which seeks to explain the world and its events through reason or determinism, strictly within the confines of the natural world. Miracles and supernatural phenomena, by their very nature, fall outside this framework. To facilitate this integration, Islamists have developed various rationalizations. For instance, Muhammad Abduh compared the fire stones

⁴ In his 2018 article, where Mehmet Şevket Eygi attributed the general trajectory of the world and the country to a departure from Islam, his statement, "*The fault lies not in the era but in the people*", can be cited as evidence that this perspective remains relevant today.

thrown by the swallows (ebabil birds) mentioned in the Chapter of the Elephant to a type of flower microbe. Similarly, Abduh explained the concept of jinn as a form of microbe. Seyyid Ahmed Han, on the other hand, interpreted the melting of the mountain before Moses as a volcanic eruption. Additionally, the phrase “*strike the rock with your staff*” in verse 60 of the Chapter of the Cow has been reinterpreted as a reference to a centrifuge apparatus (Kara, 2014b, pp. 53–54). These examples illustrate the efforts to reconcile religious narratives with a secular, rationalist framework.

The debates that emerged in the 1990s around the *Medina Charter* (*Şahīfat al-Madīna*), as discussed in *Birikim Dergisi* within the framework of Islamist thinker Ali Bulaç’s proposals, can be viewed as a recent manifestation of this intellectual trajectory. These debates sought to ground the modern value of ‘pluralism’ in Islamic tradition by returning to primary sources, arguing that pluralistic principles were inherent in early Islamic practice⁵.

3. The Dialectic of Superiority and Progress in Islamic Thought: Reconciling Tradition and Modernity

It can be argued that, in general, for adherents of a religion, and specifically for Muslims who follow Islam, the ultimate truth is embodied within their faith. It can be argued that the concept of superiority holds a central position in the Islamic intellectual tradition and serves as a theological and ideological foundation for Islamists. The belief that Islam encompasses the ultimate truth is, in this regard, said to shape the actions and motivations of Islamist movements. In this context, it can be posited that the ideology of Islamism emerged fundamentally in parallel with the perception that this sense of superiority had eroded, particularly in the face of Western modernity and colonialism. The concept of superiority in Islamist thought is not merely a theological claim but is also interpreted in relation to historical and contemporary realities. It is possible to argue that this psychological state, rooted in the assumption that adherents of the religion believed to possess ultimate truth must also be powerful in the world, enabled Islamist thought to connect with the modern idea of progress.

Within Islamism, two primary approaches—modern and conservative—can be identified, both aiming to reinforce the idea of Islamic superiority. These approaches are not tied to specific proponents but can be described as general modes of thinking applicable to Islamist thought as a whole. The conservative approach emphasizes examples and acknowledgments of modern progress within

⁵ While the methodological approach to extracting insights from these debates remains consistent, the discussions themselves are remarkably comprehensive in scope. For key contributions to these debates, see: Bulaç, (1992); Akçam, (1992); Dilipak, (1992); Karaman et al., (1993).

Islamic history and tradition, while the modern approach seeks to reinterpret Islam through the lens of contemporary rationality. This dual perspective is also evident in the view of Turkish modernization as a form of Islamization (Kara, 2014). According to this perspective, progress and modernization can only be positively regarded if they align with Islamic principles, which are tied to the ultimate acceptance of superiority. Conversely, changes envisioned within the framework of modernization must already be inherent in Islam, which is considered the ultimate truth. Yıldırım (2013, p. 103) elaborates on this view, stating that Islamism evokes the idea of reviving Islamic tradition and aims to return to the authentic principles of Islam in response to deviations caused by external ideologies. He states:

“Islamism involves developing responses to the decline of the Islamic sphere caused by modernization through Islamization or re-Islamization. When faced with intellectual and political threats, it necessitates turning to Islam or becoming Muslim again, thereby reconstructing and defending Islamic thought.”

The belief in the inherent superiority of Islam, coupled with the loss of worldly power and the perceived decline of the Muslim world, can be seen as the underlying reason for Islamists' critiques of the regression of the Islamic world. Islamists argue that if the Islamic world has fallen behind, it is not due to Islam itself but rather to Muslims' deviation from its true principles. Therefore, progress is only possible through a return to or reinforcement of Islamic values, a process that often parallels the modern idea of progress. This perspective can be seen as revealing the dynamics of revival (ihya) movements in Islamic thought, which developed alongside modernization efforts.

The notions of backwardness and progress are not unique to Islamic thought; they are fundamental modern categories deeply rooted in Enlightenment and modernist thinking, used to depict the world. The Western concept of progress can be explained through a linear historical framework, categorizing societies as ‘advanced’ or ‘backwardness’ based on their proximity to modernist ideals. This framework, which positions the ‘human subject’ as the arbiter of knowledge and history, has profoundly influenced global intellectual discourse and placed humanity in a position of agency and power in understanding the world. There is a direct connection between progress and the presentation of knowledge in this manner. According to Özel (2009, p. 104), the most distinctive feature of modern thought is the belief in the world's orientation toward progress, which has been internalized as a form of faith.

This linear understanding of progress particularly shaped the self-perception of the Islamic world in the 19th and 20th centuries. The decline of Islamic civilizations became a primary concern for Muslim intellectuals during this period. Concepts such as necat (salvation) and felah (success) emerged from feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, reflecting anxieties about progress and rebirth (Kara, 2014, p. 20;

Gencer, 2017, pp. 260-282). Namık Kemal, a prominent figure among the Young Ottomans, articulates this thought in his article titled ‘İstikbal’ (The Future):

“Let it be carefully considered: is human life anything but the future? What is the past? An endless death. What is the present? A fleeting existence. For the individual and society, the past may be happy and glorious, but what benefit does it hold for today? Today may be comfortable and secure, but what grace does it offer for tomorrow? Our future is secure because, according to the fundamental principle of Islamic jurisprudence, 'rulings must change with the changing times.' As we are obliged to perceive the manifestations of progress rising from all corners of the world, it is not permissible to turn back to the past or remain stagnant in the present” (Namık Kemal, cited in Kara, 2014b, p. 19).

Another concept closely related to progress is that of civilization. Elias (2000, p. 73) defines civilization as the West's perception of progress, noting that the concept is used to classify societies as primitive or advanced. It can be argued that the concept of civilization holds a significant place in discussions of progress within Islamist thought. From the Young Ottomans to contemporary Islamists, the central role of the concept of civilization in debates about the revival of Islam serves as evidence of this. Moreover, it can be argued that Islamists have developed their own understanding of civilization, linked to their religion. For instance, the term is derived from Medina (city) with religious connotations and signifies development and progress in the same sense as the Western concept of civilization (Duran, 2014, p. 146). The concept of Islamic civilization, which emerged during the Second Constitutional Era, marks a significant turning point in Islamic thought. Previously absent in historical discourse, this concept became a rallying point for Islamic intellectuals aiming to transcend Western modernity. In this sense, the Islamic understanding of civilization can be seen as both a response to Western modernity and a perspective that transcends it. Sezai Karakoç (1986) argues that Islamic civilization represents the pinnacle of the civilization of truth and that humanity will inevitably turn to it following the collapse of Western civilization. Similarly, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1999, pp. 182-183) states:

“The eternal and enduring civilization, which signifies the reconstruction of the world, does not require active effort. The name of this religion is Islam.”

In conclusion, the concepts of superiority and progress are deeply intertwined in Islamic thought, shaping both Muslims' self-perception and their responses to modernity. The belief in the inherent superiority of Islam has guided efforts toward revival and Islamization, while the linear understanding of history underlying the idea of progress has provided a framework for understanding and overcoming the perceived decline of the Islamic world.

4. Anti-Imperialism

One of the most significant factors contributing to the emergence of Islamism in the 19th century is undoubtedly the relationships established with modern states. This relationship can be called colonialism or imperialism. It can be argued that Muslims who reflect on the domineering consequences of these relations often resort to expressions aimed at strengthening ties among Muslims or Muslim states, which holds a significant place within Islamist thought⁶. For many researchers (Ayoob, 2008; Türköne, 2011; Kara, 2014b; Al-Azmeh: 2017, Karpat, 2017 etc.), the consequences of the relationship with the West play a crucial role in the emergence of Islamism as a mode of cohesion and a discourse of unity. This relationship can be referred to as colonialism or imperialism. Kurtoğlu (2014, p. 201) defines Islamism, with a focus on this relationship, as follows: *“Islamism is a political liberation ideology and project that emerged in the 19th century in the Islamic geography, aiming to achieve independence for Muslim states that had become colonies of the West.”* Similarly, Esposito (2002, p. 101) highlights colonialism as the most significant event that shaped the relationship between Islam and the West. Çiğdem (2014, p. 27) also emphasizes the historical formation of Islamism, stating that this historicity is based on *“the social consequences of phenomena such as imperialism or colonialism, resistance against these consequences, or transforming these consequences to the benefit of Islamic societies.”* Thus, this relationship is central to the emergence of Islamist thought. According to the Islamic world, the West has gained material and technological superiority over the East through the influence of modernization movements. Furthermore, the Islamic world perceives that the West has solidified this superiority by establishing exploitative relationships with not only the Islamic world but also the rest of the world (Kara, 2014b, p. 20). Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, almost the entire Islamic world, from the Indian subcontinent to North Africa, was colonized by modern Western states (Ayoob, 2008, p. 6). This colonial situation in the nineteenth century was identified as the first thing that Muslims needed to liberate themselves from. In societies where the modern concept of nation had not yet formed, this liberation often manifested itself as a religious salvation.

In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, there was a significant public interest in the Muslim-majority centers regarding the unity of Muslims (Pan-Islamist thought) and their liberation from colonial rules. The concept/idea of Pan-Islamism generally refers to the creation and support of such a public sentiment. In this regard, while Pan-Islamism is not synonymous with Islamism⁷, it has

⁶ While this can be formally expressed as Pan-Islamism in terms of integration, this part claims that Islamist thought has developed a modern and anti-imperialist discourse from these related narratives.

⁷ Pan-Islamism, which refers to the unity of Islam, does not directly fall within the framework of Islamist thought in terms of the consolidation of Islamic states or the unification of Muslims under one state. However, the concept of Islamic unity can be considered within the scope of Islamist thought when it is interpreted as the unification of sects, the harmonization of the Quran or Muslim practices. In the latter case, as a modern assumption, it assumes that the division of people into sects

influenced Islamism by addressing the dominant phenomenon of colonialism during that period and generating a broader public awareness. Aydın (2013, p. 47) has explained the reason and the public influence of Pan-Islamism during the emergence of Islamism as follows:

“The issue of Muslim Unity, widely discussed in the Muslim press in places like Cairo, Bombay, Istanbul, or Singapore, during the half-century between the 1870s and 1920, primarily emerged as a result of the legitimacy debate surrounding the imperial world order and the discourse on Orientalism and Muslim modernism. Those who embraced the vision of a Pan-Islamist world order represented a Muslim public opinion that was widespread beyond the segments with Islamic sensitivities towards social life, going beyond discussions of Muslim modernism. This issue found considerable attention in the European and American press, highlighting the legitimacy debates and the clash between Orientalism and Muslim modernism during that period.”

It can be argued that the merging of religious objectives with the struggle for liberation from colonialism in the lands where Muslims lived gave rise to the anti-imperialist meaning of Islamism, which emerged in the 19th century. The use of the term *necât* (salvation) to describe the essence of Islamism in the 19th century can also be linked to its anti-imperialist identity in this regard (Kara, 2013, p. 17). This situation can be said to have brought about a dual dynamic: on the one hand, it aligned Islamism's religious interpretation with the modern values established by the West, and on the other hand, it imbued Islamist thought with a character of resistance against the West's political and military domination, which was seen as a flawed understanding of modernity. This dual stance can be defined as being both against the West (in the context of political and military domination) and with the West (in terms of modern values), and it can be argued that it remains relevant today through criticisms directed at the West in different contexts. This dual perspective is evident both in contemporary indictments of the West for neglecting human rights and in intra-Islamic critiques of human rights violations, which are frequently framed as incompatible with Islam's authentic teachings.

The presence of anti-imperialism may be seen as a defining feature of Islamism, setting it apart from Pan-Islamist ideology and playing a role in the assimilation of a viable understanding of modernity within Islamism. In this regard, the concept of anti-imperialism may be understood in relation to an implicit understanding of modernity (Özel, 2009, pp. 104-105). According to this understanding, just as Muslims, through various reasons, have lagged in embracing the foundations of modernity despite their translation efforts, the West has also distorted modernity by utilizing it for misguided purposes. The anti-imperialist characteristic associated with Islamism, therefore, carries a meaning that universalizes modernity while disparaging the Western model of modernity. In the context where the Western

can be overcome through correct interpretation. Therefore, the unification of Muslim states or the unification of Muslims under a single state can also be evaluated within the framework of Islamist thought if expressed in such implications.

modernity model has established a system of inequality and exploitation, Islamists present Islam as an alternative that rejects "*all kinds of worldly privileges, claims of superiority among individuals in terms of legal rights, and advocates for fraternity and diversity as the essence of the religion*" (Naim, 2014, p. 339). Hence, given the attribute of anti-imperialism, it is plausible to assert that in conjunction with Western modernity, other manifestations of modernity coexist. Furthermore, this observation sheds light on the manner in which Muslims are situated within the context of modernity, adopting a non-Western approach. The manifestation of Islamic civilization inside the concept of Islamic civilization as an alternative style within modernity might be interpreted as a more implicit statement of an anti-imperialist nature. From a scholarly perspective, it may be argued that anti-imperialism is a notable characteristic that Islamist ideology embraces, signifying a modern Islamic interpretation.

One may posit that the anti-imperialist nature inherent in the ideology of Islamism and its associated cognitive framework have undergone transformations over time, influenced by the development of imperialist ideologies. During the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century, the anti-imperialist ideology mostly manifested itself via tangible goals, notably the emancipation of Muslim nations from colonial rules. Nevertheless, with the waning of physical colonialism throughout the latter part of the 20th century, its significance has predominantly shifted towards intangible goals. The aforementioned shift may also be discerned by examining the evolving viewpoints of Orientalists. In the 19th century, a period marked by the emergence of Islamism, scholars known as Orientalists espoused the viewpoint that Islam was an impediment to development, commonly referred to as impediment to development (man-i terakki). Furthermore, these scholars contended that Muslims, in their existing condition, lacked the capacity to achieve improvements. They conducted comprehensive studies ranging from linguistic analysis to theology, addressing various topics such as the closed door of ijtihad (independent legal reasoning), the conflict between reason and revelation, sectarian differences, the relationship between religion and the state, and the authenticity of Hadiths (Kara, 2014b, pp. 20-21). None of the aforementioned issues have been rejected on the basis of an understanding of the existence on which the views of Orientalists are based. Following Edward Said's problematization and subsequent studies on hegemony, Orientalists and Orientalism began to be viewed as agents of the colonization of the mind. Consequently, during this period and thereafter, the ideas of Orientalists themselves acquired a pejorative meaning as 'Orientalist expressions' and were incorporated into the realm of anti-imperialism. In this context, those who articulated these ideas within the discourse of localism and national identity (or, more broadly, the discourse of 'our civilization') were regarded as colonized individuals or individuals with colonizing intentions. In this regard, it can be argued that the anti-imperialist character of Islamist thought encompasses a protective dimension against exploitative ideas originating from the outside. As a contemporary example of the anti-imperialist character within Islamist

thought, one may consider the Civilizational Vision School (Medeniyet Tasavvuru Okulu⁸), spearheaded by Yusuf Kaplan. The school, which advocates for an Islam-based civilization, implicitly explains its *raison d'être* through the following critique, which also reveals the current anti-imperialist stance framed in terms of the new meaning of Orientalism: “*We are hurtling toward the abyss, driven by a secular intelligentsia that has lost its own civilizational spirit and the capacity to grasp the West in depth—reduced to epistemic slaves who, like leashed locusts, have fallen in love with their own executioners*”. (Medeniyet Tasavvuru Okulu, n.d)

5. Conclusion

This study has sought to explore the complex relationship between Islamism and modernity, arguing that despite its critique of modernity, Islamism is fundamentally a modern phenomenon. Through a contextual discourse analysis within the Turkish context, the study has demonstrated that Islamist thought, while often positioning itself in opposition to modernity, operates within the intellectual and discursive frameworks that modernity provides. This paradox is evident in the ways Islamist thinkers engage with key themes such as the secular positioning of religious understanding, the concept of superiority and the idea of progress, and anti-imperialism.

The secular positioning of religious understanding reveals how Islamist thought reinterprets traditional Islamic concepts through a modern, rational lens. This process involves a pragmatic adaptation of Islamic principles to the realities of the modern world, often blending theological language with modern discursive strategies. The emphasis on human agency and the reinterpretation of sacred texts in light of contemporary needs underscore the secular underpinnings of Islamist thought, even as it seeks to maintain its connection to Islamic tradition.

The concept of superiority and the idea of progress further illustrate the modern nature of Islamist thought. Islamists argue that the perceived decline of the Muslim world is not due to Islam itself but to the deviation of Muslims from its true principles. This belief in the inherent superiority of Islam drives efforts toward revival and Islamization, which are often framed in terms of progress and modernization. The linear understanding of history and the emphasis on progress, both central to modernist thinking, are thus integral to Islamist thought, even as it critiques certain outcomes of modernity.

Finally, the anti-imperialist dimension of Islamism highlights its modern character. Emerging in response to Western colonialism and imperialism, Islamist thought has

⁸ The Civilizational Vision School (Medeniyet Tasavvuru Okulu) was established in 2009 under the Silk Road Civilizations Research and Application Center at Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University. It can be regarded as one of the most recent movements within Islamist thought. For further details, see: <https://www.izu.edu.tr/medeniyet-tasavvuru-okulu/hakimizda>

developed a discourse of resistance that is both critical of Western domination and aligned with certain modern values. This dual stance—opposing Western political and military dominance while embracing aspects of modernity—underscores the complex interplay between Islamism and modernity. The anti-imperialist critique, while rooted in the historical experiences of Muslim societies, is articulated using modern intellectual frameworks, further reinforcing the modernity of Islamist thought.

In conclusion, Islamism, despite its critique of modernity, is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Its engagement with modernity is not merely oppositional but deeply intertwined with modern intellectual and discursive frameworks. The themes explored in this study—secular positioning, superiority and progress, and anti-imperialism—demonstrate that Islamist thought is shaped by and operates within the conditions of modernity. As such, Islamism represents a modern expression of Islamic thought, one that seeks to reconcile the challenges of the contemporary world with the enduring principles of Islam. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of Islamist thought and its relationship with modernity, offering insights that are particularly relevant in the context of ongoing debates about the role of religion in modern societies.

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Ethics Statement: The author declares that ethical rules have been followed in all the preparation processes for this study. In case of a contrary situation regarding scientific ethics issues, all responsibility belongs to the authors of the study and Çankırı Karatekin University Journal of Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences has no responsibility.