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BILAL GÖKKIR

The Role of State Policies in Modern Qur’anic Exegesis in Turkey: Case of Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır (1878–1942) and His Exegesis

Abstract

This paper explores modern Turkey’s political and intellectual attitudes and their reflections on Qur’anic studies in the example of Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır (1878–1942) whose exegetical work has been widely and influentially circulated. The task of the exegesis in Turkish was offered by Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs) to Yazır as a result of the parliamentary decision in 1926 just after the closing of the *madrasas* in 1924. The idea was that Islamic sources, at least at the level of basic knowledge should be made available to the people in their native language. Yazır began to work on exegesis of the Qur’an, *Hak Dini Kur’an Dili* (The Religion of the Truth, The Language of the Qur’an) and completed in 1938. It might be seen that the exegesis was a product of secular governmental initiation with its control-oriented character. However, at the end it was revealed that Yazır resisted the politics in the favor of traditional Islamic understanding.

1. Introductory remarks

The literature of modern Qur’anic studies from the non-Arabic speaking world is not easily available to the Western reader. In fact, it has been a custom that almost all modern studies on the history of *tafsir* follow the footsteps of Ignaz Goldziher, who seemed to limit himself to exegetical literature of the Arabic speaking world in his *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegen* (Leiden, 1920). Being loyal to Goldziher, Jacques Jomier in his *Le Commentaire Coranique du Manār, Tendances Modernes de L’exégèse Coranique en Egypte* also focuses on particularly Egyptian Qur’anic commentaries, *Manār* by Muhammad Abduh (1905) and also on the exegesis of Rashid Rida (1935) as representatives of contemporary interpretation. It seems that this neglect continued into the second half of the 20th century, as John M. S. Baljon admits his regret at not being able to cover Turkish scholarship in his *Modern Muslim Kor’an Interpretations 1880–1960*.¹ Similarly, Andrew Rippin does not mention Turkish Qur’anic studies in his *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*.²

¹ John M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880–1960)*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961, p. vii.

² Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge, 1990. The translation of Goldziher’s work into Arabic by ‘Ali Hasan ‘Abd al-Qādir, under the title *al-Madhahib al-Islamiyya fi Tafsir al-Qur’an*, Cairo: Matba’at al-‘ulum, 1944, seems to have been very

Despite this neglect by the Western world, Turkish Qur'anic studies have made a considerable contribution to Qur'anic studies, both in the modern and pre-modern era. Research on *tafsir* literature in the Ottoman era however shows that while approaches were mainly concentrated on the linguistic study of the Qur'an, most of the time these treatises were rewritten classical exegetical works on the treatises of Zamakhshari, Razi and Baydawi, in annotated styles. Research also shows that commentary works were concerned with individual *suras*, rather than with the entire text of the Qur'an.³

Turkish Islamic and Qur'anic scholarship deserves scholarly attention first of all for its Ottoman legacy and secondly because of modern Turkey's particular history in Qur'anic studies, which has been extensively re-shaped by methods originated in the West, and perspectives and politics that developed over two centuries of Westernization policy. Thus, this paper aims to expose the status of the contemporary study of the Qur'an in Turkey in the example of Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır (1878–1942) one of the important Turkish scholars of Qur'anic studies, whose exegetical work has been widely and influentially circulated in Turkish Islamic and Qur'anic studies. However, first, the intellectual and institutional background of Turkey will be examined. In this regard, secularist, modernist, and Westernized political and intellectual attitudes and their reflections in Qur'anic studies will be presented. This paper will then explore to what extent the above-mentioned Turkish exegete demonstrated influences from the national/local context in his texts.⁴

2. The emerging modern republic: The transition from the Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic as context

The 19th and early 20th centuries were a time of physical and ideological challenges for the Ottomans. At this time Turkish Muslims were adapting Western political systems

influential on Muslim scholars as well; for example, people like Husayn al-Dhahabi (1961) in his *al-Tafsir wa'l-Mufasssirin*, Ismail Cerrahoglu (1988), in his *Tefsir Tarihi*, (2 vols) (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1988) and Ali Turgut in his *Tefsir Usulu ve Kaynakları*, (Istanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı, 1994) limit themselves to Arabic-speaking scholarship and talk only about Shah Wali Allah al-Dahlawi (d. 1762), Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan (d. 1898), Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935), as if they were the only modern representatives of Qur'anic studies in the Muslim world. Recent attempts in the West, however, have been made to include Qur'anic studies from other parts of the Muslim world, like Turkey, Iran, Malaysia and Indonesia. Abdullah Said's work on Indonesian Qur'anic studies is a significant step. See: Abdullah Saeed (ed.), *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesia*, London: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005.

³ For further information, see: Bilal Gökkır at al. (ed.), *Osmanlı Toplumunda Kur'an Kültürü ve Tefsir Çalışmaları* (Qur'anic Culture and Exegetical Works in Ottoman Society), Istanbul: Kur'an ve Tefsir Akademisi, 2011; Muhammad Abay, "Osmanlı Döneminde Yapılan Tefsir ile ilgili Eserler Bibliyografyası" (Bibliography of Exegetical Works in Ottoman Period), *Divan*, 1999, Vol. 4, p. 256–257.

⁴ For evaluations of modern Turkish exegetical works in English see: B. Gökkır, "The Application of Western Comparative Religious and Linguistic Approaches to the Qur'an in Turkey", *Journal of Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, Vol. 14, No. 3, July 2003, p. 249–263; Necmettin Gökkır, *The Application of Modern Critical Theories to the Study of the Qur'an – With a Particular Focus on Qur'anic Studies in Turkey between 1980–2002* (unpublished PhD Thesis, Manchester University 2004). For Yazır in particular, see: Ismail Albayrak, "Turkish Exegesis of the Twentieth Century: Hak Dini Kur'an Dili", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2004, p. 391–413.

such as democracy, the idea of parliaments and constitutions and ethical systems and values such as human rights, liberation and equality. Namık Kemal, like many other Ottoman-Turkish thinkers, debated the idea of liberty, Islamic renewal and Western polemics on Islam in his journal, *Hürriyet* (Liberty, published in Istanbul and Paris 1868–1873). The physical and intellectual challenges of the West, Pan-Islamism (the unity of the *ummah*/Muslim community), de-colonialism, etc. were subjects that were used as an opportunity to help Islam and the Empire recover from their current positions. The scholars generally concentrated around two journals: *Sebilurresad* and *Sirat-ı Mustakim*. As a matter of fact, in these articles and elsewhere, the West was criticized for its imperialist/colonialist character, moral bankruptcy and for the abuses of Orientalism. However, at the same time, the West was taken, by some others, as a role model and Western values and ideas are tried to be accommodated. In any way the West and its values were in discussion. Consequently Westernization led to fundamental changes in behavior and belief about economics, politics, social organizations and intellectual discourse, as well as discussions about secularization and rationalization in religion.⁵

As a result, Western ideologies and perspectives were largely transferred to institutes in the Empire and modern Turkey.⁶ Starting from the late years of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey made constant attempts to adapt Western education, legal and political systems and institutions. The 19th century, for instance, was a time of fundamental reformation. Sultan Mahmud II, who tried to modernize the army and administrative structures, emerged as the best-known contemporary Muslim leader. The period is often known as the era of *Tanzimat* (Reorganization). In general terms, the reorganization was concerned with restructuring a government and simultaneously improving its status in order to cope with existing problems.⁷

A limited number of *ulama* (scholars) made a direct or important contribution to *Tanzimat*. One of the best known was Ahmed Cevdet Pasha (d. 1895), who had undergone both a traditional religious education and a modern education. Cevdet Pasha was the most important figure in the creation of *Majalla*, a formulation of a civil code that combined Islamic legal principles with new legal ideas.⁸ Some intellectual movements that took place at this time were, for example, the Young Turks, who were influenced by European liberal thinking, *Servet-i Funūn* (The Wealth of Knowledge), which was influenced by Western thought via literature and the Ottoman Society of Science (1897–1898), which published *Majmu al-Funūn*, which was about modern Anglo-Saxon philosophy.⁹ A Turkish sociologist, Ziya Gökalp (d. 1924) – another important figure – tried to find some grounds for reconciliation between Western scientific thought and purely religious Muslim thought. As a follower of

⁵ See: Gustave Edmund von Grunebaum, “The Problem of Cultural Influence”, in: *Modern Islam: the Search for Cultural Identity*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1962, p. 18.

⁶ For further information, see: William Montgomery Watt, “Islam and the West”, in: *Islam in the Modern World*, Denis Mac Eoin and Ahmed al-Shahi (eds.), London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1983, p. 4–5.

⁷ For further information, see: John Obert Voll, *Islam Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994, p. 88.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁹ For further information, see: Abdulhak Adnan Adivar, “Islamic and Western Thought: Turkey”, in: *Near Eastern Culture and Society: A Symposium on the Meeting of East and West*, T. Cuyler Young (ed.), Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951, p. 124.

Durkheim, Gökalp proposed a distinction between *medeniyet* (civilization) and *hars* (culture). He argued that Turkey should adapt Western civilization, while national and Islamic culture is preserved.¹⁰ At the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire had become a country where all the major issues of Islam at that time could be observed. Reform involved the adaptation of Western techniques and ideas. The re-assertion of Islamic authenticity and the restatement of Islam in terms of modern rationalism were common themes in the Islamic experience at the time.

As a result, most of the social and value systems of the West, were integrated even in the religious sphere. To initiate a modern Western-style religious program, for instance, the mosque services were set up with new instructions in the name of the purification, simplification and modernization of religion and religious rituals. In order to reach this “modern goal”, Turkish language was proposed as the language of worship in the mosques. To achieve this goal, some other political reforms in religion also took place. The closing of Islamic courts and *madrasa* (religious schools), for instance, followed the abolition of the Caliphate and the ministry of Religious Affairs and Trusts in 1924. The adoption, in 1926, of the European system of civil, criminal, and commercial law completed the legal reformation. *Tarikat* (Islamic Sufi orders), *tekke* (monasteries) and *türbe* (tombs or shrines) were all banned in 1925. In 1928, the statement in the constitution ‘The Religion of the Turkish State is Islam’ was finally removed.¹¹

1928 was also the year when the Latin script was introduced as the new “Turkish script”, after hundreds of years of using the Arabic script for Turkish. For the purpose of Westernization, the culture would have to be cut off from its traditional roots. The replacement of the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet was perhaps the most radical reform, in a cultural sense, in the history of Republic. However, the question here is whether this reform was born out of nationalism or a desire to westernize the state. To abolish anything Arabic might appear to be a nationalistic policy, but adopting Latin was certainly an attempt at Westernization, as the Latin script had never been used before for writing Turkish. The Arabic script, on the contrary, had a long history in Turkish culture. The effect of this reform was, therefore, immense. “This change”, Esposito observes, “effectively cut off younger generations of Turks from the religious and literary heritage of their Islamic, Ottoman past, which was preserved in its official, religious, and literary language, Arabic”.¹²

The state, on the other hand, worked on the Westernization project by giving Islam a more Turkish character so that all Turks could understand their faith without having to resort to interpreters, mediators or religious authorities (i.e. *ulama*). In this effort, the translation of the Qur’an into Turkish and its use in the mosque is very important. Although the attempt failed to last for long, the Turkish language briefly replaced Arabic as the language of religion, as seen in *müezzin*’s five daily calls to prayer and the sermons given in the mosque from between 1932 and 1950.¹³ However, classical arguments were used for

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 126.

¹¹ For further information about these reforms, see: Osman Nuri Ergin, *Türk Maarif Tarihi* (An Educational History of Turkey), Istanbul: Eser Matbaası, 1977, Vol. 5, p. 1605–2005.

¹² John Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984, p. 102.

¹³ For further information, see: H. Aydar and N. Gökkir, “Discussion on the Language of Prayer in Turkey: A Modern Version of the Classical Debate”, *Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2007, p. 121–136.

the reasoning behind this process. It has been argued that the basis of the ideas behind this transformation occurred earlier in Islamic history and came to mind before the proclamation of the Republic. In fact, thinkers like Ali Suavi (d. 1878) and Jamaladdin Afgani (d. 1897), who had a great effect on Turkish thought during the *Tanzimat* era, put forward the idea that the Qur'an should be translated into Turkish and that this translation should be used by Turkish Muslims when performing their prayers, as in the history of Islam.¹⁴ In particular, Ziya Gökalp, whose thoughts greatly affected Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the new Turkish Republic, was insistent on the idea that the *adhan* (to call for prayer), prayer and other forms of worship should be performed in Turkish. Gökalp depicted "a country where the Qur'an was read in Turkish, where the *adhan* was called in Turkish, where *salat* was prayed in Turkish and everybody was able to understand what they recited"; he made it clear that this is how he thought the Turkish land should be.¹⁵

It is very interesting to note that while almost all translations in the first period (the Ottoman *Tanzimat* era) were from Persian into Turkish, the second wave in the Second Constitutional Period (1908–1918) era were mainly from French or other Western languages into Turkish. However, despite this popularity and increase in numbers, the majority of translations failed to have a high enough linguistic level for the people, as political and commercial concerns gave rise to serious weaknesses. Nevertheless, some Turkish translations were linguistically proficient and left scientific concerns behind, such as Giritli Sırrı Paşa's *Sırr-ı Furkan* (1890), and *Sırr-ı Meryem* (1894), and Bereketzade İsmail Hakkı's *Envaru'l-Kur'an* (1913).

However, commercial and political concerns seemed to come to the fore more often in the early years of the Republic. The Armenian publisher Mihran Efendi is a noteworthy example; he attempted to publish Cemil Said's translation of the Qur'an from Kazimirski's French version into Turkish in 1924. This translation was discussed in Parliament and the members eventually came to a decision that a new translation and exegesis should be prepared by a "scholarly expert (*alim*) in Islam" in order that people could learn their religion correctly. The project of a Qur'anic translation and an exegesis of the Qur'an in Turkish was the most significant activity organized by the Turkish parliament to help the Turkish people to understand their religion from the primary sources. Eventually, the task of translating the Qur'an was given to the great Turkish poet Mehmed Akif Ersoy; while the Turkish exegesis of the Qur'an was given to Muhammed Hamdi Yazır.

3. Muhammed Hamdi Yazır (1878–1942) and his *Tafsir Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* (The Religion of the Truth, The Language of the Qur'an)

Muhammed Hamdi Yazır has been known by the epithet Elmalılı as he was born in the town of Elmalı, in the province of Antalya in Southern Turkey. However, as his father Numan Efendi, a *başkatip* (head secretary) in the Elmalı court, was from Yazır, a village in

¹⁴ See: Hilmi Ziya Ülken, *Türkiye'de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi II* (The History of Contemporary Thought in Turkey II), İstanbul: Ülken Yayınları, 1979, p. 76; Enver Ziya Karal, *Osmanlı Tarihi (Islahat Fermanı Devri 1861–1876)* (Ottoman History Period of Reform Edict 1861–1876), Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1983, Vol. 7, p. 215.

¹⁵ Ziya Gökalp, *Yeni Hayat* (New Life), İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1976, p. 11; see also: Ziya Gökalp, *Türkçülüğün Esasları* (The Principles of Turkism) İstanbul: Türk Kültür Yayınları, 1923, p. 160–161.

the province of Burdur, Gölhisar, he took the surname of Yazır at the time of the promulgation of the surname law in the Turkish Republic. Having completed his primary education and Qur'anic (*hıfz*-memorization) education in his hometown of Elmalı, Muhammed Hamdi went to Istanbul with his uncle Mustafa Efendi and joined the school, Küçük Ayasofya Medresesi (1895). He received his *ijaza* (license) from Kayserili Mahmud Hamdi Efendi, whose scholarly circles young Muhammed Hamdi had attended in Bayazıt Mosque. In order to distinguish him from his teacher Mahmud Hamdi Efendi, he used the title of “Küçük” (junior) Hamdi Efendi in some of his articles before the adopting the surname Yazır.¹⁶ During his education Yazır developed his skills in art, literature, philosophy and music. Eventually, he became a *dersiam* (lecturer) at the Beyazıt Medresesi in 1906. Meanwhile he also completed the Mektebi Nuvab, i.e., the faculty of law.¹⁷

During the second constitutional period in 1908, Yazır joined the political movement *İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Committee of Union and Progress) and supported the dethronement of Sultan Abdulhamid II and the introduction of the *Meşrutiyet* (constitutional monarchy). Just after the declaration of the constitutional monarchy, Yazır expressed his ideas about the matter of the caliphate. For him, the caliph was not merely a person who had authority over people, but was also someone who had a duty to follow the rules and constitution himself: “*The caliph, on the one hand, has the duty of attorneyship/representation for the ummah who accept his authority, on the other hand, he has a duty of regency to act in the name of the constitution and as a law maker he has to follow and act like his people*”.¹⁸ Yazır describes an alternative theory of the caliphate. Instead, he suggests a constitutional framework for the Islamic political authority for those Muslims living in Muslim lands. “*As the caliph in Islam is only a representative of the Constitution for the fulfillment, the caliphate is not a spiritual leadership. The caliphate is only leadership of the Islamic constitutional government (hükümet-i meşrutat-ı İslamiyye). Therefore, the caliph has no guardianship over Muslims in non-Islamic lands (memaliki ecnebiye)*”.¹⁹ Eventually, with the establishment of the constitutional monarchy, Yazır became a Member of Parliament for Antalya.²⁰

Meanwhile, Yazır taught *fiqh* (Islamic Law) in *Mekteb-i kudat, fiqh* methodology in the *Medresetü'l-Mütehasisisin* (School of Specialists) and the law of the *awqaf* (charitable foundations) in the *Mülkiye Mektebi* (school of civil service, later the faculty of political sciences). He was appointed as a member of the *Darü'l-Hikmeti'l-Islamiyye*, which was established in the Office of the *Sheikh-ul-Islam* and later as the head of the organization the *Darü'l-Hikmeti'l-Islamiyye*. He was then promoted to teach logic in the *Süleymaniye Medresesi*. When he was appointed as Minister of the Charitable Foundations (*Evkaf Nazırlığı*) in the first and second cabinet of Damat Ferit Paşa, he wrote his distinguished work *Irşad al-Ahlaflı Ahkam al-Awqaf*, which was related to the rules of the foundations.²¹

¹⁶ See his articles in *Beyanülhak* and *Sebilürreşad* Journals.

¹⁷ Yusuf Şevki Yavuz, “Elmalı Muhammed Hamdi (1878–1942)”, in: *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, İstanbul: Diyanet Vakfı, 1995, Vol. 11, p. 57.

¹⁸ Küçük Hamdi, “İslamiyet ve Hilafet ve Meşihatı İslamiyye” (Islam and Khilafa and Islamic Authority of Shaikh al-Islam), *Beyanü'l Hak*, (1327) Vol. I, No. 22, p. 511.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

²⁰ Yavuz, “Elmalı Muhammed...”, Vol. 11, p. 57.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

During and after the First World War, Yazır continued his ministry in Istanbul government.²² When Ankara's government came to power and Istanbul collapsed (1922), Yazır was detained and brought to Ankara for trial, but after a forty-day imprisonment, he was released as he had previous link with İttihad and Terakki movement.²³ Yazır returned to Istanbul and focused on his studies. He finished the translation of the *Histoire de la Philosophie: Les Problemes et Les Ecoles* by Paul Janet and Gabriel Stailles into Turkish under the title of *Metalib ve Mezahip* with very critical annotations and a long introduction.²⁴

Yazır wrote on Islamic issues of his time in the journals *Beyanu'l-Hak*, *Sebilü'r-Reşad* and *Ceride-i İlmiye*. The scope of his articles is quite wide, ranging from core Islamic issues, like *Ulumu'l-İslamiye* (Islamic sciences) and *tevbe* (repentance) to political issues like the *Otuzbir Mart Vakası* (Uprising of March 31). He also contributed to the discussion of Islam and the claims of modernity that "Islam does not prevent progress, but rather ensures it".²⁵

4. Exegesis of the Qur'an in Turkish

In 1926, Yazır was offered the task of the new Turkish exegesis by the head of the Diyanet İşleri (Religious Affairs Department) according to a parliamentary decision. Yazır gives as a reason for this that the closing of the *madrasas* in 1924 and the lack of religious education in the program of the new Republic produced a gap in religious knowledge in society; it was thought that Islamic culture, at least at the level of basic knowledge of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the two main sources of Islam, should be taught to the people in Turkish.²⁶ This issue was discussed in the Parliament and it was eventually decided that the basic Islamic sources were to be translated into Turkish and that duty was put under the coordination of the Presidency of Religious Affairs.

The duty of translating the Qur'an was given to Mehmet Akif Ersoy, the poet who wrote the Turkish national anthem. Ersoy translated most of the Qur'an into Turkish in a poetic-style. However, towards the end of the translation, he seemed worried that as result of the government's Turkification of worship policy,²⁷ similar political powers might force his translation to be used

²² At that time there were two governments, the Ottomans in Istanbul and the new Anatolian independent force led by Mustafa Kemal in Ankara.

²³ Yavuz, "Elmalılı Muhammed...", Vol. 11, p. 58.

²⁴ For further information, see: Süleyman Hayri Bolay, "Bir Filozof Müfessir" (A Philosopher Mufassir), in: *Türkiye Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır Sempozyumu*, Ankara: Diyanet Vakfı, 1993, p. 125–139 and Mustafa Bilgin, "Hak Dini Kur'an Dili" (The Religion of the Truth, The Language of the Qur'an), in: *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 1997, Vol. 15, p. 157.

²⁵ This is the title given for his article in *Sebilurreşad* "Müslümanlık Mani-i Terakki Değil, Damin-i Terakkidir" (Islam not the Preventer of Progress but the Provider of Progress). For the list of relevant articles by him in *Beyanu'l-Hak*, *Sebilü'r-Reşad* and *Ceride-i İlmiye*, see: Nesimi Yazıcı, "Muhammed Hamdi Yazırın Basın Hayatı ve Yazarlığı" (Muhammed Hamdi Yazır's Life and Writership), in: *Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır* published symposium papers Ankara, 1993, p. 31–32.

²⁶ Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili*, Istanbul: Eser Nesriyat, 1971, Vol. 1, p. 8.

²⁷ See: İsmail Kara, *Türkiye'de İslamcılık Düşüncesi* (The Islamist Thought in Turkey), İstanbul: Kitabevi, 1997, p. 312.

instead of the original Arabic in daily worship.²⁸ This seemed to stand in the way of the translation by Ersoy, who was known for his relatively traditionalist attitudes. Ersoy was unable to overcome the problem of justifying such religious activities at the order of the secular state, and he cut short his work when it was nearly finished in fear that his translation would be substituted for the original Arabic Qur'an. Ersoy moved to Egypt, abandoning the task. The translation never came to the public. Alongside the Turkish interpretation of the Qur'an, now Yazır took over the translation of the Qur'an into Turkish too.

Yazır began to work on translation and exegesis, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* (The Religion of the Truth, The Language of the Qur'an) in 1926. The first volume of the exegesis was published in 1935 and the whole translation was finished in 1938. The subsequent volumes were being published in chapters. The work was republished in 1960 and 1972. The language of the work is old Ottoman Turkish. As the original is written in the Ottoman Turkish, in later publications the work was rewritten in modern Turkish.

According to the agreement between Yazır and the Department of Religious Affairs, Yazır was supposed to interpret the Qur'an in the light of the following rules:

1. The intra-textual relationship between the verses should be highlighted
2. The occasion of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) should be referred to in relevant places
3. The ten official types of reading (*Qiraat al-ashara*) should be applied
4. The meaning of the words should be explained
5. The interpretation should be in accordance with *Ahl-Sunnah* and the practical rules of Hanafi School
6. The polemical ideas of non-Muslims against Islam should be clearly refuted
7. It should involve an introduction that indicated the reality of the Revelation and the Qur'an.²⁹

The exegesis consists of nine volumes under the title *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili: Yeni Mealli Türkçe Tefsir* (The Religion of the Truth, The Language of the Qur'an: Turkish Exegesis with New Translation). Indeed this title indicates Yazır's concerns, and the concerns of that time, in such a way that the words "True Religion" form a kind of response to Turkish secularist attacks on Islam and the words "Qur'anic language" are another response to Turkification attempts to the Qur'anic language in religious life. The issue of the language of the Qur'an was very controversial at that time. Yazır was opposed to the translation of the Qur'an. He explains his opinion in the introduction as follows:

O, Stupid! Can there be a Turkish Qur'an? The Qur'an is Arabic. It is canonically declared that "we sent this book in Arabic so that you might encompass with your reason" (The Qur'an, Sura Yusuf, 12/2). Think about the fact that it is not possible to call the sayings of the Prophet the Qur'an; if you do, this is heresy. A translation, even the best one, can only express what the translator understands, not the real meaning. And the expressions are not the same as the Qur'an.³⁰

²⁸ For further discussion on the language of daily prayer in Turkey see: H. Aydar and N. Gökkır, "Discussion on the Language of Prayer in Turkey: A Modern Version of the Classical Debate", *Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, p. 121–136.

²⁹ For further information, see: Yazır, *Hak Dini...*, Vol. 1, p. 19–20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

5. Political reasons behind the exegesis project

It might be seen that the exegesis was a product of governmental initiation, as it was supported and funded by the Parliament. As secularism is a doctrine that makes a strict separation between religion and politics and advocates a restricted role for religion in society, one may find it problematic how religious and secular policies came together at the same time. Further, secularism is known by most of the scholars with its control-oriented character. In his discussion of Turkey's secular politics, Simon Bromley highlights that the secularism of the state amounted to rigid state control over religious life and a strict *laicism* in public affairs rather than the institutional separation of mosque and state.³¹ One might think that Yazır manipulates this mechanism in his *tafsir* by contextualizing the issues in favor of traditional Islamic understanding. However, one should know that secularism was introduced into the Turkish constitution in 1937. In this regard, Hikmet Bayur, the Minister of Education who was the sponsor of the *tafsir*, complains:

I have been thinking since my childhood that to pray without understanding is not right. That is why I could not memorize the long chapters of the Qur'an in Arabic. When I asked lecturers of religion: "what is the meaning of these? Why not memorize them in Turkish?" they replied: "Be Quiet! You will be an unbeliever. It is better to know the Word of God as it is, you cannot understand the meaning anyway." I always received such stern answers. But, when I grew up, I learned that in the School of Abu Hanifah, to pray and recite the Qur'an is permissible in a language other than Arabic. But although we, Ottoman Turks, are all from this sect, our religious scholars do not want us to do it. I was really disappointed. 20 years later, in 1933, I became the Minister of Education. On the request of the Republican government, Muhammad Hamdi, the Minister of Charitable Foundations in the Ottoman Era, completed the *tafsir* and delivered it to the Minister of Education to be published. Meanwhile, İhsan Sungu, head of the Department of Education and Training, showed me the introduction and asked: "Can we published as like?" It starts as follows: "Hasha (I seek refuge in Allah), Turkish Qur'an" I said: "Although we are only the publishers, we cannot publish it. One of the objectives of Atatürk's revolution was to cut out this kind of phrase, *Hasha*, and to demolish such understandings which prevent development in the way of modernization together with the contemporary world..."

I left the ministry and learned that the *tafsir* was published without the phrase '*Hasha*'. But a couple of years later when I looked at it I saw that there were additions that were even more offensive. One of them was the sentence: "O Stupid! Can there be a Turkish Qur'an?" Elmalili [Yazır] seemed to have ignored our objections about the offensive point of the phrase "*Hasha*, Turkish Qur'an" and acted with a fanaticism that bankrupted the Ottoman State.³²

It seems a failure for secular policies that aimed Turkification of religion. Because, despite all these objections by some secularists, Yazır's *tafsir* has been the only work available for the Turkish reader. Therefore, it has been appreciated both by religious and

³¹ Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994, p. 125–126.

³² Hikmet Bayur, "İbadet Dili" (Language of the Worship), in: *Necati Lugal Armağanı*, Ankara: TTK Basımevi, 1968, p. 151–153.

secular circles. It is appreciated in religious circles because of the content that is dependent on traditional Islam. On the other hand, it is appreciated in secular circles not for its content, but rather as the product of modern times and the product of a secular state.

6. Academic values of the exegesis

Because of these factors, the work is sometimes compared with classical works, particularly with Razi's commentary, in terms of the philosophical debates and the multi-disciplinary approaches both pursue.³³ Yazır's strength on the philosophical side is undeniable and there is a resemblance between the two in terms of multidisciplinary approaches to some extent. However, comparing Yazır with Razi in this matter seems to be overstating the case. First of all, such a comparison is made on the basis of their philosophical aspects and the difference in period can work in favor of Yazır. Secondly, Razi was certainly speaking about the philosophical and sectarian thoughts of his time in more detail than Yazır did. Thirdly, Razi is quite even in his interpretation of the *suras* in contrast to Yazır, who neglected the *suras* in the middle of the Qur'an. Yazır does not give equal attention to every part of the Qur'an throughout the work. The first three *suras* namely, Fatiha, Baqara and Al-i Imran, are studied in detail. The last parts of the Qur'an seem to have been given similar attention too. The *suras* in the middle of the Qur'an, however, seem to have been neglected and sometimes the reader can even get the impression that Yazır did not go beyond a simple translation of these verses.³⁴ Sura Maryam, for example, is examined in just sixteen pages, whereas the first verse of Sura Ikhlas is interpreted in thirty-two pages. Similarly, Yazır gives details about the Christian views of the nature of Jesus and the Trinity when he interprets Sura Maidah (verse 17); however he ignores this in interpreting verses 16-40 of Sura Maryam. Yazır sometimes goes lengthy discussions in his *tafsir*. These lengthy discussions seem to be separate articles that he has inserted into the relevant context.³⁵

Yazır's main exegetical sources, which he frequently refers to, are Tabari's *Jami' al-Bayan*, al-Maturidi's *al-Ta'wilat al-Qur'an*, Zamakhshari's *al-Kashshaf*, Razi's *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, Jassas' *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, Abu Hayyan's *al-Bahr al-Muhit*, Baydawi's *Anwar al-Tanzil*, Abu's-Suud's *Irshad al-'Aql al-Salim* and Alusi's *Ruh al-Maani*.³⁶ Yazır, like any other classical exegete, sees four main sources for Qur'anic interpretation: the Qur'an, prophetic tradition, narrated words and views of companions (*sahabah*) and the following generation regarding the interpretation of a given verse and finally, to put it in his own words, "after all these three principles have been perceived, the interpretation that one can make with a knowledge of Arabic and Shariah within the limits of scientific reason (*ma'qulat-ı ilmiye*)".³⁷

Yazır's devotion to traditional approaches attracted similar criticisms that are made against classical exegesis as his attitude to the Qur'an is partial not holistic, giving too

³³ See: Halis Albayrak, "Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır'ın Tefsir Anlayışı" (Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır's Exegetical Perception), in: *Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır* published symposium papers, Ankara, 1993, p. 161.

³⁴ Bilgin, "Hak Dini Kur'an Dili...", Vol. 15, p. 157 and p. 162.

³⁵ See for example: Yazır, *Hak Dini...*, Vol. 2, p. 914-929.

³⁶ Bilgin, "Hak Dini Kur'an Dili...", Vol. 15, p. 154.

³⁷ See: Introduction of his *tafsir*, p. 29-30; see also: H. Albayrak, "Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi...", p. 152-168.

much attention to the text of the Qur'an, and not being selective or cautious about the hadiths narrated or the other narrations from *sahabah* or the following generations.³⁸

On the other hand, his interest in the problems of the modern time availed him to some extent, to differ from the classical works and bring the ethical, moral, social, philosophical and even the legal problems of his time to his *tafsir*. This, in fact, brings him into a confrontation with the West and Western values. When Yazır interprets Sura Baqara, verse 274, he criticizes the Western economical system for being a consumer economy.³⁹ His criticism goes beyond the practical issues, reaching down to the philosophical dimensions of Western ideology. Yazır not only indicates the contradictions of a given Western value but also points out the contradictions and problems inherent in Western thought itself. Here in Yazır, we definitely come across a Muslim scholar who is acquainted with Western thought.⁴⁰

Yazır also tackled sectarian and ideological issues and treated the philosophical, ideological and sectarian movements to discussions from a Qur'anic perspective.⁴¹ He distinguishes *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being) from pantheism when he interprets Sura Baqara, verse 165. However, he finds *wahdat al-wujud* almost equally opposed to the Islamic teaching of *tawhid* (monotheism).⁴² In *fiqh* (canonical law)-related issues, being loyal to the Hanafi School of *fiqh*; he shows an inclination towards the Hanafi School not only because of the agreement he made for his *tafsir* with the department of religious affairs, but also because it is in keeping with his personal choices. However, theologically he does not strictly adhere to the Maturidi school of thought, as he refers almost equally to the Maturidi and Ash'ari schools. Therefore, one can conclude from this attitude that not only his politically Ottoman nationality but also his religiously Sunni-Hanafi nature played a role in his accusation⁴³ of the Saudi-Wahhabi movement being too extreme in their thought and practice.

As his methodology, before starting an interpretation of any given *sura* Yazır provides the following information about the *sura* for the reader: The name or names of the *sura*, *asbab al-nuzul* (the occasion of the revelation), the number of verses, the number of words, the number of letters, the *fasılas* (rhymes), and whether the *sura* was revealed in Mecca or Medina. When he starts his commentary, Yazır introduces the relevant verses in the original Arabic first and then gives the Turkish translation of the verses. The translation is Yazır's own translation and it is a literal translation. We understand from the discussions of the time about Turkish translations of the Qur'an that Yazır deliberately did this type of "literal translations" to prevent his translation being used in prayers and rituals in the mosques, as he and some of his contemporaries believed that this was apparently on the agenda of the current regime.⁴⁴

³⁸ Ibid., p. 170–172.

³⁹ Yazır, *Hak Dini...*, Vol. 2, p. 949.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 196–197.

⁴¹ Albayrak, "Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi...", p. 158–161.

⁴² Yazır, *Hak Dini...*, Vol. 1, p. 576–577.

⁴³ Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 577–578.

⁴⁴ İsmet Ersöz, "Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır ve Tefsirinin Özellikleri" (Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır and the Characteristics of His Exegesis), in: *Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır*, published symposium papers, Ankara, 1993, p. 169–177.

For Yazır, there is no doubt that Qur'anic narratives are historical facts. These stories are mentioned in the Qur'an to enable the audiences to distinguish the distorted Biblical versions from the authentic versions found in the Qur'an. Although he is quite aware and careful about *Isra'iliyyat*⁴⁵ he does not refrain from using the *Isra'iliyyat* narratives in his exegesis.⁴⁶

The theory of abrogation (*naskh*) finds its interpretation in Yazır's exegesis slightly in a different perspective. For him, abrogation definitely exists in the Qur'anic text and abrogation itself demonstrates the progressiveness of Islamic law. He argues that only God can abrogate and the theory of abrogation exists to explain some internal contradictions in the Qur'an. Further, there are only three categories of *naskh*: abrogation of the verse and ruling, abrogation of the verse without ruling and finally abrogation of the ruling without a verse.⁴⁷

Yazır's approach to modern values and modernity seems to be not only moderate but also self-aware of the Muslim legacy. First of all, for Yazır, Muslims can only develop in modern times by respecting their own tradition. In order to achieve progress, one should, in his own words, "bring the richness of the past and the richness of the present together".⁴⁸ In Yazır's work, therefore, *ijtihad* and *tajdid* are two significant concepts. He distinguishes *tajdid* (renovation) from *bid'ah* (innovation).⁴⁹ Observing the well-known *Majalla* article, "there is no place for personal opinion in the existence of *nass*", Yazır is not apologetic about the gender inequality such as male polygamy,⁵⁰ or males inheriting twice the amount of females⁵¹ or the stipulation that the testimony of two women is equal to that of one male.⁵²

Yazır displayed also a moderate attitude towards scientific interpretation. When trying to solve the contradictions between scientific explanation and the message of the Qur'an, the exegetes should reconsider scientific explanations, as the Qur'an is not a work of science.⁵³ Yazır was critical of scholars who denied the miracles in the Qur'an, rather attempting to explain them in a scientific way. In Yazır's understanding, people cannot see or experience every possibility and therefore, there is no point in denying something that we are unable to understand with our limited capacity of observation.⁵⁴

7. Conclusion

As a conclusion, in this study, it has been argued that the Turkish literature of exegesis has been persistently affected and influenced by political context of Turkey while being culturally interwoven with contemporary political debates, particularly, during the establishment of the Republic (post-1923). Debates intensified most prominently around the issues of liturgy, the state and the constitution focusing our attention on how these were accommodated and discussed by a Turkish exegete. This is because the Qur'an, the

⁴⁵ See: Yazır, *Hak Dini...*, Vol. 6, p. 3954.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 2211.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 1747–1748; c.f. İsmail Albayrak, "Turkish Exegesis...", p. 402–403.

⁴⁸ Yazır, "Dibace", in: *Elmalılı M. Hamdi Yazır Makaleler I* (Elmalılı M. Hamdi Yazır Essays I), C. Köksal and M. Kaya (eds.), Istanbul: Kitabevi, 1998, p. 247.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 263–266.

⁵⁰ Yazır, *Hak Dini...*, Vol. 2, p. 1284–1287.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 1302–1305.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 982–983.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 3355 and also Vol. 2, p. 1121–1124.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 9, p. 6123–6130; see also: İ. Albayrak, "Turkish Exegesis...", p. 408.

main source of Islam, constantly provokes a new reflection on thought and practice in every society. Turkish intellectuals produced fresh understandings by re-contextualizing the Qur'an in their own context. In other words, they assessed their own world and created their own identity in their works. This is, of course, inevitable, because every context presents problems, questions, and dilemmas of its own, which demand timely, suitable, and practical answers.

This article, thus, has underlined how the *mufasssir* (exegete/interpreter of the Qur'an) and his *tafsir* (exegesis/interpretation,) are linked to, or generated by, various discourses and debates within a particular context. Thus, it is crucial to refer to the context and the needs of the contemporary society when analyzing the text. That is to say, the political and intellectual background of the author sometimes directs their writings. All this provides a different perspective and different concerns from previous exegeses. This is exactly what Hans-Georg Gadamer says about interpretation, that is, "to understand a text always means to apply it to ourselves and to know that, even if it must be understood in different ways, it is still the same text presenting itself to us in different ways".⁵⁵ This idea fits Turkish exegetical works very well.

Dealing with the exegesis by Yazır in particular, the Turkish secular political power seemed to be very concerned with the religious affairs with its hidden agenda in its very early time of the republic. The book was initially, planned to be published for the sake of political and secular agenda by secular and westernized politics. The aim of the politics was to cut off the relations between the public and original Islamic culture and heritage which is in Arabic by promoting secular policy of Turkification of religion. Yazır, however, in his exegesis insisted on his traditional understanding of Islam ignoring secular political intentions whatsoever.

⁵⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1979, p. 359.

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