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# MEHMET AKİF ERSOY'S QUR'AN TRANSLATION: LINGUISTIC AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES IN EARLY REPUBLICAN TURKEY

Mortaza Firuzi\*

**Abstract:** Mehmet Akif Ersoy (1873–1936), renowned Turkish poet and national anthem author, was pivotal in the War of Independence and early Republic. In his contract with the Directory of Religious Affairs (Turkey) for 6,000 lira to render the Qur'an's meanings into modern Turkish, it was stipulated that the work use the term “a rendering of meanings” (*meâl*) rather than “translation” (*tercüme*) to emphasise its interpretive and scholarly nature and be published alongside Elmalılı's exegesis. In 1932, amid reforms, he resigned and returned the payment.

This article examines the linguistic, theological, and political challenges that Mehmet Akif encountered, analysing his initial acceptance of and eventual withdrawal from the Qur'an translation commission. It also highlights the significance of his partially completed translation, undertaken in Turkey and Egypt, portions of which were rediscovered in 1988 and later in 2016.

The study argues that Mehmet Akif's withdrawal stemmed from linguistic, theological, and political sensitivities, illustrating how the Qur'an translation project exposed tensions between religious tradition and secular nation-building, even as Mehmet Akif endorsed the Turkish national project but feared the erosion of Islamic identity.

**Keywords:** *Mehmet Akif Ersoy, Qur'an translation, Early Republican Turkey, linguistic challenges, political challenges*

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## INTRODUCTION

The translation of the Qur'an into vernacular languages has always been a matter of profound debate in Islamic intellectual history, oscillating between demands for accessibility and concerns over fidelity to the sacred text. Within this broader discourse, the Turkish case occupies a uniquely contested position, shaped simultaneously by linguistic, theological, and political factors. In the late Ottoman and early Republican settings, this tension was intensified by ongoing processes of modernisation, nationalism, and identity formation. The Qur'an translation commissioned by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey to Mehmet Akif Ersoy—one of the foremost literary and intellectual figures of modern Turkey—constitutes not merely a philological undertaking, but a profoundly political and cultural episode whose implications have resonated across subsequent generations.

In the late Ottoman period, particularly during the Tanzimat reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, debates surrounding modernisation extended into religious practices and language. The Ottoman elite, attempting to harmonise tradition with Western-inspired reforms, occasionally encouraged religious texts to be paraphrased or explained in Turkish for pedagogical purposes. Nevertheless, the idea of a complete Qur'an translation into Turkish remained controversial, facing resistance from religious scholars who feared the sanctity of the Qur'an might be undermined. Translation was often seen not as an innocent linguistic act but as a theological intervention. For this reason, early efforts remained marginal, partial, and largely unofficial.<sup>1</sup>

It was only with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 that the project gained institutional legitimacy and political urgency. The new Republican elite, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, embarked on sweeping reforms designed to construct a modern, secular, and nationally homogeneous identity. Language reform became central to this endeavour, with the Latinisation of the alphabet, the purification of the Turkish lexicon from Arabic and Persian loanwords, and the promotion of Turkish as the sole medium of national life.<sup>2</sup> In such a context, the Qur'an—long read, memorised, and recited in Arabic—emerged as a challenge and opportunity. Rendering it into Turkish would simultaneously serve nationalist goals of linguistic unification and provide the state with a powerful symbol of religious reform.

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Reisliği*), established to control and regulate religious life under the new secular framework, became the key institution for realising this vision. In 1925, parliament allocated funds for an official translation and exegesis (*tefsîr*).

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<sup>1</sup> Recep Şentürk, “Direnen Meal: Akif’in Kur’an Meali’nin Tarihi ve Tahlili” [The Resistant Translation: The History and Analysis of Akif’s Qur’an Translation], in *Direnen Meal Akif Meali*, ed. Recep Şentürk (Mahya Yayıncılık, 2016), 11–23; M. Brett Wilson, “The First Translations of the Qur’an in Modern Turkey (1924–38),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 3 (2009): 422; Mustafa Öztürk, “Meâl” [A Rendering of Meanings], vol. EK-2, *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (TDV, 2019), 206–7.

<sup>2</sup> İlker Aytürk, “Politics and Language Reform in Turkey: The Academy Debate,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 98 (2008): 13, 29–30; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, *Osmanlı’dan Günümüze Türk Anayasa Metinleri* [A Compilation of Turkish Constitutional Texts: From Ottomans to Modern Day] (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, 2023), 111.

Two eminent scholars were invited: Muhammed Hamdi Yazır (also known as Elmalılı), tasked with producing the exegesis, and Mehmet Akif, entrusted with the translation.<sup>3</sup>

Mehmet Akif's selection was far from accidental. As the celebrated author of *Safahat* and the national anthem (*İstiklâl Marşı*), he commanded respect from traditional Muslim audiences and reformist circles. His intellectual reputation, combined with his nationalist credentials, seemed to make him the ideal mediator between tradition and modernity.

Yet Mehmet Akif approached the task with hesitation and profound caution. He repeatedly emphasised that the work should be described as a “rendering of meanings” (*meâl*) rather than a “literal translation” (*tercüme*).<sup>4</sup> This terminological distinction was not merely semantic; it reflected a theological position that acknowledged the impossibility of fully capturing the Divine eloquence of the Arabic Qur'an in another language. By insisting that his translation be published alongside Hamdi Yazır's exegesis,<sup>5</sup> Mehmet Akif sought to protect his work from being read in isolation, vulnerable to misinterpretation or political exploitation.

The challenge, however, extended beyond theological concerns. Following the establishment of modern Turkey and the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw a dramatic acceleration in secularising reforms. These included the removal of Islam as the state religion in 1928, and, ultimately, the introduction of the Turkish language into religious rituals in 1932.<sup>6</sup>

These included the recitation of the Qur'an, the call to prayer (*ezân*), the exaltation of God (*tekbîr*), and the Friday sermon (*hutbe*) in Turkish.<sup>7</sup> For Mehmet Akif, these developments fundamentally altered the meaning of his translation project. What had originally been conceived as a scholarly and devotional contribution to religious understanding risked

<sup>3</sup> Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, *Kabulünün 100. Yılında Millî Mutabakat Metnimiz: İstiklâl Marşı ve Mehmet Akif Ersoy: Belgeler* [The National Anthem (İstiklâl Marşı) and Mehmet Akif Ersoy: Documents Marking the 100th Anniversary of its Adoption as our National Consensus Text], ed. Ahmet Balıbey and Ömer Kesikbaş (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, 2021), 202–7.

<sup>4</sup> Dücane Cündioğlu, *Bir Kur'an Şairi: Mehmed Âkif Ersoy ve Kur'an Meali* [A Qur'anic Poet: Mehmed Âkif and the Qur'an Translation], 2nd ed. (Gelenek, 2004), 167; Wilson, “First Translations,” 429; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, *Kabulünün 100*, 202–7.

<sup>5</sup> Dücane Cündioğlu, *Âkif'e Dâir* [About Âkif] (Kapı Yayınları, 2010), 167; Wilson, “First Translations,” 429; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, *Kabulünün 100*, 202–7.

<sup>6</sup> Müzehher Yamaç, “100. Yılında Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin İlk Anayasası 1924 Teşkilat-ı Esasiye Kanunu” [Turkish First Constitution of Republic of Türkiye in its 100th Anniversary 1924 Essential Organization Law], *Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 12 (2024): 271–72; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, *Teşkilatı Esasiye Kanununun bazı maddelerinin muaddil Kanun* [The Law Amending Certain Articles of the Constitutional Law], Law No. 1222, *Resmî Gazete*, April 14, 1928; “Türkçe Kur'an” [Turkish Qur'an], *Akşam*, January 24, 1932, 2; “Dün gece Ayasofya'da kırk bin kişi vardı: Türkçe okunan Kur'an ve alınan tekbirler halkı heyecanından ağlattı” [Forty Thousand People were in Hagia Sophia Last Night. The Qur'an Read in Turkish and the Takbirs (Expressions of 'Allahu Akbar') that were said brought the People to Tears from Excitement/Emotion], *Cumhuriyet*, February 4, 1932, 4; “Ankara'da Türkçe Ezan” [Turkish Call to Prayer in Ankara], *Milliyet*, February 4, 1932, 1, 6; “Bugün Süleymaniye'de Türkçe Hutbe Okunacak” [Today a Turkish Sermon will be Recited in Süleymaniye], *Cumhuriyet*, February 5, 1932, 1, 4; “Silifke'de Türkçe Kur'an” [Turkish Quran in Silifke], *Cumhuriyet*, February 8, 1932, 3; Wilson, “First Translations,” 421–22, 431–32.

<sup>7</sup> “Türkçe Kur'an,” 2; “Dün gece Ayasofya'da,” 4; “Ankara'da Türkçe Ezan,” 1; “Bugün Süleymaniye'de,” 1; “Silifke'de Türkçe Kur'an,” 3.

becoming instrumentalised as part of a political programme to sever Turkey's ties with the wider Islamic world.

Mehmet Akif's withdrawal from the project in 1932<sup>8</sup> should thus be seen less as an act of theological and linguistic humility and more as a reflection of his fear that his translation might be misused. His later instruction to have his manuscripts destroyed after his death<sup>9</sup> underscores this deep apprehension about the possible exploitation of his work.

At the same time, Mehmet Akif's stance was not outright opposition to the Republic or modernity. As an Islamist (*İslamcı*) intellectual, his writings, particularly in *Asım*, influenced by his admiration for Muhammad 'Abduh, reveal an aspiration for a Turkish generation capable of harmonising Islamic values with scientific progress and cultural vitality.<sup>10</sup> His ambivalence toward the translation project reflects this tension: while he supported making Islamic knowledge accessible to Turkish speakers, he resisted reforms that instrumentalised Islam for political ends or risked detaching Turkish Muslims from their wider religious heritage.

The rediscovery of portions of Mehmet Akif's translation in later decades<sup>11</sup> has reignited debates not only about his linguistic style but also about the political meaning of his refusal. These manuscripts demonstrate his meticulous effort to render Qur'anic meanings with precision and reverence, yet they also embody the anxieties of an intellectual caught between fidelity to tradition and the demands of a revolutionary new state.

The present study situates Mehmet Akif's Qur'an translation project within this complex historical and intellectual landscape. It examines the linguistic and theological challenges inherent in translating the Qur'an, the political dynamics of the early Republican era, and the intricate interplay between Mehmet Akif's personal convictions and the broader reformist context of the emerging Turkish nation-state.

By drawing on archival sources, parliamentary records, contemporary newspapers, and the recently discovered manuscripts, this article offers a nuanced understanding of the factors that led Mehmet Akif to withdraw from the project, demonstrating how a seemingly linguistic and theological undertaking—the translation of the Qur'an—became a focal point for debates over national identity, religious authority, and the negotiation between modernity and tradition in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkey.

<sup>8</sup> Mehmet Âkif Ersoy, *Kur'an Meali* [Translation of the Qur'an], ed. Âsım Cüneyd Köksal and Recep Şentürk (Mahya, 2012), xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Yasin Yılmaz, "Osmanlı İslâmcılık Düşüncesinde İki Öncü İsim: Muhammed Abduh Ve Mehmet Âkif" [Two Leading Names in Ottoman Islamism Thought: Muhammed Abduh and Mehmet Akif], *ULUM* 5, no. 2 (2022): 344, 356; Mortaza Firuzi, "An Overview of Mehmet Akif Ersoy's Ideal Generation in Âsım," *Mediterrân Tanulmányok* 30 (2020): 37–41.

<sup>11</sup> Murat Küçük, "Mehmet Âkif Ersoy'un Kur'an Meali'nin Dil Özellikleri" [The Linguistic Features of Mehmet Âkif Ersoy's Qur'an Translation], *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Türkoloji Dergisi* 26, no. 1 (2022); Osman Arpaçukuru, "Kur'an'daki Meâni Sanatlarını Yansıtmaya Açısından Mehmet Akif Ersoy'un Meali" [Evaluating Mehmet Akif's Translation through the Lens of Qur'anic Rhetorical Devices (Ilm al-Ma'ânî)], in *Mehmet Akif Ersoy: Hayatı-Düşünceleri-Eserleri*, ed. Celalettin Vatandaş (TBMM Basımevi, 2022), 9–10; Ersoy, *Kur'an Meali*, xiii.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Mehmet Akif's withdrawal from the Turkish Qur'an translation project reveals a multifaceted intersection of theological conviction, linguistic sensitivity, and political consideration. Collectively, the selected studies portray Mehmet Akif's decision as a deliberate act of faith and moral defiance amid the ideological and institutional transformations of early Republican Turkey. Only a limited number of scholarly works have addressed this issue in depth; among the most notable are those by Şentürk,<sup>12</sup> Wilson,<sup>13</sup> Cündioğlu,<sup>14</sup> Uluçay,<sup>15</sup> and Küçük.<sup>16</sup>

Şentürk provides perhaps the most explicit interpretation of Mehmet Akif's refusal as an act of resistance (*direnış*). In *Direnen Meal: Akif'in Kur'an Meali'nin Tarihi ve Tahlili* [The Resistant Translation: The History and Analysis of Akif's Qur'an Translation], Şentürk frames the seven-year translation effort and Mehmet Akif's eventual withdrawal as a protest against the state-led "Turkish Qur'an and Turkish worship project" (*Türkçe Kur'an ve Türkçe ibadet projesi*). This reading situates Mehmet Akif not merely as a literary figure but as a moral and religious dissenter who opposed the politicisation of sacred texts during the secularising reforms of the early Republic.

Wilson places this act within the broader political context of 1920s and 1930s Turkey. His article, "The First Translations of the Qur'an in Modern Turkey (1924–38)," argues that Mehmet Akif's hesitation stemmed from a fear that nationalist reformers would appropriate his translation for ritual worship, effectively desacralising the Qur'an. Wilson's interpretation thus underscores the dual nature of Mehmet Akif's withdrawal—as a devotional response and political stance resisting state control over religious expression.

Cündioğlu deepens the historical account with a detailed reconstruction of the Presidency of Religious Affairs translation initiative (1926–1932) in *Bir Kur'an Şairi: Mehmed Âkif ve Kur'an Meâli* [A Qur'anic Poet: Mehmed Âkif and the Qur'an Translation]. Crucially, he cites Mehmet Akif's statement: "But if I hand it over, they will try to have it recited in prayer. Then I could not stand before my God, nor could I face my Prophet."<sup>17</sup> This testimony conveys the profound moral gravity underlying Mehmet Akif's decision, illustrating how his personal piety transcended institutional expectations. Cündioğlu's contribution thus bridges historical documentation and theological introspection, revealing the spiritual dimensions of Mehmet Akif's resistance to the politicisation of the sacred word.

In contrast to these historically and ideologically focused studies, Uluçay and Küçük approach the topic from linguistic and stylistic perspectives. Uluçay's *Mehmet Akif Ersoy'un Manzum ve Mensur Eserlerinde Dil ve Üslup* [Language and Style in the Verse and Prose

<sup>12</sup> Şentürk, "Direnen Meal," 11–23.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, "First Translations," 419–35.

<sup>14</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif'e Dâir*, 1–507.

<sup>15</sup> Mustafa Uluçay, "Mehmet Akif Ersoy'un Eserleri Üzerinde Dil ve Üslup İncelemesi" [Language and Style in the Verse and Prose Works of Mehmet Akif Ersoy] (PhD diss., İstanbul Üniversitesi, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Küçük, "Mehmet Âkif Ersoy'un Kur'an Meali'nin Dil Özellikleri," 72–101.

<sup>17</sup> Cündioğlu, *Bir Kur'an Şairi*, 143.

Works of Mehmet Akif Ersoy] emphasises Mehmet Akif’s mastery of “living Turkish,” which made him the ideal translator for a modern readership yet simultaneously heightened his apprehension towards language reform in worship. Similarly, Küçük, in *Mehmet Âkif Ersoy’un Kur’an Mealinin Dil Özellikleri* [The Linguistic Features of Mehmet Âkif Ersoy’s Qur’an Translation], documents the clarity and fluency of Mehmet Akif’s translation, describing it as linguistically accessible and stylistically refined. Although his work provides limited insight into the project’s political aspects, it complements prior studies by highlighting the literary and linguistic sophistication of Mehmet Akif’s translation.

Previous studies on Mehmet Akif’s Qur’an translation have mostly examined its political, theological, or linguistic dimensions in isolation, without integrating these aspects. Even when such integration occurred, it was minimal, and most scholars have not explored Mehmet Akif’s Qur’an manuscript discovered in 2016. This study fills that gap by examining the intersection of language, faith, and politics in Mehmet Akif’s work.

Drawing on archival sources and newly discovered manuscripts, it argues that Mehmet Akif’s withdrawal from the Qur’an translation project was not merely a personal decision but a deliberate intellectual and moral stance shaped by linguistic, theological, and political sensitivities, revealing how the translation became a site of tension between religious tradition and secular nation-building in early Republican Turkey—even as Mehmet Akif supported national progress, he remained deeply concerned about the politicisation of sacred language and the potential erosion of the nation’s Islamic identity.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a historical-textual and interpretive methodology to examine Mehmet Akif Ersoy’s Qur’an translation within the intertwined contexts of linguistic reform, political transformation, and theological debate in early Republican Turkey. Rather than treating the translation merely as a literary product, the research approaches it as a historical discourse shaped by the ideological and institutional dynamics of its time.

The analysis draws on primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include official parliamentary records of the Turkish Grand National Assembly related to the 1925 Qur’an translation initiative, as well as correspondence and budgetary reports from the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Contemporary press coverage—particularly in *Cumhuriyet*, *Akşam*, and *Milliyet*—provides further insight into the use of Turkish for reciting the Qur’an and the *ezân* in 1932. Equally significant are Mehmet Akif’s writings and the surviving fragments of his translation manuscript, recovered in 1988 and 2016. Secondary sources consist of modern scholarly analyses, critical biographies, and edited collections that illuminate the intellectual and cultural milieu surrounding Mehmet Akif and his contemporaries.

Methodologically, the study integrates archival-historical enquiry with contextual hermeneutic analysis. This approach facilitates an interpretation of Mehmet Akif’s linguistic, theological, and political decisions as interconnected responses to the secular-nationalist

reforms and ideology of the early Republican era. Through close textual analysis and contextual examination, the research investigates how linguistic choices—such as Mehmet Akif’s use of the term *meâl*—reflect concerns related to religious authority, national identity, and the role of language in conveying the sacred.

Thus, the analysis adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and historically situated methodology, aiming to reconstruct Mehmet Akif’s intellectual rationale and ethical stance amid the interplay between Islam and the emergent modern Turkish nation-state.

## THE QUR’AN TRANSLATION PROJECT

Following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the drive to produce a Turkish translation of the Qur’an gained new urgency. Early efforts, shaped in part by nationalist ideologies, often contained significant linguistic and interpretive errors. Most of these translations were undertaken through private initiatives and appeared rapidly in 1924—a year marked by profound governmental transformations, including the reorganisation of the Muslim scholars (*ulema*) into the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the abolition of the Caliphate. That same year, three notable translations entered the Turkish book market: *Kur’an-ı Kerim Tercümesi* by Süleyman Tevfik el-Hüseynî, *Nur’ul-Beyan* by Hüseyin Kazım Kadri, and *Türkçe Kur’an-ı Kerim* by Colonel Cemil Said (Dikel).<sup>18</sup>

These works were widely criticised for being mistake-ridden or containing “many errors.” Critics emphasised that the translators often lacked professional training in Qur’anic studies and possessed only limited command of Arabic grammar. For example, Süleyman Tevfik faced harsh criticism and even outright dismissal because his previous writings had dealt with secular and esoteric topics such as cookbooks and treatises on sorcery. Such a background led pious intellectuals to question his moral integrity and reliability as a translator of the Qur’an. Similarly, Hüseyin Kazım Kadri openly admitted his “insufficient training” in core Islamic disciplines, including Arabic language, jurisprudence, prophetic traditions, and Qur’anic exegesis.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, following the establishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, its head, Rifat Börekçi, publicly warned against these early translations. He argued that any Turkish rendering of the Qur’an should demonstrate “the full capacity of expression of the Turkish language,” a standard that Hüseyin Kazım Kadri’s version, in his view, failed to meet. Börekçi also condemned Colonel Cemil Said’s work as “clearly distorted from beginning to end” and cautioned Muslims not to be misled by such publications. The disappointment and controversy

<sup>18</sup> Öztürk, “Meâl,” 205–7; Wilson, “First Translations,” 422–24, 431–32; Necmettin Turinay and Selçuk Karakılıç, eds., *Millî Mücadele ve Ankara Yıllarında Mehmet Akif (1920–1925)* [Mehmet Akif During the War of Independence and the Ankara Years (1920–1925)] (TBMM Basımevi, 2022), 489.

<sup>19</sup> Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, *T.B.M.M. Zabıt Ceridesi* [Proceedings of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey], vol. 14 (T.B.M.M., 1925), 222–26; Öztürk, “Meâl,” 205–7; Wilson, “First Translations,” 422–28.

provoked by these non-specialist attempts ultimately fostered widespread public support for a state-sponsored, high-quality translation project.<sup>20</sup>

To ensure textual accuracy and theological reliability, the Presidency of Religious Affairs launched an official Qur'an translation project. On 21 February 1925, the Turkish Grand National Assembly approved allocation of funds for this initiative during the budget deliberations of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. The proposal, submitted by Eskişehir Deputy Abdullah Azmi Efendi and endorsed by 53 other deputies, was formally adopted by parliamentary decision. The primary motivation behind this project was to counter the proliferation of flawed translations and to provide the public with a trustworthy, state-sponsored alternative.<sup>21</sup> The total allocation by the Turkish Grand National Assembly for the entire project amounted to 20,000 Turkish lira. Of this sum, 12,000 lira was designated for the translation and exegesis of the Holy Qur'an, while 8,000 lira was reserved for the translation and exposition (*şerh*) of *Tecrîd-i Sârîh* [*al-Tajrîd al-Şarîh* by al-Zabîdî (d. 893/1488)], the abridged version of Imam al-Bukhârî's *al-Jâmi' al-Şaḥîḥ* (İmam el-Buhârî'nin Sahîhi). On accepting their respective assignments, Mehmet Akif and Hamdi Yazır signed formal agreements and each received an advance payment of 1,000 lira.<sup>22</sup>

Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, a prominent figure within the Presidency of Religious Affairs, played a pivotal role in coordinating the project. Acting as an influential consultant, he engaged in discussions with scholars such as Kâmil Miras regarding the selection of suitable contributors.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, the Presidency entrusted the translation of the Qur'an to Mehmet Akif and assigned the exegesis to Hamdi Yazır—both highly esteemed scholars of their time.<sup>24</sup>

Mehmet Akif was chosen for the task despite not being a formally trained member of the Muslim scholars, having received his education in state public schools (*mektep*) and initially trained as a veterinarian. Nevertheless, he was highly esteemed for his profound mastery of

<sup>20</sup> T.B.M.M., *Zabıt Ceridesi*, 222–26. Some sources suggest that Atatürk conceived the idea of translating the Qur'an into Turkish even before the establishment of the Republic. According to Kazım Karabekir's account, Atatürk remarked during a tea reception held on 14 August 1923, in honour of the Scholarly Committee responsible for drafting the national education programme at the Ankara Turkish Hearth: "I will have the Qur'an translated into Turkish and recited in this language, so that people may no longer be deceived." This statement, along with Atatürk's interview with the *Vossische Zeitung* on 30 November 1929—where he declared that he had ordered the Qur'an to be translated into Turkish for the first time—indicates the idea of a Turkish Qur'an translation had been among his intellectual and reformist concerns since the early years of the National Struggle. This inclination ultimately materialised in the official assignment of the translation and exegesis tasks to Mehmed Âkif Ersoy and Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır. For details, see Cündioğlu, *Âkif'e Dâir*, 33–40.

<sup>21</sup> T.B.M.M., *Zabıt Ceridesi*, 222–26.

<sup>22</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif'e Dâir*, 38; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, *Kabulünü 100*, 202–7.

<sup>23</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif'e Dâir*, 36–37.

<sup>24</sup> Necmettin Turinay, Mehmet Rüyan Soydan, and Selçuk Karakılıç, eds., *Dünyanın Dört Bucağından Mehmet Akif'e Mektuplar: Sıratı Müstakim 'de ve Sebilürreşat'ta Yayınlananlar, Dost Çevresinden Gelenler ve Diğer Mektuplar* [Letters to Mehmet Akif from the Four Corners of the World: Those Published in Sırat-ı Müstakim and Sebilürreşad, Letters from his Circle of Friends, and Other Correspondence], vol. 2 (TBMM Basımevi, 2021), 419–20.

Arabic and deep engagement with Islamic thought.<sup>25</sup> Revered as the “Poet of Islam,”<sup>26</sup> Mehmet Akif co-founded and edited the influential Muslim-modernist journal *Sebilürreşâd*, which was a major platform for articulating the intellectual and moral concerns of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim reformers.<sup>27</sup>

His deep religious commitment and intellectual rigour placed Mehmet Akif among the devout intelligentsia considered capable of producing a work of appropriate scholarly and spiritual quality. Ahmet Hamdi Akseki personally appealed to him, stating, “The National Assembly, as well as all enlightened people, expects this great service from you.”<sup>28</sup> Hamdi Yazır, a respected member of the late Ottoman *ulema* and a distinguished scholar, readily accepted the task of composing the exegesis.<sup>29</sup> Mehmet Akif, however, initially declined the translation assignment, expressing reservations about the theological and linguistic challenges of rendering the Qur’an into Turkish. He also voiced doubts about his suitability for such a sacred task and fears that any translation might later be misused or distorted for ideological purposes. Mehmet Akif’s reluctance thus stemmed from profound philosophical and political concerns regarding the sanctity and potential instrumentalisation of the Qur’an.<sup>30</sup>

He remarked that “to translate the Qur’an, a person must be either very learned or very ignorant,”<sup>31</sup> emphasising the immense difficulty and responsibility inherent in such an undertaking. Linguistically, Mehmet Akif expressed concern about producing a translation in “clear Turkish” without allowing it to “diverge from the original.” He also worried that the “differences of style” between the source and target languages would become too conspicuous, revealing his awareness that the constraints of open translation could hinder the preservation of the Qur’an’s linguistic and aesthetic integrity.<sup>32</sup>

However, after repeated persuasion from his close friend Babanzâde Ahmed Naim—whom Mehmet Akif affectionately referred to as “Hacı Baba”—and from Hamdi Yazır, he eventually agreed to undertake the task under specific conditions: the work would be designated as a *meâl* rather than a literal translation, and it would be accompanied by Yazır’s exegesis.<sup>33</sup>

This cautious approach reflected Mehmet Akif’s profound reverence for the Qur’an and his acute awareness of the project’s theological and political sensitivity. By 1926, Mehmet Akif had relocated to Egypt,<sup>34</sup> where he was personally hosted and protected by Emir Abbas Halim

<sup>25</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif’e Dâir*, 166.

<sup>26</sup> Abdulvahit İmamoğlu, “Mehmet Akif’te Dostluk ve Dayanışma [Friendship and Solidarity in Mehmet Akif],” in *Vefatının 71. Yılında Mehmet Âkif Ersoy Bilgi Şöleni: Mehmet Âkif Dönemi ve Çevresi*, ed. D. Mehmet Doğan (Türkiye Yazarlar Birliği Yayınları, 2008), 176.

<sup>27</sup> Uluçay, “Mehmet Akif Ersoy’un,” 211–13.

<sup>28</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif’e Dâir*, 166.

<sup>29</sup> Öztürk, “Meâl,” 205–7.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, “First Translations,” 429.

<sup>31</sup> Mithat Cemal Kuntay, *Mehmet Akif* (Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1986), 202.

<sup>32</sup> Mustafa Gülalî, “Mahir İz’in Dünyasında Mehmet Akif” [Mehmet Akif Through the Lens of Mahir İz], in *Mehmet Akif Ersoy: Hayatı-Düşünceleri-Eserleri*, ed. Celalettin Vatandaş (TBMM Basımevi, 2022), 295–96; Ersoy, *Kur’an Meali*, XX.

<sup>33</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif’e Dâir*, 167; Wilson, “First Translations,” 429; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, *Kabulünün 100*, 202–7.

<sup>34</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif’e Dâir*, 56.

Pasha—an Egyptian prince of the Kavalalı Mehmed Ali Pasha lineage and one of Mehmet Akif’s closest friends and benefactors.<sup>35</sup> Seeking solitude, Mehmet Akif settled in Hilvan, a quiet village outside Cairo, which he described as a refuge from the disheartening cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city.<sup>36</sup> There, in relative seclusion, he began work on the *meâl* in 1926, completing the preliminary draft around 1928 or between 1929 and 1930.<sup>37</sup>

Mehmet Akif continued to refine the manuscript meticulously over the following four years, working on it until 1932. However, as his work neared completion, political debates surrounding the use of Turkish in religious rituals and Qur’anic recitation grew increasingly intense. These developments profoundly affected Mehmet Akif’s perspective, ultimately reshaping his stance towards the *meâl* project.

### POLITICAL TENSIONS AND MEHMET AKIF’S WITHDRAWAL

While Mehmet Akif initially agreed to the translation project under conditions, Turkey’s evolving political climate soon complicated his position. By 1928, Islam was removed as the state religion,<sup>38</sup> and in 1932, Turkish was introduced in religious rituals, sparking intense national debates.

Notably, several key events marked this transition. On 22 January 1932, the first Turkish Qur’an recitation took place at the Yerebatan Cistern (for the original newspaper clipping, see Appendix Figure A.1).<sup>39</sup> On 24 January 1932, Turkish Qur’an recitations began in Istanbul mosques (for the original newspaper clipping, see Appendix Figure A. 2).<sup>40</sup> On 3 February 1932, a crowd of 40,000 people in Hagia Sophia was moved to tears by the Turkish Qur’an recitation and the exaltation of God (*Allahu Akbar*) (for the original newspaper clipping, see Appendix Figure A.3).<sup>41</sup> On 4 February 1932, the Turkish call to prayer was recited in Ankara (for the original newspaper clipping, see Appendix Figure A.4).<sup>42</sup> On 5 February 1932, the first Friday sermon in Turkish was delivered at Süleymaniye Mosque (for the original newspaper clipping, see Appendix Figure A.5).<sup>43</sup> Finally, on 8 February 1932, the mandatory use of Turkish in the Friday sermon and the exaltation of God was implemented nationwide (for the original newspaper clipping, see Appendix Figure A.6).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Cevat Akanat, “Safahat’taki İthaflar Neyi Söyler” [The Language of Dedications in Safahat: Meaning and Implications], in *Vefatının 71. Yılında Mehmet Âkif Ersoy Bilgi Şöleni: Mehmet Âkif Dönemi ve Çevresi*, ed. D. Mehmet Doğan (Türkiye Yazarlar Birliği Yayınları, 2008), 119–20.

<sup>36</sup> Kâzım Ürün, “Mehmet Âkif’de Mısır ve Arap Edebiyatı İzleri” [The Influence of Egypt and Arabic Literature on Mehmet Akif], in *Vefatının 71. Yılında Mehmet Âkif Ersoy Bilgi Şöleni: Mehmet Âkif Dönemi ve Çevresi*, ed. D. Mehmet Doğan (Türkiye Yazarlar Birliği Yayınları, 2008), 230–31.

<sup>37</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkife Dâir*, 56; M. Orhan Okay and M. Ertuğrul Düzdağ, “Mehmed Âkif Ersoy,” in *Diyanet İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 28 (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2003), 434.

<sup>38</sup> Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, *Türk Anayasa Metinleri*, 111n53.

<sup>39</sup> “Yerebatan Camisinde Türkçe Yasin Okunacak” [Turkish Yasin will be Recited in Yerebatan Mosque], *Cumhuriyet*, January 22, 1932, 1.

<sup>40</sup> “Türkçe Kur’an,” 2.

<sup>41</sup> “Dün gece Ayasofya’da,” 4.

<sup>42</sup> “Ankara’da Türkçe Ezan,” 1, 6.

<sup>43</sup> “Bugün Süleymaniye’de Türkçe Hutbe Okunacak,” 1, 4.

<sup>44</sup> “Silifke’de Türkçe Kur’an,” 3.

These events formed part of a state-led “experimental campaign” initiated by Atatürk, designed to realise the vision of “Turkish worship” previously articulated by nationalist thinkers such as Ziya Gökalp, who advocated conducting religious rituals in the national language.<sup>45</sup> This controversial initiative was perceived by devout critics as a direct challenge to the foundations of Islamic practice.<sup>46</sup> Mehmet Akif regarded this drive for linguistic synchronisation in worship as a form of “religion-engineering” motivated by “sinister aims,”<sup>47</sup> which further deepened his apprehensions. He became increasingly uneasy about the possibility that his translation might be appropriated for purposes contrary to his faith and intent.<sup>48</sup>

Mehmet Akif had worked diligently on the manuscript, completing an initial draft between 1926 and 1928, and subsequently devoting several years to its careful revision and refinement until 1932.<sup>49</sup> However, as the political climate surrounding Turkish ritual reform intensified, Mehmet Akif chose to withdraw from the project and requested the return of his drafts from Hamdi Yazır. In late 1932, with the assistance of his associate Fuat Şemsi, he formally terminated the agreement through a notary.<sup>50</sup>

On terminating the agreement, Mehmet Akif ensured the advance payment of 1,000 lira was returned to the relevant authorities, although some accounts indicate his colleague, Hamdi Yazır, temporarily covered the repayment on his behalf.<sup>51</sup> Despite his withdrawal, state officials continued to urge Mehmet Akif to publish his translation, even offering financial incentives.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Mehmet Akif remained resolute. Before leaving for Istanbul in 1936, he entrusted his close associate in Egypt, Mehmed Ehsan Efendi, with instructions to destroy his translation notebooks should he die in Istanbul.<sup>53</sup>

## DISCOVERY OF AKIF’S TRANSLATIONS

Despite Mehmet Akif’s intention to have his translation destroyed, portions of the work resurfaced decades later. In 1988, a typewritten copy of Mehmet Akif’s Qur’an translation—covering roughly one-third of the text—was discovered. This version had been prepared in the 1950s and was later published in 2012 by Recep Şentürk and Âsım Cüneyd Köksal. The manuscript spans from *Sûre-i Fâtiha* to the end of *Sûre-i Tevbe*.<sup>54</sup> According to experts such

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, “First Translations,” 421–22, 431–32.

<sup>46</sup> Turinay, Soydan, and Karakılıç, *Dünyanın Dört Bucağından Mehmet Akif’e Mektuplar*, 419–21.

<sup>47</sup> Şentürk, “Direnen Meal, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Eşref Edip, *Mehmed Âkif: Hayatı, Eserleri ve Yetmiş Muharririn Yazıları* [Mehmed Akif: Life, Works, and Perspectives from Seventy Writers] (Sebilürreşad Neşriyatı, 1960), 200–1.

<sup>49</sup> Şentürk, “Direnen Meal,” 15.

<sup>50</sup> Turinay, Soydan, and Karakılıç, *Dünyanın Dört Bucağından Mehmet Akif’e Mektuplar*, 422.

<sup>51</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif’e Dâir*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> Cündioğlu, *Âkif’e Dâir*, 480; Abuzer Kalyon, “Mehmet Akif’in Kur’an Meali’nin Serüveni” [The Adventure of Mehmet Akif’s Qur’an Translation], *New Era International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Researches* 7 (2021): 4–5.

<sup>53</sup> Ersoy, *Kur’an Meali*, xiii.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

as M. Ertuğrul Düzdağ, Hayrettin Karaman, Düccane Cündioğlu, Hasan Akay, and Fatih Andı,<sup>55</sup> this portion corresponds to the first nine sections (*cüz*) of the Qur'an.<sup>56</sup>

A further portion of Mehmet Akif's translation, in his handwriting, was uncovered in 2016 among the personal belongings of Hamdi Yazır. The manuscript, penned in *Rik'a* script on a lined school notebook, covers the first two *cüz* of the Qur'an—from *Sûre-i Fâtiha* to verse 252 of *Sûre-i Bakara*.<sup>57</sup> This discovery provided direct evidence of Mehmet Akif's meticulous translation style and was subsequently edited and published by Necmi Atik in 2018.<sup>58</sup>

The rediscovery of these manuscripts has not only clarified aspects of Mehmet Akif's translation method and linguistic sensibility but also reignited scholarly discussions regarding his underlying motivations, theological apprehensions, and moral stance towards the Qur'an translation project.

## WHY DID MEHMET AKIF WITHDRAW?

Mehmet Akif's withdrawal from the Qur'an translation project commissioned by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey stemmed primarily from his linguistic and theological concerns, and secondarily from political ones.

### *Linguistic and Theological Challenges*

Translating the Qur'an presents profound linguistic and theological challenges. The core difficulty stems from the classical juristic consensus that the Qur'an is defined not only by its semantic content but also by its distinctive Arabic linguistic structure (*nazm*). This dual nature—form and meaning inseparably united—forms the foundation of the doctrine of inimitability (*i'jâz*), which asserts that no human linguistic endeavour can reproduce the Qur'an's miraculous style and eloquence.<sup>59</sup>

Building on this understanding, many classical scholars view any attempt to translate the Qur'an with deep suspicion. This resistance is rooted in the concern that a translation might distort or replace the divinely arranged Arabic text. Moreover, they feared that overreliance on translations could lead to gradual neglect of the original Arabic, drawing cautionary parallels with the historical outcomes of Bible translations into Latin or English. Nevertheless, while the dominant opinion held that true translation was impossible, some early jurists—particularly within the Hanafî legal school that later shaped Ottoman jurisprudence—argued for the

<sup>55</sup> Şentürk, "Direnen Meal," 14–15.

<sup>56</sup> Arpaçukuru, "Kur'an'daki Meânî Sanatlarını Yansıtmaya Açısından Mehmet Akif Ersoy'un Meali," 9–10.

<sup>57</sup> Küçük, "Mehmet Âkif Ersoy'un Kur'an Meali'nin Dil Özellikleri," 72–101, 78.

<sup>58</sup> Necmi Atik, *Mehmed Akif Ersoy'un Kur'an Meali* [The Qur'an Translation of Mehmed Akif Ersoy] (Büyüyenay, 2018), 1–40.

<sup>59</sup> Wilson, "First Translations," 420; Mehmet Taha Boyalık, "VI. İ'câzı ve Üslûbu" [VI. Its Inimitability and Style], in *Kur'an: Diyanet İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 26 (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2002), 393–98.

conditional permissibility of translation for non-Arabic speakers, though this view remained contested.<sup>60</sup>

Regarding Mehmet Akif, his work in *Sebîlürreşâd* magazine shows that he had previously translated Qur'anic verses into Ottoman Turkish, aligning himself with those who advocated for translation. Widely known as the Poet of the Qur'an (*Kur'an şairi*),<sup>61</sup> Mehmet Akif was actively involved in intellectual debates among the devout intelligentsia on the necessity of making the Qur'an accessible in a comprehensible language as a means to address the moral and spiritual decline of Muslim society.<sup>62</sup> His journal *Sebîlürreşâd* regularly published Turkish renderings and exegeses on Qur'anic verses following the 1908 Constitutional Revolution.<sup>63</sup>

Despite his mastery of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, as well as his grounding in Islamic disciplines through classical studies alongside a modern education, Mehmet Akif was acutely aware of the formidable challenges the translation entailed.<sup>64</sup> In a letter to his friend Mahir İz, Akif voiced deep frustration and anxiety over the task, lamenting that constraints such as rendering the text in clear Turkish, maintaining absolute fidelity to the original, and preserving stylistic coherence across dialects imposed “infinite restrictions,” effectively paralysing his creative capacity.<sup>65</sup>

His profound linguistic sensitivity made him exceptionally cautious about nuance.<sup>66</sup> His handwritten drafts—filled with revisions, corrections, and marginal notes (for an example of the original, see Appendix Figure B.1)<sup>67</sup>—attest to his meticulous approach. Mehmet Akif feared that even the slightest lexical shift could distort the meaning of the Divine text. This concern was not merely linguistic but theological, rooted in his dread of committing even a minimal doctrinal error or enabling unauthorised interpretation by readers lacking proper

<sup>60</sup> Wilson, “First Translations,” 420–21, 430.

<sup>61</sup> Dücane Cündioğlu, *Mehmet Âkif'in Kur'an Tercümeleri* [Mehmet Akif's Qur'an Translations] (Kaknüs Yayınları, 2005), 14; Mehmet Doğan, “Açılış Konuşması” [Opening Speech], in *Vefatının 71. Yılında Mehmet Akif Ersoy Bilgi Şöleni: Mehmet Akif Dönemi ve Çevresi*, ed. D. Mehmet Doğan (Türkiye Yazarlar Birliği Yayınları, 2008), 15.

<sup>62</sup> In this regard, Âkif composed several verses emphasising the necessity of understanding the Qur'an directly and applying its message to contemporary life. Two of his most cited lines express this vision: **“Doğrudan doğruya Kur'an'dan alıp ilhamı/Asrın idrakine söyletmeliyiz İslam'ı.”** (“We must draw our inspiration directly from the Qur'an/And make Islam speak to the understanding of our age.”). **“İnmemiştir hele Kur'an, şunu hakkıyla bilin/Ne mezarlıklarda okunmak, ne de fal bakmak için.”** (“Know this well: the Qur'an was not revealed/To be recited in graveyards or used for fortune-telling.”)

<sup>63</sup> Mehmed Âkif attempted to translate the meanings of Qur'anic verses (*meâl*) that predate the official Qur'an translation project. These earlier efforts reflect Mehmet Akif's sustained engagement with the Qur'an as a linguistic and moral text. They can be traced across several of his writings and publications, including: 1. **Exegetical articles, verse translations, and sermon texts** published in *Sebîlürreşâd*; 2. **Verse translations** appearing as epigraphs at the beginnings of his poems in *Safahat*; 3. **Translations of works** by Abdülaziz Çaviş. For detailed bibliographical information, see Gülsen Dalgıç, Nurhan Naneci, and Handan Gökçağaç, *Mehmet Akif Ersoy Bibliyografyası* [Mehmet Âkif Ersoy Bibliography] (Millî Kütüphane Başkanlığı, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Şentürk, “Direnen Meal,” 12–13.

<sup>65</sup> Gülalî, “Mahir İz'in Dünyasında Mehmet Akif,” 295.

<sup>66</sup> Uluçay, “Mehmet Akif Ersoy'un Eserleri,” 152–53, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Atik, *Mehmet Akif Ersoy'un Kur'an Meali*, 30.

scholarly training.<sup>68</sup> To minimise this risk, Mehmet Akif planned to employ the term *meâl* for the first time in his work.<sup>69</sup> He also sought the counsel of Hamdi Yazır and intended that his translation be published in conjunction with an accompanying exegesis.

Although Mehmet Akif completed the initial draft of his translation between 1926 and 1929 and expressed satisfaction with the result,<sup>70</sup> he ultimately chose not to submit it—indicating that his reservations went beyond purely linguistic concerns. He reflected that Qur’anic *sûrahs* recited in *namaz* (daily prayer, *şalât*) could not be rendered precisely, since they are the Divine words revealed to Prophet Muhammad.

### ***Political Challenges***

Mehmet Akif’s reluctance to submit his translation was most likely driven by the political and socio-religious tensions surrounding Atatürk’s reforms in the 1930s. This period, following the abolition of the Caliphate, the dissolution of the Shari’a Courts, and the closure of the *madrassa* in 1924, generated deep unease among the devout intelligentsia regarding the place of Islam in the newly established Republic.<sup>71</sup> Aware of Imam Abû Hanîfa’s position on the permissibility of using mother tongue in acts of worship, Mehmet Akif’s apprehension extended beyond linguistic considerations. He feared that substituting Arabic with Turkish in religious rituals would fundamentally alter Turkey’s spiritual identity, severing its connection to its historical and civilisational roots as well as to the broader Muslim community (*umma*). Mehmet Akif’s principal concern centred on the possibility that his *meâl* might be exploited by political authorities to justify the use of Turkish during *namaz*—an act he believed would render him answerable before God.<sup>72</sup>

Mehmet Akif’s apprehensions did not stem from rejection of the Turkish nation or its language, but from profound concern for preserving its enduring connection to Islamic tradition. His unease intensified as the government increasingly promoted Turkish worship as a central element of its modernity and nationalisation agenda. To Mehmet Akif, such measures risked transforming Islam from a universal faith into a culturally bounded national religion. He feared that translating sacred practices into Turkish would signify a symbolic rupture with the shared religious heritage of the Muslim world. These fears were not unfounded: by January 1932, the public recitation of the Qur’an in Turkish and the state-sponsored performance of the *ezân* in Turkish in major Istanbul mosques confirmed the ceremonial institutionalisation of religious nationalisation.<sup>73</sup> Given that the *ezân* had, throughout Islamic history, been recited

<sup>68</sup> Ruhi Naci Sağdıç, “Kur’an Tercümelere Münasebetiyle Mehmed Âkif Merhum Hakkında Hatıralar” [Recollections of Mehmed Âkif in Light of Qur’an Translation Debates], *Sebilürreşad* 11, no. 2 (1958): 281–83.

<sup>69</sup> Öztürk, “Meâl,” 206.

<sup>70</sup> Şentürk, “Direnen Meal,” 19–20.

<sup>71</sup> Wilson, “First Translations,” 422.

<sup>72</sup> Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiye’de Çağdaşlaşma* [Modernisation in Turkey], 4th ed. (Yapı Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 2003), 546; Turinay, Soydan, and Karakılıç, *Dünyanın Dört Bucağından Mehmet Akif’e Mektuplar*, 420–21.

<sup>73</sup> In 1932, Turkey’s public Turkish Qur’an recitation sparked excitement and controversy, reaching Egypt. Shaykh al-Taftāzānī (d. 1936) condemned it as “irreligion” for violating sanctity, while reformist Wajdī

exclusively in Arabic across the Muslim world, this reform represented a radical departure from a millennia-old tradition that, for Mehmet Akif, embodied the spiritual and linguistic unity of the Muslim community.

It is important to note that Mehmet Akif was neither personally opposed to Atatürk nor hostile to the emerging Turkish nation-state. Likewise, after World War I, he was not ideologically devoted to the idea of uniting all Muslims under a single political entity,<sup>74</sup> or an Islamic union, as his poem *Leyla* makes clear.<sup>75</sup> Mehmet Akif occasionally expressed admiration for Atatürk and the Republic, even after abandoning the Qur'an translation project. For example, in a report sent by the Turkish Consulate in Aleppo to Ankara, it was noted that “although he met with some opposition figures, in his conversations he frequently spoke in favour of Turkey and Atatürk.”<sup>76</sup> His primary concern, however, centred on the possibility that the new Republic might cultivate a generation detached from the historical identity of Muslim Turks and alienated from the broader Islamic world. In this context, Mehmet Akif feared his translation could inadvertently contribute to such a process—serving, however unintentionally, as a tool in the state's project of cultural secularisation and linguistic nationalisation.

Mehmet Akif's intellectual vision, most vividly articulated in his poem *Âsim*, centred on the formation of a modern Muslim Turkish identity that harmonised Islamic values with national culture. He envisioned a new generation capable of balancing modernity with faith—one that could synthesise scientific progress and technological advancement with the moral and spiritual depth of Islam. In *Âsim*, he explicitly urged his readers to “take the West's science and art,” yet preserve the nation's essential spiritual character.<sup>77</sup> For Mehmet Akif, modernisation did not entail Westernisation; rather, it demanded moral discernment—the selective appropriation of Western knowledge within an Islamic ethical framework.

A projected sequel to *Âsim* was intended to expand on this vision of reconciling modern Turkish identity with a strong Islamic foundation. However, Mehmet Akif never completed this work.<sup>78</sup> Following the establishment of the Republic, his creative and intellectual energies became increasingly constrained. As a result, we are left without his final elaboration on how

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(d. 1954) defended it, arguing translation would enhance accessibility and strengthen Turkish Muslims' faith. For details, see Gotthard Jaeschke, *Yeni Türkiye'de İslamlık* [Islam in the New Turkey], trans. Hayrullah Örs (Bilgi Yayınevi, 1972), 48–49.

<sup>74</sup> M. Orhan, *Mehmed Akif Kalabalıklarda Bir Yalnız Adam* [Mehmed Akif, a Lonely Man Among the Masses] (Dergah, 2017), 68.

<sup>75</sup> In his poem “Leyla,” written on 8 April 1922 after World War I, Mehmet Akif expressed his disappointment with the idea of Islamic unity. Using the classical story of *Leyla and Mecnun* as a metaphor, he compared the Muslim world to *Mecnun*, the devoted but unfulfilled lover, and Islamic unity to *Leyla*, the beloved who remains unattainable. Through this imagery, Akif suggested the goal of a politically united Muslim community had become an unreachable ideal—one that was spiritually valuable but impossible to achieve in his time. He therefore redefined Islamic unity as a moral and spiritual ideal to be cherished by believers, rather than a political objective to be realised. For the poem, see Mehmet Akif Ersoy, *Safahat*, prepared by M. Ertuğrul Düzdağ (İz Yayıncılık, 2016), 452–53.

<sup>76</sup> “Halep Konsolosunun Mehmet Âkif Bey'in Halep'teki görüşme ve faaliyetlerine ilişkin cevabi yazısı [Response Letter from the Aleppo Consul Regarding Mr. Mehmet Âkif Bey's Meetings and Activities in Aleppo],” in Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanlığı, *Kabulünün 100*, 95.

<sup>77</sup> Firuzi, “An Overview of Mehmet Akif Ersoy's,” 37–41.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

the synthesis he imagined might have evolved under the new sociopolitical order of modern Turkey.

## ANALYSIS OF MEHMET AKIF'S WITHDRAWAL

In light of the foregoing analysis, this study has demonstrated that Mehmet Akif's withdrawal from the Qur'an translation project was not a mere act of personal hesitation but the culmination of intertwined linguistic, theological, and political anxieties. Although Mehmet Akif did not oppose translating the Qur'an into Turkish, his manuscript reveals his deep concern about committing even minor errors; however, this can at best be considered a secondary factor in his eventual withdrawal, rather than the principal one. He feared the state's reformist zeal might sever Turkey too radically from its Islamic heritage. While no longer the pan-Islamist he once was, Mehmet Akif remained uneasy about a vision of modernisation that sought to replace sacred expressions and rituals entirely. His refusal thus reflected not hostility to translation but apprehension towards a national identity stripped of its spiritual continuity. As later developments showed—when Arabic recitation was reinstated in 1950—his concerns about the limits of linguistic reform proved prescient and profound.

## CONCLUSION

This study suggests that Mehmet Akif's approach to translation can be analysed not merely as a linguistic concern, but as part of a broader intellectual engagement with questions of religious authority, cultural continuity, and modernity in a period of profound transformation.

Mehmet Akif's work is often discussed within the context of the intellectual current of Islamism (*İslamcılık*). From this perspective, his withdrawal was a decisive intervention in contemporary debates, effectively removing his translation from a highly politicised context. While he regarded the Qur'an's message as universal, he consistently emphasised the sacred and inimitable nature of its Arabic form, a view that led him to reject the idea of a full and literal translation or *tercüme*.

Mehmet Akif's preference for the term *meâl* over *tercüme* can be understood as reflecting a deliberate theological and hermeneutical stance rather than a purely stylistic preference. While Mehmet Akif translated Qur'anic passages into Ottoman Turkish in his contributions to *Sebilürreşâd*, these renderings were not presented as a *meâl*. This distinction became especially significant in 1932, when Mehmet Akif chose to withdraw his translation project amid concerns regarding its potential political instrumentalisation, particularly in relation to debates over the language of ritual prayer.

The implications of Mehmet Akif's stance extend beyond its historical context. His experience illustrates an enduring tension between national identity and religious tradition, especially in debates surrounding the politicisation or "nationalisation" of faith. For the field of Islamic studies, Mehmet Akif's case brings into sharp focus the question of hermeneutical

responsibility, illustrating how translators may grapple with accountability for textual meaning and the broader social or ritual implications of their work.

The posthumous publication of Mehmet Akif's partial *meâl* in 2012 has introduced contemporary readers to a translation distinguished by linguistic clarity, stylistic balance, and theological sensitivity. Combining accessible Turkish with rhetorical refinement, the text combines accessible Turkish with rhetorical refinement, thereby engaging with the interpretive heritage of the *medrese* tradition and the linguistic expectations of modern readers.

Mehmet Akif's translation work represents one example of how scriptural interpretation, linguistic developments in the modern period, and religious approaches interact in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING**

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author employed language enhancement tools, Grammarly, ChatGPT, and Gemini, to refine readability and language clarity. The author reviewed and revised the content to ensure accuracy and integrity. The author assumes responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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## APPENDIX A. NEWSPAPER CLIPPING DOCUMENTING THE INTRODUCTION OF TURKISH IN QURAN RECITATIONS AND CALLS TO PRAYER, 1932



Figure A.1. “Yerebatan Camisinde Türkçe Yasin Okunacak” [Turkish Yasin Will Be Recited in Yerebatan Mosque], *Cumhuriyet*, January 22, 1932, 1

**Türkçe kuran**

**Hafız Yaşar bey Yasin  
suresini okuyacak**

Riyaseticumhur musiki heyeti alaturka kısmı sabık şefi hafız Yaşar bey tarafından bugün saat ikide Yerebatan camiinde Türkçe kura<sup>k</sup> okunacaktır. Hafız Yaşar beyin kuran<sup>k</sup>kerimin Yasin suresini intihap edeceği tahmin edilmektedir. Bu sure Türkçe şöyle başlamaktadır:

“Esirgeyen, Bağışlayan, Tanrı Adıyla,,  
“ Yasin. Hikmet ile dolu kuran

gouvernen  
risin, doğru  
yegâne galip  
zaten indirdiği  
peygamber-  
sildiği zaman  
yle korkutul-  
kalan cemaati  
rin pek çoğuna  
uştur.,,  
limizle tilâvet  
halkın büyük  
klediği görü-  
camisinin bu  
ti istiap teme-  
er.

peygamberlerden  
yol üzeresin. Kura  
olan ve bağışlayan  
bir kitaptır. Bunun  
lerin arda arası k  
babaları Allah azal  
madıkları için gafi  
korkatacakam. Onl  
azap sözü sabit ol  
Kur'andan öz d  
olunacak bu ağırı  
bir sabırsızlıkla b  
mektedir. Yerebata  
gün gelecek cema  
yacağı tahin olusu

Figure A.2. “Türkçe Kur’an” [Turkish Qur’an], *Akşam*, January 24, 1932, 2



Figure A.3. “Dün gece Ayasofya'da kırk bin kişi vardı Türkçe okunan Kur'an ve alınan tekbirler halkı heyecanından ağlattı” [Forty thousand people were in Hagia Sophia last night. The Qur’an read in Turkish and the takbirs (expressions of 'Allahu Akbar') that were said brought the people to tears from excitement/emotion], Cumhuriyet, February 4, 1932



Figure A.4. “Ankara’da Türkçe ezân” [Turkish Call to Prayer in Ankara], Milliyet, February 4, 1932, 1, 6



Figure A.5. "Bugün Süleymaniye'de Türkçe Hutbe Okunacak" [Today a Turkish Sermon will be Recited in Süleymaniye], *Cumhuriyet*, February 5, 1932, 1, 4



Figure A.6. "Silifke'de Türkçe Kur'an" [Turkish Qur'an in Silifke], *Cumhuriyet*, February 8, 1932, 3

### APPENDIX B. MANUSCRIPT PAGES FROM MEHMET AKIF ERSOY'S QUR'AN TRANSLATION, SHOWING ORIGINAL HANDWRITING AND TEXTUAL VARIANTS

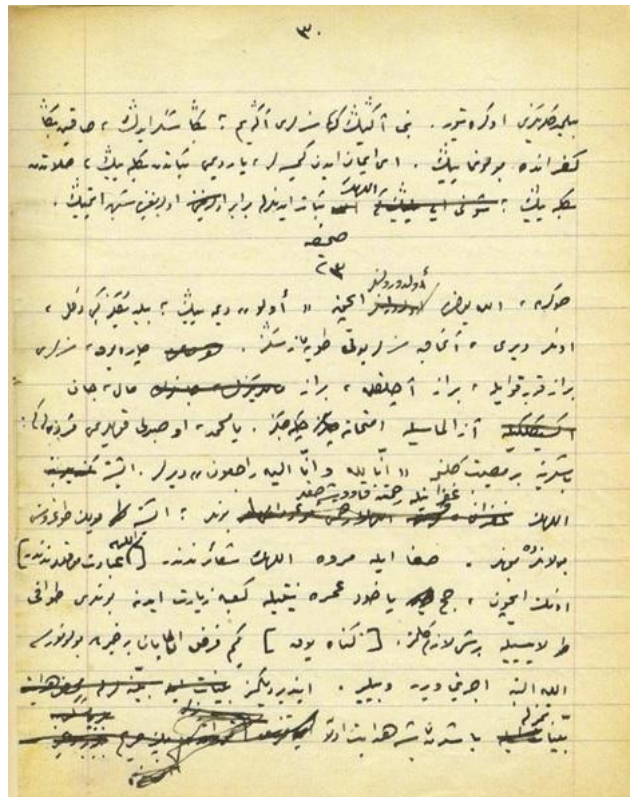


Figure B.1. Page 30 of Akif's handwritten manuscript