

# Exploring Namık Kemal's Understanding of European Concepts: An Islamic-European Synthesis or a Reversion Back to "True" Islam

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A simple reading of the Ottoman history during the 19th century displays a diverse ray of intellectual thought and discussion. The so-called clash between Islam and European political structures was a serious debate within the Empire: one that was usually polarized along the lines of progressives and conservatives. Namık Kemal through his writings aimed to overcome the dichotomous view between Islam and European political and social concepts through a reversion to what he called "true" Islamic understanding and principles. Namık Kemal throughout his writings touches upon and interprets many different European concepts and their relationship with Islam. This paper examines Namık Kemal's observation of three European ideals: "sovereignty of the people", "nation", and "parliamentarianism". The study argues that Namık Kemal understands and interprets these concepts in a manner that creates a harmonious relationship with Islam. The paper utilizes different writings of Namık Kemal to comprehend how he understands the above-mentioned concepts. The study is mainly based on Namık Kemal's primary works and specifically on Kemal's writings on sovereignty, nation, and parliamentarianism in the *Ibret Gazette*.

*Keyword:* Ottoman history, Namık Kemal, Islamic conceptualizations, Euro-Islam

## Introduction

The study of the developments within the Ottoman Empire in the latter part of the 18th century and throughout the 19th demands a more comprehensive analytical framework to understand the social and political transformations that were taking place within the Empire (Karpas, 1973, p. 243). Most commonly studies dealing with the Ottoman Empire and its modernization emphasize and evaluate this period through an analysis of external (European) impacts and influences. Consequently, the internal changes occurring within the Empire has often been ignored, causing a limited understanding of the inner social and political transformations that largely affected the future trajectory of Ottoman political, social, and economic life (Karpas, 1973, p. 246).

This paper seeks to move away from "outside" interpretation of the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire to provide an "inside" perspective to the transformations and discussions taking place in the intellectual circles at the center of the Empire. A simple reading of the Ottoman history during the 19th century shows the diverse ray of intellectual thoughts and discussions that were prominent at the time. However, this study concentrates on Namık Kemal (1840-1888) and his understanding of European social and political concepts that were widely

debated in the Empire. The so called clash between Islam and European political structures was a serious debate within the Empire: one that was usually polarized along the lines of progressives and conservatives. Namık Kemal through his writings aimed to overcome the dichotomous view between Islam and European political and social concepts through a reversion to “true” Islam which according to him was already inclusive of these concepts and structures of governance.

For Namık Kemal, European political structures did not contradict the verdict of Islam. It reinforced the central tenets and teachings of the “original” Islam. The European ideals of separation of powers, parliamentary liberalism, and sovereignty of the people were consistent and compatible with Islamic values. Namık Kemal along with other intellectuals within this approach interpreted the language of Islam in ways that came to justify and legitimize European ideals as being inherently part of the true Islam. What was needed then was not a rejection of these European ideals, but a return to true Islam which prescribes a system that is based on the sovereignty of the people, namely constitutional and parliamentary one practiced in Europe.

Kemal's method in attempting to combine European ideals with Islamic values and decrees was based on (re)interpreting the meaning of Islamic words. Verses from the Quran and Hadiths were interpreted in a manner that supported constitutional democracy along with other European ideals of the time. For example, Namık Kemal equated nation with *ümme* transforming the meaning of Islamic words to resemble that of European ones. Namık Kemal's intention in trying to build a harmonious relationship between Islamic traditions and values and European ones of the time was for the more pragmatic purpose to save the Ottoman Empire from dismemberment and collapse (Berkes, 1964, p. 259).

Namık Kemal throughout his writings touches upon and interprets many different European concepts and their relationship with Islam. This paper aims to examine Namık Kemal's observation of three European ideals: constitutional government, nation, and freedom. In this research paper, I argue that Namık Kemal understands and interprets these concepts in a manner that creates a harmonious relationship with Islam. The paper utilizes different writings of Namık Kemal to understand how he understands the above mentioned concepts. The study is mainly based on Kemal's works and specifically on Kemal's writings on constitutional government, nation, and freedom.

For the purpose of this study, I have thoroughly investigated the writings of Namık Kemal in *İbret Gazetesi* in Mustafa Nihad Özön's book *Namık Kemal ve İbret Gazetesi*. This book helped me build a foundational understanding of Namık Kemal's political conceptualizations that run through most of his articles. However, I have heavily relied on secondary sources to compliment and deepen my understanding of Namık Kemal's ideas due to the fact that my “older” Turkish is limited in understanding such complex discussions.

The first section of the paper briefly provides a background to the environment during the 19th century to build the foundation on which Namık Kemal's ideas are formed. The next section explores Namık Kemal's philosophical underpinnings to grasp his general approach which will set the tone in the next section where specific concepts are studied. Then, the paper will provide a brief discussion which will bring together the previous sections. Finally the paper will end with the concluding remarks.

## **Background**

The Ottoman Empire for centuries had been one of the world's greatest imperial powers. The influence and rule of the Empire stretched across three continents and its hard power able to rival any opponent of the time. The 1700s witnessed a weakening of the leadership and internal problems, which instigated a stall in

Ottoman expansion. By the 19th century, the Empire was in decline and struggling to retain control of its vast territory. Rising nationalism and demands from ethnic and religious groups for more self-determination situated the Empire in great danger. The frail economy and the incapacity of the Ottoman military to wage war forced the Ottoman's to seek for alliances with European nations. As the Ottoman Empire entered a boundless trajectory of degradation, European powers were advancing in all spheres.

European nations such as Britain, France, and Germany were overtaking the Ottoman's in economic, military, and political power. The clear prosperity in Europe and the infiltration of European ideas culminated in the mid-1800s with the European-inspired Tanzimat reforms. These reforms reorganized the public administration, the military and segments of the economy; however, the initiations of reforms were not enough to keep the Empire from degeneration. Not only in terms of territorial deterioration but social disintegration became a major barrier for the reformists as well. While there was a strong will and attempt to reform the Empire to reach European standards, the social fabric of the Empire limited radical reforms which would contest the social structure that had dominated for centuries throughout the Empire. For example, wide reactions from Muslims within the Empire for equating non-Muslims as equals were not uncommon (Demirdag, 2005, p. 146).

The rise of national consciousness in combination with ethnic nationalism, which the Ottoman structure had not been immune to, formed a significant problem. Different groups of the clergy, statesmen, intellectuals, writers, and poets envisioned the future of the Empire from a diverse ray of perspectives (Demirdag, 2005, p. 142). Some groups believed the decline of the Empire was due to the European style reforms which were undermining the role of Islam in the Empire (Mardin, 2006; Demirdag, 2005, p. 142). Ottoman religious leaders and conservatives rigidly opposed reforms while liberal or more progressive circles pressed for more improvements. The dichotomy between progress through adoption of European social and political structures and traditional values and foundations posed as the leading obstacle in the way of adopting European style arrangements that could possibly help the Empire prosper again. The ideological clash between the "old" and the "new" seemed to be irreconcilable and European concepts were viewed as alien from conservative and religious groups because those ideas were deviating from the traditional values of Islam and Islamic Law (Sharia) (Worringer, 2016, pp. 210-220).

European ideals (constitutionalism, parliamentary liberalism, separation of powers, responsibility of officials, equality, freedom of thought and press and enjoyment of private property) mixed with their greater technical and scientific progressions eventually arose the Ottoman's to the idea that there needed to be some form of a rearrangement within the Empire if it was to survive and compete with Europe in any significant way (Black, 2004, pp. 283-289; Demirdag, 2005, pp. 140-142).

The deterioration and the internal debates in the empire forced discussion of new modes of thought to emerge. The works of Voltaire, Fontenelle, and Montesquieu were gaining significance amongst Ottoman intellectuals who were deeply inspired by European philosophies. Fatma Muge Gocek, in her book *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* explains this important phase in the empire as:

The Ottoman epistemological transition from such Western imitation to interpretation occurred through the agency of the newly group of Ottoman intellectuals. Before the late eighteenth century, such intellectuals had mostly existed within the official household structure and had an independent standing only within the context of religious foundations. By the end of the eighteenth century, a sufficient number of new institutional forms had appeared to sustain their social position

independent of the sultan. Employment as instructors in the new Western-style schools, as journalists and columnists in the newly emerging newspapers and periodicals both in the Empire and abroad, as novelists, essayists, poets, and actors provided them with enough resources to be independent of the sultan and the households. The first group of Ottoman military and medical students and faculty trained in the Western-style state schools were taught that the epistemological origins of knowledge were not located in Islamic moral principles but instead in the secular, rational maxims of the Enlightenment. Some tried to merge Islamic ethics and Western morality; others became militantly secular and materialist. All constantly debated Western science, philosophy, and its implications for Ottoman society. The Ottoman minorities strove alongside the Muslims to create a truly multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Many served as faculty in the newly established Western-style state schools, some wrote novels and plays, others founded and acted in theater companies, and still others founded and managed newspapers. (1996, pp. 123-124)

It is within this context and out of the need for Ottoman reform to compete with Europe that different streams of intellectual thought developed in the later 19th century. Namık Kemal is also witnessing these events thought that European values can be taken and developed within traditional values of the Ottoman Empire leading to a conceptualization that is rooted in a harmonious relationship with Islam or more precisely put, that the European concepts were not alien or outside of the confinements of Islam. They were concepts rooted in the “true” Islamic traditions and values and in symphonic relationship with Islamic understanding of the political world. Against this backdrop, we proceed to understand Namık Kemal’s philosophical foundations in terms of his political and Islamic system and how they relate to each other.

### **Philosophical Foundations of Namık Kemal’s Political System**

Before moving forward to explore Namık Kemal’s understanding of specific European ideals it is critical that a foundational understanding of his general political conceptions is explored. Throughout his writings, especially in his articles for the *Hurriyet* and *İbret*, Namık Kemal’s philosophical foundations of his political conceptions can be understood.

According to Serif Mardin (2000), Namık Kemal’s focal point in his political conception starts with the understanding of the people. The starting point for Namık Kemal’s liberal ideas starts with the conceptualization of natural rights. People were endowed with certain natural rights that were given to them by birth. The political motivation is based upon securing these rights and providing a condition in which sovereignty can be exercised. In order for this to come into existence, Namık Kemal believed that this can be only possible through an association of men agreeing to protect this sovereignty (Mardin, 2000, p. 289).

Namık Kemal understood sovereignty to be the protection of freedom which he exemplifies as, “the service rendered by society in the world is the invention of an absolute normative force for the protection of freedom. The life of humanity is dependent on the continuation of this force” (Mardin, 2000, p. 291). For Namık Kemal than the initial political motive is the coming together for people to exercise their sovereignty and protect their freedom through an association of men—the philosophy of politics. Furthermore, Namık Kemal built his foundation of the individual on the basis of progress. He held a progressive view of human history and believed that the force of progressive was an onward move which is a characteristic of every society.

Although Namık Kemal had certain assumptions about the nature of the individual and of the coming together of society his aim was more practical than philosophical. For Kemal Karpat (2002, p. 50), Namık Kemal’s goal was not for Islamic reform rather it was about the restructuring of institutions. In this sense, his political foundation did not rest in reforming Islam to fit the political institutions, but it depended on adapting

European style institutions within the Ottoman Empire (Karpat, 2002, p. 52). According to Bernard Lewis (1992, pp. 316-320), Namık Kemal tries to present his arguments as notions that are encapsulated in traditional Islam, however, they are actually ideas developed in Europe and tactically employed by Namık Kemal through a consolidation of them with Islam.

In this sense, Namık Kemal's philosophical foundation of political concepts was primarily based on Islamic discourse. He formulated his ideas of European concepts through a reference to Islamic texts, traditions, and values. Namık Kemal created new vocabulary from Islamic words providing old words with new meanings which resembled 19th century European liberal ones. For instance *vatan*, the Arabic word for one's birthplace became equated with the French understanding of patriotism, *hurriyet*, being a freeman associated with liberty, *millet* with nation (Zurcher, 2010, p. 64). Islam for Namık Kemal would serve as the unifying factor in the Empire while still initiating a transformation of institutions to resemble European ones and propagating for a secular citizenship of equality based on Ottomanism. The next section dwells into specific concepts that were part of Namık Kemal's writings to explore how he used these terms in conjunction with Islam to formulate his ideas of Ottomanism.

### **State, Constitutionalism, and Government**

Namık Kemal did not differentiate between the state and government as it was ordinarily understood in Europe. Mardin (2000, p. 300) argues that Namık Kemal used state and government interchangeably. Government or state referred to the delegation of the powers of the community and the manner in which it is implemented. In referring to the community, Namık Kemal understood it much more broadly: namely using it to refer to the whole society rather than its parts. He saw the state not as a separate entity from the people that can exercise certain rights for the good of the general public, but as the sum of the individuals who composed it. In contrast to the moral state of Europe, Namık Kemal understood the state in more practical terms as being the embodiment of the individuals. The state did not have personalities that can be attributed to that are not found in the parts that form it. The role of the state for Namık Kemal is to act justly and secure the political rights of the individual. In order to accomplish such a goal, he believed that the state institutions need to be arranged in a manner to reflect constitutional and representative government. Namık Kemal in his article in the *İbret Gazetesi* (1872, No. 18) points to two devices in government that can safeguard the political rights of the people:

To keep the government within the limits of justice, there are two basic devices. The first of them is that the fundamental rules by which it operates should no longer be implicit or tacit, but should be published to the world.... The second principle is consultation, whereby the legislative power is taken away from the government. (Translation from Lewis, 1992, p. 317)

Namık Kemal understands justice of the state to mean freedom and the process of consultation as representation (Lewis, 1992, p. 317). He believed that the notion of representative government, commonly regarded as alien to Muslim societies, are in fact ideas that are expressed in the Quran and ones that have been applied in earlier periods of Islamic history (Mardin, 2000, p. 303). Furthermore, Namık Kemal argues that the constitutional expression of separation of powers and the check and balances was exercised in the Ottoman Empire in the past. For example, the different powers and roles of the Ulema, Janissaries, and the Sultan create a system which limited the absolute actions each organ can take.

Although the Empire would be following liberal European practices by adopting a constitutional government structure, Namık Kemal believed that this would be a return to the original Islamic principles. In

the eye of Namik Kemal, *baya*, the oath of allegiance to the leader of the Islamic community was essentially a social contract between the people and the state (Zurcher, 2010, p. 68). Namik Kemal explains the structure of the *baya* as:

The sovereignty of the people, which means that the powers of the government derive from the people, and which in the language of the Holy Law is called *baya*...is a right necessarily arising from the personal independence that each individual by nature possesses. (Gazetesi, 1872, No. 18; Lewis, 1992, p. 318)

By taking Islamic principles and relating European concepts to the expression of them, Namik Kemal attempts to build an understanding of the state, constitutionalism, and government.

He envisions three assemblies within the government resembles the different assemblies in the political structures of Europe. *Sura-yi-Devlet* or Council of the State would have the responsibility to draft bills; a *Meclis* which would serve as a check between the legislative body and the executive power; and a *Sura-yi-Umma*, a national assembly, which would enact bills passed by the Council of the State. The culmination of these Islamic traditions and the interpretation of them by Namik Kemal enabled him to visualize a European style government with sovereignty of the people and separation of power through different assemblies. Moreover, using Islamic ideals and attaching liberal connotations to them to create institutions of constitutional governance based on liberal principles.

States are governed by laws and regulations that are generally entrenched in constitutions. To further explore Namik Kemal's vision of constitutional government it is important and critical to understand his perspective on law. At this point, it is important to highlight a critical difference in Namik Kemal's source of law and European liberal notions of law. Namik Kemal, although a liberal in practical terms differed from his European counterparts because in belief he was advocate of Islamic orthodoxy, understood the sources of law to be religious and believed that the Islamic Law is comprehensive enough to provide fundamental rights to individuals.

The European obsession with public law of the state gave too much superiority to the moral state which according to Namik Kemal was disadvantageous. Religious law on the hand would provide a serve to create laws that are universally compelling to Islamic communities and which would serve to protect non-Muslims as well. In this manner, when Namik Kemal referred to the just state as the source of freedom, he was making reference to God's laws that dictate what is just and unjust. Departing from Islamic Law would mean a parting from a just state. Namik Kemal then envisions a government or state that is governed by Islamic Laws which according to him provides individual liberties and secures them in a higher providence.

### **Nation, Fatherland, and Vatan**

Although Namik Kemal was immersed in many different European liberal ideas he considered "vatan" to be a very important one. Namik Kemal understood the notion of fatherland to be much more than the geographical spatial territories that were explicit in European approaches. Fatherland consisted of an emotional bond made up of memories, experiences, and past (Mardin, 2000, p. 327). Furthermore he attributed characteristics to vatan that was much more personal, individualistic, and sacred. For example, he viewed vatan as a combination of honourable feelings such as brotherhood, sovereignty, liberty, family, and childhood memories (Mardin, 2000, p. 340).

The personification of the fatherland served a specific purpose for Namık Kemal. By attaching an intimate and subjective association to fatherland Namık Kemal aimed to build the individual's allegiance to the vatan in hope to create an Ottoman overarching identity that would encapsulate all the citizens within the territorial boundaries of the empire. Through his famous play *Vatan*, Namık Kemal attempts to gather support for his understanding of the fatherland which differed from the previous conceptualizations of it (Guida, 2011, p. 67). *Vatan* in its original Arabic form referred to a place where one lives, but Namık Kemal innovation was to go beyond residence to an understanding of love and attachment to the fatherland. Namık Kemal elucidates his understanding of fatherland as:

The fatherland is not composed of the vague lines traced by the sword of a conqueror or the pen of a scribe. It is a sacred idea resulting from the conglomeration of various noble feelings such as the people, liberty, brotherhood, interest, sovereignty, and respect for one's ancestors, love of the family, and childhood memories. (Mardin, 2006, p. 326)

Through defining the fatherland in these terms, Namık Kemal envisioned an Ottoman society in which individuals bonded together through shared experiences. This was an attempt to fuse together all the people of the Empire regardless of their religious and ethnic diversions, and a constitutional government would provide equal rights to all of them.

Even though Namık Kemal had liberal institutional visions for the Ottoman Empire, he based his intellectual vigor on pan-Ottomanism identity with Islamic philosophical undertones. In this way, he assumed he could solidify the ethnic and nationalist issues the Empire faces. By providing an Ottoman identity for all inhabitants of the Empire, he assumed he could build loyalty through patriotism from all segments within the Empire. Islam would play the role of solidifying patriotism because people in the Empire were for centuries religious based and using it as the underpinnings of vatan would help to unite and marry the two together—Ottomanism and Islam.

### **Freedom and Hürriyet**

Out of the many ideas Namık Kemal writes about freedom or *hürriyet* takes a central focus of attention for him. This is because of the god given freedom that Namık Kemal builds his political and philosophical views on. In Europe freedom came to be understood as spheres of action allowed for individuals by the state. However, Namık Kemal had a deeper understanding of freedom beyond state-given liberties. He understood freedom to mean the sovereignty of the people which would be upheld and protected through representational and constitutional model of government. In this sense, a just state as we discussed earlier becomes very important for freedom because a just state has the duty to protect and respect the political rights of the subjects.

Another important feature of Namık Kemal's vision of *hürriyet* is its source. Namık Kemal saw the meaning of freedom as a notion that is rooted in Islamic tradition (Mardin, 2002, p. 359). Within Islam it was noted by Namık Kemal that individuals have personal freedom and the goal of the government is to uphold the divine *hürriyet* provided to them by God through the creation of institutions that would guarantee this. Namık Kemal foresaw the French constitutional model as the one most appropriate and capable of accomplishing the goal of securing *hürriyet* for the people of the Empire. For Namık Kemal *hürriyet* derived from sovereignty of the people which in his Islamic expression was the ability to deliberate, thus informing his ideas on a consultative body as a branch within the government structure he proposes (Turnaoğlu, 2017, p. 63). *Hürriyet*, a natural right in Namık Kemal's understanding, required a form of political structure that is in opposition to the

absolutist power because individuals entered into a political society to protect their freedom through association of the people.

Freedom is the ultimate aim of political society because it is through Islamic Law that *hürriyet* is given to people and it is an ideal that should be protected and secured by people because Namık Kemal did not believe it was justifiable to expect this from God. As mentioned earlier freedom or *hürriyet* is much more than the state confined rights provided to people, Namık Kemal went even further to understand freedom in moral and spiritual sense. Stretching the meaning means that Namık Kemal sees freedom as transferring from the moral and spiritual to the conscious which comes to define the state and the nation (Erçetin, 2014, p. 62). Namık Kemal explains his idea of freedom by highlighting that, "All men are born free. The state is not an entity separate from the people and cannot have interests separate from theirs" (Aksin, 2007, p. 35). Freedom then is the natural right of individuals that is provided by divine providence and the goal of the state should be to secure these rights through a governmental structure of representative and constitutional institutions.

### **Discussion**

Looking at the discussions earlier it is clear that Namık Kemal wanted to reform the Ottoman Empire in several important ways. Namık Kemal took many ideas from the European conceptualizations of state structures and institutions. However, the interpretation and philosophical foundations he used to justify the need for such institutions differed. He believed that the most desirable way to enact reforms was through the stressing the importance of Islam. *Şeriat* or Islamic Law, he foresaw as the main organizing principle for the constitutional legal framework in which the state would function. By combining European ideals with Islamic traditions within the Ottoman Empire, Namık Kemal thought that the government can be reformed while still preserving Islamic essence and practices.

Namık Kemal's philosophical foundational understanding of Islam as a source of sovereignty and freedom allows him to combine the European ideals with that of Islam. In doing so, he does not aim to synthesis Islam with European ideas, rather Namık Kemal finds that these ideas are not new to Islamic civilization. Islam and Islamic traditions and values already inherently have these ideas within its structure. The god given sovereignty of the individual is one example among many in how he interprets concepts borrowed from Europe. Although he attaches differing meanings to these concepts, he emphasizes that these are Islamic concepts that had been practices in the past but had been disregarded. Namık Kemal's motive is to return to the "true" Islam which in his view would dictate a representational and constitutional government based on freedom and liberties for the "people".

From the above starting point Namık Kemal builds his understanding of the state or government. He looks at Islamic traditions of *şura*, *meclis*, and *baya* to exemplify how the European state structures are already present in Islamic notions. Furthermore, he discussed the notion of *vatan* which is present in Islamic tradition as meaning birthplace and innovates this to mean patriotism that is widespread in Europe at the time. Finally, Namık Kemal understood freedom or *hürriyet* to be much deeper in essence than presented in Europe. He believed freedom rises from natural right but even further provides a romantic understanding of it. Encapsulating in freedom the moral and the spiritual which the state rises out of are to protect the *hürriyet* of the people.

Overall, all these conceptualizations of Namık Kemal come together by his understanding of Islam and his attempt to reconcile European concepts with Islam. He does this not through an understanding of Islam as in

need of reform, but an understanding of Islamic traditions and values as being expanded to include the European ideas of sovereignty of the people, constitutionalism, freedom, or representational government.

### Conclusion

This study has attempted to understand the 19th century intellectual developments within the Ottoman Empire from an “inside” point of view. More specifically, it explored one prominent thinker of the time, Namık Kemal, to deepen the knowledge on social and political transformations and discussion being held at the center of the Empire. It has found that the European ideas that were openly influencing the Ottoman's were not a direct external influence but the internal processes also played a major role in giving rise to debates about the future of the Empire. Various schools of thought imagined the future of the empire in different ways. Namık Kemal saw the solution in Islam as the basis to formulate the future structure of the Empire. This paper argues that Namık Kemal did not synthesize Islam with European ideas, instead he found the intersection of European ideas in Islam and built an intellectual and a political system based on this premise. Although many studies investigate the Ottoman Empire, the exacerbated readings of the Ottoman from the “outside” need to be readdressed with readings that deal with the internal dynamics as well.

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