

International Studies Journal (ISJ)

Vol. 16, No. 3 (63), Winter 2020

Received Date: 3 November 2019

Accept Date: 26 December 2019

PP: 157-170

---

## **Turkish Geopolitical Thought: Problems of Genesis (1990s)**

---

Prof. Dr. Ruben Safrastyan \*

Geopolitics is a young field of science in Turkey. Its start was given actually in 1958 with the publication of a purely informative paper by Professor Suat Bilge<sup>1</sup>. Later, in the 1960s of the past century there appeared a report read at a scientific conference, followed by another article and a book<sup>2</sup>. The authors of that period did not shape any independent approach nor otherwise affect the process of formation of the Turkish geopolitical mentality.

The Turkish geopolitical thought was shaped later on when the retired general Suat Ilhan began his academic activities. In 1967, the subject of “geopolitics” with Ilhan lecturing was first included into the curriculum of the Land Force Military Academy. As Ilhan later wrote while passing to academic work he was going to read courses on military history and political geography and military geography when he was suddenly ordered to work out an additional 60 hours course on a new subject – geopolitics, which appeared to be a difficult task since publications on geopolitical issues were too scarce in the libraries in Ankara, including the National Library<sup>3</sup>.

The course lasted until 1969. Two years later in 1971 S. Ilhan included his lectures into a separate monograph<sup>4</sup> published in rather large circulation and accepted with interest<sup>5</sup>. Later S. Ilhan was appointed to high military offices, mainly in the field of military intelligence, received the rank of general but never dropped his geopolitical studies focusing basically on the clarification of

theoretical issues. The results of his researches were first summarized in a book titled “Geopolitical Sensitivity” (“*Jeopolitik Duyarlılık*”), which turned to be the first professional investigation of geopolitical issues in Turkey<sup>6</sup>. Notably it was published by the Turkish Historical Society (*Türk Tarih Kurumu*) established on M. K. Atatürk’s initiative for formulating and propagandizing the official representation of the Turkish history, which provides grounds to imply that geopolitics began making its first steps in Turkey as a component of the official ideology.

The book mainly reiterated the existing western geopolitical theories without any serious analysis or assessment. In the final part only the author tried to formulate his own theoretical approaches, characterizing Turkey as a link between the neighboring countries, which is simultaneously playing the role of a “lock and key” (*kilit ve anahtar*)<sup>7</sup>, thus, according to author, it may be considered a “Geopolitical Power”.

These characteristics of “lock and key” appeared to be so important for the further development of the Turkish geopolitical mentality that in a few years when the Soviet Union collapsed and the danger it had been posing for Turkey vanished they transformed and turned into a ground for “domestication” the conceptual term of the “Central power” borrowed from the American political scientists in the language of Politology in Turkey. The said concept is still important in the Turkish geopolitical discourse. The above characteristics were meant for a single objective only – to emphasize the exceptional significance of Turkey for the region and even for the world.

Continuing his judgments S. İlhan wrote about the need for the appearance of a “high quality individual” (*vasıflı insan*) who, according to his theory, would be able to correctly apply the abovementioned “Geopolitical Power” of Turkey thus turning him to an “Influential Power”. Concluding S. İlhan arrived to the following formula: “Geographical Power” in union with a “high quality

individual” brings forth “Geopolitical Power”<sup>8</sup>. Just applying S. Ilhan’s theoretical judgments to our days, we may conclude that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the leader of the Justice and Development Party and President of the country who aspires, as a “powerful” individual, to become its sole ruler and has centralized “Influential Power” in his hands, is transforming the country into a “Geopolitical Power”.

Considering the importance of Turkey’s geographical position S. Ilhan concluded that even an insignificant strengthening of some geopolitical factors in the given circumstances would be immediately felt in the Near East, Soviet Union and Europe<sup>9</sup>. This is an important conclusion since the author assumes though covertly that Turkey is capable in the case of necessity or by strengthening of “interchangeable geopolitical factors” to influence the policy of the powers that be. So, Suat Ilhan’s emphasizing that Turkey is able to become such a regional state, which may project influence on the global politics<sup>10</sup>, is not at all strange.

One of the main specific features of the abovementioned theory is the acute feeling of danger hanging over Turkey, which is connected with the presence of the Soviet Union by its side. Such a geopolitical perception was akin not only to S. Ilhan but also to many other high-ranking officers<sup>11</sup> of his generation<sup>12</sup>. Mattered in this case both the fear of the military might of the Soviet Union and the historical memory of numerous defeats borne by Turkey in Russian-Turkish wars. Notably in some other passage, S. Ilhan wrote that the new Orthodox Russian Empire emerging instead of the USSR might represent even a larger threat for Turkey<sup>13</sup>.

During the next decade, in the 1990-s, S. Ilhan continued his geopolitical studies publishing numerous articles and books, trying on the one hand to specify the characteristics of theoretical significance, and, on the other hand, to broaden the frames of his geopolitical analysis through including new fields

and providing new ideological substantiations. Thus, at a scientific conference held at Hacetepe University in Ankara in 1990 he made a report repeating his idea expressed in 1986 already that “being a Turk is difficult”, which was substantiated by the exceptional geographical location and geopolitical significance of the country containing both risks and opportunities<sup>14</sup>. This concept was further subjected to multifaceted analysis in his next book also entitled “Being a Turk Is Difficult”<sup>15</sup>. Notable is the conclusion of the aforementioned report: “A weak nation living on the Turkish lands has no chance to survive. We are compelled to be strong.”<sup>16</sup> This formula relating to the “compelled” strength found wide acceptance in the works of the next generation Turkish Geopolitical scientists. Thus, years on Professor Pınar Bilgin of the Bilkent University in Ankara chose it as a title for one of her articles<sup>17</sup>.

S. İlhan expanded his geopolitical studies to the field of Panturkist theories trying to substantiate them with the help of geopolitical instruments<sup>18</sup>. He characterized the Central Asian region inhabited by Turkic peoples as a “cross road” (*kavşak*) where all inner ties of the continent meet and without which no foreign policy in Asia can be furthered<sup>19</sup>. Basing on this assumption İlhan writes that from the geopolitical point of view the importance of the Caucasus and Azerbaijan for Turkey is connected with the fact that they enable establishing contacts with the said “cross road”, i. e. Turkic regions of the Central Asia. That role appeared “in broad daylight” with the emergence of the newly established Turkic states in Central Asia, wrote S. İlhan<sup>20</sup>.

Most interesting among the articles of several other authors<sup>21</sup> writing on geopolitical issues in the years of the Cold War is that of Professor Cezmi Sevgi<sup>22</sup>. Being an economic geographer by specialty<sup>23</sup> C. Sevgi made an attempt to analyze with the help of the basic western geopolitical theories the geopolitical importance of Turkey for the US and USSR stating that from the

strategic point of view Turkey is more important for the latter since it can enter the Mediterranean basin only through the Black Sea straits located in the Turkish territory<sup>24</sup>. Noteworthy is the author's conclusion that "from the geopolitical and geostrategic points of view Turkey is one of the most important countries in the world."<sup>25</sup> This is an important statement since under conditions of confrontation between the two poles when Turkey's security could be ensured only due to the might of its western allies, which strongly restricted the possibilities of independent activity on the international scene, the Turkish authors tried to substantiate by means of political geography and geopolitics the exceptional place and role of Turkey in the world. However, such substantiations were not quite convincing as they lacked any serious theoretical or analytical base. S. Ilhan was the only scholar who succeeded in the work out of the first in Turkey doctrinal approach and original geopolitical theory. This is what makes S. Ilhan's theory the most important phenomenon in the history of the Turkish geopolitical thought<sup>26</sup>.

However, the importance of his theory is not limited to that. As a matter of fact, in the years of Cold War already it laid the foundation of the future doctrines and approaches of Turkey's geopolitical domination, which were brought forward just after the collapse of the Soviet Union and opened new possibilities for Turkey to fill the vacuum. The common feature of all such theories was striving to represent, by means of geopolitical interpretations, the "exceptional" role and importance of Turkey in the regional or even global processes.

It is worth noting that S. Ilhan's contribution into the establishment of the Turkish geopolitical mentality is highly evaluated both by foreign and Turkish scholars. The French orientalist and geopolitical scientist Tancredè Jossèran quite right characterizing him as the master of Turkish geopolitics<sup>27</sup>. In his turn, the Turkish geopolitical scientist P. Bilgin paying a tribute to S. Ilhan for the

work done considers him “the leading geopolitics scientist in Turkey.”<sup>28</sup> It is hard not to agree with these characteristics.

The new geopolitical perceptions connected with the end of the Cold War brought forward new terms of doctrinal nature, which were widely circulated among the Turkish political scientists in the beginning of the 1990s. The most widespread of them - “Eurasia” (*Avrasya*) receiving various theoretical definitions quickly gained an important place in the political, political scientific and geopolitical discourse in Turkey. It gave birth to an original branch of the Turkish geopolitical thought, which was named Euroasianism (*Avrasyacılık*)<sup>29</sup>.

Euro-Asianism was perceived as the main doctrine, which outlined the geopolitical strategy, international relations and national security of Turkey after the end of the Cold War. As regards its scientific value - it was greatly politicized and vaguely defined. Thus, for example the leader of the Nationalistic Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) Devlet Bahçeli was basing on the Panturkist ideas and characterized it as a triangle including the Balkans, Caucasus and Near East, the heart of which was Anatolia<sup>30</sup>. A number of alternative definitions of Eurasia based on other political views were also spread. The first of them, following the theories accepted in a number of western and eastern countries, according which the confrontation between the “Capitalist West – Socialist East” existing throughout the Cold War has been substituted upon its end by the confrontation between the “Wealthy North and Poor South”, characterized Eurasia as the “South” in contrast to the wealthy and developed “North”. Supporters of the second doctrine included into the Eurasian borders only six Muslim republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia established after the collapse of the Soviet Union, of which only one was not Turkic.

In the 1990s a number of the left wing Turkish intellectuals and politicians, as well as the representatives of certain Islamist circles formulated another

approach to the Turkish Eurasian policy, which actually suggested a complete alternative to the “traditional” pro-western (by definition) Kemalist foreign policy. It was based on the idea of collaboration with the “main Eurasian states” – Turkey, Iran and Russia against the “Western Imperialism”. The adepts of this approach criticized the foreign policy of Turkey for subordinating its interests to the West and neglecting the core interests of the country. They advocated for foreign policy independent from the West. There were well-known representatives of the left and Islamist intellectual and political circles among them. A veteran of the Turkish socialist movement and a very controversial politician Doğu Perinçek who was the advocate of that view chose a characteristic title for one of his book – “The Choice of Eurasia – Independent Foreign Policy for Turkey”<sup>31</sup>. The said book was a selection of his earlier publicistic articles that did not contain any formulations having the value of theoretical generalization. Nevertheless the author’s aspiration to interpret Eurasianism as a new and alternative strategy of Turkey’s foreign policy, the goal of which was opposing to its “traditional” pro-western stance did not remain unnoticed by certain segments of the Turkish society and was welcomed by some of the left Kemalist circles. An attempt of developing D. *Perinçek*’s ideas was made by his son Mehmet *Perinçek* in a monograph on the same subject<sup>32</sup> where he lauding Euroasianism declared that Turkey might keep its existence only through the “Eurasian policy”<sup>33</sup>.

In 2007, Erdoğan’s government hit a mighty blow to the supporters of the Eurasianism doctrine imprisoning within the frames of Ergenekon operation tens of the members of various groups of the Turkish society. Doğu Perinçek was also arrested<sup>34</sup>. However Eurasianism not only preserved its positions as a original tendency in the geopolitical discourse, but even expanded the number of its supporters with the establishment of the Russian-Turkish-Iranian cooperation during the Syrian crisis.

To emphasize the predominant role of Turkey due to its “natural” geopolitical conditions in the beginning of the 1990s the scholarly and political circles in Turkey adopted the term “Central State” borrowed from the works of American political scientists of the 1980s. The first to apply this concept in the beginning of the 1990s was one of the leading Turkish political analysts Oral Sander. He did not have enough time to finalize his approaches as he passed away in 1995, but even his preliminary perception of Turkey as of a “Central State” testified that the Turkish geopolitical mentality was shifting to a new phase of important transformations.

Turning to new possibilities opening before the foreign policy of Turkey O. Sander writes in one of his articles that first of all it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that Turkey has once been a vast empire, one of the strongest in the world and that its “strategic position” remained unchanged also under current conditions because turning to a small “National State” Turkey at the same time preserves its role of a “Central State”<sup>35</sup>. In O. Sander’s opinion that role is conditional on the fact that Turkey is still in control of the straits of Bosphor and Dardanel<sup>36</sup> thus, he concludes, Turkey gains a possibility of not only being influenced by global developments but also to influence them herself.<sup>37</sup>

Like S. Ilhan O. Sander belonged to the generation of the Turkish political and geopolitical scholars who had still preserved the intrinsic sense of “danger” inherent to the years of the Cold War, but that sense was deeper hidden in him than in Suat Ilhan. Thus he turned to the classical work in the field of international relations - “Politics Among Nations” by Hans Morgenthau and basing on it suggested the following arguments: a small country that occupies geopolitical positions of strategic importance can get greater influence than permitted by its real potential would let it; but in that case it may face the danger of destabilization<sup>38</sup>. We have to stress that these judgments of an



experienced political analyst of the first half of the 1990s were neglected by all governments formed by the Justice and Development Party and in the first turn by the Prime Minister and now President R. T. Erdoğan...

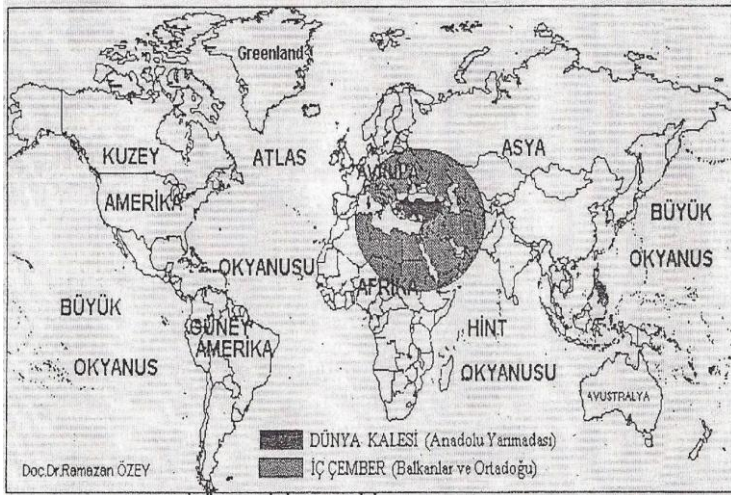
The most notable phenomenon of the Turkish geopolitical thought of the 1990s of the past century is certainly the “Theory of Central Turkish Domination” suggested by Professor Ramazan Özey in 1994<sup>39</sup>. Its main postulates may be briefly summarized as follows: Anatolia, i. e. Minor Asia is the “citadel of the world” (*kale*) and the country ruling in Anatolia – Turkey, holding that citadel has a possibility of establishing control over the regions being the part of the “inner circle” namely, according to the Turkish geopolitical scientist, the Balkans, Near East and the Caucasus<sup>40</sup>. The regions outside the “inner circle” compose the “external circle”<sup>41</sup>. Summarizing his thoughts Özey, basing on famous English geopolitical scientist Sir H. J. Mackinder suggested the following formula: “the nation that rules the inner circle is dominating in the external circle, i.e. in the world.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, Ramazan Özey in the 1990s already arrived to a “clear” conclusion: Turkey will be ruling the world. That author was no stranger to Pan-Turkism too as in another passage of his book he noted, “the Turkic world” is situated in the center of the world” and will, jointly with Turkey, dominate over the entire world.”<sup>43</sup>

Özey was not alone to characterize the geographical position of Turkey as a “natural citadel” situated in the center of the Balkans, the Caucasus and Near East. Similar judgments were made by Mustafa Yılmaz. However, opposite to R. Özey he was more restrained in his approaches and avoided making conclusions about the predominant position of Turkey in the world limiting to the statement that the position of the “citadel” provides Turkey an opportunity to get “a number of alternative economic, political and military” approaches differing from each other<sup>44</sup>.

The 1990s were marked also by geopolitical publications of a number of retired high ranked officers of the Turkish army, part of whom had been already “forgetting” about the existence of danger from the North, withstanding which was the main objective of the Turkish Armed Forces. A new geopolitical mentality was being shaped, with the motto “Turkey is located in the center of the world” in its foundation as aptly noted the retired lieutenant-general *Sadi Ergüvenç*<sup>45</sup>.

This is the picture of the Turkish geopolitical mentality during the first decades of its existence. The main tendency of that period was representing Turkey as a “Center of Power” being shaped on the regional or even global scale.

Later the geopolitical doctrines formulated in the 1990s had been systematized by geopolitical scientist and politician Ahmet Davutoğlu and included into his theory of “strategic depth” thus beginning to directly influence the foreign policy of Turkey.



## References

<sup>1</sup> Bilge A. S., Jeopolitik, - Siyasal bilgiler fakultesi dergisi, C. XIII, S. 3, 1958, s. 150-174, - [dergiler.ankara.edu.tr/dergiler/42/378/4016.pdf](http://dergiler.ankara.edu.tr/dergiler/42/378/4016.pdf) (05.03.2019).

<sup>2</sup> See on that: Ulaş Bülent, Jeopolitik: Türkiye'nin milli güvenliği ve Avrupa Birliği üyelik süreci. İstanbul, 2011, s. 294.

<sup>3</sup> İlhan S., Jeopolitik çalışmalar, - <http://www.hanemiz.com/acik-istihbarat/16720-jeopolitik-calismalari.html> (this site is no more active, the article is saved in the author's archive).

<sup>4</sup> İlhan S., Jeopolitikten taktiğe: Harp Akademileri yayını, İstanbul, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> İlhan S., Jeopolitik çalışmaları...

<sup>6</sup> İlhan S., Jeopolitik duyarlılık, Ankara, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. s. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. s. 155.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. s.142.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. s.141.

<sup>11</sup> See for example the book of General Necip Torumtay, retired commander of the General Headquarters of the Turkish Armed Forces: Torumtay N., Değişen stratejilerin odağında Türkiye, İstanbul, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Suat İlhan was born in 1925.

<sup>13</sup> İlhan S., Türkiye jeopolitiği ve jeopolitik gelişmeler, - Tarihi gelişmeler içinde Türkiye'nin sorunları sempozyumu (Dün-Bugün-Yarın): Bildiriler, Hacettepe üniversitesi Atatürk ilkeleri ve inkılâp tarihi enstitütüsü, Ankara, 8-9 Mart 1990, Ankara, 1992, s. 17-18. Notably the materials of that conference as well as the book «Geopolitical Sensitivity» by S. İlhan had been published by the Turkish Historical Society.

---

\* Full Member of National Academy of Sciences of Republic of Armenia

Email: [ruben-safrastyan@yandex.com](mailto:ruben-safrastyan@yandex.com)

<sup>14</sup> That report was published in two years, in 1992. See: İlhan S., Türkiye jeopolitiği ve jeopolitik gelişmeler, - Tarih gelişmeler içinde Türkiye'nin sorunları sempozyumu (Dün-Bugün-Yarın): Bildiriler, Hacettepe üniversitesi Atatürk ilkeleri ve inkılâp tarihi enstitüsü, Ankara, 1992, s. 7-18.

<sup>15</sup> See: İlhan S., Türk olmak zordur, İstanbul, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. s. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Bilgin P., *Only* strong states can survive in Turkey's geography: The uses of “geopolitical truths” in Turkey, - Political Geography, 2007, No. 26 (7), p. 740-756.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance: İlhan S., Jeopolitik gelişmeler ve Türk dünyasının jeopolitiği, - Türk kültürünü araştırma enstitüsü yayınları, No. 134, Ankara, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> İlhan S., Jeopolitik gelişmeler ve Türk..., s. 161.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. s. 158.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance: Enginsoy C., Türkiye'nin jeopolitik önemi ve süper güçlerin Türkiye üzerindeki çıkar çatışmaları, - Güncel konular, 1982, No. 3, s. 27-38.

<sup>22</sup> See: Sevgi C., Jeopolitik ve jeostratejinin tarihsel gelişimi açısından Türkiye'nin konumu, - Ege coğrafya dergisi, 1988, No.4, Nisan, s. 214-249.

<sup>23</sup> See on C. Sevgi: Prof. Dr. Cezmi Sevgi, - [www.cografya.ege.edu.tr/files/cografya/icerik/cezmisevgi.pdf](http://www.cografya.ege.edu.tr/files/cografya/icerik/cezmisevgi.pdf) (05.03.2019)

<sup>24</sup> Sevgi C., Jeopolitik ve jeostratejinin..., s. 245.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> I have characterized the geopolitical theory of Suat İlhan in a separate article. See: R. Safrastyan, On the question of origination of the Geopolitical thought in Turkey: Suat İlhan's “Concept of Danger”, - Armenian Army, addendum “Workbook”, 2012, No. 3, p. 110-115 (In Armenian) [Սաֆրաստյան Ռ., Թուրքիայում աշխարհաքաղաքական մտքի ծագումնաբանության հարցի շուրջ. Սուաթ Իլհանի «Վտանգի տեսությունը», Հայկական և բանակ

նազնագիտական հանդեսի *Աշխատանքային տեսողեր* հավելված, 2012, No. 3, էջ 110-115].

<sup>27</sup> Suat İlhan'ın *Türk olmak zordur İstanbul, 2009* adlı kitabı hakkında Fransa'da yayımlanan iki makalenin özeti, - <http://www.ayk.gov.tr/s9-hakkmzda/c54-bakanlar/korg-suat-lhan/> (05.03.2019) .

<sup>28</sup> Bilgin P., *Only strong states can...*, p. 741.

<sup>29</sup> Issues relating to Euroasianism had been discussed by me in one of my earlier articles: Safrastyan R., Turkey and Eurasia in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy: Some observations on geopolitics and foreign policy, - Caucasus and Central Asia Newsletter: The Caucasus and Central Asia Program at the University of California, Berkeley, 2001-2, 1, Winter, p. 3-8.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance: [Devlet Bahçeli], Genel Başkanımız Dr. Devlet Bahçeli'nin MHP 6. Olağan büyük kongresinde yapmış oldukları konuŞma, 5 Kasım 2000, – [https://www.mhp.org.tr/mhp\\_index.php](https://www.mhp.org.tr/mhp_index.php) (05.03.2018).

<sup>31</sup> Perinçek D., *Avrasya seçeneği: Türkiye için bağımsız dıŞ politika*, İstanbul, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Perinçek M., *Avrasyacılık: Türkiye'deki teori ve pratiği*, 2. Basım, İstanbul, 2016. The book was first published in 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, s. 13.

<sup>34</sup> See on it: Akçali E., Perinçek M., *Kemalist Eurasianism: An Emerging Geopolitical discourse in Turkey*, - *Geopolitics*, 2009, No. 14, p. 565.

<sup>35</sup> Sander O., *Turkish foreign policy: Forces of continuity and change*, - *Turkish Review*, Winter 1993, Volume 7, Number 34, p. 46.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 45-46.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> Özey presented that theory in a number of his publications. See for instance: Özey R., *Jeopolitik ve jeostratejik açıdan Türkiye*, İstanbul, 1998, s. 57-59.

<sup>40</sup> See the map attached to this article, which is taken from R. Özey's works.

<sup>41</sup> Özey R., Jeopolitik ve jeostratejik..., s. 58-59.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, s. 59.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, s. 41.

<sup>44</sup> Yılmaz M., Türkiyenin jeo-stratejisi açısından günümüz olaylarının değerlendirilmesi, - Üçüncü 1000'E Girerken Türkiye: Kutlu doğum sempozyumu - 1999. Yayına Hazırlayan: Ömer Turan. Ankara, 2000, s. 72.

<sup>45</sup> Erguvenc S., Turkey's strategic importance in military dimension: A Regional balance holder, - Turkey at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Global encounters and/vs regional alternatives. Ed. By: Mustafa Aydın, Ankara, 1998, p. 63.