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Turkey's Diyanet: The Revival of Sheikh al-Islam

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Since the rise of the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, Islam's influence on Turkish politics has become much more evident. For much of the modern state's history, religion had largely been confined to the private sphere, but the AKP has worked hard to change this. The decision to end the ban on the headscarf for women in the universities in 2011¹ and the elimination of Atatürkism as the official guideline for the education system in 2012² were two symbolic milestones in that regard. These policies were accompanied by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's pro-religious rhetoric, which called on the people to raise a "religious generation" (*dindar nesil*).³ In the aftermath of his election to the presidency in August 2014, this pro-religious rhetoric has been further reinforced. In the 5th Religion Council meeting of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), Erdoğan implicitly criticized the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, for not adopting religion together with "rationality and science" as the sole guidelines for the republic.⁴ Diyanet, the office of religious affairs, appears to be the president's chosen instrument for realizing his vision of a more religious state and society.

Following the abolishment of the Caliphate and the Ministry of Sharia and Charitable Foundations (Office of the Sheikh al-Islam) in 1924, Diyanet was established and was assigned the role of supervising Islam and providing religious services to the Turkish public. The Turkish military used Diyanet to legitimize its actions and win public approval, understanding that religion was an important part of people's lives in Turkey. Today, Diyanet possesses enormous financial resources. Its share of the

¹ "Üniversitelerde artık türbana engel yok," [There are no more obstacles for the hijab in the universities], *Radikal*, February 2, 2012

http://www.radikal.com.tr/egitim/universitede_artik_turbana_engel_yok-1038728

² "Atatürk İlkeleri kitaptan çıkarıldı," [Atatürk's Principles were removed from the book] *Hürriyet*, September 15, 2012, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/21459983.asp>

³ "Dindar nesil yetiştireceğiz," [We will raise a religious generation], *Hürriyet*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/19825231.asp>

⁴ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan 5. Din Şurası'nda konuştu," [President Erdoğan spoke at the 5th Religion Council Meeting], *TRT Haber*, December 8, 2014 <http://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-5-din-surasininda-konustu-154524.html>

government's budget is 5.4 billion Liras (\$2.3 billion), which is more than the combined budget of eight different ministries. These resources make Diyanet an important tool for implementing AKP's policies.⁵ The newly launched Diyanet TV channel and its radio station (2012) can be both watched and heard throughout Turkey via satellite, cable, or internet broadcasts.⁶ Having grasped the importance of social media, Diyanet also launched a Facebook page, a Twitter account, and a YouTube channel. Via these outlets, Diyanet seeks to provide more information about its activities to the public and provide information about the fundamentals of religion. Operating out of the president's office, Diyanet officials operate a popular hotline fatwa service that encourages callers to harmonize their daily lives with the principles of Islam.⁷ Above and beyond providing basic services, such as issuing "Halal" certificates to Turkish food manufacturers and suppliers since 2011,⁸ Diyanet is trying to become a more important part of people's daily lives. In this respect, in January 2015, Diyanet condemned acts like feeding a dog at home,⁹ celebrating the Gregorian calendar's new year,¹⁰ playing lottery games,¹¹ tattoos,¹² and abortions for women.¹³ These activities were judged as *haram*, (forbidden in Islam), while some matters of personal style, such as wearing an earring for men, were described as *mekruh* (nearly *haram*).¹⁴ Furthermore, the head of Diyanet, Mehmet Görmez, publicly suggested making religious marriages officially equivalent to civil marriages.¹⁵ Since the adoption of the Swiss Civil Code in 1926, religious marriages have not been

⁵ "Tek Başına 8 bakanlığı geçti," [It alone surpassed 8 ministries], *Hürriyet*, October 11, 2013, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/24893813.asp>

⁶ "Diyanet TV yayına başladı," [Diyanet TV started to broadcast], *Aksam*, June 17, 2012, <http://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/diyanet-tv-yayina-basladi--121919h/haber-121919>

⁷ "Diyanet'ten ücretsiz fetva hattı," [A free fatwa hotline from the Diyanet], *Dünya Bülteni*, March 8, 2012 <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/haberler/200834/diyanetten-ucretsiz-fetva-hatti>

⁸ "TSE'den Halal Gıda Sertifikası alan ürünlerde Diyanet logosu olacak," [The goods that receive Halal Food Certificate from the Turkish Standards Institute (TSE) from now on will also bear the seal of the Diyanet], *Helal Gıda Firmaları.net*, September 13, 2012 <http://www.helalgidafirmalari.net/tseden-helal-sertifikasi-alan-urunlerde-diyanet-logosu-olacak.html>

⁹ "Diyanetten güncel fetvalar," [Daily fatwas from Diyanet], *Milli Gazete*, January 5, 2015, http://www.milligazete.com.tr/haber/Diyanetten_guncel_fetvalar/347750#.VL9tHUeUfAk

¹⁰ "Diyanet, Yılbaşı'nı 'gayriahlaki' ve 'gayrimeşru' ilan etti!," [Diyanet declared new year's eve as 'non-moral' and 'illegitimate'], *Sendika.org*, December 29, 2014 <http://www.sendika.org/2014/12/diyanet-yilbasini-gayriahlaki-ve-gayrimesru-ilan-etti/>

¹¹ "Diyanet: Milli Piyango gibi oyunlar haram," [Diyanet: The lottery games are illicit (haram)], *Risale Haber*, January 7, 2015 <http://www.risalehaber.com/diyanet-milli-piyango-gibi-oyunlar-haram-226935h.htm>

¹² "Diyanet: Dövmesini sildirmeyen Allah'tan bağışlanmasını dilemeli," [Diyanet: The ones who do not erase their tattoos should ask for God's mercy], *Hürriyet*, January 8, 2015 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/27918161.asp>

¹³ "Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Görmez'den kürtaj açıklaması," [Head of the Presidency of Religious Affairs Görmez's statement on abortion], *Hürriyet*, June 4, 2012 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/20687889.asp>

¹⁴ "Diyanet: Erkeklerin küpe takması mekruh," [Diyanet: Men's wearing of earrings is almost illicit], *Hürriyet*, January 12, 2015 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/27949836.asp>

¹⁵ "Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Mehmet Görmez'e göre dini nikah-resmi nikah ayrımı ortadan kaldırılmalı," [According to the head of Diyanet Mehmet Görmez the split of religious marriage – civil marriage should be abolished], *Diken*, November 3, 2014 <http://www.diken.com.tr/diyanet-isleri-baskani-mehmet-gormeze-gore-dini-nikah-resmi-nikah-ayrimi-ortadan-kaldirilmali/>

recognized by the state because they were viewed by the government as promoting polygamy.

Diyanet has also tried to integrate itself into the public health services. It signed a protocol with the Ministry of Health that provides religious officials to each hospital to support patients' treatments.¹⁶ Despite objections from doctors, the protocol has remained in effect.¹⁷

Diyanet is also increasing its operations in the field of education. Recently, it approved measures to allow courses in religion to be held in public universities' dormitories.¹⁸ In addition, it has supported the introduction of Ottoman-Turkish language instruction into the high school curriculum,¹⁹ and is supporting optional courses in the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's life in public schools.²⁰ Diyanet also abolished the minimum age restriction of 12 for participating in private Qur'an courses.²¹ At the same time, in order to ease the integration of young children into its education system, it also launched its own "Qur'an Kindergartens," where children 4 to 6 years old are taught to read in Arabic, as well as the fundamentals of Islam in a framework of different games.²² Diyanet is also trying to spread its influence to Germany's large Turkish population by launching a free program called "Kindermoschee" (children's Mosque) in Germany's mosques.²³

Görmez has also spoken out on broader issues involving the Muslim world. During Pope Francis' November 2014 visit to Ankara, he warned the Pope of rising Islamophobia in Europe.²⁴ His outspoken position did not change after the terrorist attack on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. While condemning the

¹⁶ "Hastanelerde din adamı projesi başlıyor," [The project of religious officials in hospitals is launched], *Hürriyet*, January 8, 2015 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/saglik/27911067.asp>

¹⁷ "Hastanelerde din adamı projesini iptal etmeye davet ediyoruz," [We invite them to cancel the religious officials in hospitals project], *Hürriyet*, January 20, 2015 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/saglik/28007181.asp>

¹⁸ "Yurtlarda ve Gençlik Kampları'nda yeni dönem", [New era in the dormitories and the youth camps], *Hürriyet*, January 22, 2015 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/spot/diger/28023408.asp>

¹⁹ "Mehmet Görmezden Osmanlıca dersi açıklaması," [Mehmet Görmez's statement on Ottoman-Turkish courses], *DİB Ajans*, January 10, 2015 <http://dibajans.com/mehmet-gormezen-osmanlica-dersi-aciklamasi/1403/>

²⁰ "Diyanet'ten Kur'an-ı Kerim dersi açıklaması," [Diyanet's statement on the course of Holy Quran], *Bugün*, March 30, 2012, <http://gundem.bugun.com.tr/diyanetten-kuran-dersi-aciklamasi-haberi/188133>

²¹ "Kur'an Kurslarında 12 yaş sınırı kalktı," [The age restriction of 12 in the Quran courses abolished], *Milliyet*, April 8, 2012, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/kur-an-kurslarinda-12-yas-siniri-kalkti/gundem/gundemdetay/08.04.2012/1525497/default.htm>

²² "Kur'an kursu kreşlerinde oyun eşliğinde din eğitimi," [Game accompanied religious education at the Quran course kindergartens], *Hürriyet*, November 27, 2013, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/25220395.asp>

²³ "Diyanet'ten Almanya'da çocuk camisi projesi," [Diyanet's Mosque project for children in Germany], *T24*, January 2, 2015 <http://t24.com.tr/haber/diyanetten-almanyada-cocuk-camisi-projesi.282335>

²⁴ "Mehmet Görmez'den Papa'ya tarihi mektup," [Historical letter from Mehmet Görmez to the Pope], *Vatan*, November 29, 2014, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/mehmet-gormezen-papa-ya-tarihi-mektup--701825-gundem/>

terrorist attack, Görmez criticized the West for being hypocritical for only “mourning after the twelve French citizens while ignoring the twelve million Muslims killed worldwide.”²⁵

Mehmet Görmez has also made important statements on two sensitive issues: the Hagia Sophia and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In a television interview, Görmez claimed that the Hagia Sophia (an Eastern Orthodox cathedral that was the seat of the Patriarchate of Constantinople for a thousand years until it was turned into an Ottoman Mosque in 1453; it was transformed into a museum in the 1930s and declared a UNESCO heritage site in 1985) was not a church and should not be used as a museum but as a mosque.²⁶ With respect to Jerusalem, Görmez called for “the liberation of Al-Aqsa Mosque from the invasion of the occupiers.”²⁷ Görmez’s anti-Israel line became even more evident when he made a correlation between “ISIS” [the Islamic State] and Israel.²⁸ Görmez went on to declare that “Jerusalem belongs to Muslims and not to them [Israel].”²⁹ Following these statements, Diyanet announced it had included Jerusalem on its “Umrah”³⁰ route by stating that the organization will not abandon Jerusalem. Diyanet also launched a project in the Gaza Strip to reconstruct mosques damaged during the Israel-Hamas fighting in the summer of 2014.³¹ More broadly, in order to promote Islam in different regions, Diyanet has built a mosque in Albania³² and even declared that it will construct a new mosque in Cuba.³³

²⁵ “Diyanet: Dünyanın Paris için ayağa kalkmasını ibretle izledik,” [Diyanet: We have witnessed how the world reacted after Paris and we have learned from it], *Cumhuriyet*, January 13, 2015, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/183866/Diyanet_Dunyanin_Paris_icin_ayaga_kalkmasini_ibretle_izledik.html

²⁶ “Diyanet İşleri Başkanı tarihi yeniden yazdı: Ayasofya müze veya kilise değil, Müslümanların ortak mabediymiş,” [Head of Presidency of Religious Affairs had re-written the history, according to him Hagia Sophia was not a church nor a museum but a mosque for all Muslims], *Diken*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.diken.com.tr/diyanet-isleri-baskani-tarihi-yeniden-yazdi-ayasofya-kilise-degil-muslumanlarin-ortak-mabedidir/>

²⁷ Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Görmez Açıklaması, [Statement of Presidency of Religious Affairs Görmez], *Haberler*, November 8, 2014, <http://www.haberler.com/diyanet-isleri-baskani-gormez-aciklamasi-6669042-haberi>

²⁸ “Mehmet Görmez: IŞİD ile İsrail arasında fark yok,” [Mehmet Görmez: There is no difference between ISIS and Israel], *Star*, December 6, 2014, <http://haber.stargazete.com/guncel/mehmet-gormez-isis-ile-israil-arasinda-fark-yok/haber-977092>

²⁹ Diyanet’ten umre ziyaretlerine Kudüs rotası, [Diyanet has added Jerusalem to the Umrah route], *Haber 7*, December 28, 2014, <http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/1258610-diyanetten-umre-ziyaretlerine-kudus-rotasi>

³⁰ The Umrah (Arabic: *عمرة*) is a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, performed by Muslims that can be undertaken at any time of the year, in contrast to the Hajj.

³¹ “Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı’nın Gazze’ye yardımları,” [Turkish Diyanet Foundation’s aid to Gaza], *TRT Türk*, December 25, 2014, <http://www.trtturk.com/haber/turkiye-diyanet-vakfi-nin-gazze-ye-yardimlari-98645.html>

³² “Diyanet’ten Arnavutluk’a Cami...,” [Diyanet has inaugurated a mosque in Albania], Diyanet, August 26, 2014, <http://www.diyanet.gov.tr/tr/icerik/diyanet%E2%80%99ten-arnavutluk%E2%80%99a-cami%E2%80%A6/22163>

³³ “Küba’ya Diyanet’ten cami!,” [A mosque from Diyanet to Cuba], *Timeturk*, December 19, 2014, <http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2014/12/19/kuba-ya-diyanet-ten-cami.html>

In light of the tension between Erdoğan and al-Sisi's Egypt, Mehmet Görmez also launched a new Diyanet project to establish a "University of Islam" in Istanbul as an alternative to Egypt's renowned Al-Azhar University. While stating that the university had no intention of replacing Al-Azhar, Görmez openly called other Islamic universities' graduates, including Al-Azhar's, "troublemakers."³⁴

During a July 2014 international conference in Istanbul, Diyanet called on all Sunni and Shi'i religious leaders to condemn the "Muslim on Muslim violence" and to promote the Islamic unity under the auspices of a new international body.³⁵ In light of Diyanet's ecumenical declarations in regard to Sunnis and Shi'is, Görmez's attitude towards Alevis – according to Görmez, Alevis are members of a sect of Islam – is noteworthy. Similar to his predecessors, Görmez insists on including the Alevis within the Muslim 'tent,' despite Alevi objections. Görmez opposes official recognition of Alevism as a separate faith. He also refuses to allow the Alevis' house of worship, known as a "Cemevi," to be recognized by the state.³⁶

Overall, Diyanet has emerged as an indispensable instrument of Erdoğan political agenda at home and abroad. Domestically, Diyanet functions as a supreme authority for guiding the private lives of Turkish citizens and encouraging them to adopt a new Sunni-Islamic lifestyle. Beyond Turkey's borders, Diyanet is attempting to unite the Muslim world under the political and theological leadership of Turkey. In short, it is becoming more evident each day that, under Erdoğan, Diyanet increasingly resembles the Ottoman office of Sheikh al-Islam.

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³⁴ "Diyanet'ten İslam Üniversitesi," [Diyanet will open University of Islam], *Hürriyet*, October 1, 2014, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/27304749.asp>

³⁵ "Dünya İslam bilginleri barış, itidal ve sağduyu inisiyatifi sonuç bildirgesiyle sona erdi," [World Islamic scholars initiative for peace, moderation, and common sense was concluded with a report] Diyanet, July 19, 2014 <http://www.diyanet.gov.tr/tr/icerik/dunya-islam-bilginleri-baris-itidal-ve-sagduyu-inisiyatifi-toplantisi-sonuc-bildirgesiyle-sona-erdi%E2%80%A6/17102>

³⁶ "Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Alevileri kızdıracak," [Head of Presidency of Religious Affairs will anger the Alevis], *Gerçek Gündem*, July 7, 2014 <http://www.gercekgundem.com/guncel/55335/diyanet-isleri-baskani-alevileri-kizdiracak>

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