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Vol. 3, No. 8, May 2019

Turkey's Diaspora Policy and the "DİTİB" Challenge

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Today, it is possible to state that the bilateral relations between Turkey and Germany are perhaps the most strained that they have ever been. While there have been some signs of lessening tensions following the February 2018 release of German citizens held in Turkish prisons, points of contention still remain. These include an ongoing dispute over Fethullah Gülen's supporters in Germany, the fate of other German citizens currently incarcerated in Turkey, and Ankara's recent rescinding of work permits for German journalists. Meanwhile, the Ankara-Berlin relationship is further challenged by the Turkish Diaspora.¹ It is true that the transnational orientations of German citizens of Turkish origin and their communal organizations in Germany intensify the interdependencies between the two countries. However, simultaneously these transnational interconnections also increase the complexity of the bilateral relations and widen the friction between Turkey and Germany.²

The Turkish Diaspora in Germany

In 1961 a bilateral labor recruitment agreement (*Anwerbeabkommen*) between Turkey and West Germany initiated a flow of labor from Turkey to Germany.³ Due to a steady pace of immigration, the number of Turks living outside of Turkey has grown significantly since that time; today it exceeds six million people. Around 5.5 million of this number live in Western European countries.⁴ Germany hosts nearly three million Turks, the highest number of Turkish immigrants in Europe. Of the total, 1.6 million are German citizens, 1.4 million are Turkish nationals, and around a half million hold dual citizenship.⁵

Over more than a half century, the profile of mobility between Germany and Turkey has changed. Currently, there has been significant reciprocal mobility, in terms of business and tourism, as well as temporary relocation of students, researchers, and other highly-skilled persons. Yet, this enormous intensification and diversification of the exchange is only one side of the trans-nationalization between Germany and Turkey; trans-nationalization also expresses itself in the bicultural orientations, such as dual identities and loyalties, of Turks in Germany.⁶

Today, 1.2 million Turkish nationals in Germany are eligible to vote in Turkish elections. The sheer numbers involved have made this community a center of attraction in Turkish politics. In other words, the Turkish diaspora has become an indispensable element for Ankara, not only in the service of its bilateral relations with Berlin, but also for its domestic policy.⁷ As far as the Turkish diaspora in Germany is concerned, by forming migrant organizations the German-Turks at once seek to influence German local and federal politics as well as domestic

Turkish politics.⁸ There are significant number of Turks who play important role as actors in politics, civil society and culture. The spectrum of employment in this transnational diaspora in Germany is far from being homogeneous. It ranges from successful business people, academics, artists, skilled and unskilled workers to retired persons and the unemployed.⁹

The German-Turkish transnational community can be termed a diaspora due to four reasons: First, Turks in Germany have a particular identity that can be distinguished from that of the majority of German society. Second, they maintain close and permanent relationships with Turkey and possess a high degree of organization. Third, although they have not been entirely included in the formation of mainstream public opinion in Germany, they are nevertheless now increasingly courted by political parties as a target group, compared to what was the case in the past. Fourth, despite their status as *de jure* equal citizens under the law, German Turks are still not fully recognized as part of the German nation; a significant part of mainstream German society perceives German Turks as “the other.”¹⁰

Turkey's Diaspora Policy

From the beginning of Turkish labor migration to Germany, Ankara has applied a transnational migration policy to its citizens abroad. The main purpose of this policy was to prevent expatriate Turks from becoming assimilated into the cultures of their host countries. The assumption prevalent at the time was that “guest workers” would eventually return to Turkey with new skills and qualifications, and thus help alleviate the chronic shortage of skilled workers in that country. Therefore, Ankara launched a largely defensive policy which aimed to exert influence on, and shape the identity of, migrant workers. By so doing, they would preserve and strengthen the links of migrant workers to their homeland and cultivate their ultimate loyalty to the Turkish state.¹¹

In the 1980s, this policy changed, as the Turkish government realized that the presence of Turks in various European countries would be permanent. The enactment of the Turkish Basic Law of 1982 which enabled dual citizenship marks a turning point in this regard. Since then, Turkey’s policy towards its expatriate nationals in Europe can be described as a “diaspora policy.” In 2010, this policy was further modified when the *Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities* (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı – YTB) was founded to preserve the special bond between Turkey and its expatriates in Europe.¹²

Contemporary Turkey pursues what has been termed a “pro-active,” “neo-Ottoman” foreign policy.¹³ This policy prioritizes the enhancement of Ankara’s influence on issues that concern Muslims¹⁴ worldwide, such as the 2019 massacre of Muslim worshippers in New Zealand, Palestine, and of course the Turkish diaspora. The policy also inevitably determines the fundamentals of Turkey’s diaspora policy as an integral adjunct.

As it currently stands, Turkey’s policy is based upon three primary pillars: politics, culture and economy. In order to achieve its long term political goals – such as Turkey’s accession to the European Union – the Turkish government aims at mobilizing the Turkish diaspora as its lobbyists. For this purpose, the Turkish government encourages Turks to be well integrated in Germany, because only then can they increase their influence on German decision making mechanisms. In this regard, cultural exchange emerges as an indispensable element of this soft-power based foreign policy agenda. By introducing Turkey and its cultural richness to mainstream German society through its communal organizations, German nationals of Turkish origin act as a natural bridge between the two countries.¹⁵ This action also meets Ankara's expectations from its diaspora in Germany. Certainly these two fundamental pillars will be even more strengthened by the inculcation of economic inter-dependency. Therefore

according to this policy the Turkish diaspora is also entitled to deepen the bilateral trade relations between Turkey and Germany.

From Ankara's point of view, globalization is forcing Turkey to reposition itself in the web of international relations and to make use of the potential held by Turkish migrants who are scattered across the world. Therefore, it seems that Turkey will continue to focus its attention on the Turkish diaspora, with the first priority being that of Germany. In this regard, the Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği – DİTİB) has emerged as the most influential body, consisting of 960 local communities. Its' increasing activities have been widely criticized as posing a barrier to the Turkish diaspora's integration into German society, and the DİTİB has consequently come under fire from German state institutions, politicians, and the media. It therefore represents an important obstacle to the improvement of bilateral relations between Ankara and Berlin.¹⁶

The DİTİB mosque association

Since 1985, the DİTİB has acted as the umbrella organization for mosques in Germany, and was founded by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı - DİB) in order to meet the religious needs of the expatriate Turkish community. Apart the provision of religious services, the secular Turkish state founded the organization in an effort to counter-balance various anti-secular religious orders. These included the *Islamic Cultural Centre of the Süleymançıs* (IKMB - İslam Kültür Merkezleri Birliği, in German: Verband der Islamischen Kulturzentren e. V – VIKZ) and the *Islamic Community Milli Görüş* (Islamische Gemeinschaft Millî Görüş e. V., IGMG, in Turkish: İslâm Toplumu Millî Görüş). Most prominently during the 1990s, the Turkish state believed that the activities of the above groups threatened the collective identity of Turkish diaspora members as well as the identity of the secular Turkish state. Following the rise of the AKP, the Turkish government shifted its orientation towards these groups, now counting them as partners rather than threats. In the same spirit, the DİTİB ceased to function as the tool of the secular state and transformed into an instrument of Ankara's foreign and diaspora policy, as it is supervised and controlled by the DİB.¹⁷

While the exact sum of money that is transferred to DİTİB by the DİB remains unknown, the drastic increase in DİB's budget from 7.7 billion Turkish Liras to 10.4 billion Turkish Liras (2 billion USD) this year is remarkable.¹⁸ Today the organization maintains 88021 mosques and has 109332 employees. According to a study of the German parliament Bundestag's "Scientific Service" (Wissenschaftliche Dienste)¹⁹, the *DİB* sends its imams to diaspora communities and continues to pay their salaries while they are abroad.

Today, the DİTİB describes its *raison d'etre* as "providing Muslims a place of worship and to make a contribution to their integration in their host countries." Apart from carrying out religious services, the DİTİB focuses on four general areas: general education and culture, youth indoctrination, women's branch, and last but not least, intercultural and interreligious dialogue with the German society.²⁰

Apart from DİB, since it is active in Germany the DİTİB also receives funding from the German federal state and thus is subordinated to the Article 9 (2) of the German Basic Laws. This Article enables the German state to prohibit associations "whose aims or activities contravene the criminal laws, or that are directed against the constitutional order or the concept of international understanding."²¹ According to a study conducted by the German Bundestag (Parliament), the DİTİB is considered among the mosque associations that has been tagged as "vulnerable" to foreign influences, and thus has fallen under increased scrutiny as a result of the provisions of this Article.²²

From the German perspective, the DİTİB is an important partner in matters of faith and integration. Therefore, it is a member of the German Islam Conference (Deutsche Islamkonferenz).²³ However, recently DİTİB has been at the center of controversial debates and has become the target of criticism. Christoph de Vries, a politician from the German governing party CDU (*Christian Democrats*), called for suspension of DİTİB's membership in the German Islam Conference, while underlining the organization's dependence on Ankara and its so-called 'lack of reliability' in terms of accountability vis-à-vis the German state.²⁴

Despite the above, the debate on the religious community is rather more political than it is juridical. According to German law, a religious association has the right to subordinate itself to a foreign state, as it is in the case of the DİTİB. Neither the foreign funding (*Fremdfinanzierung*) nor an organizational connection compromises the qualification of DİTİB's status as a religious community. However, in order to be legal, the organization has to come to this decision independently; the realization of a democratic decision-making process and a common voice as well as a consensus in religious matters is essential. The status of religious community for an association can only be denied if it violates the provisions of the Basic Law.

The German domestic intelligence service (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz – BfV*) contemplated the question of whether DİB is acting in line with German constitutional law, or is instead pursuing anti-state goals. From the perspective of BfV, a series of incidents show that the Turkish government is using DİTİB as an instrument to achieve its objectives on German soil. One of them is the investigation of the Federal Attorney General of at least 19 DİTİB imams who reportedly transmitted intelligence about expatriate intellectuals living in Germany who have expressed criticism of the Turkish government. Apart from this, due to its religious activities DİTİB can also be considered as a significant actor in the inter-communal relations between Turks and the Kurds. For instance, the leaked pictures of Turkish youngsters wearing Turkish army uniforms in German mosques performing as the Turkish soldiers fighting against the Kurdish PYD, and the organized collective prayers for the Turkish victory over the Kurdish PYD in Afrin, are considered to be acts of significant wrongdoing that deepen the polarization among German citizens of different ethnic backgrounds.

Therefore, BfV has considered classifying DİTİB either as a suspected or an observed body. Hence, such classification endangers DİTİB's membership in the German Islam Conference and the continuance of its funding from the central government. It is important to note that the deterioration in DİTİB's reputation did not take place all of a sudden but instead was gradual. Certainly, the failed coup attempt in Turkey can be highlighted as a milestone. After this event, the Turkish government tried to tighten its grip on the Turkish community by exploiting the DİTİB. This put the organization at the epicenter of criticism.

However, the German government's policy change vis-à-vis the DİTİB cannot be explained only on the basis of Turkish politics alone. Rather, after seeing the side effects of a bond with a foreign country, Berlin seeks to form a new DİTİB-like body that will have no ties with Ankara but will be solely accountable only to itself. This, it is reasoned, will not only help moderate the political activities of the Turkish community in Germany but will also enhance their integration into the larger society.

In conclusion, given Ankara's usage of DİTİB as an indispensable instrument for its diaspora policy, and as a propaganda tool to increase AKP's public approval in the diaspora, it seems that bilateral relations with Germany will not be improved until such time as Turkey will meet the German criteria of providing the DİTİB with an autonomous structure. Moreover, assurance must be provided to German authorities that the DİTİB will not be used as a base

for covert intelligence operations. Only in this way can the lack of confidence between Ankara and Berlin concerning diaspora issues be eliminated. Otherwise, Berlin will most likely increase the amount of political pressure that it places on DİTİB in order to redesign it. This will ultimately harm the political participation of Muslim Turks in Germany as well as the future prospects of positive bilateral relations with Ankara.

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Notes

¹ Katrin Hartel, “Germany Warns on Travel to Turkey after Permits Denied”, Bloomberg, March 10, 2019 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-10/germany-warns-on-travel-to-turkey-after-journalists-barred-entry>, [Accessed: March 26, 2019]

² Yaşar Aydın, “What are the Perspectives for Improving current German-Turkish Relations?”, in: *KKI* 4:1, 2019 <http://kki.hu/en/publications/kki-4-1/6> [May 5, 2019]

³ Similar recruitment agreements were later made with Belgium, Austria (1964), the Netherlands (1967) and France (1973).

⁴ The official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Turkey, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-expatriate-turkish-citizens.en.mfa>, [Accessed: March 26, 2019]

⁵ BAMF, Migrationsbericht 2015 (Migration Survey), Nürnberg 2017, p. 162 and p.173, http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Publikationen/Migrationsberichte/migrationsbericht-2015.pdf?__blob=publicationFile, [Accessed: March 26, 2019]

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Yaşar Aydın, 2018, "Heimat Almanya: Die deutsch-türkische Migration", Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, <https://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/tuerkei/253189/heimat-almanya>, [Accessed: March 26, 2019]

⁸ Turkish umbrella organisations such as the Alevi Community in Germany (AABF), the Islamic Community (IGMG) the secular Turkish Community in Germany (TGD) and the leftist Federation of Democratic Worker’s Associations (DIDF) operate not only as bridges and mediators between the Turkish migrants and the state institutions of Germany, but also are involved in Turkish politics. In 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, they carried out elections campaign and advertised their close parties in Turkey.

⁹ Yaşar Aydın, “The New Turkish Diaspora Policy – Its Aims, Their Limits and the Challenges for Associations of People of Turkish Origin and Decision-makers in Germany”, SWP Research Paper, 2014, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/184898/2014_RP10_adn.pdf, [Accessed: March 1, 2019]

¹⁰ A representative survey by Kantar EMNID in 2016 found that 82% of Germans associate Islam with discrimination against women, 72% with fundamentalism and 64% with violence. However, only 7% of Turkish respondents consider it justified to use force when it comes to spreading and enforcing Islam; for more details: Detlef Pollack and et.al., “Integration und Religion aus der Sicht von Türkeistämmigen in Deutschland”, Westfälische Wilhelms Universität Münster, 2010, https://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/religion_und_politik/aktuelles/2016/06_2016/studie_integration_und_religion_aus_sicht_tuerkeistae_m_miger.pdf, [Accessed: March 26, 2019]

¹¹ Yaşar Aydın, “The New Turkish Diaspora Policy – Its Aims, Their Limits and the Challenges for Associations of People of Turkish Origin and Decision-makers in Germany”, SWP Research Paper, 2014, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/184898/2014_RP10_adn.pdf, [Accessed: March 1, 2019]

¹² Ibid., p. 8.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (Princeton, Princeton University Press. 2013)

¹⁵ Yaşar Aydın, “The New Turkish Diaspora Policy – Its Aims, Their Limits and the Challenges for Associations of People of Turkish Origin and Decision-makers in Germany”, SWP Research Paper, 2014, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/184898/2014_RP10_adn.pdf, [Accessed: March 1, 2019]

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 17

¹⁷ Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, <https://stratejigelistirme.diyanet.gov.tr/sayfa/57/istatistikler>, accessed: 26.3.2019. [Accessed: March 1, 2019]

¹⁸ "Diyanet'in bütçesi istihbaratı 5'e katladı", Sözcü, October 13, 2018, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/ekonomi/diyanetin-butcesi-istihbarati-5e-katladi-2678028/> [Accessed: April 8, 2019]

¹⁹ Deutscher Bundestag, Finanzierung von Moscheen, Moscheevereinen, in: Wissenschaftliche Dienste, WD 10-3000-028/18, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/561164/a2d2edb637da4a8386d9f70aa7ec99d3/wd-10-028-18-pdf-data.pdf>, [Accessed: March 26, 2019]

²⁰ Website of DITIB: <http://www.ditib.de/default1.php?id=5&sid=8&lang=de>, [Accessed: March 26, 2019]

²¹“Basic Law,” [bundesregierung.de](http://www.bundesregierung.de). [Accessed: May 2, 2019]

²² Rechtlicher Status der DITIB

<https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/566948/359318b04c5199597f024f3dd696ff21/wd-10-053-18-pdf-data.pdf> [Accessed: May 5, 2019] and Finanzierung von Moscheen bzw. „Moscheevereinen“ and

<https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/561164/a2d2edb637da4a8386d9f70aa7ec99d3/wd-10-028-18-pdf-data.pdf>, [Accessed: May 5, 2019]

²³ Deutsche Islam Konferenz <http://www.deutsche-islam-konferenz.de/DIK/EN/Startseite/startseite-node.html>, [Accessed: May 5, 2019]

²⁴ "Germany calls DITIB to cut ties with Turkey", *Ahval*, January 20, 2019,

<https://ahvalnews.com/ditib/germany-calls-ditib-cut-ties-turkey>, [Accessed: March 29, 2019]