

STATE, RELIGION AND REFUGEES: THE CASE OF TURKEY AND DIYANET*

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Abstract: Turkey has a world record in hosting the greatest number of refugees since 2014. The outbreak of the civil war in Syria led to huge human mobility across the border as millions of refugees tried to enter Turkey to escape from the tragedies of the war. Although Anatolia and the Balkans territories of Turkey have been the destination of many refugee movements since the Ottoman Empire, the huge size of the Syrian refugees presented an important challenge for Turkish decision-makers as well as Turkish society. The Justice and Development Party (JDP) government has tried to justify its open border policy to the Turkish public and promote integration of the refugees in the Turkish society. In order to be able to realise these objectives, the JDP has instrumentalised various state institutions as well. The Presidency of Religious Affairs, the Diyanet, was one of these institutions. This article tries to unravel the policies and discourses of the Turkish Diyanet towards the Syrian refugees. The basic research questions of the paper are as follows: Which policies did the Diyanet follow towards Syrian refugees? What are the basic characteristics of Diyanet's discourse with regard to refugees? How can we explain Diyanet's discourse and policies? What is the function of the Diyanet in the JDP's attitudes towards refugees? The paper argues that the JDP instrumentalises the Diyanet in its refugee policies and the Diyanet's discourse and policies aim to justify and glorify the JDP's policies.

Keywords: Turkey, Justice and Development Party, Diyanet, Religion, Islam Syria, Refugees.

* This article has been dedicated to the memories of my dear grandmother Vasfiye Avcı Kılıç and my dear aunt Kıymet Kılıç. In addition, the author devotes this article to the academicians and students of Boğaziçi University.

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INTRODUCTION

'Institutions are usually evaluated according to their vision and mission: where does an institution see itself today, and where does it plan to be in the future?... To establish a framework of vision for making projections about the future, global institutions nowadays utilize their imaginative skills in a creative way... The Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey with its *historical experience, present accomplishments and tremendous potential*, deserves to be acknowledged as one such *global institution*' (Aydın, 2008, p. 64. (emphasis added)).

Turkey's former Minister of State Mehmet Aydın's characterisation of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) as a 'global institution' in the quotation above reflects the Diyanet's increasing importance in Turkey's domestic and foreign policies under the reign of the Justice and Development Party (JDP). Although Turkey is a secular country, according to the Constitution, the JDP governments have emphasised the role of religion in many realms of politics as a conservative religious party. The increasing role of religion in the JDP's policies has had implications for the increasing role of the Diyanet in societal and political life.

The JDP came to the power in 2002 as a single-party government and it has governed Turkey for the last 19 years. The JDP political elite, like their Islamist predecessors, has claimed that religious people in the country were disadvantaged in the country since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. They have very often criticised the secular policies of the previous decades. Hence, in all policies of the JDP from domestic issues to external ties, one can see increasing traces of religion.

It is also noteworthy to state that the JDP's coming to power in the early years of the 21st century has been accompanied by a religious turn in the globe as well. The events of 9/11 increased the attention of political science and international relations on the increasing role of religion. As politics on the global scale has been witnessing a populist and conservative turn, religion has started to play a bigger role in the domestic and foreign policies of many countries ranging from the US to India, from Poland to Turkey. Therefore, what Turkey has been experiencing at home has been accompanied by global trends (Fox and Sandler, 2004; Öztürk and Gözaydın, 2018).

This article tries to understand the Turkish Diyanet's policies towards the Syrian refugees in the framework of the JDP's instrumentalisation of religion in coping with the challenge of refugees. The paper tries to answer

the following research questions: Which policies did the Diyanet follow towards Syrian refugees? What are the basic characteristics of Diyanet's discourse with regard to refugees? How can we explain Diyanet's discourse and policies? What is the function of the Diyanet in the JDP's attitudes towards refugees? The paper reaches the conclusion that the JDP instrumentalises the Diyanet in its refugee policies and the Diyanet's discourse and policies aim to justify and glorify the JDP's policies. Hence, there is a mutual interaction between the two in terms of strengthening each other in Turkey's domestic policies. The article uses the case study as its methodology.

The Diyanet's website, contents of sermons (hutbe in Turkish, khutba in Arabic), programs of the Diyanet TV, relevant legal acts, articles of the Diyanet journal, newspaper articles as well as speeches of the President of the Diyanet have been analysed in this research.

In the first part, the chapter will briefly analyse the JDP's policies towards the Syrian refugees since 2011. The second part will examine Diyanet's role in Turkish politics from the establishment of the Republic till today. The third part will try to grasp Diyanet's discourse and policies towards refugees. The basic findings of the research will be summarised in the conclusion.

THE JDP AND REFUGEES: AN INCREASING CHALLENGE

Criticising the former governments for being too much dependent on the West and being too passive, the JDP came to power with an ambitious foreign policy agenda symbolised by the notorious conceptualisation of 'Strategic Depth' developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu. According to Davutoğlu, Turkey has had a unique geographical and historical depth and is supposed to become a 'central state' in global politics by becoming an active player and order setter. 'Zero problems with neighbours' has become an important concept in Davutoğlu's approach towards foreign policy (Davutoğlu, 2001). By becoming a more active player and achieving better relations between state-society, Turkey is supposed to become the order setter country in its neighbourhood as well as to become a central state in world politics.

This image has been shattered by the war in Syria. The JDP elite believed that the Bashar Assad regime would fall in a short period after the start of the violent conflict. What happened to Husnu Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Kaddafi in Libya supposed to be repeated in Damascus. Therefore, as soon as the conflict in Syria started, Turkey implemented an

open-door policy towards the refugees. The refugee flow started in April 2011 and continued at a high pace, especially in the first years of the conflict. As the refugee flow continued, Turkey has become the country hosting the biggest number of refugees in 2014, hence surpassing Pakistan (Erdoğan, 2020a, p. 75).

The JDP tried to use discourse and implement certain policies to convince the Turkish public to accept incoming refugees. As far as the discourse of JDP politicians is concerned, they used a discourse full of historical and religious references. It was emphasised by the governing elite that migration was part of the history of Islam during the time of Prophet Mohammad. In addition, it was stated that Anatolian territories have always hosted refugees from the Ottoman times onwards. Hence, the JDP politicians tried to justify their policies via historical and religious references (Demirtaş, 2020).

In addition to the discourse, the JDP also implemented some legal and institutional changes as well. A new Law on Foreigners and International Protection (*Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu*) as well as Temporary Protection Regulation (*Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği*) came into force. Hence Syrian people coming to Turkey were accepted as people under temporary protection. They could benefit from basic humanitarian rights as well as the right to non-refoulement.

The Regulation on Work Permit for Foreigners under Temporary Protection was also accepted in 2016 that would give the Syrians the right to work legally, subject to certain conditions. That regulation was important proof that the government has come to recognise the fact that most of the Syrian refugees would stay in the country in the long term. Although only a small minority of the refugees could work legally, most of them work illegally without any registration and social security. This illegal and unregistered refugee labour is tolerated by the JDP authorities. Moreover, the Directorate General of Migration Management (*Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü*) was established in the Ministry of Interior to help formulate Turkey's policy towards refugees (Demirtaş, 2020). This was another important institutional change under the JDP.

Turkish state ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees dated 1951 and the 1967 Protocol. However, it had a geographical reserve that states that only those people coming from the European countries would have the status of refugees. Turkey still retains the geographical reservation. This geographical reservation can be criticised from an ethical

and legal point of view; however, it has a reason from the perspective of the Turkish state because of the turmoil in Turkey's neighbourhood.

However, despite all the attempts, there are increasing concerns of the Turkish public towards the Syrian refugees. Professor Murat Erdoğan conceptualises this trend in the Turkish society as 'securitisation from society' (Erdoğan, 2020a). A public opinion poll conducted by Professor Erdoğan among 2247 participants in 26 provinces in 2019 with 95 % reliability proves important evidence of society level securitisation. 73 % of the Turkish people find the policy of the Turkish state towards Syrians to be unacceptable. Even 53.6 % of the electorate of the governing party JDP and its junior partner the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – MHP) find the policies of the government to be unacceptable. In addition to that, almost 82 % of the Turkish society thinks that Syrian refugees are not culturally similar/not similar at all to the Turkish people (Erdoğan, 2020a). That percentage was 80.2 % in 2017. Hence, there was an increase of 2% of the Turkish people thinking that Syrian refugees do not have any cultural similarity to the Turkish people in two years (Erdoğan, 2020b).

Turkey Trends 2020 Survey conducted by Kadir Has University also show the negative attitudes of the Turkish public towards Syrian refugees. According to the survey, 55 % of the people are not happy with the presence of refugees. Although that number was 66.6% in 2018, still more than half of the Turkish people do have a negative perception with regard to the Syrian refugees (Aydin et al., 2021).

At that point, the Diyanet's role in the JDP's policies becomes crucial. As the JDP tries to justify its policies towards refugees via using religion, it made use of the Diyanet in various 'creative' ways. The following section summarises Diyanet's historical background in Turkish politics.

THE DIYANET AND TURKISH POLITICS

Religion played an important part in the administration of the Ottoman Empire and Şeyhülislam as the Minister of Religious Affairs and Charitable Foundations was part of the Ottoman cabinet. Although Padişah had the upper hand, religion was an important part of the Ottoman system. The 'Millet' system, the core of the Ottoman administration was also based on religious differences in society. Muslim *millet* and Christian *millet*s formed the core of the Ottoman Empire.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish administration in 1920, religious affairs became the subject of the

Ministry of Religious Affairs and Charitable Foundations. However, after the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey, the Caliphate was disbanded, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Charitable Foundations was replaced with the Presidency of Religious Affairs in 1924, which was responsible for administering religious affairs and institutions (Öztürk and Gözaydın, 2018, p. 342). The Presidency became an administrative unit that was under the authority of the Prime Ministry. In 1937, laicism entered into the Turkish Constitution.

The new Turkish Republic aimed to open a new page in Turkish history by establishing a system based on laicism. Turkey's laicist system is different from secularism. While secularism is based on the separation between state and religion, in the laicist model, religion has been under the control of the state. As the leaders of the new Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the founding cadre wanted to give an end to the administrative system of the Ottoman Empire that was based on religion. Their model was the French state. They wanted to create a new state based on contemporary norms and values. Although it was a top-down model of establishment of a laicist state (Çınar, 2008), it seemed like the only option at the time if the aim was to establish a modern state after the dissolution of the empire.

It is noteworthy that after each coup d'état, the Diyanet would widen its authority over society. The first major expansion of its authority took place with Act No 633 in 1965. With this Act, the Diyanet became responsible not only for religious issues, but for issues of *morality* as well. It was also authorised with the function of *enlightening society about religion* (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Kuruluş ve Görevleri Hakkında Kanun, 1965). This was a new 'responsibility' given to the Diyanet. Hence, it was not only administering religious affairs as a bureaucratic organization, but it was also expanding its scope via becoming an institution responsible for morality and 'enlightenment' of society (Öztürk, 2019, pp. 85-86).

The Diyanet got a new boost after the 1980 coup d'état. The leaders of the military junta implemented a new policy of Turkish-Islamic synthesis (*Türk-İslam Sentezi*) via policies to increase nationalist and religious feelings of society (Coşar, 2012). 1982 Constitution prepared by the junta regime had a particular article on the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Article 136), stating that the aim of the Diyanet was to have national solidarity and integration (*milletçe dayanışma ve bütünleşme*) (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası, 1982). This meant that the Diyanet's responsibilities were stepping beyond administering religious affairs and enhancing the construction of national identity.

After the JDP came to power in 2002 after the failure of the coalition government to solve the economic crisis in the country, the role of religion in domestic and external affairs started to increase. This was reflected in the JDP's policies towards the Diyanet. It was not a coincidence that the JDP and the Diyanet created a mutually beneficial relationship to justify and strengthen each other's policies and responsibilities. Especially legal amendment in 2010 (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Kuruluş, 2010) by the JDP government created new avenues for the Diyanet to increase its impact on the Turkish society. The fact that the JDP stemmed from the religious National Outlook (Milli Görüş) Movement led by Necmettin Erbakan was an important historical fact. Religion was one of the fundamental elements of the JDP's policies. Hence, it was quite expected that the JDP would try to use the Diyanet as its instrument in important issues.

The new act in 2010 was a turning point in the Diyanet's recent history. It stated that the Diyanet had the duty of the enlightening and guiding family, women and youth with regard to religious affairs. It allowed the Diyanet to start TV and radio broadcasting. In addition, it gave the duty to organise panels, conferences and seminars outside of the mosques. Furthermore, the act assigned the Diyanet the responsibility of providing religious information to the people in prisons, juvenile detention centres, care homes and health centres (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Kuruluş, 2010). These changes in 2010 allowed the Diyanet to have new duties and responsibilities outside of the mosque. That represented an important expansion of the Diyanet's area of responsibilities. Its new functions towards family, women and youth are also noteworthy. The increasing scope of activities by the Diyanet is in line with the JDP's focus on creating a religious generation. Erdoğan stated the following: 'We will raise a religious generation. Do you expect from a political party that has the identity of conservative democracy to raise atheist youth?' (Erdoğan hedefine bağlılık bildirdi, 2016). Opening the Quran courses by the Diyanet for 4–6-year-old children was another initiative of the JDP to raise a pious generation (Öztürk, 2016, p. 628). The fact that the Diyanet would extend its religious services beyond the mosque was an important indication that different spheres of social life would be permeated by the Diyanet. This is a process of desecularisation from above (Adak, 2020).

It must also be remembered that before and during the JDP some of the directors of the Diyanet have become parliamentarians. Lütfi Doğan was the director of the Diyanet between 1972 and 1976. He became an MP and a state minister in 1977. Tayyar Altıkulaç was the director of the Diyanet

between 1978 and 1986. He became an MP of the True Path Party between 1996 and 1999. He then became one of the founders of the JDP. He then became an MP from the JDP as well. Mustafa Sait Yazıcıoğlu was another Director of the Diyanet who also later became a parliamentarian from the ranks of the JDP. Hence, there was also a relationship between the head of the Diyanet and the Turkish right-wing political parties before and during the JDP.²

After summarising the increasing activities of the Diyanet under the JDP rule, the following section would examine the Diyanet's rule with regard to Syrian refugees.

THE DIYANET AND THE CHALLENGE OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

The Presidency of Religious Affairs has played various roles in the JDP's management of the refugee challenge. It is possible to categorise those roles. First of all, we can divide it into two: the role of the Diyanet within Turkey and in Syria. In the country, the Diyanet fulfils various functions: 1) Reproducing the JDP's discourse on refugees and justifying its policies, 2) Providing religious education and services to Syrian refugees, 3) Providing aid to refugees.

As to the Diyanet's activities in Syria, we can divide it into four: 1) providing religious services, 2) providing education, 3) preparation of religious publications, 4) providing humanitarian assistance. The article will first start with the Diyanet's functions within Turkey and then examine its roles in northern Syria which is controlled by Turkey.

First of all, the Diyanet has carried out some institutional reforms in order to deal with the refugee problem. The Department of Migration and Moral Support Services was opened within the Diyanet in 2017 to work especially on refugees. The first duty of the department has been stated as working to provide solutions to religious, cultural and social problems that occur as a result of internal and external migration (Göç ve Manevi Destek Hizmetleri, 2020). It is important to note that the Diyanet is seen as responsible for not only providing religious services, but also contributing to the solution of cultural and social problems. This is an indication of the increasing role attributed to Islam in societal affairs by the JDP.

² I would like to thank the referee for drawing my attention to this point.

Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu's opening speech at the Department of Migration and Moral Support Services of the Diyanet gives important clues of this approach:

'They are actually condemning humanity today with incomprehensible and solid walls raised by racism. My concern is that, God forbid, winds blowing from Europe and the world would condemn Turkey to such racism. Therefore, this centre has great importance. We could not turn our backs on our brothers in Syria; we did not. Thank God, despite the whole world, we brought peace to an area of 4 thousand square kilometres there. The members of the institution that we opened today are also there today. They recite the call for prayer five times a day. Praise be to Allah, we present a challenge to those who try to raise irreligious children there, to separate them from their own beliefs, not just in our own understanding, but by showing them to the world. We will develop an understanding that provides and constitutes order in whole Turkey' (Göç ve Manevi Destek Merkezi Dualarla Açıldı, 2019).

This quotation from the Interior Minister Soylu has two important characteristics. First of all, it claims that there is racism in Europe and other parts of the world. It is true that the far right is increasing in the world. However, the problem with this speech is that it overgeneralises this problem and hence re/produces 'Europe' as the other of Turkey. Second, Turkey is shown as the saviour of Syrians whose religious beliefs are at stake. Diyanet's approach bears similarities to the Minister's attitude.

Second, the JDP assigned a special role to the Diyanet in its refugee policies. This has become quite clear as the Integration Strategy Document and National Action Plan (2018-2023) of the Directorate General of Migration Management has emphasised the Diyanet's role in providing guidance to refugees and giving them religious education. In this important Document, the Diyanet was one of the institutions that the Directorate General of Migration Management would cooperate with the Integration Strategy Document and National Action Plan (2018-2023) (Uyum Strateji Belgesi, 2020).

We can start our analysis of Diyanet's policies with its function of reproducing the JDP's discourse on refugees and justifying its attitudes. Throughout its discourse, the Diyanet officials stated that migration was a phenomenon that is part of Turkish and Muslim history. There are many references to Turkish history as well as the history of Islam. In addition, there are many references to religious sources, like the Quran verses. Bayram Demirtaş, head of the Department of Migration and Moral Support Services,

stated that human being is a migrant because this world is temporary and a place of exile for Muslims. Giving reference to the verse of the Quran, he states that return is only to God (Demirtaş, n.d.). Therefore, there is an attempt to give the image that we are all migrants anyway according to Islam.

The President of the Diyanet Ali Erbaş stated that Anatolian territories are migration territories. He further expressed his view that 'We look after the migrants and asylum seekers irrespective of what their belief is... These lands are lands of migration... from the Balkans, Caucasus, everywhere... These lands have become the lands on which migrants live' (Avrupa'nın sınırlarına dayanan, 2020).

The Diyanet's discourse is also full of glorification of the Turkish nation that is very much in line with the discourse of the JDP. The political elite of the JDP tries to produce a Turkish identity that is supposed to protect the refugees throughout history. Erbaş, the President of the Diyanet, states that 'Those who had been migrants (*muhacir*) in history became the host (*ensar*) for those who came later. We are such a merciful nation' (Avrupa'nın sınırlarına dayanan, 2020).

Moreover, several Friday sermons (*hutbe*) were directly dealing with the refugee issue and carried clear messages for the Turkish public. The *Ensar-muhacir* metaphor of the JDP was reproduced by the Diyanet in these *hutbes*. Generosity and sacrifices of the Turkish society were glorified as well (General Directorate of Religious Services, 2017). This *hutbe* came a short while after a 9-month pregnant Syrian refugee woman in Sakarya was killed together with her 10-month baby. Hence, the Diyanet was trying to accommodate the concerns of the Turkish public. In another *hutbe*, refugees were named as brothers and sisters and it also stated that 'our duty is to be the remedy' (General Directorate of Religious Services, 2016). Hence, Friday sermons were used to produce approval of the Turkish public towards refugees. This is an important indication of how religion has been instrumentalised to have an impact on the Turkish society.³

Like the JDP, the Diyanet also tried to construct Europe as the other of Turkey with regard to the refugee issue. The Diyanet's President claimed that 'You see, don't you? They are killing without mercy because 100 thousand people reached the borders of Europe. Once again, we are sending them bread, water, and other needs. If we don't do it, we are responsible.

³ For a comprehensive historical and conceptual analysis of Friday sermons, see: Ongur, 2020.

We should be like that. We were raised like that. Because only this way we become great and full of glory. We should never forget this. This is what glorifies us' (Avrupa'nın sınırlarına dayanan, 2020).

Another important feature of the Diyanet's discourse is its replica of the JDP elite's discourse of 'geography of heart' (*gönül coğrafyası*). The JDP elite used this concept to refer to ex-Ottoman territories as well as Muslim territories. This concept was never explained fully and left as an ambiguous term. Erbaş, the President of the Diyanet stated that 'geography of heart cannot be limited to Anatolia' (Bizim gönül coğrafyamız, 2019).

Second, the Diyanet tried to provide religious education and services to Syrian refugees. For every camp hosting refugees, a coordinator religious official was assigned (Demirtaş, n.d.). Furthermore, special classes were opened for refugees in the Quran courses.

Moreover, the Diyanet's broadcasting agencies were helpful to spread the messages of the Diyanet to the Turkish public. There were special programs on refugees on the Diyanet TV. Some religious books were published in Arabic as well. The Diyanet also started to broadcast Friday khutbas (*hutbe*) in Arabic and English as well (Ekiz, 2016). In addition, humanitarian assistance was provided to the refugees via the Diyanet as well as the Turkish Diyanet Foundation.

Furthermore, the Diyanet also played important roles in northern Syria in which the Turkish security forces controlled after the operations of Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch. The Diyanet prepared a report about its activities in this region. The report explained how the Diyanet provided services in four categories: 1) religious services 2) education services 3) publications 4) humanitarian assistance (Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2018). In addition, the Turkish Diyanet Foundation has so far built 600 houses in northern Syria. Building of 4,400 houses still continues (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı'ndan, 2020).

It is important how the JDP tried to get societal consent for the military operations using religion. Both Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch Operations started, the *sala*⁴ was recited from the mosques in the border provinces of Turkey (Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2018).

⁴ *Sala* means prayer read by a muezzin in the mosque at certain times, for example when a person died.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on Diyanet's discourses and policies towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. Refugees have become an important challenge for Turkey since more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees crossed the border and tried to establish new lives. The JDP assigned a new role for the Diyanet for the integration of the refugees on the one hand and getting the consent of the Turkish public. The JDP used the Diyanet as an important tool in the refugee issue as well as it tries to use it in many domestic and external issues as well. There is a mutual interaction between the JDP and the Diyanet. As the JDP increases the role of the Diyanet, the Diyanet justifies the policies of the JDP from which both benefit as a result of this relationship. This study showed that the Diyanet tried to use migration as a natural phenomenon in human lives. Basing its arguments on historical and religious references, it tries to convince the Turkish society to make further sacrifices. The Ensar-muhacir metaphor stemming from the history of Islam was repeated by the Diyanet as well.

However, the study also emphasised that despite all the policies and discourses of the Diyanet and the JDP, the refugee issue continues to be a challenge for Turkey as the concerns of the Turkish public towards refugees have a tendency to increase further.

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