

## Erdoğan's comprehensive religious policy: management of the religious realm in Turkey

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# SWP Comment

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## Erdoğan's Comprehensive Religious Policy

Management of the Religious Realm in Turkey

Salim Çevik

Tayyip Erdoğan's management of the religious realm in Turkey relies on three different but complementary components: i) using state institutions and resources to define and control the religious discourse and life, ii) incorporating religious communities and organisations into the party and state institutions, and iii) forming new religious organisations and communities through family-controlled religious foundations (*vakıf*).

Erdoğan never made a secret of his desire to create a New Turkey founded on pious generations. To achieve this, he has a multi-layered strategy that demonstrates certain continuities but more ruptures with the Republican policies on religion.

### Historical Legacy and State Institutions

Republican policies on religion were more ambiguous and complex than is often assumed. Although an assertive secularism remains one of the central pillars of the Kemalist ideology, religion paradoxically maintained an important role in the formation of the national identity and culture. Accordingly, on the one hand, despite its modernist and anti-religious inclinations, the Kemalist regime could not resist the temptation of using the influence of reli-

gion over Turkish society by controlling religious institutions and limiting religious expression. On the other hand, the regime also aimed to create a modernised version of Islam that would be firmly under state control. The early Republican regime tried this by replacing social religious organisations such as religious orders (*tarikât*) and religious communities (*cemaat*) with state-controlled religious institutions. While the former were severely repressed, as all madrasas and dervish lodges were declared illegal, a newly formed state institution — a Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) — aimed to fill the void. Simultaneously during the creation of the Diyanet, all mosques became state property, and some years later all prayer leaders became state officials. Thus, despite its rhetoric on secularism, Turkey has been a state in which religion and the state are intertwined, to the extent that all the mosques and all their



imams are controlled and owned by the state. This provides an excellent apparatus for the state to control and shape religious discourse, even at the grassroots level.

In 1948, state investment in the religious realm expanded with the formation of vocational courses with the professed aim of training religious personnel. Three years later, under the centre-right Democrat Party, these courses were transformed into secondary schools (Imam Hatip Okulları, hereafter IHLs). The number of these schools rapidly expanded under the more conservative governments of the 1970s and 1980s and became major sites for religious training. Unlike the Diyanet, however, IHLs soon became contentious entities. Fearing that these schools were out of control, the Kemalist establishment intervened against them starting in 1997. A technical change in the rules for university entrance exams, which was ostensibly enforced by the secular military, made it almost impossible for IHL graduates to enter university departments other than theology. Thus, this was a huge blow to IHLs, and student enrolment as well as the number of schools rapidly declined to almost nothing. While IHLs dealt with this, compulsory religious education in other state schools, which was introduced by the military regime in 1980, remained untouched. Just like the Diyanet and unlike the IHLs, religious education was perceived as still being in line with the original intention of promoting state-friendly religious teaching.

### **The AKP and State Institutions**

Hence, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) makes extensive use of state resources for its declared goal of raising a pious generation, it is building on a historical and institutional legacy. The Diyanet and IHLs play a central role, which can be observed through the increased visibility of the Diyanet in public life and the increased importance of IHLs in the education system.

After the AKP's ascension to government in 2002 – and more so after the party

became confident of its real power – it started to take steps to revitalise the IHLs. To this end in 2011, the AKP once again changed the rules for university entrance exams by removing the disadvantages posed to IHL students. This change by itself was enough to revitalise the IHLs, pointing to a certain demand by the public for these types of schools. However, in the following years, several technical changes followed to ensure a growing student enrolment at IHLs, while several regular schools were also converted to IHLs. As of 2018, IHL students comprised 12 per cent of the entire secondary school population, demonstrating a considerable increase from the 8.6 per cent in 1997 prior to the military's intervention. However, this increase is more a result of the deliberate efforts of the government rather than the popularity of IHLs. During the initial round of student placements for secondary schools in 2017, IHLs only reached a 52 per cent occupancy rate, compared to 95 per cent for regular high schools. While the government attempts to attract more students to IHLs by changing the rules for student enrolment and registration, non-pro-government media outlets are routinely filled with complaints from families whose children had to be registered in IHLs against their will. Moreover, in the curriculum of regular schools, religious classes have been expanded to include more courses such as “The Life of the Prophet” and “Qur'an” in order to provide further religious training for the entire student body.

The Diyanet's growing importance in public life can be observed through the continuous increase in the institution's personnel and budget numbers. According to the 2019 proposed budget, the Diyanet's cadres exceed 140,000 employees, and its annual budget, according to the current exchange rate, is approximately €1.7 billion, comprising 1.2 per cent of the total budget. This means that both the number of personnel as well as the Diyanet's share in the total budget has doubled since the AKP came to power in 2002. The increased budget is accompanied by increased levels of visibil-

ity and prestige. In the new state protocol list, which was updated in 2012, the head of the Diyanet was elevated from being 53rd in line to 10th. Even the uniform for the head of the Diyanet was changed from a modest black cloak to an eye-catching and lustrous white – one that attracts attention for the head wherever he goes. Yet, the increased importance of the Diyanet is not limited to such items. The head of the Diyanet is becoming increasingly visible, and he often accompanies President Erdoğan at public events. Moreover, the duties of the Diyanet have been re-organised to increase its influence in new areas, such as education and social counselling. The former director of the Diyanet, Mehmet Görmez, made this point when he declared that the Diyanet will no longer be confined to the mosques. In line with this aim, the Diyanet is now working in cooperation with other state institutions such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Family, and the Ministry of Youth. As a result of such cooperation, the Diyanet is now active in various spheres of social life such as celebrating religious nights at university dormitories, solemnising marriages (which was exclusively regulated by the municipalities in the past), providing educational support in elementary and high schools, providing social and psychological counselling at hospitals, marriage counselling, etc.

Thus, although the AKP's instrumentalisation of the Diyanet to shape religious life around the country is not unprecedented, the scope and resources invested in this aim present a novel situation. Moreover, this investment in the Diyanet becomes all the more interesting given that political Islamists in Turkey have a long history of distrust towards the Diyanet, considering, with certain insight, that the institution was initially created to transform religion so that it would remain in line with Kemalist expectations.

However, in a significant departure from the Kemalist legacy, the AKP's investment in the Diyanet does not aim to replace religious communities with the Diyanet. In-

stead, the Diyanet is only one pillar of a more comprehensive effort to shape religious life in the country; shaping relations with the social religious organisations constitutes the second aspect of these efforts.

## Incorporating Social Islam

“Social Islam” refers to all religious organisations such as religious orders or foundations that are not created or controlled by the state's bureaucratic apparatus. Despite repression by the Kemalist regime of religious orders and religious communities, these organisations survived and eventually became influential actors in social life.

Although they have differences with each other, in their totality they constitute the bulk of the religious scene in Turkey. Thus, while in theory they are still illegal, their existence and impact are known to everyone, and they have been involved with political actors for a long time as well. Aside from these more traditional religious organisations, several Islamic organisations – in the form of foundations and associations – were founded throughout the Republican period. Although these foundations and associations rely on a better-educated constituency, they form a much smaller portion of Turkey's social Islam.

Expectedly, the AKP maintains a special relationship with all types of religious organisations. As the AKP's hold over conservative votes became ever-more consolidated, its links with religious communities deepened. The AKP's relations with religious communities are based on a policy of carrots and sticks.

Accordingly, the AKP makes state resources available to some religious communities in exchange for their electoral support. One typical aspect of such government support is providing land and direct financial support for formal institutions built up by religious organisations. These include a wide range of institutions, including schools, universities, dormitories, Quran schools, and media organisations. A second type of support involves opening up state

cadres exclusively to certain religious organisations. Initially, the Gülen movement – with a better-educated constituency – made use of the bulk of these spaces. Particularly after the fallout with the Gülen movement, some of the cadres previously filled by the Gülenists are also now open to other religious organisations. Also, some of the financial assets and institutions that had been confiscated from the followers of the Gülen movement are distributed to other religious organisations as a bounty. Thus, the government has lot of carrots to offer religious organisations in exchange for their loyalty.

If AKP fails to receive the support it expects, then it resorts to divide the communities. Selective use of carrots and sticks is once again the main instrument of this strategy. It is fair to say that, in the current religious scene of Turkey, intra-group divisions are almost as fundamental and important as inter-group rivalry. Several religious groups are divided on the axis of pro-Erdoğan and anti-Erdoğan.

In religious communities that detach themselves from the alliance, the AKP usually tries to forge alliances with dissenting figures and supports them in order to either take over the community or – if that is impossible – at least limit its influence by creating an intracommunity fight. To this end, AKP governments supported figures in the past such as Mehmet Denizolgun of the Süleymançı community and Kemalettin Özdemir of the Gülen movement. These individuals had their own charisma and claims for the leadership of these communities. By supporting them and their leadership claims, the AKP aimed to control these groups as well. Yet, the most typical – and significant – divide is the one between the Çarşamba and Beykoz branches of the İsmailağa Cemaati. An important branch of the Naqshbandiyya order, this religious group is currently divided into two communities, each taking their names from the neighbourhoods of Istanbul where the *vakıf* centres (İsmailağa Association and Marifet Association, respectively) are located. Whereas the Çarşamba branch is in full

accord with the AKP's rule, the Beykoz branch is trying to protect and preserve its autonomy without openly challenging the AKP government. However, this attempt of preserving its distance comes with a cost, as was observed most symbolically in 2016, when a Quran seminary built in Istanbul by the Marifet Association was abolished by the Istanbul Municipality without any court decision. On the other hand, the İsmailağa Vakfı receives all the benefits of a full accord with the government, as state institutions and resources have all been opened up for the group in the last few years.

If all these strategies do not work and a community remains, as a whole, against the AKP, then outright oppression starts. Although the fate of the once mighty Gülen movement is well-known, the repression of the Furkan Vakfı remains an often unnoticed, yet revealing case. This is a small and highly conservative religious group with Salafi overtones. Moreover, as a movement that is highly critical of the Gülenists, the Furkan Vakfı partially sided with the government during the feud between the AKP and the Gülen movement. As such, it is an unlikely candidate for government repression, but its leader, Alparslan Kuytul, is also a persistent critic of the AKP government. As a result of his criticisms, the Furkan Vakfı has been subject to increased pressure in the last few years. When Kuytul continued with his criticisms, he was eventually arrested on 30 January 2018 and remains in prison. All the activities of his community have been banned, as his *vakıf* has also been abolished.

## Novelty of the AKP's Approach

Taken together, it is possible to claim that the AKP's "*cemaat* policy" is built upon three strategies. The first and main strategy is to create an alliance with religious communities. Only if that fails are the divide-and-rule tactics or outright oppression enforced. Forging alliances with religious groups is certainly not a new phenomenon in Turkish politics. Creating such clientelist

relationships with religious communities has a long tradition in Turkish political history, particularly for the parties to the right of the spectrum. However, the alliance between the AKP and religious organisations differs in significant aspects from previous alliances observed in Turkish politics. The AKP invests incomparably greater amounts of resources into these alliances. Moreover, the resources that the AKP makes available for religious communities are not limited to financial means – they go beyond opening state resources to religious organisations and increasingly enable mergers between state institutions and religious organisations.

Introduction of a programme called Values Education (Değerler Eğitimi) is a case in point. Through this programme, the AKP offers these religious organisations access to state institutions and schools and gives them a certain role in the governance of religious education. Religious organisations also acquire a more prominent role in the activities of the Diyanet. Although in the past the distinction between state and social Islam was largely preserved – the former being more Kemalist-oriented and representing the political centre, and the latter more in alliance with peripheral forces – the AKP has created a fusion of these formerly separate religious organisations.

Although the benefit of such an alliance with the AKP may be obvious for religious organisations, it is clear that the AKP holds the upper hand. The extent and terms of the alliance are not always decided by the religious organisations but sometimes forced upon them. Official declarations of support from several religious organisations to a wavering AKP government in the wake of the elections on 24 June 2018 are a case in point. Several experts with insider knowledge of these religious communities pointed out that such declarations of support are quite unusual, and the impetus for this initiative did not come from the organisations but from the government. These movements were not generally enthusiastic about declaring their support but were forced to make such declarations. Moreover, this is not an isolated event, and at

several other critical junctures the AKP has demanded such declarations of support. What is more interesting is that such declarations have few short-term benefits for the AKP. Given that Erdoğan already enjoys a very large degree of support among the members of these religious organisations, these declarations have little electoral impact. However, they are more crucial for assimilating these religious organisations into the AKP government and making them subordinate to the political will. Such an alliance has long-term implications. The more such alliances become visible, the more that the lines separating the government and religious organisations blur.

## Beyond Transactional Alliances

This is a fundamental change compared to the former alliances between religious communities and right-wing political parties. The alliances built between centre-right parties and religious communities were transactional. The political parties provided protection to the communities and patronage in exchange for their voter support. Group identities remained distinctly separate, and the support of the religious communities was conditional upon the benefits it accrued through this patronage relationship, but it was in no way guaranteed. Although certain alliances, such as the alliance between most Nurcu communities and former Prime Minister and President Süleyman Demirel, had been quite stable and long-term, the religious communities often shifted their support among different parties, creating new alliances before each election. This is the point in which the AKP's policy on religious communities differs most significantly. The AKP is no longer satisfied with the passive support of religious communities. Instead, it demands active participation in the political framework designed by Erdoğan. The distinctive identities of the political party and the religious communities have been dissolved, and support for Erdoğan and the AKP forms the main identity.

The desire to preserve their autonomy and independent identities explains the hesitance of many religious communities to declare their support, even though they benefit greatly through this alliance. In any case, at the end of the day, the majority of the groups have yielded to the demands, whereas only a small minority have resisted.

Furthermore, this also ties together the futures and fates of religious organisations with the AKP, leaving the religious organisations no other option than to provide full support for the party. Whereas in the past these movements had been spared the wrath of the state and government – largely due to their civil and independent character – this is now changing. Several of these organisations even survived military interventions with little to no damage. However, their newly formed organic relations with the AKP government mean that they will suffer a serious setback if the AKP government falls. This not only ties these movements and their vote bank irrevocably to the AKP, it also eliminates the possibility of a major form of opposition: religiously inspired opposition. This is particularly true given that, in authoritarian contexts, where civil society and all forms of organisation are severely oppressed, as in contemporary Turkey, the religious realm becomes the only venue for the dissemination and organisation of dissent. The crucial importance of controlling and erasing the autonomy of the religious realm is therefore obvious to an authoritarian regime that aims to control all spheres of life.

## New Religious Organisations

The expansion of state resources and the incorporation of social Islam with state institutions and the party are complemented by the formation of a group of entirely new religious organisations funded and ruled by Erdoğan's immediate circle, who are often members of his own family. Although the AKP had largely succeeded in its attempts to incorporate religious organisations into the party and state, the loyalty

of these organisations could never be taken for granted. Keeping these organisations on track needs constant and delicate supervision. Moreover, the fallout with the Gülen movement, which supported the AKP loyally for a decade, might have exacerbated the loyalty problems.

Two institutions – TÜGVA (The Service for Youth and Education Foundation of Turkey) and TÜRGEV (Turkish Foundation to Serve the Youth and Education) – are two typical and prominent examples of the efforts to create new religious organisations. Although Erdoğan's son Bilal played a crucial role during the expansion of TÜRGEV, today the Erdoğan family is represented by Esra Albayrak, Erdoğan's daughter, on the executive board of TÜRGEV, whereas Bilal Erdoğan is on the executive board of TÜGVA and other similar but smaller-scale organisations, such as Yeni Türkiye Eğitim Vakfı, Kartal Eğitim Vakfı, İnsan ve İrfan Vakfı, and İlim Yayma Vakfı. Erdoğan himself frequently appears at events organised by these foundations, openly declaring his support for their activities. For instance, in one of these events in 2015, he stated that TÜRGEV and other similar foundations are central to his aim to raise a pious generation.

Similar to other religious organisations, these two organisations focus on educational institutions, particularly student dormitories, with the professed aim of raising a pious generation. TÜRGEV has 62 dormitories, of which 12 are for high school students and the rest for university students. It also has six dormitories abroad. In total, currently more than 10,000 students live in TÜRGEV dormitories. There is a gendered dimension, a division of labour among the dormitories established by the two foundations: TÜRGEV exclusively focusses on female students, whereas the 58 dormitories of TÜGVA are all for male students. Hence, Erdoğan's daughter is in the executive of the former, and his son is usually in charge of all other organisations.

However, the activities of neither foundation are limited to student dormitories. TÜRGEV also operates several kindergar-

tens, primary and higher-level schools, as well as a university. On its part, TÜGVA holds a wide range of educational and cultural programmes organised all around the country through city and district representatives. These programmes point to almost limitless financial resources. It is not uncommon for TÜGVA programmes to end with an international trip to Spain or Central Asia or a visit to the holy cities in Saudi Arabia outside the month of pilgrimage. Needless to say, all these programmes are free of charge. In both TÜRGEV and TÜGVA, all the lavish activities and the exponential growth of the foundations are financed by unidentified donors. Yet, TÜRGEV is known to have received a \$100 million donation between 2008 and 2012 from Gulf countries through Bilal Erdoğan, and it made the news for the first time in 2013 during the corruption scandal that involved the Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab, who pleaded guilty in New York on charges of money laundering.

### **Distinctiveness of New Religious Organisations**

Although the activities of these organisations all resemble the ones of social religious organisations, they differ from a typical religious organisation through their lack of a central religious leader and religious teachings. This is often compensated for with selective readings of the traditional texts and contemporary Turkish Islamist thinkers. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, who is known to be the man who influenced Erdoğan the most and whose ideological works are an inspiration to the contemporary political system, often appears as a central figure. However, none of these are essential, or even particularly central, for defining and attributing an ideological core to these organisations. In fact, the loose ideological orientation enables these organisations to reach out to the widest possible number of students.

Although there is no distinctive religious ideology or religious text that will shape

and separate the students and graduates of these religious organisations, they are all defined by their personal loyalty to Erdoğan and the AKP. Although the history of TÜRGEV dates back to Erdoğan's mayorship of Istanbul in the mid-1990s, its resources and activities multiplied during the third Erdoğan government, and from 2012 onwards it has become a nationwide organisation. TÜGVA was founded in 2013 and, since then, several other small-scale organisations have followed. Thus, it would be safe to say that since 2012, the third pillar of Erdoğan's policy in the religious realm has been activated. This also roughly corresponds to the dates when Erdoğan broke with the Gülen movement, implying that loyalty issues had been the primary motivation in the attempts to create new loyal religious movements. The impact of the fallout with the Gülen movement during the sudden growth of these foundations is also acknowledged by the executives of these foundations. The lack of clear religious teachings or a clear ideology — other than loyalty to Erdoğan — in the programmes of these organisations also confirms this hypothesis.

This is an unprecedented move in Turkish political history. Although religion and politics interacted with each other in several different ways, no political leader in history ever attempted to create entirely new religious organisations and movements. Moreover, the enormous amount of resources and efforts channelled into raising religious youth who are loyal to Erdoğan also implies the long-term power projections of Erdoğan. These efforts, which would come to fruition in no less than a decade, imply Erdoğan's desire to be active in politics for the foreseeable future — and even potentially to transfer this loyalty to his offspring. By creating new religious organisations, the AKP constitutes a global exception as well. Although several Islamic organisations around the world discuss the separation of religious organisations from political parties — the most prominent example being the Tunisian Ennahda, which arguably announced this separation in its



last party congress – Turkey’s AKP seems to be going in the opposite direction. Erdoğan, who ruled over the AKP with an iron fist but did not have the religious background nor the religious organisation, now intends to create a community by all means necessary. However, this religious community seems to be defined by personal allegiance to Erdoğan above anything else. To this extent, this is more of a political move than a religious one.

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## A Comprehensive Policy

When considered together, it is possible to say that the three elements pointed out in this paper comprise a comprehensive and multi-faceted policy for controlling and regulating the religious realm in Turkey. Employing the Diyanet as the true representative of Islam and forging alliances with religious communities have strong historical precedents. However, the AKP’s policies during the last decade constitute a certain rupture. First of all, the amount of resources being poured into it are significantly greater. Second, these institutions are not being developed as alternatives to each other but as parts or layers of a more complementary strategy. The Diyanet, *cemaats*, and newly emerging religious organisations are not deployed as antagonists to each other but as allies in the formation of a new religious generation. Last, but definitely not least, these various institutions and communities are merging with the AKP and losing their autonomy. By co-opting all these institutions and organisations, Erdoğan enjoys direct or indirect control over most of the religious realm in Turkey. As such, these policies seem to be less inspired by religious indoctrination than a desire to control a crucial realm of civil society, which – as several other examples in the Middle East have demonstrated – is crucial for sustaining an authoritarian system.

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