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Diyanet's Role in Building the 'Yeni (New) Milli' in the AKP Era

Nil Mutluer

Since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, the Presidency of Religious Affairs [*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, hereinafter *Diyanet*] is the only legally established state institution that regulates Sunni-Muslim religious affairs and serves the citizens who profess that faith. Therefore, examining *Diyanet* sheds light on the changing relations of religion, politics, state, and society, and the values attributed to the secular - *laik* - and the national in Turkey. The aim of this study is to examine the continuities and novelties that *Diyanet*, as an institution which has assumed a major function since its foundation in creating the national religion of the Turkish Republic, namely the secular - *laik* - Muslim Turkish national identity, underwent in the neoliberal AKP [*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party] period.

Discussions on the modern relations as well as the tensions between secularism and religion have been directly linked with theories on the formation of modernity and of the European nation-states and nationalisms. Such theories regard socioeconomic (Gellner 1983), cultural (Anderson 1991) and/or political modernity (Breuilly 1994; Tilly 1996) as the basis of the modern nation-state. With their secularist bias such theories underestimate the significant role religion plays at social and political levels and consign religion to the domain of the private.

Secularization processes differentiate various spheres of human activity, including, in particular, economy, society and polity from religious institutions and norms (Casanova 1994). This process not only shapes the meanings attributed to the secular, and the religious, as well as to the national and nationalism in a power hierarchy, but it also has an impact on individuals' as well as socio-political actors' identification with these concepts (Jenkins 2004). Euro-centric narratives position the secular-religious divide in binaries (Asad 2003) where the secular is identified with "hegemonic conceptions of progress" (Butler 2008), such as freedom and being modern or liberal, and the religious is identified with backwardness (Asad 2003; Dhawan 2013). And as Brubaker argues there is an intertwined relationship between religion and nationalism:

Nationalist politics can accommodate the claims of religion, and nationalist rhetoric often deploys religious language, imagery and symbolism. Similarly, religion can accommodate the claims of the nation-state, and religious movements can deploy nationalist language (2012: 16)

This intertwined relationship notwithstanding, however, at the symbolic level, the “fundamental ontologies and structures of justification” of nationalism and religion differ from one another (Brubaker 2012: 17) and this also shapes the way secularism is understood and practiced.

The Turkish state's approach to faith and religion has been shaped in relation to the Ottoman period (Gözaydın 2014). Even though there are different arguments about whether the relations between religious and state affairs have been managed separately (İnalçık 1973, Mardin 1998) or together (Akgündüz 2002; Başgil [1942] 2007; Kara 2008), it is safe to say that in the last period of the Ottoman state and during the foundation era of the Republic, religion was controlled by the state (Yavuz 2009). In the nation-state building process, the founding Kemalist elites of the early republican era adopted a unifying approach centred around the Muslim and Turkish citizens. In the early Republican era religion was still an effective force, and therefore, in the nation-state building process, Kemalist elites sought to control religion's role in politics through a myriad of legislations and state institutions, while introducing national truths as substitutes for religious ones (Gülalp 2017: 49). Ethnic identities other than the Turkish have been disregarded. As a result of the ban on such religious institutions as *medreses*, *tekkes* and *zaviye*s during the early republican era, *Diyaret* has been the dominant reference institution within the Islamic faith for more than 90 years (Gözaydın 2009). Moreover, since the problem of freedom of conscience in Turkey has been dealt with almost exclusively on the basis of the restrictions brought on Sunni-Islam institutions and practices, both the non-Sunni Islamic communities, and religious communities professing other faiths, as well as non-believers have been marginalized and discriminated (Bora [2002] 2003; Akgönül 2011).

In the foundation era of the Republic, arguing that it is against “modernity”, Kemalist elites sought to restrict religious-political activities, by positioning all Islamic practices that fall outside the framework set by the State, as reactionary. They presented the principle of secularism as an ideological imposition designed to protect the state against both reactionary and anti-Turkish currents (İnsel 2001; Çelik 2001). Accordingly, secularism or *laiklik* as it was referred to by the Kemalist founders of the state, was positioned, from the very beginning, not as something that protects democratic freedoms, but as something that protects the secular, Turkish, Muslim identity (Ünder 2001; Kara 2004; Öztürk 2016). Therefore concepts such as secularism, secular-Turkish and democracy have been positioned, from the very beginning, as rival approaches which seek to restrict each other's respective spheres of influence (Mutluer 2016a; Gülalp 2017). As a result, those who identify themselves with secularism or democracy have found themselves positioned as each other's other.

How *Diyaret* is positioned in this divide between secularism and democracy has always been open to interpretation by different factions and governments. The political and sociological balances in the relations of power have become the primary determinants of *Diyaret*'s social and political activities. In line with the changes in the political conjuncture, *Diyaret*'s budget, activities and service areas have been restricted in some periods and expanded in others.

While those who stand for democracy and freedom of conscience against the centralist secular approach advocated for the abolishment of Diyanet, those who advocated for the central-statist approach saw Diyanet as a bulwark of secularism (Gözaydın 2008).

When the AKP came to power in 2002, it positioned itself as a “conservative democratic” political party (Akdoğan 2004). The 2002 Party Program described AKP as follows:

AK PARTI seeks to make dominant an understanding of politics which looks for change in continuity, protects differences within unity, trusts in the dynamism of the society and is open to the developments and novelties in the world. As such, it is a democratic, conservative, innovative and modern party (AKP 2002).¹

As such, AKP positioned itself, not only as a representative of the grassroots conservatives' aspirations to emancipate religion, but also as an active contender in the current political dynamics centred around such concepts as innovativeness and modernity. In the founding congress of AKP, Erdoğan sought to bridge the secular-democrat divide by stating that his party was advocating for a secular state based on the rule of law. In the speech he made, Erdoğan said that “we see secularism as guarantee for democracy and as the basic principle for social peace” (Akdoğan 2004: 629).²

Yet after the electoral victory of 2011 with 49.83% of the votes, AKP started to recede from its original promise of hitting a balance between secularism and democracy. Under the umbrella discourse of democratization, the AKP has applied a hegemonic project based on neoliberal, conservative and authoritarian premises (Akça 2014). In order to succeed in implementing this project it had to redistribute the roles in the relations between family, society, the market and the state (Öztañ 2014) and as a modern national “hegemonic” (Öztürk 2016) state institution, Diyanet was a convenient tool, which could be used to instil the new religious and national values.

AKP's position on Diyanet's existence has changed over time. In 2002 when the AKP came to power, the party officials saw Diyanet as an institution against freedom of conscience and as such they were highly critical of its existence. After 2010, however, Diyanet experienced its most powerful period in terms of both its budget and socio-political activities, under the AKP governments. I argue that in the AKP period Diyanet has become one of the major institutions of the Turkish state not only carrying the new understanding of religion as well as the ‘the national’ to the different segments of Turkish society, but also reshaping the relations between state actors, society, family and market according to conservative neoliberal authoritarian needs.

This study focuses on how Diyanet has become one of the most important political symbols and representatives of the “*yeni milli*” (new national) – or to use AKP's own terminology “*yerli ve milli*” (homegrown and national) – values and authoritarian, neoliberal policies that the AKP seeks to instil and implement. By adopting feminist discourse analysis (with a reflexive approach) this study first discusses the institutional structure of Diyanet during the AKP era, and then analyses the policies and public statements of Diyanet, government and non-governmental actors in the following issue areas: Diyanet's presidents during the AKP era, nationalism-militarism, Kurdish, Alevi and gender questions. The data of this study is based on archival, media and ethnographical research on structural, social and political economic dimensions of Diyanet carried out between 2012 and 2014 (Mutluer 2014) as well as on discourse analysis of archival and media material of and about DIB's activities since 2014.

The Institutional Structure of Diyanet: From Republican to AKP Eras

Diyanet was established on 3 March 1924, to replace the Ottoman Ministry of Religious Affairs and Foundations. In the same period, religious institutions such as *tekkes*, *zaviyes*, *medreses* and *dergahs* were banned with statute n° 677, known as *tekkes* and *zaviyes* statute, passed in 1925. In 1931 the scope of Diyanet's activities were narrowed down to regulating the texts of religious sermons. This move undermined Diyanet's effectiveness and relegated it to a more passive role (Gözaydın 2009). Diyanet was given its first organic law eleven years after its foundation, in 1935. Up to that point Diyanet owed its legal status to budgetary bills and had no other legal basis which determined its organizational structure (Mertcan 2013). Diyanet received its current organizational structure and scope with statute n° 633, of 1965. In addition to restructuring Diyanet headquarters and field office, that statute, which is still in force, introduced moral education of the society as one of the areas of Diyanet responsibility (RG-2/7/1965-12038).

In the post-1980 Coup period, there was not much change in Diyanet's position and its mission to enlighten people on religious matters continued as before. The 1982 Constitution mentioned Diyanet in article 136, which charged it with the task of "remaining over and above all political views and thoughts and performing its legally assigned duties under the guidance of the principle of secularism and adopting national solidarity and integration as its sole purpose." After the 28 February 1997 military intervention, however, the scope of its activities was narrowed down, and its budget³ was reduced considerably.

With the coming of AKP to power in 2002, the position of Diyanet as an institution was strengthened once again, and many improvements have been made to its budget, staffing and employment conditions. There have been continuous increases in the Diyanet's budget since the very first days of AKP governments. Yet these increases cannot be judged as excessive as they can be seen as compensating for the cuts during the February 28th military intervention era. But in 2010 there was a hike in the increase of Diyanet's budget.⁴ The same year, Diyanet status in the hierarchy of the public administrative machinery was promoted from that of a 'general directorate' to that of an 'undersecretariat.' This move allowed the controversies prevalent since the 1980s regarding Diyanet's legal status to subside (Gözaydın 2009)⁵ and provided a legal basis for its international activities (Öztürk & Sözeri 2018). These changes allowed Diyanet to move its services and activities outside the mosque. The scope of Diyanet's institutional responsibilities was expanded and the financial status of its staff was improved. In the same period Diyanet TV and Radio were launched and they started broadcasting to a wide range of audiences in society. Diyanet spiritual and ethical guidance activities started to encompass not only religious matters, but a wide range of other issues as well, and they expanded from health institutions to prisons, from youth detention centres to seniors' residences. Family has become one of the key areas of interest in these activities.

During the AKP era, Diyanet has been redesigned to provide a link between the state, community, family and market according to neoliberal, conservative and authoritarian needs. Moreover, the AKP discourse has tactfully changed. The balance of power between imposed secularism on the one hand and the demands of grassroots democrats and conservatives on the other – that balance had an impact on AKP's own approach to

Diyanet as an institution. Thus for example, in a statement made in 2006, the then-president of the TGNA (Turkish Great National Assembly – Parliament), Bülent Arınç expressed the opinion that in a secular country an institution like Diyanet should not exist and religious services should be provided by non-state foundations (Arınç 5/5/2006). In 2012, however, the same Arınç, who, at that time was serving as Deputy Prime Minister and cabinet spokesperson, made a statement emphasizing the importance of Diyanet services and promising to promote Diyanet's position in the State protocol. In his statement Arınç even referred appreciatively to the early republican era of Atatürk's presidency – a period which often used to be criticized by the AKP for its homogenizing and centralizing tendencies (*Yeniçağ* 10/7/2012). In the months following this statement, Diyanet's rank in the state protocol was promoted from 51st, to 10th. After assuming office, the Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu linked Diyanet directly to the office of Prime Ministry (*Hürriyet* 1/9/2014). The shift in AKP's approach to Diyanet as a state institution reveals how the party decided to instrumentalize the institution to instil the new national values and neoliberal policies.

The Presidents of Diyanet: From seeming autonomy to apparent subservience

During the AKP era, the Presidents of the Diyanet played prominent and active social and political roles. Diyanet employees of this period also assumed more active roles than their predecessors in previous periods. The institution's approach to national religion, namely the secular, Muslim, Turkish identity was determined by the presidents' respective activities regarding faith, the respective distances they kept to politics and the statements they made during changing political circumstances.

The first President appointed during the AKP period, who came to power in 2003, was Prof. Dr. Ali Bardakoğlu. In his period a lot of work was done regarding the training of Diyanet staff, academic studies and overseas appointments (Gibbon 2008). Moreover, the number of female employees, and the range of activities targeting women and the family, increased (Tütüncü 2010; Maritato 2017). In this respect, Bardakoğlu gave the impression of being a more active president than his predecessors. In a speech, Bardakoğlu describes the functions that Diyanet performed in the republican era as follows:

First Period: 1924-1965, in this period Diyanet only performed administrative duties. In the second period from 1965 to 1982, Diyanet's main function was to enlighten the public in religious matters. In the third period covering the years 1982 – 2004 Diyanet's main task to provide for social solidarity and integration (Yavuzer 2005: 61).

In another speech, Bardakoğlu talks about Diyanet's mission of reaching out to the different layers of society:

The purpose of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which is over and above of all forms of political opinion and thought, is to provide for national unity and solidarity, to promote the supreme principles of our religion including brotherhood, mutual help, and self-sacrifice, to enlighten our people in religious matters, and to commit them to ethical values (*Ibid.*).

Even though Diyanet experienced one of its strongest periods during Bardakoğlu's presidency, as the above statements show, he sought to keep Diyanet's distance from politics and saw its primary mission as that of enlightening the society on religious matters. In fact, one of the reasons why Bardakoğlu's presidency was not extended

another term was the distance he kept to politics. For example, when Erdoğan publicly suggested to “solve Turkey’s headscarf problem” by asking Diyanet’s opinion about the issue, Bardakoğlu replied:

Diyanet does not issue opinions on demand. Our opinion is known: Headscarf is a religious requirement, but it is not a prerequisite of religion. The issue must be solved politically. Defining the boundaries of individual freedoms is the job of the Parliament. If secularism is juxtaposed with the headscarf, harm may come to secularism (*Habertürk* 11/11/2010).

The ban on headscarves had been imposed by the National Security Council in 1984, four years after the 1980 coup. It had a tremendous impact on life-plans of a number of headscarfed women, who were deprived of their education or jobs because of the ban (Akbulut 2008; şişman 2009; Korteweg & Yurdakul 2014). It also polarized the society by juxtaposing secular Muslim women who were not wearing headscarves against religious Muslim women who were wearing it and provided the AKP with a much-needed story of victimization, which it skilfully used to pursue its political agenda (Mutluer 2016a). Societal polarization on the issue was so clear-cut, that different camps even used two different terms to signify religious covering of women. The believers and those who defended the wearing of the headscarf as a matter of individual freedom called it *başörtüsü* - literally headscarf -, while those who positioned themselves as Kemalist, secular Muslims used to call it *türban*. It was in this tense context of societal and political polarization, that Erdoğan sought to pull Diyanet right into the controversy by seeking its opinion on the matter. But Bardakoğlu resisted that attempt with the above quoted reply. This incidence was not only a good example of the distance that Bardakoğlu kept to politics, but it also was the first sign of the leave that Erdoğan took from his original campaign promise of protecting secularism. After Bardakoğlu, Mehmet Görmez, who was the vice president during Bardakoğlu’s term, became the second president of Diyanet appointed by the AKP in November 2010.

What distinguished Mehmet Görmez from his predecessor was his willingness to get involved in current affairs and to take a political stance in certain issue areas. Yet he too emphasized that religion and politics should be separated from one another and took concrete steps toward making *Diyanet* a more autonomous institution – a demand which had also been expressed by his predecessor, Ali Bardakoğlu. Subsequently, during the period of Görmez’s presidency, Alevi and Kurdish problems were high on the public agenda and he engaged in political activities and made statements regarding these issues. Even though in these statements Diyanet recognized the Alevi and Kurdish problems as problems and sought to propose solutions, which was a first in its history, changes in the political circumstances also led to contradictory political statements and practices. We shall return to these contradictions in greater detail below, as they are significant in showing how Görmez’s approach to national religion has changed over time.

Perhaps the best examples of political statements made by Görmez can be found in the aftermath of the corruption scandals of 17-25 December 2013 which claimed the posts of four cabinet ministers and which were instigated by AKP’s former ally, the Gülen Movement.⁶

After this event, the alliance between the Gülen Movement and AKP collapsed irrevocably (Watmough & Öztürk 2018), and especially after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, for which the AKP accused the Gülen movement, Turkey added another axis to its repertoire of

societal polarizations, which was already heavily populated by Turkish/Kurdish and Sunni/Alevi juxtapositions.

Even though Görmez did not explicitly name any specific communities, it was obvious that a statement he made after the corruption scandals was pointing to the Gülen movement. Emphasizing that religious structures and services should remain within the confines of religion and morality, Görmez said “of course stealing is bad. But stealing the nation’s spirituality is bad too” (*Haber7* 11/9/2014). Yet despite this statement, he was accused by some AKP supporters of being affiliated with the Gülen Movement (KPSScafe 3/8/2017).

During Görmez’s presidency, Diyanet became a showcase in and through which the AKP exhibited its power in all its neoliberal glory. The best example of this is the controversy about the Diyanet President’s official car. Erdoğan himself ordered a very expensive car to be bought for the President of the Diyanet to demonstrate the high esteem in which the institution was held. When this move was criticized by the opposition parties, including the Peoples’ Democracy Party, as a waste of public money, Görmez decided to return the car, and using the occasion of Bara’a Night⁷, made a statement inviting the believers to “foreswear the occasions in which we forget about truthfulness, morals and virtue, and go instead for hypocrisy and vanity” (*Cumhuriyet* 1/6/2015). But Erdoğan publicly admonished Görmez for his decision to return the car, and presented him with an armoured Mercedes which he ordered Görmez to use in his official capacity. This was one of the peaks of neoliberal symbolism – a form of vanity that marks the Erdoğan Era (Gök 22/11/2015).

Görmez not only failed in keeping the Diyanet away from politics as much as he liked, but he also failed in preventing Erdoğan from politicizing the institution even more. The net result of these tensions was Görmez’s early retirement. In September 2017, Ali Erbaş was appointed as the new president of Diyanet.

The first speech that Erbaş made after assuming office was unapologetically political. He referred to the Gülen movement as FETO – an acronym for Fethullahist Terror Organization, which was starting to be used by the government particularly after the coup attempt of 15 June 2016. To emphasize the significance he attributed to Islamic Unity, Erbaş also used the Islamic concept of *ummah*⁸ and talked about “the revival of *Ummah*” to get his political message through in no uncertain terms. The exact wording of the relevant passage from his statement is as follows:

Our institution is the hope of all those who pray for the damage that FETO caused by exploiting young brains with a mysterious and obscure understanding of religion to be repaired and the legacy of our martyrs to be honoured. In order to reclaim the confused minds and provide for the revival of the *Ummah*, we need to work harder than ever before (*Cumhuriyet* 18/9/2017).

Under close examination, out of these three presidents of the AKP era, Bardakoğlu stands out for his success in keeping the institution relatively distant from politics. While during Bardakoğlu’s presidency *Diyanet* followed a relatively independent course, and even resisted AKP’s and Erdoğan’s passes at it to use it for political advantage, the institution’s involvement in politics increased with each of Bardakoğlu’s successors and this increase ran a parallel course to the increases in AKP’s votes in successive elections. As AKP’s political support base expanded, its tendency to centralize political power became more pronounced and *Diyanet* turned increasingly into an instrument which Erdoğan and the AKP used as a neoliberal showcase representing the power of Islamic neoliberalism and to

transmit and instil the new values of the so-called “new Turkey” to the society. This change is best reflected in the ambivalent position of *Diyanet* on Kurdish and Alevi questions, particularly during Görmez's presidency.

Militarism and Martyrdom: From Nation to *Ummah*

Another issue area where the continuities in the state's approach to *Diyanet*, as well as the new policies introduced by the AKP, can be examined revolves around militarism and martyrdom.

Thinking that the relationships between politics on the one hand and religion and military on the other might be likely to cause problems in the future (Kara 2004: 181), the founding elites of the Republic designed *Diyanet* and the Turkish Armed Forces as institutions charged with the task of protecting Kemalism, secularism and the Republic. This way it was possible not only to instil the Turkish national values in all male citizens through the compulsory military service, but also to encourage everyone, including women, children and the elderly, to participate in the militaristic spirit of Turkish nationalism (Cizre 2001).

Since its foundation, *Diyanet* performed this function particularly well through its sermons, publications and public statements which “assimilated religious holiness in nationalism” (Altınay & Bora 2002: 147). National Unity was built and presented through a symbolism which differentiated itself from other Muslim Communities as somehow superior. When the history of the Turkish nation was re-written, the points of intersection with the Islamic history were deliberately exalted. In other words, in order for the Turkish identity to appear stronger, Islamic elements were added to it. This resulted in the creation of a type of “National *Ummah*” which was somehow separate from the Muslim *Ummah* (Saçmal 2013: 26). *Diyanet* was presented not only as the representative of the only true version of Islam, but it also served to provide religious legitimacy to the Turkish state whenever it was needed. This allowed the state to present its policies of secularization and nationalization as religiously justified.

Even though Islamic activities have been restricted after the 12 September 1980 coup, these restrictions were not fully extended to *Diyanet*. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the ban on headscarves, which cost many women their education and jobs, was imposed in this period. In the so-called post-modern coup of 28 February 1997, the government reacted even harsher. The governing coalition partners of the period, the leader of the political Islamicist Prosperity Party, Necmettin Erbakan and the leader of the True Path Party, Tansu Çiller were forced to resign. During that period the National Security Council started to control *Diyanet*'s sermons, and *Diyanet*'s publications were observed to adopt a militaristic and nationalist language that was tailor made to counter a possible Islamic threat. In fact, the election of the AKP to power in 2002 can be seen as a reaction against the persecution and exclusion to which the 28 February coup subjected the Islamicists (Yılmaz 2004: 615).

The AKP was a political party which was established by politicians coming from the *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook) tradition and *Diyanet*'s instrumental role continued in this new period as well. Islamic activities which had been weakened during the 28 February period and the restrictions and budget cuts that had been imposed on *Diyanet* were lifted. It was in this period that nationalism and Islam were brought even closer to one another. In

2012 the then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan charged the institution with the upbringing of a religious generation (*Diken* 27/2/2016). In the many speeches he made, Erdoğan introduced a “*yeni (new) milli*” conception of the Turkish nation as “*yerli (homegrown) ve milli (national)*” which encompassed only Muslim communities. In this context Islam was positioned as the basic commonality that defined this nation as a nation. While the phrase “National Will” [*milli irade*] gained more and more prominence in the discourse of the governing party and its leader, the notion of Turkishness has been gradually deemphasized. And the Diyanet’s muftis, following Erdoğan’s advice, started to use the term *milletimiz* (our nation) or *milli* (the nation) instead of “Turkish Nation” (Saçmal 2013). The fact that the present president Ali Erbaş used the term *umma* in his inaugural speech appears to be in line with this approach (*Cumhuriyet* 18/9/2017).

Even though changes in political circumstances lead to shifts in the symbolic emphasis put on concepts like Turkish, nation or *umma*, the importance attributed to the concept of martyrdom never changed. And Diyanet made regular statements designed to present both compulsory military service and death as a martyr as normal phenomena. It never missed a commemoration when doing so helped to normalize military service or martyrdom. The best examples of this are the sermons issued for the commemoration of Dardanelles Campaign of 1915-16. The frequent themes that come up in these sermons are: the loftiness of military service, the virtue of defending the homeland, and the happiness of reaching the rank of a martyr. Thus, for example, in one of the sermons dated February 1990, martyrdom is identified with the survival of the nation, and exalted as such.

Our nation is so familiar and enamoured with the ranks of martyrdom and that of a war veteran, without them it is not possible to think of this nation, the life of this nation, or the history of this nation. In the ‘Allah Allah’ cries of the soldiers in the wars, in the hopeless love that makes death appear to them as a reunion with their maker, in the smell of the heaven they inhale, there is always a desire for martyrdom. Nations which lack this desire are destined, sooner or later, to bow to the wind of history and to disappear.⁹

The same theme has been covered every year more than once. But particularly in the 1990s when the armed conflict with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party [PKK – *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*] reached its peak, the emphasis put on “martyrdom” carried a different meaning. These sermons sought to motivate as much the general public as the soldiers protecting the borders of the nation-state and they reproduced the importance of martyrdom in defending the homeland over and over again.¹⁰ This approach of the 1990s has also been taken over by the AKP, particularly in times when the conflicts intensified and it will be further discussed below, under the heading of the Kurdish Issue.

The AKP also use the theme of martyrdom to forestall public outcry in cases of industrial work accidents. Thus, for example in relation to the case of the Soma Coal Mine, which was run by a private company under the auspices of a publicly owned enterprise, Turkish Coal Mining Enterprises [TKİ – *Türkiye Kömür İşletmeleri*] and where 301 miners died as a result of a mining accident due the lack of appropriate safety measures in May 2014 (*Diken* 14/5/2014, 16/8/2016), Görmez made the following statement emphasizing martyrdom:

God’s endless mercy be unto our brothers who lost their lives. They rest in peace. God give them the rank of martyrdom! (...) When the believers come face to face with a calamity, they say ‘we belong to god and shall return to him...’ They teach us how blessed it is to pursue an honest penny, the proceeds of one’s own labour. They are now the quests of our God. They are now the neighbours of our beloved Prophet.¹¹

Even though Görmez called for an effective investigation into the circumstances of the accident to identify and punish those who were responsible, the fact that the workers who lost their lives have been referred to as martyrs, can be seen as an attempt to normalize workplace murders, and as such it is one of the clearest examples that, in the AKP era, the theme of martyrdom is used for neoliberal purposes as well. After this speech, Diyanet's Muftis have organized a number of events under the title of "Soma Martyrs."¹² Thus, in the AKP era, both militarism and *milli* –national – became more Islamic, and martyrdom more neoliberal connotations. Diyanet is one of the main institutions that reflects both shifts.

The Kurdish Question: From religious inclusion to nationalistic exclusion

Diyanet's approach to the Kurdish issue has followed state policies since its foundation. Thus, this has led Diyanet to have contradictory approaches to the Kurdish issue in line with the shifting policies of the AKP.

During the whole Republican history, Diyanet's approach to Kurdish identity and the Kurdish problem has been in line with the official political approach of the respective period. During the foundation of the Republic all ethnic identities but the Turkish one were disregarded, Kurds were assimilated into the Turkish nation (Yeğen 2002) and this was reflected in Diyanet's policies and discourses about the existence of Kurds.

Yet, particularly in the 1980s, Kurdish demands for the recognition of their identity became more pronounced. The Kurdish movement has become active in Turkish politics; however, there have been intermittent periods of armed conflict with the PKK, which is a militaristic organization. These conflicts reached their peak in the 1990s when the militarization of pro-state Kurds, who sided and co-operated with the Turkish state, and forced evacuations of the "pro-Kurdish" villages, became commonplace occurrences (Kurban *et al.* 2007).

Accordingly, the sermons published by the Diyanet in the 1990s revolved around such themes as patriotism and the importance of the defence of the homeland, Turkish civilization and the blessedness of military service. The theme of martyrdom, which was mentioned above, was used to condemn the activities of the PKK. The presumed virtues and inherent characteristics of the Turkish nation were praised.¹³

Diyanet adopted this approach in the AKP era as well and particularly in the sermons and official statements published and issued during periods of intense armed conflict, the theme of martyrdom returned.¹⁴ In the context of public debate on the question of conscientious objection (to compulsory military) service in 2012, it issued a statement to the effect that "conscientious objection is unacceptable from a religious point of view", something which was criticized heavily by anti-militaristic circles and theologians alike (*Milli Gazete* 20/4/2012).

In the AKP period the steps that Diyanet took on the questions of Kurdish identity and language were influenced by the prevailing political conjuncture and its contradictions at that particular time. Thus, for example within the context of public debate about the possibility of giving sermons in the Kurdish language, Ali Bardakoğlu declared that they could comply with such a wish, if there was a demand for it (*CNN Türk* 3/9/2009).

However, some commentators list this issue as one of the areas of contention between Ali Bardakoğlu and the government (Türeñç 13/11/2010).

Under Görmez's Presidency, Diyanet appointed 1000 *meles* who received their theological training in local *medreses*, to such Kurdish-majority cities as Diyarbakır, Urfa and Mardin. *Mele* means *imam* in Kurdish, and this was a move in line with the government's then-prevalent policy of peace talks with the Kurds (*Radikal* 21/6/2012). The same period also witnessed a proliferation of sermons emphasizing the importance of peace among Muslims. At the same time however, when the preparations for the publication of sermons in Kurdish, Arabic and Zaza languages were well underway (Başaran 26/3/2012), the Islamic Encyclopædia was published by Diyanet in February 2014. The Encyclopædia extensively covered the distinctive cultures and languages of the Turks and Arabs in 44 volumes, but it did not mention the Kurds and the Kurdish language even once – a fact which received widespread criticism for its blatant disregard of the Kurdish identity. Amidst these criticisms the TGNA accepted the so-called democratization legislation on the Kurdish issue, and the first sermon in Kurdish language was given on 8 March 2014, in Cizre, şırnak.

The ambivalences in the position of Diyanet on the Kurdish question resurfaced four years later, in January 2018, when Turkey started a military operation in the northern Syrian enclave Afrin. The majority of the population in Afrin is Kurdish and it was then under the control of the *de facto* administration of the Kurdish dominated Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed branch People's Protection Units (YPG), which the Turkish government accused of being linked with the PKK. The newly appointed president of Diyanet, Ali Erbaş issued a statement in support of the operation in which he weaved the themes of *ummah* and martyrdom into one single thread. In an atmosphere where any criticism of the operation was effectively suppressed by the government in the domestic media while reports of unlawful killings and displacement of the civilian population in the Afrin region were frequent in the international media, Erbaş said that the reason why the military operation of the Turkish forces and their allies was progressing slowly was because the Turkish military and its non-state allies “were fighting according to Islamic moral principles and were acting sensitively to protect the lives of the civilians.” Erbaş sought to buttress his argument by giving the non-Muslim American soldiers, who, he claimed, killed 1 million innocent people, as a contrasting example. This was a clear sign that, in the AKP era, *Diyanet* used the discourse of the “unity of Muslims” as a political tool even when making a militaristic statement supporting a cross-border operation by the national army of the Turkish state (*Cumhuriyet* 10/2/2018).

The Alevi Question: Inside and/or Outside Diyanet

The Alevi Question is a further issue area in which Diyanet's and its presidents' discourses reflect the shifting policies of the AKP. During the foundation of the Republic, the founding elites regarded Alevis as an intrinsic part of the Turkish-Muslim identity and therefore they did not provide a specific framework designed to allow them to exercise their freedoms of belief and conscience. Keeping Sunni Islam under control through secularism, the state did not need any other belief system (Küçük 2002: 902; Mutluer 2015). Quite to the contrary, in the early Republican Era, Alevism was one of the excluded others of the republican identity (Yeğen 2002). The controversy over Alevis

representation in Diyanet came to the public agenda in the 1980s, but according to Ismail Kara its roots go back to the 1920s, and in effect, to the very first attempts at transitioning to multi-party politics in the early republican era (Kara 2004: 194). According to Kara, the public debate about the Alevis in the 2000s was set within a framework of democracy, democratization and freedoms, because the Alevis experienced a number of massacres in the republican era which were provoked by state agents and yet the culprits have never been held accountable for their actions. In fact, until the 2000s most Alevis refrained from using the word "Alevi" openly in public (Massicard 2005; Mutluer 2016) and this resulted in the normalization of social discrimination against the Alevis.¹⁵

During his presidency Bardakoğlu objected to the prejudices in relation to Alevis. Thus, for example, being reminded that some Alevis do not observe such religious practices as fasting, praying and the ban on alcohol as a part of their faith, Bardakoğlu made the following statement:

Life is wider than prayer, alcohol and fasting. We wrote history together. If we restrict the points of agreement to these three, it would mean that there is no other commonality in the family. We cannot reduce religiousness or the Muslim identity to these three points... This must be the principle: Those who observe [these practices], observe, those who don't, don't. We need to create an environment of freedom without obstructing each other, or forcing each other (insel 23/10/2010).

Görmez, for his part, visited the Erikli Baba Cultural Association, an Alevi organization, in 2011, saying "I came here to eat *lokma* with *cans*. This is a courtesy visit" (Haberler 27/5/2011). *Can* and *lokma* are culturally loaded words associated with the Alevi traditions (the first refers to human beings as souls, the latter refers to a very modest meal) and the fact that Görmez chose to use those words in explaining the reason of his visit, was a clear message of goodwill. Similarly, in 2012, in a TV program he participated in, Görmez said that:

Alevism is a *sui generis* path which was born from within the tradition of Islamic wisdom. This path too has its own ways of entreaty, its own methods, and its own places where these are practiced. There should be no legal constraints to construct *camevis*. They should be freely constructed (T24 13/10/2012).

Again, in 2012 when Alevi houses were branded, supposedly for the purpose of identifying and attacking Alevis, Görmez said: "If necessary I will personally wait in front of the houses that have been branded" (Şahin & Işık 1/8/2012) and spoke positively about the religious practices of the Alevis.

These positive statements about Alevis coincided with the governmental policy of the time, the so-called "opening to the Alevis," when a series of workshops were organized with the participation of Alevi organizations. Even though these workshops started in a very promising way which allowed different Alevi groups to voice their common demands clearly, because of two changes in the political conjuncture, they failed to produce any concrete policy outcomes (Mutluer 2016b). The first change in question was Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's election as the leader of the main opposition party, CHP. Kılıçdaroğlu is an Alevi, and with his election as the leader of the opposition, Alevi votes lost the attraction they had for Erdoğan and the AKP. The other change was the outbreak of the Syrian war in which the Erdoğan government positioned itself squarely against the Bashar al-Assad regime, who was himself a *Nusayri* – an *Arab Alevi*. These two developments resulted in a U-turn in the AKP's policy of "opening to Alevis" and this U-turn, in turn, was reflected in Diyanet's statements.

For example, Diyanet was very complimentary about the Alevi when the government pursued a policy of openness, however refused the request of an Alevi inmate in a maximum security prison to talk with an Alevi *dede* (a spiritual-religious counsellor in Alevism), instead of a Sunni imam, to take faith-oriented guidance, on the grounds that Alevism is not a separate religion (Öztürk 17/7/2012; Söylemez 5/2/2016). Even though this statement sounds like it was directed against Alevism as a faith, the real issue was that Alevi *dedes* had not, and still do not have, legal standing under the constitution.

Similarly, in an interview with Al Jazeera on 7 July 2014 Görmez insinuated that *cemevis* (Alevi houses of prayer) are not real houses of worship:

We do not define; we try to understand. *Cemevi* is *cemevi*. As a scholar I know it as a place where entreatment is made, where Allah's name is mentioned – like a Mevlevi or Bektaşî lodge. We cannot see them as houses of worship of a different religion, houses of worship equal to mosques. It is a product of the efforts to present Alevism as if it were a different religion. Alevism has a history of 1,000 years. We cannot disregard this history and make new definitions (Bulut 7/7/2014).

The last president of the AKP era, Ali Erbaş's position on this question is also in line with Görmez's final approach. By saying that "Mosques are for both Sunnis and Alevi to pray in," Erbaş made it clear that he does not approve of *cemevis* to be officially recognized as houses of worship and Alevi communities criticized him because of this statement (*Cumhuriyet* 12/3/2018).

Gender Relations: From woman to family

Gender relations in general, and how women are positioned in the society in particular, are one of the important projects of both the founding elites of the Republic and the AKP. The ideal republican woman was a protector and symbol of modern, secular, Turkish and Islamic values, western-looking, well-educated to raise her children, caring of her family and ready to sacrifice herself for the good of the society if needed (Berktaş 1998; Sancar 2014; Mutluer 2016a). And Diyanet was charged with the task of handling the responsibilities of the woman who was seen as servant and protector of the family in the private sphere.¹⁶ But until the AKP period the presence of women in the Diyanet was minimal.

In the AKP period, particularly under the presidency of Ali Bardakoğlu, the active presence of women in the Diyanet and services targeting women have increased considerably (Hassan 2011). Pointing out that half of the population consists of women; Bardakoğlu declared that they were practicing positive discrimination in the recruitment of female staff and preachers (*Milliyet* 30/8/2008). The same period also witnessed women becoming regular contributors to feminist literature and graduates of theological faculties were employed by Diyanet in gender equality projects (Tütüncü 2010). The so-called Family Offices (*Aile Büroları*) established during the presidency of Bardakoğlu in 2003, were restructured as Family and Guidance Offices (*Aile ve İrşat Rehberlik Büroları*) in 2007 and, targeting women, they started to work in the general area of family-religion-society relations. The derelict women's sections in the mosques were renovated and with such activities as morning prayers and religious conversations, mosques were transformed into places where women can come for purposes other than praying.

Even though there was an official ban on headscarves in state-affiliated institutions starting in the 1980s, Bardakoğlu let the female staff of Diyanet decide in either direction.

Still, as mentioned above, he refrained from making a public statement to support Erdoğan on this issue, which cost him his presidency.

Particularly after 2011, AKP government policies regarding women were developed in relation to the family. Despite criticisms by the women's movement, the AKP government changed the name of the State Ministry responsible for Women and the Family, to the Ministry of Family and Social Policies and shifted its focus from women to the family. The president of Diyanet at the time, Mehmet Görmez, followed suit and signed a cooperation protocol with that ministry. The aim of the protocol was to protect the values of the Turkish family, to strengthen the family and to work on social service projects.¹⁷ As such, this protocol reflected the fact that Diyanet was charged with promoting a new version of family values which was based on Islamic, and not secular, republican motifs of the foundation era.

This agreement with the Ministry of Family and Social Policy also shaped the gender relations in society. Even though the number of women preachers employed by Diyanet increased from 453 in 2013 to 726 in 2014,¹⁸ the feminist, anti-discriminatory approach that gained prominence during Bardakoğlu's presidency somehow fell from grace during Görmez's presidency. For example, even though women preachers talked about such topics as violence against women in their sermons, they usually made a fleeting reference to it, leaving male perpetration eminently underemphasized. In general, Diyanet basically approached gender and women issues by following the government's lead and issuing public statements supporting the government's position¹⁹ on topics such as the protection of family, work life of women, how children should be raised, the future of youth, marriage, divorce, domestic violence and violence against women.²⁰ Moreover the women preachers of Diyanet reached out to women, not only through their sermons in the mosques, but through their various guidance activities outside in their everyday lives as well (Maritato 2017).

In the AKP era, reproductive health and abortion have become politically hot issues. Erdoğan made it clear that he wants a ban on abortion and he received criticism from secular and religious segments of the society alike. Erdoğan's musings did not result in a change of the applicable laws, but the state hospitals effectively stopped performing abortion (*Morçatı* 3/2/2015; Karaca 3/5/2013).

In this period Görmez made statements supporting AKP's position. Diyanet's official position on the question of abortion, as stated in the Religious Questions and Answers Section of their website, is that it is not "appropriate from a religious point of view."²¹ In addition, Diyanet also declared that in-vitro fertilization methods are "appropriate from a religious point of view," provided they do not lead to a suspicion of adultery between the married couples. This view was in line with the prevailing laws of the period banning in-vitro fertilization for unmarried women (RG-6/3/2010-27513).

Since the 1990s, Diyanet's views on women's work life too have evolved with the changing economic conditions. In the 1990s Diyanet emphasized that women should not do any work outside the house²², today it takes the view that women should participate in work life in equal terms:

According to Islam, as a rule, woman can work both inside and outside her house and help her husband in providing for her family. According to the circumstances, it is also possible that the spouses change roles in the family.²³

Sexual orientation has always been a taboo subject for the Diyanet. Even during Bardakoğlu's presidency when a feminist approach gained prominence, Diyanet did not

issue any statement on the topic. Under a heterosexist state system, Diyanet simply refused to accept that there can be differences in terms of sexual orientation:

In view of the disconcerting tendency of sexual behaviour disorders getting more pervasive in the society, the already well-known position and answer of Islam needs to be stated very clearly. The presidency of religious affairs should lead the education of the society about the sexual behaviour disorders which are contrary to human nature and against the nature of the Muslims. Without offending or publicly humiliating people, it should support initiatives which seek solve the problems in a healthy way (*Kaos GL* 6/11/2009).

This statement of Diyanet has not only been criticized by the libertarian circles, but it also created controversies within Islamic circles as well.²⁴

Conclusion

As İřtar Gözaydın says “the state makes use of the Diyanet as an administrative tool to indoctrinate and propagate official ideology regarding Islam” (2014:13). Diyanet was established to secure “the secular nature of the state in Turkey” (Gözaydın 2008: 1). This approach has determined the meanings attributed to secularism and Turkishness, as well as how these concepts are used in everyday life. During the AKP period the institution carries on being a socio-political tool and when necessary it uses the national and religious in an “intertwined way”, in Brubaker’s sense (2012). Thus, with AKP’s coming to power the meanings attributed to and the practice of the secular, the religious and the national have changed. In the beginning, the self-styled conservative-democratic AKP sought to bridge the gap between the two positions which were pitched against one another during the foundation period of the republic – namely the secular Turkish and Muslim democratic positions. But particularly after 2011, the increases in AKP’s votes encouraged it to move from a more inclusive conservative democratic position, to a more conservative, neoliberal authoritarian position. And AKP’s leader, Erdogan, did not refrain from positioning the secular and the Muslim as two mutually exclusive sides of a political polarization. And Diyanet’s role has changed accordingly. In the AKP era, Diyanet has become more powerful and more active than in any other period. Its budget increased and its status in the state hierarchy was stepped up. It reached out to society, and its activities were carried outside the mosques. AKP and its leader Erdogan positioned the institution as one of the important symbols of the political establishment which makes political statements and engages in politics to further AKP’s policies in such issue areas as the Kurdish and Alevi questions or gender relations. When needed, he asks for its view. In short, in the AKP era, the institution has become a representative of the “*yeni (new) milli (national)*” – “*yerli (homegrown) ve milli (national)*” – identity and the neoliberal policies of the government, and its ties to the political centre has become stronger than ever.

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NOTES

1. The translations of this and all the following quotations from original Turkish sources are mine.
2. This was a continuation of Ali Fuat Başgil's approach, which questioned but did not reject secularism. Başgil was one of the ideologues of the Democrat Party, which in turn, was the political root of all centre-right currents that followed it (Başgil 1954 in Mert 2001: 2008).
3. For a detailed analysis of Diyanet's budget at the political turning points in Turkey, please see (Mutluer 2014: 17-32) which was prepared by an anonymous group of economists and social scientists working in different institutions. In 1980 Diyanet's part in the overall state budget was 0.60 %.
4. In 2010 Diyanet's part in the overall state budget was 1 % and it has increased since then. For detailed analysis of Diyanet's budget at the political turning points in Turkey, please see Mutluer (2014).
5. The Statute n° 6002, of 1 July 2010 amending The Statute Regarding the Establishment and Duties of the Presidency of Religious Affairs and Some Other Statutes.
6. The Gülen movement is also called the *Gülen cemaati*, *cemaat* or, particularly after the AKP parted company with them, as FETÖ [Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü – the Fethullahist Terror Organization].

7. A religious night two weeks before Ramadan starts, when Muslims seek for forgiveness and pray to God for that.
8. *Ummah* refers to the religious community of all Muslims.
9. "Gazilik ve şehitlik" (Veteranship and Martyrdom), Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Hutbe Arşivi (The Presidency of Religious Affairs Sermon Archive – 02.02.1990).
10. For different examples look "Askerlik ve İslam" (Military and Islam), Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Hutbe Arşivi (The Presidency of Religious Affairs Sermon Archive – 06.09.1996).
11. "Müminler Tek Vücut Gibidir" (Believers are One), Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Hutbe Arşivi (The Presidency of Religious Affairs Sermon Archive – 09.05.2014).
12. For example (*Dinihaberci* 29/8/2014).
13. One example of these sermons can be "Milletimiz Parçalanmak İsteniyor" (They seek to break our nation apart), Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Hutbe Arşivi (The Presidency of Religious Affairs Sermon Archive – 02.10.1998).
14. Some examples can be "Aziz şehitlerimize" (To Our Holy Martyrs), İstanbul Müftülüğü Hutbe Arşivi (Istanbul Directorate Sermon Archive – 21.10.2011); *Milliyet* (17/2/2018).
15. The first public use of the word Alevi after the foundation of the Republic was in 1963 published by students in Ankara (Massicard 2005: 55).
16. In their statements Diyanet regard "Westerners" and non-Muslims as other. "İslam'da Aile" (Family in Islam), Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Hutbe Arşivi (The Presidency of Religious Affairs Sermon Archive – 05.01.1990).
17. Aile ve Sosyal politikalar bakanlığı ile Diyanet İşleri başkanlığı arasında İşbirliği protokolü (26/10/2011). URL: <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/isbirligiProtokolleri/Aile%20ve%20Sosyal%20Politikalar%20Bakanligi.pdf>.
18. Diyanet Activity Report 2014 (February 2015: 34).
19. One of the example can be the last statement of current President Ali Erbaş during 8 March Women's Day (*Diken* 8/3/2018).
20. Examples can be found in "İslam'da Aile" (Family in Islam), Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Hutbe Arşivi (The Presidency of Religious Affairs Sermon Archive – 05.01.1990).
21. "Kürtaj yaptırmak caiz midir?" (Is it permissible to have an abortion?) <https://kurul.diyamet.gov.tr/Cevap-Ara/999/kurtaj-yaptirmak-caiz-midir->
22. "İslam'da Aile" (Family in Islam), Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Hutbe Arşivi (The Presidency of Religious Affairs Sermon Archive – 05.01.1990).
23. "Kadınların İş Hayatında ve Yönetimde Yer Almaları" (Women taking part in business life and management) <https://kurul.diyamet.gov.tr/Karar-Mutalaa-Cevap/2913/kadinlarin-is-hayatinda-ve-yonetimde-yer-almalari>
24. One example of this criticism can be found in (T24 8/8/5011).

ABSTRACTS

This study argues that Diyanet has become one of the most important political symbols and representatives of the “*yeni milli*” (new national) – or as named by AKP members, “*yerli ve milli*” (homegrown and national) – values and neoliberal economic policies that the AKP seeks to instil and implement. Adopting feminist discourse analysis (with a reflexive approach), this article examines the continuities and novelties that Diyanet, as an institution which has assumed a major function since its foundation in creating the national-religion connection of the Turkish Republic, namely the secular -laik- Muslim Turkish national identity, underwent in the neoliberal AKP [*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party] period. This study first discusses the institutional structure of Diyanet during the AKP era, and then analyses the policies and public statements of Diyanet, government and non-governmental actors in the following issue areas: Diyanet's presidents during the AKP era, nationalism-militarism, Kurdish, Alevi and gender questions.

INDEX

Keywords: Diyanet, Turkey, Religion, Nationalism, Gender

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