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The *Diyanet* in the context of the combat against Covid 19 in Turkey

As soon as the first case was confirmed on 11 March Turkey acted quickly and by mid-March had taken the first steps, closing borders and imposing confinement, as well as taking economic measures to support those worst affected by the pandemic. As a model centralised state, the country is in some way used to tackling natural disasters, in particular earthquakes which are common in Turkey. The unprecedented context of the Covid 19 pandemic has required the mobilisation of all the state's structures, especially the Ministries of Health and of the Interior, but also of a ministry that does not speak its name, the *Diyanet*, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which has a special status in the organisation of the state and also in the daily lives of citizens. It has been strongly criticised over the past few years by the opposition who judge it to be too much under the control of the AKP government and in fact the *Diyanet* has shown during this crisis that it has been a veritable instrument of control for the power on the population.

A few figures are required in order to better understand this issue. The *Diyanet* is the most powerful and the most extensive Islamic organisation in the country and it depends directly on the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, an exceptional status about which it boasts regularly on its web site¹. In fact, it operates like a huge ministry with 130,000 employees, managing 84 000 mosques and thereby enjoying considerable influence over believers. In a secular country, the prominence of the *Diyanet* and the existence of religious civil servants demonstrate the ambiguity of Turkish laicity. If there is one inescapable religious actor in Turkey, it is the *Diyanet*, which includes among its prerogatives the management of worship, the organisation of pilgrimages and sermons preached in mosques². It is also the institution which, voiced by its thousands of imams and muezzins throughout the whole country, sets the lead and dictates the individual and collective attitude to be adopted when faced with exceptional phenomena such as epidemics and earthquakes, but also in some political crises, such as during the attempted coup in 2016, when it aided President Erdoğan.

Political power is aware of this force and since the outset has associated and integrated the *Diyanet* in its plan to combat Covid 19. Thus, in the first instance, being responsible for pilgrimages to holy cities, the organisation repatriated pilgrims who had left for the *umrah*. Unfortunately, the confinement of those repatriated has not been very efficient, according to several studies as well as opposition factions. In fact, the pilgrims in quarantine in university halls of residence have been able to go out and receive visitors, which has helped to spread the virus.

Moreover, in line with the government's wishes, the *Diyanet* has suspended all collective worship in mosques, including Friday prayers. Mosques have remained open however but only for private prayer, which the authorities nevertheless encourage to be done at home. On this topic, the different agencies of the *Diyanet*, its internet site, television channel and online sermons have helped by constantly insisting on the importance of confinement to better tackle the pandemic.

1See the website in several languages: <https://www.diyamet.gov.tr/fr-FR>

² Emir Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey. Law, Policy Making and the Diyanet*, I.B Tauris, 2018

So, since 23 March, the *Diyanet* has had to coordinate an unprecedented Ramadan in a context of confinement, so that the celebrations, which ordinarily are collective, festive, family gatherings, did not turn into a massive incubation cluster of the virus. Therefore, the traditional *iftars* that bring the community together have been banned, and the *tarāwīh*³ prayers have also been suspended. Minarets have been used not only for calls to prayer, confined in the house, but also to inform and to raise awareness of the importance of the fight against the virus. Thus, at the end of every *ezan* the imam repeats the same phrase, "don't trust outward appearances, the virus is still here, continue the fight, stay home".

While these initiatives are praiseworthy and salutary, others have been much more controversial and have discredited the *Diyanet*, as for example the conflation made by its leader Ali Erbas between the virus and homosexuality. In fact, in his sermon on Friday 24 April, the first this year in the month of Ramadan, the *Diyanet* head declared that "Islam considers fornication to be one of the gravest sins and it condemns homosexuality" because "these practices bring disease with them". He stated this in his address to the faithful, mentioning the AIDS virus in particular, linking it but without naming it, to the coronavirus. These pronouncements quickly circulated on social media and unleashed a controversy which went as far as the courts. Many net surfers condemned these "hateful" statements by Ali Erbas, criticising him for "dividing people instead of bringing them together" in a vital mobilisation for a sacred union. A lawsuit was filed against the leader of the *Diyanet* by the lawyers at the Ankara bar but he instantly won the public support of President Erdoğan. Government-supporting media declared that Ali Erbas had only reiterated principles found in the Koran and they denounced "these attacks against Islam". Thousands of internauts expressed their support, using the hashtag "Ali Erbas is not alone". In turn, the Ankara prosecutor's office joined in and launched an investigation into these lawyers "for insulting religious values".

By way of conclusion, it should be pointed out that by only taking action, which is to say only taking measures against the coronavirus, after the government decision to ban gatherings, the *Diyanet* has clearly proved that it is totally under the control of the government which appointed it. In this respect, certain branches of Islam, particularly represented by Cubbeli Ahmet of the Naqshbandi community at Ismail Agha Mosque in the Fatih district of Istanbul, had criticised the *Diyanet* for having delayed in cancelling collective prayers. Moreover, in a country sharply divided between government supporters and their opponents, by pointing the finger at homosexuality, the *Diyanet*, which up until then had been unanimously supported in its management of the crisis, has voluntarily placed itself in a position of division and disruption, just as the current government does in order to control the country. Thus, it is no longer content to manage religious affairs but it also is participating more and more in the shaping of society, as the government wishes it to do. By taking on the role of the religious arm of power, not just at home but also abroad, when it accompanies diplomacy and the AKP's soft power policies, the *Diyanet* is taking part in a profound redefinition of Turkish-style secularism.

³ The *tarāwīh* are the daily, evening prayers, which take place after *iftar*, the evening meal at the end of fasting, during all the month of Ramadan. These additional prayers are prayed in pairs of two *rakaa*, a ritual sequence of prayer, with generally altogether include between 11 and 45 *rak'a*. They are normally performed in congregation, which is why they have been suspended this year.