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Coronavirus Outbreak and Islam: Emergent Issues

GROUPE SOCIETES RELIGIONS LAÏCITES

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Turkey. Health workers who have died in the fight against Covid-19 raised to the rank of "martyr"

Turkey is one of the top ten countries affected by the Covid-19 epidemic, with 146,000 known cases to date and 4,055 deaths¹. Like everywhere else in the world, healthcare workers have paid a heavy price to this disease and a renowned theologian has wished to honour them, basing this on an Islamic tradition. It is about declaring them as "martyrs" (*shahid* in Arabic and in Turkish) which is no small feat in Islam for, according to the Koran (3:163), this status places the deceased just below that of the Prophet and he or she is promised eternal life. Turkey is not innovating on this point because Egypt made such an announcement beforehand, last March, as did Iran, where this was decided by the supreme guide, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and France where Mohammed Moussaoui, president of the Conseil français du culte musulman (French council of the Muslim Faith) extended this status to all Muslims who have died from this disease.² In Atatürk's secularised Turkey, even directed by the conservative party of Tayyip Erdoğan, this decision requires the exercise of a certain amount of caution, seeing the symbolic strength of the term "martyr". The country is in fact quite divided with 50% ardently supporting the President, which includes his nationalist allies, and they face an equal number of determined secular and republican opponents.

Behind this project is Professor Hayrettin Karaman (aged 86) a theologian, specialist in Islamic law and former advisor to President Erdoğan. He is close to the Muslim Brotherhood whose ideas he reworks with the old Ottoman values but he is deeply opposed to jihadism in any form including that of Islamic State as well as Saudi Wahhabism. Karaman is described by his lay opponents as the *fetvacı* of the Palace (*Saray fetvacı*), which means he who makes judicial religious decisions (*fatwa*) based on the traditions of Islam (the Koran and hadith), a description that he himself rejects, stating that Islamic law has no place in a secular Republic. However, since early May, the theologian has responded to a demand from the people wanting to know whether a health worker killed by Covid-19 could be a martyr. As a professor of law, he quoted a hadith (a saying of Muhammad) which recognises that those who die in combat in the name of Allah are martyrs as are those who die of the plague (*tâ'ûn* in Arabic) or who die by drowning

or women who die in childbirth. So, this concerns health workers who die while combatting Covid-19. Nevertheless, Karaman has pointed out that the Hanafi school of jurisprudence to which the Turks are linked distinguishes between the "true martyr" (*el-şehidü'l-hakiki*) who dies on the battlefield fighting the enemies of Islam and the "martyr by decision of law" (*el-şehidü'l-hükmi*), a category which includes all the other martyrs including health personnel. Because they lose their life in order to save that of someone else the health worker is therefore also, in his or her way, fighting for God³. Over the last few years, in Turkey, the status of martyr has been bestowed on Turkish soldiers who died in the line of duty defending their homeland (in Syria for example) but also civilians who lost their lives opposing the putsch in the failed coup d'etat in July 2016.

This judicial ruling by Karaman, which certainly has everything of a *fatwa* and which is presented as such by his political enemies, received a favourable welcome from the Minister of Religious Affairs, Ali Erbaş, and the Health Minister Fahrettin Koca. The Good Party (İyi Parti) led by Meral Akşener, a splinter from the nationalist party, goes even further since two of its members of parliament are ready to formulate a legislative proposal to formalise this recognition. However, without minimising the sacrifice made by health workers, dissident voices have been heard, qualifying Karaman's *fetva* as a "populist *fetva*" (*popülist bir fetva*) which is allegedly hiding a political manoeuvre to create an alliance with the heroes of the day⁴. However, the most subtle opposition to this *fetva* comes from a well-known figure in the secular Republic, the very dynamic Ahmet Hakan, director of the opposition newspaper *Hürriyet*, who, although very generous in his praise of health workers, and who also believes that they should all be recognised as martyrs, nevertheless views this concept in a secular manner, as was the case in Atatürk's time. In his opinion, health workers should be martyrs as were the Turkish soldiers, who during the War of Independence (1921-1922), died defending the homeland against the Greek army. Here the word "martyr" refers to lay heroes (*kahraman*), a term also used by Hakan⁵.

While the religious and lay camps unanimously recognise the sacrifices of health workers who have lost their lives during the pandemic they are divided over the interpretation of the term "martyr" that each side links with its own cultural references. The secular group maintains this word with the desanctified idea that came from the Republic while on the other hand the religious faction uses it to resanctify. This policy is clearly in line with the strategy to restore Muslim cultural, ethical and social values encouraged by Tayyip Erdoğan's party, and this is taking place in a Turkey which still remains secular, in its legal system and in its constitution. But the desire to abandon laicism is not unattractive to some. As proof of this, a few years ago the same professor Karaman had devised a project for a non-secular Turkey along the lines of the "special partnership" which links the churches and the state in Germany.⁶

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¹ <https://covid19.saglik.gov.tr>

² Nader Allouche, « Pour le CFCM, un musulman mort du coronavirus est un "martyr", ou le risque d'un nouveau djihad », *Valeurs actuelles*, 10 April 2020.

³ H. Karaman, « Şehit sağlıkçılar », pro-government daily, *Yeni Şafak* 5 May 2020 edition (<https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/hayrettinkaraman/sehit-saglikcilar-2054744>).

⁴ « Prof. Dr. Hayrettin Karaman sağlık çalışanlarını "şehit" yaptı ama... », <https://www.dinihaber.com/genel/prof-dr-hayrettin-karaman-saglik-calisanlarini-sehit-yapti-ama-h145269.html> (site of clerics opposed to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, to the tarikat and the cemaat).

⁵ « O kahramanları... ‘Şehit’ ilan etmenin tam zamanıdır, » <https://jurnalci.com/o-kahramanlari-sehit-ilan-etmenin-tam-zamanidir-122904.html>

⁶ See my article « La Turquie de l’AKP (2002-2017). Laïcité autoritaire et vellités de sortie de la laïcité », in Jean Baubérot, Philippe Portier and Jean-Paul Willaime, eds, *La Sécularisation en question. Religions et laïcités au prisme des sciences sociales* (Paris: Aubier, 2019), p. 189-207.