

## **The transnational politics of religion: Turkey's Diyanet, Islamic communities and beyond**

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**ABSTRACT** *The article builds on current academic debates pertaining to the use of religion in global politics. By examining how and why religion is used as a tool for foreign policy aims as well as for perpetuating a state's identity and institutional capacity at home and abroad; the article presents a theory-informed discussion on Turkey's transnational politics of religion from a comparative perspective. The country's use of religion as a political tool outside of its borders has been studied in Western Europe, Africa, Asia and the Balkans thanks to extensive fieldwork and interviews conducted between 2016 and 2020. The article investigates how and why Turkey has implemented similar policies with different aims in different geographic territories and the underlying material and normative motivations for this pursuit. The main argument presented in the article is that Turkey, under the rule of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), employs religion for three fundamental reasons: to bolster its regional and global influence, to access regions or groups that are difficult to reach through traditional foreign policy tools and to alter domestic political balances or amass power.*

**Keywords:** Turkey, Religion, Soft Power, Diyanet, Islam, AKP

## Introduction

In recent years, the intricate and multifaceted role that religion plays in domestic politics and foreign policy has become one of the most studied subjects in the fields of politics and international relations.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have investigated the various roles that Abrahamic religions such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism play in global politics<sup>2</sup> and discussed how and why some particular countries explicitly and implicitly utilize religion in both domestic and foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> Numerous academic studies and policy papers make a series of assertions regarding the use of religion in global politics that can be categorised along three objectives which generally fit into the instrumentalization of religion both in domestic and foreign policy areas: **a)** to bolster regional and global influence **b)** to access regions and groups that are difficult to reach through conventional foreign policy tools and **c)** to alter domestic political balances or amass power. These three objectives are debated in relation to the personal characteristics of the leaders and/or political groups which use religion in foreign policy as well as the state's identity and its institutional capacity. Beyond that, the causal factors driving the use of religion in foreign policy is still an important subject which should be scrutinised through the lens of multiple theories.

In accord with this Special Issue's goal of presenting a theory-informed perspective on Turkish foreign policy, this article uses the three objectives listed above as a starting point for discussion and further analyzes what countries seek to achieve by using religion as a foreign policy tool. It uses the contemporary Republic of Turkey's *sui generis* secular (*laik*) state structure<sup>4</sup> and its intricate instrumentalization of Sunni Islam in the new millennium both at the level of the ruling party—namely the Justice and Development Part (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP)—and throughout society as a case study into how state and non-state actors use religion in international relations<sup>5</sup> for different reasons. Furthermore, semi-non-state religious organizations that maintain an indirect relationship with the state have also been using religion in global politics for various aims and these are also affecting Turkey's image outside its borders, as some policy makers have underlined that “after the beginning of 2010's we have been observing Turkey's abuse of Islam beyond its territories”<sup>6</sup>. In this context, Turkey's use of religion as a political tool outside of its borders has been studied in Western Europe, Africa<sup>7</sup>, Asia<sup>8</sup> and the Balkans<sup>9</sup>. Using this background, this article presents a comparative analysis by discussing these regions and beyond. It also investigates how and why Turkey has implemented similar policies with different aims in different geographic territories and the underlying material and normative motivations for this pursuit.

This study relies methodologically on two foundations. The first is ethnographic findings acquired from field studies conducted between 2016 and 2020 in the Balkans, Western Europe and the United States. These findings rely on 52 semi-structured interviews with elites in Turkey, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Sweden, France, Germany, England and the US.<sup>10</sup> Most of the interviewees preferred to stay anonymous due to the political sensitivity of the issues discussed. Additionally, even though the general aim of the interviews was to understand the impact and transformation of Turkey's religious-oriented foreign policy

and the host countries' reactions, all of the interviews have unique characteristics due to the different structures of each country. These interviews generally were conducted with the representatives of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (hereinafter *Diyanet*) in host countries, prominent figures of Turkey's various Islamic groups such as the Gulen Movement and Suleymanci communities, and Turkish diplomats and employees of foreign ministries in the host countries. Conducting these interviews offered an opportunity to examine how and in what manner Turkey utilizes religion and how elites and ordinary citizens in these countries react. The second methodological foundation is based on the secondary resources covering the activities of Turkey's religious apparatuses in Africa, Asia and the Caucasus. The article also examines official publications of the *Diyanet* and statements made by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on some political issues.

The article is structured as follows: the first section investigates how various structures and actors have utilized religion in the changing world order. The second section explicates how Turkey has used Sunni Islam in different ways throughout history. This section particularly focuses on Turkey's use of religion in domestic and foreign policy as well as the period of AKP rule during which religion has been used to a greater extent. The subsequent sections will discuss how Turkey and various Turkey originated actors have utilised religion in the Balkans, Western Europe, the Anglo-Saxon world, Africa, and Eurasia. The final section addresses conclusions that may be made by comparing Turkey's actions in various regions.

### **The use of religion in international relations and those who use it: state, non-state and intermediary actors**

Some have noted that the world has witnessed in the past century the near disappearance of religion from political spaces with the growth of secularism and its profound influence on global politics.<sup>11</sup> However, this situation has ended with renewed influence of religion in world politics. This influence continues in a multifaceted and layered manner. The evolving situation has precipitated a number of debates since the early 2000s<sup>12</sup>, and the extent to which various actors utilize religion in global politics is studied in greater depth with novel questions in this article.

The first issue is one of sequencing, namely the use of religion by states first in domestic politics then in foreign policy. According to Fox, the use of religion in foreign policy – especially by states – relates to those states' domestic political environments.<sup>13</sup> Often, countries' deliberate use of religion in foreign policy can be traced back to domestic political developments.<sup>14</sup> Some leaders, such as Turkey's Erdoğan, have frequently tried to use religion for domestic political gain.<sup>15</sup> However, one should not present religion solely as an instrument to be (ab)used by leaders. Religion is one of the most important determinants of a state's identity and its institutions,<sup>16</sup> and thus on a most basic level studies exploring connections between and use of religion in foreign policy would fall under the constructivist paradigm. How states conceptualize and use religion as a foreign policy tool, however, depends on their political systems, state structures and the identities and objectives of their political actors.<sup>17</sup> The use of religion as a foreign policy tool typically has mixed results, as constructivist Kubálková argues, and it is thus essential to study the ontological differences between states

that use religion in foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> In light of this, it is useful to return to the research question to ask how and why a given state uses the same tools with different aims in different geographic territories and what would be the underlying material and normative motivations for this pursuit.

Secondly, it is important to note that non-state actors also use religion as a foreign policy tool. Although a state's instrumental use of religion in the international arena may appear to conform to realist theory, the utilization of religion by non-state actors on the global stage can be better explained with a constructivist interpretation that gives primacy to identity, norms and culture. Therefore, the use of religion in foreign policy for mostly non-state actors is not directly related with power relations.<sup>19</sup> Such a reading reveals how these actors differentiate their own norms over time with changing conditions around the world and how they alter their foreign policy decision making accordingly. While the activities of some actors serve the purpose of searching for peace and rapprochement<sup>20</sup>, some actors use religion as an instrument to disseminate violent narratives.<sup>21</sup> This is beyond the limits of realism and neo-realism which study world politics through mostly, but not fully with a state-centered positivist lens.

When considering the comprehensive nature of Islam, compared to the other Abrahamic religions, and the authoritarian structures of many states with Muslim-majority populations,<sup>22</sup> it is important to mention the existence of a third actor instrumentalising religion in foreign policy. Definitely, this issue is not related to the nature of Islam, but to states and their objectives. These actors may appear to be non-state actors and may claim to be so, but when contemplating the relationships they form with the state in the name of partnership with ruling authorities, it would be more accurate to describe them as semi-civic organizations. Although these organizations generally operate in an interests-based manner within authoritarian state structures, they appear in quite different forms in different geographical spaces. These organizations, which are not autonomous, endeavour to establish global influence pursuant to their own identities and religious views and strive to gain visibility. The relationships, consistencies and conflicts between states, non-state actors and semi-civic structures that use religion in the international arena affect their influence and visibility across the world and how countries that allow them to operate within their borders perceive them.

Important questions here are how states, non-state actors and semi-civic structures use religion in international politics, and why. It is apparent in this context that religion is a source of power, suggesting it can be analysed from a realist perspective, but also a given that it includes norms, values and identity, factors given more weight under constructivist approaches. Clearly, religion is not a classical form of (hard) power. This compels us consider the connection between religion and soft power, an issue that arose with the first articulation of the concept of soft power by Joseph Nye in very early 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Haynes was one of the first to seriously include religion within the scope of soft power. Haynes argues that both religion and religious actors are determinants of foreign policy influence and that this influence must be defined as religious soft power.<sup>24</sup> However, this influence may also appear in both positive and negative contexts in various indirect manners when considering the ambivalent nature of religion. Although the past decade has seen a significant increase in discussions over how

religion and religious institutions and actors can be used as elements of soft power in global politics<sup>25</sup>, the number of studies approaching the topic through collective readings of domestic and foreign policy is rather small and sceptical. Mandaville and Hamid, who further expanded on this trajectory,<sup>26</sup> identified three ways in which states exercise religious soft power transnationally. First is the institutional and normative capacity of states and their civilizational affinity, second is the socio-political circumstances of states and the aims of those seeking to wield religious soft power, and third is the double-edged sword structure of religious soft power. Finally, Bettiza suggests that some states act as important religious institutions and that their use of religion with and as a symbolic, cultural and network-based element in foreign policy compels us to broaden the scope of what is typically meant by soft power.<sup>27</sup>

It is certainly possible to synthesise all these definitions, especially when studying Turkey's use of religion as a foreign policy tool. However, the advantage of the constructivist approach is that it enables us to study the instrumentalization of religion in global politics both vertically and horizontally by scrutinizing it within a matrix of power, norms, values, and identity. Furthermore, it also enables us to interpret different actors' use of religion in various forms. Therefore, constructivism would be a more suitable lens through which Turkey's transnational politics of religion under the AKP rule, which has different dimensions and actors, can be studied.

### **Scrutinising Turkey's history along the axis of religion**

“Islam will not act according to us; we will act according to Islam”

Recep Tayyip Erdogan 2019<sup>28</sup>

Although Turkey's founding elite claimed to have established an entirely new republic amid the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Turkey, in certain respects, rests upon continuities with its predecessor. A complete departure from history was not realistic. One of the most important points at which a sort of paradoxical logic emerged was when the ostensible secular Turkey began to utilize and instrumentalize religion. Although the Republic of Turkey asserts that it withdrew religion from the core of the state and enshrined *laiklik* as one of the building blocks of the state's structure, it borrowed a method of governance directly from the Byzantines and the Ottomans. This method entails the state's use and administration of religion through certain institutions or agencies. The *Diyanet*, founded in 1924, assumed this responsibility during the Republican era, as did a council during the Byzantine era and the office of the Shaykh al-Islam during the Ottoman era.<sup>29</sup>

The *Diyanet* is tasked with governing Sunni Islam for the benefit of society on behalf of the state and within the limitations the state has imposed. The principle of *laiklik* and the foundational philosophy of Turkey, which sought to seize control of religion through the *Diyanet*, legally banned autonomous religious organizations/communities, though it did not eliminate them entirely.<sup>30</sup> Discreetly operating religious communities have become important political actors. Religion remained inextricable from politics and continued to be even after the

collapse of the Ottoman state. This continuity is apparent in the cadres of the *Diyanet*, particularly after the 1960s. As Professor Mehmet Görmez, who served as the director of the *Diyanet* between 2010-2017, noted a 2016 interview:

In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, the *Diyanet*, perhaps unintentionally, entered into a relationship with other religious structures without being fully aware of it. Individuals close to religious organizations began to be employed to meet the personnel needs in Anatolia and various parts of the country. This was necessary and unavoidable.

This situation was the outcome of the interests-based unification of religion and state, as we noted above, while the 1960s and 1970s witnessed Turkey's exportation of various religious structures. The exportation of religion was a consequence of Turkish nationals and other Muslims choosing to migrate to various parts of the world, particularly Continental Europe.<sup>31</sup> The swelling numbers of migrants necessitated the establishment of organizations that would provide religious services for them in their new home countries. Due to the significant population of Turkish citizens in places such as Germany, Austria, France and Sweden and because Turkish citizens adopted a more moderate interpretation of Islam relative to other Muslim-majority countries, Western states chose Turkey to fill this role. The *Diyanet* as well as other religious organizations thus began to operate internationally in the late 1970s and its role grew in the 1980s. Following the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, some Turkish religious organizations became more active in the Balkans, Central Asia and Africa.<sup>32</sup> One of the most prominent of these organizations was the Gülen Movement, which embedded itself in Turkish politics in the 2000s. The Gülen Movement, which adopted a para-political character, became a key determinant of how Turkey utilized religion in foreign policy.<sup>33</sup>

In 2001, a political cadre of former defenders of Islamic ideology founded the AKP under the leadership of Erdoğan and, after winning elections in 2002, assumed sole control of the government. Particularly after 2006-2007, the AKP was certainly not alone in its use of religion and religious organizations. The Gülen Movement became one of the AKP's most important foreign policy partners through a coalition based on mutual interests and collaboration. Within this relationship, the Gülen Movement guided the AKP internationally and provided it with human resources and the AKP provided legal and normative legitimacy in return. However, especially after 2013, the deterioration of the Turkish economy, Erdoğan's adoption of an exclusive discourse that threatened certain sects of Turkish society, his oppressive use of religion and nationalism in domestic politics, and the interests-based battle he started with various groups, particularly the Gülen Movement, altered both Turkey's image and Erdoğan's policymaking. Following the 2016 coup attempt, Ankara's relations with the West became cooler than ever before due to the Islamization and nationalization occurring in Turkey.<sup>34</sup> Although Turkey is still governed by a secular constitutional system, Ankara uses religion in every societal domain in a rigid and intense manner, never before seen in its history.<sup>35</sup> Its heavy use of religion has far-reaching consequences throughout the world as well as in its domestic politics

## **The Balkans: Neo-Ottomanism and imaginary reality**

“Turkey establishes its Balkans policy from Ankara, but there are different realities of the region which Turkey could not manage to understand properly.”

These are the words of a prominent former member of the North Macedonian Parliament explaining the intricacies of Turkish-Balkan relations in 2019. While a sizable portion of the Balkans was ruled by the Ottomans for over three hundred years and consequently has some religious, cultural, and linguistic connections with modern Turkey, the Balkans is politically, economically, culturally and historically distinct from Turkey. Nevertheless, Turkey recognized the Balkans as part of its sphere of influence and made policy accordingly during the early Republican era and especially during the 2000s after the end of the Cold War and the wars in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>36</sup> This situation is a key reason why Turkey’s Balkan policy is flawed, but it is progressively more differentiated during the AKP era for many different reasons. The main ones are the differences between Turkey and the Balkans’ norms, values and identity perceptions. A key reason for this differentiation was Turkey’s use of religion in every facet of its relationship with the Balkans and often to a much greater extent than necessary.

“We invited Turkey and its religious institutions to our country so that no sort of radical movement would disturb our country.”

This quote is from an interview we conducted in 2017 with Mihail Ivanov, an advisor to former Bulgarian President Zhelyu Zhelev, who invited the Turkish *Diyanet* to Bulgaria in the 1990s. The *Diyanet* also became active in Albania and North Macedonia in the 1990s. Turkey subsequently provided financial assistance and other support to the offices of muftis in these countries, and the *Diyanet* trained and assisted their imams when necessary. Similarly, other Turkish religious organizations, such as the Suleymanci community, began to establish influence through schools, student dormitories and other institutions after the birth of the Gülen Movement. These activities continued in the Balkans after 2002 due to the good relationship Turkish religious organizations maintained with the AKP, Turkey’s economic growth, and the AKP’s affinity for the West. Speaking in a 2018 interview on this matter, a former Albanian State Minister observed:

“[When] the AKP rose to power, it seemed to prove that Islam and democracy were functioning collectively, and we viewed this situation positively. For us at the time, this demonstrated development and progress. But Turkey under the AKP later began to distance itself from democracy and implemented a slew of foreign policies based on religion, and this evoked questions perhaps not within society but among state elites.”

The AKP pursued serious investments and initiatives in the Balkans through the *Diyanet* and other institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı*, TİKA). For example, the *Diyanet* constructed the

largest mosque in the Balkans in the Albanian capital of Tirana and built many others throughout the region. The *Diyanet* also began to support the offices of muftis in these countries through official agreements. It provided scholarship opportunities for youth in the region to study in Turkey, and both the public and elites in the region greeted these developments positively as they bolstered Turkey's visibility in the Balkans. However, the foreign policy initiatives Turkey implemented after 2013 based on domestic political changes occurring during these years provoked various reactions in the Balkans. These reactions were provoked by Turkey's widespread use of religion and religious apparatuses as foreign policy instruments.

One of the most significant issues was the international nature of the battle between the Gülen Movement and the AKP, especially after the 15 July 2016 coup. The Turkish government accused Fethullah Gülen of being the mastermind behind the coup attempt and demanded that countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo outlaw Gülen Movement activities. While some countries, such as North Macedonia, complied with Turkey's demands, others, such as Albania, did not. Turkey made considerable investments in some Balkan countries in an effort to break the influence of the Gülen Movement, but these investments began to directly and indirectly influence religious spaces due to their religious character. An official from the North Macedonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs whom we interviewed in 2019 said;

“Especially after the failed coup attempt in Turkey, Erdoğan's Turkey sought to pacify oppositional Islamist actors in the region through the *Diyanet* and similar institutions and to situate its own Islamist agenda in the spirit of the Balkan people by building mosques and appointing loyal imams.”

This statement contains two differing explanations for Turkey's evolving use of Islam in foreign policy. It also exposes the manner in which Turkey uses religion internationally. Senior Turkish bureaucrats have also expounded upon this situation. In a 2020 statement, *Diyanet* Director Ali Erbaş emphasized that Turkey has incredibly strong relations with Balkan countries and that this cooperation will continue through religious education, services and religious publications. Erbaş, stressing the importance of the Balkans to Turkey, said, “Our historical ties will continue as they have in the past.” This situation was predominantly met with satisfaction among the Muslims of the Balkans but evoked some questions within the region's non-Muslim communities. Turkey's use of religion in a more multifaceted manner in its Balkans policy after 2010 positively and negatively impacted the states and different religious groups in the region. This demonstrates that Turkey under the AKP is an extremely effective yet contentious actor in the Balkans. Turkey has acted on its nostalgic neo-Ottoman desires by dreaming up an imaginary reality in the Balkans by instrumentalizing its religious power in the region. Likewise, a constructivist interpretation would argue that Turkey's religious oriented foreign policy in the Balkans has different vertical and horizontal dimensions that use norms, belief, ideas, and institutions.

### **Western Europe: From helping to controlling the diaspora**



“Turkey’s use of religion has increasingly overreached its legal limits and involved diaspora politics in various ways. It is thus difficult to understand which activities are related with religious service and which with diaspora control.”

These are the words of a French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official whom we interviewed in 2018 highlighting this situation. Turkey’s religious-oriented relations have a storied history and are important to understanding the current situation. The motivations of Turkish religious institutions in Western Europe are different from their motivations in other parts of the world. This history is interwoven in the history of Turks’ migration to Europe over the past century. Starting in the 1960s, a need to provide religious services to Turkish nationals migrating to Europe for economic reasons and individuals coming to Europe from other countries emerged. Similar to other regions, European states invited Turkey and organizations affiliated with the *Diyanet* into their countries or allowed them to establish the legal institutions necessary to operate in their borders because they believed the Turkish organizations could be more compatible with their social and political atmosphere. Therefore, starting the mid-1970s, Turkish religious organizations began to provide services to Turkish nationals and other Muslims in numerous countries including Germany, France, Austria, Sweden, and the Netherlands.<sup>37</sup>

These official religious institutions and other organizations became more active during the 1980s and 1990s and especially after the AKP rose to power in the 2000s. There are three underlying reasons for this: a) Turkey’s economic growth and ability to move resources internationally particularly between 2002 and 2011; b) the growing areas of influence for the Turkish state as it used its religious organizations to operate internationally; c) Turkey’s use of religion in foreign policy for various reasons especially after 2011 and unification of its diaspora with other Muslims to exert influence in Western Europe.

For instance, as of 2020, Turkish institutions run more than nine hundred mosques in Germany. The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği*, DITIB), a *Diyanet* institution, has sent more than one thousand imams—whose wages are paid by Turkey—from Turkey to Germany. Additionally, the *Diyanet* has representative offices, mosques and organizations operating on its behalf in countries including France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Austria. Other religious organizations such as the Gülen Movement, Sulaimanis and Naqshibandis also have a number of associations, dormitories and institutions in these countries. However, all these organizations have left complex and oftentimes negative impressions on European political elites due to Turkey’s changing domestic political balances and their consequences in the international arena. An official from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs whom we interviewed in 2018 highlighted this situation:

“Turkey’s religious institutions have operated in our country and other countries for years. We are – or were – very happy that they are present in our country. But as a result of some changes in recent years, we are seeing that these institutions sometimes engage in activities beyond the domain of their operations such that it piques our suspicions of these institutions. This compels us to seek out alternatives.”

Such sentiments also exist outside of France. The spill-over of the conflict between the Gülen Movement and the AKP went beyond Turkish borders<sup>38</sup> and led to different types of activities being enacted in Europe after 2014 by the *Diyanet* as well as institutions with which it has direct and indirect relationships. For instance, an investigation that began in Germany in 2015 and later spread to Austria and France showed that local institutions affiliated with the Turkish *Diyanet* and other Turkish religious structures operated in coordination with Turkish intelligence against both the Gülen Movement and other oppositional organizations. In other words, the Turkish state used mosques and Muslim institutions as tools to exert influence over the diaspora. These institutions also used propaganda to advertize Erdoğan's domestic and European policy. Erdoğan's Turkey grew more authoritarian, utilized religion excessively as a tool of legitimation and began to collect intelligence and propagate an evolving state identity in the diaspora in line with its authoritarian tendencies.<sup>39</sup> However, these operations were met with different reactions in Western Europe than in the Balkans, the fundamental reason for which was the divergent formation of power relations between the countries. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron considered banning or, at the very least, limiting the operations of the *Diyanet* and spoke about rumours that had emerged before 2021 regarding the institution's interference with France's upcoming elections:

“In Continental Europe today, there are community organizations, local groups and political groups, among which is the *Diyanet*, which [has been] mobilized by Turkey's official organs of propaganda... They sometimes interfere with our elections and other times finance [European] organizations. We have seen this again in recent days.”

The institutional response from senior positions in the French government was not the only reaction in Europe. Many countries, including Germany, Austria and Sweden, reacted like this or in similar ways. This demonstrates that Turkey's religious institutions have become powerful in Western Europe during the AKP era while at the same time changing their focus from merely providing services to govern or control the diaspora.<sup>40</sup> This evokes a number of questions about autonomy and certainly falls outside of the space for the historical use of religion and religious institutions. This is also related to the ambivalent use of religion and limited capacity of religious soft power as it was argued previously.

### **The Anglo-Saxon World: The struggle to close the gap in a race entered late**

Comparatively speaking, Turkey's religious institutions and structures began to organize relatively in the Anglo-Saxon world, which includes the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). There are four main reasons for this: a) Turkey does not have the historical relationship with the US and UK that it does with the Balkans or Continental Western Europe; b) the Turkish diaspora in the Anglo-Saxon world is smaller than its Continental West European counterpart, and Turkey thus lacks the direct channel for the provision of services in the US and UK that it has in other parts of Europe; c) the share of Turkish nationals within the Muslim populations in these countries is relatively small compared to those from other regions, and there is no role that Turkey could fill in religious spaces in these countries because the

other Muslim communities in these countries are already well organized; and d) the religion-state and community relations in Anglo-Saxon countries are subject to less government control relative to those in the Balkans and Continental Western Europe, so Turkey's ability to establish relations with the states is thus considerably weaker. Isobel Ingham-Barrow, head of policy at Muslim Engagement and Development, spoke about this situation in a 2020 interview:

“I can say, particularly for the UK, that most of the Muslims here come from Asia, and Turkish Muslims have not been in the most visible position, at least until recently. However, the fact that Turkey has become discussed in the context of religion around the world in recent years brought the subject of Turkey to the agenda. But it is still not a very widespread topic.”

Turkey's organizational efforts in the UK with religious institutions, at least officially, began much later compared to its efforts in other parts of Europe. The Diyanet Foundation of England began providing services in 2001 through organic ties to the Turkish Embassy in London's Religious Services Consultancy, and it is now one of many Turkish organizations engaging in religious and cultural activities with Turks in the UK. There are more than seven mosques affiliated with the Turkish Diyanet Foundation of England, with the Luton Turkish Islamic Centre Mosque and the Bristol Turkish Islamic Centre Mosque being two key examples. The foundation also installs cadres of religious officials to the mosques or masjids that the various Turkish organizations build. Additionally, the Gülen Movement and Naqshibandis have various religious institutions, mosques and organizations throughout England. The advent of these groups' organizational efforts dates back to the 1980s before they were affiliated with the *Diyanet*. Despite all these initiatives, there is currently no evidence confirming assertions that Turkish organizations attempt to control the diaspora, interfere with domestic politics, or export Turkish political trends using religious institutions. It can be confirmed, however, that Turkey's religious institutions have become more visible and active both domestically and internationally.

Similar to the UK, the *Diyanet*'s operations began late in the US relative to those in Europe. The Diyanet Centre of America was founded in 1993 as an institution functioning in coordination with the Turkish *Diyanet*. Prior to this, however, Turkish Muslims had already taken advantage of religious freedom in the US and founded Turkish mosques and religious associations. However, these mosques have strong cultural and nationalist undertones and have thus isolated Turks from other American Muslims. The buildings have mainly been named after Ottoman Sultans, similar to mosques in Turkey. A Turkish flag flies above each mosque, and the interior decor in each pays homage to Turkish culture, making them less appealing to non-Turks. The fact that the Turkish-American community and other Muslim groups do not share religious spaces is also caused by a linguistic gap between Turkish Muslims and non-Turkish Muslims. Religious officials serving at these mosques generally do not know much English and therefore their communications are limited with Turkish originated diaspora members. Therefore, Turkey's religious oriented influence is limited when compared to the other parts of the world. It is important to note that the *Diyanet* and other Turkish religious institutions engage in far fewer initiatives in the UK and US, and this is due to the social and

political configurations in these countries as well as the character of their Turkish diaspora. This also demonstrates the limited power of religion alone.

### **Africa: The religious dimension of neo-colonialism and neo-Ottomanism**

Turkey's efforts to hasten political, military, cultural and economic relations with African countries began with the "African Expansion Action Plan" prepared in 1998, but this plan remained merely an idea until the AKP rose to power in 2002 and announced 2005 as the "Year of Africa". That same year, Turkey attained observer status at the African Union. The cumbersome progression of relations with the West and European Union in the late 2000s and early 2010s and the wave of rebellions known as the "Arab Spring" after 2010 motivated Turkey to strengthen its relationships with African states. Accordingly, in the early 2010s Turkey turned to Africa in search of new trade partners and to reinforce its diplomatic influence on the continent. One of the most important contributions to Turkey's strength in Africa was the Gülen Movement, which had operated there for years through educational institutions and other organizations. As a result of these initiatives, the number of Turkish diplomatic missions in Africa rose from 12 in 2002 to 42 in 2020. Both public and private companies in Turkey including Turkish Airways, TIKA, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, the Maarif Foundation, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Red Crescent and the Anadolu Agency maintained relations with Africa. There are a few underlying motivations for Turkey's growing presence in Africa.

The first is the neo-Ottomanism that first entered Turkish political spaces with Turgut Özal in the 1980s but became dominant in the late 2000s as a consequence of Ahmet Davutoğlu's influence in the AKP and Turkish politics. Davutoğlu and Erdoğan's neo-Ottomanism, which would later emerge as a leader-oriented ideology, not only called for Turkey to influence former Ottoman territories but also encouraged Ankara to use religious and cultural partnerships to influence regions with significant Muslim populations around the world.<sup>41</sup> This influence indicates a relationship predicated on neo-colonialism and hegemony, as it gave the appearance of a tutelary system over these geographic regions. Turkey began to aspire to a degree of dominance over North Africa in particular but also over the entire continent.

The second reason for Turkey's growing presence in Africa was the struggle for global dominance Turkey entered with some Western states after 2014. Turkey competed with countries such as France, which has historically dominated North African countries, that were former Ottoman territories. This process can be seen as a combination of neo-colonialism and neo-Ottomanism, and was, in a sense, a geopolitical battle in which religious institutions were used as weapons. While Turkey's growing presence in Africa may not appear to be explicitly religious, former *Diyanet* Director Mehmet Görmez clearly underscored its religious character in a 2016 interview:

"We have a legacy from the Ottoman Empire in that region and a responsibility to our religious brothers. We cannot leave them struggling or abandoned."

The *Diyanet* and other Turkish transnational state apparatuses opened wells and provided health services and food aid, especially on religious holidays, in countries including Somalia, Nigeria and Angola.<sup>42</sup> The Turkish Diyanet Foundation also provides urgent humanitarian assistance to regions experiencing crises such as civil wars and natural disasters. Additionally, the *Diyanet* prints and distributes the Quran in nine languages in 24 African countries and provides imam support to African mosques.

While all these activities were not directly organized by the Gülen Movement, which was very active in Africa between 2007 and 2013, they were indirectly supported by it. However, just as in the Balkans and in Western Europe, the close relationship between the Turkish state and the Gülen Movement devolved into a conflict that spread beyond Turkey's borders and into Africa after 2013. Although there is not currently evidence that the *Diyanet* or other Turkish religious structures directly clashed in Africa as they did in the Balkans or Western Europe, Turkey expanded relations with African countries to hinder the Gülen Movement's operations, and increased its own religious, cultural and economic activities in Africa, legitimizing these actions with a neo-Ottomanist discourse. Turkey also features alongside China, India, Russia, Brazil, the US, the EU, and the Gulf states, which have all recently increased their presence in Africa. It is important to note, however, that Turkey is trying to establish its presence and power in Africa through religious and cultural partnerships, though African political elites largely do not view these efforts positively, as in the Balkans. This also demonstrates that religion can serve cover different socio-political purposes and therefore it has the double-edged sword structure.

### **Eurasia: The fusion of Islamism and Turkism**

During the Cold War, Turkey did not – or was unable to – meaningfully influence the Soviet Turkic republics and the broader Eurasian region due to the bipolar world order and the secular ideas defining Soviet identity. However, the AKP began to penetrate these regions using religion in the early 2000s and attempted to assume a tutelary role. After the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, the *Diyanet* implemented numerous initiatives directed at the region to meet the growing demands of Muslim communities living in Caucasus and Central Asia. Furthermore, has started to play a role of protecting and preserving Islam in the region. One of the highly ranking *Diyanet* official commented on this situation in a 2016 interview:

“Our services, especially during the Soviet era, pertain to the urgent needs emerging in the fields of religious education and services that have been ignored and denied for almost a century under the inhumane and tyrannical policies of hostile and atheist regimes. As the Muslim nations and communities in the Eurasian region gained independence and autonomy, our regional activities prioritised, as an urgent matter, the reconstruction and betterment of the culturally interwoven religious identities and senses of belonging, with a consideration of the needs of the era.”

In this regard, the Islamic Council of Eurasia (*Avrasya İslam Şurası*), an organization sponsored by the *Diyanet*, provides nearly all the services which were mentioned in the above quotation. The Islamic Council of Eurasia is a collaborative initiative launched in 1995 primarily to facilitate cooperation in the areas of religious services and education between indigenous religious institutions in Muslim countries and the institutions of Muslim society in Eurasia. The fundamental objective of this collaborative initiative, which is thought to serve as a forum for counsel to address contemporary religious issues, is to facilitate cooperation between Muslim religious institutions and organizations to provide religious services and education needed by Muslim communities in a uniform and coordinated manner. The fact that the Islamic Council of Eurasia operates under the auspices of the *Diyanet* in the Turkic republics bolsters the religious and ethnic tutelary system Turkey maintains in the region. Although this tutelage may be symbolic, the Islamic Council of Eurasia normatively engages in religious spaces on contemporary religious issues such as the determination of new approaches and methods in the provision of religious services and education. This is the very classical and successful examples of Turkey's religious soft power in the region.

However, they also connect to Turkey's wider ambitions. For example, Erdoğan attended the 2018 opening ceremony of the Bishkek's Imam al-Sarakhsi Mosque that the *Diyanet* and the Turkish Diyanet Foundation had constructed in the capital of Kyrgyzstan. This mosque is the largest in Central Asia. Erdoğan, speaking at the ceremony, stated, "Our mosque and its complex will, God willing, be conducive for the rejuvenation, of the religion, language, history, culture and conversation that previously existed between Anatolia and Central Asia. This project has appeared after six years of considerable efforts and will remain at the heart of Central Asia for centuries as a gift from the Turks to the Kyrgyz people."<sup>43</sup> We can understand from this statement that Turkey uses its religious institutions in these countries as both symbols and instruments of visibility, similar to what it has been doing in the Balkans and in Africa. That is to say, Turkey's religious oriented activities in the region have multidimensional aims.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how Turkey has historical utilized religion in its foreign policy while also discussing contemporary international activities and the interconnectedness of Turkish institutions (state, religious organizations, and non-state actors) in their operations in various regions. It predicated its arguments on interviews and on an analysis of these institutions' operations and made comparison across regions. Although 2002, when the AKP came to power, was not the starting point for Turkey's use of religion in foreign policy, its utilization certainly grew after this year and accelerated throughout the 2010s. Turkey's operations in this space are too complex and interwoven to be singularly labelled as neo-colonial, hegemonic or from a simple realist perspective. In recent years, Turkey has employed religion in foreign policy for three fundamental reasons: **1)** to bolster its regional and global influence (a Realist interpretation), **2)** to access regions or groups that are difficult to reach through traditional foreign policy tools (a more Constructivist interpretation that speaks to the role of identity and culture) and **3)** to alter domestic political balances.

Turkey's shift of its domestic political trends and agenda to the international arena and its use of material force while doing so prevents us from arguing that it has used religion only as soft power in foreign policy. Nevertheless, Turkey's use of religion in foreign policy indicates a certain change that has unfolded in its state identity, as constructivists would argue. It is important to note, however, that regardless of the degree to which Turkey appears to utilize religion and religious organizations, the degree in which these activities generate influence relies on three factors. The first one is the relationships and power dynamics that foreign countries maintain with Turkey. The second one is the characteristics of the Turkish diaspora and other Muslim diasporas in those countries. And lastly, the normative and practical connections with Turkey that are held Muslims of other countries and the power and influence of Turkish religious organizations in that region. In this context, the use of religion in foreign policy, especially for Turkey, cannot be studied on a single level or through a single lens because of its horizontally and vertically multidimensional structure.

### **Note on Contributors**

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Warner and Walker, "Thinking about the role"; Sandal and Fox, *Religion in international relations theory*; and Haynes, *Religion in Global Politics*.

<sup>2</sup> Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*; Cesari, *What is Political Islam*; and Marshall, "Roman Catholic Approaches"

<sup>3</sup> Bettiza, *Finding Faith in Foreign Policy*; Henne, "Government interference in religious institutions"; James and Ozdamar, "'Religion as a factor in ethnic conflict'"

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- <sup>4</sup> Ozturk, "Turkey's Diyanet under AKP rule".
- <sup>5</sup> Haynes, *Religion and International Relations*, 5, and Sandal and James, "Religion and international relations theory," 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Interview with high-ranking French Interior Ministry staffer in May 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> Ozkan, "Turkey's Religious and Socio-Political Depth".
- <sup>8</sup> Korkut, "The Diyanet".
- <sup>9</sup> Ozturk and Gozaydin, "A Frame"
- <sup>10</sup> A majority of the interviews were conducted by the first author. Both authors contributed to the theoretical framework and conceptual analysis of the data gathered as a result of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork.
- <sup>11</sup> Philpott, "The rise and fall".
- <sup>12</sup> Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*.
- <sup>13</sup> Fox, "Religion as an overlooked element," 53.
- <sup>14</sup> Fox and Sandler *Bringing Religion*, 168.
- <sup>15</sup> Yavuz, and Öztürk. "Turkish secularism and Islam under the reign of Erdoğan".
- <sup>16</sup> Brown and James, "The religious characteristics of states," 1345.
- <sup>17</sup> Henne, "The two swords".
- <sup>18</sup> Kubáľková, "Towards an international political theology".
- <sup>19</sup> Sandal and Fox, *Religion in International Relations Theory*, 176.
- <sup>20</sup> Sandal, "Religious actors".
- <sup>21</sup> Gurses, "Is Islam a cure?".
- <sup>22</sup> Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*.
- <sup>23</sup> Nye, "Soft power."
- <sup>24</sup> Haynes, *Religious Transnational Actors*.
- <sup>25</sup> Ciftci and Tezcur, "Soft power".
- <sup>26</sup> Mandaville and Hamid, "Islam as statecraft".
- <sup>27</sup> Bettiza, "States, Religions and Power".
- <sup>28</sup> Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan; "Biz İslam'a Gore Hareket Edeceğiz İslam Bize Gore Degil <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v80YpZ-I1cl>
- <sup>29</sup> Ozturk and Sozeri, "Diyanet as a Turkish Foreign Policy Tool".
- <sup>30</sup> Ozturk, "Transformation of the Turkish Diyanet".
- <sup>31</sup> Citak, "National conceptions".
- <sup>32</sup> Ozturk, "Religion, Identity and Power".
- <sup>33</sup> Watmough and Ozturk, "The future".
- <sup>34</sup> Candar, *Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist Moment*.
- <sup>35</sup> Yilmaz and Albayrak, *Populist and Pro-Violence*.
- <sup>36</sup> Bechev, "Turkey in the Balkans".
- <sup>37</sup> Citak, "The institutionalization".
- <sup>38</sup> Tas, "A history".
- <sup>39</sup> Yabancı, "Home State Oriented Diaspora Organizations," and Baser and Ozturk, "Positive and negative".
- <sup>40</sup> Baser and Feron, "Host state reactions".
- <sup>41</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*.
- <sup>42</sup> Ozkan, "Turkey's Religious".
- <sup>43</sup> Erdoğan Kırgızistan'da Cami Acilisi Yaptı, <https://www.haberler.com/guncel/erdogan-kirgizistan-da-cami-acilisi-yapti-11196649-haberi/>