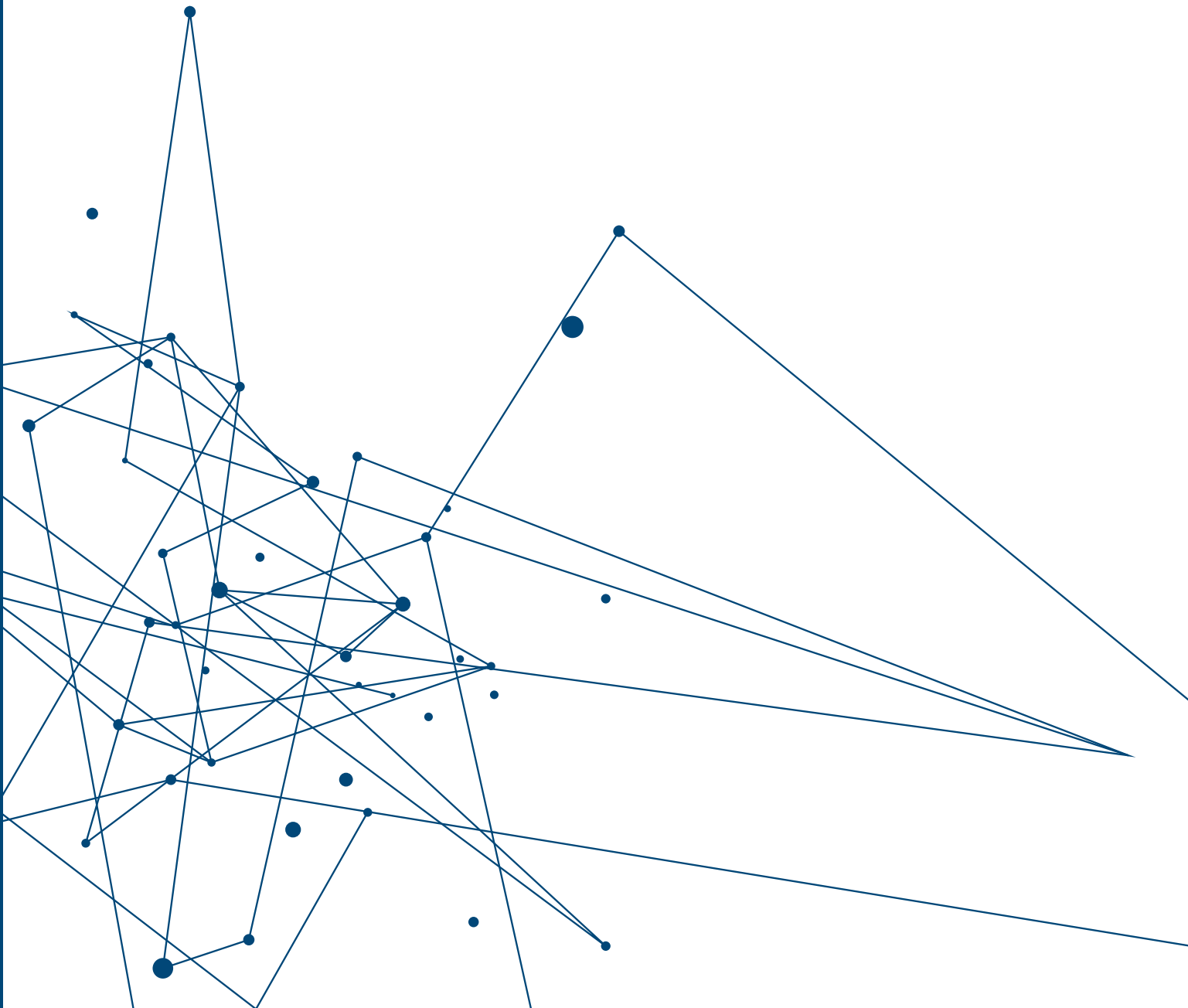


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# Care and Control: Turkey's Ambitions for 'Its' Domestic Abroad

Chiara Maritato



Under the rule of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), there has been increased attention given to the activities of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in Europe by scholars as well as the general public. The number of religious officers sent to Turkish migrant communities has increased, and the number of religious services has expanded in scope and scale. Imams and preachers sent to Europe have been assigned a new pastoral mission to teach Islam to new generations and to provide religious and moral support for all aspects of life. Moreover, Diyanet's extensive network is crucial to reconfiguring the diaspora's sense of belonging in essentialist religious (Sunni Muslim) and nationalist (Turkish) terms. The report retraces this evolution, relating it to the recent strengthening of diaspora policies and institutions that are aimed at forging a loyal diaspora regarding religious and political behaviours.

This paper is one of five CATS Network Papers assessing perceptions, ongoing debates, and key responses in selected EU member states regarding Turkish diaspora policies.

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1.

# Introduction

Over the past two decades, Turkey's long-lasting interest in migrant communities living in Western Europe has assumed different forms and meanings. On the one hand, Turkish governments have systematically engaged in reaching out to the Turkey-originating diaspora. On the other hand, Ankara has strengthened its so-called public diplomacy via soft power strategies to build a positive image of Turkey and influence public opinion abroad about Turkish politics. To carry out these two overarching goals, a plethora of institutions have been mobilized at national and transnational levels. The Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (*Siyaset Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı*, SETA), the Maarif Foundation, and the Yunus Emre Institute, via its cultural centres abroad, have been the most engaged in painting a positive picture of Turkey as a defender of non-Turkish Muslim diasporas in Europe, and in combatting Islamophobia. Actors like the Union of International Democrats (UID) and the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, YTB) have been mostly engaged in ensuring the diaspora's political loyalty to the Turkish government. The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has been committed to monopolizing religion and spreading religious-nationalist messages throughout the diaspora. Faced with growing right-wing tendencies in many European states, Turkey's intervention as a paladin of Muslim communities requires an attentive analysis of the narratives employed and the actors involved.

This report assesses the forms and meanings of Turkey's expansion of diaspora policies under the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). It reveals how they have been reframed in religious-nationalist terms. It is divided into the following four sections: the first presents Turkey's long-lasting interest in diaspora communities; the second casts light on how the successive AKP governments have built on existing networks of institutions to establish new systematic and concerted diaspora policies; the third deals with the Diyanet, one of the oldest Turkish state agencies operating in Europe, to assess how its international mission has evolved when religion (Sunni Islam) has become a tool to both define and govern the diaspora; and the fourth analyses how under Turkey's democratic backsliding, Sunni Muslim Turkish identity has been defined in essentialist terms to indicate a loyal pro-government diaspora as well as how the fight against Islamophobia has also reflected the Turkish government's intent to protect and patronise Muslim communities living in Europe.

2.

# Turkey's Engagement with 'its' Domestic Abroad: Historical and Socio-political Background

The guest worker agreements like the one signed between the Turkish government and the Federal Republic of Germany for the period between 1955 and 1973 intended labour migration to be temporary. In the late 1970s, when family reunification policies enabled the continuation of migratory waves from Turkey to Europe, the Turkish state's role in building diaspora communities gained prominence, and the lexicon about migration changed. Concomitant with the intent to design policies for its citizens working abroad, the change in perception from distant workers to expatriate migrant workers (*gurbetçi*) also included a re-labelling of migrants as Turkish “minorities” in Europe.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1970s, their permanent settlement triggered a change in perceptions and policies towards Turkish migrants. Embryonic measures, such as sending imams during Ramadan or religious feasts, were implemented to guard against cultural assimilation and to promote voluntary returns.<sup>2</sup>

The 1980 military coup marked a watershed moment in Turkish history, the effects of which reverberated inside and outside the country, thus affecting the Turkey-originating diaspora. The Turkish state moved to control the activism of left-wing opposition groups outlawed in Turkey and of Muslim organizations and established formal links and institutions to tighten relations with emigrants. At that time, Islamist, Kurdish, and left-wing organisations established in Western Europe

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<sup>1</sup> Damla B. Aksel, “Kins, Distant Workers, Diasporas: Constructing Turkey’s Transnational Members Abroad”, *Turkish Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014): 202

<sup>2</sup> Ibid;

Zeynep Sahin Mencutek and Bahar Baser, “Mobilizing Diasporas: Insights from Turkey’s Attempts to Reach Turkish Citizens Abroad”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 1 (2018): 86-105; Can Ünver, “Changing Diaspora Politics of Turkey and Public Diplomacy”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 1, no. 12 (2013): 183

opposed and were simultaneously monitored by the Turkish state. Among these, the Islamist organisations' religious and political practices and strategies had important repercussions for Turkish politics, leading to frequent conveyance of social and political remittances. In Turkey, Islamist parties and organisations could indeed profit from international networks. One such example is the country's main Islamist movement, National Outlook (Milli Görüş), whose branches in Western Europe enabled the circulation of leaders, ideas, and financial assets.

Left-wing associations, the Kurdish movement, and Alevi organisations, all repressed in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, also reorganised forms of activism in the diaspora.<sup>3</sup> The flourishing of civil society organisations in host countries, while contributing to raising awareness and mobilising internationally, also allowed for material and ideological support of like-minded organisations in Turkey, creating new spaces of mobilisation, particularly for Kurds and Alevis and their diasporas. Security concerns about opposition movements abroad were based on a twofold strategy of caring and control, which began in the 1980s and lasted until the early 2000s.

In this period, several policies were implemented to reach Turkish migrants abroad. In 1981, under a military-appointed government, dual citizenship was permitted to every citizen of Turkey. The Ministry of National Education and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet) started to send teachers and imams regularly to Turkish communities living abroad. Moreover, Article 62 of the 1982 Constitution stipulated not only the state's duty to ensure family unity, children's education, and cultural needs, but also the social security of Turkish nationals working abroad. As such, it intended to reinforce their ties with their country of origin and to facilitate their return. Moreover, in 1986, Turkey allowed voting at customs a few weeks before elections to foster political mobilisation and bolster links with the Turkey-originating diaspora.

These measures continued in the early 1990s with the so-called "pink card" granting legal and social rights to former Turkish nationals. Moreover, the political party law was also amended to establish party branches outside the country.<sup>4</sup> At that time, a transformation occurred in the perception of emigrants, from mere remittance generators to communities of "Euro-Turks", constituting a bridge between Turkey and the EU.<sup>5</sup> Although the strategy of maintaining links with its Turkish emigrant communities abroad dates back to the 1980s, it was only in the 1990s that Ankara began to perceive them as an asset for foreign policy aims and transnational politics.

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<sup>3</sup> Gökçe Yurdakul and Ahmet Yükleven, "Islam, Conflict, and Integration: Turkish Religious Associations in Germany", *Turkish Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 217-31;  
Samim Akgönül, "Islam turc, islams de Turquie: acteurs et réseaux en Europe", *Politique étrangère*, no. 1 (2005): 35-47

<sup>4</sup> Damla B. Aksel, 2014: 204

<sup>5</sup> Ayhan Kaya, "Euro-Turks as a Force in EU-Turkey Relations", *South European Society and Politics* 16, no. 3 (2011): 499-512

For instance, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliđi ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlıđı*, TİKA) was established in 1992. As Turkey's interest in its citizens abroad has become intertwined with its foreign policy, the narrative over diaspora has also emerged.

3.

# The AKP Diaspora Policy: Caring and Control

Since the early 2000s, the AKP's diaspora policy has shifted in scope and scale from its predecessors. Not only has the diaspora become a proactive part of the country's foreign policy, but it has also been extended to communities lacking Turkish citizenship or formal ties with Turkey. The AKP's diaspora policy has been systemic, determining the ways in which state agencies and diaspora institutions operate abroad while redefining how diaspora communities relate to Turkey politically, socially, and economically. Over time, diaspora policies expanded, and consulate services adopted a more "empathetic angle" regarding migrants' associations.<sup>6</sup> In 2009, the "blue card" mechanism replaced the "pink card". Besides the same residence, travel, and work rights granted to Turkish citizens, blue card holders were granted the right to public employment in Turkey on a temporary and contractual basis and the possibility to enrol in social insurance and pension schemes in Turkey.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, thanks to legal changes in the electoral law between 2008-2012, Turkish citizens living abroad were bestowed the right to vote from abroad. For the first time in 2014, they cast their votes in the countries they reside in.

Over the past two decades, legal, socio-cultural, economic, and political links with Turkish communities abroad have been strengthened at international, transnational, and national levels. A network of actors and institutions (i.e., think tanks, migrants' associations, embassies, and state agencies) often located in a grey zone between diaspora and foreign policy played a significant role. Meanwhile, the budgets of the Diyanet and TİKA, which have been internationally active during the past two decades, have skyrocketed.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, YTB) was established to

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<sup>6</sup> Kerem Öktem, "Turkey's New Diaspora Policy: The Challenge of Inclusivity, Outreach and Capacity" (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center [IPC], Sabanci University, 2014), <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20200327-00032456.pdf> (accessed 01 September 2021)

<sup>7</sup> Sinem Adar, *Rethinking Political Attitudes of Migrants from Turkey and Their Germany-Born Children Beyond Loyalty and Democratic Culture*, SWP Research Paper 07/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], June 2019), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019RP07/#fn-d30796e842> (accessed 04 December 2023)

<sup>8</sup> Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkey's Diyanet under AKP Rule: From Protector to Imposer of State Ideology?", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 619-35



build social, cultural, and economic relations with kin and co-ethnic communities, (former) citizens abroad and foreign students. It propagates an ethnic-religious conception of nationhood.

The Turkish government has historically been selective in its support for Turkey-related diaspora communities, ignoring Armenians and Greeks from Turkey, controlling and obstructing Kurdish and Alevi communities as well as left-wing organisations. This outlook continued under successive AKP governments. Active support for and mobilisation of Sunni Muslim Turkish groups loyal to the AKP and its brand of political Islam has been a core component of the Turkish diaspora policy in the last two decades.<sup>9</sup> This strategy has been based on the will to defend emigrants' rights and to prevent them from experiencing discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia within the EU.<sup>10</sup> The reference to Islamophobia in the YTB's agenda shows how Turkey's intent to protect its citizens abroad, including kin communities, and, as such, to act as a patron to them is intrinsically related to the country presenting itself as a global actor. The employment of a nexus of institutions abroad to facilitate "a web for surveilling and monitoring new and old enemies of Turkey"<sup>11</sup> has been perceived as interference by countries like Germany and the Netherlands, as well as Austria, whose 2015 "Islam Law" bans the foreign funding of religious groups and requires imams to speak German.<sup>12</sup>

This renewed activism in diaspora policy occurred during the AKP's drift toward authoritarianism, exacerbated following the 2016 coup attempt. While Turkey's diaspora policies have contributed to the propagation of authoritarian practices within the diasporic civic space,<sup>13</sup> the country's authoritarian shift has also prompted a "new" wave of emigration composed of groups with high cultural capital or high revenues, or religious and political groups that have fallen out of the government's favour.<sup>14</sup> In 2017 alone, 113,326 people emigrated from Turkey – a 63% increase compared to the previous year. The heterogeneous backgrounds and motivations of those leaving Turkey, who originate from different socio-economic backgrounds and

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<sup>9</sup> Chiara Maritato, Kerem Öktem, and Anna Zadrožna, "Introduction - A State of Diasporas: The Transnationalisation of Turkey and its Communities Abroad", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021):105-120

<sup>10</sup> Zeynep Sahin Mencutek and Bahar Baser, 2018: 95-6

<sup>11</sup> Bahar Baser and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Positive and Negative Diaspora Governance in Context: From Public Diplomacy to Transnational Authoritarianism", *Middle East Critique* 29, no. 3 (2020): 330

<sup>12</sup> The 2015 "Islam Law" came into effect on 31 March 2015, which is available here:

Federal Chancellery of Austria, *Federal law on the external legal relationships of Islamic Religious Societies - Islam Law 2015*, (Austria, December 2015), [https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Islamgesetz/Islam\\_Law.pdf](https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Islamgesetz/Islam_Law.pdf) (accessed on 02 December 2023)

<sup>13</sup> Bilge Yabancı, "Home State Oriented Diaspora Organizations and the Making of Partisan Citizens Abroad: Motivations, Discursive Frames, and Actions Towards Co-Opting the Turkish Diaspora in Europe", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021): 139-165

<sup>14</sup> Gül Üret, "Between Lifestyle Migration and Comfortable Exit Strategies: Turkish Golden Visa Investors in Greece", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021): 166-87

religious-political affiliations, did not precisely reflect the Turkish government's discourse on the diaspora as a homogeneous, docile, and loyal "domestic abroad."

### 3.1

## Governing the Diaspora through Institutions

Turkey's renewed activism towards the diaspora under AKP rule has two main pillars. The first pertains to governance and draws upon the instruments through which the Turkish state aims to reach and govern the diaspora. These include state agencies and government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) comprising a mosaic of ad hoc institutions, policies, and bureaucratic apparatuses through which Turkey maintains political, economic, and religious ties with its communities abroad. The most important of these actors rose to prominence in the 1990s. In the case of institutions like the Diyanet and TİKA, the AKP government sponsored the professionalisation of their activities and fostered intra-institutional coordination. From the early 2000s, this led to an increase in the number of personnel employed and the budget allocated. TİKA has been elevated to a central institution as part of the renewed diaspora policy while keeping its pivotal role in the Balkans and MENA region, where it implements projects such as mosque restorations and community support programmes. Meanwhile, the Diyanet is among the leading Turkish state institutions to have established a link with emigrant workers living abroad. Under the AKP government, religious services abroad have dramatically evolved from sporadic actions to permanent pastoral care designed to guide Turkish Muslim communities living abroad.<sup>15</sup>

This reflected the larger vision of the AKP's foreign policy outlined in Ahmet Davutoğlu's book *Strategic Depth* and shaped by the diffusion of Milli Görüş's nationalist Islamic ideology in Turkey and Europe. Implemented during Davutoğlu's Ministry of Foreign Affairs mandate (2009-2014), the main objective was to formulate an ethno-religious and pan-Islamic foreign policy using public diplomacy instruments and other soft power tools. Established in 2010 and linked to the Office of the Vice Presidency today, the YTB is the output of this renewed engagement. It is the only agency solely committed to implementing diaspora policies, education programmes, networking, and funding schemes for diaspora organisations.

In the past two decades, Turkish lobby organisations and cultural agencies have become essential soft power and public diplomacy tools to propagate the dominant

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<sup>15</sup> Chiara Maritato, "Pastors of a Dispersed Flock: Diyanet Officers and Turkey's Art of Governing Its Diaspora", *Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica* 51, no. 3 (2021): 321-3

state narrative while creating a positive image of Turkey abroad. The Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD) was established in 2004 (renamed the Union of International Democrats, UID, in 2018) and has expanded from Germany to the rest of Europe. As a pro-AKP lobby group, the UID serves two aims: to defend the rights of Turkish-origin migrants in Europe and to kindle the ties of “European Turks” with the Turkish government.<sup>16</sup> The Yunus Emre Institute cultural centres, established in 2007, are related to the Yunus Emre Institute, a public agency promoting the Turkish language, art, culture, and intercultural dialogue. The institutes provide Turkish language courses and cultural activities as part of a general mission to “enhance Turkey’s recognition, credibility and prestige in the international arena.”<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, since 2016, the Turkish Maarif Foundation has been funded as a hybrid public-private structure committed to providing educational services by establishing Turkish schools abroad. The foundation is reported to have overtaken the Gülen movement’s network of schools closed in Turkey and abroad in the aftermath of the 15 July 2016 attempted coup.<sup>18</sup> All these instruments are employed to propagate the ideological transformation of the Turkish state while extending the “pernicious polarization” of society with clear-cut binary divisions (i.e., loyal (“us”) versus traitors (“them”)) of AKP governance into the diaspora.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.2

## From “Migrants” to “Diaspora”: Mobilising a Polarized Space

Relatedly, the second pillar of the AKP’s diaspora policy concerns the governance of the diaspora as a polarised space. Yabancı highlights how civil society organizations with organic ties to the AKP, like the UID, have increasingly seized the diasporic civic space through nationalist and civilisationist rhetoric and entrenched authoritarian

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<sup>16</sup> Bilge Yabancı, 2021: 146

<sup>17</sup> Yunus Emre Institute, *Vision -Mission*, <https://www.yee.org.tr/en/corporate/vision-mission> (accessed on 10 December 2021)

<sup>18</sup> The Maarif Foundation’s activity represents the AKP’s governance modes, blending private and public actors.

Élise Massicard, “Une Décennie de Pouvoir AKP En Turquie: Vers Une Reconfiguration Des Modes de Gouvernement?”, *Les Etudes Du CERI*, no 205 (Paris: Centre d’études et de recherches internationales [CERI], 2014) [https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/Etude\\_205.pdf](https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/Etude_205.pdf) (accessed 04 December 2023)

About the Gülen movement schools and the establishment of the Maarif Foundation, please see Gabrielle Angey, “The Gülen Movement and the Transfer of a Political Conflict from Turkey to Senegal”, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19, no. 1 (2018): 53–68

<sup>19</sup> Murat Somer, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke, “Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies”, *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (2021): 929–48

practices.<sup>20</sup> The polarisation of Turkish communities living abroad, and especially between Turkish Muslim conservatives and Kurds, Alevis, and secularists, dates back to the 1970s. However, more recently, polarisation within the Islamist sphere is also salient. The collapse of the alliance between the AKP and the Gülen movement in 2013 also reverberates throughout the diaspora. The AKP has accused the movement of being the mastermind that orchestrated the 2016 attempted coup and categorises it as a terror organisation. As a result, many individuals with alleged ties to the Gülen movement were purged from their posts. International schools formerly run by the movement and its philanthropic activities were seized and re-branded. Moreover, the 2016 attempted coup also accelerated the formation of power blocs via extraterritorial security measures against dissidents. This led to support for some segments of the diaspora, with the establishment of pro-state (i.e., pro-AKP, pro-Erdoğan) blocs even within Sunni Muslim communities, while aggressively excluding groups and individuals declaring themselves in opposition to the current regime.

Against this backdrop, the term “diaspora” started to be officially employed to refer exclusively to a segment thereof, namely those loyal to the government. According to Aksel, the conceptualization of emigrants as Turkish “diasporas” is a phenomenon that first occurred in the 2000s, arising among business elites and later adopted into the political discourse.<sup>21</sup> The Turkish government’s decision to employ the term “diaspora” reflects what scholars define as a global trend in which migrant populations are re-labelled “diaspora” or “domestic abroad”, whereby origin states actively engage in describing, constructing, and re-imagining their members abroad.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Turkey, loyalty to the government rests on two binary political frontiers: one between the “East” and the “West”, and the other between Muslim Turks and secular Europeans. This dichotomy, which has characterized the conservative rhetoric of the Turkish far right since the 1950s, considers the West as a threat to traditional values and boosts polarisation within Turkey between pious conservative and secular societal groups. The Turkish government has also used the term diaspora to describe the relations with 'host' societies, suggesting either a tendency toward assimilation to the West or the ability to maintain strong ties with their own (Eastern) civilization.<sup>23</sup>

To grasp the continuities between the national and the transnational levels of these dichotomies, it is relevant to mention the simultaneous emphases in the AKP’s discourse. On one hand, the diaspora suffers from an increase in Islamophobia and assimilationist discourse in Europe. At the same time, Muslims living in Muslim-

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<sup>20</sup> Bilge Yabancı, 2021: 141

<sup>21</sup> Damla B. Aksel, 2014: 11

<sup>22</sup> Francesco Ragazzi, “Governing Diasporas”, *International Political Sociology* 3, no. 4 (2009): 378–97; Latha Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad: Diasporas in International Relations* (Oxford, 2010)

<sup>23</sup> The notion of the Great East (*Büyük Doğu*) as theorised by the Islamist ideologue Necip Fazıl Kısakürek is based on an antithetic vision of religious and secular models. This ideology is an essential reference for the AKP’s ruling elite.

Yüksel Taşkın, *AKP Devri [The AKP Era]*, (Istanbul, 2017)

majority societies are victims of Islamophobia in the form of discrimination coming from secular elites living in the same society.<sup>24</sup> Islamophobia in both cases is described as an anti-Islam project which reflects deliberate discrimination and a violation of human rights perpetrated against Muslims. Moreover, the dichotomy reflects a polarised narrative in the home country where criminalisation of the opposition involves targeting political parties, politicians, and activists.<sup>25</sup> Although Turkey has always monitored dissident groups, the surveillance has usually been relatively discreet and operated through diplomatic channels. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, “these activities became overt, perhaps to incite fear and demonstrate the reach of the state beyond its borders.”<sup>26</sup>

Within the framework of the AKP’s “new diaspora policy”, Islamic identity has, therefore, been elevated to establish and promote an image of Turkey as the protector of Turks and Muslims in Europe facing discrimination. The discourse of combatting Islamophobia is, in this respect, particularly telling as it is deployed to strengthen an essentialized definition of Turkish communities in religious terms. Turkey’s public diplomacy sets out to gain global recognition and validation as the leader of the Muslim world, the “saviour” and protector of Muslim communities in the West, and patron of the global Muslim population.<sup>27</sup> This narrative is also shaped and propagated by pro-AKP think tanks. In this vein, religion (Sunni Islam) has assumed a relevant role as an object of policy and an instrument by which the diaspora is governed. In the past two decades, Diyanet’s network of mosques and offices in Europe has accordingly expanded, and the institution has emerged as an international actor. This has been concomitant with an increase in religious services and moral support towards the diaspora<sup>28</sup> and the spread of a conservative morality targeting women and families with the intent to deepen the fault line between the pro-AKP/conservative Muslim diaspora and the secular/anti-AKP one.

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<sup>24</sup> Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez, *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies* (New York, 2018)

<sup>25</sup> Ayhan Kaya, *Turkish Origin Migrants and Their Descendants: Hyphenated Identities in Transnational Space* (London, 2018)

<sup>26</sup> Bahar Baser and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, 2020: 330

<sup>27</sup> Sinem Adar and Halil Yenigün, “A Muslim Counter-Hegemony? Turkey’s Soft Power Strategies and Islamophobia”, جدلية [Jadaliyya], 06 May 2019, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38646> (accessed 04 December 2023)

<sup>28</sup> Samim Akgönül, “Diyanet dans la Patrie, Diyanet dans le Monde. En guise d’introduction”, *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey*, no. 27 (2018)

4.

# The Diyanet as an Instrument of Diaspora Policy: Forms and Meanings

Established in 1924 to manage and control religious practices in Turkey, the institution's mission expanded with time to include the diffusion of morality within society, a concept introduced in 1965 (Act 633).<sup>29</sup> Simultaneously, the institution enhanced its presence at the local and provincial levels via Qur'an courses and preaching activities.<sup>30</sup>

The Diyanet's international mission officially started in 1978, when the Turkish Counsellor for Religious Services (*Din Hizmetleri Müşavirliği*) was established in the Turkish Embassy to Germany. The Attachés for Religious Services (*Din Hizmetleri Ataşeliği*) were also established at the same time in Europe, the U.S., and Australia. Zana Çitak affirms that the Diyanet acted as "both a domestic and an external policy instrument of the Turkish state in the context of national identity and the evolution of the role of religion in the Turkish polity."<sup>31</sup> In line with the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, a doctrine combining nationalism with Islam, which became a state ideology in post-

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<sup>29</sup> Act 633, is available on the Diyanet website:

Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (DİB) [Directorate of Religious Affairs], *Kuruluş ve Görevleri Hakkında Kanun* [Law on the Establishment and Duties], no 633 (Turkey: 2 July 1965)  
[https://hukukmusavirligi.diyamet.gov.tr/Documents/633%20sayılı%20Kanun%20\(6002%20öncesi\).pdf](https://hukukmusavirligi.diyamet.gov.tr/Documents/633%20sayılı%20Kanun%20(6002%20öncesi).pdf) (accessed 29 January 2024)

<sup>30</sup> The Diyanet is a state agency often described as emblematic of the early republican laicism, as the state manages and controls religious affairs through its bureaucracy. This control is exerted via the management and supervision of the activities conducted in mosques, the elaboration and diffusion of an official interpretation of Sunni Hanafi Islam, and the employment of religious officers (imams, muezzin, preachers, muftis) as civil servants.

İftar B. Gözaydın, "Diyanet and Politics", *The Muslim World* 98, no. 2-3 (2008): 216-27;

İftar B. Gözaydın, "Religion, Politics and the Politics of Religion in Turkey" in *Religion, Politics and Turkey's EU Accession*, eds. Jung Dietrich and Catharina Raudvere (London, 2008);

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkey's Diyanet under AKP Rule: From Protector to Imposer of State Ideology?", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 619-35

<sup>31</sup> Zana Çitak, "National Conceptions, Transnational Solidarities: Turkey, Islam and Europe", *Global Networks* 18, no. 3 (2018): 388

1980s Turkey, Diyanet's role evolved from an agency embodying a domesticated religion as designed by the early Republican Kemalist elite to a ruling instrument in the hands of political powers geared towards maintaining the conservative status quo.<sup>32</sup> The 12 September 1980 military coup – which was justified based on having to contain the politicisation of broad circles and political instability – enabled the generals who acted as guardians of secularism to strengthen piety among the people. Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution made religious instruction in state schools obligatory, and Article 136 expanded Diyanet's mission to protect national solidarity and integrity.<sup>33</sup>

In the aftermath of the coup, when refugees and asylum seekers, amongst them many Kurds, migrated from Turkey, Diyanet's involvement with international affairs intensified. In 1984 and 1985, the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB) in Germany and the Diyanet's Department for International Relations (*Diş İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü*) were established. Imams and preachers started to attach themselves to the Diyanet mosques in Europe, providing religious services and conducting socio-cultural activities for adults and young generations. In addition, from 1979 to 1989, the Diyanet's personnel increased from 50.000 to nearly 85.000.<sup>34</sup>

## 4.1

# The Entangled Religious and Diaspora Policy Role of Diyanet Officers

Although the Diyanet's engagement to reach diaspora communities dates back to the early 1980s, it has significantly expanded under AKP rule. Scholars emphasise that Diyanet has become a transnational actor and a key diaspora institution since the rise of the AKP into power.<sup>35</sup> In fact, since the early 2000s, the Turkish government's

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<sup>32</sup> Faruk Birtek and Toprak Binnaz, "The Conflictual Agendas of Neo-Liberal Reconstruction and the Rise of Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Hazard of Rewriting Modernity", in *The Post-Modern Abyss and the New Politics of Islam: Assabiyah Revisited. Essays in Honor of Şerif Mardin*, eds. Faruk Birtek and Toprak Binnaz, (Istanbul, 2011): 15

<sup>33</sup> Günter Seufert, "The Changing Nature of the Turkish State Authority for Religious Affairs (ARA) and Turkish Islam in Europe", CATS Working Paper, no. 2 (Berlin: Centre for Applied Turkey Studies [CATS], June 2020), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/CATS\\_Working\\_Paper\\_Nr\\_2\\_Guenter\\_Seufert.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/CATS_Working_Paper_Nr_2_Guenter_Seufert.pdf) (accessed 03 December 2023)

<sup>34</sup> Erik J. Zürcher, "The Importance of Being Secular: Islam in the Service of the National and Pre-national State," in *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity: Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Celia J. Kerslake, Kerem Öktem, and Philip Robins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 64–65

<sup>35</sup> Thijl Sunier, Heleen van der Linden and Ellen van de Bovenkamp, "The Long Arm of the State? Transnationalism, Islam, and Nation-Building: The Case of Turkey and Morocco", *Contemporary Islam* 10, no. 3 (2016): 401–20; Stefano Allievi and Jørgen Nielsen, *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe* (Leiden, 2002);

diaspora policy and Diyanet's international mission have been profoundly intertwined. The extent of the entanglement of religious and diaspora policy can be seen through the reincorporation of Sunni Islam into official state ideology, as well as the renewed presence of religion in the public sphere. According to Seufert, Diyanet officers have been assigned to change Turkey's outlook and strengthen Islam abroad, which marks an overlap between the ruling party and the Diyanet.<sup>36</sup>

This transformation occurred through a complete reorganisation of the Diyanet, the budget and responsibilities of which have significantly expanded in recent decades.<sup>37</sup> It was the Ali Bardakoğlu presidency (2003-2010) in particular that promoted a reformulation of Islam as a social phenomenon and the reshaping of religious services as moral support to be extended beyond the mosques and into private houses, reformatories, women's shelters, prisons, and hospitals.<sup>38</sup> During the same period, religious officers' roles have been redesigned to professionalise and standardise activities. Preachers, imams, muftis, and Qur'an teachers have also gained new visibility utilising an expansionistic employment policy that continued into the 2010s. It is relevant to highlight the increasing number of personnel from 81,851 in 2009 to 121,845 in 2013, reaching a record high of 128,469 in 2020. The Diyanet has profited from an increased budget, which soared to 1.7 billion USD in 2019, and has become one of Turkey's largest state agencies.<sup>39</sup> Since 2003, women have also been appointed as vice-muftis, preachers, and Qur'an teachers, with the intention of reaching the female population and expanding projects and activities to embrace families and younger generations.<sup>40</sup>

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Zana Çitak, 2018;

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri, "Diyanet as a Turkish Foreign Policy Tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria", *Politics and Religion* 11, no. 3 (2018): 624-648;

Chiara Maritato, "Addressing the Blurred Edges of Turkey's Diaspora and Religious Policy: Diyanet Women Preachers Sent to Europe", *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey*, no. 27 (2018), <http://journals.openedition.org/ejts/6020> (accessed 29 June 2021)

<sup>36</sup> Günter Seufert, 2020: 42

<sup>37</sup> Chiara Maritato, "Expanding Religion and Islamic Morality in Turkey. The Role of the Diyanet's Women Preachers", *Anthropology of the Middle East* 13, no. 2 (2018): 43-60;

Ceren Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey: From the Birth of the Republic to the AKP* (Cambridge, 2018)

<sup>38</sup> Ali Bardakoğlu, *Religion and Society. New Perspectives from Turkey* (Ankara, 2006);

See the Diyanet official report of the religious services and project provided between 2003 and 2010: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (DİB [Directorate of Religious Affairs], *Hizmetler ve Projeler 2003-2010*, [Services and Projects 2003-2010] (Ankara, 2010)

<sup>39</sup> The Diyanet's budget has constantly increased: from 7.7 billion Turkish lira in 2018 to 10.4 billion Turkish lira in 2019. The agency has a budget which is now larger than those of eight ministries.

"Diyanet'in 2020 bütçesi sekiz bakanlığı geride bıraktı, bütçenin 125 milyon lirası derneklere aktarılacak" [Diyanet's 2020 budget left eight Ministries behind, 125 million lira of the budget will be transferred to associations], *T24* (online), 24 October 2019, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/diyanet-in-2020-butcesi-sekiz-bakanligi-geride-birakti-butcenin-125-milyon-lirasi-derneklere-aktarilacak,845137> (accessed 29 June 2021);

Aram Ekin Duran and Daniel Bellut, "Diyanet: Turkey's religious body that makes millions", *Deutsche Welle* (online), 20 September 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/diyanet-the-turkish-religious-authority-that-makes-millions/a-50517590> (accessed 29 June 2021)

<sup>40</sup> Chiara Maritato, "Performing Irşad: Female Preachers' (Vaizeler's) Religious Assistance Within the Framework of the Turkish State", *Turkish Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015): 433-47;

Chiara Maritato, *Women, Religion, and the State in Contemporary Turkey* (Cambridge, 2020);



**Table 1: Diyanet Personnel (2009–2022)**

Year	Number of personnel	Number of female personnel
2009	81,851	10,821
2010	84,157	11,041
2011	98,555	10,226
2012	105,472	16,456
2013	121,845	17,371
2014	119,743	18,593
2015	117,378	18,606
2016	112,725	17,823
2017	109,332	17,876
2018	107,206	17,656
2019	104,814	17,624
2020	128,469	23,657
2021	105,445	25,063
2022	113,476	26,673

Source: Diyanet Strateji Geliştirme Başkanlığı, 2009–2021 Yılı Faaliyet Raporları <sup>41</sup>

The professionalisation of religious officers has stemmed from the opening of new positions, such as the preachers working in prisons and those employed in the Diyanet’s Family and Religious Consultation Bureaus (*Aile ve Dini Rehberlik Büröleri*) established in 2003, whose selection is based on their academic qualifications in theology.

A further important aspect here is that religious officers work towards expanding conservative Islamic morality to cover the entire society. This imposition of morality has transformed religious services from accommodating sporadic requests for spiritual guidance for a specific reason and at a particular moment to a permanent mission of professional and holistic pastoral care made available on demand and focused on every aspect of one’s life. The AKP’s redefinition of religion and morality as public affairs and national identity markers has also shaped diaspora policies. Since the early 2000s, such expansion of religious services has affected the Diyanet’s foundations abroad, whose activities have been fundamentally reshaped. The number

Fatma Tütüncü, “The Women Preachers of the Secular State: The Politics of Preaching at the Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity and Sovereignty in Turkey”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 4 (2010): 595–614.

<sup>41</sup> Diyanet Strateji Geliştirme Başkanlığı [Directorate of Religious Strategy Development], 2009–2021 Yılı Faaliyet Raporları [Annual Reports 2009–2021] <https://stratejigelistirme.diyamet.gov.tr/sayfa/22/Faaliyet-Raporlari> (accessed 05 April 2024)

of Diyanet cadres (imams, preachers, and religious officers) sent abroad has increased, and their competencies have been redefined. According to Diyanet's official statistics, 459 religious officers served abroad in 2021, a notable increase from 41 in 2012.<sup>42</sup>

Diyanet officers abroad are employed for either two years or five years, and their activities fall under the supervision of Turkish embassies and consulates, where the Turkish Counsellor for Religious Services (*Din Hizmetleri Müşavirliği*) acts as the president of the DİTİB and is charged with coordinating the activities carried out in the country's mosques. Some scholars contend that such arrangements put imams and preachers on par with diplomatic officials and associate them and their activities in host societies with the interests of the sending state, i.e. Turkey.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, since the contingent sent abroad comprises officers already employed by the Diyanet in Turkey, this position has been perceived as problematic.<sup>44</sup> The multifaceted activities conducted by Diyanet officers mirror the symbolic and creative instruments used by the Turkish government to reach and govern the diaspora.

## 4.2

# Diyanet officers sent to diaspora families: From religious services to pastoral care

The Diyanet's international mission has expanded to the extent that the agency is not only a transnational actor through which religious services are provided to the diaspora; rather, it is also currently engaged in exercising a form of care and control that closely embodies what Foucault refers to as "pastoral power," a distinct governmental technique.<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that while in the past, religious officers sent abroad were tasked with officiating religious services and celebrating religious feasts, their role has since been expanded. Imams and preachers (including female preachers) sent abroad now organise religious seminars and socio-cultural activities for women and families, including young generations and elderly people.<sup>46</sup> Their spiritual guidance and moral support resemble a pastoral function devoted to strengthening loyalty to the origin state via religion.

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

<sup>43</sup> Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri, 2018: 15

<sup>44</sup> Günter Seufert, 2020: 42

<sup>45</sup> Michel Senellart, François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, *Michel Foucault. Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the College De France, 1977 – 78* (Basingstoke, 2009)

<sup>46</sup> Chiara Maritato, 2021: 321–38

The decision to send women preachers to serve Turkish Muslim communities abroad dates back to the early 2000s and is concomitant with the increase of women employed in the Diyanet workforce. However, the activities conducted in Diyanet mosques outside Turkish territory have scarcely been examined due to difficulties in gathering data on female religious officers working abroad. While in 2009, the official report of the Diyanet's annual activities stated that 52 female officers operated in 15 countries,<sup>47</sup> the 2017 report referred to 366 religious officers being sent to Europe without mentioning the exact number of women preachers nor the exact distribution of officers across countries.<sup>48</sup>

Still, field research conducted in Italy, Sweden, and Austria between 2017 and 2019 has allowed some significant data to be collected. Since 2003, Diyanet's projects have aimed to invite women to mosques, provide religious services and moral support to women and families, and expand religious seminars for adults and youth, which have been rapidly replicated abroad. The first group of women preachers arrived in Europe in the early 2000s and actively worked in the Diyanet foundations' female sections [*kadın kolları*]. In the past decade, Diyanet appointed relatively young and highly educated women preachers to serve Turkish Muslim communities living abroad.

Diyanet's female preachers are mainly responsible for disseminating religious knowledge. This occurs via Qur'an readings and exegesis sessions, during which the preachers give a short sermon after reading a section of the Qur'an in Arabic. These seminars are held in the morning or early afternoon, except for teenagers (in the afternoons or on weekends) or working women (in the late afternoons or the evenings). Diyanet preachers give advice and admonitions concerning personal conduct. However, the preachers invite women not only to perform religious obligations but also to behave according to Islamic principles to represent the ideal, devout, modern Muslim woman. Docility, obedience to authority, and patience are among the recurring characteristics that compose the desired combination of religious and behavioural principles.<sup>49</sup> The conservative messages conveyed to women are presented as an alternative to hegemonic and secular Western modernity.

As such, a juxtaposition is set between two perceived homogeneous and antithetic models of the East and West against the background of a stereotyped vision of the European family as a threat to traditional values, lacking morality, being far from religion, and unable to take care of children and elderly people. For example, references are made to the divorce rates in European countries to justify a discourse

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<sup>47</sup> Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (DİB) [Directorate of Religious Affairs], *Hizmetler ve Projeler 2003-2010*, [Services and Projects 2003-2010] (Ankara, 2010)  
<https://stratejigelistirme.diyamet.gov.tr/sayfa/22/Faaliyet-Raporlari> (accessed 05.04.2024)

<sup>48</sup> Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (DİB) [Directorate of Religious Affairs], 2017 Faaliyet Raporu [2017 Annual Report] (Ankara, 2018)  
<https://stratejigelistirme.diyamet.gov.tr/Documents/2018%20%C4%Bodare%20Faaliyet%20Raporu.pdf> (accessed 05 April 2024)

<sup>49</sup> Chiara Maritato, 2018: 49-50

according to which Western values are a menace to the traditional Turkish family. What is important to stress here is the assonance between the commitment to safeguarding traditional Turkish families living in Europe faced with the apparent menace posed by Western models, and the strengthening of the ‘Turkish family’ as one of the central tenets of the AKP agenda.<sup>50</sup> Hence, attending sessions in mosques and actively participating in the religious and social activities organised by the Diyanet foundations abroad is perceived not only as seeking spiritual guidance on how to behave piously in daily life, but is also seen as an antidote to any possible attempt to “assimilate” to the “European model.” Diyanet’s officers also include families and family-related issues in the policies and discourse about the diaspora. The preachers emphasise protecting the traditional Turkish family as a source of identity. With the rise to power of the AKP, women’s participation and visibility in the religious domain have notably overlapped with family-centric policies. These two aspects should thus be addressed to clarify how the discourse on family has been propagated to diaspora communities.

Projects and seminars such as “Family School Seminars” (*Aile Okulu Seminerleri*) have been organised by religious officers employed in Diyanet branches in European countries. The emphasis is on family-related issues, including women’s role within the family, children’s education, marriage, and divorce.<sup>51</sup> Such attention on future generations in a diasporic context also mirrors the AKP’s discourse on strengthening the traditional Turkish family and attempting to forge a more pious Turkish society and diaspora.<sup>52</sup>

In recent decades, Diyanet has restructured its media channels (including TV, website, radio, and YouTube) to reach out to young people and women. It has also prepared programmes aimed at the diaspora.<sup>53</sup> Diyanet’s TV channel has an extensive schedule combining religious seminars and online sermons with talk shows where religious experts discuss current issues, including women in Islam, family life, and children. Many of the episodes are also available on YouTube.<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere, social media accounts of Diyanet foundations in many European cities regularly post about socio-cultural events organised for children and teenagers. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

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<sup>50</sup> Berna Yazıcı, “The Return to the Family: Welfare, State, and Politics of the Family in Turkey”, *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2012): 103–140

<sup>51</sup> About the DİTİB “Family School Seminars” organized in Germany, see: Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği (DİTİB) [Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs], *DİTİB’de “Aile Okulu” seminerleri başladı* [“Family School” seminars started in DİTİB], 06 March 2023, [www.diyanehaber.com.tr/ditibde-aile-okulu-seminerleri-basladi](http://www.diyanehaber.com.tr/ditibde-aile-okulu-seminerleri-basladi) (accessed 03 December 2023)

<sup>52</sup> Demet Lüküslü, “Creating a Pious Generation: Youth and Education Policies of the AKP in Turkey”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 637–649

<sup>53</sup> An example is the TV series released in 2015, “Stockholm Treni” [Stockholm Train], to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the labour migration between Turkey and Sweden. The twenty-five documentary episodes are available online on the Diyanet TV channel, *Diyanet TV (online)*: <https://diyanet.tv/stockholm-treni> (accessed 03 December 2023)

<sup>54</sup> The YouTube channel has 1.52 million subscribers. For the entire schedule, please see: DiyanetTV, *YouTube (online)*, <https://www.youtube.com/user/diyanetv> (accessed 05 April 2024)

Diyanet branches abroad organised online meetings and seminars for local communities to promote interaction and maintain active projects for women and families. The seminars via online platforms and websites have also allowed for an intense virtual circulation of Diyanet officers' discourse, an example of which is the online series "Family Seminars" organised by the Diyanet Foundation in Italy (*DİTİB İtalya*). Such practices exponentially grew during the COVID-19 pandemic when religious meetings had to be held on online platforms.<sup>55</sup> In April 2021, the programme included a conference by the Turkish Counsellor for Religious Affairs in Washington on the topic "Daily life expected from a Muslim". Seminars dedicated to family issues and women's role in the family are among the activities carried out by the Family and Religious Consultation Bureaus that currently operate in many Diyanet branches abroad.

Diyanet's official publications often depict families living outside Turkey at the risk of facing a constant menace posed by European societies that are perceived to lack morality, religion, and devotion to children and elderly people.<sup>56</sup> Besides seminars and panels, religious officers work at the Family and Religious Consultation Bureaus to assist women and families via telephone or appointment. Counselling services related to family, parenthood, and childcare are included in religious services and de facto contribute to redefining the religious officers' role as professional civil servants. Such officers perceive their work as a moralising mission and themselves as role models for women and younger generations. Teenagers receive special attention as they are considered to be most frequently exposed to family conflicts on matters related to cultural and religious practices. Turkish language courses and social events like trips and picnics for children and teenagers, iftar dinners during Ramadan, and culinary kermesses are all part of the socio-cultural activities integrated into Diyanet's routine religious services, training, and guidance sessions in mosques. As part of the services offered by the Family and Religious Consultation Bureaus, Diyanet officers regularly visit elderly people at home, in hospitals, and prisons, and provide counselling services and moral support. This occurs via protocols Diyanet has signed with host countries' ministries and state agencies.

The similarity between the activities that Diyanet officers conduct in Turkey and abroad demonstrates how institutions and practices at home are replicated in the diaspora. Moreover, they illuminate how the practices and discourse that assert Western values as a threat to the traditional Turkish family also reinforce the bond between Turkey and its diaspora.

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<sup>55</sup> Chiara Maritato and Gül Ince-Beqo, "Diaspora Governance in Times of COVID-19: The Case of Turkish Diyanet in Italy", *Italian Political Science* 17, no.2 (2022)

<sup>56</sup> The Family and Religious Bureaus abroad regularly organise projects for families. In 2013, the Austrian Diyanet Foundation (ATİB) launched the *Avusturya Mutlu Aile Destek ve Danışmanlık Projesi* [Austrian Happy Family Support and Counselling Project] a detailed programme combining seminars on family-related topics.

5.

# Strengthening the Diaspora's Islamic Identity while Promoting Turkey as a Global Actor

While providing a wide range of religious services and moral support, Diyanet officers are not merely instruments or delegates through which the official state narrative is spread abroad. Rather, they use their agency through the elaboration of a diasporic identity that is not only built on Sunni Islam, but is also loyal to the government. Such an international mission, although defined as being directed towards Muslim communities, mostly targets the diaspora that originates from Turkey. This focus is evident at sessions and seminars organized by Diyanet, where the employment of the Turkish language limits access to the Turkish-speaking diaspora only. However, such attempts to tighten ties with the pious segment of the Turkish diaspora also speak to a large section of the secular segment of Turkey-originating minorities living in Western Europe. As Samim Akgönül argues, Ankara's policies, "implemented in order to attach or reattach generations born in Western Europe to the "homeland", are also targeting these secular segments of Turkish minorities in Western Europe. It's true that to some extent, children of secular Turks can be Islamised through a process of searching for their identity. However, the opposite is also true."<sup>57</sup>

Diyanet indeed pursues a twofold objective: the first relates to what we already defined as a "moralising mission" aiming to reach diaspora communities and propagate Islamic moral principles and practices, and the second is to diffuse a definition of Turkish history in Islamic terms, to associate Turkey with Islamic tradition, and to project into diaspora communities a sense of belonging to the wider Muslim community. Before proceeding to the next section, we should consider whether Diyanet's role in conveying a discourse that blends Turkish nationalism with Islam is the institution's *raison d'être* and has only partially evolved over the years.

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<sup>57</sup> Samim Akgönül, "Turkish Islam in Europe: Political Activism and Internal Conflicts" *Fondazione Oasis* (online), 18 July 2019, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/turkish-islam-in-europe-akp-vs-gulen> (accessed 03 December 2023)

Diyanet has propagated the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” – a nationalist and religious conservative state ideology – within diaspora communities as well. However, this attempt to manage emigration's cultural and socio-political effects has occurred through spreading moral imperatives and governmental discourse, guiding individuals to internalise conservative moral conduct and normalising self-governing practices relating to individual behaviour with supposedly common moral expectations of the community. This entanglement of individual morality, collective practices, and the community's judgment and expectations is essential to consider when assessing the political effects of Diyanet as a foreign policy tool. For example, in 2018, the Austrian government closed seven mosques and declared that up to 40 imams could lose their residence permits. The decision followed an investigation into activities conducted at mosques and reports about children wearing uniforms and waving Turkish flags while re-enacting the First World War's Battle of Gallipoli in a Diyanet mosque in Vienna.<sup>58</sup>

The aforementioned shows not only how religion and nationalism are woven together in the figure of the martyrs of the Gallipoli Ottoman-Islamic defensive campaign against the infidels but also how these representations shape the identity of migrants in Turkish mosques in Europe. In this vein, “Turkishness” is a condition to be protected in a passive, defensive way. At the same time, it also entails a proactive sense of belonging. When considering the content of the Diyanet officers' preaching and the official publications related to the Turkish diaspora, a form of religious counselling emerges that combines basic principles of morality and religious knowledge with national symbols, obedience to authority, love for the homeland, and the protection of the family as an immutable entity. Religion and nationalism intertwine in constructing a proactive sense of belonging and a mobilised, politicised migrant self.

In line with authoritarian extraterritorial practices<sup>59</sup> aimed at dichotomising the conduct of a population abroad by dividing it into patriots versus traitors, this discourse appears to be constructed to exclude hybridity and plurality. While strengthening loyalty to the motherland and the sense of belonging to a set of religious and cultural values, Diyanet officers address only a segment of the diaspora – namely, those who defer to the government and, therefore, are more prone to being receptive to its discourse. These efforts translate and exacerbate tensions outside state borders and polarise the “good” pro-AKP and the “bad” emigrants. In this dichotomous view, pro-government and religiously conservative “good” Kurds are, for instance, juxtaposed against the so-called “bad” Kurds depicted as “terrorists” and opponents of the Turkish government and/or state.

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<sup>58</sup> “Austria to shut seven 'political' mosques and expel imams”, *BBC* (online), 08 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44410597> (accessed 02 December 2023)

<sup>59</sup> Marlies Glasius, “Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices: A Framework”, *Globalizations* 15, no. 2 (2018): 179-97

Such a binary logic is even more salient in the wake of the 2016 attempted coup, when the government declared a state of emergency, which ushered in repressive measures and politically motivated purges. Most of these targeted followers of the politico-religious network around the charismatic preacher Fethullah Gülen. The Gülen movement, formerly a close ally of the AKP government in the country's gradual shift towards a post-secular political arrangement, is now largely considered the government's greatest threat. Extending this unrest into the diaspora has put Diyanet's officers on the frontline: any practice qualifying as transnational political opposition has been stigmatised and marginalised. Moreover, in line with the government's discourse, the Diyanet directly opposed its former ally in a 137-page report published in 2017.<sup>60</sup> The report officially states that the Gülen movement is a terror organisation (*Fethullahçı Terror Örgütü*, FETÖ) and accuses it of having "abused religion."

While conducting activities among the diaspora, state officials may require access to information for governing purposes. This occurs mostly through surveys and reports that the Diyanet foundations abroad are tasked with developing. The 2019 report on Diyanet's activities clearly states that it examines, controls, and archives reports on the activities conducted by the offices abroad and their annual action plans.<sup>61</sup> Religious officers also provide field information about political and religious activities conducted by Turkish communities outside Turkey. Moreover, they work under the supervision of religious attachés employed at embassies and consulates. This arrangement has recently raised concerns as it may sometimes amount to mobilising political opposition. Cases of imams accused of controlling and reporting on members affiliated with the Gülen movement raise questions about the Diyanet's collection of personal data on Turkish opposition figures in EU member states.

In the past decade, such events have contributed to the recalibration of the relationship between European countries and the Diyanet as the main actor of Turkish Islam. Turkey's interference in the diaspora, promoting conservative social values and fostering a collective identity marked by religion, has indeed aroused scepticism among some Western European rulers who view it as a threat to the social cohesion of Muslims in their own respective countries. This has occurred at the same time as restrictive regulation of Islam by Western European countries that have enacted laws and measures to 'nationalise' and regulate the practising of Islam. When the image of the Diyanet as the symbol of a moderate Islam started to waver, the institution reframed its discourse regarding Muslim communities living in Europe and placed

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<sup>60</sup> Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu Başkanlığı [High Council of Religious Affairs of Türkiye], "Kendi Dilinden FETÖ, Örgütlü Bir Din İstismarı" [Exploitation of Religion and Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization] (Ankara, 2017), <https://www.aa.com.tr/uploads/TempUserFiles/haber/2017/07/KENDI-DILINDEN-FETO-20170725son.pdf> (accessed 23 June 2021)

<sup>61</sup> Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı [Directorate of Religious Affairs of Türkiye], 2019 *Faaliyet Raporu* [2019 Annual Report] (Ankara, 2020): 34-35, <https://stratejigelistirme.diyamet.gov.tr/Documents/2019%20Y%C4%B1%C4%B1%20Faaliyet%20Raporu.pdf> (accessed 05 April 2024)



more emphasis on the discrimination they faced. Within this narrative, the diaspora is *re-imagined* and *mobilised* as an Islamic entity forming part of the Muslim bloc.

## 5.1

# Where Does the Diyanet Stand in Turkey's Role as a "liberator" of Muslim Communities in the West?

With the establishment of the Committee on Human Rights Inquiry in the Turkish parliament in the 1990s, the intent to mobilise Muslim communities living in Western European countries has been dressed as a commitment to fight Islamophobia in the West. Institutional measures have evolved with a sub-parliamentary committee put in place to monitor Islamophobic activities in Europe and the U.S. in 2021, combined with the Turkish government's more pronounced and public commitment to its mission to fight against Islamophobia.<sup>62</sup> Since 2016, the notion of Islamophobia has permeated Turkey's public agenda, including government discourse, media, diplomatic meetings,<sup>63</sup> academic conferences, and publications by think tanks. These publications have largely circulated between Turkey and diaspora communities, as well as through diaspora institutions like the YTB and the Directorate of Communications.

Established by a presidential decree in 2018, the Directorate's mission includes: "To establish profound and multilateral relations with the national and international public opinions, decision-makers and media; to ensure a qualified representation of Türkiye in all fields applying all communication tools and methods and to empower

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<sup>62</sup> The Committee on Human Rights Inquiry was established in 1990 (Law No. 3686):

<https://insanhaklarimerkezi.bilgi.edu.tr/tr/content/39-tbmm-insan-haklarn-inceleme-komisyonu> (accessed 16 December 2023);

Evren Elverdi, "National Parliamentary Human Rights Committees as Human Rights actors: The Committee on Human Rights Inquiry," *Yasama Dergisi*, no. 41 (June 30, 2020): 317-38

In 2021, a sub-parliamentary Committee was founded:

[https://www5.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/komisyon\\_tutanaklari.goruntule?pTutanakId=2752](https://www5.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/komisyon_tutanaklari.goruntule?pTutanakId=2752) (accessed 16 December 2023)

<sup>63</sup> One example is the *Emergency meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation* (OIC) held in Istanbul on 22 March 2019 to discuss the terrorist attack on two mosques in New Zealand. The meeting came at the request of the Republic of Turkey "to raise awareness of the threat posed by Islamophobia and countering all forms and manifestations of terrorism, as well as the efforts made to protect and support Muslim communities throughout the world".

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), "Istanbul Hosts an Emergency Meeting of the Executive Committee to Discuss the Terrorist Attack on Two Mosques in New Zealand", 19 March 2019, [https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t\\_id=20712&t\\_ref=11748&lan=en](https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=20712&t_ref=11748&lan=en) (accessed 16 February 2021)

the Türkiye brand.”<sup>64</sup> While the Directorate has contributed to strengthening Turkey’s international role as a defender of Muslim communities in the West, the Diyanet has played a part in defining Islamophobia not only as a problem to be solved but more so as an anti-Islam project. In 2016, a “strategy to combat Islamophobia” was drafted, and a dissemination strategy was implemented to reach Muslim communities living abroad.<sup>65</sup> In the same year, the Diyanet inaugurated the Diyanet Center of America in Maryland with the stated intention to not only provide religious services but also “contribute greatly by changing the negative perceptions of Islam as well as generating authentic Islamic knowledge.”<sup>66</sup>

In Diyanet publications, Islamophobia is defined as “fear” with both passive and active characteristics. On the one hand, like many other phobias, it is generated by a passive defensive reaction against something “unknown” or perceived as not fully intelligible. On the other hand, Islamophobia is depicted as the result of a well-determined action that, in Diyanet publications, is defined as “part of an anti-Islam project, a discrimination and a violation of human rights perpetrated against Muslim minorities in the West.”<sup>67</sup> While conferences and symposia on Islamophobia have been organised to train religious officers to be sent to Western countries, Diyanet has issued publications and broadcasted TV and radio programmes to raise awareness of Islamophobia.<sup>68</sup> This was combined with annual reports issued by SETA and the government’s official discourse defining Islamophobia as anti-Islam, “the new anti-Semitism,” and “a crime against humanity.”<sup>69</sup> The Diyanet’s commitment against the rise of Islamophobia in Western countries has occurred not only in a climate of terror generated by the attacks perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State in Europe (and in Turkey, too) but also in the context of the rise of right-wing nationalist parties in many Western countries.

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<sup>64</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, Directorate of Communications, [www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/vizyon-misyon](http://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/vizyon-misyon) (accessed 08 April 2021)

<sup>65</sup> Between 22 and 25 May 2017, the *Common Strategies against Islamophobia* conference gathered religious officials from different countries, including religious advisers who work as Diyanet representatives, religious attachés and coordinators of religious services. Aynur Ekiz, “Turkey’s Diyanet forms strategy to tackle Islamophobia. New strategy to gather Muslim pioneers in Europe, arrange meetings with non-Muslim communities: Diyanet head Mehmet Gormez”, *Anadolu Ajansı* (online), 13 May 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkeys-diyamet-forms-strategy-to-tackle-islamophobia/817803> (accessed 23 March 2021)

<sup>66</sup> Abdülkadir Özkan, “Diyanet Center of America: An epicenter in the fight against Islamophobia”, *Daily Sabah* (online), 12 April 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2016/04/12/diyamet-center-of-america-an-epicenter-in-the-fight-against-islamophobia> (accessed 23 June 2021)

<sup>67</sup> Mehmet Akif Okur, Üretilen Korku: İslamofobi [Manufactured fear: Islamophobia] *Diyanet Aylık Dergi*, 2017

<sup>68</sup> An example is the TV programme “*İslamofobi Endüstrisi*” [Islamophobia Industry], which is available online on the Diyanet TV channel website: <https://www.diyamet.tv/islamofobi-endustrisi>, *İslamofobi Endüstrisi* (accessed 10 July 2023)

<sup>69</sup> The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) emergency meeting was held on 22 March 2019. Erdogan’s speech is available online: Erdogan calls for fight on Islamophobia as on anti-Semitism, *TRT World* (online), <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/erdogan-calls-for-fight-on-islamophobia-as-on-anti-semitism-25176> (accessed 10 July 2021)

It is relevant here to emphasise how the commitment to fight against Islamophobia relates to a wider process of “transnationalisation of Turkey”, which operates through a plurality of Turkish national and transnational actors, including institutions like the Diyanet, the YTB, and the Directorate of Communication as well as think tanks like SETA and associations like the UID engaged in producing, distributing, and re-imagining “Turkishness” and Turkey beyond its current borders. In its attempt to build social, cultural, and economic relations with kin and co-ethnic communities, (former) citizens abroad, and foreign students, the YTB included in its agenda the pledge to defend emigrants’ rights and to prevent them from experiencing discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia within the EU. The reference to Islamophobia here makes it clear that Turkey’s intent to extend patronage and protection to its citizens abroad, including kin communities, is intrinsically related to the country’s desired image as a global actor. Similarly, the UID branches mobilise the diaspora as loyal partisan citizens abroad and appeal to the Turkish diaspora’s fears, expectations, and resentments as immigrants within the increasingly anti-immigrant context of Europe.<sup>70</sup> The Directorate of Communication epitomises the strategy of mixing the securitisation of Islam in many Western European countries, the rise in Islamophobic acts, and the “empower the Türkiye brand” campaign in the international realm.<sup>71</sup> In light of the AKP’s reimagination of Turkey as the leader of a global *umma* (or at least of those Sunni Muslim communities who are ready to consider such leadership), religious soft power is employed by a wide range of Turkish state actors and institutions, primarily the Diyanet.

While the rise in anti-immigrant sentiments and Islamophobia in European countries reinvigorates the old polarisation between the West and the East, the idea that Muslim communities “need saving” should be critically assessed as it may cast light on what anthropologist Nazia Kazi interprets as a sense of domination disguised as liberation. When a paternalistic link with a diaspora is strengthened, the state of origin contributes to an exclusive sense of belonging that might dilute cultural and social “contaminations” that pave the way for hybrid and complex identities and the demand for full participation in society.<sup>72</sup> This is the case with Turkey, whose narrative about Islamophobia largely focuses on Islam and overlooks factors like gender, migratory background, different social and cultural capital, and the precarity of working conditions. Islam is presented as the essential and causal factor in determining discrimination against Turkish communities living abroad. The paradox of this narrative, according to Ayhan Kaya, is that it seems similar to that of Islamophobic movements, viewing the migratory background in conjunction with

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<sup>70</sup> Bilge Yabanci, 2021: 141

<sup>71</sup> The Directorate’s official website refers to the aim of empowering the Turkish brand via the establishment of profound and multilateral relations with national and international public opinions, decision-makers and media. See: <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/kurum-hakkinda> (accessed 10 March 2024)

<sup>72</sup> Nazia Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics* (Lanham, 2018)

Islam.<sup>73</sup>

Diyanet's proposed solutions to tackle Islamophobia are aimed at combatting the "misperception" of, and ignorance about, the "real nature" of Islam, which is considered one of the causes of anti-Islamic discrimination. The strategy to tackle discrimination is based on a strong commitment to the communities abroad to "provide them with rightful information on Islam and how to practice it in the right way, enhance social activities and spiritual guidance."<sup>74</sup> To this end, Muslims in the West should engage individually and be "good examples" in society rather than collectively. The pious life propagated by Diyanet officers is thus defined in opposition to a "Western" set of values but does not infringe upon legal regulations and constitutional obligations. This steers attention toward a significant part of the narrative about Islamophobia, whereby Muslims are portrayed as compatible with the existing order and context without questioning the inequalities upon which that order is built.

Moreover, the "good Muslim" archetype defined as compatible with Western European societies implies no challenges to either the status quo or the conditions generating discrimination. In this scenario, Muslims as a homogenous group can be integrated into mainstream society, and Islamophobia is perceived as merely attitudinal, resulting from people's perceptions and prejudices that can be tackled by interfaith dialogue and mutual knowledge.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Islamophobia is presented as inherent to Western civilization (also conceived as a homogenous bloc), immutable, and therefore an element that co-produces unbridgeable differences between "us" and "them."

A further issue to deal with is how Turkey's commitment to liberate Muslim communities living in the West affects liberal Muslims, non-Turkish, and non-Sunni Muslim communities. The essentialised assumption that Turkish communities living abroad are Sunni Muslims marks a diversion away from any references to a modern, cultural, and "European" Islam open to secular thought<sup>76</sup> and, thus, prone to assimilation. Enes Bayraklı, who in 2018 and 2019 anchored the TV programme "Islamophobia Industry" (*Islamofobi Endüstrisi*) on the Diyanet TV channel (TRT Diyanet), clearly condemned those who talk about European Islam as "charlatans"

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<sup>73</sup> Ayhan Kaya, 2018: 35

<sup>74</sup> Halife Keskin was interviewed on the Diyanet TV programme, translated by the author: Dini Haber Analiz 08.04.2016 (Analysis of Religious News, 8 April 2016), *Diyanet TV* (online), 08 April 2016, <https://www.diyaret.tv/dini-haber-analiz/video/dini-haber-analiz-08-04-2016> (accessed 20 February 2024)

<sup>75</sup> Nazia Kazi, 2018

<sup>76</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: Democratic Peace and Euro-Islam Versus Global Jihad* (London, 2008);

Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim* (Markfield, 2013);

Moch Faisal Karim, "Integrating European Muslims Through Discourse? Understanding the Development and Limitations of Euro-Islam in Europe", *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 18, no. 4 (2017): 993-1011

and defined the narrative of European Islam as Europe's attempt to "manipulate Islam."<sup>77</sup> The effects of a narrative in which Europe and Islam are described as irreconcilable have recently been criticised by Muslim intellectuals in Europe, whose reformist and liberal approaches have been vehemently opposed by the Diyanet and the Turkish state diaspora institutions for being "against Islam." In 2019, some of these scholars penned a letter to the European Commission to denounce the funding of a pro-government Turkish think tank (SETA) to publish a report on Islamophobia in Europe. In this report, the voices of Muslim activists who deliberately distance themselves from Islamic associations and promote more reformist interpretations are listed among those who incite Islamophobia and racism against Muslims.<sup>78</sup> Victimisation aimed at tightening a dichotomous and exclusive identity without problematising the intersectionality that fosters systemic discrimination against Muslims might reinforce processes of co-radicalisation and symbiotic relationships between Islamophobic and xenophobic far-right groups on the one hand, and Islamist groups on the other.

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<sup>77</sup> Islamofobi Endüstrisi [Islamophobia Industry], episode 16, *Diyanet TV* (online), 05 April 2019 <https://diyanet.tv/islamofobi-endustrisi/video/islamofobi-endustrisi--16-bolum> (accessed 02 December 2021)

<sup>78</sup> European Islamophobia Report 2018 (SETA Foundations 2019), [https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/09/EIR\\_2018.pdf](https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/09/EIR_2018.pdf) (accessed 20 April 2024): 103, 115  
The report refers to Necla Kelek e Seyran Ates, who founded the Ibn Rushd - Goethe Mosque in Berlin.

6.

# Conclusion

This report has analysed continuities and changes in Turkey's long-lasting interest in strengthening the link with "its" diaspora communities. It has emphasised three main aspects. The first is that under AKP rule, projects and activities have expanded mainly via establishing new diaspora institutions and enhancing existing ones. Institutions like the YTB, the UID, and the Diyanet have broadened their activities to reach diaspora communities. A second point concerns the Diyanet, whose long-lasting European presence has also profoundly evolved. Diyanet officers sent to Europe have been assigned a new pastoral mission to teach Islam to new generations and provide religious services related to any aspect of life. The motivations that drive this activism have also developed and reflect an attempt to reconfigure the diaspora's boundaries of belonging in essentialist religious (Sunni Muslim) and nationalist (Turkish) terms. The ambition to forge a loyal Turkish Muslim diaspora has concerned countries like Austria, Germany, France, and the Netherlands, which see Turkey's influence over Turkey-originating migrants' communities as an attempt to underpin exclusive belonging at the expense of the diaspora's multiple and hybrid identity formation.

The third aspect considers how the scope and scale of the changing nature of Turkish diaspora policies have reflected the complex reconfiguration of the Diyanet from the more values-oriented presidency of Ali Bardakoğlu (2003-2010) to a more scripture-bound reading of the holy book with the appointment of both Mehmet Görmez and Ali Erbaş as successive heads of the Diyanet. Familialism and the radicalism of Islamist interpretation have quashed attempts at co-existence and negotiation among heterogeneous understandings within the diaspora institutions. Such an authoritarian turn has not only expanded the persecution of opposition outside Turkish territory but has also transformed the diaspora into a stage of contention. In this respect, the new wave of migration raises questions about whether and how ideologies, ideas, party cadres, and practices circulate between Turkey and diaspora communities and what kind of dialectic and power relations emerge. Moreover, although the cultural, religious, and socio-political tools employed to reach and govern the diaspora are more prominent in power and visibility, the organisation of the dissident groups within the diaspora communities require attentive consideration as it will remain significant in the coming years.

While diaspora policies and institutions have been designed to provide emigrants with social and political services, they have drawn concerns about how Turkey's

authoritarian political universe at home reverberates among the diaspora. Moreover, the potential influence of a foreign state has been perceived in host societies as an effort to intervene in other countries' domestic politics via their Muslim and Turkish communities. One of the main topics used by the Turkish government to justify its intervention has been the combatting of Islamophobia in the West. The rise in xenophobic attacks in many European countries has seen the Turkish government present Islamophobia as an anti-Islam project and self-define itself as the "protector" of Muslim communities in the West. However, the victimisation of the Muslim communities and the view that Islam is the sole factor behind the attacks has concerned liberal segments of the Muslim diaspora. The lack of a more holistic perspective, which includes other factors like education and the social and economic capital of Muslim migrants, might lead to a reproduction of an old dichotomy (secular European versus Muslim communities), which in the long run could exacerbate conflicts and radicalise groups, making them increasingly exclusive and immutable.

# Abbreviations

AKP	<i>Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)</i>
DİTİB	<i>Turkish-Islamic Union of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği)</i>
Diyanet	<i>Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı)</i>
SETA	<i>Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (Siyaset Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı)</i>
TİKA	<i>Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı)</i>
UETD	<i>Union of European Turkish Democrats</i>
UID	<i>Union of International Democrats</i>
YTB	<i>Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı)</i>



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