The *Diyanet* "Program of International Theology": Adjustment to Western Norms or Aggiornamento from Inside?

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In the debate about Turkish accession to the European Union, the training of imams is one of the most sensitive issues as it highlights the role of the state in religious affairs. My thesis project is a study of religion-state relations in Turkey that explores the role of a state institution named *Diyanet İşleri Baskanlığı* (Directorate of Religious Affairs, hereafter *Diyanet*). The focus of my research is to explore how the *Diyanet* has the potential to shape the religious landscape through the authority which it gives to its civil servants in Turkey and in a transnational context. As I am only at the beginning of my research, the content of my presentation will be more an empirical one.

Diyanet and Europe

The *Diyanet* is a state institution which was created in the aftermath of the foundation of Turkish Republic (1923) and which is attached to the Office of the Prime Minister. It was given the mandate to decide matters concerning the beliefs, worship and ethics of Islam, to appoint and dismiss religious officials, and to administer the religious sites. The annual budget of the institution is 1,6 billion dollars for the remuneration of around 88 000 employees and the management of 77 000 mosques[1]. As indicated by the Minister of State Mehmet Aydın and related to the issue of globalization, *Diyanet*'s interest to the European question has three major dimensions: the position and image of Islam in the West; the condition of Muslims living in the West and finally, Turkey's relation with the EU as a negotiating country[2].

That being so, the institution regularly faced the problem of lacking religious officers with high levels of education and culture who will lead society, who will understand the people they address and who will answer their religious requests[3] (in Turkey but also in a migratory context). The *Diyanet* selects its personnel through an entrance examination and requires them to complete a series of vocational training activities according to the type of service they will offer[4]. Undoubtedly, the key question is about the Muslim identity while the globalization process is constructing a 'deculturalised' Islam[5]. To what extent will this state institution be successful in recovering the identity of the Turkish diaspora through its religious authority?

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[1] http://www.diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyanet-Isleri-Baskanligi-AnaMenu-sayisal-bilgiler-65.aspx

[2] Aydın, Mehmet. (2008), *Diyanet's* Global Vision. *The Muslim World*, 98: 164–172. doi: 10.1111/j.1478-1913.2008.00216.x

[3] Buyrukçu, Ramazan. (2006), Türkiye'de Din Görevlisi Yetiştirme Problemi ve Çözüm Önerileri, *AÜIFD*, 47/2: 99-126.

[4] Ata, Ulvi. (2008), The Educational Services of the PRA and its Contribution to Religious Education in Turkey. *The Muslim World*, 98: 302–312. doi: 10.1111/j.1478-1913.2008.00228.x

[5] Roy, Olivier. (2004), *Globalized Islam, The Search for a New Ummah*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 23.

In light of the above, I wish to develop two hypotheses:

1. During the process of Turkish integration into the European Union and in a confusing post 9/11 context, *Diyanet* leaders are assigning more and more autonomy to the religious authorities in the public sphere by providing them with a more academic training. Ejder Okumuş describes this process through the concept of 'academic religiosity'[6].
2. There is progressively a switch from the traditional role of the *Diyanet* -putting religion in the private sphere- to a formal institute actively promoting the public visibility of religion.

Concerning the last hypothesis, it will be probably too soon to argue that Turkish secularism is switching from what Ahmet Kuru calls 'assertive secularism' to 'passive secularism'[7]. However, my research will include this particular point concerning the relation between the *Diyanet* and politics. I argue that there is a link between the reforms within the *Diyanet* and the political tendency of the current government (conservative Muslim leaders), in power since 2002. I therefore ask how has Turkish secularism advanced throughout the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)?

In a previous interview on the role of the institution, Ismail Kara revealed that the *Diyanet*'s accomplishment was a success for regulating the religious affairs of the state more than of the Muslim believers[8]. Indeed, since the beginning of the century the *Diyanet* has launched several projects which bring to light their concerns about the need of reforms. I therefore develop my hypothesis by mentioning three main projects among numerous ones:

1. The decentralization of the sermon: in October 2009, the Religious Council of the *Diyanet* accepted a proposal which allows imams to be more active in writing the sermons[9].
2. The *Diyanet Academies* project: upper cadres of the *Diyanet* will require at least ten years of experience as a university lecturer to raise the academic level of religious officials. A one year program is scheduled which includes intensive training in a foreign language[10].
3. The "Program of International Theology": the purpose of this program is to recruit foreign students (mostly Turkish immigrants) in order to provide them with a classical bachelor's degree in theology in a Turkish university, and under the supervision of the *Diyanet*. This will be the main project of my presentation.

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[6] Okumuş, Ejder. (2008), Turkey-Religiosity and the PRA. The Muslim World, 98: 345–362. doi: 10.1111/j.1478-1913.2008.00232.x
[7] Kuru, Ahmet. (2009), Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey, Cambridge University Press, New York.
[8] Ismail Kara, interview published on Altınoluk Dergisi, November 1993, 93: p. 22.
[9] See the report edited by Thijl Sunier, The Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs in a Changing Environment, VU University Amsterdam-Utrecht University, January 2011, p. 51.
[10] *Ibid.* p. 48.

Uluslararası İlahiyat Programı (Program of International Theology)

Traditionally, theological training in Turkey is assured by two main establishments: the religious preacher High school or *İmam Hatip* and the faculties of theology. For now, the "Program of International Theology" launched in 2006, is being run within the faculties of theology of *Ankara Üniversitesi* and *Marmara Üniversitesi* in Ankara and Istanbul. In 2011, the number of candidates is estimated at 306 from Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, the Netherlands, Australia, Denmark, Great Britain, Italy, Norway. Currently, all the candidates under the age of 25, are originally from Turkey with citizenship and a High School Diploma from one of the above countries. According to the need on the job market, *Diyanet* maintains the rate of 60% male candidate[11]. The main job opportunities which is suggested in the booklet of the program (as the *Diyanet* assumes the management of the program by providing the students with a full accommodation and a scholarship) can be enumerated as below:
- Religious instructor at school
- Mosques'imam
- Religious services within the municipalities and public institutions
- Academic career
- Integration facilitator in the Turkish diaspora

These job opportunities that the institution would assign their graduates reveal the different kinds of post where the religious authorities of *Diyanet* are oriented, both in the public and the private sphere. In line with these purposes, the candidates are chosen according to an ideal profile based on the following main skills:
- Being a reference to the Turkish compatriots in Europe within their integration process into society (transmitting religious, but also cultural and moral, values)
- Emphasizing the moral and ethical dimensions of Islamic piety by being a model
- Eliminating harmful prejudice related to Muslim identity and Islam in Europe
- Demonstrating leadership skills

These elements show the objectives of the program as a vocational training for the candidates. Will the graduates be able to satisfy the interest of the *Diyanet* while at the same time blossoming personally in the job market? To what extent will they be autonomous and have a public role as a religious authority? In line with the structure of the program, some relevant discourses can be enlightening. Indeed, Ali Bardakoğlu's speech (former president of *Diyanet*) in October 2010 enhanced mediatic controversy about the increasing visibility of the imams in Turkey when he said:

> "*Imams are not only civil servants who lead the prayer ; they have also to be melted in the mass and become opinion leaders.*[12]"

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[11] All these informations are provided from the online booklet on:
www.diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/dok/uip_2011_tanitim.pdf, consulted on May 20th 2011.

[12] Quoted by Sami Kılıç, « Le Diyanet entre le marteau et l'enclume », *Zaman France*, 22/10/2010. See also an opposition to this discourse by Mehmet Ali Birand, « You Can't Make an Imam an Opinion Leader », 04/10/2010 ; http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=you-can8217t-make-an-imam-an-opinion-leader

In line with this idea, Mehmet Aydın argued about the vocational training of the imam in academic career in his article published in *Muslim World*:

> "*The knowledge produced theoretically in academia should be harmonized and coordinated with the experiential knowledge gained in the mosques, schools and society.*[13]"

Focusing on academic training can also be a way for the *Diyanet* to distinguish itself in a competition for the training of imams in Europe. This challenging environment is at the heart of the issue about the religious market where the *Diyanet*'s imams are facing the lose of their monopoly. Frank Peter's article on religious authority shows the ambivalence in between the usual way of recruiting imams from abroad and the political demand of local training, for instance in France[14]. The same issue was debated in Germany where a public university started recently to offer a training program for imams[15] or in the Netherlands where the Dutch government has attempted several times since 1996 to train imams locally[16]. In the booklet of the program, *Diyanet* authorities are openly claiming to spread the "correct knowledge" on Islamic theology to justify why the candidates have an interest in studying in Turkey. A similar idea was developed by Ali Bardakoğlu, under whom the program was launched in 2006:

> "*We regard the Presidency of Religious Affairs as an institution which takes the religious demands and traditions of people into account, and if there are any diversions from these, one which tries to improve them with true and authentic religious knowledge; this is an institution that tries to inform our people by providing them with training and education under the light of a scientific and sound religious knowledge.*[17]"

The example of the "Program of International Theology" is quite relevant to study the role taken by the *Diyanet* through the process of training imams. This reveals the orientations of this state institution in a context of the country's accession to the EU. Any work attempting to analyze state institutions towards the representation of religious actors needs to theorize the structure of these state institutions. It will certainly be the first step of my research before attempting to conduct a participative observation. This will also help understand the impact of globalization on modernity and the issue of secularism issue in Turkey. I therefore argue that the globalization and EU membership processes have had a similar impact on Turkish modernity and very likely on the political strategies of state leaders.

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[13] Aydın, Mehmet, *op. cit*, p. 171.

[14] Peter, Frank. (2006), « Une religion civile en quête d'autorités religieuses », *Confluences Méditerranée*, Numéro 57, p. 69-81.

[15] Charlton, Angela, "German university launches training for imams", 13 October 2010, http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/10/13/german-university-launches-training-imams/

[16] Sunier, Thijl, op. cit., p. 85.

[17] Bardakoğlu, Ali. (2006), *Religion and Society – New Perspectives from Turkey*, Presidency of Religious Affairs, p. 16.