

## **Negotiating Values: Diyanet and the Syrian Refugee Crisis**

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### **Abstract:**

If during the early Republican era migration was a controlled process serving nation-building, the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis has reasserted, and, in the meantime, challenged Turkish national identity. This paper analyzes Diyanet's religious narratives regarding the Syrian refugee crisis, its role in legitimizing the government's refugee policy, and the rising tensions between humanistic Islamic values and nationalism faced by the institution. Methodologically, I primarily rely on content analysis of the Friday sermons released by Diyanet between 2011 and 2018.

**Key Words:** Diyanet, Syrian refugee crisis, humanistic Islam, nationalism

### **Introduction**

While globalization and migration are often referred to as threats to nations' unity and homogeneity, most modern nation-states have never been ethnically homogeneous. Nationalist movements in the last two centuries attempted to create myths of homogeneity, in some cases even by

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resorting to extreme measures such as expulsions, ethnic cleansing or even genocide<sup>1</sup>.

After the Cold War, we have witnessed a surge in national attitudes in Europe and the USA<sup>2</sup>, with politicians and mass media portraying new flows of migration as a menace to national security and identity, while humanitarian and religious organizations pushed for migrants' protection. Data shows that despite the popular narrative of accelerated increase, international migration remained stable in relative terms (around 3% of the total world population) in the last century. What has changed is the origin and direction of migration flows: if before 1960, Europe was a continent of emigrants and colonizers, after 1960 it turned into a destination of migrants of diverse origin<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, in a globalized world, migration flows have become "multilayered and not easily controlled by nation-states"<sup>4</sup>, generating anxiety and fear of cultural loss. As Faas and O'Connor demonstrate migration is actually "testing the adaptability of national identities"<sup>5</sup>, by revealing how inclusive or exclusive is a nation's identity and what are its non-negotiable core values.

Bassam Tibi argues that globalization challenges old wisdom embedded in cultures and compels them to develop new insights, pointing to the universal character of humanism<sup>6</sup>: "The idea of various grammars of humanism that are supposed to exist in a variety of civilizations – such as Islam and the West – suggests the existence of universal core values that

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<sup>1</sup> Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, Sixth Edition (Macmillan International, 2020), 366.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Schmidt and Markus Quandt, "National identity, nationalism, and attitudes toward migrants in comparative perspective", *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 59:5-6 (2018): 355.

<sup>3</sup> Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 1-14.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmet İçduygu and Fuat Keyman, "Globalization, Security, and Migration: The Case of Turkey", *Global Governance* 6 (2000): 383.

<sup>5</sup> Laura O'Connor and Daniel Faas, "The Impact of Migration on National Identity in a Globalized World: A Comparison of Civic Education Curricula in England, France and Ireland," *Irish Educational Studies* 31:1 (2012): 52.

<sup>6</sup> Humanism is a secular (yet not atheist) concept that places human beings at the centre of the universe. It relies on human reason to understand the world. See Bassam Tibi, "Islamic Humanism vs. Islamism: Cross-Civilizational Bridging," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 95: 3 (2012): 236.

can be shared by diverse cultures and civilizations even though these differ from one another.”<sup>7</sup>

Islamic humanism or, rather humanistic Islam, a concept proposed by Leirvik<sup>8</sup> who argues that humanism is one of the several possible interpretations of Islam, draws from the sources of Hellenism and can be traced back to the classical period of Islam<sup>9</sup>. In the Arabic language, Islamic humanism, humanity, and humanitarianism are often used interchangeably, as all three terms can be translated with the word *insānīya'*<sup>10</sup>. According to Moussa the concept *insānīya'* means a universal empathy towards all human beings, popularized by Muslim scholars in the 1960s, who argued that Islam and humanism share similar core values, such as justice, dignity, and human rights<sup>11</sup>.

### **Diyamet and the Turkish Nation**

Founded after the abolition of the caliphate, Diyanet (the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs) is an official state institution which manages aspects of Islamic faith and worship in Turkey since 1924<sup>12</sup>. The Turkish brand of secularism did not entail the state's neutrality and impartiality towards religions but, as Feyzioglu<sup>13</sup> noted, it kept the state involved in religious affairs. In other words, religion was not separated from the state, but it was placed under strict state control and even instrumentalized to its aim and goals<sup>14</sup>. Diyanet has played an important role in nation-building, social solidarity, and integrity. From guarding the “rational religion” in the early republican era to promoting Sunni Islam as an antidote to communist and leftist groups and as a core element of

<sup>7</sup> Bassam Tibi, “Islamic Humanism vs. Islamism: Cross-Civilizational Bridging,” 248.

<sup>8</sup> The author also proposes the use of humanistic Christianity instead of Christian humanism, following the same logic. See Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Islamic humanism or humanistic Islam?”, *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* (2020): 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Bassam Tibi, “Islamic Humanism vs. Islamism: Cross-Civilizational Bridging”.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Benthall, *Islamic charities, and Islamic humanism in troubled times* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2016), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Jasmine Moussa, “Ancient origins, modern actors: defining Arabic meanings of humanitarianism”, *Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper* (2014): 25.

<sup>12</sup> Radu Gabriel Safta and Călin Felezeu, *Turcia contemporană între moștenirea kemalistă și Uniunea Europeană* (Cluj-Napoca: CA Publishing, 2001), 65-66.

<sup>13</sup> Turhan Feyzioglu, “Türk İnkılabının Temel Taşı: Laiklik,” in *Atatürkçü Düşüncesinde Din ve Laiklik*, ed. Ethem Ruhi Fiğlalı (Ankara: ATAM, 1999), 137-198 cited in M. Hakan Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 37.

<sup>14</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, 38.

Turkishness, Diyanet has been an indispensable institution for every regime and ideology in Turkey<sup>15</sup>.

Under the AKP rule Diyanet's power and range of activities were extended, with a substantial increase in its personnel, budget and ranking, the head of the Presidency being included in the state protocol list<sup>16</sup>. Diyanet started to operate outside the mosque and extend its authority over social, family and gender relations both at home and abroad<sup>17</sup>, relying on former Diyanet President Ali Bardakoğlu's definition of religion as a "social phenomenon"<sup>18</sup>. Diyanet is one of the largest state institutions, employing around 120,000 people and managing 87,381 mosques in Turkey as of 2016. Yet, the expansion of Diyanet and its capabilities did not result in its independence. The Presidency is still under state control and cannot carry out its agenda<sup>19</sup>.

The Presidency enjoys a privileged position in society too, being regarded as one of the most trustworthy institutions in Turkey, as shown by the findings of the Konda poll from 2014, according to which 72% of Turks trust the Diyanet<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, 44% of Turks go to the mosque at least once a week for the Friday prayer, only 23% declaring that they never go to the mosque as reported by the 2012 PEW Research on Religion and Public Life<sup>21</sup>. Consequently, the Friday sermons reach between 44% and 77% Turks each week. PEW Research Center's "The Global God Divide" 2020 study does not survey participation in Friday sermons, but shows that 75% of Turks think that belief in God is necessary to have good morals, while

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<sup>15</sup> Ihsan Yılmaz and Ismail Albayrak, "The Evolution of the Kemalists' Diyanet" in *Populist and Pro-Violence State Religion* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 55-87.

<sup>16</sup> Raja M. Ali Saleem, *State, Nationalism, and Islamization: Historical Analysis of Turkey and Pakistan* (Palgrave Studies in Religion, Politics, and Policy, 2017), 181-182.

<sup>17</sup> Sevgi Adak, "Expansion of the Diyanet and the Politics of Family in Turkey under AKP Rule," *Turkish Studies* 22 :2 (2021): 205.

<sup>18</sup> Ali Bardakoğlu cited in Chiara Maritato and Luca Ozzano, "Patterns of Political Secularism in Italy and Turkey," *Politics and Religion* 12 (2019): 465.

<sup>19</sup> Chiara Maritato and Luca Ozzano, "Patterns of Political Secularism in Italy and Turkey," 465.

<sup>20</sup> "Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Araştırması Algılar, Memnuniyet, Beklentiler," *KONDA* (2014), 6, [http://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/HYD\\_DIBArastirmasiRapor\\_Kasim2014.pdf](http://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/HYD_DIBArastirmasiRapor_Kasim2014.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> James Bell, "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity", *Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life* (August 9, 2012), 17, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2012/08/the-worlds-muslims-full-report.pdf>.

71% consider religion very important in their lives<sup>22</sup> Another study conducted with 302 students of five faculties at the University of İnönü, shows that 82,1% of the respondents believe that Diyanet is needed in society, around the same percentage is against leaving religious affairs to other religious communities or groups and 51,2% are aware of Diyanet's activities. However, around half of the respondents think that Diyanet could improve its services<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, there is a 2021 poll published by *Duvar*, an online Turkish newspaper, which shows low trust in Erdoğan's government – who won the elections two years after the study was published-, and public distrust in Diyanet (54% of citizens having no confidence in the institution). Yet according to the same study Diyanet still enjoys more trust than the national education system<sup>24</sup>. Turkish society is polarized on different issues, however, at the moment there is no major “competitor” or credible alternative to Diyanet in Turkey.

Confidence in Diyanet is not an outcome of recent developments or of its status boost. In this regard, a 2002 study concluded that 76% of participants followed the Diyanet fetvas (legal opinions), and 68% believed that the Diyanet plays a leading role in ensuring national unity<sup>25</sup>. Considering the positive image of Diyanet over time, its role as an opinion leader is undoubtable.

One of the main activities of the Presidency is to prepare the content of the Friday sermons. Each year Diyanet releases 54 khutbas - 52 Friday sermons, and 2 special khutbas for Eid al-Fitr/ Ramazan Bayramı and Eid al-Adha/ Kurban Bayramı- which are read in every Turkish mosque. The khutba/hutbe is the Islamic public preaching, carried out

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<sup>22</sup> Christine Tamir, Aidan Connaughton and Ariana Monique Salazar, “The Global God Divide,” *PEW Research Center* (July 20, 2020), 5-13, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide/> .

<sup>23</sup> İbrahim Aşlamacı, “Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Hizmetlerine Yönelim Durumları: İnönü Üniversitesi Örneği”, *İnsan Ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi* 5:6 (2016): 1571.

<sup>24</sup> “Turkish citizens have no trust in Erdoğan's government, poll shows,” *Duvar* (October 13, 2021), <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-citizens-have-no-trust-in-erdogans-government-poll-shows-news-59191>.

<sup>25</sup> Kemaleddin Taş, *Türk Halkının Gözüyle Diyanet* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2002) cited in Emir Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey, Law, Policy-Making and the Diyanet* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 70.

every Friday and during the main Islamic holidays<sup>26</sup>. In early Islamic tradition, attendance to the Friday sermon was mandatory for free Muslim men, as it indicated their membership in the ummah (wider Muslim community)<sup>27</sup>. The khutbas aimed to answer religious, social, and political questions faced by Muslims, based on the Quran and the Prophet's Hadiths. The role of the preacher or khatib/hatip has been to interpret and apply Islamic teachings and to mediate between Islamic tradition and contemporary realities<sup>28</sup>. Throughout Islamic history, the kuthba either supported or, in some cases, criticized the official stances of policymakers. Since Sunni Islam lacks a formal institutional authority, the khutbas do not represent an official statement of the Muslim community but they "contribute to the construction of sites of deliberation"<sup>29</sup>. Studies on Western European Muslim communities show that participating in Friday sermons regularly can be correlated with higher political exposure and increased voter turnout<sup>30</sup>.

### **Diyanet and the Syrian Refugee Crisis**

Turkey hosts the largest refugee population in the world of which 3.6 million are Syrians according to the UN Refugee Agency<sup>31</sup>. Thus, it is not surprising that there is a growing body of literature on the socio-political<sup>32</sup> and economic<sup>33</sup> integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Ankara's policy towards refugees<sup>34</sup> as well as on public attitudes and

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<sup>26</sup> Richard C. Martin, *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 394.

<sup>27</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Khuṭbah," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0461>.

<sup>28</sup> Emad S. Awad, "Intertextuality in Friday Khutba," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture* 5: 1 (2017), 59-60, [http://jiscnet.com/journals/jisc/Vol\\_5\\_No\\_1\\_June\\_2017/7.pdf](http://jiscnet.com/journals/jisc/Vol_5_No_1_June_2017/7.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Mazen Hashem, "The Muslim Friday Khutba: Veiled and Unveiled Themes," *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding* (2009), 9, [https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2009\\_The\\_Muslim\\_Friday\\_Khutba.pdf](https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2009_The_Muslim_Friday_Khutba.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Michalis Moutselos, "Praying on Friday, Voting on Sunday? Mosque Attendance and Voter Turnout in three West European Democracies", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2019): 1-18.

<sup>31</sup> UNHCR Türkiye, *Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey* (2023),

<https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey>.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmet İçduygu and Evin Millet, "Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Insecure Lives in an Environment of Pseudo-Integration," *Global Turkey in Europe*, Working Paper 13 (August 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Murat Demirci and Murat Güray Kırdar, "The Labor Market Integration of Syrian Refugees in Turkey," *World Development* 162 (2023).

<sup>34</sup> Nermin Aydemir, "Framing Syrian Refugees in Turkish Politics: A Qualitative Analysis on Party Group Speeches," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11:4 (2023).

perceptions of the refugees<sup>35</sup>. This paper strictly focuses on Turkish official religious narratives regarding refugees between 2011- when the Syrian crisis began- and 2018. To this aim, it analyses the kuthbas released by Diyanet in the aforementioned period, paying special attention to the sermons making direct or indirect references to the Syrian refugee crisis. While most of the reviewed khutbas give moral advice and guidance on how to be a better Muslim, educating believers about their religious responsibilities and values, there are several khutbas with clear political messages. The political issues raised most frequently are the Palestinian question<sup>36</sup>, the Syrian civil war, and the refugee crisis. There is evidence that Diyanet supports the government's policies through the khutbas, an example in this regard is the sermon reminding Turks that „freedom requires responsibility” read in the mosques right after the government's Twitter ban<sup>37</sup>. Therefore, the khutbas also contribute to the formation of public opinion in terms of both domestic and global politics, especially on issues faced by Muslims.

In 2017 Diyanet's institutional capacity was upgraded, providing the Presidency with new opportunities to work on the refugee crisis. Diyanet's Department of Migration and Moral Support Services was created to solve religious, cultural, and social issues resulting from internal and external migration. Later, Diyanet was also included in the Integration Strategy Document and National Action Plan (2018-2023) of the Directorate General of Migration Management as a provider of guidance and religious education to refugees<sup>38</sup>.

Diyanet's khutbas referring to the Syrian refugee crisis revolve around five major themes: the Quranic metaphor of ansar and muhajirin, the importance of united brotherhood/sisterhood in Islam, respect for diversity, the moral duty for charity and the obligation to protect the

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<sup>35</sup> Şenay Özden, “Syrian Refugees in Turkey,” *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies: MPC Research Reports* (2013).

<sup>36</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Dinmeyen Yaramız: Kudüs,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (May 18, 2018), <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/HutbelerListesi/Dinmeyen%20Yaram%C4%B1z%20Kud%C3%BCs.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Raja M. Ali Saleem, *State, Nationalism, and Islamization: Historical Analysis of Turkey and Pakistan*, 181.

<sup>38</sup> Birgül Demirtaş, “State, Religion and Refugees: The Case of Turkey and Diyanet,” in *Europe in Changes: The Old Continent at a New Crossroads*, Katarina Zakić and Birgül Demirtaş (Belgrade: Institute of International Politics and Economics, 2021), 146-147.

mazlum (oppressed). These themes are reiterated in many sermons aiming to change negative attitudes towards refugees and to urge action. Their content supports the government's refugee policy indirectly and showcases contradictions between humanistic Islamic values and nationalism.

Most of the sermons underline the Turkish people's duty to support the newcomers, by invoking the Quranic story of hijrah (hicret), respectively Prophet Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622<sup>39</sup>. The Muslims who left Mecca were called muhajirin (muhacir in Turkish) (migrant) while Medina's first Muslims who welcomed and aided the newcomers were known as ansar (ensar) (helper)<sup>40</sup>. Diyanet's discourse shows a preference of the term muhajirin over the contemporary Turkish term of mülteci in the khutbas, since the former has religious connotations and suggests a spiritual journey, while the second implies need and indicates economic and security-related issues. A khutba<sup>41</sup> published in April 2012 links the relation between ansar and muhajirin to Muslim brotherhood:

"The bond of faith that brings believers' hearts together is sufficient for brotherhood. It is this brotherhood that ended the historical struggle between the Aws and Khazraj tribes in Medina, the city of the Prophet, and united them. Also in Medina, in the house of Enes b. Malik, our Prophet initiated the practice of brotherhood between the Ansar and the Muhajirin, an exemplary practice that has no equal in history (...) Although their languages, colors, economic opportunities, traditions, and customs were different, our Prophet broke the circle of anger and self-interest and created an exemplary society of brothers who "helped each other in goodness and piety"<sup>42</sup>.

While the khutba does not directly mention the Syrian refugee crisis, it encourages believers to take the example of the Prophet and act in the spirit of brotherhood during difficult times. Another sermon from 2017

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<sup>39</sup> Zeki Saritoprak Migration, *Feelings of Belonging to a Land, and the Universality of Islam, in Islam and Citizenship Education*, eds. E. Aslan, M. Hermansen (Wiesbaden: Wiener Beiträge zur Islamforschung, Springer VS, 2015), 45.

<sup>40</sup> Gerhard Bowering (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 219.

<sup>41</sup> Since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis.

<sup>42</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, "Kardeşlik Çağrısı," *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (6 April 2012) <https://dinhizmetleri.diyamet.gov.tr/Documents/2012%20Y%C4%B1%C4%B1%20Hutbeleri.pdf>.



emphasizes that the way Turks treat refugees is a trial of their faith and humanity:

“Let’s see our guest brothers as a blessing, not a burden. Let’s not attribute the mistakes of some to all of them. (...) Every soul that takes refuge in our mercy and hopes for our help is a test of our faith, our Islam, and humanity.”<sup>43</sup>

As seen the theme of Muslim brotherhood and sisterhood is closely intertwined with the muhajirin and ansar metaphor, but not limited to it. The importance of Muslim unity is underlined by the Quranic verse repeated in many khutbas “The believers are but brothers” and calls upon the participants to strengthen the unity of the ummah<sup>44</sup>, which, according to a 2015 sermon is “trampled on in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Egypt”<sup>45</sup>, referring to the devastating effects of the Arab Spring.

Considering the growing anti-refugee sentiments in Turkey, Diyanet tried to tackle the problem of discrimination against refugees by promoting respect for diversity as an Islamic requirement. In the Presidency’s narrative racism and xenophobia are linked to the so-called pre-Islamic age of ignorance, Cahiliye dönemi, yet a 2015 khutba sadly noticed that these attitudes are not scarce within the contemporary Muslim community:

“In the Age of Ignorance, people were proud of their ethnic origin and the tribes they belonged to. They would defend their tribes, even if it was unfair, and consider themselves superior to others. One of the most important features of our Great Religion, Islam, is that it has eliminated the superiority of one race over another, one group or community over another

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<sup>43</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “İmanımız ve İnsanlığımızın İmtihani: Mülteciler,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (July 7, 2017), <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/HutbelerListesi/%C4%B0man%C4%B1m%C4%B1z%20ve%20%C4%B0nsan%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1m%C4%B1z%C4%B1n%20%C4%B0mtihan%C4%B1%20M%C3%BCtceiler.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Eid al-Fitr,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (June 15, 2018), <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/HutbelerListesiIngilizce/Eid%20Al-Fitr.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Birliğimizi, Beraberliğimizi, Kardeşliğimizi Muhafaza Edelim!” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (September 11, 2015), <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/HutbelerListesi/Birli%C4%9Fimizi,%20Beraberli%C4%9Fimizi,%20Karde%C5%9Fl%C4%9Fimizi%20Muhafaza%20Edelim.pdf>

group or community. (...) We regret to say that today, among Muslims who believe in the same religion, the same Book, and the same Prophet, the number of those who put their sect, ethnic group, race, and ideology ahead of Islam, the religion of mercy, is not small at all<sup>46</sup>.

Lukewarm attitudes towards Arabs are older than the Syrian crisis, being deeply rooted in the Turkish modernization project. The Kemalists were influenced by Orientalism, respectively by the Western representation of the Muslim World. The adoption of the Westernization project and assertion of a distinctive cultural character of the Turks<sup>47</sup> required keeping a distance from everything and everyone regarded as Oriental, including the Arabs. With some exceptions, the new Turkish nation was made up of non-Arab Muslim Ottomans<sup>48</sup>. The Syrian crisis exacerbated the negative attitudes especially, in South-Eastern Turkey where the presence of Syrians has seriously altered the ethnic and religious balance of the region<sup>49</sup>, but also in Western Turkey's big cities like Istanbul, Izmir or Ankara, where large numbers of Syrian refugees reside. Many Turks consider that hosting refugees poses economic, cultural, and security-related challenges to their country, 81,7% of them being against granting citizenship to refugees according to Hacettepe University's Migration and Politics Research Center study of 2014<sup>50</sup>. Higher national identification of Turks is linked to negative attitudes towards migration; thus, nationalists are less likely to welcome refugees<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, "İslâm, İrkçiliğin Her TürLüsünü Reddeder," *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (June 5, 2015), <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/HutbelerListesi/%C4%B0slam%20İrk%C3%A7%C4%B1%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1n%20Her%20T%C3%BCrl%C3%BCs%C3%BCn%C3%BC%20Reddeder.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Ayşe Kadioğlu, "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity," *Middle Eastern Studies* 32:2 (1996), 185.

<sup>48</sup> Hasan Kayalı, "Türklerin Araplara bakışı," *Al Jazeera Turk* (July 28, 2014), <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/gorus/turklerin-araplara-bakisi>.

<sup>49</sup> Soner Cagaptay, Bilge Menekşe, "The Impact of Syria's Refugees on Southern Turkey," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy-Policy Focus* 130 (July 2014), 6-14, [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus130\\_Cagaptay\\_Revised3s.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus130_Cagaptay_Revised3s.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> M.Murat Erdoğan, "Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration", *Hacettepe University Migration and Politics Research Centre-HUGO* (2014), 37.

<sup>51</sup> Şenay Yitmen and Maykel Verkuyten, "Positive and Negative Behavioural Intentions towards Refugees in Turkey: The Roles of National Identification, Threat, and Humanitarian Concern," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 28:4 (2018).

Although most of the khutbas preach Muslim brotherhood/sisterhood and equality of believers, themes like the moral superiority of the Turkish nation and its role as a protector of the oppressed are also advanced:

“History witnesses that Allah Almighty (s.w.t.) will not leave helpless our noble nation, who deems protecting their religion and homeland as the most supreme duty. The mercy and grace of Allah (s.w.t.) will be with those who stand by the oppressed, the refugee, and the immigrant.”<sup>52</sup>

The khutbas remind and celebrate not only the major events linked to Islamic history like the hijrah<sup>53</sup> or Karbala battle but also cherish Seljuk and Ottoman historical achievements like the Battle of Manzikert<sup>54</sup>, the Conquest of Constantinople<sup>55</sup> as well as national celebrations like the Battle of Gallipoli, the Turkish War of Independence<sup>56</sup> or the July 15 failed coup attempt<sup>57</sup>.

This approach displays a conflicting positioning of the Diyanet, walking on a thin line between Islamic humanism and Turkish nationalism, in its efforts to mediate not only between tradition and modernity, by

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<sup>52</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Effort is from believers, victory is from Allah,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (August 24, 2018), <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/HutbelerListesiIngilizce/Effort%20is%20from%20Believers,%20Victory%20is%20from%20Allah.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Rahmet’in Hicreti,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, T.C. Ankara Valiliği İl Müftülüğü Hutbe Arşivi* (November 1, 2013), <https://ankara.diyamet.gov.tr/Sayfalar/contentdetail.aspx?MenuCategory=Kurumsal&contentid=241>.

<sup>54</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Zaferler Allah’tandır,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, T.C. Ankara Valiliği İl Müftülüğü Hutbe Arşivi* (August 30, 2013), <https://ankara.diyamet.gov.tr/Sayfalar/contentdetail.aspx?MenuCategory=Kurumsal&contentid=241>.

<sup>55</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Fetih Şuuru,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, T.C. Ankara Valiliği İl Müftülüğü Hutbe Arşivi* (May 25, 2012), <https://ankara.diyamet.gov.tr/Sayfalar/contentdetail.aspx?MenuCategory=Kurumsal&contentid=241>.

<sup>56</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Our Nation’s Struggle for Existence: The Victory of Çanakkale,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (March 16, 2018), <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/HutbelerListesiIngilizce/Our%20Nation%20E2%80%99s%20Struggle%20For%20Existence%20The%20Victory%20Of%20C3%87anakkale.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, “Milletçe Yeniden Doğuş: 15 Temmuz,” *Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cuma Hutbeleri* (July 13, 2018), <http://www2.diyamet.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/HutbelerListesi/Millet%C3%A7e%20Yeniden%20Do%C4%9Fu%C5%9F%2015%20Temmuz.pdf>.

interpreting the Quranic teaching in the light of the contemporary developments, but also by negotiating belongings – Turkish national and universal Muslim and mitigating tensions between the sacred and profane.

The khutba is a powerful tool for fundraising too, with believers being encouraged to donate. Diyanet carries out its charitable campaigns through the Türkiye Diyanet Foundation. Since 2011 the foundation has run several campaigns like “Now is the Time to Help Syria” (2012), “It’s Time to Help the Turkmens” (2015), “Now is the Time to Heal the Wounds” (2016) or “Don’t Let Humanity Die in Aleppo” (2017), raising donations worth more than 197 million TL as for 2017<sup>58</sup>. Helping refugees is considered a form of zakat, a religious obligation of Muslims to donate a part of their wealth, which constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. Diyanet’s explanation of the At-Tawbah Surah<sup>59</sup> includes refugees or people “who had to leave their country due to various pressures even though they had goods and property in their country” as recipients of zakat<sup>60</sup>.

Diyanet also runs a fetva hotline service, which provides Islamic guidance related to various matters or questions with the aim to encourage “callers to harmonize their daily lives with the principles of Islam”<sup>61</sup>. In addition to Turkish, the fetva service is available in Arabic, English and German<sup>62</sup>. However, the number of Syrian refugees using the hotline is low<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Faaliyet Raporu* (2017), 64,

[https://tdvmedia.blob.core.windows.net/tdv/files/Media/Files/raporlar/TDV\\_2017\\_FaaliyetRaporu.pdf](https://tdvmedia.blob.core.windows.net/tdv/files/Media/Files/raporlar/TDV_2017_FaaliyetRaporu.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Quran. The 60<sup>th</sup> verse specifically refers to the duty of *zakat*: “Zakāh expenditures are only for the poor and for the needy and for those employed for it and for bringing hearts together [for Islām] and for freeing captives [or slaves] and for those in debt and for the cause of Allāh and for the [stranded] traveler - an obligation [imposed] by Allāh. And Allāh is Knowing and Wise.” - English translation available on *Quran.com*.

<sup>60</sup> “Tevbe Suresi - 60 . Ayet Tefsiri”, *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Kur'an-ı Kerim Portalı* (2023), <https://kuran.diyanet.gov.tr/tefsir/Tevbe-suresi/1295/60-ayet-tefsiri>.

<sup>61</sup> Svante Cornell, “The Rise of Diyanet: the Politicization of Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs”, *The Turkey Analyst* (9 October 2015),

<https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/463-the-rise-of-diyanet-the-politicization-of-turkey%E2%80%99s-directorate-of-religious-affairs.html>

<sup>62</sup> “Alo Fetva 190”, *Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu* (2023), <https://fetva.diyanet.gov.tr/>.

<sup>63</sup> Merve Terlemez, “Toplumsal Kabul ve Uyum Süreci Açısından Kent Sakinlerinin Suriyeli Sığınmacılara Yönelik Algısı: Konya Örneği,” (Master’s thesis, Selçuk Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Konya, 2020), 148-149.

Diyanet's involvement in the management of the Syrian refugee crisis is not limited to raising donations and promoting tolerance through its sermons. The Presidency enabled young Syrians to continue (or start) formal education through the project "I am aware therefore I stand by you". In 2018 there were 12,978 students registered in 17 schools in Ankara, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Kilis. Besides the Diyanet personnel, the success of the project is ensured by 226 Syrian volunteer teachers<sup>64</sup>. The project included Turkish language courses to Syrian graduate and undergraduate students who wanted to continue their education in Turkey<sup>65</sup>.

Many Syrians will probably never go back to their country, given that they have built a life in Turkey, thus, instead of returning to Syria they might turn into a large minority<sup>66</sup>. Diyanet's support for the refugees' settling in Turkey<sup>67</sup> coupled with the decision to grant Turkish citizenship to some Syrians<sup>68</sup> reminds us of the fate of the modern muhajirin - Muslim immigrants from the Balkans, Caucasus, Russia, and the Middle East - who were assimilated into Turkish culture a century ago. Initially, the word vatan or homeland was used to define the "place of birth"<sup>69</sup>, however, between 1856 and 1878, when millions of Muslims from the Crimea, Caucasus, and the Balkans were forced to leave their countries, the homeland acquired a new meaning, respectively a safe haven where Muslims could perpetuate their faith, culture, and traditions. The hijrah principle or the obligation to migrate to countries under Muslim rule, facilitated a major human flow to the Ottoman Empire<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> "Projelerimiz: "Farkındayım Yanıbaşındayım," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı*, <https://www.tdv.org/tr-TR/site/projelerimiz/farkindayim-yanibasindayim-1054>.

<sup>65</sup> Sabrina D. Misir Hiralall, Christopher L. Fici, Gerald S. Vigna, *Religious Studies Scholars as Public Intellectuals* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> Tim Jacoby, Roger Mac Ginty, Bülent Şenay, "The Vaiz(e) and Syrian Refugees in Bursa," *Turkish Area Studies Review, Bulletin of the British Association for Turkish Area Studies* (2017), 37, <http://batas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/TASR-No29.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> "This land is your land, Turkish religious authority tells Syrian refugees," *Hürriyet Daily News* (March 2, 2017), <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/this-land-is-your-land-turkish-religious-authority-tells-syrian-refugees--110369>.

<sup>68</sup> "Turkey processing citizenship for 50,000 Syrians, interior ministry official says," *Hürriyet Daily News* (September 22, 2017), <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-processing-citizenship-for-50000-syrians-interior-ministry-official-says-118290>.

<sup>69</sup> Taner Akçam, "Türk Ulusal Kimliği Üzerine Bazı Tezler," in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce, İslamcılık*, eds. Tanıl Bora and Murat Gültekinil (İstanbul, İletişim, 2005), 54.

<sup>70</sup> Kemal H. Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 330.

Even though, as seen, most Turks oppose the naturalization of Syrian refugees, the common Sunni Islamic religious affiliation, recent developments, and history give us reasons to consider the possibility that some refugees might share the fate of modern muhajirins, being assimilated into the Turkish nation. Of course, such a scenario requires, above all, linguistic assimilation, integration of Syrian refugees into the labor market – a challenging aspect considering the country’s current economic situation – and larger social inclusion.

### **Conclusions:**

Stronger national identification is generally linked to negative attitudes towards immigrants and minorities. Turkey is not an exception in this regard, Syrian refugees often being regarded as the undesired „Others“. The present paper shows that Islamic narratives focusing on common Sunni Islamic belonging of most Turks and Syrian refugees can provide for softening negative attitudes towards refugees. Motifs in the khutbas associated with humanistic Islam such as brotherhood, unity, tolerance, and justice successfully serve this purpose. However, Diyanet is a state-controlled institution, supporting the state’s ideology, and as a result, navigating contradictions and negotiating values. On the one hand, Diyanet has played a key role in legitimizing the AKP’s refugee policy, by using the metaphors of the Quranic ansar (helper) and muhajirin (migrants), in the spirit of humanistic values. On the other hand, the Presidency is also actively promoting national identification, by praising the Turkish nation’s superiority and celebrating nonreligious national holidays, having to mediate between humanistic Islamic and national values. The present research does not include Diyanet’s activities in Turkey-controlled Northern Syria after the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch Operations and is limited to the 2011-2018 period. Further research is needed to compare Diyanet’s religious narratives and activities in Turkey and Syria to deepen our understanding of Diyanet’s management of the Syrian refugee crisis and reveal potential layers of support for or disapproval of the government’s policy.

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