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Secularism, Religion, and Identification beyond Binaries: The Transnational Alliances, Rapprochements, and Dissent of German Turks in Germany

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Abstract

This article discusses the ways in which power-based socio-political shifts in Turkey during the AKP (Justice and Development Party) era transnationally influence the relations between and within the Muslim German Turkish communities and their organizations in Germany. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, archival research and reflexive discourse analysis, this article takes DITIB (The Turkish Islamic Union of Religious Affairs) in Germany, which is the affiliate organization of Diyanet (The Presidency of Religious Organization) in Turkey, and analyses its relations with other German Turkish organizations such as Milli Görüş (The Islamic Community of National Vision) and the Gülen Movement in Germany. Such analysis reveals the dynamics of competition between secular and religious, as well as intra-religious, actors and how their members claim their religious and socio-political rights beyond binaries.

Keywords: Religion; Diyanet/DITIB; Milli Görüş; Gülen Movement; German Turks.

Introduction

German Turks² and their socially, politically, religiously, ethnically, and culturally heterogeneous organizations reflect the dynamic transnational power relations between states, non-state organizations, and individuals. These organizations shape the socio-political relations in different localities of Germany, Turkey, and Europe. Among them, Muslim German Turks, i.e. German Turks who affiliate themselves with Sunni identity, and their religious and socio-political organizations, play a significant role in claiming their religious freedoms and socio-political rights and liberties as citizens of Germany and Turkey. The heterogeneous political and social consequences and formations of their transnationality (Faist, 2011 in Beilschmidt, 2013) shape Muslim German Turks' everyday claim-making (Adar, 2009) and identification processes (Jenkins, 2004), as well as the discourses and policies they develop in relation to the state and other organizations' policies.

This article looks at the ways in which power-based socio-political shifts in Turkey during the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) era transnationally influence the relations between and within the Muslim German Turkish communities and organizations in Germany. Starting in 2011, the AKP's liberal political approach during its first two governing periods gradually shifted to a radically authoritarian one. This shift became particularly pronounced with the 17-25 December 2013 corruption cases. After the coup attempt of 15 July 2016, the shift reached its zenith and became

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² By German Turks, I refer to Turkish descent individuals in Germany of whom a remarkable share of were born and raised in Germany.



a well-established cornerstone of AKP rule. This has not only caused corresponding shifts in the AKP's religious political alliances, but also led to increasingly tense political relations between Germany and Turkey. In turn, this tension has put additional pressure on the Muslim Turkish institutions and communities in Germany.

The focus of this article is on the alliances, rapprochements, and dissent not only between Muslim German Turkish communities, but also within them. This focus is informed by broader ethnographic and archival research which begun in Turkey in 2013, and in Germany in 2018, and continues to the present. The research includes several in-depth interviews, including with the presidents of *Diyanet* (The Presidency of Religious Affairs) in Ankara and DITIB (*Türkisch-Islamische Union der Anstalt für Religion e.V.*, The Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) in Cologne. In addition, the article is based on interviews with several members and volunteers of *Diyanet*, DITIB, and other religious communities both in Turkey and Germany, for example, *Milli Görüş* (*Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Görüş*, The Islamic Community of National Vision) and *Gülen* Movements' *Süleymanlılar* (*Verband der Islamischen Kulturzentren -VIKZ*, The Association of Islamic Culture Centers), AABF (*Alevitische Gemeinde Deutschland*, *Federation of German Alevi Associations*), German Turkish Society (*Türkische Gemeinde in Deutschland*), and KOMKAR (*Verband der Vereine aus Kurdistan in Deutschland e.V.*, Federation of Associations from Kurdistan in Germany). The interviews were conducted in Turkish and at locations of the respondents own choice, such as their offices, the respective mosques at which they worship, the cafes they frequent, or, in some cases, their homes in Ankara, Berlin, Cologne, and Istanbul. To analyze the data gathered, reflexivity and feminist critical discourse analysis are employed as analytical tools to identify the multi-dimensional shifts in social and political power relations (Ransom, 1993; Alvesson et al., 2000).

It is this methodological framework which guides the article in exploring how the politics of religious dissent shifted during the AKP period, as well as the translation of the meanings attributed to the religious and the secular in the transnational space between Turkey and Germany. This methodology also allows the paper to examine the heterogeneous discourses, policies, and practices of religious institutions and their members to continue with their transnational claim-making processes in Germany and/or Turkey.

In order to carry out this examination, I analyze the transnational identification, policy-making processes, and heterogeneous composition of German Turks and their organizations in several critical intersectional dimensions. I start by discussing the ways in which secularism (Asad, 2003; Fox, 2015) and the politics of religion, specifically Islam, have been practiced both in Turkey and Germany. Following this, I seek to identify the shifts in alliances, rapprochements, and dissent triggered by the shifts in opportunities, obstacles, interests (Jenkins 2004), and threat perceptions that Muslim German Turkish organizations and individuals feel in their everyday socio-political relations with one another and the German and Turkish states. Finally, I highlight the discourses and policies that Muslim German Turks as individuals or as groups within their organizations develop beyond the binary oppositions which political power holders produce and promote. Such a multi-dimensional intersectional analysis has the potential to foreground the meanings attributed to the secular, the religious, the national, and the democratic beyond the binaries. Furthermore, in all these interactions with one another and with the German and Turkish states, Muslim German Turks create what Mignolo calls 'border-thinking' (Mignolo, 2000), in other words, a frame of mind which not only aims to understand and express knowledge from a subaltern point of view, but also closes the gap between opposite knowledge and terminologies, creating, in Mignolo's words (2000:18), a 'dialogue with the debate on the universal/particular'.



Secularism, Religion, and Beyond

Elaborating the political doctrine of secularism and its relation with the secular and the religious as concepts in modern everyday power relations is crucial in comprehending the current transnational social and political shifts of alliances, rapprochements, and dissent between individuals, the state, and non-state actors of Muslim German Turks. In this respect, I find the respective theoretical approaches of Asad and Fox particularly inspiring, for they allow us to understand not only how and why secularism was formed in Turkey the way it was, but also how and why the relations between the secular (nation) state and religious actors have shifted in Turkey over time. Furthermore, they also offer us a conceptual framework to understand why the German state has given free rein on its own soil to a religious state institution of Turkey.

According to Asad, secularism is a political doctrine ‘by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion’ (Asad, 2003: 5). The secular is that integral part of secularism which engenders modern behaviors, knowledge(s), sensibilities, and governance (Asad, 2003). Values attributed to what is understood as the secular and the religious are shaped in an intersectional way beyond the exclusionary binaries and, in many cases, secular overlaps with the religious (Asad, 2003). However, in the context of the modern nation-state, the secular and the religious have been dichotomously connected to one another. As Dressler argues, Asad’s historicizing criticism of ‘the work’ of the secular and the religious ‘in the formation of modern discourses and subjectivities has radically challenged (the essentialist perspective of) both secularist and religionist approaches to religion’ (2013: 85).

Fox, for his part, focuses on the tension between the secular and the religious and develops what he calls the ‘competition perspective’ (2015) to understand the role of religion in politics in the modern era. According to Fox, in the ‘secular-religious competition perspective’, secularism poses an ideological challenge to religion in political and social areas (Fox, 2015). Yet he also makes a point of underlining the fact that ‘neither religion nor secularist ideologies are monolithic’ and that there are ‘clearly divisions and competition within... the secular and religious camps’ as well (Fox 2015, 18). In order to flesh out the competition perspective, Fox prefers a narrower concept of political secularism which he defines as ‘an ideology or set of beliefs advocating that religion ought to be separate from all or some aspects of politics and/or public life’ (2015: 28). Fox refers to Casanova (2000) to argue that, thus defined, political secularism is a ‘statecraft principle’ which separates and excludes religion from political authority.

In the case of Turkey, religion plays a significant role in the formation not only of the nation, but also of what Asad calls the secular.³ Following the Ottoman path, founding elites of the Turkish Republic aimed to control religion’s role by adopting a unifying approach centered around Islam. Forged through various secular legislation and state institutions (Gözyayın, 2009; Azak, 2010; Dressler, 2013), a Sunni (Hanefi), Muslim, Turkish identity was made the central element which gives unity to the nation. In this process, religion became so central to what is referred to as *laiklik* that it became a politically loaded concept (Cizre, 1996). As the goal of the founding elites was to tightly control the religious practices in the public sphere (Özyürek, 2006), the aim of the secularist-laicist approach has evolved to restrict and control public religious activities and institutions (Kuru, 2009; Haynes, 1997).

³In this study, I use Asad’s conceptualization of the secular to understand the interrelation between religion and secularism in the formation of the nation-state. As Gözyayın (2020) argues, an in-depth analysis focusing on the archeology of the secular since the Ottoman era still needs to be done.

This approach became the reference point for the continuation of the top-down nationalist state policies, engendering the laic (Kemalist) – Islamist competition, to use Fox's terminology. This competition, in turn, resulted in fundamental values built around two poles in which laic values are considered progressive, while religious/Islamic values are considered backward (Azak, 2010). Kemalist laicism can be considered as 'both a value system and an identity that becomes manifest in the symbols of those who identified themselves with that system' and excludes the ones who are not identified with these values (Mutluer, 2016: 41).

This competition in the socio-political arena notwithstanding, there is a common-ground which both religious and secular camps share. By integrating the intersection of corporatism, populism, and nationalism as the basis of its ideology, Kemalism tried to absorb possible right-wing conservative challenges (Çiğdem, 2004). Thus, with Kemalism on one side and Turkish conservatism and Islamism on the other, both shaped their relations with secularism by embracing the political, economic, and social outcomes of modernization while rejecting its cultural and intellectual ramifications. As a result, a culture that assimilates political and social categories became the principal modern basis for both camps (Çiğdem, 2004). The main differences they have stemmed from the different values they embrace in the cultural realm and from their different positions in the power hierarchy. It is these two differences which underpin what Fox (2015) would call their 'secular-religious competitive positioning' vis-a-vis one another.

Even though laicists on one side and conservatives and Islamists on the other were locked in a secular - religious competition in Fox's sense, the common ground which they both shared allowed, particularly during the Cold War, the joining of forces in the anti-communist camp. On the one hand, secular establishment bureaucrats and elites saw Islamism/Conservatism as an antidote to what they considered to be the bigger and more serious threat of communism. On the other, the Islamists were happy to develop alliances with the establishment whenever they were allowed to do so (Özkan, 2020). Since the 1950s, Islamists and conservatives have been active in politics and invariably side with the state on the many occasions in which the state decides to crack down on the left. This 'anti-communist alliance' became particularly pronounced after the 1980 coup when state secularism started to gain a manifestly Islamic tone (Parla, 1986). The irony of the matter was that the same state bureaucracy that, particularly after the 1980 and 1997 coups, tried to forcibly oust Islamists from whatever public service positions they were occupying also allowed them to gain strength in such positions (Çiğdem, 2004; Özkan, 2020). While the 1980 coup resulted in the left's erasure (Laçiner, 2004), particularly after the 1990s Islamists and conservatives found a chance to increase their visibility and popular credibility in the political arena (Çiğdem, 2004; Yavuz, 2009). Thus, the AKP's election to power in 2002 was a victory for Islamism and conservatism which had been in the making since at least the beginning of the Cold War.

During these decades in which secular and religious actors both competed with one another and formed anti-communist alliances, there was only one state institution which was charged with the task of regulating Muslim religious affairs in Turkey, namely *Diyânet*. Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, *Diyânet*, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, is the only institution officially allowed to regulate Sunni Muslim religious affairs and serve citizens who profess that faith. *Diyânet's* primary purpose has been to act as 'an ideological apparatus' of the Turkish state (Öztürk, 2016). The institution was granted and used a certain degree of administrative autonomy, but politically its main function was that of a 'belt of transmission to convey to society the ideology of the governments' (Ozzano et al., 2019: 472). Depending on the governments' policies, *Diyânet's* budget, activities, and service areas were restricted in some periods and expanded in others (Mutluer, 2014; Mutluer, 2018).



Diyânet has full control over the mosques in Turkey. There is no legal and official mosque or Sunni religious organization in Turkey which is not under the purview of *Diyânet*. This means that there is no other venue for Sunni Muslim groups to practice their religion other than at *Diyânet*'s state-controlled mosques. This does not mean, however, that various religious communities have simply disappeared. Many of them, like *Millî Görüş* and the *Gülen* Movement, have carried on their underground activities and, thanks to their transnational connections, have maintain their social, economic, and political strength. Germany was one of the countries, and perhaps the most important one, in which such communities found a free rein to nurture a transnational social and economic power base.

DITIB: transnational secular-religious actor

The German Turkish transnational field has played a significant role in the formation of political Islam in both countries. The politics of Islam has been an issue for Germany since the 1950s. With its increasing Muslim migrant worker population, Germany found itself confronted with the necessity of regulating hundreds of imams, places of worship, and Islamic organizations. The intensifying transnational activities of Islamic groups of Turkish origin, like *Millî Görüş*, *Gülen* Movement, and *Süleymanlılar* (Seufert 1999; Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Yurdakul, 2009; Yurdakul, et.al. 2009), accentuated this. Especially after the 1979 Iranian revolution, Germany started considering political Islam as a potential security threat and increased its determination to regulate and control political Islam. Some scholars, notably Özkan (2019), argue that the perceived 'communist threat' also motivated Germany to regulate and keep political Islam as a controlled political actor. As such, the politics of Islam in Germany have been shaped in a transnational ambiguity between safeguarding the freedoms of conscience and speech of Muslim individuals and communities, and regulating Islamic organizations as controlled political actors (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Yurdakul, 2009; Yurdakul et al., 2009; Özkan, 2019).

Under these circumstances, Turkey became an attractive partner for Germany during the Cold War era as they were both positioned in the anti-communist Western camp. As a result, Germany saw Turkey and its state institution *Diyânet* as a tame and safe alternative to provide political stability and control any possible extremist activities at the grass-root level. After all, the task of *Diyânet* was described in the Article 136 of the 1982 Turkish constitution, written by the 1980 junta, as:

“remaining over and above all political views and thoughts and performing its legally assigned duties under the guidance of the principle of secularism and adopting national solidarity and integration as its sole purpose”⁴

The 1980's *Diyânet* interpretation of Islam, often referred to as 'official/reformed secular state Islam', was seen more adaptable to the secular European public values. Germany thus gave a green light to the foundation of DITIB precisely because of its official links with the powerful state institution of Turkey, *Diyânet*.

In 1984, DITIB was founded as an umbrella organization of around 200 mosques of Turkish migrants with a special agreement between Germany and Turkey. It is directly linked with the Turkish state institution *Diyânet*. The president of DITIB is appointed by the Turkish state and holds a diplomatic status as a Religious Services Advisor (*Din Hizmetleri Müşaviri*) at the Turkish Embassy in Berlin. The imams of DITIB mosques are sent by *Diyânet*, and are funded by the Turkish state. In other words,

⁴<https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2010/03/20100319-17.htm>

imams serving in DITIB mosques in Germany are public servants of the Turkish state. Today, DITIB is the biggest Muslim organization of Turkish-German citizens with its 960 mosques affiliated to 14 federal states. DITIB provides general education and cultural activities, youth and woman branches reaching out to the majority of the Turkish Sunni-Muslim community in Germany, and links to the German society with its intercultural and inter-religious dialogue activities.

DITIB follows *Diyanet* in executing services regarding Islamic (Sunni) faith and practices, in enlightening society about religion, and in carrying out the management of places of worship. However, in many cases the information given through DITIB venues goes beyond religion to include messages promoting Turkish nationalism or commenting on current political controversies. In some of my interviews with DITIB volunteers, both from Berlin and Cologne, respondents said that it was commonplace to hear messages about the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK (*Partiya Karaken Kurdistan*, The Kurdistan Workers Party) in the 1990s. More recently, the official and unofficial statements of imams and DITIB officials include frequent references to such politically loaded subjects like the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey or Turkey's military incursion into the Afrin region of northern Syria in 2018. In my interviews with DITIB's officials, they made a point of emphasizing that DITIB imams never go into such political matters in their sermons. However, the *Diyanet*'s President's public statements in Ankara on the same politically loaded subjects raises the question of how the imams, who are *Diyanet* appointed civil servants of the Turkish state, can ignore *Diyanet* president's statements (Mutluer, 2014; Mutluer, 2018) Nevertheless, among other Muslim German Turks' mosques, the DITIB's mosques in Germany still provide a relatively neutral space for Muslims who do not want to affiliate themselves with other political-religious communities.

Germany has developed regulations for its Muslim inhabitants, yet it took time for the German state to accept that Muslim migrant communities in Germany are permanent parts of the German society. It was only in 1999 that Germany started to naturalize the newborn children of the migrant population by introducing the new citizenship law, *Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz*. In 2006, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the then Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, emphasized the fact that 'Islam is a part of Germany and that the German society welcomes its 14.5 million people with a migration background' (Rosenow-Williams and Kortmann, 2013: 53). Yet in my research I heard from different Muslim German Turkish community members what has already been well documented by previous studies: although Germany's recognition of the permanence of the Muslim population is welcomed by the community and their organizations, they still feel alienated and in some cases stigmatized. As one of my interviewees said, 'Germany still confuses integration with assimilation'.⁵

This being the case, DITIB's perception of Muslim German Turks and their position in German society reflects the common ground which both Kemalists, Islamists, and conservatives all share in their understanding of Turkish secularism. Following research of scholars like Yükleven and Yurdakul, I also observe that DITIB encourages the improvement of the socio-economic status of Muslim German Turks but also aims at 'maintaining the loyalty of Turks to the Turkish state and nation and shows no tolerance for debates that criticize the Turkish state' (2011:70). As such, being part of German society culturally and intellectually is not an idea which finds much support in DITIB. However, against the official approach of DITIB, there is a heterogeneity of discourses and practices among the grassroots of the organization and even among some DITIB officials.

⁵ Interview dated 27 November 2019 in Cologne.



Germany has always had a cautious relationship with political Islam. DITIB has long been regarded as a ‘good Muslim organization’ because of its close ties with the state organization of secular Turkey, namely *Diyanet*, and its activities are more controlled in comparison to other organizations like *Milli Görüş* in Turkey (Yurdakul, 2009) or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria (Özkan, 2019).

Competition within Transnational Religious Actors

As argued by Fox, secular and religious are not monolithic and the competition between ‘religious and secular ideologies is also complemented by struggles between subsets of these ideologies’ (2015, 37). There has been an ongoing competition between the actors within these categories as well. The tensions between religious actors arises not necessarily or mainly from their religious differences, but from the competing power positions that they want to hold in in their relations with one another. This is the case with the religious organizations of Muslim German Turks. Depending on opportunities, obstacles, and interests in everyday power relations, individuals, communities, and/or state and non-state organizations identify with, or distinguish from, each other (Jenkins, 2004). As such identification processes are based on power relations, we see shifts in transnational alliances and disassociations among religious organizations (in our case DITIB, *Milli Görüş*, and the *Gülen* Movement) and/or states (in our case the German and Turkish states). The AKP’s political turn from democratic conservative to authoritarian had a transnational impact on the positioning of *Milli Görüş* and the *Gülen* Movement in this power hierarchy.

Milli Görüş is the second largest Turkish association in Germany after DITIB with 15 regional associations and 323 mosques. Its organizational activities in Germany started in the 1970s around the political and spiritual ideas of former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, and these ideas were institutionalized as IGMG (Islamische Gemeinschaft *Milli Görüş*) in Germany in 1995. *Milli Görüş* also organized itself in a successive series of political parties in Turkey. However, each time a party was founded, it was eventually banned by the constitutional court citing activities contrary to the separation of religion and state (the main principle of Turkish state secularism) and a new party had to be formed. The political oppression in Turkey led the movement to strengthen itself transnationally (Yurdakul, 2009). Although their Islamic political ideas were banned, they still manage to influence their members in Turkey.

Milli Görüş has long been under surveillance by *Verfassungsschutz* (The Federal Office of Protection of Constitution), the German intelligence agency, mainly because of its Islamist ideas (Yükleyen et al., 2011) and alleged relations with Islamist groups in the Middle East, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Vielhaber, 2012). As a result, *Milli Görüş* was regarded as a threat to both German and Turkish societies by their respective states (Yükleyen et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the community members of *Milli Görüş* are heterogeneous in their level of social and political identification to both the German state and society. Although, in comparison to DITIB, the institution has managed to amend its institutional structure in time, *Milli Görüş* is more engaged in making their demands public, such as speaking out against religious discrimination, and it is still monitored by *Verfassungsschutz* (Yurdakul, 2009; Rosenow-Williams, 2014). This situation demotivates members of *Milli Görüş* to identify themselves with the German state and society. As one of my interviewees said:

“*Milli Görüş* in Germany and Europe has changed in time and has become a more democratic, transparent institution. It cut its ties with fundamentalist groups. Yet still this does not seem to be enough for the German state to accept us as part of this society”.⁶

From the 1980s to around the 2010s, DITIB and *Milli Görüş* were positioned as binary opposites in Germany. If DITIB was regarded as the ‘good Muslim organization’, *Milli Görüş* was regarded as the ‘bad’ one (Yurdakul, 2009). Moreover, both organizations distanced themselves from one another because of their relationship with the Turkish state. Their members refrained from going to each other’s mosques and, even though some of my interviewees said that there were some religious differences between them, the distance they keep is better understood as reflective of competition in the religious camp, in Fox’s sense.

Today, President Erdoğan himself comes from the tradition of *Milli Görüş*. Erdoğan was one of the disciples of Erbakan and a leading figure in the *Refah Partisi* (Prosperity Party), the political forerunner to *Milli Görüş* until late 1990s. In the early days after his resignation from the Prosperity Party, to becoming one of the leading founders of the AKP in 2002, Erdoğan publicly declared that ‘he has taken off the *Milli Görüş* shirt’ and started to follow a new path.⁷ In its party program in 2004, the AKP positioned itself as a ‘conservative democratic’ political party committed to ‘protecting differences within unity’ (Akdoğan, 2004).

When the AKP was elected for the first time in 2002, Erdoğan appointed well-educated members of the *Gülen* Movement to key governmental positions in order to securely ‘govern the country and closely monitor the military with the help of the police force’ (Yavuz et al., 2016: 136). The *Gülen* Movement had long had an ‘erstwhile dark network’ of influence (Watmough et al., 2018) and this was entrenched in the police force, intelligence service, and state bureaucracy after its coalition with the AKP (Yavuz, 2003; Yavuz et al., 2016). As such, Erdoğan’s metaphor of ‘taking off the *Milli Görüş* shirt’ can also be seen as a symbolic gesture signaling Erdoğan’s shifting alliance from *Milli Görüş* to the *Gülen* Movement in order to consolidate his government’s power.

The *Gülen* Movement’s spiritual leader, Fethullah Gülen, takes Said Nursi’s religious perspective as his spiritual base. In Germany during the 1990s, the *Gülen* Movement organized its activities around educational and learning centers, and the Movement’s newspaper *Zaman* had a German edition. It was, and still is, far more successful than the other religious organizations of Muslim German Turks because of its loose networking ability, intercultural as well as inter-religious activities, and its structural visibility and accessibility to the German authorities (Andrews, 2011). The movement does not have its own mosques and until very recently Movement followers preferred to go to DITIB mosques. My interviewees tell me that many *Gülen* Movement members also took active roles in the management of DITIB mosques.⁸ However, members of the Movement used to stay away from *Milli Görüş* mosques especially as *Milli Görüş* used to be in the bad books of the Turkish state.

The *Gülen* Movement used to be a pro-state, Turkish nationalist movement and served as an actor in the transnational soft power strategies of the AKP, particularly when it came to developing connections with German actors. Two of my interviewees from the *Gülen* Movement reminisced about how they were contacted by Turkish state officials during the AKP era to organize events for

⁶ Interview dated on 29 November 2019 in Cologne.

⁷ <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/milli-gorusle-gurur-duyuyorum-5178071>

⁸ Interviews between March 2019 and January 2020 in Berlin and Cologne.



Turkey or to develop transparent connections and, in some cases, public events.⁹ The Movement also enjoyed the recognition and acceptance of local and national public authorities in Germany. One of the above mentioned interviewees tells me that when the Federal State authorities had a message to convey to the religious Muslim community in Germany, they did so by talking at one of their events or to the *Gülen* Movement's newspaper *Zaman*.¹⁰

AKP, DITIB, and the *Gülen* Movement were allies until it became public knowledge that the *Gülen* Movement and the AKP government parted company after the Movement released evidence of corruption implicating the Erdogan government (what is known as the 17 and 25 December 2013 events). This was the moment when the AKP and the *Gülen* Movement became opponents. The attempted coup, which the AKP government claims to have been masterminded by Fethullah Gülen, happened two years later on 15 June 2016. In September 2016, *Diyanet* demanded that DITIB imams collect intelligence about *Gülen* Movement members. In 2017, after this espionage affair became public, the head of the Turkish Intelligence Service, Hakan Fidan, handed a dossier to the German government with a list of people and institutions that the Turkish state had put under surveillance.¹¹ The list included institutions and people from the *Gülen* Movement, as well as from Kurdish and leftist circles. German officials subsequently communicated to the people on the list that they were in danger and should not travel to Turkey (Adamson, 2020). These steps signaled that the Turkish government sought to export a domestic political conflict 'in the form of extraterritorial repression' (Öztürk et al., 2020: 64).

Since then the financial, personnel, and organizational dependence of DITIB on *Diyanet* is viewed with rising skepticism by German politicians, and is increasingly considered by many as a mixture of religious practice and pursuance of Ankara's political objectives in Germany.¹² In September 2018, one week before the state visit of Erdoğan to Germany, Verfassungsschutz sent a dossier to its local state agencies about DITIB and suggested for the organization to be placed under surveillance. Many local federal states refused to accede to this suggestion arguing that, at a local level, they cooperate closely with DITIB to reach out to Muslim communities and do not want to harm these relations. Because of the refusal of the Federal States, the Verfassungsschutz decided not to put DITIB under surveillance for the time being.¹³ Different than *Milli Görüş* and the *Gülen* Movement, when the heterogeneous grassroots composition of Muslim German Turks who use DITIB services are considered, the concern of local federal governments not to harm their relationship with the Muslim German Turkish community is understandable as different localities have different social and political dynamics.

According to some of my interviewees, the transnational pressure that the Turkish state put on the *Gülen* Movement since 2015 greatly harmed the Movement's institutional power and its members' everyday life. Their relations with the German authorities are on good terms as they believe that Germany tries to protect them, yet they also realize they are no longer invited to all socio-political occasions. There are cracks appearing within the Movement. Some are critical either of the

⁹ Interview dated 8 May 2019 in Berlin and interview dated 9 May 2019 in Berlin.

¹⁰ Interview dated 8 May 2019 in Berlin.

¹¹ <https://www.dw.com/tr/casusluk-krizinin-kronolojisi/a-40391548>

¹² Deutscher Bundestag, wissenschaftliche Dienste, Ausarbeitung: Rechtlicher Status der DITIB. p. 4, 19.07.2018.

¹³ <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/ditib-beobachtung-101.html>

Movement's involvement in politics or in the undemocratic policies of the AKP.¹⁴ Some have grown critical of all the political activities of the *Gülen* Movement and distance themselves from it. In addition to the Turkish state's transnational surveillance and profiling activities, the *Gülen* Movements' members and institutions have been subjected to social lynching and vandalization of their properties, intimidation through threats to their relatives in Turkey, stigmatization, and mobbing. Individuals who were known to be a member of the Movement were forced to resign from their managerial positions at mosques or were chased away. The highest ranking DITIB officials say that there are standing instructions to prevent such things from happening but unfortunately such things happen.¹⁵

The relations between the AKP government and DITIB on one side, and the *Gülen* Movement on the other, led to the formation of a new alliance between the AKP, DITIB, and *Milli Görüş* in Germany. The symbolic turning point that crowns this new alliance is *Diyanel's* President Ali Erbaş's visit to *Milli Görüş's* headquarter in Cologne and a jointly organized public event at a stadium in Bremen. With this visit from one of the high ranking state bureaucrats of Ankara, *Milli Görüş* gained legitimacy. This transnational alliance will surely change the power dynamics within the Muslim Turkish community in Germany.

Seen from Fox's competition perspective however, this newly formed alliance between DITIB and *Milli Görüş* is akin to any other political alliance. As such, it is subject to the whims of shifting threat perceptions and power relations within the religious camp which can change at a moment's notice. Perhaps the most perceptive expression of this insight came from one of my interviewees, a prominent figure of the Muslim Turkish community in Germany, who has been an active member of IMGM (*Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Görüş*): 'Our state either neglects us, or suffocates us.'¹⁶ On the one hand, he sees Erdoğan and the Turkish state as a strong power that protects their 'Muslim' priorities and dignity in the international area. Yet, on the other hand, he also criticizes him and the Turkish state for regarding the Muslim migrants from Turkey as a ready-to-hand force to defend Turkey's interests. Such an approach puts Muslim Turkish migrants in a position where they always feel compelled to justify and defend Turkey's political discourse to German bureaucrats and people. These sentiments suggest that the grassroots level is more heterogeneous than the shifting alliances at the higher levels of the organizational hierarchies.

Thinking beyond Binaries

Since its foundation, DITIB has had a transnational hybrid character as its organizational structure combines both vertical/hierarchical and horizontal/grassroots elements. It is Turkish *Diyanel's* centrally controlled affiliate in Germany and has a hierarchical administrative structure. However, DITIB is also the umbrella organization of grassroots mosque communities. In this hybrid character, power is concentrated in DITIB's headquarters in Cologne but, for Muslim German Turks, the local branches of DITIB in different federal states, as well as the mosques in communities, can wield power through voicing their opinions and influencing the everyday socio-political decision making of the organization. The fact that influence can be wielded at the grassroots level shows that local actors have the capacity to practice the religious, the secular, as well as the democratic in intersectional ways that go beyond well-worn binary oppositions. Furthermore, in all of these interactions Muslim German Turks create what Mignolo calls a 'border-thinking' (2000), namely a frame of mind which

¹⁴ Interview dated 8 May 2019 in Berlin and interviews on April - June 2019 in Berlin, November - December 2019 in Cologne.

¹⁵ Interview with Berlin Embassy Religious Services Advisor President of DITIB dated 3 December 2019 in Cologne.

¹⁶ Interview dated 29 November 2019 in Cologne.



bridges opposite forms of knowledge and terminologies, expressing them from a subaltern point of view and engaging them in a dialogue with the debate on the universal/particular. Grassroots Muslim German Turks interventions in politics represents the potential knowledge and perspective which is nourished by, but at the same time critical of, both German and Turkish states and societies.

The shifts within *Diyamet* from being decentralized and democratic to an authoritarian organization also influence DITIB's approach to its grassroots. When the AKP first came to power in Turkey, it advocated abolishing *Diyamet* as it saw the organization as an obstacle to religious freedoms (Mutluer, 2018). Since abolishing an institution which had an existential significance for Turkish secularism was not easy, the AKP chose to reform *Diyamet* and redesign it to be more responsive to grassroots demands. These steps were also welcomed by the members and volunteers of DITIB as they regarded that moment as an opportunity to have their claims heard and acted upon. They also thought that the decentralization and democratization of DITIB would eventually lead to Islam being recognized under German Law. One of my interviewees expressed the mood of that period:

“for a time we really thought a democratic change could be possible and we could even developed a platform with the involvement of theologians, sociologists etc., where we could provide responses, if necessary reformed responses, to Muslim migrants' religious questions and needs regarding the country they live in”.¹⁷

In 2006, the women, youth, and education branches of DITIB started to be formally institutionalized at the local level in federal states and at the central level in Cologne. In 2009, DITIB's charter was amended to allow for local branches in different Federal States to be organized with their own management structure (Gorzewski, 2015). However, DITIB members and volunteers, as well as many other Muslim German Turks, believe that the short decentralization and transparency period ended around 2014. Some of the ex- and current DITIB members feel that what came after 2014 was the opposite of decentralization; it was a new wave of centralization within DITIB. One example of this can be found in the DITIB's demand that imams and *vaiizes* - women religious preachers - be involved in social activities regarding female and youth issues. Maybe not coincidentally, this policy came at a moment when the AKP attempted to redesign the family in Turkey by restructuring the role of women as 'religious', and *Diyamet* followed suit by signing a protocol with the Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Policy (Mutluer, 2018; Mutluer, 2019). At the time, this new policy of *Diyamet* was not welcomed by DITIB members and volunteers as they did not want to mix the area of the secular with the religious. As one of them said:

“I was told to have women religious preachers in all our activities. I asked them what would be the point of having women religious preachers in social services? We are doing social work for women. Women religious preachers do not have anything to do with that type of work”.¹⁸

As observed by Muslim German Turks who use DITIB mosques, since 2014 the DITIB headquarters used the Turkish consulate-affiliated religious affairs attachés and consulate officials to restrict the activities and stifle the voices of grassroots mosque communities. In one prominent example, told by several interviewees, during the Hessen local branch elections in 2014, the old administration was forced out of office and a new administration installed by DITIB headquarters. Following this, the new administration changed articles of an agreement with the Hessen Ministry of Education, without

¹⁷ Interview dated 28 December 2019 in Cologne.

¹⁸ Interview dated on 9 October 2019 in Berlin.

informing the Ministry. The Ministry found DITIB headquarters' intervention to be contrary to democratic transparency and suspended the agreement. This shows that both the German authorities and the grassroots communities are actors regarding their own rights, and DITIB cannot establish a centralized control over Muslim German Turks as *Diyane*t does to Turks in Turkey, even when it sought to re-centralize DITIB.¹⁹

The 2017 general assembly was another example of re-centralizing tendencies in DITIB. When DITIB headquarters tried to change its charter in a way that would restrict the voting rights of the grassroots mosque communities, it introduced this change in an underhand way. By making use of the language differences between the German and Turkish versions of the charter, DITIB headquarters argued that the change was necessary to bring each version in line. The voting rights of the mosque communities were mentioned in the German version but not in the Turkish and, as the issue was not allowed to be discussed openly during the assembly, the changes were approved despite some local branch delegates' objections.²⁰

According to some ex-volunteers of DITIB, the re-centralization policies went so far that anyone who defended the pluralist and transparent values of the institution were blamed by public servants appointed by *Diyane*t for being thoroughly 'Almanlaşmış' (Germanized). They were further accused of forgetting Turkishness and nationalist feelings. One of my interviewees said that:

“that period was like a ‘take over’. We just wanted a transparent institution that reflects the needs of the grassroots. DITIB’s grassroots are made of people like me, civilians who grew up in DITIB’s mosques. But we were educated and are living in Germany as citizens of this country. We believe in transparency and democracy”.²¹

The new alliance between *Milli Görüş* seems not to be welcomed by all DITIB members and volunteers. Some regard it as the direct intervention of politics into religion and an attack on DITIB’s neutrality.²² Some are also unhappy of being positioned as ‘the diaspora, ready forces to apply the homeland politics’²³ by the Turkish state. Especially those who were born and educated in Germany feel themselves active members of both the Turkish and German communities, but not as a ‘diaspora whose connections are cut off’ as some of them highlight.²⁴

According to some of the ex- and current DITIB and mosque community volunteers and members, one of the main problems of DITIB is in not meeting the needs of Turks in German society, even though the organization has the capacity to do it. It seems *Diyane*t’s approach is much more influential in DITIB’s policy development and decision making process than its grassroots. Nevertheless, the resistance, new discourse, and recent policies developed by local DITIB bodies and mosque communities suggest that coming generations think beyond binaries. It seems that they would like to have more say in the management of their religion in the future.

¹⁹ Interviews between March 2019 and January 2020 in Berlin and Cologne. <https://euturkhaber.com/index.php/2020/05/12/hessen-cyaletinde-ditibin-sorumlulugunda-inanca-dayali-islam-din-dersi-okutulmasına-son-verilmesi-ve-surece-dair-dusunceler/#>

²⁰ Interviews dated 7 March 2019, 12 April 2019, 13 September 2019 in Berlin and 22-25 November 2019, 1-3 December 2019 in Cologne.

²¹ Interview dated on 23 November 2019 in Cologne.

²² Interviews dated March 2019 - January 2020 in Berlin and Cologne.

²³ Interview dated on 24 November 2019 in Cologne.

²⁴ Interviews dated March 2019 - January 2020 in Berlin and Cologne.



Conclusion

The transnational space between Germany and Turkey is shaped by the 'competition' (Fox 2015) within and between religious and secular actors. During the AKP era, power-based socio-political shifts in Turkey, and the accompanying political shifts within *Diyanet*, influenced the relations among and within DITIB, *Milli Görüş*, and *Gülen* Movements in Germany. In order to consolidate the political power of the party he leads, Erdoğan first distanced himself from *Milli Görüş* and approached the *Gülen* Movement during the early 2000s. Subsequently, and especially after 2013 corruption scandal, Erdoğan broke this alliance with the *Gülen* Movement and again started courting the popular support base of *Milli Görüş*. These shifts in Erdoğan's alliances and rapprochements had significant repercussions in the identification processes of the members of *Milli Görüş*, the *Gülen* Movement, and DITIB in Germany.

Since its foundation in the early 1980s, up until Erdoğan's authoritarian turn in the early 2010s, DITIB in Germany was considered by German officialdom as a reliable and trustworthy religious civil society organization of Muslim Turks. They based this on DITIB's close ties with *Diyanet*, and hence with the secular Turkish state. By contrast, German officialdom shunned *Milli Görüş*, despite the organization ardently adhering to the regulatory legal and political framework of Germany. German officials branded *Milli Görüş* as a 'radical Islamic' organization due to its members' Islamist activities in the past and of the critical distance organization kept from DITIB, *Diyanet*, and the secularism understanding of the Turkish State. During this period, the *Gülen* Movement acted as the AKP governments' non-governmental goodwill ambassador in Germany, and even though some of its members were critical of Erdoğan's authoritarian turn, they did not stop collaborating and supporting the Turkish state. This came to an end when Erdoğan and the *Gülen* Movement parted company for good; a long and turbulent break-up which started in 2013, and ended with the 2016 coup attempt.

In the aftermath of the coup attempt, the *Gülen* Movement's fall from grace in Turkey was almost complete, but the civil relations it had cultivated with the German officialdom in the past allowed it to continue its activities in Germany, albeit with a much restricted field of play. By stark contrast to the *Gülen* Movement's fall from grace after 2016, *Milli Görüş* in Germany enjoyed a marked rise in favor with the Turkish State and its relations with DITIB, thus *Diyanet* and the Turkish state.

Amidst these shifts in alliances and rapprochements, my research reveals that there is an emerging new group of dissenting actors in the transnational field between Germany and Turkey. This emerging new group consists of those Muslim Turks living in Germany who have been (and in most cases who still are) affiliated with either DITIB, *Milli Görüş*, or the *Gülen* Movement, but who have grown weary of the skirmishes and competition both within and among these movements, institutions, and the German and Turkish states. These new actors identify themselves simultaneously as German and Turkish, while maintaining a healthy critical distance to both the German and Turkish state policies and practices regarding Muslim Turks living in Germany. As individuals or as members of their mosque communities and/or religious organizations, they develop another way of identifying beyond the established binaries. They are still not strong, but their well-discerned presence says something about what can be expected in the future.

The meanings attributed to the secular and religious are beyond binaries (Asad, 2003), and the values attributed to secularism are shaped by the 'secular and religious actors competition' (Fox 2015). My research suggests that new meanings and new forms of everyday identification with the secular and the religious may emerge among the dissenting group of Muslim Turks living in Germany. Their quest for another way beyond the established binaries gives rise to 'border thinking' (Mignolo, 2000),

enabling them to think through, and be critical of, opposing and different knowledges at the same time.

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