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Discussion

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## The Diyanet of Turkey and Its Activities in Eurasia after the Cold War\*

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The collapse of the Eastern Bloc started a new process for all believers who lived in Eurasia, be they Muslims or not. It was unprecedented in Islamic history that Muslims were forced to choose which road to travel and what method to adopt when their society reemerged from an extended period of oppression by atheist regimes. In Eurasia, there already exist Muslim societies that have established a sound and permanent structure for handling relations between religion and politics, religious administration and education, revival of Islamic culture and civilization, communication between Islamic groups, and relations with other religions. At the same time, there are societies at the first stages of this learning. The atheist regimes destroyed tens of thousands of mosques, *madrasahs* [religious schools], *tekkes* [Sufi training houses], and *zaviyas* [Sufi hermitages] or used them for other purposes, neglected tombs of great sultans, sheikhs, and Islamic scholars, and passed *waqfs* [religious communal properties] to others. Millions of Muslims continued to believe in Islam, but until the 1990s, only the older generation held Islamic knowledge and carried on an Islamic lifestyle, which was sometimes degraded to superstition. In the latter half of the Cold War period, the communist regimes softened their oppressive attitude towards religions. When they collapsed, nevertheless, Muslims in Eurasia found themselves in a vacuum of religious knowledge, they had no mosques in which to pray, no imams to guide the flock, no publications to refer to, and no intellectuals to address their questions. This situation caused the Muslims in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, as well as in many other Islamic countries, and some Islamic groups, to help their co-believers in Eurasia. As Aislu Yunusova remarks: “It is clear to visiting religious figures, researchers and scholars from Muslim countries that most Muslims in Russia do not know the history, norms, procedures and rites of Islam. At best the believers know one or two prayers. Taking advantage of this fact, Muslim preachers, tutors, teachers, or simply adventurers are flocking in from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan. Some Russian Muslim leaders prefer Turkey as a model

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for developing a secular state, others prefer Saudi Arabia, a bulwark of orthodox Islam."<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the 1990s, the number of mosques, schools that provided religious education and religious officials, had decreased to a number incomparable to that of eighty years before. By a similar ratio, this number has been recovered during the last twenty years; there were three hundred mosques in the Russian Socialist Republic in 1990, but, according to the statistics in 2006, this number had risen to eight thousand; in 1991, there were almost no schools that provided Islamic education, but today, there are as many as sixty.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the number of people who are going on pilgrimage to Makka and who participate in Friday prayers and other religious rituals increased dramatically. Without a doubt, financial and spiritual support from Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia has played an important role in this development.

This article examines the activities the *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs, henceforth referred to as the Diyanet) carries out in Eurasia. I will also refer to the activities of *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı* (the Foundation of Turkish Religious Affairs). Since the Diyanet cooperates with numerous Muslim spiritual boards in territories stretching from Mongolia to Croatia, I will endeavor not to describe each case of cooperation in detail, but to balance among cases taken from various parts of Eurasia.

### THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE DIYANET

Today, the Diyanet is one of the most important public institutions in Turkey. The Diyanet employs approximately one hundred thousand personnel and has central and provincial organs. The president, vice president, High Commission of Religious Affairs, Qur'an Verification Commission, and Departments of Religious Services, Religious Education, Hajj [pilgrimage], Religious Publications, and Foreign Affairs compose the central organs, while the provincial organs consist of the province and county muftis' offices, educational centers, and Qur'an courses.<sup>3</sup>

In the Ottoman era, the office of the sheikh-ul-Islam provided religious services, one of the functions that the Diyanet carries out today.<sup>4</sup> On May 3,

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1 Aislu Yunusova, "Islam between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains," Lena Jonson and Murad Esenov, eds., *Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute for International Affairs, 1999): [www.ca-c.org/dataeng/07.yunusova.shtm](http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/07.yunusova.shtm) (accessed September 1, 2009).

2 Mark A. Smith, "Islam in the Russian Federation," *Conflict Studies Research Center, Russian Series* 53 (2006), p. 5.

3 On the Diyanet's duties, see: *The Muslim World* 98:2-3 (2008) and [www.diyamet.gov.tr](http://www.diyamet.gov.tr). On the Diyanet's *waqf* see: [www.Diyametvakfi.org.tr/](http://www.Diyametvakfi.org.tr/).

4 İrfan Bozan, *Devlet ile Toplum Arasında Bir Okul: İmam Hatip Liseleri, Bir Kurum: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Istanbul: TESEV Publishing, 2007), p. 54 ([www.tesev.org.tr/UD\\_OBJS/PDF/DEMP/BirOkulBirKurum.pdf](http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD_OBJS/PDF/DEMP/BirOkulBirKurum.pdf), accessed September 1, 2009).

1920, after the opening of the Turkish Grand National Assembly on April 23, 1920, a ministry entitled Şeriye ve Evkaf Vekaleti was established and carried out religious services. On March 3, 1924, the Diyanet took over the duties of this ministry. The Diyanet appeared in a constitutional text for the first time in 1961.<sup>5</sup> After that time, a law was promulgated to regulate the Diyanet's sphere of duties and authority and some intellectuals and politicians began to complain that the existence of the Diyanet contravened the Turkish Republic's principle of laicism.<sup>6</sup> For example, the Birlik Party argued that Turkey was a laic state, that there should be no clerics in Islam, and that it is necessary to separate religious and state matters, and that the creation of classes providing religious services contradicted not only laicism as the main guarantee of freedom of faith and conscience in Turkey, but also Atatürk's reforms and general principles of the 1961 Constitution itself. This party appealed to the Constitutional Court to remove the article on the Diyanet from the Constitution. A decision of the Constitutional Court in 1971 ruled that the Diyanet was not a religious institution, but a general administrative institution, and therefore did not contravene laicism.<sup>7</sup>

İştar Gözaydın identifies the Diyanet as an institution established within the framework of domestic law by the founders of the Turkish Republic to protect laicism. The state uses the Diyanet against religion and its possible influence on the sociopolitical situation of the country.<sup>8</sup> İsmail Kara, another excellent specialist, characterizes the Diyanet as an institution trapped between religion and the state.<sup>9</sup> According to Kara, the political center of the state uses the Diyanet as an instrument to impose its religious understanding, which exists within a set of parameters, on society, and thus desires to destroy the efficacy of the social authority of the *ulama* and sheikhs.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Diyanet has been influential in the formation of people's religiosity since 1950.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Ali Bardakoğlu, the current president of the Diyanet, has claimed that laicism does not require a total separation between religion and the state; rather, as the Ottoman example demonstrates, the state and religion can keep one another in balance whereby cooperation between religion

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5 Ibid., p. 56.

6 Ibid., pp. 57-59.

7 <http://209.85.129.132/custom?q=cache:tbq2AcweDxEJ:www.anayasa.gov.tr/eskisite/KARARLAR/IPTALITIRAZ/K1971/K1971-76.htm+Diyanet+1972&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk> (accessed September 1, 2009); *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Publishing, 1997), pp. 38-44. For a detailed evaluation of this issue, see Hadi Adanalı, "The Presidency of Religious Affairs and Principle of Secularism in Turkey," *The Muslim World* 98:2-3 (2008), pp. 234-238.

8 İştar Gözaydın, *Diyanet* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2009), pp. 245-246.

9 İsmail Kara, *Cumhuriyet Türkiyesi'nde Bir Mesele Olarak İslam* (Istanbul: Dergah, 2008), p. 51.

10 Ibid., p. 80.

11 Ejder Okumuş, "Turkey-Religiosity and the PRA," *The Muslim World* 98:2-3 (2008), p. 354.

and the state helps society to develop. Bardakoğlu notes that the decision of the Constitutional Court in 1971 (noted above) shares this understanding.<sup>12</sup> A basic difference between the Diyanet and the sheikh-ul-Islam derives from the fact that the Ottoman Empire was a religious state headed by a caliph who had the authority to appoint the sheikh-ul-Islam, whilst the Turkish Republic, which appoints the president of the Diyanet, is a laic state.<sup>13</sup>

Today, removing the Diyanet from the secular state system is inconceivable. If a political party in Turkey does not recognize the existence of the Diyanet, this party will be banned, since Article 89 of the Political Party Law states: "Political parties cannot have any intentions that are in contravention of Article 136 of the Constitution, which is concerned with the position of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which, in keeping with the principle of laicism, remains removed from all political views and thoughts, which aims for national solidarity and unification and which fulfills the duties laid out in the special law, in the general administration."<sup>14</sup> Because of this article, political parties, except for small left-wing parties, refrain from criticizing the Diyanet's activities, be them domestic or foreign. Since the Diyanet has eventually become part of the prime minister's apparatus, policy changes made by the government (or changes to the government itself) directly affect the Diyanet's activities.<sup>15</sup> In fact, its Eurasian policy tangibly changed after the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002.

### THE DIYANET'S ROLE IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

When the Diyanet's president, İbrahim Elmalı, left the country for the first time to visit Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria to participate in the ceremonies commemorating Prophet Muhammad's birthday in 1966, the press published fervent criticism.<sup>16</sup> The Turkish government recalled Elmalı from Tunisia and he did not go to the other countries.<sup>17</sup> Recently, foreign delegations, both Islamic and non-Islamic, visit the Diyanet at least once a month, to which the Diyanet often makes a return visit.<sup>18</sup> Turkey, unlike Saudi Arabia and Iran,

12 Ali Bardakoğlu, "The Structure, Mission and Social Function of the Presidency of the Religious Affairs (PRA)," *The Muslim World* 98:2-3 (2008), p. 175.

13 İsmail Kara, "Din ile Devlet Arasında Sıkışmış Bir Kurum: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı," *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi*, No: 18 (Istanbul: MÜİF Vakfı Publishing, 2000), pp. 30-31.

14 [www.tbmm.gov.tr/genser/kanun3.html](http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/genser/kanun3.html), Madde: 89 (accessed September 1, 2009).

15 Kara, *Cumhuriyet Türkiyesi'nde*, pp. 80-92.

16 *Milliyet Gazetesi*, June 28, 1966, p. 9.

17 *Milliyet Gazetesi*, June 29, 1966, p. 1 (<http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr/Ara.aspx?araKelime=ibrahim%20elmali&isAdv=false>). I would like to thank Professor Mehmet Görmez for informing me of this site.

18 For example, the president and vice president of the Diyanet visited Bosnia-Herzegovina in September 2009, Kazakhstan and Bashkortostan in July 2009, Georgia in June 2009, and Belgium in April 2009. On the other hand, in July 2009, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian

is a laicist state, but the Diyanet has expanded its foreign activities over the last thirty years. A reason for this expansion was the end of the Cold War; the world now appears to be demarcated by “civilizations” that allegedly clash and reconcile. In this situation, religions can easily be converted into a sphere of international relations. In 1998, for example, despite being a secular state and pursuing foreign affairs in a secular manner, the US Congress adopted the International Religious Freedom Act and created an ambassador, fully authorized in matters of international religious freedom, in the State Department as well as a commission for the same purpose. In addition, there was an international religious freedom advisor appointed to the National Security Council.<sup>19</sup> Since 2001, these bodies have published the International Religious Freedom Reports, evaluating various countries.<sup>20</sup> This law allows the US government to impose economic and political sanctions against countries that violate religious freedom, as is currently implemented.<sup>21</sup> The United States maintains that this law does not contradict the concept of secular foreign policy. A similar phenomenon can be seen in Russia’s foreign policy. In the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church became responsible for developing a new national identity. On the other hand, the Russian Orthodox Church established strong ties along the Black Sea Rim and Eastern Slavic countries.<sup>22</sup> As a part of this process, the Russian Orthodox Church became a rival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Greek Patriarchate of the Phanar).<sup>23</sup> The Diyanet’s expanding function in international politics lies in the same context.

Moreover, the worldwide debates on Islam after September 11 facilitated Turkey’s commitment to international religious politics via the Diyanet. Turkey as an Islamic country guided by laicism had advantages in maintaining a balance between religion and politics in Eurasia. The Diyanet maintains a distance from religious groups, Sufi schools, and political parties. In its publications and Friday sermons, the Diyanet presents Islam only in its moral dimensions, untouched by legal or political nuances, including jihad. The state has taken all the mosques in the country under its control through the Diyanet as an effect of the law promulgated in 1998.<sup>24</sup> Almost all parties (Western coun-

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Orthodox Church visited the Diyanet, and in August 2009, a delegation from the Karachai-Cherkessia Islamic Institute did so. [www.Diyanet.gov.tr/yayin/Diyanetaylik.asp](http://www.Diyanet.gov.tr/yayin/Diyanetaylik.asp) (accessed September 1, 2009).

19 Patricia M. Y. Chang, “Religion and American Foreign Policy in the New Millennium,” *İslamiyat* (June 2003), pp. 35–50.

20 [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/).

21 Chang, “Religion and American Foreign Policy,” p. 39.

22 Alicja Curanovic, “The Attitude of the Moscow Patriarchate towards Other Orthodox Churches,” *Religion, State and Society* 35:4 (2007), pp. 301–318.

23 For examples of this rivalry in Estonia and Ukraine, see Aslı Bilge, “Moscow and Greek Orthodox Patriarchates: Two Actors for the Leadership of World Orthodoxy in the Post Cold War Era,” *Religion, State and Society* 35:4 (2007), pp. 100, 103.

24 Kara, “Din ile Devlet Arasında,” pp. 41–42.

tries, some Muslim countries in Eurasia, and the Diyanet itself) began to consider the Diyanet system as a model of religion-state relations in Eurasia.

Mehmet S. Aydın, a leading Turkish theologian advocating the reconciliation of civilizations, argues that the integration of Turks and Muslims in Europe makes the Diyanet no less responsible for foreign than domestic affairs.<sup>25</sup>

The representation of Turkey as a model for Eurasia is hardly new. With the end of the Cold War, the United States introduced Turkey as a model of secularism to the newly established independent states in Central Asia.<sup>26</sup> The Central Asian countries welcomed this initiative.<sup>27</sup> Another reason for the Diyanet's expanding cooperation in Eurasia during the 1990s was that the collapse of the Eastern Bloc forced Turkey to face the legacy (former territories) of the Ottoman Empire in the Caucasus and the Balkans. Turkey began to assist the Muslims in these regions, responding to local demands. Historical connections and traditional theological closeness, intermediated by the Hanafi School of Law, played an important role. This is a condition lacking for the Iranians or Saudis. From the furthest edge of the Balkans to the depths of Asia, Eurasian Muslims represent Sunni (in particular, Hanafi and Shafii) conviction. Sufism is an inseparable component of Eurasian Islam. In Central Asia, the Yesewi, Bektashi, Qadiriyyah, and Naqshibandi Orders have been influential,<sup>28</sup> as have been the Naqshbandi and Qadiri Orders in the Russian regions.<sup>29</sup> The Bektashi and Naqshbandi beliefs had taken root in the Caucasus and Balkans.<sup>30</sup> These tariqahs, together with their *silsile* [lineages], contributed to pre-1917 traditions being passed to the post-communist period.

On the other hand, after 1990, nearly all the new states in Eurasia adopted laicism and tried to strike a balance between religion and state (and religion and politics) by employing spiritual boards (muftiates). Many Turkic republics established a Muslim spiritual board, affiliated with the Office of the Prime Minister or one or another ministry, in order to keep emerging religious groups under control. Unsurprisingly, these countries regarded the Diyanet as their

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25 Mehmet Aydın, "Diyanet's Global Vision," *The Muslim World* 98:2-3 (2008), pp. 167, 168.

26 Hakan Yavuz, "Is There a Turkish Islam? The Emergence of Convergence and Consensus," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 24:2 (2004), p. 226.

27 Erel Tellal, "Türk Dış Politikasında Avrasya Seçeneği," Mustafa Aydın, ed., *Türkiye'nin Avrasya Macerası* (Istanbul: Nobel Publishing, 2007), pp. 27-29.

28 See Galina M. Yemelianova, "The Rise of Islam in Muslim Eurasia: Internal Determinants and Potential Consequences," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 5:2 (2007), pp. 73-91.

29 For an explanation of how the Naqshbandi spread and took root in the İdil-Volga region before the 1917 Revolution, see Hamid Algar, "Shaykh Zaynullah Rasulev: The Last Great Naqshbandi Shaykh of the Volga-Urals Region," Jo-Ann Gross, ed., *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of Identity and Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 114; Michael Kemper, "The History of Sufism in the Volga-Urals," *Islamic Civilization in the Volga-Ural Region* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2004), pp. 36-38.

30 Mikhail Roshchin, "Sufism and Fundamentalism in Dagestan and Chechnya," *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien* 38 (2004), pp. 2-6.

model in their quest for new religion-state relations.<sup>31</sup> Several Islamic countries in Asia and in Eurasia even copied the Diyanet system. Symptomatically, these countries perceived the Diyanet not as an institution that took shape in the Turkish Republic, but as one having passed from the Ottoman Empire.

The Diyanet does not cooperate with religious sects, *jamaats* [religious communities], or NGOs, but works with the official institutions of muftis and spiritual boards in Eurasia. Law prohibits the Diyanet from cooperating even with well-established religious groups, such as the Fetullah Gülen movement targeted at spreading education, rather than confining its activities to mosques. In the 1990s, they opened a number of secondary schools in Central Asia, Russia, and the Caucasus and they are still successful in their activities.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the Russian authorities closed several schools and all schools suffered the same fate in Uzbekistan.<sup>33</sup> Several researchers argued that the Turkish state could have guided Fethullah Gülen's activities in a more balanced manner via the Diyanet.<sup>34</sup>

In Turkey's relations with the Turkic republics in Central Asia and the Turkic and Muslim communities in the Russian Federation, the concept of "foreign Turks" plays an important role. Policy makers and intellectuals in the late Ottoman period frequently referred to this concept, which was often rephrased throughout the republican period. This concept was revived in the early 1990s, implying "the Turkish World from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China." It was *The Economist* that first used this phrase in 1991.<sup>35</sup> From the beginning, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs hesitated to use this expression, and it has thus never been pronounced in official state policy. Nevertheless, this concept guided the Turkish government's enthusiastic cooperation with the Turkic republics in Asia. In addition, the government introduced the Turkish Cooperation and Development Administration Bank in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1992 to organize educational, cultural, and economic relations with "foreign Turks."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, many public institutions and NGOs, such as Turkish Radio and Television, the Ministry of Culture, and the Turkish Historical Institute, carried out their own projects in Eurasia.<sup>37</sup> The Diyanet activities were a part of this multifaceted expanding cooperation.

31 Olivier Roy, *Yeni Orta Asya ya da Ulusların İmal Edilişi*, translated by Mehmet Morali (Istanbul: Metis, 2005), pp. 215–216.

32 Hakan Yavuz, "The Gülen Movement," M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, eds., *Turkish Islam and the Secular State* (Cyracuse: Cyracuse University Press 2003), pp. 39–40.

33 Farhad Alimuhamedov, "Peaceful Muslim-Non-Muslim Co-existence in a Secular Context," *International Conference on Peaceful Coexistence: Fethullah Gülen's Initiatives for Peace in the Contemporary World*, p. 2 ([www.fethullahgulen.org/conference-papers/peaceful-coexistence.html](http://www.fethullahgulen.org/conference-papers/peaceful-coexistence.html)).

34 Ihsan Yılmaz, "İjtihad and Tajdid by Conduct: The Gülen Movement," *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 232–233.

35 Ömer Göksel İşvar, "Türkiye'nin Azerbaycan-Ermenistan Uyuşmazlığına Yönelik Politikaları," Yelda Demirağ and Cem Karadeli, eds., *Orta Asya ve Kafkasya* (Ankara: Palme, 2006), p. 244.

36 [www.tika.gov.tr/RU/](http://www.tika.gov.tr/RU/) (accessed September 1, 2009).

37 Nadir Devlet, "Türkiye'nin Avrasya'ya Yönelik Kültür Politikaları," Mustafa Aydın, ed.,

Unexpectedly, the priority area for the Diyanet's foreign activities is still Europe, not Eurasia. In Europe, the Diyanet provides religious services to Turkish laborers, who emigrated there at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. In the 1980s, emigrants established a number of associations and so-called mosque centers. The number of these organizations increased in the 1990s. The Diyanet started to send imams to these mosques in 1971<sup>38</sup> and religious attachés abroad in 1978. These attachés established religious administrations abroad. This was a countermeasure against Turkey-based Islamic communities and sects that were significantly influencing Turkish emigrant laborers in Europe.<sup>39</sup> In 1983, the Diyanet introduced the Foreign Affairs Department.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduced religious consultants and attaché staff to offer guidance in religious matters in a number of countries. Currently, consultants from Turkey provide religious services in Germany, the United States, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Great Britain, the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Macedonia, Georgia, Albania, Kosovo, and the Republic of Northern Cyprus, and twenty-two religious attachés are in operation, mostly in Germany. In Eurasia, only Nakhchivan and Romania have religious attachés from Turkey. These consultants and attachés also work as presidents of NGOs and associations established by the Diyanet in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands.<sup>41</sup>

#### THE DIYANET'S ACTIVITIES IN EURASIA AND THE EURASIAN ISLAMIC COUNCIL

As early as the 1970s, a number of Arab countries sent representatives to international meetings of leaders organized by the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the official governing body for Islamic activities in the five Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, whilst no representatives from Turkey participated in these meetings. As a NATO member, this reluctance was understandable because almost all of the final reports of these meetings condemned the United States and Israel, with the exception being the international conference to commemorate the one thousand two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Imam Bukhari in 1974.<sup>42</sup> The Diyanet

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*Türkiye'nin Avrasya Macerası 1989-2006: Avrasya Üçlemesi 2* (Istanbul: Nobel, 2007), pp. 177-209.

38 Ali Dere, "The PRA of Turkey: The Emergence, Evolution and Perception of Its Religious Services Outside of Turkey," *The Muslim World* 98:2-3 (2008), pp. 292-293.

39 Nico Landman, "Sustaining Turkish-Islamic Loyalties," Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki, eds., *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State* (London: C. Hurst & Co Publishing, 1997), pp. 217-219.

40 Gözaydın, *Diyanet*, p. 320.

41 For example, concerning Germany, see: [www.ditib.de/index.php?lang=en](http://www.ditib.de/index.php?lang=en)

42 Alexandre Beningsen, "Sovyet Müslümanları ve İslam Dünyası," edited and translated by İsmail Orhan Türköz, *Çöküş Öncesi Sovyetler Birliği'nde İslamiyet ve Müslümanlar* (Ankara: Diyanet Vakfı, 1997), pp. 69-70.

launched contacts with Muslim leaders in the Soviet Union in 1985, when a delegation, headed by Tayyar Altıkulaç, then-president of the Diyanet, visited the muftis of the spiritual boards of Muslims in Moscow, Tashkent, Baku, and Mkhachkala. Altıkulaç met Shamsaddin Babahan (mufti of Central Asia and Kazakhstan), Allahshukur Pashazade (mufti of the South Caucasus), and Mahmut Kikiev (mufti of the North Caucasus).<sup>43</sup> The Diyanet made its second visit in 1989 to attend the one thousand one hundredth anniversary of Russia's acceptance of Islam and the two hundredth anniversary of the introduction of the Orenburg Spiritual Board of Muslims by Catherine II. A number of directors of Muslim spiritual boards and ministers of religious affairs from various Islamic countries participated in this meeting. Then-president of the Diyanet, Sait Yazıcıoğlu, and the delegation he led went to Ufa, Nizhnekamsk, Noberzhnye Chelny, and Kazan, and exchanged ideas with Talat Tajuddin (Talgat Tadzhuddin), today supreme mufti of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation.<sup>44</sup>

After 1990, cooperation among religious leaders in Eurasia increased with the result that the Diyanet introduced a directorate in charge of Eurasian countries in its Foreign Affairs Department in 1994.<sup>45</sup> This directorate followed and researched religious situations in Eurasia, functioned as the secretariat of the Eurasian Islamic Council (explained below), guided the construction and restoration of mosques in Eurasia according to the Project for Protection of the Turkish Cultural Presence, and managed the religious education of Muslim students and leaders sent from Eurasian countries.<sup>46</sup>

The Diyanet's most effective educational, religious, and cultural contribution to Eurasian co-believers is the periodical convocation of the Eurasian Islamic Council (EIC), which started in 1995 to promote cooperation among the spiritual boards of Muslims in Eurasia. In May 2009, the Diyanet held the seventh EIC. The permanent director of the EIC is the president of the Turkish Diyanet (Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz from 1995–2003 and Dr. Ali Bardakoğlu from 2003 to the present), while the assistant directors are president of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the South Caucasus, Allahshukur Pashazade, and chief of the ulama of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Dr. Mustafa Efendi Jerich. The EIC executive committee is composed of the president of the Russian Council of Muftis, Ravil Gaynuddin (Gainutdin), president of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kazakhstan, Dr. Abdussattar Darbisali, and president of the Macedonian Islamic Union, Suleyman Efendi Rajabi. The presidents of the religious administrations of Turkey, Albania, Western Thrace, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia and Vovvodina,

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43 Halit Güler, *Orta Asya'da İslam'ın Yeniden Doğuşu* (Ankara: Diyanet Vakfı, 1994), pp. 1-103.

44 Ibid., pp. 105, 153.

45 *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, p. 390.

46 Gözaydın, *Diyanet*, p. 143.

Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Crimea, Lithuania, Dagestan, Chuvashiya, Omsk Oblast, Tatarstan, Slovenia, Belarus, Poland, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia, Bashkortostan, and Chechnya participate in the EIC. Uzbekistan has never sent representatives to EIC meetings, while Chechnya only sent representatives to the seventh EIC. Academics, parliamentarians, diplomats, and even the prime minister of Turkey often attend the EIC meetings. Judaist, Catholic, and Orthodox representatives gave speeches in the opening session of the fourth EIC in Sarajevo.<sup>47</sup> The first five EICs were held under the leadership of the former president of the Diyanet, Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz (1992–2003), while the present president, Ali Bardakoğlu, was responsible for the sixth and seventh EICs.

Uzbekistan's non-participation in EIC activities would seem to derive from its struggle with domestic Islamic extremists in the 1990s, rather than any antipathy against Turkey. The Uzbekistan government blamed Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, the Taliban, Hizbullah, and the then-prime minister of Turkey for the terrorist act in Tashkent on February 16, 1999.<sup>48</sup> As a result, in 2002, the Uzbekistan authorities dissolved the local office of the Diyanet's religious services and no official from the Diyanet is serving in this country. Uzbekistan's rejection of international religious contacts has not been limited to its relations with Turkey. For example, Uzbekistan did not take part in the Third Congress of World and Traditional Religions organized by Kazakhstan in 2009.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Uzbekistan prohibited the preaching or practice of any Islamic doctrines other than those of the Hanafi School of Law in mosques or religious schools.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the Uzbekistan Spiritual Board bestows on the Hanafi School a monopolist position while rejecting contact with the Turkish Diyanet of the same Hanafi School of Law.

The resolution adopted by the seventh EIC to publish Islamic classics and textbooks of Islamic knowledge was a measure to overcome Wahhabi tendencies in Eurasia. If one examines Islamic literature published in Eurasia after 1990, those with Wahhabi or Salafi perspectives have been predominant; this lamentable situation obliges traditional Muslim leaders to jointly intensify their

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47 *IV. Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2001), pp. 7–9.

48 Cengiz Sürücü, "Türkiye-Özbekistan İlişkilerinin Üç Evresi," Mustafa Aydın, ed., *Türkiye'nin Avrasya Macerası* (Ankara: Nobel, 2007), pp. 356–357.

49 [www.religions-congress.org/content/blogsection/6/31/lang,english/](http://www.religions-congress.org/content/blogsection/6/31/lang,english/)

50 Adeeb Khalid, "A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5 (2003), pp. 588–590.

51 el-Matürîdî es-Semerkindî (d. 944), a Sunni theologian, and his school played a great role in the formation of Islamic theology and thought. The vast majority of Muslims in Eurasia adopted Abu Hanifa's (d. 767) views in the field of Islamic law and practices and simultaneously adopted Maturidi's theology.

**Table 1. Issues Discussed at the EICs (1995–2009)**

No.	Month	Venue	Main issues and Resolutions
1	October 1995	Ankara	- Cooperation between spiritual boards to build and restore mosques - Religious education and student exchange - Religious publications - Measures to celebrate religious holidays on the same day - A resolution protesting against the destruction of mosques during the Bosnian War - Religious freedom in Western Thrace and Bulgaria <sup>*1</sup>
2	October 1996	Istanbul	- Religious education
3	May 1998	Ankara	- Preparation of an Islamic calendar - Missionary activities in Eurasia - Cultural function of Mosques in multiconfessional regions <sup>*2</sup>
4	July 2000	Sarajevo	- Dialogue between cultures and religions - Sending students to theological faculties in Turkey - Deciding that Turkish should be the EIC's working language - Promoting the Latinization of EIC member countries' alphabet - Religious publications for children <sup>*3</sup>
5	April 2002	Northern Cyprus	- Activation of EIC member countries' contacts with Northern Cyprus, international activities to lift the embargoes imposed on it - Promoting peace talks between Israel and Palestine - Condemning terrorist activities in the world - Strengthening counter-missionary activities in Muslim regions in Eurasia <sup>*4</sup>
6	August 2005	Istanbul	- Defending Islamic identity and culture in Eurasia - Religious tolerance and coexistence - Countermeasure against anti-Islamic propaganda in western media - Minority rights of Muslims, building good relations with non-Muslims in society - Future invitation of Muslims in Europe into the EIC as observers <sup>*5</sup>
7	May 2009	Istanbul	- Updated or new publications of Islamic classics and other sources of religious knowledge - Joint programs among Islamic universities and theological faculties to work out curricula and resources for Islamic education <sup>*6</sup>

\*1 I. *Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 1996), p. 172.

\*2 II. *Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 1998), p. 304.

\*3 IV. *Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2001), pp. 7-9.

\*4 V. *Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2003), pp. 348-350.

\*5 [www.Diyaret.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyaret-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-409.aspx](http://www.Diyaret.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyaret-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-409.aspx) (accessed September 1, 2009).

\*6 [www.avrasya-is.org/basin-aciklamalari-ve-bultenler](http://www.avrasya-is.org/basin-aciklamalari-ve-bultenler), no. 11 (accessed September 1, 2009).

publication activities (especially of pre-Soviet classics with Maturidi,<sup>51</sup> Hanafi, and Yesewi<sup>52</sup> ideas).<sup>53</sup>

At these EIC meetings, the presidents (muftis) or other representatives of spiritual boards of Muslims reported the situation of mosques, religious services, publications, and education in their countries and articulated problems they faced. The discussion that followed these reports revealed the common problems and domestic specifics that Eurasian Muslims faced. In general, representatives from the Balkans complained of problems with waqfs [communal properties] of the spiritual boards and the need for the restoration of their Ottoman heritage, such as mosques, libraries, madrasahs, and tombs, while those from the Caucasus, Baltic states, and the Russian Federation were dissatisfied with their organizational bases for religious services and training, and with their relations with “other” Islamic groups. The representatives from the Central Asian countries described their elementary stages in religious administration, services, and education. Remarkably, the various problems noted in the first three EICs during the 1990s had largely been resolved by the seventh EIC, which demonstrates the success achieved by Eurasian Muslims in Islamic education and cadre training, which helped them to regain a respectable position vis-à-vis radical Islamists. For example, at the first EIC, representatives from the Russian Federation complained about the absence of institutions of higher Islamic education and insufficiency in teachers and imams, and requested that the Diyanet establish an international theological faculty specialized in the education of Eurasian Muslim cadres. Instead of responding to this request, the Diyanet assigned students from Eurasia to existing theological faculties, which have not developed special programs for these students. On the other hand, Eurasian countries have introduced many Islamic universities and faculties during the last two decades.

Many religious leaders participated in the opening ceremony of Kunta-Haji University, to which Putin sent a message.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Russia is preparing to create Islamic courses in secondary schools for Muslim students. Putin’s religious advisor, Aleksei Grishin, and others visited Turkey in December 2009 and consulted the Turkish Ministry of Education. They researched the curriculum of Islamic courses taught at secondary schools in Turkey. One hundred students who graduated from the universities listed in Table 2 will come to

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52 Ahmed Yesewi (d. 1166) was the first Turkic mystic poet and Sufi. He was a pioneer of Turkish mysticism and founded the first Turkic tariqah, the Yasaviyya, which spread over the Turkic-speaking areas, especially Central Asia, very quickly.

53 Sönmez Kutlu, “Avrasya Coğrafyasında Kadim Dini Bilginin Kaynakları ve Yeniden Üretilmesi Sorunu,” Paper presented at the seventh EIC held in Ankara in 2008, p. 6. I would like to thank Professor Kutlu for giving me this draft.

54 [www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=16117](http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=16117); [www.worldbulletin.net/news\\_detail.php?id=46241](http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=46241) (accessed September 1, 2009).

**Table 2. New Islamic Universities Opened in the Russian Federation**

Founder	Venue	Year of Foundation	Name
Council of Muftis (R. Gainutdin)	Moscow	1999	Moscow Islamic University
Tatarstan Spiritual Board of Muslims	Kazan	1998	Russian Islamic University
Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia (T. Tadzhuddin)	Ufa	2003	Russian Islamic University of the CSBMR
Dagestan Spiritual Board of Muslims	Mkhachkala	2002	North Caucasus Islamic University
Kabardino-Balkaria Spiritual Board of Muslims	Nalchik	2007	Abu Hanifa North Caucasian Islamic University
Karachai-Cherkessia Spiritual Board of Muslims	Cherkessk	2004	Ismail Bostanov Higher Islamic Institute
Chechnya Spiritual Board of Muslims	Groznyi	2009	Kunta-Haji Islamic University

Turkey for further religious education provided by the Diyanet and theology faculties.<sup>55</sup>

EIC meetings often focused on the issue of celebrating religious holidays on the same date. This is one of the most urgent problems for Muslim countries, particularly in Eurasia. Muslims in Eurasia request clarification of when to start the Ramadan month (of fasting) and the dates of the 'Eid ul-Fitr and the 'Eid ul Adhaa (two major Islamic holidays). The research that the Organization of the Islamic Conference conducted on this matter remains fruitless. Although there are differing practices in Eurasia, the decisions adopted by the first, second, fifth, and seventh EICs demonstrate that Muslim countries in Eurasia have largely accepted the Diyanet's festal calendar.

The representative of Western Thrace (the muftis of Iskeche and Gumulcine), who participated in all the EICs, reported the problems that the ethnic Turkish Muslim population faced in regard to the Greek government. The mufti of Gumulcine, Ibrahim Sharif, stated that the mufti in Western Thrace had not only religious, but also political and legal authority.<sup>56</sup> Since 1985, approximately one and a half thousand ethnic Turks in Western Thrace have been experiencing dual power as a result of Greece's neglect of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. The muftis are not elected by the local Muslim population; the Greek government appoints them instead. The Muslim population cannot determine whom they should follow: the appointed or elected muftis.<sup>57</sup> Sharif

55 [www.aksam.com.tr/2009/12/24/haber/dunya/3130/putin\\_in\\_imam\\_hatip\\_ilgisi.html](http://www.aksam.com.tr/2009/12/24/haber/dunya/3130/putin_in_imam_hatip_ilgisi.html) (accessed December 24, 2009).

56 III. *Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2000), p. 118.

57 I. *Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 1996), pp. 34-35.

added that the Greek government had instigated a number of prosecutions and imposed numerous penalties against the elected muftis.<sup>58</sup> The Iskeche mufti, Mehmet Emin Agha, echoed Sharif by saying that the people did not accept the appointed muftis who were carrying out their duties at home, rather than in their offices.<sup>59</sup> According to Agha, the Greek government neglected the Lausanne Treaty, and usurped the religious, social, and cultural rights of the ethnic Turks. The Greek authorities denied religious freedom and education and confiscated waqfs.<sup>60</sup> During the 2000s, the Western Thrace muftis sued the Greek government for violations of the local Muslims' rights at the European Court of Human Rights, which issued several rulings in favor of the Muslims. However, their rights have been far from being defended, as was shown by the Gumulcine mufti Ibrahim Sharif's speech at the seventh EIC. Sharif stated that after the Greek government appointed muftis, these muftis together with the Greek government appointed about a hundred and fifty imams in Western Thrace.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the government modified school curricula so that no time was left for religious lectures.

At the first EIC in 1995, the mufti of Karachai-Cherkessia of the Russian Federation, Ismail Ali Berdiev, stated that during the Soviet Union there were only nineteen mosques in his region, but this number increased to a hundred and seventy-five by 1995. In the 1990s, generous financial aid came from Arab countries, but these countries tried to administer the mosques and religious institutions that they had helped to build. When the local Muslims wanted to run them by themselves, the Arab aid ended. Mufti Berdiev found this attitude incorrect, while emphasizing the need to educate local imams and teachers and publish religious calendars and books.<sup>62</sup> In 1998, Mufti Berdiev reported that Christian missionaries were publishing numerous works in the Karachai language to distribute them in villages, though the results of their endeavor had not been substantial. After these missionaries' activities, Wahhabism appeared. A certain number of students who returned from Saudi Arabia no longer recognized the authority of the Hanafi School of Law, causing serious tensions in the Karachai Muslim community. Berdiev said that they could overcome this problem significantly since they had built their own institute for Islamic education, which later became the Abu Hanifa Higher Islamic Institute.<sup>63</sup> In 2002, the Karachai-Cherkessia assistant mufti and rector of the institute, Ismail Bostanov, followed the speech of his superior by adding that students who studied Islam in a foreign country for five or six years tend to become alienated from the local community. Bostanov found it more effective to provide religious education in

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58 *II. Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 1998), p. 184.

59 *II. Avrasya İslam Şurası*, p. 177.

60 *III. Avrasya İslam Şurası*, p. 50.

61 Previously, the Greek government appointed only muftis, but since 2008, began to appoint imams, too.

62 *I. Avrasya İslam Şurası*, p. 118.

63 *III. Avrasya İslam Şurası*, p. 205.

the region; local education would make Muslim leaders more tactful in coexisting with other religions in the region, primarily the Christians.<sup>64</sup>

In 1995, the mufti of Tajikistan, Fethullah Khan Sharifzade, remarked on the activities of Bahaist<sup>65</sup> missionaries in Tajikistan.<sup>66</sup> In 1998, the head of the Tajikistan religious committee, Dr. Said Akhmehdov, pointed to Tajikistan's tradition of ardent Islamic education. According to statistics in 1999, Tajikistan had more than two hundred madrasahs and even Islamic universities, which educated not only Tajiks, but also students from other countries of Eurasia. There were more than a hundred Qur'an courses at the central mosques, after which more than two thousand Tajik students went abroad to continue their education.<sup>67</sup>

## OTHER KINDS OF DIYANET AID ADDRESSED TO EURASIAN MUSLIMS

### *(1) Construction or Restoration of Mosques and Other Islamic Institutions*

The Diyanet has financially contributed to the construction or restoration of mosques and Islamic schools in Eurasia since the 1990s. The Diyanet has built twenty-seven and restored six mosques and paid for the internal and external decoration of many mosques.<sup>68</sup> The Baku Shehitlik Mosque, the Nakhcivan Kazim Karabekir Mosque, and the Kazakhstan Talgar Mosque were built with investment, from the Diyanet Waqf,<sup>69</sup> which also restored the Tomb of Murat Hüdavendigâr in Prishtina, Kosovo.<sup>70</sup> The Diyanet also contributed to the restoration of Moscow Central Mosque, Belarus Mosque in Minsk, and many mosques in Bulgaria. Moreover, the Diyanet plans to build mosques in Tbilisi and Batumi (Georgia), Vilnius (Lithuania), and Tirana (Albania). Moreover, the Diyanet has built a number of secondary and higher Islamic schools in Eurasia. In the 1990s, the Diyanet financially contributed to opening a higher Islamic institute and three theological high schools in Bulgaria, an Islamic pedagogical high school in Romania, a theological faculty and Turkish high school

64 V. *Avrasya İslam Şurası* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2003), pp. 328–331. İsmail Bostanov was assassinated in September, 2009. In memory of this rector, the institute was renamed, as is shown in Table 2.

65 Bahá'ism is a religion founded in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century by Mirza Hoseyn 'Ali Nuri (1817–1892), who is known as Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís regarded Bahá'u'lláh as the most recent in the lineage of Divine Messengers that stretches back beyond recorded time to include Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Christ, and Muhammad (<http://info.bahai.org>).

66 I. *Avrasya İslam Şurası*, p. 123.

67 III. *Avrasya İslam Şurası*, pp. 225–226.

68 *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, p. 791.

69 *Orta-Asya Türk Cumhuriyetleri, Balkan-Kafkas Ülkeleri Camileri ve Eğitim Merkezi Albümü* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2003).

70 For details on the financial contributions that the Diyanet made from 1990 to 1998 to the spiritual boards in Eurasia, see *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, p. 792.

in Baku, Azerbaijan, and a theology faculty in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. In the 2000s, however, the Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan authorities closed the theology faculties created with the help of Diyanet.<sup>71</sup>

Since 1990, the Diyanet provided stipends to students who came to Turkey for religious education from Eurasian countries. In 2008, 547 local imams, including 60 from Albania, 57 from Western Thrace, 20 from Romania, and 20 from the Russian Federation, visited Turkey for a few months for educational programs and training seminars. 819 students participated in Qur'an courses, with 80 students coming from Mongolia, five from Kosovo, ten from the Crimea, and 139 from Georgia.<sup>72</sup> 147 students were registered at İmam-Hatip High School, including five students coming from Azerbaijan, eight from Kyrgyzstan, six from Montenegro, and seven from Serbia.<sup>73</sup> In addition, the Diyanet assigned 198 students to theological faculties in Turkey, with two students from Romania, two from Kabardino-Balkaria, fifteen from Kazakhstan, three from Western Thrace, ten from Albania, and two from the Crimea. The Diyanet provided scholarships to 43 students, including six from Tatarstan, one from Dagestan, three from the Crimea, and three from Bulgaria.<sup>74</sup>

### (2) *Dispatching Imams to Eurasia*

In the 1990s, the Diyanet began to send imams to Muslim regions in Eurasia. But the number of these dispatched imams decreased as religious education in these countries developed. For example, during the Ramadan month in 1996, the Diyanet sent twenty imams to Azerbaijan, ten to Uzbekistan, eight to Kyrgyzstan, and eight to Tatarstan.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, in Ramadan of 2008, no imams were sent to these countries. Since 2008, the Diyanet sent thirty imams to serve in Crimea, one to Nakhchivan, four to the Russian Federation, three to Mongolia, and twelve to Kyrgyzstan. In sum, nearly a hundred imams served abroad. These imams attended a six-month course and learned the language and culture of the country to which they were being sent.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the Diyanet also financially helped several foreign spiritual boards that did not enjoy any financial support from their own states and had insufficient revenue.<sup>77</sup>

### (3) *Religious Publications in Local Languages*

Since the 1990s, the Diyanet has published religious literature in various Euroasian languages; this was often combined with its translation activities.

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71 Ibid., p. 789.

72 These statistics, as with other statistics used in this article, include the countries and communities that participated in the EIC. I also relied on *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2008 Yıllık Faaliyet Raporu* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2008), p. 62.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, p. 789.

76 *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2008 Yıllık Faaliyet Raporu*, p. 64.

77 *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, pp. 791–792.

These publications were mainly composed of brochures explaining the Qur'an, handbooks on worship, compilations of hadiths, and books on Islamic history and law. The Diyanet distributed these publications among the Eurasian Muslims with the help of local spiritual boards. These translations targeted at Eurasian countries did not always prove to be effective; many of the translations were linguistically poor. In particular, in the texts explaining worships and practices, a single error in translation may completely destroy the effectiveness and make the worship worthless. Recently, however, the Diyanet and the local spiritual boards tried to overcome this problem by establishing commissions of linguistic and religious experts. The seventh EIC decided to adopt this policy. In 2001, the Diyanet published seven issues of its Eurasian journal printed separately in Kyrgyz, Azeri, Turkmeni, and Kazakh, but later abandoned this practice.

Today, the Diyanet publishes literature in Georgian, Russian, Romanian, Albanian, Mongolian, Azeri, Kyrgyz, Turkmeni, Tatar, Bulgarian, and other languages, and shares these publications with the local spiritual boards. In 2008, for example, the Diyanet printed six thousand copies of a booklet entitled "I Am Learning My Religion" in Georgian, six thousand copies in Russian, fifteen thousand in Kyrgyz, five thousand in Romanian, five thousand in Albanian, and five thousand in Azeri. Likewise, the Diyanet printed a booklet entitled "I Am Learning about My Book" in these languages with an additional five thousand copies in Tatar. The Diyanet published "I Am Learning about My Prophet" in these languages, with an additional five thousand copies printed in Uygur.<sup>78</sup> In total, the Diyanet sent one million copies of religious publications and fifty thousand religious calendars to Eurasia in 2008.<sup>79</sup> This however caused problems with the customs control of several countries and the Diyanet is currently planning to entrust these publications to the local spiritual boards.

#### (4) *Sister City Programs*

The Diyanet helped to establish dozens of sister city relations by matching a local mufti in Turkey to one in Eurasia. The Turkish muftis call for donations to help their Eurasian co-believers during the Ramadan month or after Friday prayers and send money to their sister cities in Eurasia. For example, the Üsküdar district of Istanbul was twinned with Mordova of the Russian Federation, which contributed to cooperation between the Muslim communities of these territories, under the supervision of the Diyanet and Mordovan Spiritual Board. The mufti office in Kayseri in Turkey financially helped to build a mosque in its sister city of Gorajde, Bosnia-Herzegovina; this mosque

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78 *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2008 Yılı Faaliyet Raporu*, p. 64.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

was opened in August 2009, demonstrating the achievement of the sister city program.<sup>80</sup>

(5) *Qurban [Sacrifice of Animals] through Wakalah [Guardianship]*

The Diyanet carries out charity activities aimed at domestic and foreign communities by means of “*qurban* through guardianship.” This practice has become very widespread in Turkey in the last decade, strengthening the culture of charity in Turkey. The Diyanet Waqf sends a portion of the *qurban* first to Africa and then to Muslim communities in Eurasia. In 2008, Turkey sent the shares from nine thousand *qurban* to Africa and Eurasia, whose local communities, suffering poverty and hunger, greatly appreciated this charity.<sup>81</sup>

EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DIYANET’S EURASIAN POLICIES

I would like to briefly examine whether the Diyanet’s Eurasian policies have been successful or not. Eurasian experts in Turkey share the view that Turkey’s secular Eurasian policies were unsuccessful during the 1990s.<sup>82</sup> The same can be said for the Diyanet’s activities during the 1990s. The Diyanet did not have sufficient scientific knowledge concerning multicultural, multiconfessional, and multinational Eurasia. Because of Eurasia’s isolation during the Cold War, its Muslim and non-Muslim peoples encountered the Diyanet’s activities unaware of the complexity of the historical moment. Ignorance of local values sometimes was a cause of disappointment for both sides. One may find a similar lack of experience in the activities of other Muslim countries that tried to help their Eurasian co-believers in the 1990s. For this reason, despite the breakthrough in the number of mosques and other quantitative factors during the last two decades in Eurasia, we are still in want of scientific knowledge of the cultural and civilizational components of its religiosity.

Since the 1990s, a number of Muslim countries and communities began to emphasize their Muslim identity to obtain foreign aid.<sup>83</sup> This is understandable since many of them neither receive financial aid from the state nor are blessed with local foundations prosperous enough to support local needs. Local spiritual boards and muftis struggle for access to foreign aid, often driven by personal motivations. As a result, spiritual boards and muftis are often

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80 [www.diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/DIYANET/2009aylik/ekim/bulten/Bulten.html](http://www.diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/DIYANET/2009aylik/ekim/bulten/Bulten.html) (accessed October 15, 2009).

81 *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2008 Yılı Faaliyet Raporu*, p. 64.

82 Mustafa Aydın, “Avrasya’da Dönüşüm ve Türkiye,” Mustafa Aydın, ed., *Türkiye’nin Avrasya Macerası* (İstanbul: Nobel, 2007), pp. 2–3.

83 Mustafa Aydın, “Geçiş Sürecinde Kimlikler: Orta Asya’da Milliyetçilik, Din ve Bölgesel Güvenlik,” Mustafa Aydın, ed., *Küresel Politikada Orta Asya: Avrasya üçlemesi I* (İstanbul: Nobel, 2005), pp. 255–256.

criticized for their distracted use or even squandering of funds.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, public opinion in EIC member countries is often critical of the official ulama and spiritual boards for rivaling the political influence and legal rights of Islamic NGOs, Islamic political parties, and Sufi groups of their countries.

An error that the Diyanet and other Muslim organizations committed in their Eurasian policies was that they often tried to use religious services for other, political purposes. Turkey used religion to strengthen “Turkishness” in the Eurasian nations, while Saudi Arabia and Iran perceived Eurasia to be a new arena for Wahhabism or Shi’a Islam. The bankruptcy of this policy had become all the more obvious by the end of the 1990s. Turkic republics rejected Turkey-sponsored pan-Turkism.<sup>85</sup> Another error that the Diyanet committed was that it had not attached importance to Russia since the 1990s until quite recently. The Diyanet president, Ali Bardakoğlu, is trying to remedy this situation; he even stated: “I wish one of the theological faculties in Turkey were able to provide education only in Russian. This is urgently necessary. I wish we could raise a hundred imams with command of Russian.”<sup>86</sup>

Wahhabism proved itself not to be a force to unify, but on the contrary, to split the Muslim communities in Eurasia. Fundamentalist groups never took root in Eurasia, but are only in constant conflict with traditional Sufi brotherhoods and, moreover, have complicated Muslim relations with other religions and cultures. These politicized trends of Islam led to prejudice and discrimination against Muslims, violence, and terror, especially in Chechnya, Dagestan, and the Central Asian countries.<sup>87</sup> As the Shi’a’s influence in Eurasia was limited, Iran adopted a more neutral and secular policy. In contrast, Turkey behaved more ambitiously since it had advantages that were lacking for Iran and Saudi Arabia. Turkey is a laic state and has the institution of the Diyanet within this laic framework.

When the government of the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2003, it reshuffled the Diyanet leadership. In this process, academics from the theological faculties began to direct the Diyanet, which could not but be reflected in its Eurasian policy, too. Turkey revised the nationalistic approach pursued in the 1990s vis-à-vis Eurasian countries. Since the begin-

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84 Galina M. Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam, A Historical Survey* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 157–165; Aislu Yunusova, “Is Islam Reviving in Russia?” *Proceeding of the International Symposium Islamic Civilisation in the Volga-Ural Region* (İstanbul: IRCICA, 2004), pp. 354–357.

85 Hakan Yavuz, “The Trifurcated Islam of Central Asia: A Turkish Perspective,” John L. Esposito, John O. Voll, and Osman Bakar, eds., *Asian Islam in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 127.

86 [www.haber7.com/haber/20091114/Diyanetten-Rusca-egitim-acilimi.php](http://www.haber7.com/haber/20091114/Diyanetten-Rusca-egitim-acilimi.php) (accessed November 13, 2009).

87 Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam*, pp. 187–189; Mitat Çelikpala, “Sovyetlerden Günümüze Orta-Asya, Kafkaslarda Vehhabilik ve Siyasal İslam,” Yelda Demirağ and Cem Karadeli, eds., *Orta Asya ve Kafkasya* (Ankara: Palme, 2006), pp. 228–232.

ning of this century, Turkey began to emphasize local values and autonomy that local co-believers should maintain. Moreover, the Diyanet had become quite experienced through its activities since the 1990s in Eurasia. Through the implementation of student and imam exchanges, it became acquainted with the local specifics of Eurasian regions. Instead of nationalism, which was popular among Turkish political circles in the 1990s, scientific and academic perspectives appeared. There is a noticeable difference between the first five EICs and the most recent two. For example, the final reports of the first five EICs described EIC representatives as “religious representatives of the Turkish Republic, Balkan Countries, Caucasian Countries, and Turkic and Muslim communities,” while the final report of the seventh EIC defined them as “representatives of spiritual boards of Muslim countries and societies located in Eurasia that are connected with one another by a common language, history, and culture.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, instead of “Turks and Turkic societies,” we now have “Muslim societies.”

During the last two decades, Turkish scholars working at theological faculties have conducted a number of academic studies of Eurasian regions, covering tradition, history, and the current situation. For example, İbrahim Maraş’s study on the *kadimci* [traditional] and *cedidci* [new] Islam in the Volga-Ural region during 1850–1917 innovated our knowledge of this region; both the Diyanet and other theological institutions appreciated this book.<sup>89</sup> Various academic and educational institutions organized international symposiums on the religious situations in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Russian Federation, and the Turkic republics,<sup>90</sup> and about Ahmed Yesewi, Musa Carullah Bigiyev, and Gaspıralı İsmail.<sup>91</sup> Significant works of religious literature in Eurasia were translated into Turkish. This should partly be attributed to academic papers written by many students coming from Eurasia to Turkey for education. These academic contributions made the Diyanet and Turkish theological circles more conscious of the uniqueness of Islamic practice in Eurasia, underestimated in the 1990s.

Mehmet Görmez, vice president responsible for foreign affairs at the Diyanet since 2003, summarizes the Diyanet’s new Eurasian policy as follows: “We can speak of a Muslim minority in almost every country in this globalized world. We know that every minority faces serious problems. There are essentially no international institutions that deal with or keep an eye on these problems. Today, the United Nations, the European Union, a variety of human rights organizations, and church institutions, particularly the Vatican, follow the rights of Christian minorities at every stage; unfortunately, however, there

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88 [www.Diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyanet-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-409.aspx](http://www.Diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyanet-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-409.aspx)

89 İbrahim Maraş, *Türk Dünyasında Dini Yenileşme, 1860–1917* (Istanbul: Ötüken, 2002).

90 [www.ircica.org/congress-workshops/irc402.aspx](http://www.ircica.org/congress-workshops/irc402.aspx) (accessed June 15, 2009).

91 For example, see: *Ölümünün 50. Yılında Musa Carullah Bigiyef Sempozyumu Metinleri, 6–7 November 1999* (Ankara: Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2002).

is no international institution that defends or is concerned with the problems and troubles of Muslim minorities. We can even speak of Muslim minorities that are not known by the Islamic world."<sup>92</sup> The lack of an institution that defends rights of Muslims internationally appears even more dangerous if we consider that global powers are trying to use religion to gain influence in the globalizing world. The president of the Diyanet, Ali Bardakoğlu, states that violence, terror, invasion, disruption of social harmony, and a preponderance of material values and self-satisfaction in the contemporary world, have caused mankind to lose hope; in this spiritual chaos, superpowers and the media may use religion as strategic weapons.<sup>93</sup>

The new role that the Diyanet began to play in Eurasia is connected with the ruling Justice and Development Party's endeavor to change the present bi- or unipolar world. Ahmed Davutoğlu, the current Turkish minister of foreign affairs describes the current international politics as chaotic. According to him, the bipolar world during the Cold War ceased to exist, but we do not have a new world order. The US and the USSR used to be able to establish order in the Caucasus and Near East, but they cannot do so now. The US cannot establish regional order unilaterally, as is shown by its sorrowful experience in Iraq. Neither can Russia, as is shown by its August 2008 War with Georgia. Russia realized its self-interests but could not establish order in the Caucasus. In this situation, Turkey should act as an order maker in the Middle East and in the Caucasus. "This is not an imperial thrust" [here, Davutoğlu is referring to the accusations of him being a Neo-Ottomanist – S. K.]. Davutoğlu argues that being a passive observer is not in Turkey's national interest. Turkey should present ideas of establishing a new international order.<sup>94</sup> The Diyanet, as an institution affiliated with the Office of the Prime Minister, cannot ignore this view articulated by the Turkish foreign minister. It was not by chance that, in September 2009, the Diyanet opened "religious consultants" as its representatives in Albania, Kosovo, and Georgia, namely the conflictive regions of the Black Sea Rim and the Caucasus.<sup>95</sup> To what extent will the Diyanet be able to contribute to Turkey's mission of establishing order in the Black Sea region? This remains to be seen.

The Diyanet attaches much importance to dialogue between religions and even established a "dialogue office" in its Foreign Affairs Department in the 1990s. The Diyanet closely followed accusations against Islam in Western

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92 [www.sabah.com.tr/Ramazan/GununSohbeti/2009/08/28/musluman\\_kardesine\\_sahip\\_ciktikca\\_muslumundur](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ramazan/GununSohbeti/2009/08/28/musluman_kardesine_sahip_ciktikca_muslumundur) (accessed September 1, 2009).

93 [www.aa.com.tr/en/oteki-kavramini-sozlugumuzden-silelim-2.html](http://www.aa.com.tr/en/oteki-kavramini-sozlugumuzden-silelim-2.html) (accessed September 1, 2009).

94 [www.aksam.com.tr/2009/09/08/haber/siyaset/3162/yeni\\_duzenin\\_oncusu\\_turkiye\\_olacak.html#](http://www.aksam.com.tr/2009/09/08/haber/siyaset/3162/yeni_duzenin_oncusu_turkiye_olacak.html#) (accessed September 15, 2009).

95 [www.Diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyanet-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-118.aspx](http://www.Diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyanet-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-118.aspx) (accessed September 1, 2009).

countries, and published its views on the internet site concerning the caricature crises in Denmark and Sweden.<sup>96</sup> The Diyanet president, Ali Bardakoğlu, immediately responded to the accusations against Prophet Muhammad and Islam made by Pope Benedictus XVI in a speech at a Conference entitled “Faith, Reason, and University: Memories and Reflections” held at Regensburg University in Germany on September 12, 2006. On November 28, the same year, Pope Benedictus XVI visited the Diyanet as part of his visit to Turkey and took a much more conciliatory attitude toward Islam.<sup>97</sup>

On November 12–16, 2008, the Diyanet president Bardakoğlu and his delegation visited Moscow to pay a visit to Patriarch Alexi II, immediately before his death. The delegation had a talk with the future patriarch, Metropolitan Kirill. In response, Patriarch Kirill and his delegation visited Ankara on July 6, 2009. This meeting ended with dialogue and messages of mutual tolerance. Ali Bardakoğlu desired the freedom of “twenty million” Muslims in Russia, while Patriarch Kirill appreciated the concrete measures adopted by the Turkish government to improve the situation of the Christian minority in Turkey and desired the prompt reopening of Heybeliada Seminary.<sup>98</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Acting within the framework of a laic state, the Diyanet started its international activities in Europe in order to prevent political and religious radicalism among emigrant laborers. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s opened a new sphere of its activities in Eurasia. It is true that a huge number of mosques, madrasahs, and other religious institutions were restored or built and numerous young Islamic cadres were educated in Eurasia with the help of the Diyanet during the 1990s, but the insufficiency of area study knowledge and the nationalistic approach to Eurasia shared by the Diyanet and the Turkish political elites limited the effects of the Diyanet’s Eurasian policy. The advancement of Eurasian studies in Turkey and the Justice and Development Party’s coming to power in 2002 changed this situation. Turkey now understands and respects the Eurasian specifics of Islam much more correctly. The change of government also signified Turkey’s quest for an independent role (while being a member state of NATO) in establishing a regional order in the

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96 [www.diyamet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyamet-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-371.aspx](http://www.diyamet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyamet-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-371.aspx), No:81 (accessed September 1, 2009).

97 For a copy of the speech, see: [www.diyamet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Duyurular.aspx?ID=3](http://www.diyamet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Duyurular.aspx?ID=3), No:97, 98; [www.diyamet.gov.tr/english/default.asp](http://www.diyamet.gov.tr/english/default.asp). For detailed accounts of visits, see: [www.diyamet.gov.tr/turkish/DIYANET/2007aylik/ocak/aylik/Diyamet.html](http://www.diyamet.gov.tr/turkish/DIYANET/2007aylik/ocak/aylik/Diyamet.html) (accessed September 1, 2009); [www.zenit.org/article-18316?l=english](http://www.zenit.org/article-18316?l=english).

98 [www.aa.com.tr/en/rus-ortodoks-patrigi-ankarada.html](http://www.aa.com.tr/en/rus-ortodoks-patrigi-ankarada.html) (accessed July 7, 2009). Established in 1844, this seminary provided higher Orthodox education, but was closed by a decision of the Turkish Constitutional Court in 1971.

post-Cold War Caucasus, the Near East, and the Balkans. To what extent will this tandem of secular and religious authorities be successful? We will examine this through the geopolitical changes in this region in the near future.