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Pro-Violence Sermons of a Secular State: Turkey's Diyanet on Islamist Militarism, Jihadism and Glorification of Martyrdom

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Abstract: The literature on martyrdom has not, so far, systematically analysed a constitutionally secular state's extensive use of religion in propagating martyrdom narratives by using state-controlled religious institutions. This paper addresses this gap in martyrdom literature. In addition, even though some studies have analysed how martyrdom narratives have been used for political purposes in Turkey for mythmaking and building a collective memory, a religious institution's active use by the state for the purposes of mythmaking and collective memory building has not been studied. This paper shows that the contents of the Friday sermons, that reach at least 50 percent of the country's adult males every week, have moved from Turkish nationalist understanding of militarism and martyrdom to more radical, Islamist and actively pro-violence interpretations that actively promote dying for the nation, homeland, religion and God. The sermons also emphasise that new generations must be raised with this pro-violence religious spirit, which is also novel.



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1. Introduction

The concept of martyrdom is not new. It appeared early in human history. For millennia the nationalist and religious rhetoric of many peoples, cultures, countries and nations has encouraged self-sacrifice for a perceived greater cause. The religions of Egypt, Mesopotamia and ancient Greece had these ideas of heroism and self-sacrifice in defense of good against evil (Szyska 2004). In ancient Greece, ritual ceremonies were dedicated to the fallen heroes in patriotic wars, and in these ceremonies and prayers a hero's death was skillfully portrayed as something desirable (Bosworth 2000, p. 14; see also Bowersock 1995; Rosoux 2004; Roberts 2012). In addition, in many oppressed groups, such as Jews during the Hellenistic period or early Christians in Roman times (York 2007), martyrdom played several roles such as forging authority, escalating the struggle, strengthening ranks, legitimising alternative culture and a sense of differentiation and hostility (Hatina 2014, p. 5; Klausner 1987, p. 233). While martyrdom narratives play a role in the process of delegitimising the enemy, at the same time they work towards increasing the legitimacy and prestige of the group that martyrs belong to (Klausner 1987, pp. 231–32).

The glorification of martyrdom, death and blood narratives have been instrumentalised for building collective memories, rituals, symbols, mythmaking and mass mobilization in many polities, regardless of their democratic or autocratic character (Anderson 1983; Dorraj 1997, p. 489). The martyrdom narrative could be secular or religious. It is one of the “powerful tools of political action and powerful weapons used in political struggles to create and maintain popular support for both nationalist and religious struggles” (Sluka 1997, p. 49). Islam today is the religion best known for its emphasis on the virtues of martyrdom for a variety of reasons (Hatina 2014; see also Fields 2004; Cook 2007).

Martyr, *şehit* in Turkish, is derived from the Arabic verb *shahida*, which means he witnessed or he experienced an event personally or he was physically present (Freamon 2003, p. 317). Though many classical and contemporary Islamic sources take *shahid* in the sense of martyr, the killed one(s) on the path of God (mostly during jihad), the Qur'an contextualises the term with variations (*shahid*, *shahada*, etc.), as in the primary meaning.¹ The Qur'an speaks of those martyred or killed as *yuqtalu*, which relates to *fighting* or the act of *killing*.² It is significant that there is no use of *shahid* or *shahadah* related to death in the Qur'an. Rather, *shahid* as a martyr emerges in hadith collections and later written Islamic sources. Therefore, removing the Qur'anic primary use and meaning, it is understood that post-Qur'anic references recontextualised Qur'anic verses in existing Islamic literature and translations, identifying *shahid* or *shahadah* with martyrs or martyrdom as understood in English. Given some of the hadiths, martyrdom might be split into a combatant or a non-combatant martyrdom. In some of the hadiths, the Prophet also speaks of other types or grades of martyrdom, other than being killed in the battlefields, such as death from fire, plague, drowning, pleurisy, stomach complaint or while giving birth, among others (Cook 2002, p. 12; Topaloğlu 2010, pp. 429–30). Yet a great deal of judicial literature and hadiths show that, primarily, the most acceptable path to martyrdom is to be killed on the path of God while confronting infidels on the battlefields, which these sources describe as jihad (Cook 2002, p. 12; Hatina 2014, p. 54; Topaloğlu 2010, p. 429).

Apart from theoretical arguments on the root and evolution of martyrdom in Islam, it is known that martyrdom narratives have 'functioned to forge a sense of solidarity, enhance mass mobilization, and preserve the sacred values of the community' in autocratic countries (Dorraj 1997, p. 489).

Martyrdom and its commemoration in modern times have not been in the monopoly of the state. Moreover, the glorification of death and martyrdom do not necessarily always have religious motives. Making use of the concepts are secular opposition movements with revolutionary, fascist or communist motivations, such as the Narodnaya Vola in Czarist Russia, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) in Lebanon, the Front de libération nationale (FLN) in Algeria and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, as well as various religious groups (Hatina 2014, p. 11; Payne 2011, p. 113; Outram and Laybourn 2018).

However, the literature on martyrdom has not, so far, systematically analysed a self-declared secular state's extensive use of religion in propagating martyrdom narratives by using state-controlled religious institutions. This paper addresses this gap in martyrdom literature. Even though some studies have analysed how martyrdom narratives have been used for political purposes in Turkey for mythmaking and building a collective memory (Azak 2007, 2008, 2010; Kadioğlu 1996), a religious institution's active use by the state for the purposes of mythmaking and collective memory building has not been studied. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by analysing the empirically rich case of the secular Turkish State's Directorate of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet).

In the last few years, on the one hand, an increasing number of studies have analysed the growing importance of the Diyanet to the state, the gradual shift in the AKP-controlled Diyanet's discourse, its intensifying media projects, identity politics, militarism, domestic and international use for political purposes and its outreach to diaspora populations (Öztürk 2016; Yilmaz and Barry 2020; Korkut 2016; Mutluer 2018; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Yilmaz and Barry 2020; Ongur 2020; Yilmaz and Albayrak 2021). On the other hand, some studies have underlined how the motifs of martyrdom and sacrificing one's own life have recently gained a cultic quality in the AKP narratives (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018, p. 12). One would expect that the AKP's increasing emphasis on these pro-violence themes would be reflected in the messages of one of the AKP's most significant religious propaganda machines, the Diyanet. However, there are no detailed studies on the Diyanet's increasing shift towards Islamist militarism, jihadism and its increasing use of pro-violence narratives that encourage believers to sacrifice their lives for the nation, homeland, religion, ummah (global Muslim community) and Allah. This paper aims to address this gap by analysing

the Diyanet's Friday sermons delivered every Friday in every mosque in Turkey, and abroad, in thousands of Diyanet-controlled mosques.

Friday sermons play a significant role in the Diyanet's dissemination of the pro-state religiopolitical message. In Islam, Friday prayer, unlike other prayers, is a congregational prayer, obligatory for every adult male and only performed at the mosques, together with the congregation. The Friday sermon (*khutba*) lasts about 15 min and is a crucial part of the Friday prayer. The Diyanet's own poll in 2014 found that about 60% of Turkish adult males attend Friday prayers (AA 2014). Another poll in 2017 showed that the figure was about 50% (MAK 2017, p. 16). This has been a huge propaganda opportunity for the state.

Although there is not a study dedicated to this phenomenon, it is well known that the Diyanet has been used for these purposes before the AKP. In this sense, there is a significant continuity between the Kemalist and Erdoganist periods (Yilmaz 2021). However, this paper shows that there has been a gradual rupture in the Diyanet's engagement with the martyrdom narratives for the last decade. In addition to continuing using martyrdom in the sermons for mythmaking and collective memory building, this paper argues that in the last decade the Diyanet has been actively encouraging people to sacrifice their lives for the nation, homeland, state, religion and Allah. It must be underlined that the last two (religion and Allah) were not highlighted in sermons from the pre-AKP period. The sermons also keep repeating that new generations must be raised with this pro-violence religious spirit. This has never been the case before. Thus, the paper contributes to the martyrdom literature by showing how a constitutionally secular state promotes the Islamist concept of dying for the nation, religion and God.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the Diyanet, its sermons and their political instrumentalisation by the state is discussed. Then, our methodology and main concepts are very briefly discussed. This will be followed by our analysis of primary data, the weekly Friday sermon texts. The empirical analysis section has three interrelated sections, militarism, jihadism and Islamist glorification of martyrdom in the Friday sermons.

2. Diyanet's Political Instrumentalization by the State

Despite the secularist claims of the state, the Turkish state and national identity have been fused with Islamic identity. In fact, Islam was institutionalised in a government agency at the birth of the republic and integrated into the government structure with the Directorate of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet). This continued an Ottoman state strategy, in which the sultan's authority subordinated the Islamic scholars' authority (Toprak 1981; Berkes 1998; Bein 2011). The Diyanet has a prominent place in the constitutions of 1924, 1961 and 1982. The current constitution, from 1982, mentions the Diyanet in Article 136, stating that it functions in accordance with the principle of secularism, stays out of all daily political debates and works towards fostering national solidarity and unity (Yilmaz 2005).

The institute is a bureaucratic structure. In its early years, the Diyanet was a centralised state institute that had replaced the offices of *Shaykh al-Islām*, *qāḍīs* (judges) and *madrasas*. Thus, apart from the Diyanet, almost every single mechanism that provided religious instructions was closed down and declared illegal (Tarhanlı 1993; Gözaydın 2020; Öztürk 2016).

The Diyanet has played a central role in redefining Islam's place in Turkish society (see in detail Gözaydın 2020). The main task of the Diyanet was 'to control and to shape Islam in accordance with the needs of the secular nation-state to the effect of creating a secular, modern, national, and official Islam' (Yilmaz 2005, p. 389). In other words, the Diyanet has been a political institution, serving the ideological agenda of the state (see now in detail Yilmaz 2021).

Since its establishment, the Diyanet has been subject to various phases and has recently witnessed a fundamental transformational change (see in detail Gözaydın 2020). When the Kemalist one-party regime ended in 1950 (Ozden and Yilmaz 2010), rather than the political parties but the Kemalist military regime continued using the Diyanet for high-politics issues such as helping with national solidarity and against several religious communities and Islamist Sufi networks such as the Naqhsbandis (Ertürk 2020). This did not change after

the anti-Kemalist AKP came to power in 2001 (Yılmaz 2017). The institution's importance with AKP is demonstrated in the scale of its funding and support by the AKP government. Since 2014, the Diyanet has been receiving over USD 1 billion for its annual budget, and the figures are constantly increasing (Öztürk 2016). In 2020, according to a five-year plan, USD 2 billion was released, and this sum will gradually increase the budget to USD 2.6 billion by 2023 (Ahval 2019). To support its activities, some 107,000 employees are on the payroll operating in 36 countries with 61 branches and publications in 28 languages (Duran and Bellut 2019). Apart from funding, AKP has also made structural changes to increase the legitimacy, prestige and influence of the Diyanet in domestic politics. The elevation of the President of the Diyanet (başkan) from directorate to permanent secretary (müsteşar), and the state protocol of the Diyanet's director's hierarchy being elevated from 51 to 10, can be considered both symbolic and practical moves (Öztürk 2016). This new status of the Diyanet and the increased budget allowed it to establish radio and television channels. Furthermore, its mandate was expanded to provide religious services outside mosques, including, for example, in institutions such as hospitals, prisons, retirement homes and women's shelters (Duran and Bellut 2019).

The literature on the Diyanet agrees that the Diyanet has started to be highly politicised and turned into a propaganda machine of the AKP with the appointment of Mehmet Görmez as its director in November 2010 (Öztürk 2016; Yılmaz and Barry 2020; Korkut 2016; Mutluer 2018; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Yılmaz and Barry 2020; Ongur 2020).

Our own analysis of the sermons between 2001 and 2021 also confirms these authors. The Diyanet had of course been a political instrument of the state since its founding (Gözyayın 2020; Yılmaz 2005). However, it previously adhered to the high politics of the state, such as promoting Turkish nationalism, nation-state, Turkishness, deep reverence to the state and rulers and militarism. However, with Görmez's appointment in 2010, it has become an apparatus of the AKP, not the state, and has engaged with daily political issues to support the AKP.

With the AKP's increasing authoritarianisation (Yılmaz et al. 2020; Yılmaz et al. 2021), the Diyanet has completely lost its relative autonomy from the ruling political party. This has not been the case since the start of the multi-party political era in 1950. As this paper shows, this is starkly observable in the Diyanet's increasing Islamism and Islamist populism (Yılmaz 2018; Yılmaz and Morieson 2021), following the AKP line. As Akalın finds 'there has been a major change in sermon content to reflect the AKP's idea of Islam, and a diversion from Kemalism and Turkish-Islamic Synthesis' (Akalın 2016, p. 8). If sermons were designed to promote 'the main tenets of Kemalism' under the hegemony of Kemalists, today they promote 'the main tenets of Islamism' under the AKP government (Kenar 2011, p. 203). As a result, the Diyanet has even started directly targeting the AKP's political adversaries such as the Gülen Movement (Barton et al. 2013; Weller and Yılmaz 2012; Esposito and Yılmaz 2010; Yılmaz and Albayrak 2021).

When a group of Erdoğan supporters first wore shrouds to signal that they supported him unto death in December 2013, the act was interpreted as a relatively fringe gesture. However, since then, public declarations of wanting to kill and die for the regime have permeated the public sphere (Yanık and Hisarlıoğlu 2019). As our analysis below will show, the Diyanet's sermons have not been immune from this pro-violence necropolitical (Carney 2018) manifestation.

3. Main Concepts and Methodology

Before proceeding further, we seek to define the main concepts we use in this paper. The term militarism has been used variously as 'an ideology glorifying war; the propensity to use force; military build up; excessive influence (of either the institution of the military or of the military-industrial complex; or the influence of military relations on social relations in general' (Stavrianakis 2015, p. 490). In this paper, we use it to mean the worldview of a people/state that glorify their military and war and strongly believe that a state should maintain a strong military capability to be able to use it to defend and expand

national interests and/or values. Even though the term Islamism has become too nebulous (Ayoob 2005, p. 952), in this study we use it to mean ideologisation of Islam as a political system (Ismail 2004, p. 616) and the instrumentalisation of Islam by individuals, groups and organisations to pursue political objectives (Denoeux 2002, p. 61). The term jihadism is 'like the word jihad out of which it is constructed, is a difficult term to define as it remains a recent neologism and no single, generally accepted meaning has been developed for it' (Firestone 2012, p. 263; Sedgwick 2015). It is a term that has been used 'to refer to the most violent persons and movements in contemporary Islam' (Kramer 2003, p. 65) and 'has been applied to various insurgent movements whose ideology is based on the Islamic notion of jihad' (DeLong-Bas 2018). In this paper, we adopt Omar Ashour's definition of jihadism: "armed confrontation with political rivals is a theologically legitimate and instrumentally efficient method for socio-political change" (Ashour 2011, p. 379; Sedgwick 2015, p. 34).

In this paper, we subject Diyanet sermons to qualitative content and discourse analysis. Even though Friday sermons are delivered orally, in mosques they are actually read verbatim from the centrally written text in Turkish. They are then posted on the Diyanet's official website. The Diyanet centrally prepares 54 sermon texts every year, for the 52 weeks plus two religious festival sermons. These are delivered in Diyanet-controlled mosques, which now number around 90,000 in Turkey, plus the many thousands abroad in Turkish diaspora communities, especially in Western European countries such as Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Yilmaz 2001a, 2001b, 2003).

Thus, the research in the present paper is based on textual sources of Diyanet sermons gathered from its official website as the Diyanet publishes all the full texts of sermons regularly on its official webpages. We have gathered these sermons from different Diyanet webpages over the years. The links of these websites are provided below in the endnote.³ However, some of these were removed or the webpages disappeared altogether. Thus, some of these links do not work anymore and the sermons between 2001 and 2007 can no longer be accessed online but they are saved in our archive.

We have analysed all sermons between January 2001 and July 2021. We have uploaded all these texts to NVivo 12 software for textual, content and thematic analyses. The sermons, of course, have many different themes, such as worship, unity of Muslims, brotherhood, charity, national days, Islamic festivals and so on. We focused on the texts that made mention of terms such as war, martyr, veteran, veteranship, martyrdom, blood, death, kill, soldier, Mehmetçik (Turkish soldier), jihad, ghaza, conquest, independence, army, military, enemy, sacrificing life, homeland, state, hero, heroism, victory, survival, threat, peace operation, ummah, oppression, victim, protection, assault, attack and defence. We have also looked at themes related to these terms and concepts. Moreover, we have closely looked at the sermons on the anniversaries of historical events such as the Gallipoli War, Victory Day and the Conquest of Istanbul. Lastly, we looked at sermons that made mention of Jerusalem, Palestine, Israel and the West.

When referring to a specific sermon, we will only give its date. Since 2017, the Diyanet is translating its sermons to different languages, including English, and posting them on its website. Thus, the sermons we quote here after 2017 are the Diyanet's own translations and the earlier ones are our own translations.

4. Militarism in Friday Sermons

Historically, the Diyanet has been no stranger to the army. The institution was formed by the Kemalists who were military guarantors of secularism in Turkey. Previously, rather than the word 'army', the military was referred to using the word 'Mehmetcik', which is attributed a religious meaning in both sermons and general discourse. However, this has changed as the army has come under the control and guardianship of the AKP in recent years.

Before 2015, sermons read on occasions such as Victory Day (30 August) and Martyrs' Day (18 March) examined notions of nationalist and militarist rhetoric in a positive manner, with little to do with conspiracy theories. In these sermons, heroism and Turkish

nationalism prevailed, with ‘saint ancestors’ mentioned and a focus on ‘obstacles will be overcome’ as long as ‘the spirit of Çanakkale’ is kept alive by ‘taking lessons from the past’ (14 March 2014; 13 March 2013). The importance of understanding ‘the role of belief and spirit behind the victories’ and having ‘faith and submission’ was also a focus of the sermons (14 March 2014).

In parallel with the increasing autocratic policies, bellicose and combative political discourse of the AKP, the Diyanet has increasingly adopted militaristic and aggressive Islamist terminologies in its sermons. The sermons seek sacrifice from the nation and prepare the audience for duty. Particularly sermons post 2015 are directed towards AKP’s perceived antagonists. However, this was already evident before 2015. A sermon close to Victory Day in 2014 emphasised that it is the duty of current generations to ‘protect the homeland they have entrusted by previous generations to hand them over to the next generations’ by ‘shedding their blood’ (29 August 2014).

Diyanet sermons create a sense of fear and urgency among the congregation when they talk about ‘a new war of independence’ being a ‘matter of survival’ against ‘the enemy’. This enemy—which includes pro-Kurdish politicians, Gülenists and the opposing political parties, mainly the Republican People’s Party (CHP)—is designated by the AKP and is otherised and demonised by the government. These notions have been conveyed in many Friday sermons.

As of 2014, we see that the term ‘*mehmetçik*’ (the Little Muhammad), which had been traditionally used to define Turkish soldiers, gained an Islamist character as it was being linked to the ummah at the macro level in contrast to its previous Turkish nationalist use. For example, the sermon delivered on 14 March 2014, defines *mehmetçik* as the ‘common name’ of the Islamic army, irrespective of their race, place or colour. Since 2019, it has been declared that Turkish soldiers have the duty to emancipate all of the oppressed nations from suppressors, appointing a sort of private international mission to the Turkish army. For example, in the sermon delivered on 25 October 2019, following the Peace Spring military campaign, *mehmetcik* were spoken as:

On the front for the good to prevail in the world and for the sake of humanity.
[. . .] they are rushing and struggling, [. . .] for the oppressed and the victimized who are deprived of their rights and freedoms.

In the same vein, the sermon delivered on 11 October 2019 states that:

[we] will fight for diminishing the evil and for establishing the good on earth
[and] our nation will continue to be the remedy for the remediless people, be there for those people who has nobody by their side, and be the hope and safe haven for the victimized and the refugees.

Similarly, in another sermon delivered 28 February 2020, entitled ‘Our Fight, and Spirit of Unity and Solidarity in the Cause of Allah’, we see that the role of Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) has changed, evolving, by Erdogan’s definition, into ‘Muhammedan Army’ (الجيش المحمدي) (Erdogan 2019), whose main goal is to free oppressed Muslims in the world.

The sermon says:

Our soldiers have been and will always be standing by the oppressed against the oppressors. They are at the battlefronts for the good of the world and shield their chests for humanity. They are mobilized to rush to help of those whose rights are infringed and removed from them. (28 February 2020)

In this sermon, based on the Qur’anic verses, the Turkish army is defined as the ‘truth’ and ‘true believers’ while others are ‘falsehood’:

Our soldiers place faith in the following verse and stand firm by the side of the truth against the falsehood, ‘And say, “Truth has come, and falsehood has departed. Indeed, is falsehood, [by nature], ever bound to depart”’. Our soldiers run from victory to victory with the heartfelt committment [sic] to the verse, ‘So do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior if you are true believers’. They say ‘Stop!’ to the graceless attacks of the enemy, satisfying the

Prophet Muhammad's call, 'Fight in the cause of Allah with your wealth and lives'. (28 February 2020)

The TAF, which had been under the tutelage of Kemalists, has become part of the Islamist Erdogan regime, and this can be easily seen in the language of the sermons as well. Sermons since Ali Erbaş assumed office have shifted from presenting ideas of religious sacrifices to presenting a harder militarised notion. The expression 'our army' has been adopted in prayer once the Diyanet began to praise the cross-border operations of the army. For example, the Peace Spring Operation launched by the TAF to create a 'safe zone' in northern Syria on 25 October 2019, was explained to the congregation as follows:

as our army advances for the sake of peace, innocent people, women and children will find confidence and peace under the shadow of our crescent-star flag. (25 September 2019)

Sermons have not only increased the frequency of mentioning the army but have begun to glorify its sacrifices. In one sermon, as an example of the merits of Mehmetçik, it was proclaimed:

While running from front to the front, he sometimes leaves a leg, sometimes an arm, sometimes an eye behind; but always keeps the love of the homeland in the front. 'Long live homeland!' he would say, 'As long as the homeland is secure [I am ready to lay down my life for]!' (25 October 2019).

Surrounded and engulfed in 'the ring of fire', it is the army, according to the Diyanet, that defends the people and their faith. The growing AKP-led military presence is thus rationalised as a necessary step for Turkey to ensure its safety, while it masks Ankara's growing expansionist and irredentist ambitions.

Overall, the Diyanet's sermons have increasingly employed a heavy militaristic language as the TAF has become subordinate to the AKP and been a part of its Islamist policies after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. In the next part, we will scrutinise how jihadism has been used in sermons since the AKP regime's militaristic shift.

5. Jihadism in Friday Sermons

The most controversial Islamic term, jihad, epistemologically and literally means 'struggle', or more broadly, to achieve something on the path of God (Özel 1993, p. 527). However, the term has also been interpreted as a fight or battle, traditionally and historically, by the Islamic jurisprudence. Over the course of time, the term has been split into two, with *jihad al-akbar* (greater fight) meaning inner struggle against the self and *jihad al-asghar* (lesser fight) meaning to fight against disbelievers. It is still a debated question whether jihad in an armed sense, is defensive or offensive (Bukay 2008, pp. 77–99; Sabbaghchi 2014).

Perhaps one of the most important indicators of the change and transformation that the Diyanet has experienced in recent years has been the use of this controversial concept of *jihad*, which, as noted above, is open to different interpretations. In the past, under the surveillance of the Kemalist army, the guarantor of secularism, it was ensured that jihad was not widely espoused by congregations. Only in the Diyanet's recent repositioning in compliance with Turkey's authoritarian government has it adopted a bellicose concept of *jihad* and included it in the official discourse.

Following the 2010 constitutional referendum, in which Erdoğan freed himself from the Kemalist 'threat', the Diyanet began to use the term jihad in the offensive and emancipatory context, rather than spiritual or defensive, as discussed above. Likewise, from 2011, we began to witness a special emphasis on *wahdat* (unity) and 'ummah' (Islamic unity) rather than the Turkish 'nation' (national unity). For instance, the sermon delivered on 18 March 2016 says:

Our hero ancestors sacrificed their blood and their lives for God and Islam. They defended the oneness of God, the honour of Islam and the dignity of Muslims.

Previously, rather than God, Islam and ummah, the nation and homeland would have been emphasised in sermons about sacrificing lives. In the same vein, the sermon delivered

on 17 March 2017 commemorating the Gallipoli Campaign, invoked the same rationale for the Diyanet and Erdoganist regime. The sermon says:

Çanakkale is one of the best instances of uniting on common ideals and embracing the national and ummah awareness [. . .] Because many sons of the homeland who spoke different languages, had different skin colours, and came from different regions sacrificed their lives for the nation, for the homeland, for the truth, for the right path, for justice, and for virtue. They poured into Çanakkale from every house in Anatolia, from every region in Rumelia, from Damascus, from Baghdad, from Cairo, from Tripoli, from Skopje, from Kosovo, from Sarajevo, from Caucasia to crush the latest attack of the Crusaders. [. . .] They did not let the hope of the ummah go away.

Thus, one can argue that unlike under the Kemalists, the Diyanet sermons delivered during the post-coup Erdoganist era contain revisionist and irredentist character, together with a transnational use of jihad. This is much clearer in the examples of the Friday and Eid sermons delivered amid the increased Islamist rhetoric of Erdoğan and the AKP, during military operations such as in Syria and Azerbaijan or freeing Quds, which is accompanied by anti-Semitic discourse.

In these sermons, Turkish Muslims are addressed as the ‘the hope of the oppressed’, and Turkey is defined as ‘the home (refuge/safe haven) of the miserable’ (14 May 2021). Additionally, the sermon underlines the significance of Quds (Jerusalem) and Masjid al-Aqsa, wanting all Muslims around the world to strive to protect such places under occupation. This issue was also on the agenda of the Diyanet very recently because of the Israeli state’s attacks against the Palestinian civilians and the loss of many innocent civilian lives. In the Eid al-Fitr sermon, delivered by the head of the Diyanet, Ali Erbaş, holding a sword in the pulpit as a sign of jihad and conquest during the sermon, firmly stated that:

The issue of al-Quds is a shared issue that concerns not only Palestinians, but also all Muslims [. . .] For the sake of this Eid morning, may Allah the Almighty (swt) grant salvation to all oppressed people, and all victimized people forced out of their homes and lands. May He (swt) enable us to strengthen our spirit of being ummah and of brotherhood in faith. May He (swt) enable us to see true days of Eid when al-Quds, the Masjid al-Aqsa, and all Islamic lands and places under occupation can freely celebrate (13 May 2021).

In the same manner, the term jihad has been defined and propagated as an armed conflict by the Diyanet as of 2016. A sermon entitled ‘Jihad: The Struggle in Allah’s Cause with One’s Life and Wealth’ on 16 February 2018, was issued following the Afrin Military Operation in Syria. Though the sermon begins with the peaceful explanation of jihad, that is striving ‘against his own soul’, it finishes with the explanation of the external, armed jihad, which is underscored as the ‘true meaning of jihad’. The sermon declared that ‘the highest level of the jihad is the armed struggle’. The sermon sees the TAF’s Afrin Military Operation as a matter of life and death for Turkish Muslims and subliminally defines Kurdish people living in Afrin (who are predominantly Muslim) as ‘enemies of Islam’:

If a believer succeeds in the jihad with one’s own should, then s/he will succeed in the jihad against the enemies of Islam as well. [. . .] Today, we are striving with our lives and our wealth for existence as a nation. [. . .] We all have our responsibilities in this struggle for survival [. . .] O Allah! Grant victory to our heroic army who has been fighting for our independence and our future, for our unity and solidarity.

In the same fashion, the sermon entitled ‘For Our Soldiers (Mehmetcik) are All Our Prayers’ delivered on 25 October 2019 is a good example of an irredentist and transnational use of jihad. The sermon was addressing the TAF’s Peace Spring military campaign, defining it as a jihad that would emancipate the oppressed Muslims from the disbelievers. The sermon starts with a hadith, underlining the need to carry jihad on the path and the cause of Allah, in an armed manner, then continues:

Mehmetçik has hit the road once again [...]. To bring peace to those victimized by terrorism, to bring tranquillity to those at unease, to lighten those whose hearts are in flames [...] Mehmetçik rewrites the history with his sweat and blood. Along the borders he protects, not only is our homeland safe, but also the fate of humanity is saved from chaos. (25 October 2019)

The head of the Diyanet, Ali Erbaş, preached this same sermon while on a trip to the southern Hatay province where he met with military officials coordinating the assault on the US-backed Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Afrin (Diken 2018). In addition, during an opening ceremony of a Qur'anic School, Ali Erbaş reportedly said,

I beg God's mercy and grace for our martyrs, and I beg God that our veterans heal very soon. We are opening Qur'anic Schools. They continue jihad over there and we do here, too. (Diken 2018)

A month later, on 16 March 2018, there was another Diyanet sermon on *jihad* and fighting at the commemoration of the War of Gallipoli. The title of the sermon distributed nationwide was 'Our Nation's Struggle for Existence: The Victory of Çanakkale'. Amid the Afrin operation debates and the excessive politicisation of martyrdom, the sermon opens with a Qur'anic verse and a hadith that underscores the importance of *jihad*:

Our Almighty Lord enjoins: Those who [...] were harmed in my cause or fought or were killed—I will surely remove from them their misdeeds, and I will surely admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow as reward from Allah.

The hadith transmitted in the same sermon reads:

Allah guarantees to the person who carries out Jihad for His Cause and to confirm the Kalimah al-Tawhid that He will either admit him into Paradise or return him with his reward or the booty he was earned to his residence from where he went out. (16 March 2018).

The actions of the TAF, including its various operations in Syria, sanctioned by the AKP, are increasingly being presented in sermons as holy war waged by Turkey. To introduce this concept of *jihad*, which is highly controversial and open to different interpretation, the Diyanet had to step in. The concept of *jihad* has found an increasingly secure place both in supportive statements of Ali Erbaş, the current President of the Diyanet, in regard to operations in Syria and also in relevant Diyanet sermons. The mosque's presence in this political arena clearly shows that Turkey, facing the repercussions of the Syrian crisis and being driven into the vortex of this crisis, activated this concept of *jihad* as a political move. The AKP government has been criticised for its strategy since the beginning of the Syrian crisis. In recent years, Turkey's presence and the rationality of Turkey's operations in Syria has been questioned by the public. In the face of these questions, the regime has been in search of ways to legitimise its policies and tried to convince the Turkish people of the rationality of its policies. In this context, the narrative of *jihad* has played an important role in conveying the message, both domestically and abroad, that the TAF is in *jihad* against 'those who pursue mischief and corruption' and 'tyranny'. Showing the operations of the TAF as equivalent to *jihad*, one of sermon reads as follows:

Today, as a nation, we are fighting for survival with our lives and property. Our Mehmetçik shows once again to the whole world that we can sacrifice our existence for the sake of our faith, our flag and our homeland. (16 February 2018).

The deaths of 33 members of the TAF from an attack by the Syrian Arab Army during Operation Peace Spring and Operation Idlib in 2020, which were launched by the TAF to create a safe zone in northern Syria, were explained to the public using the concept of *jihad*. During this period, in relation to the operations in Syria, the message given to the public was that TAF launched these operations, not only to protect the people of Turkey from attacks and threats, but also,

to deliver peace to the regions that are overwhelmed by terrorism, to be the hope of those innocents whose hope are consumed, and to deliver peace to those aggrieved ones whose peace has been abducted. (28 February 2020).

In addition, with the start of Operation Peace Spring, the *surah* Al Fath from the Qur'an (meaning 'Victory', chapter 48 of the Qur'an, with 29 verses) was read after the morning prayer in all mosques, and prayers were said for the TAF. Erbaş, as head of the Diyanet, performed the morning prayer in Ankara, defending the operation with the words:

Against the plans of the cruel and tyrannical forces that attempted to occupy every corner of the Islamic world, the peace of the nation and the region, the establishment of peace and security, the honour of the ummah.

After the Idlib attack, the concept of *jihad* was again used in the sermon in response to indignant questioning by the public. The following Friday, Erbaş led prayer and delivered the sermon in Hatay, the border city of Turkey with Syria. In the sermon, Erbaş again described the cross-border operations of the TAF using the concept of *jihad*:

Our Mehmetçik, by following the call of our Prophet, who says 'do Jihad with your hands, your tongues and your possessions', says 'stop' to the shameless raid of the enemy ... Mehmetcik, who set out on an expedition to deliver peace to the geographies tired of terrorism, hope to the innocents whose hope was consumed, and peace to the aggrieved ones whose peace was lost. (28 February 2020).

To summarise, the Diyanet's emphasis on *jihad*, in line with the AKP's aggressive policies abroad, has shifted from national to a transnational and global level, as seen in the sermons. The TAF's military operations have been defined as *jihad* for the first time in Diyanet's history. Additionally, the sermons' use of *jihad*—which means struggle—has been taken more radically, as an armed fight, and defined as one of the essential tenets of the TAF in its current role.

6. Martyrdom in Friday Sermons

In the heyday of the Kurdish 'peace process', both the AKP government and the Diyanet arguably strived to ensure that concepts such as martyrdom were not glorified, with the then-famous slogan of the AKP at the time, 'Don't let mothers cry anymore!'. This slogan clearly referred to the mothers of martyrs (Turkish soldiers killed by the PKK) and killed members of the outlawed PKK. Thus, while trying not to intimidate its conservative and mildly nationalist base, the AKP propagated themes of unity, togetherness, tolerance and cohabitation as it maintained dialogue with Kurdish parties, including the HDP and PKK. During this phase, Erdoğan stressed the importance of 'the peace process' by referring to the mistakes of former governments, hailing the prospect of fully resolving the Kurdish issue by the end of the process while pursuing the Muslim Democratic model. In this regard, arguably the most notable statement of Erdoğan was about martyrdom. In 2012, Erdoğan tweeted: 'A logic of accepting and swallowing a certain number of martyrdoms every year is neither humanistic nor conscientious', amid mounting criticism by extreme nationalists of 'the peace process' (Bir Gun 2020). This statement is in deep contrast to more recent attitudes of the party's leadership regarding the sacrificial endurance of the nation.

During the peace process period, martyrdom was not a popular subject in Friday sermons. Between 2010 and 2015, very few sermons referred to martyrdom, including those preached on 18 March, Martyrs' Day, and August 30, Victory Day. However, martyrdom has become one of the most striking and recurring themes of Diyanet sermons since 2015. While martyrdom had been used in many sermons in the context of wishing God's mercy for all ancestors and martyrs, as a show of gratitude from current generations, the intensity of references to martyrdom in sermons over recent years points to a shift in the sermon's discourse.

As will be seen in the following examples taken from sermons over the past decade, the use of the martyrdom narrative has been transformed from a phenomenon that should be avoided, to a precious and glorified status that every honourable and patriotic citizen

should seek and desire. Thus, the Diyanet joined AKP in promoting martyrdom as not only an inevitable cost that the nation must bear to protect is independence and sovereignty in the face of mounting attacks from ‘the external forces’ that ‘employ various plans and traps against the nation’s survival, independence and future’, but also a phenomenon that must be embraced and appreciated for the sake of security and wellbeing of the homeland (*vatan*).

This discussion of martyrdom is embellished with examples from the era of ‘happiness’ (*al-‘aṣr al-sa‘ādah* such as Badr, Uhud and Mūta), the Turkish conquest of Manzikert, the conquest of Istanbul, Sakarya, Dumlupınar, the War of Independence and so on, before shifting focus to those painful places that Muslims still live (e.g., Gaza, Aleppo, Idlib and Arakan/Myanmar). The sermons usually praise the uniqueness of Turkey and Turks, who not only ‘sacrificed their lives and irrigated this territory with their blood’ to render it homeland, without blinking, but also constituted ‘the last hope’ of the Islamic world. The sermons then exalt the sacrifices of ‘the noble nation (*necip millet*)’ today:

As a nation, we passed through great troubles and heavy tests. Just yesterday in Çanakkale, Sakarya, and Dumlupınar, the remorseless powers that lost their mercy and humanity came to us to wipe us from the stage of history. We were subjected to one of the biggest betrayals of our history on 15 July. We had tremendous strength that made us victorious in these difficult days. This power was our unwavering faith in God. It was our love for homeland, adhan, flag and independence. It was our love for Martyrdom and veteran (26 January 2018).

Citing the ‘challenges and threats’ this ‘noble nation’ has been facing recently, this sermon continued:

We live without food and water when necessary, but we never compromise our freedom and independence, and dignity. We cover our bodies for the sake of our sacredness, but we do not give up even an inch of our homeland. (26 January 2018).

The Diyanet visited the same rhetoric after the Turkish forces launched an operation in northern Syria to form a ‘security zone’ there, stressing that Turkey would make whatever sacrifices it took to uphold its honour, freedom and independence and to defend every inch of homeland against enemies (11 October 2019).

However, according to the sermons, martyrdom is a religious obligation as much as a patriotic duty. Usually, sermons promoting martyrdom begin by referring to Qur’anic verses and *hadiths* and then stressing its religious imperative. A sermon preached on 18 March, Martyrs’ Day, defined martyrdom as a divine status:

Martyrdom is such an exalted place that it was praised by our Lord and desired by our Prophet. Martyrdom is to reveal its existence so that right, truth and justice prevail on earth. It is to witness goodness and peace in the face of evil and cruelty. The reward of this martyrdom is honor in the life of this world and heaven in the hereafter. (16 March 2018).

Furthermore, the glorification of martyrdom is not confined to exalting the sacrifices, courage or glories of former generations, or to highlighting what martyrdom corresponds to in Islam. The term ‘martyr’ has also been traditionally ‘sweetened’ to associate it with something that arouses a desirable taste in the subconsciousness of people (Yılmaz and Erturk 2021a, 2021b). In many sermons, martyrdom is coupled with ‘*sherbet*’, a sweet Turkish drink, in order to not let martyrdom evoke a negative meaning such as loss of life. In one sermon, for example, this rhetoric was revisited while explaining what homeland means:

Homeland is a sacred trust left to us by those who sacrificed their lives, their loved ones and all their wealth and drink martyrdom [*sherbet*], and those who give up their existence and become veterans. (30 August 2019).

‘Drinking *sherbet* of martyrdom’ was mentioned in 10 sermons between 2014 and 2020. As of 2011, it is now seen as vital to learn and teach the significance of martyrdom in

sermons. For instance, it was said that ‘we must explain the heroism and sacrifices of our martyrs and veterans to our children, and teach the value of our cherished homeland and our lofty values’ (18 March 2011). In the same vein, another sermon says:

It is a fact that those who cannot grasp the spirit of martyrdom and veteranship are doomed to remain in captivity of the enemies. Next generations must be introduced to this spirit and raised with this spirit. (16 March 2012).

In the same fashion, as mentioned above, the use of martyrdom in politics spreads fear into opposition circles inside and outside the country, targeting those who must be fought and killed. For instance, Erdoğan, addressing the main opposition party CHP’s Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu—in a manner reminiscent of Mustafa Kemal’s quote ‘I order you to die’—stated ‘there will be no heads on their shoulders’ following the Spring Shield military operation in Syria ([Yeni Şafak 2020](#)). Then Erdoğan added:

O Mr. Kemal! We have given these martyrs in Uhud, Khandaq [. . .] and will continue to give them from now on. But you don’t know what martyrdom is and what it is to be a martyr. It is impossible for you to comprehend this. ([Yeni Şafak 2020](#))

The loss of civilian lives in the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey brought a new meaning to the notion of martyrdom in the Friday sermons. The 15 July coup attempt and notions of martyrdom helped the AKP to renew the allegiance of its base and strengthen its grip on public institutions, including the Diyanet. This unwritten allegiance could constitute a new model of engagement in which the transformation of emotion is produced both in the individual and in societal consciousness. With the martyrs of 15 July alive, the resistance against this coup attempt is immortalised in religious, cultural and social terms by the government and in Friday sermons, while the bond between the ordinary people in the street and the AKP government deepened ([Taş 2018](#)). The coup attempt and the notion of martyrdom, which is increasingly found in the memory of every demographic of Turkish society, has become the site of symbolic immortality in the collective consciousness. The glorious pages of Turkish history, such as the Battle of Manzikert, battles of Sakarya and Dumlupınar and Turkish War of Independence, even the great battles that have led the course of Islamic history (such as Badr and Uhud), are increasingly being understood in relation to 15 July. The sermon preached on the occasion of the first anniversary of the 15 July coup attempt, mentioned these ‘historic turning points’ as the occasions when it became apparent God was helping Turkey and then stated that the nation also witnessed God’s help on 15 July (14 July 2017).

In addition to sacrificing self for the nation, flag and homeland that were also the themes in the pre-AKP period, during the Erdoganist era we see that martyrdom has come to be used for Islam, the ummah and Allah, not just the Turkish nation, state and country. Furthermore, significantly in the post-coup era, during the TAF’s military operations in Syria under the command of ‘chief commander’ Erdoğan, the sermons have emphasised the need for Mehmetçik to prove to the whole world that they are ready to become martyrs as the number of military casualties increased. In this respect, martyrdom and death have become a spatial reality that encourages and normalises the death of the subject for the sovereign in the Friday sermons. For instance, the sermon delivered on 16 March 2018 says:

Our mehmetçik showed the whole world once again that we would sacrifice ourselves for our faith, our flag, and our motherland without hesitation [. . .] O Allah! Grant us sagacity, foresight, strength and wisdom against those who seek sedition, malice and mischief, and those who trick and set traps against our nation and the ummah of the Prophet!

In another example, we see that martyrdom has become a motive and propagation in the sermon delivered on 28 February 2020, the anniversary of the so-called Kemalist soft coup staged in 1997:

It is the desire to fall martyr in the cause of Allah or live on as a veteran that we have deep in our hearts. (28 February 2020).

In line with Erdoğan's heavy martyrdom discourse as of 15 July 2016, and particularly since 2017 (Kurdish operations), and claims that there would be more martyrs and blood, we simultaneously see these sentiments reflected in Diyanet sermons, with the use of martyrdom and self-sacrifice within Islamist discourse (T24 2018). For the first time since at least 2010, dying for the state and becoming a martyr appeared in the March 2019 sermon quoted above. The March 2019 sermon has another novelty. Previously, martyrdom was mentioned in reference to the past. Younger generations were emphasised, but only in the context of teaching them the spirit of martyrdom. In 2019, for the first time, the sermon stated that, if need be, there will be many more martyrs:

In case of a necessity, many souls shall pass away for such sake; however, no impure hand shall be able to touch upon what is sacred for us. Those who have designs against damaging the unity and solidarity of our nation, in servitude to Allah only, shall never be able to succeed. (15 March 2019)

This message was strengthened in the 11 October 2019 sermon:

Those who set their eyes on our homeland, every inch of which is watered by the blood of our noble martyrs, and who aim to scatter our nation are doomed to lose today, too, just as in the past.

Similarly, we see that martyrdom and sacrificing oneself has become a daily motif and a reality in the sermons, which has been mostly integrated with a siege mentality that puts both Turkey and the 'Islamic world' on the brink of attack by 'infidels'. For instance, the sermon delivered on 11 October 2019 notes that:

The world today was turned into a place full of dark and evil traps ... Those who plan to dig pits of fire in all around the Islamic world have used weapons of sedition, terrorism, and betrayal to cause brothers to hit one another.

Moreover, the one delivered on 28 February 2020 preaches:

We as a nation are facing great challenges and going through heavy tests today [...] We will not let anybody pull our national flag down the post, silent our adhans, or tread on our homeland. [...] It is the desire to fall martyr in the cause of Allah or live on as a veteran that we have deep in our hearts. [...] Allah the Almighty gives the good news to those who, with this great love, have sacrificed their lives in this cause.

We see that martyrdom, together with a siege mentality, and paradoxically *i'la kali-matillah*, an Islamic goal or principle whose aim is to promote and disseminate the words of Allah, has begun to be used in the sermons. The sermon delivered on 15 March 2019 says that glorifying and disseminating Islamic belief and making it dominant in the world is significant, together with *shahadah*, 'which is the base of religion'. The sermon continues by stating that 'in case of a necessity, many souls shall pass away for such sake'.

Similar to the use of jihad, martyrdom has gained a transnational Islamist character, elevated from the micro to the macro level, in line with Erdoğan's caliphal dreams, the political Islamist idealization of Erdoğan. For example, the sermon entitled as 'The Turkish Victory of the Battle of Gallipoli and the Esprit de Corps', delivered on 15 March 2019 says:

The martyrdom [...] is one of the most supreme positions since a martyr takes the risk of abandoning all such beloved ones as his mother, father, wife, and children for the sake of religion, homeland, nation, state, and freedom.

Overall, the empirical evidence shows that the radical use of martyrdom, both inside and outside the country in an Islamist and nationalist sense, has been employed in Diyanet sermons, simultaneous with the AKP's and Erdoğan's heavy discourse on martyrdom.

7. Conclusions

The literature on martyrdom has not systematically analysed how a secular state has made use of religion in propagating martyrdom narratives by using official religious organs of the state. This paper has addressed this gap in the martyrdom literature by

studying the secular Turkish Republic's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). The empirical evidence derived from the sermons shows that under the rule of the AKP, the use of militaristic elements, jihad and martyrdom, have gained significant emancipatory, irredentist, revisionist and Islamist meanings since 2015.

Since its foundation, the Diyanet has been used as a political institution. It helped the rulers to propagate their understanding of Islam, love of homeland, Turkish nationalism, revering the state, militarism and so on. However, if we exclude the one-party regime until 1950, it was not closely identified with the daily policies of a ruling political party. With the AKP's consolidation of power and removing the secularist military's tutelage, and the appointment of a pro-AKP and Islamist director, Mehmet Görmez in November 2010, the Diyanet has gradually become an apparatus of the AKP and has engaged with daily political issues to support the AKP.

With Görmez's appointment in 2010, the contents of the sermons have gradually moved from Turkish nationalist understanding of militarism and martyrdom to a more radical, Islamist, pan-Islamist, jihadist understanding.

The analysis in the paper also shows that there has been a dramatic shift from national level to the macro transnational and global level with the use of Islamic values such as jihad and martyrdom, and even the military through the redefinition of the *mehmetcik* as a transnational army of Islam. Previously, while the martyr were mentioned either in passing or when there was a commemoration of a historical military event, the AKP's Diyanet started frequently talking about these issues, actively supporting current military operations, military's duty to do jihad and to help the oppressed peoples in the world. The paper has shown that while continuing to use martyrdom in the sermons for mythmaking and collective memory building, the Diyanet has also been actively encouraging people to sacrifice their lives for the nation, homeland, state, religion and Allah for the last decade.

The sermons also, for the first time in Diyanet's history, strongly state that new generations must be raised with this pro-violence religious spirit. Thus, this paper contributes to the martyrdom literature by showing how a constitutionally secular state promotes the Islamist concept of dying for the nation, religion and God.

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- ¹ For example, the state sponsored Islamic Encyclopedia of Religious Directorate of Turkey states that 'shahid' (plural shuhada) as a religious term signifies those whom killed Muslims on the path of Allah' (Topaloğlu 2010, p. 428).
- ² See Qur'an 2:154; 3:157, 169, 170; 4:74; 9:111.
- ³ www2.diyaret.gov.tr/DinHizmetleriGenelMudurlugu/Sayfalar/HutbelerListesi.aspx; (accessed on 30 May 2021) www.diyaret.gov.tr/turkish/hutbe/hutbeliste.asp?yil=2003; (accessed on 30 May 2021) www.istanbulmuftulugu.gov.tr/hutbeler/1559-hutbe-arsivi.html; (accessed on 18 January 2015) <http://istanbulmuftulugu.gov.tr/component/content/category/108-hutbeler.html>; (accessed on 18 January 2015) <https://ankara.diyaret.gov.tr/Sayfalar/contentdetail.aspx?MenuCategory=Kurumsal&contentid=241>; (accessed on 18 January 2015) <https://webdosyasp.diyaret.gov.tr/UserFiles/ankara/UserFiles/Files/2009percent20hutbelerpercent5F2e6e7f85percent2De6ffpercent2D4ea7percent2Da61dpercent2D6469c89afe07.zip>; (accessed on 18 January 2015).

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