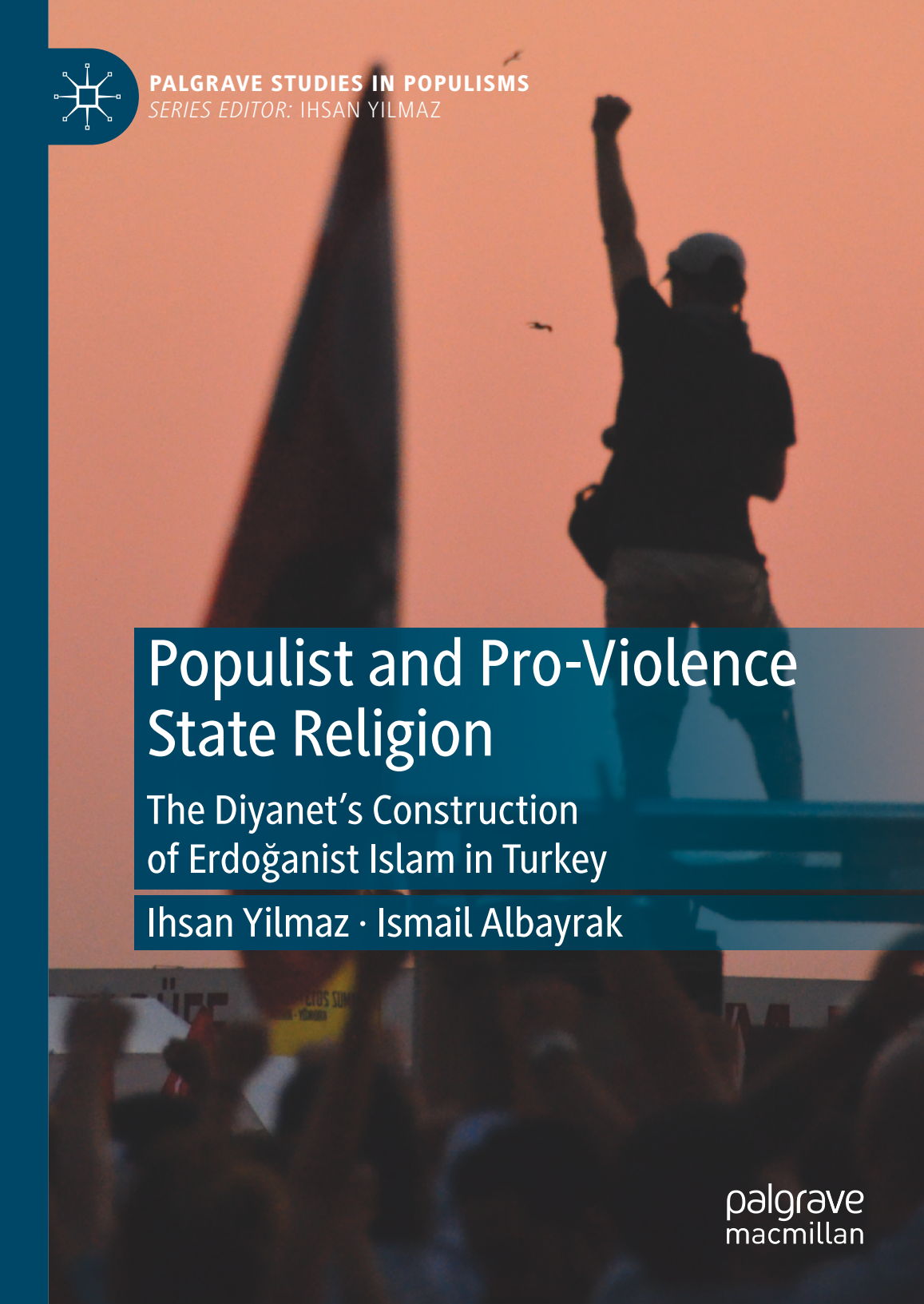

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Populist and Pro-Violence State Religion

The Diyanet's Construction of Erdoğanist Islam in Turkey

Ihsan Yilmaz · Ismail Albayrak

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ISSN 2731-3069 ISSN 2731-3077 (electronic)
Palgrave Studies in Populisms
ISBN 978-981-16-6706-0 ISBN 978-981-16-6707-7 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6707-7

Cover credit: Özgür Kesedar/EyeEm/Getty Images

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

Contents

CHAPTER 1

From Pro-Kemalist to the Populist and Pro-Violence Diyanet

"The mosques are our barracks
The domes our helmets
The minarets our bayonets
And the believers our soldiers"
(Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 1997)[1]

These verses are from a poem recited by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during a rally in Siirt in 1997 (Friedman 2016). When Erdoğan recited these verses, he caused a great stir in Turkey. At the time, Turkey was dominated, or under the 'tutelage' of the Kemalist elite and military forces, who insisted that the country be governed according to strict secular principles (Çelik 2018). Erdoğan was himself mayor of Istanbul when he read these verses, yet his position did not protect him from the

[1] This poem was not written by Erdoğan, but he was imprisoned for reciting it. Erdoğan and his supporters always claimed that the poem was written by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's intellectual father, Turkish nationalist, Mehmet Ziya Gökalp in 1912. Gökalp (d.1924) was a well-renowned thinker of the early twentieth century. His work made considerable contributions to the pan-Islamic identity that Turkified the heterogenic fabric of post-Ottoman Anatolia (Devereux, 1968). The name of the poem is "The Soldier's Prayer." But this part recited by Erdoğan was not in the original poem of Gökalp, it was added to it by someone else: https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/siiri-boyle-montajlamislar-99109; https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/o-siiri-kimin-yazdigi-yillardir-biliniyordu-99423

I. Yilmaz and I. Albayrak, *Populist and Pro-Violence State Religion*, Palgrave Studies in Populisms,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6707-7_1

wrath of the secularists, who imprisoned him for violating state secularism. For a public official such as Erdoğan to push a religious, indeed Islamist, narrative in public was considered criminal by the secular state. The Kemalists therefore charged Erdoğan with 'inciting hatred', imprisoned him for four months, and banned him from holding office (Friedman 2016).

Today, even though secularism remains embedded in the Republic of Turkey's constitution, and therefore in much of what might be termed its black letter law, the influence of Islamism[2] over Turkish politics and society has increased in an unprecedented manner (Yilmaz 2020; Solomon 2019; Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018; Karaveli 2016). Laws governing citizens' micro-dynamics and macro issues, such as state-sanctioned activities, have all been affected by the rise of Islamism (Saleem 2015). For instance, the AKP ruled state lifted the ban on women wearing scarves in public offices, and consistently increased its sponsorship of mosque constructions (Agence France-Press 2017; Saleem 2015). These activities in the past would have been viewed against *laïcité* and the secular spirit of the constitution. However, during the almost two decades Erdoğan has spent in power as Prime Minister and later President of Turkey, the country's socio-political fabric has been fundamentally altered, and the power of secularism vastly reduced. Religion is at the core of this change.

The contemporary Turkish Republic has a history marked by painful and uneven relationships between the church and state, or in this case mosque and state. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, *the father of Turks*, embarked Turkey on a quest for modernization following the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Çelik 2018). This modernization was based on the Kemalist principles of *Republicanism*, *Populism*, *Nationalism*, *Laïcism*, *Statism*, and *Reformism* (Yilmaz 2021; Ulusoy and Kirval 2017, Kuru and Stephan 2012; Hanioğlu 2011). The stringent formula was viewed as necessary to stabilize a region that had lost its central power, the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled for six hundred years. Under an authoritarian single-party regime, the People's Republican Party (CHP) led by Atatürk set out to

[2] In this book, we use Islamism as politicized version of religion of Islam, meaning 'turning religion into an ideology and an instrumental use of Islam in politics by individuals, groups and organizations in order to pursue political objectives' (Yilmaz 2021: 104). This ideology 'is not a coherent ideology, it focuses on identity politics rather than ideas and an appeal to emotions rather than intellect' (Yilmaz 2021: 105).

build a new Turkey and reform its institutions. Kemalist ideals enforced Westernization across the new Republic, and prevented Islam from having a significant influence over the nation's institutions and political sphere: secularism, therefore, was a precondition for nationalism (Yilmaz 2021; Ulusoy and Kirval 2017, Kuru and Stephan 2012; Hanioğlu 2011).

For nearly eighty years, the relationship between state and mosque was determined by the government's secularist ideologies. Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) has played a central role in redefining Islam's place in Turkish society (see in detail Gözaydın 2020). The institution has an immense bureaucratic structure. Under Kemalist influence, it operated within the bounds of *laïcité* and the secular ideals promoted as part of the Kemalists' social engineering programme. Under this prototype of *dīn,* Sunni Islam was promoted through Diyanet, which denied the non-Sunni plurality of the region and religion. Other places that promoted religious ideas and practices, such as *madrasas, tekkes,* and *zaviyes* (sufi lodges), were banned in early Kemalist era (Mutluer 2018), making Diyanet the dominant source of religious authority.

The end of the Ottoman Empire was not merely the termination of a monarchy. The Empire had its own system of governance and religious guidance that shaped the laws and norms of the land. At its peak in the sixteenth century, the empire spread over three continents (parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia) (Blakemore 2018). Its people took pride in the monarchy's position and influence in geo-politics. With its elimination, the multilingual, ethnically diverse, and religiously plural empire has lost its identity, and its former Turkish subjects were left with overarching ontological insecurity (Yilmaz 2021). This existential crisis came into being when the nation-state—as a concept and an existing polity—was taking root across the globe (Kohli 2004). For Turkish people, the ordeal of defeat and loss, and the growth of nation as the core aspect of human identity, generated much anxiety and fear.

The infant republic had its fair share of challenges regarding its survival, economics, and autonomy, but most profound was an intangible challenge: Overcoming the Turkish people's lack of collective self-esteem (Wendt 1999). Due to the Ottoman Empire's gradual decline in international significance, and eventual defeat in the aftermath of the First World War, the Turkish people—including the leaders of the new Republic of Turkey, were left insecure and shaken. A humiliating defeat by the European forces had destabilized the self-image of the Turkish elite (Yilmaz 2021).

In such conditions, nations are known to overcompensate and rationalize so that stability can be restored (Mitzen and Larson 2017; Wendt 1999). Turkey did this by disassociating itself from the 'backward' traditions of the sultanate and aspiring to 'modernize' like the West. The loss at the hands of Western powers had instilled in the collective consciousness an idea that Turkey was 'behind' and needed to reform to become a part of the 'civilized' world, rendering its heritage obsolete (Çapan and Zarakol 2019).

Under this historical context and political climate, the Kemalists embarked on a set of reformist policies, and the population went through extensive social reengineering in order to become Westernized. Paradoxically, while the Kemalists wished to emulate the West, there remained deep-rooted insecurities among them regarding Western intentions towards Turkey. This hybridized 'ambivalent Westernism' became the core of nationalism in Turkey's newly formed Republic (Yilmaz 2021). The trauma of loss of territory and the end of a glorious empire suggested to the Kemalists that Turkey needed to 'modernize' in order to catch up with the West. The Kemalists therefore pushed for ambivalent Westernization in order to construct their vision of a modernized Turkey (Alaranta 2020). Throughout the turbulent years after the founding of the Republic, attempts at reforming Islam and creating a purified science-friendly Turkish religion played a unique and important role in the Kemalists' nation-building project. Fear of appearing 'backward', insecurity regarding European intentions towards Turkey, and a need for a coherent national identity, led the Kemalist elite to propagate a centralized version of Islam that was also highly Turkified (Gözaydın 2020). In this new religious landscape Islamists, non-Muslims, non-Turks, and non-Sunnis were marginalized (Yilmaz 2021).

To cement this new version of Turkish identity in its citizens' minds, the military led Kemalist regime relied on education. The 'Sunni Muslim Turk' was the idealized in textbooks. The 'we' or 'the people' of the Republic were constructed using this mould (Babahan 2014). Over the years, due to changes in the political tides, state discourse around who or what is 'good' or 'bad' has varied, yet Islam has remained an important influence throughout (Azak 2010). For nearly eighty years schoolbooks presented the ideal Turkish citizen as a 'moderate' Muslim. Under AKP rule, however, the curriculum has been heavily altered. Many 'modern' and scientific ideas and theories, such as Darwin's theory of evolution, have been abandoned and replaced by Islamist ideas and explanations.

Jihad has begun to be promoted in schools, and scientific theories that do not comply with Islamist interpretations of the Qur'an are rejected (Yilmaz and Erturk 2021; Altuntaş 2017; Yanarocak 2016). One constant during both Kemalist and AKP rule has been the promotion of an 'ideal Muslim', though what constitutes an ideal Muslim has changed much over time (see in detail Yilmaz 2021). While education played an important role in the propagation of the 'ideal Muslim', so too did the religious publications and sermons issued by Diyanet. Indeed, Diyanet has played a central role in Republic of Turkey since the body's inception.

Diyanet's position within the state has allowed it to maintain its presence in the political realm, even as Turkey changed governments (Gözaydın 2020). The institution has been empowered at instances where the Kemalist and Erdoğanist have felt the need to attack opposition forces. The CHP's main political rival was for many years the Islamist National Outlook Movement (NOM) of Necmettin Erbakan (Yavuz 2003; Yıldız 2003). Given the rival party's right-wing Islamic views, Diyanet was used to counter NOM's Islamism with its own brand of moderate Islam. Later in the 1980s, a rather right-wing Kemalist military-led government took power at a time when socialism or the left was of growing concern. Then President Kenan Evren used Diyanet to propagate a newer version of the Muslim nationalism. In this period, the 'Turkish–Islamic Synthesis' promoted a certain type of Sunnification of society as a counter to the socialists, leftists, and Kurdish separatists that had flourished throughout the mid-twentieth century in Turkey (Saleem 2015; Ünlücayaklı 2012).[3] The rise of Erdoğanism has again seen Diyanet used to propagate the Turkish state's notion of an ideal citizen.

Established in the Ottoman state's ruins, the new Turkish Republic introduced Diyanet under article 429, confirmed by the Parliament in

[3] Interestingly, this process has also revealed a strange situation where relations with Shiite Iran have developed greatly in Turkey, particularly in theology faculties and many other Islamic organizations. Even, it is observed that frequent visits are made between Turkey and Iran, and Shia origin professors are employed in divinity faculties first time in Republican period. To put it differently, we are talking about a period when an interpretation of particular Sunnism is promoted on the one hand, and on the other hand, there is closer contact with the Shiite world than ever before. AKP is the party of contradictions. Just as Erdoğan is getting close enough to establish very warm relations with Iran and declares it a second address, and on the other hand, supports opposition in Syria while Iran is standing next to regime. Similarly, while seemingly advertising Sunnism in Turkey, it is observed that Shia propaganda is made in an interesting way.

1924 (Korkut 2016). The institution's formation was aimed at regulating the public's religious life, especially organizing the places where people pray, as well as attempting to influence religious belief (including by publishing some authentic works thought to be beneficial for society). Diyanet in its early years was a centralized state institute that had replaced the offices of *Shaykh al-Islām*, *qāḍī*s (judges), *madrasa*s, and Sufi lodges. Thus, apart from Diyanet, almost every single mechanism that provided religious instructions was closed down and declared illegal (Tarhanlı 1993; Gözaydın 2020; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Yilmaz and Barry 2018; Kara 2000).

For a government pursuing secularism, the Kemalist obsession and reliance on faith were ironic yet understandable. Divorcing religion from the Turkish Republic's public and private discourses was not easy. The region had remained the seat of the caliphate for nearly four centuries, and most Turkish people were faithful Muslims. Establishing Diyanet therefore allowed for the continuation of this core element of Turkish society and the state, and simultaneously allowed for state control over most of Turkey's mosques and thus, the country's religious life. The hidden agenda behind the establishment of Diyanet was to build a new Turkish Republic ideology (Gözaydın 2020). The religious institution facilitated the formation of a new secular system (Yilmaz 2021; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Yilmaz and Barry 2018; Kara 2000). At the same time, the state monopoly over religious services in Turkey prevented backlash from religious Turks following the establishment of new *laïcité* norms and values. Equally, the nationalistic version of Islam propagated by the agency helped cement secular values and norms in place. Thus, Diyanet has played a central role in the engineering of modern Turkish nationalism.

Since its establishment, Diyanet has been subject to various phases and has recently witnessed a fundamental transformational change (see in detail Gözaydın 2020). Historically, it either enjoyed generous support or was denied support and privileges by Turkey's political and military authorities. Depending on the political climate, the institute's need to counter various opposition forces determined its relevance for the ruling parties. These two forces have frequently interfered with Diyanet's operations.

The influence of Erdoğan led Justice and Development Party (AKP) has manifested a new role for Diyanet. The institute has been redefined by the AKP, which is normalizing Islamism as the new national historical

narrative. This turn of events has made Diyanet once again a focal point for transmitting a newly engineered national narrative and identity. The directorate is communicating the AKP's ideals and legitimizing the party's rule through its 'sacred' position within Turkey.

Since its inception, the body never focused on empowering ordinary people, fulfilling their spiritual requirements, or paving the way for people's religious freedom in multicultural and ethnic 'Turkish' communities. Rather, Diyanet has assumed a mission of legitimizing the current government's (AKP) authoritarian policies. It has also played a similar role for the various CHP led governments and periods of military regimes. However, its role and significance in the AKP era is unprecedented. Through the public institution of 'mosque'/Diyanet and the state/AKP, Diyanet has increasingly gained legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The sacred nature of this marriage between Diyanet and the state/AKP has helped normalize and justify the authoritarian government and its Islamist ideology.

As the AKP grew confident in its position in power its involvement with Diyanet increased. In contrast to the party's earlier (2002–2010) pro-European Union rhetoric, which stressed the importance of human rights, sought pluralistic societal understanding, promised democratic opening out, and promised equity and freedom, the new AKP developed fascist tendencies and placed great emphasis on the local/native and the nation above the individual (*yerli* ve *milli duruş*) (Yilmaz 2021; Yilmaz and Barry 2018; Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). The transformation of Diyanet into the AKP's mouthpiece coincided with this ideological alteration of the AKP.

Through Diyanet and its weekly sermons, the AKP has communicated its ideology and policies, sending them not only into domestic localities but also to global audiences. Diyanet's exportation of AKP's politics kills two birds with one stone: on the one hand, Diyanet transfers AKP ideology and policy to the Turkish diaspora; on the other hand, it gives an impression of the AKP's Islamist sensitivities to both Turkish and non-Turkish Muslims outside Turkey (Korkut 2016; Öztürk 2016). Using Diyanet as the channel to reach and influence the Turkish diaspora demonstrates the regime's exclusionist approach to politics, which is based upon notions of Sunni Muslim Turks being the core group which defines Turkish identity. The AKP's outreach programmes also help the party construct a transnational support base (Yilmaz and Demir 2021).

In this way, Diyanet is gradually becoming a transnational instrument of the AKP.[4]

The institution's importance to the AKP is demonstrated in the scale of the funding and support it receives from the AKP government. Since 2014, Diyanet had an annual budget of over 1 billion USD, and the figure is constantly increasing (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018). In 2020, according to a five-year plan, 2 billion USD were spent on Diyanet, and the directorate's annual budget is set to increase to 2.6 billion USD by 2023 (Ahval 2019; Duran and Bellut 2019). To support its activities, some 107,000 employees are on the Diyanet payroll, and operating in 36 countries with 61 branches and publications in 28 languages (Duran and Bellut 2019; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018).

The Ministry of Education and YÖK (High Presidency of Tertiary Education) spend vast sums on Turkey's religious schools and universities, making Diyanet one of the most handsomely financed religious ministries among Muslim countries (van Bruinessen 2018). Diyanet's influence is greater than the Turkish embassies' offices, as its current funding exceeds many other ministries. The AKP's leadership uses Diyanet to construct a massive global network which conveys their Islamist vision of Turkey to Turkish citizens and diaspora Turks alike (Duran and Bellut 2019; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018).

Apart from funding the directorate at a scale hitherto unknown, the AKP has also made structural changes to legitimatize Diyanet's role in Turkey's domestic politics. The elevation of the President of Diyanet (başkan) from director to permanent secretary (müsteşar), and the state protocol of Diyanet's director's hierarchy being elevated from 51 to 10, can be considered both symbolic and practical moves (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Lepeska 2015). Under the leadership of Mehmet Görmez, Diyanet's new status and 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).

[4] Diyanet is not the only institution in Turkey that has become AKP's instrument. Imam Hatip High Schools, Divinity Faculties and many religious 'civil' society organizations that have become AKP at least as much as the Diyanet. Nevertheless, in this study, we will only focus on Diyanet's radical change and transformation.

The unwavering support of the AKP emboldened some of Diyanet's personnel, who appear to see themselves as the sole diplomatic representatives of the state in other countries (Albayrak 2020). Thus, Diyanet's mosque personnel have acted as secret agents of the state among the Turkish diaspora in Europe and other places (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Yilmaz and Barry 2018). Some imams and social attachés (who are usually Diyanet employees) in embassies and consulates target known opponents of the AKP regime, and record their moves to report to the government. For instance, the intelligence shared between Yusuf Acar, Dutch Diyanet attaché, and the government of Turkey suggests Diyanet's surveillance activities targeted members of the opposition Gülen Movement (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018). Rapid change and enormous transformation in Diyanet coincided with the directorship of Mehmet Görmez, who played an important role in marrying the AKP with Diyanet, so that the two became intertwined. In contrast to his predecessors, Görmez was vocal in giving his own opinion about almost every issue in Turkey, from social, political, and economic issues to education and moral matters (Mutluer 2018). Although Turkish society was not accustomed to a garrulous religious figure, Görmez's interest in politics brought Diyanet closer to AKP. If one analyses Görmez's statements during his directorship, one can easily see the stages in which Diyanet was drawn into politics, step-by-step, through the collaboration of its President and the AKP's masterminds (Öztürk 2016).

Görmez launched an unofficial partnership between the Diyanet and AKP. As part of this unofficial partnership, Görmez assumed the role of the spokesman of the AKP, rather than merely the director of the High Presidency of Turkey Religious Affairs. A prominent example of this occurred during and after the 2016 mysterious coup attempt which sought to end AKP rule. Immediately after it was apparent a coup was being attempted, Görmez organized the recitation of *salā*[5] by imams and *muadhdhins* in every mosque in Turkey (Tremblay 2016; Albayrak 2020). The symbolic act lent support and religious legitimacy to the AKP. This was the first step taken to dress a religious garment over resistance to the coup, essentially implying it was a religious duty to support the AKP regime. In the following days and months, it became

[5] It is a traditional praise for the Prophet to call people to go to mosque or inform that something happens.

apparent that Diyanet was commissioned to idealize—religiously and spiritually—resistance to the mysterious coup attempt (Tremblay 2016).

Ali Erbaş, who took the baton of directorship from Mehmet Görmez in September 2017, was determined to continue his predecessor's pro-AKP agenda. The new director's commencement address is symbolic of what he planned to achieve during his tenure. His symbolic use of a sword during his initial address, which he held in a traditional Ottoman fashion, and addressing of the *ummah* (as opposed to citizens of Turkey) coincide with Erdoğan's pursuit of transnational neo-Ottomanism (Mutluer 2018). Like Görmez, Erbaş successfully conveys the message and mission of AKP to the world through Diyanet's resources (UN 2020). For example, at the highly controversial reconversion of the ancient Byzantine Church Hagia Sophia to a mosque, Erbaş led Friday prayers and in his sermon targeted 'the ones' who had turned the structure to a museum. He called these people 'damned', and expressed great contentment with its 're-conquest' (Arab News 2020). This is proof of the increasing joint activities of the AKP and Diyanet going beyond the mosques and operating under the guise of a religious gathering, and of their combined ability to reach people and perpetuate Islamism throughout Turkish society.

The symbiotic relationship between the mosque and state reached new heights under Erbaş. Imams encouraged their congregations to vote for the AKP; AKP candidates freely came to mosques and promoted themselves, and even pro-AKP women used this opportunity to address men in the mosques (Lord 2018). Many Diyanet Qur'an courses turn into convenient AKP polling offices. In the hands of Görmez and Erbaş, Diyanet, in tune with AKP's policies, was radicalized and became exclusivist, polarising, and divisive.

The redefined Diyanet has two dimensions. First, Diyanet has been supporting various government policies through Friday sermons, where it also attacks and defames government critics and opposition forces. The directorate is increasingly able to give the impression that political dissent is unIslamic, and that even the poor decisions made by the AKP ought to be supported by Muslims. In doing so, it attempts to reduce the general dissatisfaction of the people with their government. These activities have an impact both inside and outside of Turkey. Second, the mosque is now unquestionably attached to the government, and the two are enmeshed in a symbiotic relationship. Diyanet, a strong state apparatus, has also become the sole arbiter of 'correct' religious discourse in

the country (Albayrak 2020). To preserve Diyanet's monopoly on religious power, the AKP suppressed the religious and social activities of all non-official religious and non-governmental organizations (except those that approve of AKP policies and are in close contact with Diyanet). The gradual expansion of the official business areas of Divinity Faculty graduates, and the peak employment opportunities enjoyed by these graduates, especially within Diyanet itself, has made Diyanet a very attractive state office to work within. As the directorate grows in power and influence, its leaders begin to think of Diyanet not merely as a religious authority, but as having ownership over religion within Turkey, and perhaps also within the Turkish diaspora.

Diyanet goes beyond performing the role of a mosque, or the coordinator of a network of mosques. Indeed, its activities are not limited to the place of worship alone. Bearing in mind the extensive national and international network and media coverage featuring journals, radio, television (TV), and digital networks it controls, Diyanet has continuously expanded its hinterland (Mutluer 2018; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018) and has become a global institution wielding soft power on behalf of the state of Turkey (Korkut 2016).

Its presence within the Turkish diaspora allows for it to be used as an effective instrument of the government in controlling Turkish people outside Turkey. The Turkish diaspora's religious life and perceptions of Turkey are generally shaped by this institution, particularly in Europe (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018). The changing nature of the AKP policies is constantly revitalized among the Turkish Muslims in Africa, Eurasia, and Europe by means of Diyanet's activities in mosques (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Korkut 2016; Öztürk 2016). The mosque and its modernized outreach avenues have become the state's proxy. One of the important goals of this newly formed political ambition of Diyanet is to build Salatin mosques (grand mosques) in various parts of the world, including in Western Europe, the Balkans, the United States, Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti, and beyond.

Islamist populism in Turkey under the banner of the AKP and its leader, Erdoğan, has only increased in the last two decades. Thus, Turkey is an illustrative case which shows how Islamist populism operates in power, and redesigns relevant state institutions so that they can be used to perpetuate Islamist populism. Diyanet provides a valuable case study to comprehend the AKP's populism, which uses the directorate to consolidate its largely manufactured populist dichotomies. The role of Diyanet in

engineering populist appeal through its Friday sermons is an understudied phenomenon. This book offers a contribution to this insufficiently studied area.

This book evaluates the content of these sermons in the light of the marriage between Diyanet and the AKP, and the political and religious ramifications of this marriage as they are reflected in the sermons. The state has instrumentalized the mosque in Turkey since its inception. Under AKP rule, however, the dynamics have drastically changed with widespread repercussions. Indeed, the poem that Erdoğan had recited nearly three decades ago is synonymous with the AKP's use of Diyanet. The poem's narrative symbolizes the mosque as the faithful's armor in war. In an echo of the verses, Diyanet is the AKP's key tool with which it consolidates power at home and overseas, and the armor it wears when it must defend itself from attacks.

On the other hand, the poem's focus on violence has also come become a reality. As we show in this book, Diyanet in the Erdoğanist era has not only become more religious, populist, and civilizationist, but also increasingly pro-violence and content with using hate speech, whereby judicial and even extrajudicial violence is justified against Erdoganism's critics who are framed as enemies.

Erdoğanism and Its Politics: A Zero-Sum-Game Between Friends and Enemies

Erdoğanism is an eclectic ideology and constructed, to a degree, ad hoc. It is based on the actions and rhetoric of Erdoğan and his supporters. It is deeply connected with conservatism, Islamism (Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018), Pan-Islamism, Muslim Nationalism (White 2012), majoritarianism (Özbudun 2014), Ottomanist nostalgia (Yavuz and Öztürk 2020, 144–178), Islamist populism, Islamist victimhood, resentment, anti-Westernism, anti-Kemalism, Islamist insecurities, conspiracy theories, authoritarianism, personalism, patrimonialism, the personality cult around Erdoğan, pan-Turkism inside and pan-Ummatism outside, Islamist myth-making, militarism, jihadism, and glorification of martyrdom (Yilmaz 2021).

Erdoğan claims to represent 'the people' and 'the nation'. Nevertheless, and similar to other manifestations of populisms in different parts of the world, his populism is not inclusive. The 'national will' (*milli irade*) in his discourse is comprised predominantly of the (Sunni)-Muslim

Turkish nation (Bora 2007). Erdoğanism has a Manichean understanding of humanity and divides it into two antagonistic and warring parts: 'us' versus 'them', or 'we' versus 'they'. Here, 'they' domestically refers to the Westernized and non-practicing Muslim sections of society, and 'we', refers to the native and national, authentic, religious Sunni-Muslim Turks (Özçetin 2019: 950). Globally, Erdoğanism's populist antagonism is between Muslims—led by Erdoğan himself—and infidels, but especially the Crusader West.

Erdoğanism sees domestic and international politics as a Schmittian zero-sum-game between friends and enemies. In a leaked conversation between 12 top-AKP strategists after an election defeat in 2015, the chief advisor to the then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Ertan Aydın, states:

> While President Erdoğan acts along the lines of Carl Schmitt, the Prime Minister Davutoğlu follows a Habermasian line. Erdoğan's line exists within a need for power while Davutoğlu's line acts within a need for sympathy.

Carl Schmitt[6] was of the opinion that the state must have a dictatorial exceptional status above the law, and that state sovereignty and autonomy must be based on the existential distinction between friend and foe. This foe can be any person or entity that represents a serious threat or conflict to one's own interests (Vinx 2019). His illiberal jurisprudence

[6] Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) was a conservative and pro-Nazi German legal, constitutional, and political theorist. Schmitt is seen as one of the most important critics of liberalism, parliamentary democracy, and liberal cosmopolitanism. Vinx (2019) summarises his main ideas on politics and underlines that Schmitt argued that liberalism bypasses and wipes out real politics through ideas such as universal human rights, and parliamentarianism, displacing the sovereign state. Schmitt's work highlights the importance of a strong state, executive power, and a homogeneous society. His illiberal jurisprudence and his passionate anti-Semitic mentality facilitated his support of the Nazi regime. He justified Hitler's extrajudicial murders of political opponents. He also elaborated on dictatorship and argued that any government that can act decisively must include a dictatorial element in its constitution. In his view, the concept of 'state of emergency', allows the executive from any legal restrictions on its power. This is normal according to Schmitt because state sovereignty and autonomy must be based on the distinction between friend and foe and this distinction has to be defined existentially. Such an enmity does not have to be based on nationality and real substance of hostility can be anything, including internal actors within a country. This can be any person or entity that represents a serious threat or conflict to one's own interests (see in detail Vinx 2019; see also McCormick 1994; Scheuerman 1999; Mehring 2014).

and anti-Semitism led him to support the Nazi regime, and he justified the regime's extrajudicial murders of political opponents. For him state sovereignty and autonomy must be based on the distinction and enmity between friends and foes. This enmity does not have to be based on nationality and can be based on hostility internal actors within a country (see in detail Vinx 2019; see also McCormick 1994; Scheuerman 1999; Mehring 2014).

Aydın goes on to critically explain Erdoğanism's Schmittian strategy:

> We have religionised our struggle. Thus, when opponents attack us, they no longer attack only us, but also attack our religion and sacred values. Because we make mistake of coding the nature of this relationship. *We present our relationship with the opposition as if it were a relationship between believers (us) and the Meccan polytheists (the opposition).* Because of the *ummatism*, we remove the Alevis from our target list of potential voters. This is not a sustainable tension. Our ideology will either go bankrupt or we will find a way out of here.[7]

One of the 12 men in the group was Taha Özhan, who is another Schmittian. Özhan was the chief of AKP's think tank SETA,[8] a pro-Erdoğanist propaganda outlet. He frequently used Schmitt's ideas when attacking Erdoğanism's critics. He reminded people that 'it should not be forgotten that, to state it by borrowing from Carl Schmitt, the one who is elected by the nation is the one that decides the state of exception'.[9] When describing the Gülen Movement's opposition to the AKP and Erdoğanism he used the Schmittian framework again:

> In the war that the Gülen Group waged against the AKP as a non-political actor, while finding new allies its arguments are losing their strength and

[7] https://t24.com.tr/haber/akp-secim-tutanaklari-2-13-yilda-elimizde-bir-pipet-her-duyguyu-somurduk-bu-duygusal-vampirlik,313498.

[8] Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfi), http://setav.org/en/.

[9] www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/ozhan/2012/02/18/27-nisandan-7-subata-siyasete-mudahale. Two days after this column was published, Erdoğan was speaking to his party's youth branch in his public appearance after the incident as he had an operation. It cannot be a coincidence that Erdoğan made his infamous speech on the pious generation and for the first time he talked about a 'vindictive youth.' This is discussed in the section titled 'Erdoğanist Social Engineering: Pious and Vindictive Youth.'

> its claims become dubious. In contrast, Erdoğan is getting stronger and more persuasive by putting the Gülen Group, which has opened up war on him, where it should be in the '*friend-enemy' world of politics*. This situation puts the Gülen Group in a dramatic predicament.[10]

When many left wing and liberal democrat academics signed a petition asking the state to stop its violence against the Kurds, Özhan together with his colleague Bekir Gür from SETA published a commentary again with a Schmittian mindset. Even the title is very striking: 'Quote of the day: Traitors cannot be Intellectuals'.[11] They state that the commentary is a tribute to the 'pseudo-academics' who objected to the Erdoğanist violence. They question whether

> ...it is possible to be both an infidel (*gavur*) and intellectual? ...What sort of serious contribution can be expected from someone who lives in this land but not even once prostrated (*secde*) to God? Being an infidel is related to betrayal and loyalty rather than a theological situation. One can be a non-Muslim but not an infidel on the one hand and on the other, *one can be a Muslim and an infidel*. The only criterion is treason.[12]

They then refer to Schmitt:

> There is perhaps no other living example in which Carl Schmitt's "friend-enemy" construct fits so well. The Infidel is the enemy. Those who are with the enemy are also infidels… Worship of the person, the works he performs, and the domestic masks he uses are evaluated on a separate level. Likewise, the religion of non-Muslim who is not an infidel is not important.[13]

No one from the AKP has ever objected to what Aydın, Özhan and others have been saying about Erdoğanism's Schmittian style of politics.

[10] www.star.com.tr/yazar/gulen-grubunun-basarisi-yazi-852229/.

[11] www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/gunun-sozu-vatan-haininden-aydin-olmaz-120932.html.

[12] www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/gunun-sozu-vatan-haininden-aydin-olmaz-120932.html.

[13] www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/gunun-sozu-vatan-haininden-aydin-olmaz-120932.html.

Religious Populist and Pro-Violence Narratives of Erdoğanism

Diyanet's current phase of transformation was engendered by the politics of AKP. The party increasingly justifies its authoritarian populist style of governance through Diyanet sermons, allowing Erdoğan and the AKP leadership to expand the reach of their Islamist populist ideology. Moreover, the 'mosque' status of the state within the state has also allowed for it to blend a combination of emotions rooted in anxiety and anger, to further increase the populist appeal of the AKP. The book explores the strategy of survival that the state has used through its instrumentalization of Diyanet to extend its emotive populist narrative and in turn gain legitimacy.

This premise is a part derived from the works of Jan-Werner Muller (2016: Chapter 2). Muller (2016) argues that populists in power grow authoritarian in due course. Authoritarian leaders are required to make their policies socially accepted as a 'matter of survival', as their source of legitimacy, especially in electoral authoritarian settings. Addressing this emerging 'need', we observe the emergence of an alliance, if not the merger, of two concepts: authoritarianism and populism on the global political stage.

Populism, which is modified in line with the political culture of the nation in which it occurs, is emerging as a strategy used by various regimes in order to legitimize authoritarian rule. Populism in the hands of such leaders has also been used to 'construct' a social 'reality', designed to make their authoritarian rulings acceptable and attain the support of the government constructed 'people'. In this regard, religion is increasingly becoming a key component of populist discourses across the world. From India to Turkey, Malaysia to the United States, populist political actors are referring to religious notions to galvanize support. Religion not only shapes populist ideologies, but also helps generate feelings of belonging, fear, and anger, thus shaping the performance of populism. In Turkey, religious populism has been synonymous with the AKP's shift towards authoritarianism (Yilmaz 2021).

Emotions play a significant role in religious populism. Stemming from structural (national and international) as well as affective foundations, populism has been effective in speaking to the deep emotions of the masses (Salmela and von Scheve 2017, 2018; Brady et al. 2017; Graham et al. 2011). Populist political actors are adept at triggering deep rooted

emotions by tapping into a collective sense of grievances, resentment, disillusionment, anger, fear, and vindictiveness, (Yilmaz 2021; Bonansinga 2020; Demertzis 2019; Blakemore and Ratri 2018; Rico et al. 2017). In Turkey, the personalistic style of the President Erdoğan and the AKP involves a range of strong negative emotions, such as resentment and fear of other domestic groups, but also positive emotions, such as love of the homeland and passion for the nation, and mixed emotions like Ottomanist restorative nostalgia, to galvanize support for their populist narratives (Yimaz 2021).

Recently, populism has become widely adopted as a frame through which the political activities of Turkish regime may be understood (Sawae 2020; Taş 2020; Castaldo 2018; Özçetin 2019; Özpek and Yaşar 2018; Yılmaz 2018; Kirdiş and Drhiemur 2016; Selçuk 2016; Yabancı 2016). There are studies looking at role of religion in populist appeal of Turkey's AKP in general and analysing religious references in Erdoğan regimes' populist narratives (Yabanci 2020; Yabanci and Taleski 2018). There is an emerging literature on Diyanet and its political activities. However, they either discuss how Diyanet is used as an instrument of foreign relations/policy to create soft-power in some certain regions (Ozturk 2016) or they analyse Diyanet's activities to change the sociology through the lenses of de-secularization (Adak 2020). The role of Diyanet in constructing Islamist populist appeal remains understudied. Addressing this locum, we critically analyse populist appeal in Diyanet's sermons. This is the focal component of the present work.

Populism is not a uniquely twenty-first-century occurrence. The formal study of populism dates back to Tsarist Russia, nineteenth-century American politics, fascism, and the socialist regimes of Latin America (Glaser 2017; Moffitt 2016; Bjerre-Poulsen 1986). Edward Shils' work on the subject refined the concept on bases of three core principles. These features of populism are first, that 'the people' are sovereign and above their rulers; second, that there ought to be a direct connection between 'the people' and their government; third, that the 'will of the people' is an 'associate with justice and morality' (Shils 1956).

Yet there has been a great deal of scholarly contestation over whether these concepts could be said to form a coherent populist ideology, albeit a 'thin-centred' one, or whether they in fact constitute something else entirely; a type of populist political strategy, or a style of behaviour, or a discourse. The work of Mudde terms the concept 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and

antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004: 543). For others, 'lacking the sophistication of other ideologies like socialism or liberalism, it is a thin-centred ideology and could be combined with other beliefs and ideas of politics' (De la Torre 2019: 7).

On the other hand, as Laclau explains, populism is 'a way of constructing the political' and 'the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such' (Laclau 2006: 680). Populism, whether it is a thick or thin ideology or a 'royal road', whatever it is, has the common features of a populist style including antagonistic rhetoric, 'people' versus 'the elite', hostility towards representative democracy in the name of direct democracy; hostility against independent state institutions and bureaucratic checks and balances; and finally, towards independent press, an appeal to the 'bad manners' to demonstrate his/her dismissal of the established political convention and thirdly performance of crisis, breakdown or threat (Moffit 2016: 45; Taggart 2004, 2012).

In populist practice, democracy is reduced to the will of the majority to the detriment of minorities, which are constructed as undesired, enemies, or possible collaborators with a foreign enemy. To this end, populists are highly skilful in speaking the language of the people, and in shaping their will while claiming to govern in their name. Populism, in a nutshell is about manufacturing and directing reaction of majority to 'few privileged, but beyond protest. It is full of political ambitions. Therefore, it is a political style of power-mongers capitalizing on 'protest culture' through manufacturing emotional appealing to the majority and constructing an audience of majority to rise on their shoulder (Fahlenbrach et al. 2016: 1).

This 'otherization' of minorities takes place in more than one dimension. Taguieff observes two dimensions of populism: *vertical* and *horizontal* (Taguieff 1995: 32–35). In its vertical dimension populism divides as 'us' 'the people' versus 'them', 'the corrupt elite' (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Taguieff 1995). The horizontal dimension divides among citizens of the nation; 'the pure people' of the land versus 'the evil traitors', and un-wanted citizens who are excluded from the populist conception of 'the people' (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Taguieff 1995). This ability to connect with various facets inside and outside a society makes it a highly versatile phenomenon.

Populists are highly charismatic figures (Kissas 2020; Pappas 2016; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; van der Brug and Mughan 2007). They are divisive, antagonistic, highly skilful in speaking the language of 'the people', ready to instrumentalize any religio-theological (Albayrak 2013), socio-cultural and emotional elements and shape and direct the 'will of the people'. In doing so they aim to inform and shape the perception of masses and tailor them as their political audience with the help of *words tapping into emotions,* and manipulation of facts in this vein, in an *Orwellian* fashion. They voice (capitalize upon) the grievances of underdog groups, advocate on their behalf, and organize them around their charismatic 'self' (Kissas 2020). Then, in a constructed setting they provoke and pit the people against 'the elite', who are portrayed as the source of all ill-doings. Under this constructed setting populists are allowed to go beyond political rules and norms, and freely challenge established norms of the space[14] they operate within. To be able to do so they construct new utopian spaces, which Taggart (2004) calls 'heartlands', ideally imagined emotional spaces. 'Heartlands', 'a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of imagination', are key in building the 'people' around the populist 'self', and constant references to these heartlands and the people who inhabit them are embedded in populist discursive performances. They do not construct this space alone. Rather, they invite the people to take part in the space created for them, and reach out to the people to ask for their help in constructing utopian heartlands (Kissas 2020; Pappas 2016). The heartland is the ideal space for populists to operate within, because there they can define the rules (Dreher 2020; Kissas 2020; Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018; Pappas 2016). Thus, phrases used by populists, such as 'constructing a New Turkey', 'Make America Great Again (MAGA)', *Akhand Bharat* (Greater India), *Naya* Pakistan (New Pakistan), etc., are the examples of the utopian societies promised by the charismatic populist leaders around the globe.

The current regime in Turkey has been described in different ways. It has been called a 'delegative democracy' (Taş 2015), or as practicing a form of 'weak authoritarianism' (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016), 'electoral authoritarianism' (White and Herzog 2016), 'illiberal democracy' (Lord

[14] In this analogous, space refers to the state and its established institutions and practices [including the independent media platforms] checking on their political powers with the excuse of reasserting the people's will over the elite's will and democratise the politics.

2019) or idiosyncratically Erdoğanism (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). The common points of all these definitions are the populist and authoritarian characteristics of the current regime in Turkey. Therefore, rather than discussing the characteristics of the regime, our question is about the force allowing the regime to maintain its popularity despite its authoritarian nature. We call this force Erdoğanism. It emerges as a reflective invention which reveals the multidimensional characteristics of the regime. Erdoğanism not only recognizes the authoritarianism of the regime, but also combines nationalism, Islamism, and populism to maintain the popularity. Erdoğanism is Islamist because its narratives rely on Islamism and Islam is key instrument in its formation of 'the people', the nation, and the designation of threats and enemies. Erdoğanism is nationalist, because it is exclusive in its approach to its nation in expense of others. Erdoğanism is populist because it sets up 'us' versus 'them' dichotomies in highly antagonistic manners. However, its nationalism and populism are moulded by Islamism, giving Erdoğanism a civilizational aspect. The populist aspect of Erdoğanism has been discussed and used as an illustrative case in the literature. In Lewis et al. (2019) Erdoğan is presented as the only right-wing leader labelled 'very populist'. Thus, we are faced with an Islamist nationalist populist regime in Turkey.

The AKP has instrumentalized Diyanet to act as a propagator of its populism. This populism is a thin ideology which adjoins itself with conceptions of Islamism and Islamic civilizationism, and which securitizes its core narratives and relies on several emotive provocations to maintain its legitimacy and perpetuate itself. Although populism is a very important issue in the current Turkish administrative structure, we sometimes observe that even contemporary populism theories will fall short in the definition of Turkish type populism. Populism in Turkey (more accurately Erdoğanism) does not display a static structure. It is a lively formation that shows periodic and conjunctural changes and includes many shadow populist actors in the series that started with Erdoğan. For example, Mehmet Görmez, the previous head of the Diyanet, was a populist and charismatic leader as much as Erdoğan. The current president is more populist than he was, but is far less charismatic. In short, Mehmet Görmez was Erdoğan's counterpart in the Diyanet. In other words, the chief populist is Erdoğan, but a lot of miniature populists have been created with the passage of time. From Akar (secretary of defense) to Soylu (interior minister), populism became the operating principle behind many pro-AKP civil gatherings, and even the mafia took advantage of

populist ideals spreading through Turkish society.[15] The hollow populist charisma of an increasing number of Turkish politicians and officials has, unfortunately, led Turkey down a dark path towards authoritarianism.

Brubaker contributes to the discussion of populism by identifying a new dimension, the *civilizational*. He writes that alongside groups and parties with a physical/personal existence 'impersonal forces or institutions that are seen as threatening our way of life or our security: globalization, unfettered trade, the European Union, radical Islam, and so on' (Brubaker 2017: 1192). The civilizational aspect is particularly important in the populist construction of the people and designation of their enemies. A constructed people need a civilization to identify with, and enemy to hate and fear, and which is said to be conspiring against the people directly or indirectly through its collaborators. Civilizationist populism puts less emphasis on national differences but more on civilizational differences, especially differences allegedly the product of religions and their legacies (Brubaker 2017: 1211) that in this aspect of populism, religion emerges as a political identity defined by its other. Through the lens of civilizational populism, Brubaker argues that right-wing populists in Europe converged towards each other as a result of their anxious preoccupation with an alleged civilizational threat from Islam. This anxious 'preoccupation with Islam has given rise to an identarian "Christianism", a secularist posture, a philosemitic stance, and an ostensibly liberal defence of gender equality, gay rights, and freedom of speech' (Brubaker 2017: 1193). Thus, while civilizationism can still be 'understood as a form of nationalism, the boundaries of belonging and the semantics of self and other are reconceptualized in civilizational terms, then one can speak of an alternative to nationalism' (Brubaker 2017: 1211). In this civilizationalist discourse the imagined community or nostalgic utopian home is 'located at a different level of cultural and political space than national discourse' (Brubaker 2017: 1211). Civilizationism is an alternative principle of vision and division of the world, but it does not supersede nationalism, rather it combines the forces with it (Brubaker 2017: 1211). In relation to populist politics, civilizationism (civilizationist rhetoric) in the hands of populist actors serves as a highly effective emotional instrument of division and galvanizer of popular support. Yilmaz (2021: 128) argues that Islamism,

[15] The famous Turkish mafia leader Sedat Peker was also a person who experienced the peak of populism with the AKP. When he had a conflict of interest, he became persona non grata in the AKP hinterland.

too, is civilizationist since 'its survival and maintenance are highly dependent on the level of antagonism between Islam and its "other", the Judeo-Christian West' (Yilmaz, Demir and Morieson 2021: 3).

Despite its competing definitions, populism is about constructions (construction, de-construction, and re-construction) of 'the people(s)', and mobilization in an antagonistic fashion. Construction requires individuals to believe in and gather around some certain 'cherished values'. In this regard, the relationship between populism and religion, especially as a source and generator of 'civilizational values', is an emerging phenomenon drawing scholarly attention (De Hanas and Shterin 2018; Zúquete 2017; Brubaker 2016, 2017; Hadj-Abdou 2016; Marzouki and McDonnell 2016; Morieson 2021). Religion is providing a fertile ground not only in constructing a receptive audience, 'the pure people' of the populists; but furthermore, relevant and highly valuable materials in setting up 'us' versus 'them' dichotomies and perpetuating these divisive binaries (Nilsson 2018; Taguieff 1995).

Populist politicians appeal to collective sense of resentment, disillusionment, and anger to mobilize their constituents. Emanating from structural (national and international), as well as affective foundations, populism has been effective in speaking to the deep emotions of the masses. It appears that religion is playing key role in providing persuasive moral claims which trigger the self-righteous resentment necessary for a populist dividing of the 'good' and 'bad' people, and the mobilizing of the former against the latter. From this point of view Islamism is politicization of the religion of Islam (Cesari 2021; Yilmaz 2018; Mozaffari 2007). Thus, it is inherently populist in its performance, insofar as it relies on enemies and existential threats to survive. However, it is highly hegemonic in its instrumentalizing of the 'enemy other' to capture political and economic power through 'fighting' them.

Within and outside Turkey Diyanet has been active in spreading a hybrid Kemalist and Ottomanist civilizational identity (Yilmaz 2021). This civilization is portrayed as superior, pious, and under constant threat from 'traitors' and foreign forces. This ontological sub-theme of populism is extended beyond the border to Muslim majority countries, as Turkey reasserts its claim to be the 'leader' of the 'Muslim World' (Taş 2020; Nicosia 2016; Gürzel 2014). Thus, the civilizational identity becomes a transnational one that is facilitated by various institutions, and Diyanet's growing intentional and online presence is also playing a role in its facilitation.