

# IDEOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS IN THE COVID-19 HEALTH CRISIS IN TURKEY BY POWER, POLITICS, AND RELIGION

*This article aims at analyzing the various ideological interventions, prompted by the pandemic in Turkey, in the fields of power, politics, and religion. In a country and a context where politics and religion are closely connected, and a particular Turkish experience with few parallels in the Muslim world, our investigation will be two-fold: how to calculate the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on the Turkish political field, and secondly, how has the religious world reacted in backing up politics in its response to this crisis. We are seeking to understand the effects of the crisis on the established power, and on the orientations of national and international policy in the context of a health crisis. Lastly, we need to examine the role of religion in the management of the crisis.*

Bayram Balcı\* & Sümbül Kaya\*\*



TPQ

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\* Bayram Balcı is a Researcher at CERI Sciences Po in Paris and the Director of French Institute of Anatolian Studies in Istanbul(IFEA).

\*\* Sümbül Kaya is a Fellow and Head of Contemporary Studies at the French Institute of Anatolian Studies(IFEA).

**L**ike most countries in the world, Turkey experienced the full force of the spread of Covid-19, which has been in the headlines since March 2020. Iran was one of the first countries to be heavily affected, and as its neighbor, Turkey officially declared its first coronavirus case on 11 March 2020, and the first death linked to the virus on 17 March. According to *Worldometer* data, in May 2020 Turkey ranked 41st in the number of people infected by the virus (133,721 cases) and 33rd in terms of coronavirus deaths.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Turkey was distinguished by having the fastest infection rate in the world, though this was partly due to its increased capacity for screening. In fact, it was one of the ten first countries to have backed, and implemented large-scale testing. However, the Turkish Medical Association (*Türk Tabipleri Birliği*, TTB) asserted that “the real level of infection was even higher as only people who tested positive were officially recorded, people treated for Covid-19 on the basis of clinical symptoms were not being counted.”<sup>2</sup> On 1 June, when the country embarked on a progressive though nonetheless limited emergence from a long lockdown<sup>3</sup>, the official numbers were these: 1,964,364 tests carried out, 162,120 cases confirmed, 125,963 recoveries, and 4489 deaths.<sup>4</sup> By 9 November 2020 Turkey saw the arrival of a second wave, and the numbers given by the Ministry of Health, although incomplete, pointed to increased numbers of infections and deaths. On 5 December 2020 the figures were these: 19,517,084 tests carried out, 533,198 cases confirmed, 427,242 recoveries, and 14,705 deaths.<sup>5</sup> So in the autumn of 2020, while several European countries such as France and the United Kingdom locked their populations down again, Turkey implemented new, weak measures designed to restrict the activity of certain businesses (cafés and restaurants, hairdressers, sporting venues, etc.) which were to shut at 10 p.m. And there was similarly the reintroduction of a partial lockdown for persons aged over 65, only allowed to go out between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. in some large cities like Ankara and Istanbul. From 18 November 2020 a partial curfew limited outings at the weekend to between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m. and other limitations were imposed, but it seemed that everything was being done to avoid a total lockdown which could damage the country’s already precarious economy. However, the worsening situation obliged the authorities to toughen its control measures. A near-total lockdown at weekends was imposed throughout the country, and a weekday curfew between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. The failure to include in the statistics asymptomatic

<sup>1</sup> “Türkiye, koronavirüste tanı ve can kaybında dünyada kaçınıcı sırada?”, *Birgün*, 8 May, 2020, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/turkiye-koronaviruste-tani-ve-can-kaybinda-dunyada-kacincisi-sirada-300054>

<sup>2</sup> Evren Balta and Soli Özel, “La bataille des chiffres, un faible taux de mortalité en Turquie,” *Institut Moutaigne*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/blog/la-bataille-des-chiffres-un-faible-taux-de-mortalite-en-turquie>

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Pérouse, “Wuhan de la Turquie à l’épreuve de la pandémie,” *Analyses pluridisciplinaires sur la crise sanitaire Covid-19 en Turquie*, cited by Balci, Bayram. Kaya, Sümbül. (2021) *Analyses pluridisciplinaires sur la crise sanitaire COVID-19 en Turquie*.

<sup>4</sup> See the official site of the Turkish Ministry of Health for further detail: <https://covid19.saglik.gov.tr/>

<sup>5</sup> See the official site of the Turkish Ministry of Health for further detail: <https://covid19.saglik.gov.tr/>

positive cases prompted questions about the reliability of figures issued by the Health Ministry. During the first wave of the pandemic the Turkish Medical Association recorded figure much higher than those given by the State, but during the second wave the Association's website coincided with official figures.<sup>6</sup>

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This article aims at analyzing the various ideological interventions, prompted by the pandemic in Turkey, in the fields of power, politics, and religion. In the context of a country where politics and religion are intimately connected, and of a particular Turkish experience with few parallels in the Muslim world, our investigation will be two-fold: how to calculate the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on the Turkish political field, and secondly, how has the religious world reacted in backing up politics in this crisis. We shall be investigating the effects of the crisis on the established power, and on the orientations of national and international policy in a health crisis. Lastly, we need to examine the role of religion in the management of the crisis. First, however, let us look at the state of the country when the crisis first hit Turkey.

In terms of methodology, this research is based on a qualitative survey carried out in times of Covid in Istanbul, in particular on the basis of interviews with mosque staff and neighborhood leaders. It is also based on the observation of daily life during a period of confinement, as well as by the analysis of official declarations from the government and the President of the Republic, Turkey's Religious Affairs General Directorate (Diyanet), medical and health authorities, religious brotherhoods, and associations such as the Turkish Medical Association.

### ***The Reinforcement of Political Polarization***

Many studies have sought to investigate the effects of the nature of regimes on the management of a health crisis.<sup>7</sup> This approach, which consists in asking if a democratic regime manages a pandemic better or worse than a totalitarian regime, seems to us to be somewhat off-target and unoriginal, a kind of avatar of the much-debated

<sup>6</sup> For further detail please see: <https://www.tb.org.tr/kollar/COVID19/index.php>

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Kleinfeld, “Do Authoritarian or Democratic Countries Handle Pandemics Better?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/do-authoritarian-or-democratic-countries-handle-pandemics-better-pub-81404>

theory of democratic peace. The simplistic, binary notion that the transparency of democracies ensures that people will obey a lockdown yet in authoritarian regimes it is easy to confine a population already used to surveillance and the limitation of fundamental liberties just does not work. If the media argue that China and Iran will emerge less well than some liberal democracies like Germany, then Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom are counterexamples. We believe that this debate is influenced by many extra-political parameters such as size and demographic composition, as well as the culture of social relationship with sick and vulnerable populations, two vital features which, quite properly in Turkey's case, have had a role in the management of the crisis. The youth of the population and family solidarity, meaning that old and young live under the same roof, have been two crucial factors in the fight against the pandemic in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> And what is more, access or lack thereof to medical materials and how crowded hospitals are have a direct bearing on strategies for managing the health crisis. In contrast, it is easier to analyze the way in which the fields of government and politics invest ideological issues in Covid-19. We will see that this health crisis is also a test that strengthens political polarization.

From the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 the Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, a doctor by training, was more center stage in the media than the President. As other researchers have observed, Erdoğan seemed to have decided to manage the crisis in a non-polarizing way since the Health Minister was seen more as a bureaucrat using scientific language than as a politician. Similarly, quarantining pilgrims returning from Mecca could be viewed as an action hostile to his own political base. Some of the tweets and speeches of the President of the Republic aimed at reviving a feeling of national unity against Covid-19 to arouse public support, as is evidenced in the following extract:

*“Our state and all our institutions are working continually to serve the nation. I hope, inshallah, that we shall get through this difficult process. As long as we follow the rules and instructions and definitely continue to stay at home.”<sup>9</sup>*

We must also remember that if Erdoğan is still in power it is thanks to a political alliance, the popular alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*) made in February 2018 between the AKP and the extreme right Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP). The extreme right does not concur in the idea advanced by Oytun Erbaş, a specialist in experimental medicine, that Turkish genes are resistant to Covid-19.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Evren Balta and Soli Özel, “La bataille des chiffres, un faible taux de mortalité en Turquie,” *Institut Montaigne*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/blog/la-bataille-des-chiffres-un-faible-taux-de-mortalite-en-turquie>

<sup>9</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's speech on 22 March 2022. For detail see: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/>

<sup>10</sup> Oytun Erbaş, “Corona virüs Türklere bulaşmıyor,” *Yeniçağ*, 5 March 2020, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/oytun-erbas-corona-virus-turklere-bulasmiyor-270766h.htm>

Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the MHP and hence one of the pillars of the government, supports the public health action being implemented. For him, it is by way of an appeal to national unity in the face of Covid-19, and by the power of science and prayer coupled with respect for the public health measures implemented by the government, that the virus can be conquered.<sup>11</sup> He also urges the people of Turkey to distrust “opportunists, provocateurs and the back market.”<sup>12</sup> According to Vincent Geisser, “health nationalism set in train by political leaders only works in terms of mobilization and social representation because it attaches itself to the ordinary nationalism which is widespread in the population.”<sup>13</sup> This applies to our context in which ordinary nationalism is everywhere and transcends class. This Turkish ‘hygiene-nationalism’<sup>14</sup> is also seen in fund-raising campaigns established by the government on a national scale with the slogan ‘We can do it for ourselves’ (*Biz Bize Yeteriz*).

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*“In terms of foreign policy, the initiatives taken by the government to aid a hundred or so countries around the world in order to restore its image and to revitalize its foreign policy can be considered as a half success.”*

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However, these appeals to national unity to fight the coronavirus are pious hopes and the political polarization which existed before is strengthened by the health crisis. One of the first sources of tension between government and the opposition concerns the measures taken by the government to address the pandemic and this shows that the opposition has not embraced the measures proposed and indicates a lack of trust in such public action. The Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* - CHP) criticized the state’s slowness and tentativeness in taking lockdown measures. In fact, from 3 February 2020 flights to and from China and Iran were suspended and the land borders with neighboring countries were closed. The closure of non-essential businesses and stadiums (in a country where football is a second religion) was quickly decided on, though in practice this was patchy. The selective

<sup>11</sup> TRT Haber, “Devlet Bahçeli: İsaletli tedbirler alındı,” 17 March 2020, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/devlet-bahceli-isabetli-tedbirler-alindi-467809.html>

<sup>12</sup> TRT Haber, “Devlet Bahçeli: İsaletli tedbirler alındı,” 17 March 2020, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/devlet-bahceli-isabetli-tedbirler-alindi-467809.html>

<sup>13</sup> Vincent Geisser, “L’hygiéno-nationalisme, remède miracle à la pandémie? Populismes, racismes et complotismes autour du Covid-19,” *Migrations Société*, 2020/2 no. 180.

<sup>14</sup> Vincent Geisser, “L’hygiéno-nationalisme, remède miracle à la pandémie? Populismes, racismes et complotismes autour du Covid-19,” *Migrations Société*, 2020/2 no. 180.

lockdown, strictly imposed only on the age ranges of less than 20 and more than 65 years old, the age categories not required to keep the economy turning and the most vulnerable to the virus, was also the subject of heavy criticism by the opposition. The real political tensions, however, related to two other issues: measures to support businesses most affected by the forced economic slow-down, and the release of prisoners almost at the end of their sentences to ease prisons, major sites of contamination.

Some opposition municipal authorities, notably the metropolitan authorities in Ankara and Istanbul, encouraged by their electoral victory in March 2019, launched initiatives to collect money for the most-needy.<sup>15</sup> Perfectly legal, these solidarity campaigns, which are common in Turkey, are not without political, and even electoral, design in the main towns that implemented them. All local authorities of all political hues did this, including and above all the AKP, which could thus construct and maintain a strong client list link with its supporters. The government was very displeased with this opposition initiative. On the direct intervention of President Erdoğan, collecting money in the context of the fight against Covid-19 by any organization other than that designated by the state – as it happens, the above-mentioned campaign ‘We can do it for ourselves’ – was prohibited. True to his discourse of demonizing the opposition, he accused the initiative of separatism, aiming to set up a state within the state.<sup>16</sup> To set an example, he donated seven months of his salary as President of the Republic to swell the national campaign. Thus, while the battle against Covid-19 could have been an occasion for solidarity and real unity setting aside ideological conflicts and divisions, the crisis was certainly the umpteenth lost opportunity for a coming-together of the government, on the one hand, the opposition, and the section of the population which is unfavorable to it on the other.

Lastly, the government did not lighten the repression of its opponents in any way. Arrests continued, especially of local elected representatives in Kurdish towns, like the mayor of the town of Siirt from the pro-Kurdish HDP, who was replaced in May 2020 by a representative appointed by the State.<sup>17</sup> And further, some bloggers and other critics of government management of the pandemic were arrested, and some imprisoned.<sup>18</sup> In sum, the crisis and its management did not generate conformity

<sup>15</sup> Vahap Coskun, “Devlet içinde devlet olmak,” *Perspektif*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.perspektif.online/tr/siyaset/devlet-icinde-devlet-olmak.html>

<sup>16</sup> Hamdi Fırat Büyük, “Turkish President Accuses Municipalities of Forming ‘Parallel State’,” *Balkan Insight*, 1 April 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/01/turkish-president-accuses-municipalities-of-forming-parallel-state/#gsc.tab=0>

<sup>17</sup> Hürriyet, “5 belediye başkanı görevden alındı, Siirt ve Iğdır’a kayyum,” 16 May 2020, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/5-belediye-baskani-gorevden-alindi-siirt-ve-igdira-kayyum-41518904>

<sup>18</sup> Diego Cupolo, “Turkey cracks down on journalists, others as coronavirus rumors spread,” *Al Monitor*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/turkey-journalists-social-media-pandemic-crackdown.html>

to the measures taken by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, or to his government, but instead reinforced existing conflicts and divisions.

### *The Health Crisis as an Opportunity to Emerge from Diplomatic Isolation?*

The management of the crisis was not without an impact on Turkish foreign policy. While the crisis exaggerated tensions and divisions in domestic politics, the coronavirus offered Turkey a chance to end its isolation in international politics. As a consequence of this changing paradigm, Turkey has become unpopular with its neighbors, and even its traditional allies appear disturbed.

It is true that Turkey is a full member of NATO and is still officially a candidate to join the EU, but for some time the country has had tense relations with the two pillars of the western alliance, the United States and the European Union. In the first case, there is disagreement over Syria, and divergence over Russia.<sup>19</sup> In the second case the argument also relates to the issue of Syria, and also to the decline in the rule of law in Turkey which damages realistic chances of a rapprochement between Ankara and the European Union.<sup>20</sup> Even so, the fundamental problem lies in the migrant crisis, used to exercise pressure. Thus, in the context of multiple disagreements with the European Union, and knowing how touchy the Europeans are about this issue, Erdoğan has not hesitated to play the migrant card as a weapon by urging refugees in Turkey to cross over the Greek border in order to seek refuge in a Europe that does not want them.<sup>21</sup>

Turkey does not have better relations with its immediate neighbors. Having been cordial before the Syrian crisis, they are now complicated with Greece, with Syria obviously, and also with Egypt, Cyprus and Israel.<sup>22</sup> The picture is less dark in respect of Russia, but even there, links are uncertain, ambiguous and by no means immune to new excuses.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, Turkey has installed a ‘corona diplomacy’ to come to the world’s assistance, to re-dynamize a foreign policy bogged down in a fair number of tricky situations. Turkey has sent various forms of medical aid to a very large number of countries, to regild its image among its own population and the international community alike. For instance, Ankara included Western countries

<sup>19</sup> Mehmet Yegin, “Turkey between NATO and Russia: The Failed Balance,” *SWP*, 30 June 2019, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019C30/>. inst the Pn the Fi.’ (Figure 2of Turkey, Mevress conference withe

<sup>20</sup> Bill Park, “Turkey’s isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?” *International Affairs*, Vol.91 N.3 (2015), pp.581-600.

<sup>21</sup> Berkay Mandracı, “Sharing the Burden: Revisiting the EU-Turkey Migration Deal,” *International Crisis Group*, 13 March 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/sharing-burden-revisiting-eu-turkey-migration-deal>

<sup>22</sup> Aydıntaşbaş et al. “Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey and the New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2020. [https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/eastern\\_med](https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/eastern_med)

<sup>23</sup> Seçkin Köstem, “Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2020.

in its corona diplomacy, responding to a NATO appeal it sent aid to Spain, Italy and even the United Kingdom. In the Middle East, Iran received virus screening kits, masks and other protective equipment, as did Algeria, Yemen and Iraq, and Libya for the territories controlled by the Government of National Accord, which is allied with Ankara. More symbolic and unexpected, aid has been sent to Israel and to Armenia, whose nationals stranded in Turkey were helped to make the journey back to their native country. How does Recep Tayyip Erdoğan benefit from this medical aid policy?

We suggest that this resort to coronavirus diplomacy is a resource for the presidency in respect of domestic policy, since it also transmits to his own people the image of a country which is doing well and is able to help other countries even while its own economy is shaky. Thus, the message carries reassurance to a section of the people who, at the same time, are encountering difficulties in getting masks for themselves.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘corona diplomacy’ was also vigorously criticized by the opposition because the aid packages sent to Italy and Spain flagged up the presidency rather than the Turkish Republic, as can be seen on Figure 1. If the ‘corona diplomacy’ can be seen as an instrument of soft power, thereby highlighting his leadership qualities, it is a matter of the soft power of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This approach reveals a personalization of the Turkish state.<sup>25</sup> It is also the intention of the Presidency to valorize Islam through this aid programme since the bundles shipped carried a quotation from Mevlana, a Sufi Turco-Persian poet of the 13<sup>th</sup> century who died in Konya, ‘After despair, countless hopes. After darkness, countless suns.’ (Figure 2). The official wording on these aid parcels also stresses that Islam insists on solidarity as a fundamental principle.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>The sale of masks was forbidden in the country during the first wave of the health crisis and the state then distributed 5 masks per week per person free of charge through pharmacies. Faced with an insufficient logistical system the government changed tack several times before authorising the sale of masks.

<sup>25</sup>Erdi Öztürk, “Turkey’s Use of the COVID-19 Battle as a Religious Soft Power Instrument and its Limitation” *IFEA*, 9 June, 2020, <https://ifea-istanbul.net/index.php/tr/etkinliklerimiz/guncel-etk/turkey-s-use-of-the-covid-19-battle-as-a-religious-soft-power-instrument-and-its-limitation>

<sup>26</sup>Anadolu Agency, “Covid-19: Turkey sends medical aid to more than 30 counties,” 16 April 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-sends-medical-aid-to-tunisia-to-address-covid-19/2303355>

*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*



Turkish armed forces deliver this medical aid, though they seem to be keeping a low profile in the management of Covid-19 at the national level. Even while it is hard to estimate the effects of Turkey's 'corona diplomacy' it seems to us important to note that it has not served to extract Turkey from its isolation. In fact, in parallel to this medical aid as a manifestation of soft power, there has also been a return to, or a continuation of, the 'hard power' implemented since the failed coup d'état of 15 July 2016. In effect, the Turkish army has multiplied its military operations outside the national territory in the context of the battle against the PKK in Iraq and Syria. In the middle of the health crisis the Turkish military presence in Libya illustrates further the development of Ankara's offensive regional strategy, in which the Turkish military henceforward takes a central role.<sup>27</sup> Turkish military support, with its air-power, its drones and its mercenaries, has been decisive in turning the course of the war in favour of the Government of National Accord, GAN. This action in Libya has been an opportunity for Turkey not only to strengthen its position but to give a demonstration of power showcasing superior Turkish technology.

For Ankara these military operations constitute a means of situating itself as an undeniable actor in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, and to signal to other regional and international powers that it is ready to deploy its technological superiority in a context of high geopolitical tension. The Turkish presence in Libya also illustrates the General Staff's adherence to a new military doctrine given the name 'Blue Homeland' (*Mavi Vatan*). It is based on three principles: the militarization of foreign policy (recourse to the army); the long-distance defense of Turkey particularly by control of its maritime frontiers in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, and the development of a solid arms industry to implement this strategy. This concept has oriented Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign and defense policies in a political context in which, with the aim or re-establishing its legitimacy, the governing party has allied itself with the nationalist (and tending towards sovereigntist) extreme right called '*Ulusalci*', which favors a rapprochement with authoritarian authorities such as Russia, China and even Iran to the detriment of the West. Thus, the Covid-19 crisis has not stopped Recep Tayyip Erdoğan embarking on other battles. The simultaneous use by the President of *hard power* and *soft power* has been keenly criticized by the opposition, but the President's muscular language on foreign policy, particularly about the East Mediterranean crisis, enjoys real popular support. However, society remains polarized on most questions of internal policy during the coronavirus crisis, but not in the religious sphere, where the attitude of 'religious power' in the country, that is to say the management of

<sup>27</sup> It must be emphasised nonetheless that even if long before the health crisis Parliament had approved a motion allowing President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to send military forces into Libya to support the Government of National Accord, the GAN of Fayeze El-Sarraj recognized by the UN, which is fighting the forces of the putschist Marshal Khalifa Haftar, it is clear that the war has been pursued during a full health crisis.

religious affairs in the pandemic, has not stirred up as many divisions in the nation, perhaps even the opposite.

### ***Religious Authorities in the Fight Against the Pandemic***

There are at least two reasons why religion must be considered in order to understand the effects of a pandemic like coronavirus on society in general as well as on Turkish society in particular. The first reason is that, facing such a scare believers and even a number of unbelievers, in such circumstances, find solace in spirituality in order to understand, accept and get over the event; they turn towards God or towards his representatives on earth, the authorities or religious guides.<sup>28</sup> The second reason is that all religions, because they assemble people, for prayers or collective movements or pilgrimages can be a means for the pandemic to spread, as was the case in Korea and France for the first outbreaks of the disease. At the same time, the influence and the strength of persuasion that religions exert over the faithful can be efficient partners in the fight against infection. These two factors, the clergy addressing the population and their mobilization in order to limit the effects of the disease have been visible in practically every country in the world, regardless of religion. In Turkey, where the main religion is Islam, has seen the Diyanet as the main actor in reassure and mobilize the faithful against the pandemic. In addition, there are numerous religious brotherhoods and Islamist intellectuals who express themselves through television channels, publications, and internet sites.

Among these actors, undoubtedly the most influential in Turkey is the Diyanet, the most powerful and the most widespread throughout the country. In fact, the Diyanet functions like a giant ministry with 130,000 employees, managing 84,000 mosques and thereby exerts a powerful influence over believers. It is an unavoidable religious actor, managing the religion and organizing pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina.<sup>29</sup> Through the voices of its thousands of imams and muezzins working all over the country this institution gives the tone, dictating the individual and collective attitudes to be adopted in confronting exceptional events such as epidemics and earthquakes as well as certain political crises.

Turkish Islam is also represented by a large number of Sufi brotherhoods. Among the main ones we can name the Naqshbandiyya, founded by Bahâ'uddin Naqshband and which has a network of agencies around the whole world. In Turkey it is divided

<sup>28</sup> Kali Robinson, "How Are Major Religions Responding to the Coronavirus?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 March 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-are-major-religions-responding-coronavirus>

<sup>29</sup> Emir Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey. Law, Policy Making and the Diyanet*. London, New York: I.B Tauris, (2018).

into three branches,<sup>30</sup> of which the biggest in terms of the number of followers is the Menzil community, named after the village in the province of Adıyaman where the founder established his headquarters. Another branch of the Naqshbandiyya is led by Osman Nuri Topbaş, who is to be found at the Mahmud-Hüdayi-Vakfi foundation, where the headquarters are located in Üsküdar. Finally, the community of İsmailağa, located in the neighborhood of Fatih in Istanbul, makes up the third group. This last branch has the particular characteristic of maintaining good relations with President Erdoğan,<sup>31</sup> who visited it on 13 January 2020.<sup>32</sup> The differences in dogma between these movements are insignificant, since they all interpret and live Islam in the light of the teaching of their master and founder Naqshbandiyya Bahâ'uddin Naqshband.

Finally, Islam in Turkey is also a media ecosystem relaying the analyses of more or less influential Muslim intellectuals. Among these, we can name Abdurrahman Dilipak, who writes in the strongly Islamist daily paper *Yeni Akit* and Hayrettin Karaman, an editorialist on the newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, who is just as fundamentalist. At the opposite end of the spectrum is İhsan Eliaçık, who embodies a new movement in Turkish Islam, that of anticapitalistic Muslims or leftist Islamists.

More than ever, the Diyanet, the religious arm of political power, quickly imposed restrictions on meeting places and the introduction of new practices such as preventive measures and social distancing. The call to prayer has been modified somewhat since, at the end of his call, the imam adds a phrase reminding people that the pandemic is still around and that the duty of the faithful is to combat it by staying at home. The banning of collective prayers in mosques has been the most important decision taken in conjunction with the political powers. Similarly, all collective religious assemblies were banned, notably the pilgrimage to Mecca, once the health risk was really confirmed. In any case, the Saudi authorities closed all the holy sites which made the grand *hajj* impossible in July 2020. Furthermore, still wishing to limit the spread, funerary practices have been simplified: quicker prayers before a restricted group and a very swift burial. To better spread information about the new rules, the Diyanet has made use of the media but above all its territorial coverage is assured by the imams. All of them have followed its recommendations, some having anticipated them and they reproached the institution for its lack of reactivity. Other currents in Turkish Islam such as the main brotherhood movements already mentioned had invited the faithful to practise the same caution using preventive

<sup>30</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "The Naqshbandi-Khalidi order and political Islam in Turkey," *Hudson Institute*, May 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/research/11601-the-naqshbandi-khalidi-order-and-political-islam-in-turkey>

<sup>31</sup> Cumhuriyet, "Resmi Gazete'de yayımlandı: İsmailağa Vakfi kuruldu!" December 2020, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/resmi-gazetede-yayimlandi-ismailaga-vakfi-kuruldu-1796150>

<sup>32</sup> On the content and commentaries on this visit, see: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/395243/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-dan-ismailaga-cemaatine-ziyaret>

measures and social distancing.

### *Conclusion*

By way of conclusion, several comments can be made which point to what Turkey might be like when the coronavirus crisis is over, although the end is not yet in sight. Firstly, in terms of domestic policy, the management of the crisis has not really affected the nature of current political power, which was and remains authoritarian. This authoritarianism might well be accepted by some of the population who would recognize the good management of the health situation and the avoidance of many deaths, for the infringement of liberties thus far, since the confinement, has not been as strict as in other countries. In fact, the government can be proud of having managed the crisis well even if criticism is expressed and there is still the question of the reliability of statistics. This careful management has pulled the rug from under the feet of the opposition including two new groups – the *DEVA* and *Gelecek* parties, dissidents from the AKP - which appeared during the crisis. These parties have not had time to build themselves up throughout the country and their programs and the leaders' speeches have been overshadowed by the mobilization during the pandemic. Thus, those in power, whose mandate finishes in 2023, can feel reassured. There will be no need to organize early elections to renew their legitimacy.

Secondly, in terms of foreign policy, the initiatives taken by the government to aid a hundred or so countries around the world in order to restore its image and to revitalize its foreign policy can be considered as a half success. The success in dealing with the first wave is due to the fact that the country showed strong capability in its sanitary reaction which is reassuring as regards the image that it can give of itself.

Finally, there are two points to highlight regarding the religious dimension of the crisis. The pandemic has revealed and demonstrated the osmosis between the AKP and the Diyanet. The latter has worked hand in hand with the government during this crisis, proving its loyalty to the point that it seems to be a branch of the party rather than an institution of the state, above the political debate. Despite this, the Diyanet has not failed in its public service mission. Its recommendations to the faithful facing the crisis were proof of common sense and scientific rationality by taking confinement measures and making Islamic practices conform to recommendations from the order of doctors. In so doing it has privileged public health over the practice of the faith, which has not been the case everywhere else.