Middle Eastern Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fmes20

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Published online: 09 Aug 2010.

To cite this article: Ufuk Ulutas (2010) Religion and Secularism in Turkey: The Dilemma of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Middle Eastern Studies, 46:3, 389-399, DOI: 10.1080/00263200902899812
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00263200902899812

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Religion and Secularism in Turkey: The Dilemma of the Directorate of Religious Affairs

UFUK ULUTAS

One of the most controversial institutions in the Republic of Turkey has been the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı). After the abolition of the Caliphate and the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations (Șeriye ve Evkaf Vekâleti) in 1924, the Diyanet was formed as a new government agency. Attached to the Office of the Prime Minister, the Diyanet was given the responsibility to carry out activities related to Islamic belief, the principles of worship and morality, religious education of the public, and management of places of worship.

Since its formation, the Diyanet has been a matter of continuous discussion among various segments of the Turkish society. Its status and activities in the ‘secular’ Turkish Republic constituted the bulk of the debate in both secular and religious circles. Both sides have had their own reasons to argue against and, in some cases, to defend it. Whereas some secularists have criticized the Diyanet for being an obstacle to the complete application of ‘secularism’ in Turkey, some religious people have considered it a secularist tool to control and restrict religious observance. At the same time, some secularists were content to see the state maintain control over religious affairs, even if it was at the expense of the ideal of secularism to a certain degree. Some religious people, on the other hand, enjoyed new job openings for themselves, and facilities and services offered by the Diyanet, such as newly built mosques, newly produced copies of the Qur’an, and various religious publications.

This article aims to examine the Diyanet from its formation in 1924 to the present day, and attempts to place the Diyanet in the context of the prevailing perplexity over state–religion relations in Turkey. It first questions Turkish-style secularism and surveys its development. It then examines the laws concerning the formation of the Diyanet, such as the laws of March 1924, in order to disclose the responsibilities, power, and limits of the Diyanet. It also deals with the question of why the Turkish Republic would need the Diyanet and where the Republicans placed it in a secular state. The article also presents the pious intellectuals’ view of the Diyanet and its publications. It finally stresses the idiosyncratic nature of state–religion relations in Turkey in connection with the Diyanet. Ultimately, this article is an attempt to contribute to scholarly debates on the drawing of borders between the religious and non-religious (state) spheres in Turkey.
Immediately after the proclamation of the Turkish Republic, in order to break the influence of religion over the state affairs and to replace Ottoman Islamic civilization with its Western counterpart, the Republicans introduced a series of laicizing reforms pertaining to civil law, education, and social life. These reforms included the abolition of the caliphate, abolition of the madrasas and unification of education (Tevhid-i Tedrisat), abolition of the Sufi lodges, and abolition of the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations. Most of these reforms were passed in the National Assembly on 3 March 1924, and proved to be instrumental for creating a sharp rupture from the Ottoman Empire and starting the long-lasting debate on secularism, or laicism, in Turkey.

It is noteworthy that, similar to many other concepts of western origin that were adopted by the Turkish Republic, secularism was also understood rather differently by various parties and often confused and used interchangeably with laicism in Turkey. Although secularism and laicism are in some limited senses used synonymously, they have different etymologies and theoretical implications. The word secular means ‘of this world’ and refers to the opposite of religious. Secularism basically seeks the necessary distance, the non-coincidence, between matters of religion and the state. Secularism therefore tries to establish an autonomous socio-political sphere, in which the sphere of religion and the sphere of state affairs are totally separate. Laicism, on the other hand, originates from the French word lai, and means ‘of the people’ as distinguished from ‘the clergy’. Thus, it distinguishes the lay members of a church from the clerical strata. Laicization is the process of rendering something lay, or transferring it to lay control. While this process may necessitate an absolute separation of religious and worldly matters (e.g., politics, education, etc.), as in French laicism after 1905, its scope may not be as extensive as secularization. This is simply because lay people are not expected to be non-religious or anti-religious. In other words, while laicism separates religion or tradition from state affairs, it may also charge religion with a prominent, lay-defined, and official role, as in the case of Turkey.

The main distinction between secularism and laicisim, therefore, is the rather intricate relation between laicists and religion. This distinction also allows for more mixed relations between worldly and religious matters; and enables the laicists to claim some sort of control over religion. That is why some scholars call French laicism ‘Jacobin secularism’, and some scholars label Turkish secularism as ‘radical Jacobin laicism’. In the French and Turkish cases, we see various extents of interference in religion. This variation derives mainly from the difference of the role of the clergy of the dominant religions in these countries; that is to say, Catholicism has an established clergy whereas Islam has not. The lack of established clergy in Islam indicates that no special class equipped with holy abilities speaks to the people on behalf of God and religion. Therefore, as compared with the French laicists, Turkish laicists did not completely detach themselves from their religion. Returning to the etymology of the concept, since Islam does not create powerful and dominant clergy, Turkish lais might not have as absolutist a stance against the religion and clergy as the French during the Third Republic did. On the contrary, Turkish lais tried to implement certain reforms within Islam in order to make it a ‘modern’, ‘national’, and ‘liveable’ religion. Attempting to transform their religion into a ‘modern’ religion, the Turkish lais proposed to translate the call to prayer (adhan)
into Turkish, created church-like mosques by putting in rows of chairs, and introduced music into the religious services. This interference with religion is more evident in the Turkish case, and there are abundant examples of it in the history of the Turkish Republic.

The founders of the Turkish Republic attempted to separate state affairs from Islam and named this proposed relationship between the two spheres laicism, or laiklik in Turkish. The very concept of laiklik became one of the ‘six arrows’ of the Republican People’s Party (RPP) for remaking Turkey. A theoretically better choice than secularism in the Turkish context, laicism also became the underlying motive of the early Republican reforms in Turkey. As the establishment and proposed role of the Diyanet demonstrate, borrowing the French concept of laicism, Turkey modified the concept to create a particular kind of laicism that we can call alla Turca laicism.

Since its establishment, the Diyanet has reflected mainstream Sunni-Islamic beliefs, partly because Sunni-Muslims have constituted the vast majority of the population in Turkey. In addition, the Republican elite who established the Diyanet were also Sunni-Muslims; they considered Sunni-Islam as, in Ernest Gellner’s terms, ‘high culture’ as opposed to folk Islam (i.e. Alevism and Sufism) and chose to promote the ‘high culture’ through the Diyanet. This was primarily due to the fact that, characterized by uniformity, simplicity, and scripturalism, ‘high Islam’ was easier for the state to control than folk Islam, which was not canonized, and had many different interpretations. Hence, the early Republicans, therefore the Diyanet, preferred Sunni-Islam and totally ignored folk Islam, especially Alevism.

The RPP’s series of reforms aimed at curtailing the influence of Islam in Turkey’s legal system, education, and social life were remarkably successful; however, they could not completely abolish Islam’s previous social and legal influence. Ironically, alla Turca laicism, though apparently fighting against its influence over social and legal affairs, created new legal spaces for Islam.

One of the ministries formed after the opening of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) on 3 May 1920 was the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations, which aimed at fulfilling the function of the Shayk al-Islam in the Ottoman Empire. As Ali Fuad Basgil argues, the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations had both religious and political influence, very much like the Shayk al-Islam. Indeed it became one of the most important government ministries in Ankara. One of the highest ranked ministers of the cabinet – arguably second to the Prime Minister – the Minister of Islamic Law and Foundations deputized for the President or Prime Minister in their absence. Mustafa Fehmi Efendi, for example, deputized for Mustafa Kemal in the latter’s absence and acted as the speaker of the parliament in 1920. In another case, on 9 February 1924, Mustafa Fevzi Efendi, the Minister of Islamic Law and Foundations at the time, deputized for Ismet Inonu, the Prime Minister, with the approval of Mustafa Kemal.

On 3 March 1924, three important laws were passed in the TGNA: the abolition of the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations and Ministry of War, the unification of education, and abolition of the caliphate and expulsion of the Ottoman dynasty. In compliance with these laws, civil bureaucracy took over responsibility for
executing public services previously carried out by religious bureaucracy. The primary reason – one may also call it fear – underlying the abolition of the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations and Ministry of War was summarized by Hoca Halil Hulki Efendi, a deputy from Siirt, who was one of the drafters of the law: ‘There is a great danger in religion’s and the army’s interest in the state affairs. This reality was accepted by all modern countries and governments as a governing principle.’ It is noteworthy that Hoca Halil Hulki himself was a religious bureaucrat. Specifically, he was the mufti of Siirt; with these laws, he was technically proposing to restrict his own power.

The founders of the Republic had three options to reorganize religion according to the ideals of the Republic. After the abolition of the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations, the founders might have remained indifferent to religion, as secularism proposes, or they might have left religious affairs to the Islamic groups (cemaats), or they might have controlled religion by reorganizing its institutions. The founders chose the final option, and the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs accompanied the abolition of the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations. According to the first article of the law, the TGNA and the government were given the legislative and executive power to regulate the laws pertaining to interpersonal relations; the Diyanet has since been authorized to supervise all cases concerning the exalted Islamic religion related to beliefs and worship, and to manage all Islamic institutions. The same law articulated the duties and responsibilities of the Diyanet. According to the third article, the Diyanet’s director was to be appointed by the President on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. Attached both organizationally and financially to the Office of the Prime Minister, the Diyanet’s main duties included the administration of all mosques and appointments and dismissals of all imams, preachers, callers to prayer, sextons, and so on. The last article stated that all offices of muftis (müftülük) were to be attached to the Diyanet, and all Islamic foundations were to be administered by a General Directorate of Foundations, which would be established by the Office of the Prime Minister.

An important point to note here is that Islamic schools, legal institutions, and religious foundations, which were previously owned and administered by the religious bureaucracy, were not to be owned by the Diyanet according to these laws. In other words, the Diyanet had no legal rights on the buildings, e.g. mosques, Islamic institutions, etc., that their employees were administering, and this meant the loss of a substantial source of income for the Diyanet. More importantly, the Diyanet also had no authority related to the education of its employees. According to the Tevhid-i Tedrisat law, which was passed on the same day in 1924, all types of activities related to education became attached to the Ministry of Education. This ensured that all the Diyanet employees were to be trained in the national schools. The fourth article of the Tevhid-i Tedrisat law proposed the establishment of a Faculty of Divinity in Istanbul University in order to train experts in religion to be hired by the Diyanet. It also stipulated that new schools (mekteps) to train imams and preachers were to be established. These mekteps survived until 1933, and the Diyanet opened Quran Study Schools in 1934 in order to replace these mekteps.

The transition from the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations to the Diyanet was not a simple change of name. This was definitely one of the key reforms of the
Republican revolution. The Director of Religious Affairs was a refined and laicized form of the Minister of Islamic Law and Foundations, resulting in the removal of all worldly responsibilities of the Minister of Islamic Law and Foundations, and the confinement of its religious authority. The appointment of Börekçizade Rifat Efendi, the mufti of Ankara, as the first Director of Religious Affairs served as an indication of the early Republicans’ ideas about the Diyanet. In the Ottoman Empire, such an ordinary mufti as Börekçizade could not become a Shayk al-Islam. Hence, considering the old leaders of the ilmiye class, people found Borekci’s appointment as the leader of state’s religious organization rather strange. However, this appointment was quite a rational move for the government, because Borekci acted together with Mustafa Kemal and supported him with his fetvas during the Turkish War of Liberation. Borekci was also a member of the early Republican elite, and he contributed to the early Republican reforms in the area of religion.

The ‘one party period’, which lasted until 1950, was difficult for the Diyanet. During this period, the religious bureaucracy weakened dramatically, and excessive state control over religion and the Diyanet became intolerable for the religious population and Diyanet employees. The Diyanet, now left with a very small space for manoeuvre, had its already restricted authority curtailed further. In 1931, the duty of appointment and dismissal of imams, preachers, callers to prayer, and sextons, given to the Diyanet in 1924, was taken away and given to the General Directorate of Foundations. Part of this duty was given back to the Diyanet one year later; however, the General Directorate of Foundations retained partial authority on these appointments.

As the state attempted to marginalize religion, it was also trying to implement certain reforms. It is noteworthy that in the ‘reform of religion’ project, the Diyanet was not a policy maker. It existed solely to implement reforms proposed by a commission headed by Fuad Koprulu. This reform proposal included performing the rituals of worship in Turkish, redesigning the interior of mosques, and introducing musical instruments into worship. However, the vast majority of people strongly opposed these reforms, preventing their success, causing the commission to be dissolved, and the measures to be abandoned.

During the Democratic Party period (1950–60), Turkey saw certain improvements in state–religion relations, and the Diyanet enjoyed this amelioration to a certain extent. Restoration of the Arabic call to prayer was an example of a major departure from the religious policies of the ‘one party period’. During this period, the most pressing problem of the Diyanet was the shortage of educated personnel. The Director of Religious Affairs of the time, Ahmed Hamdi Akseki, drew people’s attention to this shortage and accused the Ministry of Education of failing to train people for the Diyanet. He further said that it became impossible to find imams to lead the prayers, preachers, and even washers of the dead, let alone enlightened and competent religious scholars. In order to solve this problem, the Imams and Preachers Schools (Imam-Hatip Okullari) opened in 1951. In the same year, the Higher Islamic Institute (Yuksek Islam Enstitusu) was founded to provide higher education for the graduates of the Imam and Preacher Schools.

Also during this period, the status of the Diyanet was discussed in the TGNA for the first time since its establishment. Some Democratic deputies proposed that the Diyanet should have been given autonomy to perform its duties in the best possible
way. They also argued that the Diyanet employees were in great need of a salary increase. In parallel with this proposal, the director of the Diyanet, Ahmed Hamdi Akseki, gave a press conference in Istanbul in which he requested autonomy for the Diyanet and annexation of religious foundations to the Diyanet. The government did acknowledge the requests, but did little about the salary increase, while the other demands were refused, primarily because the Democratic Party, like the RPP, considered the control of religion and the related task of restraining the power of the religious bureaucracy, i.e. the Diyanet, as an important responsibility of the state. 19

The 1960 coup d'état ended Democratic Party rule in Turkey; however it did not bring about fundamental changes in the organization and responsibilities of the Diyanet. The MEHTAP (Central Government Organization Research Project), 20 which was carried out between 1962 and 1963 based on a cabinet decree, 21 was a comprehensive study on the distribution of central government functions, making suggestions for more efficient public services in Turkey. It aimed to restructure the board of ministers, the Office of the Prime Minister, ministries and their sub-organizations, autonomous institutions and the regional units of the central government. The MEHTAP project proposed certain changes to the authority and duties of the Diyanet, and listed the Diyanet’s duties as scholarly research on the Islamic faith, the religious preferences of the Turkish people, and Islamic schools of thought (madhabs); increasing the intellectual level of religious publications while also exercising control over independent Islamic publications; training its own personnel; and overseeing the local organizations of the Diyanet. 22

An important change occurred in 1976 when the Diyanet was given the authority to open representative offices abroad to answer the questions of expatriate Turkish citizens about the Islamic faith and rituals of worship. With this law, the Diyanet became an organization that oversaw religious affairs not only in Turkey but also abroad. Although this law might have been passed with the intention of serving Turkish citizens abroad, one may argue that it also aimed at hindering Turkish citizens’ contact with other interpretations of Islam and preserving the alleged uniformity of religion in Turkey.

Immediately after the September 1980 coup, the military government arrested Turkey’s leading politicians, dissolved the bicameral Grand National Assembly, declared martial law, then banned all political activity, and drafted a new constitution. The 1982 Constitution kept the Diyanet’s authority and duties nearly unchanged. The constitution articulated that the Diyanet perform its prescribed duties in accordance with laicism by transcending all political ideologies and by aiming for national unity and solidarity. 23 This article yet again expressed the state’s sensitivity about religion–politics relations; it also burdened the Diyanet with further responsibility – namely, maintaining national unity and solidarity.

The Diyanet is still one of the pillars of the Turkish Republic. Under the constitution, it is illegal for any political party to call for its abolition. An organization that takes its power from the constitution, the Diyanet possesses duties that can be summarized under four main categories: services concerning the rituals of worship in Turkey, services concerning religious education, services abroad, and services concerning the Diyanet Foundation.

According to the law passed on 1 August 1998, the Diyanet has the sole authority to open and administer mosques in Turkey. It is also responsible for the appointment
and dismissal of imams, callers to prayer, and other religious employees. It currently oversees more than 75,000 mosques in Turkey; however, due to budgetary restrictions, the Diyanet does not currently have employees working as imams and callers to prayer in almost one-third of these mosques. However, this does not mean that these mosques are not in service. Local people usually appoint a volunteer from among themselves to call to prayer and lead the prayers. This shortage is partly a result of a decrease in the number of the Diyanet employees in the last ten years.

Another major duty of the Diyanet concerning the rituals of worship is to organize pilgrimages, one of the five pillars of the Islamic faith. This service includes travel arrangements, briefings on the pilgrimage, and guidance in Saudi Arabia. The Diyanet has employees specially trained in pilgrimage services.

Education is one of the points about which the laicists in the Turkish Republic are extremely sensitive. Instruction of religion in national schools is permitted by law, and the Ministry of Education has full control over it. Therefore, the instructors of religion are employees of the Ministry of Education, not of the Diyanet. The only school-like institutions that the Diyanet oversees are the Quran Study Schools. Most of the students are around the age of 12 when they start school. Diyanet employees help the students in these schools to recite the Quran according to the rules (e.g. *tajweed*, *tashih-i huruf*, and *talim*), to memorize the Quran by heart, and to learn about the life of the Prophet Muhammad and Islamic history.

As previously mentioned, the Diyanet is also responsible for carrying out services for Turkish citizens abroad. This service includes the establishment of mosques and instruction in religion, as well as printing religious publications and providing social services and pilgrimage and funeral services. The Diyanet’s services abroad started relatively late compared to other services provided by various Turkish-Islamic groups. When the Diyanet’s responsibilities expanded to include Europe as well as Turkey, for example, most practising Turks had already become a member of one of the three major Turkish-Islamic groups abroad: the National Outlook Organization (*Milli Görüş*), the Islamic Cultural Centre (*Süleymanis*), or the European Democratic Ulkuçs Association (Nationalists). As was the case at home, Islamic groups’ prior activities diminished the influence of the Diyanet institutions abroad, and prevented the infiltration of state-sponsored religious teaching into the Turkish Diaspora living mostly in Europe.

The Diyanet also works like a social organization through the Diyanet Foundation. The foundation financially supports the Diyanet, runs hospitals and care centres for the poor, collects charity and almsgivings (*zekat*), and redistributes them to the poor. There are several companies that belong to the Diyanet Foundation, including the Diyanet Vakfi Publishing House, KOMAS (food supplies), and GINTAS (construction). It also has shares in some of the Islamic financial institutions, such as Kuveyt Turk. Diyanet Vakfi Publishing House is one of the most important departments of the Foundation. It publishes the Diyanet version of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the Diyanet’s Quranic translations and exegesis, books related to Islamic law and rituals of worship, prayer books, and books on Islamic history.

The compatibility of the Diyanet with laicism in Turkey has been the subject of a long debate, and both laicists and religious people have various opinions on this
issue. Islamists' criticism of the Diyanet was mainly because of the state’s control over Islam and the Diyanet’s use of Turkish-Islamic synthesis as its hegemonic ideology. In 1949, Esref Edip, the editor of the Islamist magazine Sebilurresad, directed rhetorical questions to the Prime Minister, Semsettin Gunaltay, about the status of the Diyanet in laicist Turkey. Addressing Gunaltay, he said that 'Today, your so-called laicist government has a religious character, because the Diyanet is attached to your government, and its budget is approved by the parliament. Which country in the world has this kind of strange laicism?' Another religious journalist, Ahmed Tasgetiren, criticizes the Diyanet and draws his readers’ attention to the fact that religious people do not trust the Diyanet, which is the state’s mouthpiece on Islamic issues. Also, some anti-nationalist Islamist writers, such as Abdurrahman Dilipak and Ali Bulac, criticized the Diyanet for its use of Turkish-Islamic synthesis, which, according to these writers, undermined Islam’s universality and unity of Muslim solidarity.

On the other hand, some other Islamist writers like Mehmet Sevket Eygi have defended the necessity of and demanded more autonomy for the Diyanet. An important personality who speaks in favour of the Diyanet is Fethullah Gulen. In an interview published in the Zaman newspaper, he said that ‘Although I can criticize certain points about the Diyanet; I see it useful, and I am a supporter of it.’ It would be correct to argue that, considering the Diyanet’s role as the sole organizer and facilitator of worship services in Turkey, most of the Islamic intellectuals are currently in favour of the Diyanet. Hayrettin Karaman summarizes the ideas of the supporters of the Diyanet from among the Islamists: ‘it is neither logical nor permissible to oppose an institution that is necessary for maintaining religious services in integrity and order’. The current Director of Religious Affairs predictably sees the Diyanet as compatible with laicism. He says:

In terms of its structure, the Directorate of Religious Affairs is a public institution. In other words, it is located within the state organization. Lawyers and scholars have always debated whether this contradicts with the secular structure of the state. In fact, this has to do with the way one views secularism.

He points out that the question of whether the Diyanet is compatible with secularism depends on one’s understanding of the concept, and gives his own understanding of secularism:

Secularism is respect shown in religious affairs by the state and the lack of religious intervention in state affairs. However, this does not mean a total severance. Secularism does not entail a total independence and operation in two separate areas. As the Ottoman example illustrates, it is rather a relationship based on mutual respect and balance. In other words, it is an approach that prevents domination but enables communication, solidarity and cooperation towards developing the society further.

Our previous theoretical discussion shows that what Ali Bardakoglu defines as secularism is far from what secularism really is. What he defines above is actually
tolerance, not secularism. If by secularism he means laicism, this is again not quite a suitable definition of laicism. As previously mentioned, laicism also requires state–religion separation. Furthermore, it does not prevent the state’s domination of religion; on the contrary, a laicist state may restrict and control religion.

There is also no uniformity among the laicists as far as the Diyanet is concerned. Orhan Aldikacti, the author of the 1982 Constitution, argues on the issue of the Diyanet’s compatibility with laicism: ‘It [Diyanet] is both incongruous [with laicism], and a necessity of it [laicism].’³² Aldikacti’s answer indeed encapsulates the laicism in the Turkish context. The Diyanet is incongruous with laicism because the Diyanet’s presence prevents separation between the state and religion in Turkey; on the other hand, laicism may necessitate the Diyanet, because religion should be kept under the control of the state. Although the debate on the compatibility of the Diyanet with laicism continues, the Constitutional Court’s judgment ended the debates on the legal platform. In its reasoned decision, the Constitutional Court asserted that the state’s control over religion aims to prevent religious fanaticism by training competent religious scholars and providing religious services for the majority Muslim population.³³ The first part of the reasoned decision goes in line with Aldikacti’s answer and amounts to saying that alla Turca laicism necessitates the state’s control over religion to protect itself.

Although some religious people have criticized the Diyanet for various reasons, some others have continued to enjoy new job openings, facilities and services offered by the Diyanet, such as new mosques, newly produced copies of the Quran, and other religious publications. For example, especially during the 1950s and early 1960s, the Suleymançis established a symbiotic relationship with the Diyanet. Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan, the leader of the movement, was a Quran teacher and founder of many Quran Study Schools before and after the law giving permission to open Quran schools in Turkey. After the law was passed, primarily because of the shortage of educated personnel, the Diyanet hired many of Tunahan’s followers. They worked as imams and preachers in the mosques, became teachers in Diyanet’s Quran Study Schools, and dominated various levels of the religious bureaucracy in the Diyanet. After the law was passed that allowed only Imam-Hatip School graduates to be hired by the Diyanet, the Suleymanci influence on the Diyanet diminished because the Suleymancis were mostly studying in their own Quran seminaries and not in the Imam-Hatip Schools. However, this law did not diminish the influence of other Islamic groups such as the Naqshbandis, who have always had close relations with the state. The Imam-Hatip Schools were very popular among the Naqshbandis, and many Naqshbandis supported these schools and sent their children to them. Especially after the 1960s, the Naqshbandis considered the employment opportunities in the Diyanet as crucial to the success of their survival and acquired top positions within the Diyanet.³⁴ The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy’s research illustrates this effort:

A key survival strategy of the Nakşibendis during the years of rampant Kemalist secularism was their active lobbying for functions in the bureaucracy of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the Diyanet. Several obtained influential positions, which they could exploit when the Democratic Party’s 1950 victory brought more tolerance for religious expression.³⁵
In brief, the Diyanet became a major source of employment for religious people, and some religious groups used this as an opportunity to colonize the laicist state from inside. A striking indicator of the success of this aim is a survey carried out among Diyanet employees in 1998. When they were asked, ‘What is the function of Islamic groups in Turkey’, 45 per cent answered: ‘Islamic groups make people understand Islam better’; 35 per cent answered: ‘They provide sense of belonging’; and only 5 per cent answered: ‘They are for nothing’. It is remarkable that most employees of the Diyanet, which was established by the Republican regime to make people understand Islam better, viewed Islamic groups, which the laicists consider as a danger to the Republican regime, as a means for better learning of Islamic belief and rituals. However, these answers should not be very surprising considering that a large number of the Diyanet’s employees are members of these Islamic groups.

Ahmed Hamdi Basar, one of the financial advisers to Mustafa Kemal, writes in his memoirs that in the course of a conversation with Mustafa Kemal during a journey, he told Mustafa Kemal:

Religion should not be ostracized; on the contrary it is necessary to keep the religion alive and subordinate it to the [Republican] revolution. We will never be able to reach our goals by destroying mosques and building Halkevleri in their stead. It is possible to make our sound audible to the people, who are gathering in mosques, to make these places [mosques] modern community centres, to abolish clergy, and to make everyone talk about religion and the world.

Basar summarizes the Republican view of religion and alla Turca laicism, which has subordinated religion to the state through the Diyanet rather than rendering the state indifferent to religion. The Diyanet has undertaken responsibility for making the state’s control over religion or its presence in religious affairs visible through sermons and publications, helping the state gain legitimacy among the religious people.

The Turkish Republic has supported the mainstream Sunnism as the ‘high culture’, and the Diyanet has played a crucial role preaching Sunni Islam as the one and only way of Islam in Turkey. The Diyanet has been the Achilles’ heel of the Republican regime in the sense that religious people found employment in it and some considered this as a way to colonize the laicist state from inside. Although the Republicans attempted to monopolize religious education and publication through the Diyanet, intensive activities of Islamic groups (cemaats) in Turkey and abroad have minimized Republican success. The Diyanet became the official representative of state-sponsored religion; however, it never became as influential as Islamic groups among ordinary Turkish people.

Notes
2. Ibid., p.333.
3. Ibid., p.333.
4. Ibid., p.337.
8. The ‘Six arrows’ are republicanism, nationalism, etatism, populism, laicism, and reformism.
16. Ibid., p.186.
20. Merkeze Hükümet Teşkilatı Araştırmaları Projesi.
23. 1982 *Constitution*, article no.136.
31. Ibid., p.17.