

## GEOPOLITICS OF RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER POLICY BRIEF #2

# THE MANY FACES OF TURKEY'S RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER

By Ahmet Erdi Öztürk

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Turkey, under the ruling Justice and Development Party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has sought to use Islam visibly and impactfully in its foreign policy, sparking a diverse range of responses. Countries with Muslim and Turkish diasporas that are more economically and politically influential than Turkey are troubled by Turkey's political actions. Nations that are politically and economically equal to or less developed than Turkey appear satisfied by the very same activity. Turkey's multidimensional use of religious soft power can be designated as being fundamentally ambivalent in nature.**

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Turkey's increased focus on religion domestically and internationally has been viewed with heightened skepticism, particularly by many of its Western European partners.
- The appeal of Turkish soft power has started to wane as domestic politics become more prominent within its external projection of religious influence.
- In the Global South, and particularly in Muslim-majority nations, Turkey manages to maintain a broadly positive image by supporting everyday religious causes.
- Ankara is aspiring to establish itself as a leader of the Muslim world and to compete directly with other countries that have traditionally claimed this status.
- Efforts by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to eradicate the global movement linked to former imam Fethullah Gülen have become a significant factor in Turkey's external relations.



This brief is a product of the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project, a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs.

*The conclusions and recommendations of this Berkley Center publication are solely those of its author(s) and do not reflect the views of the center, its leadership, or its other scholars.*

## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary relationship between religion and state in Turkey lays claim to a complex history, dating to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent foundation of a constitutionally *sui generis* secular government in 1923. Secularism in Turkey—*laiklik* (in Turkish)—corresponds to the control and instrumentalization of religion, on behalf of the state, in a manner coordinated with the state identity, and for the interests of the state. Transnational religious structures emerging from this relationship have recently come into use as a key instrument in Turkish foreign policy. The Presidency of Religious Affairs (known commonly as the Diyanet) is one such transnational state apparatus and is tasked with regulating religious affairs both in Turkey and abroad, where it provides religious services to Muslim minorities.<sup>1</sup> Other religious organizations maintain policies compliant with the state.

While the relationship between religion and state was the subject of much long-standing debate in domestic politics, it was met relatively positively in foreign policy. In fact, Turkey earned a privileged position among both Muslim-majority nations and Western European countries. That positive reputation eroded under the leadership of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi [AKP]), particularly after 2013, when the authoritarian drift became clearly visible. As the AKP government transformed Turkey's state identity into a synthesis of nationalistic discourse and nostalgic passion, and exported domestic political issues through religious apparatuses, Turkey began to lose its status as a positive religious soft power<sup>2</sup> abroad.

Today, Turkey is perceived as a problem child in some Western European countries due to the way it brandishes religion in an array of domains, from domestic politics to foreign relations, and its consequential stray

from democratic values. For instance, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that his country, starting in 2024, would no longer accept imams from other nations—primarily Turkey—as part of its battle against radicalism. France also froze the bank accounts of Diyanet mosque associations in early 2020, since these institutions were often weaponized for political aims and degraded the harmony between Muslims in France.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar move, Germany launched a 2017 investigation with the assertion that Diyanet imams were conducting espionage in Germany on behalf of the Turkish government.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, the Austrian parliament decided to shutter mosques in Austria that belonged to the Diyanet and the Turkish National Outlook Movement,<sup>5</sup> a religiopolitical movement and series of Islamist parties inspired by late Turkish prime minister Necmettin Erbakan. Although this process does not appear to be heading toward a simple conclusion, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz underlined his concerns regarding political Islam as producing parallel societies and radicalizing tendencies, explicitly defining the stance of his government.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to deliver a one-dimensional verdict of the Diyanet and various Turkey-originated religious communities (*cemaats*) which are currently under the influence of President Erdoğan, especially on a global level. If Turkey is perceived as a problem child in some Western European countries, it is viewed in much more positive terms in parts of the Global South. For instance, Turkey has managed to occupy a remarkable position in the eyes of Muslim-majority nations in Africa and their societies by offering assistance to the needy on religious holidays and at every possible opportunity through the Diyanet.

Turkey has also provided aid to Muslims in the Balkans, where it has been active since the early 1990s, through religious transnational apparatuses and communities.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on these historical relations, Turkey also constructed the largest mosque in the Balkans

through hyperactive transnational state apparatuses in Albania, a nation known for its religious diversity. Moreover, Turkey today maintains operations in places such as Russia, where it fundamentally should not be the main point of focus due to the lack of sociocultural ties with Muslims in the country, through the Diyanet and the Sunni Islamic communities with which it has recently fortified its organic ties.

From this complicated picture, this policy brief explores how Turkey projects religious soft power in both domestic and foreign policy, focusing on the influence of the Diyanet and Sunni Islamic fraternal organizations. These operations predate the definition and discussion of religious soft power as a concept in both academic and non-academic circles. Though these actions originate from the same center of focus, they garner starkly different reactions in different countries due to power relations and hierarchies between states, with key differences in perception between Western Europe and the Global South.

The brief then examines how Turkey under Erdoğan uses Islam in foreign policy in a manner heretofore unseen in its long history as a constitutionally secular republic, overlaying broader tensions in domestic policy related to the rise of authoritarianism. It concludes by considering why Turkey uses religious soft power: Is Turkey using Islam as an instrument of soft power to influence the communities where it operates, the states leading these communities, or the opinion of its own domestic public?

## **TURKEY'S EMBRACEABLE RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER**

The issue of Turkish religious soft power is complex in large part due to the paramount role Islam plays in Turkey's mutating domestic political configuration and the reflection of domestic political changes directly into its foreign policy behaviors. Using religion as a

hyperdimensional instrument in domestic politics gives Turkey the ability to diversify its soft power projection in foreign policy through a symbolic, cultural, and network-based manner.<sup>7</sup> The Diyanet and the state have recently come to possess momentous institutional power built in coordination with religious fraternal organizations. But this religious soft power exhibits a myriad of faces<sup>8</sup> due to the state identity Turkey sought to modify from a repressive *laik* (secular) one to a repressive Islamist one, especially in the past decade, as a result of the political maneuvers of successive AKP regimes and the ability of President Erdoğan to establish different unconventional and unofficial interest-based coalitions with various power groups in Turkey. One can illuminate the religious soft power brandished by Turkey today through a discussion of certain actors and contributing elements.

Turkey realized its own creation by decimating the status of the Ottoman Empire as the caliphate of Sunni Islam and by erecting a *laik* government in its place. The top-down execution of this process, and the inability of Turkish society to adapt to this change, in turn produced a social clash that has lasted for a century. Furthermore, the prolonged lack of a caliphate compelled other Muslim countries, Egypt in particular, to keep their distance from the *laik* Turkey during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

In domestic politics, however, Turkey ceded to the Diyanet control over matters pertaining to Sunni Islam, and the Islamic fraternal organizations that volunteered their religious control to a state apparatus maintained their de facto operability. Even though this created a power struggle between the Diyanet and the Islamic fraternal organizations, in the course of time they started to collaborate both in Turkey and abroad. The growing population of Muslims in Europe in the late 1960s—due to migration—and the need for some semblance of religious services for Muslims again brought Turkey to the agenda.

*Using religion as a hyperdimensional instrument in domestic politics gives Turkey the ability to diversify its soft power projection in foreign policy through a symbolic, cultural, and network-based manner.*

This was the case because European nations believed that the Diyanet, under the secular Turkish state, would be more suitable to serve the Muslims in their nations than some Wahhabi or Salafi movements. By the early 1970s, the Diyanet, parallel to the situation in Turkey, began operating legally in Europe. This wave of foreign expansion spread first to the Balkans, accompanying changing global political balances into the early 2000s, and later to Turkic countries in Asia and nations such as Australia with which Turkey has scant cultural and historical affiliation.

The Diyanet was certainly not the only actor on the stage. The National Outlook Movement and influential Sunni-Hanafi groups such as the Süleymancı and Nakşibendi communities, which laid the ideological and historical foundations for the AKP, began establishing relations with Turkish and other Muslim migrants via affiliated organizations. But the first Turkish structure to exceed these limited relations was the Gülen Movement,<sup>10</sup> an organization that has recently garnered significant controversy. The movement was founded under the leadership of Fethullah Gülen, a former imam, who endeavors to establish an influence both in Turkey and abroad. In this regard, the Gülen Movement fostered relations with the elites of other nations by opening educational institutions from the 1990s until the mid-2010s.<sup>11</sup> Surpassing the appearance of a mere actor arriving from abroad, it existed in these countries as a semi-localized Turkish religious force. Gülen-affiliated institutions became elements of Turkish soft power where they operated because of the liberal interpretation of Islam they used.

Yet, this was but one of the visible faces of the Gülen Movement. Its other face sought to infiltrate the civilian and military bureaucracy in Turkey, starting in the late 1980s, and fought the Kemalist tutelary state structure in a recessive manner. Although this face attained some success by the 2000s, it actually flourished in the initial years

of AKP rule. The movement formed an unconventional and informal coalition with the AKP government, especially after 2007, to defuse the Kemalist tutelage. The Gülen Movement became a force of Muslim soft power internationally as it slowly descended upon the critical position it targeted within Turkey. The AKP government and the state's transnational apparatuses cultivated influence in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa together with the Gülen Movement.

One of the most important sources for this influence was the sharing of accurate information and the formation of an effective network between the state and the movement. In other words, the Gülen Movement funneled to the AKP and the Turkish state apparatuses under its control accurate information about the societies in which it operated. The Turkish government was then able to respond to societal needs with other apparatuses under AKP control, primarily the Diyanet. For instance, in countries ranging from Somalia to Macedonia, the Diyanet offered expansive religious services and distributed aid packages to Muslims on religious holidays. Other transnational arms of the state such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı*) built mosques and education centers. And in the early 2000s, the Diyanet assumed the role of patron, distributing collective religious sura through religious scholars in the Balkans and Africa.

It is notable that all these elements of influence revealed themselves outside of the Western world. But despite this, Turkey and its religious apparatuses could only wield influence over Sunni Muslim diaspora groups in Western countries, lacking the opportunity to spread to other segments of society. While Turkey tried to interact with other Muslim groups in Western countries, it faced difficulty in building structures powerful enough to influence a multitude of social groups, as these are not easy entities for Turkey to penetrate.

This is because Western states have not allowed Turkey to enter spaces where it could expand beyond the provision of religious services to Muslims. So, by the early 2010s, Turkey had exhibited its religious soft power only in nations relatively weaker than itself. In more powerful Western countries, Turkey managed to masquerade as a decent example through which to unify Islam and democracy

### THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: TURKEY AS A “PROBLEM CHILD”?

By 2013, Turkey under the AKP departed course from collaborating with the Gülen Movement in using Islam and Islamic institutions collectively in foreign policy. Instead, Erdoğan entered a grave battle against the Gülen Movement, leading to conflict within the military and civilian bureaucracy.

A number of factors in both domestic and foreign affairs help to explain the dramatic shift in relations between Erdoğan and the Gülen Movement. In Turkey, Erdoğan gradually descended into authoritarianism following the Gezi Park Protests and in response to a deteriorating economy. He also chose nationalism and Islam as new instruments for his authoritarian policies. Abroad, the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood, which enjoyed close relations with the Erdoğan regime,<sup>12</sup> put further pressure on the Turkish president. On the other hand, the Gülen Movement aimed to control the bureaucratic structure and security forces despite Erdoğan’s political influence. One might argue that the Gülen Movement had an interest- and power-based conflict, much like Erdoğan and his regime.

The conflict for power between Erdoğan and Gülen—two influential figures fond of control—profoundly impacted Turkish politics and the activity of the Turkish government in the regions where it employed its influence. Plummeting from the climax of the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, in which members of the Gülen Movement are thought

to have participated but whose full picture is yet unclear, Turkey resorted to a change in identity: a synthesis of Islam and nationalism with burgeoning authoritarianism under Erdoğan’s leadership. The extent to which Islam could be used as a soft power in foreign policy became open for discussion in the case of Turkey.

Erdoğan’s choice of Islam as an instrument while the AKP grew more authoritarian awakened discomfort in some nations longing for the peaceful coexistence of Islam and democracy. The struggle between Erdoğan and the Gülen Movement has also become a matter of security for foreign countries as the conflict swelled beyond the Turkish border, compelling some countries to approach Turkey and its religious apparatuses with newfound apprehension. The Diyanet’s monitoring of Gülen Movement members who fled the country and sought refuge abroad after 2013 and its furtive collusion with Turkish intelligence in the nations where the movement operated led to problems in places with Muslim and Turkish populations, including Kosovo, Albania, Germany, and Austria. These problems, such as spying imams<sup>13</sup> and the kidnapping of Gülenists,<sup>14</sup> obscuring Turkey’s use of Islam and Islamic transnational institutions as a soft power, culminated in Turkey’s appearance as a country bearing its domestic issues by manipulating religious institutions.

Turkey also drew criticism for collaborating with groups that view the West with suspicion—nationalists and the Eurasianists, for example—and its adoption of a Western-opposed, rigid, and occasionally adversarial tone as Erdoğan tried to stabilize his domestic position after 2013.<sup>15</sup> For example, in Bulgaria Erdoğan is still the most trusted and admired political actor among Bulgarian Muslims, and the Bulgarian Office of the Grand Mufti receives most of its assistance from collaboration with the Turkish Diyanet. Yet, Bulgaria allowed no other state apparatuses of Turkey to enter the country, due to the

*Turkey during the rule of the AKP, and especially after 2010, has sought to use Islam visibly and impactfully in its foreign policy, and this has sparked a diverse range of responses.*

evolving identity and stance of the Turkish government.

More broadly, the unofficial coalition between Turkey and the Eurasianists, who espouse an anti-Western approach to foreign policy, in domestic politics engendered Erdoğan's further hardening on religion and his expanded use of Islamic references in Western relations. This situation was first met with fear that the social configuration would degrade where there are dense populations of Turkish migrants or where AKP supporters command substantial influence over diaspora groups. Countries—including the Netherlands, France, and Germany—began discussing how to prevent Erdoğan's administration from swaying the Turkish diaspora and other Muslim groups in their respective nations with anti-West language.

As Turkish identity continues to evolve, loyalty to and prioritization of political leaders remain a key feature of domestic politics. Erdoğan managed only to bring about constitutional changes in a referendum after 2017 yet failed to position himself as responsible for and in charge of everything. Concurrently, he began appealing to the image of a Muslim president and did not confine himself domestically in doing so. He began, in a relatively concealed manner, challenging the leaders of other nations that bear historical and symbolic importance for Islam, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran.

This conflict comprised two separate dimensions. On the one hand, Erdoğan used this struggle to broadcast to his domestic audience the image of a leader defending the rights of the global ummah and to consolidate his own power. On the other, Erdoğan acted as the symbolic founder and leader of Muslims around the world by claiming that his understanding of Islam was different from and more superior than others. Even in nations with very small Muslim populations, such as Cuba, Erdoğan champions initiatives to open alternatives to Saudi centers of worship. In late 2019, for example, he held

an opening for an environmentally conscious mosque in Cambridge, England, accepting financial support from Qatar and employing the symbolic name of Yusuf Islam. These behaviors undoubtedly are viewed positively by Muslims, yet they inflict damage on the secular state structure Turkey had built by the early 2010s. But this hazard, at least for the Turkish regime, is not perceived negatively.

## **TURKEY: AN AMBIVALENT RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER**

The exploitation of religious institutions, religious values, and religion itself by states as a form of soft power in foreign policy appears on its face to create inescapable tension due to the seeming impossibility of eluding the inherent characteristics of structures with an unwavering capacity for power. However, the case of Turkey and the authoritarian and sporadically populist Turkish administration, which found in Islam a tool to achieve its aims, paints a different picture. Turkey, in addition to using Islam as an element of soft power, also consolidated domestic political strength and engendered influence over diaspora groups. This situation certainly pertains to the evolution of its state identity and to the political goals of the actors realizing this change.

But there exists a basic point which seems impossible to refute: Turkey during the rule of the AKP, and especially after 2010, has sought to use Islam visibly and impactfully in its foreign policy, and this has sparked a diverse range of responses. Countries that are more economically and politically influential than Turkey and that have Muslim and, especially, Turkish diasporas are troubled by Turkey's political actions. At the same time, nations that are politically and economically equal to or less developed than Turkey appear satisfied by the very same activity. This no doubt relates to these nations' respective political agendas.

The struggle between countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran over which will wield the most influence over the global ummah has also further crystallized key questions about Turkish religious soft power: Why does Turkey seek to bolster its religious soft power? Who is the intended audience? Policies emanating from the same source and implemented using identical tools encounter varying reactions and thereby complicate the challenge of defining the nature of Turkey's religious soft power. One can therefore at present most accurately designate Turkey's multidimensional use of religious soft power as being fundamentally ambivalent in nature

## NOTES

1. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkey's Diyanet under AKP Rule: From Protector to Imposer of State Ideology?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 619–635.
2. For an explanatory work on religious soft power, see Jeffrey Haynes, "Causes and Consequences of Transnational Religious Soft Power," *Political Studies Conference Proceedings* (2010).
3. Daily Sabah, "France Shuts Diyanet's Bank Accounts," *Daily Sabah* (February 2, 2020): <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2020/02/20/france-shuts-diyansets-bank-accounts> [last accessed May 3, 2020].
4. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Does Turkey Use 'Spying Imams' to Assert its Powers Abroad?" *The Conversation* (April 4, 2017): <https://theconversation.com/does-turkey-use-spying-imams-to-assert-its-powers-abroad-75643> [last accessed May 5, 2020].
5. Askin Kiyagan, "Austrian Court Axes Decision to Shut Down Mosques," *Muslim News* (February 16, 2017): <http://muslimnews.co.uk/news/islamophobia/austrian-court-axes-decision-shut-mosques/> [last accessed May 29, 2020].
6. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and İřtar Gözaydın, "A Frame for Turkey's Foreign Policy via the Diyanet in the Balkans," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 7, no. 3 (2018): 331–350.
7. Gregorio Bettiza, "States, Religions, and Power: Highlighting the Role of Sacred Capital in World Politics," *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs* (2020): <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/states-religions-and-power-highlighting-the-role-of-sacred-capital-in-world-politics>.
8. Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, "Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy," *Brookings Institution* (2018): [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FP\\_20181116\\_islam\\_as\\_statecraft.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FP_20181116_islam_as_statecraft.pdf).
9. Nicholas Danfort, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Turkish Foreign Policy: From Atatürk to the AKP," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2008): 83–95.
10. On the one hand, the Gülen Movement has been defining itself as a transnational faith (Sunni Islam) based on education and peaceful, intercultural dialogue, and they call themselves the Hizmet (service) Movement. On the other hand, the Turkish state has been defining the movement as a terror organization which had a direct role in the July 15, 2016, coup attempt and calls it the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETO). These two different denotations could be read as symbols of the polarization of the group. In the interests of academic objectivity and critical distance, it is preferred to use the more neutral term: the Gülen Movement.
11. Simon P. Watmough and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "From 'Diaspora by Design' to Transnational Political Exile: The Gülen Movement in Transition," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19, no. 1 (2018): 33–52.
12. Hillel Fradkin and Lewis Libby, "Erdogan's Grand Vision: Rise and Decline," *World Affairs* 75, no. 6 (2013): 41–50.
13. Chase Winter, "Turkish Imam Spy Affair in Germany Extends across Europe," *DW* (February 16, 2017): <https://www.dw.com/en/turkish-imam-spy-affair-in-germany-extends-across-europe/a-37590672> [last accessed July 9, 2020].
14. Nordic Monitor, "Turkish Diplomat Who Orchestrated Kidnapping in Kosovo Became Human Rights Chief in Turkey," *Nordic Monitor* (February 8, 2020): <https://www.nordicmonitor.com/2020/02/turkish-diplomat-who-orchestrated-kidnapping-in-kosovo-became-human-rights-chief-in-turkey/> [last accessed July 9, 2020].
15. Toni Alaranta, *National and State Identity in Turkey: The Transformation of the Republic's Status in the International System* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).



### About the Author

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk is lecturer of politics and international relations at London Metropolitan University. He is author of more than 20 peer-reviewed articles, numerous policy reports and opinion pieces, and co-editor of four special issues and two books on religion and Turkish politics. His book, *Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century*, will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2021.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

---

The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

This policy brief was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The conclusions and recommendations of this Berkley Center publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the center, its leadership, or its other scholars.

**BERKLEY CENTER**  
*for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*  
**GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**

**The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University** seeks a more just and peaceful world by deepening knowledge and solving problems at the intersection of religion and global affairs through research, teaching, and engaging multiple publics. Two premises guide the center's work: that a comprehensive examination of religion and norms is critical to address complex global challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

**BROOKINGS**

**The Brookings Institution** is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.