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Faith, Politics and the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Turkish Response

Oğuz Alyanak

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, in Turkey, all eyes were on *Diyanet*, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the country's highest authority for regulating matters pertaining to Islamic practices. Would the Diyanet, like other religious authorities around the world, propose to close down mosques for a temporary period?

Such a mandate is an intricate matter as mosques are more than sites for the performance of religious duties. They are also political institutions where moral instruction, in the form *vaaz* and *hutbes*, or sermons, take place. Mosques, along with *vakıfs* or religious foundations, are heavily funded under the current Justice and Development Party government, to further the Turkish President's imaginary of a pious generation (Lüküslü 2016). Moreover, as the 2016 coup attempt showed, mosques are treated by the state as sites of national struggle: on the night of July 15, 2016, when jet planes and tanks dominated major Turkish cities, imams recited prayers, including the *sela* (salat-al-Janazah) and the *ezan* (the call to prayer), outside the regular salat times. This practice was last heard in Turkey almost a century earlier, before the Turkish Republic was founded (Gill 2016).

Like most organized religions, Islam is open to interpretation. It is a discursive tradition (Asad 2009) whose universals are constantly negotiated when put in practice in local contexts by its practitioners (Bowen 1998). Islam is also a political artifact, which can endow masses with the power to mobilize in light of an urgency. While some believers may choose to take advice from their local authorities, and dismiss Diyanet's instructions, many in Turkey follow its guidelines when it comes to debatable matters. Hence the importance of Diyanet's response to COVID-19.

On March 13, a few hours before the Friday *salat*, which men are required to attend, Diyanet issued a statement urging those who showed symptoms to pray at home. "It is not *farz* [mandatory] for those living under quarantine to pray the Cuma. It is not *caiz* [sanctioned] either for these persons to forgo this call and take part in a congregation." But what was overlooked was that many carriers of COVID-19 were asymptomatic. Further the *hutbe*, the Friday sermon entitled, "It is the duty of the believer to take precaution, but the judgment belongs to Allah [*Tedbir Mümin'den Takdir Allah'tandır*], was preached by imams that very afternoon. The *hutbe*, which referred to precautions such as washing hands with soap, refraining from touching one's face and eyes with dirty hands, not using common prayer beads, staying at home for 14 days on return from a trip, and not shaking hands, also reassured congregations that "Allah provides the cure for all diseases He has sent" and "He is the One who will end my life, and resurrect me."

If Allah is the ultimate arbiter, the One who provides the cure for diseases, and the One to end and resume life, why should Muslims adhere to public health advice?

The answer lies in a more nuanced reading of the Qur'an. In Islam, the right to dignified human life is of utmost priority. While Allah, the provider of life, has endowed human with the gift of life, it is the duty of the individuals to sustain it through the means (the intellect, and science) provided to them. Numerous verses, along with the *sunnet* (sunnah), references to sayings and practices by the Prophet Muhammed as conveyed by his companions, play a guiding role in matters pertaining to Islamic medical and health ethics (Daar and Khitam 2001; Shomali 2008; WHO 2005).

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Social media teaser: The responses of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey to the COVID-19 pandemic need to be considered under a critical light—not as evidence of the rigid boundaries of a religious system, but a testimony to the political nature of such conversations.

Three days after this statement, Diyanet issued a second one, suspending prayers, including the Friday salat: “To attend *ibadets* [religious practices], one should not only be healthy, but also not put others in harm’s way.”

The COVID-19 outbreak is a reminder of the social and cultural impact of medical emergencies. In its wake, religious authorities worldwide have taken measures to suspend rituals which could jeopardize public health. In Turkey, a statement was issued by the country’s highest authority of religious affairs to suspend gathering for ritual practices. The statement, however, came after March 13, when millions of men gathered to pray the Friday salat. Was the delay in taking proactive measures a bureaucratic blunder? Or given the increasing emphasis on religious institutions in Turkey, should it be read as a daring act – one which puts public health at risk in order to make a political stance?

The number of COVID-19 cases in Turkey at time of writing is low, but with increased testing, the numbers will only increase (on 27 March, 3629 cases, 75 deaths). As medical anthropologists duly note (Inhorn and Sargent 2006), like many other organized religions, Islam is a system of faith that accommodates the challenges that medical emergencies bring. Yet, the responses of religious authorities like the Diyanet have to be considered under a critical light – not as evidence of the rigid boundaries of a religious system, but a testimony to the political nature of such conversations.

Notes on contributor

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