

THE USE OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AT TURKISH UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: This paper shows that although Turkey is formally a laic state, Islam has de facto the status of a state religion. Therefore, the Turkish state cannot remain neutral in religious matters. Under the current Turkish government Islam has consolidated its position and its symbols have become visible in the public space. Religious symbols, such as mosques, prayer rooms and headscarves, are spreading at Turkish universities. Current developments show the absurdity of the concept of Turkish secularism, which originally means the constitutional separation of church and state.

Užívání náboženských symbolů na tureckých univerzitách

Abstrakt: Tento příspěvek ukazuje, že ačkoli je Turecko formálně laickým státem, má islám *de facto* postavení státního náboženství. Proto turecký stát nemůže zůstat neutrální v náboženských záležitostech. Pod současnou tureckou vládou islám upevnil svoji pozici a jeho symboly se staly viditelnými ve veřejném prostoru. Náboženské symboly, jakými jsou mešity, modlitební místnosti a muslimské šátky, se šíří i na tureckých univerzitách. Aktuální vývoj ukazuje absurditu turecké koncepce laicismu, která znamená v původním smyslu ústavní odstavbu státu od církve.

Key words: Turkey, religious symbols, university, secularism

Klíčová slova: Turecko, náboženské symboly, univerzita, sekularismus

I. TURKISH CONCEPT OF LAICISM

Officially, the Republic of Turkey is a laic state. The principle of Laicism (*Lâiklik*) was first introduced in the Turkish Constitution (Hereinafter “TC”) in the year 1937, and later the secular state was continuously enshrined in every constitution. Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic in 1923, was convinced that the great influence of Islam was one of the main reasons of the backwardness and the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. The problem, as Atatürk and others saw it, was that the political leader (Sultan) was also the religious leader (Caliph) creating a problem in the ability of the Ottoman Empire to modernize. Therefore, he wanted to ban Islam from politics and established a laic order in the new Republic of Turkey. Since then, the principle of Laicism has remained a core element of the Turkish concept of state. For example, according to Article 2 TC

from 1982, which currently is the latest version, the Republic of Turkey is officially a laic state.

The current concept of Laicism in Turkey can be deduced from the Preamble of the Turkish Constitution from 1982. Specifically, the Preamble states that “*sacred religious feelings shall absolutely not be involved in state affairs or politics*”.¹ Together with the principle of nationalism, the principle of Laicism has the function to assert itself ideologically against religion (Islam), which is suspect not to be in accord with the republican-secular structure of the modern Turkish state, and which demands the unity of state and religion.

The principle of Laicism gets its “institutional protection” by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), which was established already in 1924 and has been enshrined in Article 154 TC from 1961 (now: Article 136 TC from 1982). This Presidency, being part of the general administration, “*exercises its duties prescribed in its particular law in accordance with the principles of Laicism, removed from all political views and ideas, and aiming at national solidarity and integrity*”.² Consequently, the Presidency of Religious Affairs has two responsibilities: the protection of Laicism and the protection of the national unity. However, *de facto*, the Presidency of Religious Affairs does not protect Laicism, but rather promotes and favours Sunni Islam, which is the prevailing religion in the Turkish population with a share of over 70 percent.³

By its purely Sunni Hanafi interpretation of Islam – not considering the Islamic faith of the Alevis, whose consist of 10–25 percent of the population,⁴ and other Islamic movements – the Turkish state in the form of the Presidency of Religious Affairs violates its laic duty to religious and ideological neutrality. Only against the backdrop that under Kemalist state logic, pluralism in religious life is considered the first step to religious and ethnic separatism; and that religious exploitation entails the risk of linguistic and religious division of the nation itself, this practice is understandable. Due to the Kemalist convictions, only a centrally formulated and enforced uniform version of religion guarantees the preservation of national unity and protection from exploitation by religious fundamentalists. Therefore, the state-controlled Sunni-Hanafi Islam functions as “quasi state religion”.

The Presidency of Religious Affairs is now one of the largest and richest institutions in Turkey. It has expanded steadily since its establishment, and its status was solidified after each of the three military coups d'états (1960, 1971, and 1980). Its staff, which was around 70,000 when the Justice and Development Party (Hereinafter “AKP”) came to power in 2002, has almost doubled. At the end of 2013, it officially had 121,845 employees, including about 90,000 Imams.⁵ Its 2015 budget is 5.73 billion Turkish Lira (TL), which

¹ Preamble TC from 1982.

² Art. 136 TC from 1982.

³ See: U. S. Department of State: International Religious Freedom Report 2013: Turkey, available online under: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dclid=222277> [accessed on 18.03.2015].

⁴ See: OEHRING, Otmar: Länderberichte Religionsfreiheit: Türkei, Aachen 2012, p. 13.

⁵ See: ALACABEY, Servan: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı'na 10 yılda 50 bin personel, in: İhlas Haber Ajansı from 13.06.2014, available online under: <http://www.ihb.com.tr/haber-diyanet-isleri-baskanligina-10-yilda-50-bin-personel-363340/> [accessed on 18.03.2015]; BAYDAR, Yavuz: Diyanet tops the budget league, in: Today's Zaman from 20.10.2013, available online under: <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/yavuz-baydar>

is about 1.5 times bigger than that of the Interior Ministry and 2.8 times bigger than that of the Foreign Ministry.⁶

This shows that the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which originally was established as a national instrument in the fight against Islam to preserve Laicism and to take control over Islam, has become more and more independent and in fact a state organ of religion against the principle of Laicism as enshrined in the TC. In contrast to the common Western understanding of Laicism, Turkish Laicism does not meet its demands of establishing a laic order of the state by separating religion from the state and by legally regulating its mutual relationship. Instead, Turkish Laicism provides the State – in the form of the Presidency of Religious Affairs – with the interpretation monopoly on religion matters and bureaucratized religious life. The Turkish state does not control Islam, which profits from freedom of religion, anymore. Instead, the Turkish state has created its own Sunni state religion that is directed, managed, and promoted directly by the state-run Presidency of Religious Affairs. Thus, Turkey has – at least initially – become a Sunni Islamic republic, in which Islam was simply de-politicized and controlled by the state, and continues to exist as a religious and cultural source of Turkish identity as well as a tool to create national unity. Therefore, the Laicism being practiced in Turkey can be described as a misnomer: Behind the facade of the institutional separation of state and religion, a state-organized and controlled state religion is concealed.

As the Turkish state controls the *de facto* state religion of Sunni-Hanafi Islam, only Islamic religious symbols are visible at universities in Turkey. Therefore, before coming to the use of religious symbols at universities in Turkey, it needs to be shown, what exactly the religious symbols of Islam are.

II. RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN ISLAM

There are several religious symbols used in Islam. In the narrow sense, the name of “Allah” in Arabic writing, the colour green, and mosques with their characteristic minarets all symbolize Islam. In the wider sense, the star and crescent, as well as the headscarf, also stand for the Islamic religion.

1. THE NAME OF “ALLAH” IN ARABIC WRITING

The word “Allah”, meaning “god” in Arabic, is of great importance in Islam. In its original Arabic script or characters, it is regarded as visually representing Islam. When used as a symbol, the writing of “Allah” appears decorated.

/diyanet-tops-the-budget-league_329311.html [accessed on 18.03.2015]; *Gazeteciler Online*, Dehşet ar-tış! 85 bin camiye 690 bin imam hatipli, in: *Gazeteciler Online* from 24.10.2014, available online under: <http://www.gazetecileronline.com/newsdetails/14779-/GazetecilerOnline/dehset-artis-85-bin-camiye-690-bin-imam-hatipli> [accessed on 18.03.2015].

⁶ Genel Bütçe Kapsamındaki Kamu İdareliri Toplamı. 2015 Yılı Bütçesi Ödenek Teklif Tavanları, available online under: https://www.maliye.gov.tr/Documents/2015-2017_ovm_ekler.pdf [accessed on 18.03.2015].

2. THE COLOUR GREEN

The colour green has a special place in Islam. Green is often used to represent Islam among other world religions. The green colour can often be found in mosques, as well as on the flags of Muslim countries, notably Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The origin of the Islamic use of green colour is not clear: some argue that green was the favourite colour of the prophet Muhammad, and that he wore a green cloak and turban. Others believe that the green colour symbolizes vegetation and life.⁷ Some say that after the death of Muhammad, only the caliphs were allowed to wear green turbans. In the Quran (Sura 18:31), it is said that the inhabitants of paradise will wear green garments of fine silk. While the reference in the Quran is verifiable, it is not clear if any of the other explanations are reliable, or simply mere folklore.

3. STAR AND CRESCENT SYMBOLISM

The star and crescent is the best-known symbol used in representing Islam. It features prominently on the flags of many Islamic countries, notably Turkey and Pakistan. However, this symbol is not of Islamic origin. Rather, it was a polytheistic icon adopted during the spread of Islam and its use today is sometimes controversial in the Muslim world. The crescent and star are often said to be Islamic symbols, but historians say that they were the insignia of the Ottoman Empire and not of Islam as a whole.⁸ It is also important to keep in mind that Islam has very few traditional symbols and the crescent moon and star are not the ones that are recognized as traditional symbols by most Muslims. The symbol is due to its cultural diffusions and also with the spread of Islam to the Ottoman Turks, who ruled a large area of Europe, Asia and Africa. The Ottoman Turks put the crescent moon and star symbol on their flag and it has since become associated with Islam.

4. MOSQUES (*CAMI*), LITTLE MOSQUES AND PRAYER ROOMS (*MESCIT*)

Mosques are the holy places of worship in Islam, and, therefore, mosques are also a recognized symbol of Islam. With its characteristic dome, minaret or, the tower traditionally used by a muezzin – the crier to call the faithful to prayer five times a days – mosques come to everybody's attention from far away, both visually and acoustically. The number of minarets per mosque varies, from one to as many as six. They are constructed in a wide variety of forms. In Turkey, slim, circular rocket-shaped minarets are common.

Little mosques or prayer rooms for Muslims are called *Mescit* in Turkish. In contrast to a big mosque, these places are not meant for the Friday prayer, so they do not have a pulpit (*Minber*) but a prayer niche (*Mihrab*). These places of worship can be found in

⁷ See: FINSTER, Barbara: Farben, in: ELGER, Ralf (ed.): Kleines Islam-Lexikon, 3. Auflage, München 2001, p. 93.

⁸ See: FAZILI, Fiaz: The United Story of Crescent moon and stars as symbols, logos or tattoos, in: Crescent, September 2009, p. 42.

residential areas, and areas open to the public, such as shopping malls, theatres, airports, railway stations or bus terminals.

5. HEADSCARF

The requirement of wearing a headscarf for women is justified mainly on three passages of the Quran, which are found in Sura 24, verse 31 and Sura 33, verse 53 and 59. However, none of these parts of the Quran explicitly stipulates that Muslim women cover their heads or wear a headscarf. Instead, these Suras show Muslim women in general the modest and bashful requirements of how to dress and behave in ancient Arab times, to waive coquetry and unnecessary sexual incitement of men. Nevertheless, in the early Islamic tradition, these Suras were unanimously interpreted in accordance with such a provision. These interpretations were based on additional provisions that can be found in the Hadiths, the tradition of the words, exemplary acts and behaviour of the Prophet. Quran exegesis and Islamic legal scholars followed these secondary normative sources, while developing their statements concerning the headscarf and the dress code for Muslim women.

III. RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AT TURKISH UNIVERSITIES

At the end of 2014, there were 180 universities in Turkey.⁹ Among these were 108 state-run universities and 72 private foundation universities. At these universities, several of the above mentioned religious symbols of Islam can be found. However, the name of “Allah” in Arabic writing and the colour green are not among them. At universities in Turkey only the star and crescent, mosques and prayer rooms, and the headscarf can be found.

1. STAR AND CRESCENT

The star and crescent symbol is visible at every Turkish university, namely on the Turkish flag being obligatory inside and outside the university building, showing a white star and a white crescent on red background. However, as already mentioned before, the star and crescent on the Turkish flag are used as historical reference to the traditional insignia of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey’s predecessor state, and not as a symbol of Islam. Having made Laicism a fundamental principle of the Turkish Republic in its constitution, the star and crescent on the Turkish flag are far from being a religious symbol or from being used as officially showing Islam as an integral part of the Turkish state or the Turkish identity.

⁹ *Ihlas Haber Ajansi*, Bülent Arınç: ‘Üniversite sayısını 180’e çıkardık’, in: IHA.com from 24.10.2014, available online under: <http://www.ih.com.tr/haber-bulent-arinc-universite-sayisini-180e-cikardik-403851/> [accessed on 18.03.2015].

2. MOSQUES (CAMI)

Some universities in Turkey have their own mosque on the campus. Currently, there is no law obliging universities to provide their own mosque on university ground. According to additional Article 2 of the Building Act, Article 73 the Municipal Act and Article 35 of the Law on the Establishment and Duties of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the construction of mosques lays in the hands of the local authorities and its operation in the hands of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. However, the head of the Presidency of Religious Affairs announced in November 2014 that each university campus in Turkey would be provided with its own mosque in the forthcoming years.¹⁰ In the political practice of the current Turkish Republic, this announcement of the head of the powerful Presidency of Religious Affairs has the same effect as a law or regulation. Each university and the municipalities where the university is located, will *de facto* feel obliged to build at least one mosque on the university campus. At the time of his announcement, there were already 15 mosques built and in use on university campuses. In 2015 another 50 mosques will be opened on university campuses.¹¹ Thus, by the end of 2015, about a third of the Turkish universities will have their own mosque on the campus. On top of the list of universities with on-campus mosques is the 18 March University in Çanakkale, which by the end of 2015 will accommodate three mosques with the overall capacity of 15,000 people.¹²

3. LITTLE MOSQUES AND PRAYER ROOMS (MESCIT)

In Turkey, no law or regulation exists, which obliges universities to provide prayer rooms for their staff or their students. However, on grounds of Additional Article 2 of the Building Act in connection with Article 16 of the Regulation on Construction Types in Planned Areas, prayer rooms shall be set up in any social space such as educational establishments, where there is need for it. But, according to Article 35 of the Law on the Establishment and Duties of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, any opening of a prayer room needs the approval of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. The details for the building permission and the specific features of the prayer room are laid down in special regulations to the Building Act and the Municipal Act. Despite the lack of any legal obligation to provide prayer rooms at universities, according to requirements set by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, each university in Turkey should provide at least three prayer rooms.¹³ These prayer rooms (*Mescit*) are generally meant to be open for praying persons from any religion. However, in practice, the design and terms of using these prayer rooms are specifically designed for Muslims and not other religions.

¹⁰ *Sariyer Gündem*: Her üniversite kampüsüne bir cami geliyor, in *Sariyer Gündem* from 21.11.2014, available online under: <http://www.sariyergozlem.com/her-universite-kampusune-bir-cami-geliyor.html> [accessed on 18.03.2015].

¹¹ *Sariyer Gündem*: Her üniversite kampüsüne bir cami geliyor.

¹² *Memurlar*: Üç camii ve 53 mescitli üniversite, in: *memurlar.com* from 04.03.2015, available online under: <http://www.memurlar.net/haber/503823/> [accessed on 18.03.2015].

¹³ *Sol Haber Merkezi*: Zaman gazetesi üniversitelere en az üç mescit istedi!, in: *Haber Sol* from 06.01.2013, available online under: <http://haber.sol.org.tr/medya/zaman-gazetesi-universitelere-en-az-uc-mescit-istedi-haberi-65645> [accessed on 18.03.2015].

Firstly, there have to be separate prayer rooms for men and women, which is a characteristic feature of Islam. Secondly, each person who wants to enter these prayer rooms, has to take off his or her shoes before entering, no matter of which religion he or she is a member of. As taking off shoes for prayer is a specific feature of Islam, members of other religions, like Christians and Jews, are forced to adjust their prayers due to the praying rules of a different religion, namely Islam. This can be seen as a discriminating practice towards other religions than Islam and could be considered not to be in accordance with the religious neutrality of the state, which is demanded by the principle of Laicism. Therefore, in fact, the prayer rooms at Turkish universities are mainly made for the religious Muslim population and they do not take into consideration the needs of other religions. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned, that non-Muslim females, who want to do their prayers inside the prayer room for women, are not obliged to put on a headscarf before entering the room.

On top of the list of universities with prayer rooms is again the 18 March University in Çanakkale, which by the end of 2015 will have a total number of 53 *Mescits*.¹⁴

4. HEADSCARF

For 87 years, Turks have lived in an officially laic state founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who rejected headscarves as backward-looking. Headscarves were banned in civic spaces and official buildings.¹⁵ However, the headscarf issue was always deeply divisive for the country's predominantly Muslim population. About two-thirds of all Turkish women – including the wives and daughters of the Prime Minister and President – cover their heads.¹⁶ President Erdoğan even sent his daughters to universities in the USA, because at the time of their studies they were not allowed to wear their headscarves at Turkish universities.

In 2008, the governing AKP, with its roots in Islam, amended the Turkish Constitution to ease a strict ban at universities, allowing headscarves that were tied loosely under the chin. Headscarves covering the neck and all-enveloping veils were still banned. Before this change, according to additional Article 17 of the Higher Education Act, which was restricted by a decision of the Council of Ministers from 1981 and an administrative regulation by the Council of Higher Education from 1982 concerning the dress code at Turkish universities, female students covering their hair with a headscarf, were prohibited to attend lectures and seminars at universities. The AKP government argued, the headscarf ban meant many girls were being denied an education. In contrast to that, the secular establishment was afraid that easing the use of headscarves would be a first step to allowing Islam into public life. Based on the opposition's petition, the law changing the Turkish Constitution and lifting the headscarf ban, was quashed by

¹⁴ *Memurlar*: Üç camii ve 53 mescitli üniversite.

¹⁵ KORTEWEG, Anna C. – YURDAKUL, Gökçe: *The Headscarf Debates. Conflicts of National Belonging*, Stanford 2014, pp. 11, 57.

¹⁶ See: SEELING, Luisa: *Verachtung von gestern*, in: *Zeit Online* from 25.01.2013, available online under: <http://www.zeit.de/2013/04/Tuerkei-Frauenfeindlichkeit-Frauenrechte/komplettansicht> [accessed on 18.03.2015].

the Constitutional Court, and later became one of the key counts of the charge in the pending case regarding the prohibition of the AKP, which ended without its prohibition.

After some constitutional changes,¹⁷ in October 2010 the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) allowed the appeal of a female student at Istanbul University, who was banished from the lecture hall, because she had concealed her hair under a hat. The Council of Higher Education then ordered that students must not be expelled from classes on grounds of having committed a violation of the disciplinary code.¹⁸ Professors and lecturers were only allowed to record the violation and report it to the university board. Academic staff, who continued to banish female students from the lecture hall were threatened with disciplinary hearings themselves. Thus, the headscarf ban at Turkish universities was *de facto* abolished, even without having mentioned the headscarf itself in the Council of Higher Education's regulation.

In October 2013, by amending the Regulation Concerning Dress and Clothing of Employees of Public Agencies and Institutions, the governing AKP also lifted the rules banning women from wearing headscarves in the country's state institutions – with the exception of the judiciary, military and police.

Nowadays, the headscarf as a symbol of the Muslim faith is omnipresent at Turkish universities, namely among the female students. More and more of them show their religious belief in public and make their “being a good Muslim” attitude visible to everyone. Nationwide, the number or the share of headscarf students at Turkish universities is not evaluated yet. Of course, its number differs from university to university. However, two things become visible: (1) The overall number of students with headscarves is constantly increasing. (2) The number of students wearing a headscarf obviously depends on the characteristics of the region, province or city where the university is located and on the university's profile, i.e. what kind of students and students with what kind of (political or religious) convictions the university is aiming to attract.

Due to missing empirical research and evidence, the reasons for this development cannot be determined exactly. One explanation definitely is that after the lifting of the headscarf ban at Turkish universities, many female students have entered the universities who formerly would have been excluded from higher education because of their religious beliefs shown by wearing a headscarf. Second, by allowing female students to wear a headscarf at university, many female students who took off their headscarf before at the university's entrance gate or who were covering their natural hair under a wig, were definitely now encouraged to wear their headscarf openly. However, it remains concealed, if and to what extent less religious female students at Turkish universities also wear a headscarf because they were facing or at least subjectively felt some open or unspoken social pressure by their classmates or academic staff.

Beyond the female students, headscarves as symbols of a woman's religious belief, has also slowly become visible among the university staff, within the administrative

¹⁷ Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasasının Bazı Maddelerinde Değişiklik Yapılması Hakkında Kanun No. 5982 from 07.05.2010, RG 27580 from 13.05.2010.

¹⁸ See: BIA Haber Merkezi, YÖK Başörtü Düzenlemesine İstanbul'dan Başladı, available online under: <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/125225-yok-basortu-duzenlemesine-istanbul-dan-basladi> [accessed on 18.03.2015].

staff, the service staff, and within the academic teaching staff. For example, from the academic year 2014–15 on, as one of the first female teachers, Assist. Prof. Dr. Merve Safa Kavakçı Islam, the first deputy who entered the Turkish Parliament in 1999 with a headscarf, has been teaching at the Department of International Relations and Political Science at Üsküdar University in Istanbul with a headscarf.¹⁹ Numbers or percentages of academic staff at universities wearing a headscarf are not available yet. However, their small number is expected to increase each term.

IV. CONCLUSION

Although, according to its constitution, Turkey is a laic state, with its absolute control of religion by the Presidency of Religious Affairs and its exclusive promotion of the Sunni-Hanafi Islam, the Turkish state has created its own Islamic state religion. Consequently, the Turkish state does not stay neutral in religious affairs. According to its absolute interpretation monopoly, it sets the official content of the Islam being practiced in Turkey. Under the AKP government, Islam steadily strengthened its position and became more and more visible in public. Exemplary, this development can be seen at Turkish universities. There, the use of Islamic religious symbols such as mosques, prayer rooms and headscarves became legalized and officially promoted by the state in the form of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. As a consequence, especially in the previous five years, the use of Islamic religious symbols at Turkish universities increased dramatically and demonstrates the absurdity of the Turkish concept of Laicism in comparison to its original concept being established at the times of the French Revolution, describing the constitutional separation of state and church.

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¹⁹ *Vatan Gazetesi*: Merve Kavakçı ‘siyaset bilimi’ dersi verecek, in: Gazetevatan.com from 06.07.2014, available online under: <http://www.gazetevatan.com/merve-kavakci-siyaset-bilimi-dersi-verecek-655748-yasam/> [accessed on 18.03.2015].