

Turkish Islamic Organizations in Europe

Turkish Islamic landscape in European countries with large Turkish Muslim populations is dominated by major Islamic organizations with roots in Turkey. Although it differs from country to country, they are mainly grouped under five major Islamic movements, representing the spectrum from moderate to violent and radical: “official Islam” (Diyanet), political Islam (Milli Görüş), a mystical Sufi order (Süleymanlı), Turkish civil Islam (Gülen) and revolutionary (Kaplan).¹

Diyanet (Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs)

The Directorate of Religious Affairs is the department of the Turkish state that regulates the practical aspects of religious life in Turkey, and an instrument of state control over Islam at home and abroad. All imams in Turkey are appointed by the Diyanet, which also prepares their Friday sermons. Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule, the Diyanet has grown exponentially in size and significance, becoming one of Turkey’s largest and increasingly politicized institutions, gradually influenced by the more radical Middle Eastern Salafi religious movement.²

The Diyanet has been active in Europe since the late 1970s, providing Turkish mosques with imams in order to meet religious needs of Turkish minorities. In the early 1980s, the Diyanet began to establish its network of DITIBs (Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği - Turkish Islamic Union of the Directorate for Religious Affairs), umbrella organizations and mosque associations. In Germany, the DITIB became the largest umbrella association, with 896 member organizations under its control. The Austrian branch of Diyanet controls about 58 out of the 250 mosques in the country. It also has significant presence in the Netherlands (the largest mosque-organization in the country, with 143 out of 220 Turkish mosques), Belgium (65 mosques) and Denmark (the largest Turkish organization with 27 mosques).³

Diyanet is characterized by hierarchical structure: its external relations department in Ankara is responsible for activities outside Turkey, such as selecting, training and sending imams, or organizing funerals and pilgrimages. Usually, the chairman of a DITIB is accredited to the Turkish diplomatic mission in a given country. Imams’ work is supervised by the Diyanet officials in the European embassies and consulates. The deployment usually lasts four to five years, a deliberate measure from preventing them to become locally rooted.⁴

¹ Yükleyen, A., *Localizing Islam in Europe. Turkish Islamic Communities in Germany and the Netherlands*, Syracuse University Press, 2011.

² Edelman, E., Cornell, S. Lobel, A. Karaveli, H., “Turkey Transformed. The Origins and Evolution of Authoritarianism and Islamization Under the AKP”, Bipartisan Policy Center, October 2015, pages 62-65.
<http://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/BPC-Turkey-Transformed.pdf>

³ Sunier, T. Landman, N., *Transnational Turkish Islam. Shifting Geographies of Religious Activism and Community Building in Turkey and Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

⁴ Transnational Turkish Islam..., p. 53.

Diyanet is focused on strengthening and promoting Islamic identity inextricably linked to the Turkish state. Highly nationalistic rhetoric and celebration of Turkish historical events and national holidays are standard activities of associated organizations. Diyanet organizations are also the largest mosque builders in Europe. Occasionally, the organization raises concern about its influence over Turkish immigrants in Europe.

Millî Görüş (ICMG)

Millî Görüş is an Islamic religious-political movement founded in Turkey by Necmettin Erbakan in 1969. An ideological father of modern Turkish Islamists, including the ruling AKP party, Erbakan propagated radically anti-secular and anti-Western ideology, calling for the overthrow of Turkey's secular Kemalist regime and transformation of Turkey into an Islamic state. While officially rejecting violence, Erbakan favored a gradualist Islamization through *dawa* – Islamic preaching and education. Erbakan founded numerous political parties, which were subsequently banned.

Erbakan's supporters established Milli Görüş branch in Germany in 1976, known since 1995 as Islamic Community Millî Görüş (ICMG), with headquarters in Cologne. Several other branches were opened in Europe by the end of 1970s.

Today it is the most influential Islamist organization in Germany, and one of the most important Islamist movements operating within the Turkish Diaspora in Europe (apart from Germany, in the Netherlands and Belgium, also present in Italy and Scandinavian countries). It claims to operate over 514 mosques and cultural centers in eleven European countries, with majority of them located in Germany. ICMG's total European membership is about 87,000, and it estimates about 300,000 participants of its religious services in Europe on a weekly basis.⁵

After establishing foothold in Europe, the main goal of Millî Görüş was to support Erbakan's program of Islamization of Turkey. From the 1999 onwards, the movement claims to have focused on the interests of Turkish Muslims as citizens of Europe. It has become eager to present itself as a moderate, exclusively religious organization that has abandoned its political, Islamist past and encourages Muslim integration into the European societies. When addressing Turkish audience, however, the rhetoric used by the ICMG leaders and propaganda tools often reveal anti-Western, anti-capitalists, anti-Semitic overtones, along with their contempt for democracy and liberal values, and support for Islamization of Turkey, as well as European countries. The ICMG focus is placed in particular on the youth, through extensive educational programs, such as seminars, summer camps, Quran classes, after-school clubs, sport and artistic activities.⁶

ICMG has long been under German security services' suspicion of pursuing a long-term, gradualist strategy aimed at the eventual introduction of sharia law in Germany. The movement has been accused of contributing to the creation of "parallel societies", which apart from hindering integration, constitute a fertile ground for radicalization.⁷ ICMG also cooperates with the Muslim Brotherhood (their leaders are linked through marriage), becoming de facto voice of the German Muslim community.⁸

In 2013 Turkish Islamists were represented, for the first time ever, in the German federal elections by the Alliance for Innovation and Justice (BIG) party. The party revealed apparent connections to the

⁵ Vielhaber, D., "The Milli Görüş of Germany", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, June 2012.

<http://www.hudson.org/research/9879-the-milli-g-r-s-of-germany->

⁶ *Ibidem*; *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, p. 77.

⁷ "The Milli Görüş..."

⁸ Vidino, L., "Aims and Methods of Europe's Muslim Brotherhood", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, November 2006. <http://www.hudson.org/research/9776-aims-and-methods-of-europe-s-muslim-brotherhood>

Turkish AKP, while one of its powerbrokers was a prominent member of the Millî Görüş in Germany.⁹ The party gained support of roughly 7% of Turkish voters.¹⁰

Süleymanlı

The Süleymanlı movement was founded by Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, a 20th century Islamic scholar and a master in the Naqshbandi Sufi Order. It was established in Turkey in the 1940s in opposition to the creation of the secular Turkish state and the closing of religious schools.¹¹

Tunahan's followers were among the first to organize religious life of Turkish migrants in Europe in the 1970s.¹² The first Turkish-Islamic organization to try to organize local mosques under a nationwide umbrella association was the Association of Islamic Cultural Centers (Verband der Islamischen Kulturzentren e.V., VIKZ).¹³ Today it represents over 300 mosques in Germany, with around 20,000 registered members. Its Swedish branch is one of the largest Muslim federations in the country, with 14 congregations and more than 10,000 members. It also controls 23 mosques and organizations in Austria, 48 in the Netherlands, and 13 in Belgium. In addition, the movement has branches in other European countries and in the United States.¹⁴

The movement's structure is hierarchical, grounded however in religious authority and charisma rather than in formal positions. In Europe it exercises relative autonomy from Turkey, and the chief imam in Cologne is the highest authority of the movement's European branch.¹⁵

Süleymanlı is a mystical, apolitical movement, with activities focus almost exclusively on religious education.¹⁶ In Turkey the movement is primarily organized around educational institutions, in particular dormitories for high school and university students.¹⁷ Similarly, religious education activities at all levels, from elementary to advanced theological training, is the main preoccupation of the movement in Europe.¹⁸ Imams at Süleymanlı -run mosques are locally recruited, with emphasis on their familiarity of local community, since they are expected to participate in community activities outside the mosque. In contrast to other Islamic organizations, the movement does not place much importance on maintaining relations with sister organizations in Turkey and Europe, and these relations are maintained on a more personal rather than institutionalized level.¹⁹

There has been little study about the movement in Turkey. Similarly, in Europe it receives much less attention than other Islamic movements.²⁰ In general, the perceptions of the movement in Europe are mixed. In the Netherlands for example, in the past accused of extremism and support for Turkish neo-fascist organizations, today the Süleymanlı adherents are regarded as moderate mainstream Muslims.²¹ In Germany on the other hand, in the 1970s and 1980s the movement was notoriously brought to attention due to its anti-

⁹ Sirin, V., "New Islamist Approach to Turks in Germany", Gatestone Institute, **October 11, 2013**.

<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4014/islamist-turks-germany>

¹⁰ Paulick, J. "German-Turkish Voters Turn Away from SPD", *Spiegel Online International*, August 16, 2013.

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/turkish-voters-in-germany-turn-away-from-spd-a-916927.html>

¹¹ Rubin, B. (Ed.), *Guide to Islamist Movements*, M.E. Sharpe, 2010, Vol. 2, p. 436.

¹² *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, p. 58.

¹³ Westerlund, D., Svanberg, I. (Ed.), *Islam Outside the Arab World*, Routledge, 1999, p. 327.

¹⁴ *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, p. 61.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pages 62-63.

¹⁶ *Guide to Islamist Movements*, Vol. 2, p. 436.

¹⁷ *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, p. 58.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pages 64-65.

¹⁹ Peter, F., Ortega, R., *Islamic Movements of Europe*, I.B.Tauris, 2014, pages 223-224.

²⁰ *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, p. 58.

²¹ *Islamic movements in Europe*, p. 225.

integrationist outlook.²² More recently, concerns emerged about the VIKZ's anti-Western, anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian and anti-secular hidden political agenda.²³

The Gülen Movement (The Hizmet)

The Gülen Movement is a religious and educational movement founded and inspired by Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher, scholar, author and speaker, and the movement's spiritual leader, who is currently living in self-imposed exile in the United States. It was founded in Turkey in the 1960s, and expanded internationally, including Western Europe in 1990s. Focused primarily on educational activities, the movement has established a worldwide network of private schools and other educational centers, and claims to be combining modern scientific knowledge with traditional Islamic education. There are more than 1000 Gülen-inspired schools in more than 100 countries around the world.²⁴ The movement's adherents are estimated at anywhere between 1 and 8 million, with an estimate 2 million students enrolled in its schools.²⁵

Unlike other Turkish Islamic movements, the Hizmet lacks clear organizational structure. It consists of relatively autonomous educational institutions and student houses. Accordingly, Fethullah Gülen has no formal position within the movement; his influence stems mainly from his charisma and the status of the movement's founder.²⁶ The schools are mainly funded from donations by Gülen supporters.²⁷ Beyond educational activities, the movement has been active in the media. The recently seized by the Turkish government *Zaman* newspaper was owned by Gülen followers.

Although the movement declares its commitment to integration of Muslims in Western societies and to democracy, peaceful coexistence, tolerance and dialogue, it's secretive and mysterious character as well as lack of transparency provoke frequent suspicions and accusations of the movement's unclear intentions, as well as its hidden political agenda. These concerns are mainly expressed in the Netherlands and Belgium, while in Germany on the other hand it is perceived as much more preferable option than Milli Görüş.²⁸ In the government and some academic circles in the United States Gülen has been perceived as radical Islamist, and his movement a threat to the US.²⁹

In Turkey, in the last years it has been accused of infiltration of state institutions and fiercely cracked down.

The Kaplan Movement (Tebliğ Movement)

The Tebliğ movement is a radical splinter group of the Milli Görüş, which began separate operations in 1983. The group's leader, Cemalettin Kaplan, a spiritual disciple of Necmettin Erbakan, belonged to the branch of Milli Görüş inspired by the Islamic Revolution. It claimed that the establishment of an Islamic state in Turkey needed to be achieved not within the system, but through the use of force. In 1992 Kaplan proclaimed the Islamic state of Anatolia, and declared himself a Caliph two years later.³⁰ In 2002 he was

²² *Islam Outside the Arab World*, p. 327.

²³ *Transnational Turkish Islam*, pages 65-66.

²⁴ Mandaville, P. (Ed.), "Muslim Networks and Movements in Western Europe", Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, September 2010, p. 13. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/09/Muslim-networks-full-report.pdf>

²⁵ Beauchamp, S., "120 American Charter Schools and One Secretive Turkish Cleric", *The Atlantic*, August 12, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/120-american-charter-schools-and-one-secretive-turkish-cleric/375923/>

²⁶ *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, pages 89-90.

²⁷ "Muslim Networks and Movements...", p. 13.

²⁸ *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, p. 82

²⁹ Wagner, A. R., "When Moderation Masks a Radical Agenda", *The Washington Times*, January 21, 2016.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/jan/21/abraham-wagner-gulen-movement-a-threat-to-us-turke/>

³⁰ *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, p. 112.

convicted in Germany for incitement to murder, and served a four year sentence. He was subsequently extradited to Turkey, where he was sentenced to life in prison for planning to overthrow the Turkish government. The group is known to have received money from radical Egyptian cleric Yusuf Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as other Middle Eastern sources.³¹

Following Kaplan's death in 1995, the organization disintegrated into different factions. It was banned in Germany in 2001, but maintains a group of radically-oriented sympathizers.³² In the Netherlands, there are about 200 Muslims active within two separate Kaplan factions.³³

The dynamics between main Islamic organizations worldwide often reflect political situation in Turkey. This is in particular visible in the context of relations between the Diyanet and ICMG. While the Turkish government was for decades hostile to the Erbakan's Islamist movement and its European branches, this hostility began to ease after the Milli Görüs-rooted AKP party came to power in 2002. The difference between mosques administered by traditionally moderate Diyanet, and those under the control of more radical ICMG has waned.³⁴ In the Netherlands, both Diyanet and the Milli Görüs are cooperating in umbrella organizations.³⁵ Similarly, the internal conflict between the Gülen movement and the Turkish government prompted the closure of some of Gülen schools abroad.³⁶

³¹ "Netherlands"

³² *Transnational Turkish Islam...*, p. 112.

³³ *Guide to Islamist Movements*, vol. 2, p. 481.

³⁴ Tibi, B. "Islamists Approach Europe", *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2009. <http://www.meforum.org/2047/islamists-approach-europe>

³⁵ N/A, "Netherlands", *World Almanac of Islamism*, American Foreign Policy Council, October 4, 2013.

<http://almanac.afpc.org/Netherlands#>

³⁶ Canturk, S., "Turkey's Allies Mobilizing Support Against Gülen Movement's Schools Abroad", *Daily Sabah*, May 19, 2015.

<http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/05/19/turkeys-allies-mobilizing-support-against-gulen-movements-schools-abroad>