

Rethinking the role of the *ulama* in Turkey

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During work towards my PhD in political science, focusing on state and religion in Turkey, I became increasingly interested in the role of the *ulama* within the context of (Sunni) Muslim majority countries. Put simply, the *ulama* are religious scholars and functionaries; they are those who are considered to have expert knowledge through their study of religious texts or Islamic law. The *ulama* have been described by various scholars as the transmitters and protectors of Islamic learning and as the guardians of tradition, and thereby can be considered to constitute a key pillar of the social order within Muslim populations (Kara 2005; Hatina 2009). At the same time, the *ulama* play a fundamental role in the shaping and (re)defining of the Islamic religion.

Despite this significant role, until recently the *ulama* were a neglected subject within academic and particularly Turkish studies. This was chiefly a reflection of two dynamics. Firstly, in its heyday, the *ulama* in the Ottoman Empire referred to a vast network of institutions headed by the *Meşihat-i İslâmiyye*, the office of the highest religious authority, the *Şeyhülislam*, comprising judicial and educational responsibilities alongside the *muftis* as well as imams, preachers and Sufi sheikhs and *waqfs* (Kara 2005). However, owing to the processes of secularisation associated with the emergence of the modern nation-state, an assumption arose that the *ulama* had been consigned to history. Indeed, in the case of the ostensibly laic Turkish Republic, following secularisation policies such as the closure of the *medreses* (religious schools), the adoption of a secular civil code and the abolition of the caliphate, the Ottoman *ulama*'s traditional domain of action and authority had been significantly reduced. Even the concept of *ulama* itself had been abandoned by the new Republican regime by the 1930s, whilst the Ottoman *ulama* was absorbed into a key institution of the Turkish Republic, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), which was established in place of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations in 1924.

Secondly, the role and authority of the *ulama* has been challenged by the pluralisation of knowledge (Hatina 2009) resulting from the growth of modern religious education and particularly the growth of Islamism since the 1970s.

The combination of these twin challenges, therefore, seemed to have marginalised the traditional *ulama* within modern Muslim majority societies. In the Turkish case, the lack of interest in the role of the official *ulama*, as represented within the *Diyanet*, also reflects the fact that it remains significantly different to examples elsewhere due to the secularisation of the Turkish legal framework; thus the *Diyanet* is comparatively far more circumscribed compared

to the *ulama* in most other Muslim contexts, given that the Turkish institution has no legal jurisdiction. In other words, in contrast to other settings, its *fatwas* (Islamic rulings) are not legally binding. Given this overall context and the *Diyanet*'s apparently more limited role, there have been only a handful of noteworthy studies on the institution, which have typically involved a focus on the nature of the laicism of the state.

In recent years, however, a number of scholarly works on religious establishments across the Muslim world have suggested a more complex reality and a need to rethink the role of the *ulama* within modern nation-states. The scholar Muhammad Qasim Zaman has, for instance, argued in his study of the *ulama* in Pakistan that the question should not be whether the authority of the *ulama* has declined or increased, but 'how that authority is constructed, argued, put on display, and constantly defended' (Zaman 2010). There have also been a number of studies on the ways in which the Ottoman *ulama* defended itself with flexibility against encroachments on its realm of action and authority (see, for example, Bein 2011 on the *ulema* as both agents of change and guardians of tradition).

In a similar sense, in my research I am interested in questions regarding the evolving role of the modern-day *ulama*, the *Diyanet*, not in terms of how it fits in with a particular understanding or regime of laicism, but the construction of its authority, the challenges to it and its relations with other religious and Islamist actors. These are important questions; how these dynamics play out will have a bearing on and shape Islamic discourse and the nature of religious authority.

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