

Turkey's global soft-power push is built on mosques

Ankara is funding thousands of mosques out of more than just goodwill

By John M. Beck

The Atlantic (01.06.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2MwXnHI> – The mosque being built in Albania's capital will be the largest in all the Balkans. Still a few months away from opening, it already dominates a corner of Tirana, overshadowing the neighboring Parliament building from a 105,000-square-foot compound. The building's walls are clad in pale stone and topped with domes and minarets, which look nothing like any structures that have stood in the area before.

Instead, the building echoes classic Ottoman architecture, and for good reason—it is being funded by Turkey. It's among a series of new mega-mosques constructed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government at home and abroad. One in Accra, Ghana, is the largest in West Africa. Another in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, is the largest in Central Asia. A complex in Maryland is said to be the largest of its kind in the entire Western Hemisphere. There are at least 2,000 others of various sizes that are funded by Ankara, and still more have been planned or discussed in places such as Venezuela, where Erdoğan is bolstering Nicolás Maduro's beleaguered government, and Cuba, which Erdoğan claimed Muslim sailors reached before Christopher Columbus. Once completed, many of these mosques remain controlled by Ankara, and—in areas with large Turkish diasporas—deliver the same state-mandated weekly sermon heard in every city, town, and village back in Turkey.

Erdoğan has faced criticism from Western powers in recent years for actions seen as anti-democratic and illiberal:

Perceived domestic enemies have been purged and jailed; Kurdish armed groups have been attacked in both Syria and Iraq; banks and foreign powers have been harangued for Turkey's own financial woes. At the same time, his government has progressively expanded a global soft-power campaign, and mosques are only the most obvious result. It also supports religious schooling, a program for restoring Ottoman-era buildings, and extensive social and aid operations. Most beneficiaries have so far welcomed the assistance, but a few, notably in Germany, now worry that Turkish influence could deepen their own communal divides or even be a vehicle for espionage.

Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, aspire for Turkey "to be more than a normal country, to be something greater," Selim Kuru, an analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, told me. "And they express that very often." Religion, he added, can prove a more potent tool than conventional cultural outreach or force projection.

Turkey's mosques are controlled by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, or Diyanet, a state body that employs imams, writes sermons, and issues fatwas. It was founded in 1924, but grew rapidly under the AKP to become a more overtly political organ with an ambitious global remit. With well over 100,000 people now on its payroll, its budget has expanded more than fourfold since 2006, during Erdoğan's first term as prime minister, to 12.5 billion lira (\$2 billion) this year. That figure is orders of magnitude larger than many government ministries, and even the national intelligence agency. Diyanet spokespeople did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

The Diyanet often fills funding gaps in recipient countries, as it has done in Albania. In 1967, when Albania's then-dictator, Enver Hoxha, mandated state atheism, the public practice of religion was outlawed, and places of worship were demolished or repurposed. After his downfall, the population,

which identified as 57 percent Muslim, 10 percent Catholic, and 7 percent Orthodox, found itself without mosques or churches and lacked the means to build them. Foreign money began pouring in: Pope John Paul II laid the cornerstone for a Roman Catholic cathedral in 1993; a few years later, the Greek Orthodox Church began work on its own, one of the largest of its kind in Europe.

For a while, Tirana's Muslim majority lost out. In the center of the capital, only Et'hem Bey Mosque had survived the Hoxha era, and it has room for just a few dozen at prayer time. Come festivals and holy days, worshippers had to gather outside, in Skanderbeg Square. So in 2010, the city's mayor, Edi Rama, approved the construction of a new mosque, funded by the Diyanet. Erdoğan attended the groundbreaking ceremony five years later and thanked Rama, who by then was prime minister.

There have been gripes about Turkish involvement, and about the architectural style of the building, which will be called the Great Mosque of Tirana, but its construction is seen by many as only the latest foreign power to take an interest in their country, the Albanian historian Auron Tare told me. "There's a religious competitiveness," he said. "You have these different countries, these different sorts of religious bodies who are all converging here."

Turkish money has also reached Albania through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), which distributes most of the country's development assistance and which has carried out more than 200 projects there, according to Erdoğan's office, including restoring Ottoman mosques. The agency is also funding various other programs in Tirana, such as park development and the construction of university dorms, the city's current mayor, Erion Veliaj, told me. Albania is still one of the poorest countries in Europe, and he's happy to spare his own budget. However, a TİKA spokesman told me the organization had no relevant restoration projects in Albania, despite listing a number on its website, and did not reply to

further requests for comment.

Seeing the new mosque close to the Catholic and Orthodox cathedrals, Veliaj said, gives him “immense pleasure.” He’s confident, too, that Albania’s relaxed variety of Islam will remain unaffected by Turkish influence, partly due to an extensive intermingling of once-distinct religious groups during the atheist years. No one, he said, wants to start a fight at the dinner table. Besides, Turkey’s Hanafi interpretation of the Sunni branch of Islam is, Veliaj added, far more tolerant than that propagated by “other countries”—a thinly veiled reference to more doctrinaire strains of Islam promoted by Saudi Arabia and others in Albania after Hoxha’s fall. “As a mayor,” Veliaj said, “I’m happy to see that assistance come from Turkey than from some other place.”

Whereas Turkish efforts in Tirana, Accra, and elsewhere appear to point to a soft-power push in countries with relatively small Turkish diasporas, Ankara has also plowed money into countries where large numbers of Turks live, such as Germany. When Turkish guest workers began arriving in the 1960s, lawmakers there were also happy to have Diyanet assistance. The Turkish organization built mosques, provided social services, and significantly tamped down any risk of extremism. As time has gone on, though, Germany has become home to more than 3 million people of Turkish origin or descent, and lawmakers are beginning to have misgivings over Ankara’s continued influence, particularly as Erdoğan’s rule grows more and more polarizing.

The Diyanet, through the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB), another Turkish government body, runs 900 of Germany’s 2,400 mosques. It describes itself as politically neutral, but has been the subject of multiple controversies. Last year, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that some DİTİB imams led prayers supporting Turkey’s military incursion into Syria’s Afrin region. Another DİTİB-run mosque held a performance to mark the Battle of Gallipoli that involved

children dressed in fatigues lying as fallen soldiers under a large Turkish flag, *Stern*, a weekly, said. In 2017, German authorities investigated a number of imams on suspicion that they had spied on followers of Fethullah Gülen, the Pennsylvania-based preacher whom Ankara blames for an attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2016. At the time, Germany's domestic intelligence agency was reported to be considering placing DİTİB under official surveillance.

Markus Kerber, a senior civil servant in the German interior ministry, told me that it was now time to reduce the links between Ankara and his country's Islamic community. The Turkish diaspora in western Europe is seen as an important strategic asset for the AKP, he said, but Germany aims to have domestically educated imams and domestically funded mosques in the future.

DİTİB did not respond to requests for comment. After the appointment of a new board chairman in January, however, the organization seemed determined not to be sidelined. "DİTİB remains, and will continue to be, the strongest and most important guarantor of a resource and reason-based interpretation of moderate Islam for all Muslims," it said in a statement.

At a recent meeting in Ankara with the Diyanet president and some of Erdoğan's advisers, Kerber said he told his counterparts that "your Turks are now our Turks." Their immediate reaction, he added, was bewilderment.

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Russia: Terrorist attack on Orthodox church in Chechnya

RIA Novosti (19.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2J03iBQ> – An incident with an attempt to seize parishioners in the church of the Archangel Michael in Grozny is an attempt by extremists to set Orthodox against Muslims, the head of the synod's Department for Relations of Church and Society and News Media of the Moscow patriarchate, Vladimir Legoida, declared.

“Another attempt by pseudo-Islamic extremists to set Orthodox against Muslims,” Legoida wrote on Saturday in his account on one of the messenger services.

A press release distributed by the synodal department notes that the attackers tried to intimidate Orthodox believers of Chechnya and sow inter-confessional strife, but they got a worthy rebuff.

“We mourn the parishioner of the church of the Archangel Michael who fell victim to the terrorist act, and also for law enforcement agents who showed themselves to be real heroes and perished in performing their duty of protecting worshipers,” Legoida declared, as quoted in the report.

The head of the synodal department expressed confidence that

“the act of terror will be unanimously condemned by representatives of world religions in Russia and abroad, as well as by all healthy-minded people.”

“Orthodox and Muslims of Russia, as before, will be united in struggle with terrorists, supporting one another in the face of the common danger,” Legoida added.

The head of the Chechen republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, reported to journalists earlier that four militants penetrated the church of the Archangel Michael in the center of Grozny and their goal was to seize parishioners. He said that as the result of an immediately mounted special operation, all four were wiped out, one policeman died from wounds, and one parishioner had an injury of moderate severity. According to information of the Investigative Committee of the RF, two policemen guarding the church perished, another two were wounded, and one civilian was killed. (tr. by PDS, posted 19 May 2018)

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BELGIUM: Deadly terrorist incident in Liège raises the issue of ‘conversion’ and ‘radicalisation’ in prison

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (08.06.2018) – On 29 May, a gunman killed two female police officers and a student in Liège before he was shot dead by police. Prosecutors are investigating the shooting as a terrorist incident.

The shooting occurred around 10:30am local time near a high school on a major road in the city, which lies some 90 kilometres east of Brussels.

The local public prosecutor said the man armed with a knife repeatedly stabbed the two policewomen, then used their firearms to shoot them dead, and shouted ‘al-Akhbar’. One of the deceased officers had already lost her husband and leaves behind two 13-year old twin daughters.

After the killings, the man continued on foot, opening fire on a parked vehicle where a 22-year old student sat in the passenger seat. The young man, who had recently finished his exams and was to become a teacher, died. The killer then continued and entered the Leonie de Waha school where he held a cleaning lady hostage. When he realised that she was Muslim, he asked her if she was observing Ramadan. When the woman replied yes, he answered that he would not kill her. The woman pleaded with him and tried to convince him that it is bad for a Muslim to kill other people.

The killer was eventually shot in a gunfight during which several other police officers were wounded. He had past

convictions for robbery, violence and drug dealing.

In 2015 a Brussels-based Islamic State (IS) cell was involved in the attacks on Paris that killed 130 people in 2015, and in the 2016 attacks in Brussels, which resulted in the death of 32 people.

A Belgian 'convert' to Islam

The killer's name is Benjamin Herman, a typical Belgian name. He was born in 1982 in Belgium and his parents are not Muslims. He had past convictions for robbery, violence and drug dealing. During the shootings, Herman was on a penitentiary leave, which had been the case a dozen times before, and not always without problems.

Herman is suspected of having been 'radicalised' in prison by Fouad B. who has been again arrested on 7 June.

Fouad B. was sentenced for acts of violence in 2002 and 2005. In 2006, he committed a robbery at gun point in a night shop in Verviers, a small city in the east of Belgium where an extremist cell was dismantled and an imam was recently deported. Fouad B. was sentenced to a suspended sentence of two years but shortly after assaulted a man on the street and was sent back to prison.

More names of detainees said to have radicalised Benjamin Herman have emerged in the media, such as Yassine Dibi and Joey Leclercq.

It has been known for years that there are strong links between radical Muslims claiming to be pro-jihad and criminals. The meeting place between these two worlds, which are otherwise light years away from each other, is within the penitentiary system. It is in prison that Benjamin Herman began to practice Islam. A former cell-mate testified on a Belgian TV channel that Herman was praying five times a day and scrupulously observing Ramadan.

Conversion to a peaceful religion or to a deadly political ideology?

Recruiters for Islamist ideology in prisons are not spreading a peaceful and loving Islam among other detainees, which would make them better citizens, better husbands, better fathers. Instead, they spread an ideology of hate, segregation, exclusion and self-exclusion, and indiscriminate violence. They misuse Islam and exploit the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of other detainees to try to transform them into potential time-bombs and kamikazes once they are released, as the Islamic State propaganda teaches and preaches online.

Guards in prisons say that the profile of prison populations have changed. While in the past gang leaders were imposing their rule on other prisoners, Muslim criminals have now taken their place and force others to abide by their religious norms. In some prisons, Muslims are in the majority and as a dominant group, impose their rule. In a TV program, a former prisoner testified that he had been under pressure not to be naked while taking a shower. Another prisoner said they were told they would have to join the group if they want to safely use the prison yard.

Which solution? To isolate radicalisers?

Prison guards admit that it is difficult to identify signs of radicalisation of prisoners who were originally mainline Muslims or who were not Muslim. The rule of law in democratic societies prohibits the 'monitoring' of the conversations between prisoners. Moreover, many detainees speak Arabic or other foreign languages amongst themselves. Sudden intensive practice of Muslim rituals (prayers five times a day, observing Ramadan, and so on) may cause the raising of guards' eyebrows but this is questionable.

Some propose to strictly isolate radicalising and radicalised

prisoners so that they cannot communicate with each other and infect other potential victims, but this method has a price. Building more prisons takes time and money. Building one cell in the prison of Haren (Flanders) costs 1 million EUR. The accommodation of one detainee costs the state and society 170 EUR per day. Are the tax-payers ready to finance specific and costly detention facilities for such prisoners?

New threats in the near future

Returnees from the battlefields of Iraq, Syria, and other conflicts are perceived as potential threats for the security of populations in Europe, but there is another threat that is rarely discussed: the release of prisoners who have been radicalised during their detention. In France, 450 radicalised prisoners will be released next year at the end of their term. In Belgium, it is estimated that 28 radicalised prisoners will be freed this year. When Benjamin Herman was granted some freedom, we saw what happened. What will the next released individuals do?

Some conclusions

Prisons have become places of recruitment and training of future 'soldiers' at the service of a deadly ideology, but other sectors of our democratic and open societies have also been infiltrated by this ideology (internet, social media, schools...). The problem of Islamism must be tackled upstream and not downstream. This ideology must be treated with the appropriate antibiotics and vaccinations; however, the medicines have yet to be created.

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The Hague City Council is concerned about Salafist activities

By Hans Noot, *HRWF board member*

HRWF (19.05.2018)
– <https://bit.ly/2IVbsLK> and <https://bit.ly/2Gy97kL> – A majority of the City Council of the Hague, the Netherlands, wants to discontinue the annual average €10.000 subsidy for volunteer activities of the Salafist As Soennah Mosque. According to the mayor of The Hague, Major Pauline Krikke, the mosque will no longer qualify for subsidies from the City as it has come under scrutiny after it was revealed that the mosque received financial support to the tune of more than 130.000 Kuwait Dinar (more than € 350.000) from *Al Najat*, a Kuwait charity organization that supports jihadists in Syria. According to a documentary of the Dutch media producers *Nieuwsuur*, the mosque also received funds from the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS)*. The Dutch Intelligence Agency (AIVD) had warned the City council of these financial transactions. Members of the mosque council were also recorded

expressing pro-jihadi sentiments and advising female genital mutilation.

The mosque was mentioned in the Dutch media several times during this past year when one imam, Fawaz Jneid, was alleged to have called the Rotterdam Mayor, Ahmed Aboutaleb, an apostate Muslim, in addition to preaching against homosexuals, and cursing both film maker Theo van Gogh and Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. There is currently a restraining order against Jneid for the region around the As Soennah Mosque in The Hague.

Since Jneid's departure from the mosque, tolerance is preached openly. New allegations, however, suggest that behind closed doors, opinions and practices are contradictory.

The As Soennah Mosque is the most influential Muslim centre in the Netherlands.

(*) The Revival of Islamic Heritage Society was listed on **11 January 2002** pursuant to paragraph 8 (c) of resolution 1333 (2000) as being associated with Al-Qaida, Usama bin Laden or the Taliban for "participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf or in support of", "supplying, selling or transferring arms and related materiel to" or "otherwise supporting acts or activities of" Usama bin Laden, Al-Qaida (QDe.004) and the Taliban.

Source: UN Security Council Committee:

https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/revival-of-islamic-heritage-society

(**) See more information in NL Times: <https://nltimes.nl/2018/03/26/rotterdam-mayor-called-enemy-islam-controversial-imam>

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