

In Turkey, Religious Authorities Get in the Way of Science

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Like almost every other country in the world, Turkey has been hit with the coronavirus. And like other Muslim countries, in Turkey there has been a clash between religious authorities, unwilling to lock down shops, or mosques, or cities, and the medical specialists, who insist such measures are necessary.

The latest report on the situation in Turkey, from the journalist Can Dunder, is [here](#):

Over the past two weeks, Turkey has been witnessing a lethal tug of war between reason and belief – one that shows us again how dangerous politicized religion can be.

Turkish health-care professionals and scientists, led by the Turkish Medical Association, have been advocating fact-based

policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic. But they face a powerful opponent in the country's religious establishment. The government's enormously influential Directorate of Religious Affairs, an agency that is supposed to regulate the role of Islam, has become one of the key institutions in the fight against covid-19 – and not always for the better.

It was clear from early on that the biggest threat would come from outside Turkey's borders – and especially from those making their Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca. When authorities in Saudi Arabia identified 100 coronavirus cases, they quickly moved to cancel visits to the central Kaaba shrine. Some 21,000 pilgrims from Turkey returned home by March 15.

Experts insisted that returning pilgrims should immediately be quarantined, but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) did not want to annoy those religious people who mostly vote for the AKP.

The Directorate of Religious Affairs, the state institution in charge of managing the mosques, requested that returnees self-isolate at home for 14 days, without receiving any visitors.

Erdogan's refusal to impose a quarantine on the pilgrims returning from Mecca, crowded with people, was a serious error. He did not listen to the medical experts, but rather to his political instincts. He did not want to antagonize either the religious pilgrims, nor the religious establishment, by requiring such a quarantine. Instead, those pilgrims were merely "requested to remain in self-isolation." The government was apparently more afraid of antagonizing the religious authorities, who were opposed to a quarantine, than it was of the angry reaction from the medical establishment. There was no enforcement mechanism: no fines were imposed on those who were found outdoors.

The majority of people did not listen. Social media filled

with photos of returning pilgrims making visits and accepting guests. Confronted with the public refusal to cooperate, the government suddenly decided to quarantine the last group of returnees. More than 6,400 returning pilgrims were placed in university dormitories; all the students who had lived there were evicted.

Erdogan, having realized that many were not complying with the request to self-isolate, then decided that he would impose a quarantine on the last group of returning pilgrims. But there was again an enforcement problem with religious pilgrims who had their own ideas about what created the coronavirus and about how it spread. Too many of them refused to accept the scientific explanation for the virus, and continued to think that their own piety would protect them from the wrath of Allah, who they believed used coronavirus as a weapon against those who were insufficient in their faith.

Some of the pilgrims, citing the unequal treatment, tried to escape quarantine. Some of them tried to force open the doors of their dormitories; another group that managed to get out was caught traveling to another city in a rented bus.

But it was too late. Thousands of people had spread across the country. Within a week, the number of cases surged from one to more than 1,000...

*The second big mistake was made at Friday prayers, which draw around 18 million people each week. Friday prayers have been canceled in many Islamic countries. Iran pulled back on February 27; on March 13, Kuwait put out the message that people should pray in their homes. In Turkey, the **Directorate of Religious Affairs** made a similar announcement – but only in the form of a suggestion. Bars, night clubs, libraries and museums were closed, but mosques remained open – and they were crowded with believers. On March 16, the government announced that communal Friday prayers were being suspended.*

But it was too late again. The death announcements began on March 17. Within one week, Turkey had surpassed all other countries in the rate of increase of cases.

Erdogan stayed inside his presidential palace for a full week following the first announced case. On March 18, he finally emerged to host a meeting on "Coordinating the Fight against the Coronavirus." Officials from the Directorate of Religious Affairs participated, but there was no one there from the Turkish Medical Association. As he left the four-hour conference, Erdogan chose to speak like a cleric rather than a president, citing traditional Islamic texts: "It is up to us to behave in accordance with the hadiths, to take precautions and leave judgment to Allah. I believe that we will make it through this period with patience and prayers."

As the educated everywhere know, "patience and prayers" have nothing to do with "making it through" the coronavirus crisis. It takes test kits, masks, ventilators, it takes doctors and nurses. "Patience and prayers" have been of no efficacy to stop the spread of the virus. A week after Erdogan's meeting with Diyanet officials, on March 25, when the number of deaths had risen to 59 and the number of cases had reached 2,433, Erdogan gave a televised address in which he assured the nation that the government would end the spread of the virus in two to three weeks. To experts who had argued that the illness will be transmitted even faster in the coming weeks because of the initial delayed response, he said simply: "Our Lord's help will be on our side." A few days later, the death toll in Turkey from the coronavirus had risen to 108, with 7,402 cases. Allah did not come to the rescue.

Throughout most of March, President Erdogan continued to misinform the Turkish public as to the severity, and likely duration, of the disease. When he assured the nation that the spread of the virus would end in two to three weeks, he was overlooking the conclusions of his own medical experts that,

far from ending, the virus would spread ever more rapidly. Some infectious disease specialists have claimed that up to 60% of the Turkish population would become infected unless drastic measures – including the quarantining of whole cities – were taken. So far, Erdogan has not done so, though he has cancelled all international travel and, inside Turkey, banned travel among 30 major cities, including the three largest, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir.

He appears to be listening more closely now to medical experts than he did when the outbreak first occurred and he refused to impose a quarantine on pilgrims returning from Mecca.

The Turkish response has been better – swifter, and sterner – than in neighboring Iran, where the government has been erratic, confused, and conspiracy-minded. But Erdogan needs to do more; he needs to emulate the Chinese, whose complete lockdown of Wuhan has apparently turned the tide in that country, with a dramatic drop in the number of new cases of coronavirus being reported.

On television, religious scholars rather than scientists dominated coverage of the coronavirus, explaining the role of “extramarital relations, adultery, homosexuality, and anal relations” in the spread of the virus. The coronavirus emergency is showing the country just how the secular foundations of the education system have been eroded.

Instead of scientists explaining what measures individuals should take to slow down the spread of the coronavirus – social distancing, handwashing, wearing of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), avoiding all gatherings of more than a handful of people – the Turkish television devotes much of its broadcasting time to religious scholars, who provide no useful information as to how to deal with the coronavirus, but instead offer their incessant moralizing as to why it has spread. Many of these religious scholars attribute the spread

of the virus to what they consider to be the immoral behavior of those afflicted. In their view, it is Allah's way of punishing a population of Muslims who either engage in, or tolerate, "extramarital relations, adultery, homosexuality, and anal relations." This might lead the credulous to believe that if they refrain from such sexual behavior, they will remain immune to the virus, and need not self-isolate but can go out and about, including visits to the mosque. Such behavior would be devastating. People need to be told, rather, that the virus makes no distinction between the good and the bad, the Believer and the Unbeliever. Saint or sinner, wash your hands, keep your distance, stay away from crowds. It's the only way.

Turkey's economy was already in poor shape as the pandemic approached, and its health-care system is utterly unprepared for the challenge it faces. So it's no wonder that the authorities have been unable to produce a serious, well-thought-out response. Religious officials have stepped into the gap – announcing, for example, that mosque loudspeakers would broadcast prayers every night.

A credulous population may believe that the broadcasting of prayers every night will have some effect in warding off the disease. The Turkish medical authorities know that such measures have no efficacy and are harmful, for they get in the way of a coherent response to the epidemic, based on science and not superstition. The health officials recognize that those who put their faith totally in Allah, and not in science, will be less inclined to accept the need to wash their hands repeatedly, to observe social distancing, to wear masks. .

The Directorate of Religious Affairs is a huge and powerful institution. In 2019, it received five times more funding from the budget than the intelligence community. Its staff outnumbers the number of doctors in the country; Turkey has

more mosques than hospitals.

Under Erdogan the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has greatly expanded; he has also built tens of thousands of new mosques and of Imam Hatip religious schools. He has expanded the training of Muslim clerics. This is part of his systematic effort at re-islamizing the country. Many of these newly-empowered clerics, who would have been quickly silenced under Ataturk, offer their own religion-based interpretations of the coronavirus crisis: that it is Allah's punishment for being imperfect Muslims, and Muslims can halt the spread of the virus not through social distancing, wearing masks, and self-isolating, but only by becoming better – i.e., deeply devout – Muslims.

By obstructing science and misallocating vital resources, political Islam in Turkey has become a direct threat to the health of the nation. Turks now find themselves fighting the virus even as they confront the ignorance that leads to bad policy.

Turks need to understand that there are no conspiracies behind this crisis; the disease was not created by any group of humans to contaminate any other group; it seems to have been spread first from bats to humans in Wuhan, China, and then those humans who were coming and going in Wuhan became the vectors for the spread of the virus to other people, elsewhere in China and around the world. That is why bans on travel into and out of any country, and similar bans on travel within a country, are so important in containing the virus.

The continuing power of the religious establishment is evident in the fact that while communal daily prayers, and Friday Prayers, are no longer to be held, mosques in Turkey have still not yet been closed completely but remain open for individual worshippers. As there is no regulation of how many individuals may enter a mosque at any one time, the danger of

the infection spreading through visits to the mosques remains. The Diyanet should play no role from now on in the government's continuing response to the coronavirus, not on when quarantines should either be imposed or lifted, and on what populations, not on how long the general shutdown of stores, restaurants, sports events, and other crowd-attracting venues, should remain in place, and especially not have any say on when, and to what extent, mosques can be reopened for communal and Friday Prayers. Science, not Religion, will get the Turks – just like everyone else – through this.

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