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Use of Religion in Blame Avoidance in a Competitive Authoritarian Regime: Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet)

Ihsan Yilmaz ¹, Ismail Albayrak ^{2,*} and Omer Erturk ³¹ Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia² School of Theology, Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, VIC 3002, Australia³ Independent Researcher, 10967 Berlin, Germany

* Correspondence: ismail.albayrak@acu.edu.au

Abstract: Blame avoidance has been one of the most applied strategies by policy makers in both democratic and non-democratic regimes to avoid responsibility and accountability in cases of failure and tragic events. It is also known that politicians have used religion for Machiavellian purposes, as exactly advised by Machiavelli. However, a systematic empirical analysis of how religion is used for blame avoidance by politicians has not been conducted. In this article, we aim to address this gap by examining the empirical data derived from the weekly Friday sermon texts produced by Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs and delivered in more than 90 thousand mosques every week to a large segment of the population in Turkey, where the majority claims to be religious. Starting with its violent response to the peaceful Gezi protests in 2013, the ruling AKP has opened up a new phase in Turkish political history by resorting to civilizational populism: it blamed the Western world for financing and masterminding the protests, using the protestors as internal pawns to attack Turkey and the Muslim World, suppressed the protests brutally and entered into a populist authoritarian regime. Our paper shows, following this turn, how the Diyanet sermons started using religion to help with the AKP's blame avoidance. The Diyanet either parroted the AKP's conspiratorial narrative or tried to convince the citizens that all negativities are works of God and with these humans are being tested by God. The AKP's use of religion to avoid blame is a text-book case of how both a religious institution and religious discourse can be used to help the incumbent avoid responsibility. Whenever, there was a problem that would the AKP votes, the Diyanet's sermons tried to shift the blame to either God or citizens or conspiratorial enemies.

Keywords: religion; authoritarianism; blame avoidance; politics; Islam; Turkey; AKP; Diyanet; sermon



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1. Introduction

According to the Bible, the first known blame game goes back to the pre-world life, in which the first male and female were created. Adam blames Eve, who made him eat the fruit of the tree while Eve says that the snake deceived her (here the snake is Satan) and ate the fruit. Even God is blamed in the Bible at the next stage (Genesis 3:12–15).¹ It is the equivalent of original sin in politics which is inherited from the forefathers. In summary, this unchangeable habit of human before s/he appeared on the stage of history continues today. For example, we easily blame fast food restaurants for making us fat, blame tobacco companies for giving us cancer, blame the church for our lack of spiritual growth, we even blame God for the results of our poor choices “O God why is this happening to me?” (thefranklinnewspost.com). However, no blame game is as colourful as in political life.

Politicians seek blame avoidance when they are held guilty for their failures, as well as they seek credit claiming for their good policies. It is a vital issue for the policy

makers because it is known that voters are much more inclined to remember the losses and sufferings than gains. Because of the voters' this tendency, bureaucrats in governments and policy makers primarily seek to avoid blame.

Contemporary political life is full of such examples. Weaver's *Politics of Blame Avoidance* has been one of the most comprehensive and leading studies that lists what blame avoidance strategies might be followed by the officeholders. He has shown that there are eight blame-avoiding strategies that policymakers can apply: 'agenda limitation', 'redefine the issue', 'throw good money after bad', 'pass the buck', 'find a scapegoat', 'jump on the bandwagon', 'circle the wagons' and 'stop me before I kill again' (Weaver 1986). According to Weaver, policymakers' effort to keeping the blame-generating issue off the agenda is agenda limitation strategy. If they fail to succeed a blame-generating issue off the agenda, 'they may be able to reshape' and redefine the issue, such as 'developing new policy options which diffuse or obfuscate losses'. Throwing good money after bad, Weaver's third strategy, is usually employed by the office holders under the circumstances of negative-sum games; when there is no way left to prevent losses, or other strategies failed, the policymakers may be able to prevent or obstruct by providing extra resources 'to shore up the status quo' thus can avoid suffering losses. Pass the buck, as a fourth strategy, is explained by Weaver as such: 'if a blame-generating decision has to be made, policymakers are likely to try to delegate that decision to someone else'. During the times that the political leaders fail to pass the buck, they are likely pass the blame on others, and this is called find a scapegoat, the fifth strategy (Weaver 1986).

As a sixth strategy, jump on the wagon, Weaver states that political leaders may employ jump on the wagon and avoid blame if there is any other working popular alternative, when their other strategies do not work. Weaver notes that this is also related to 'desire to turn blame into credit'. If other strategies are not viable in deflecting blame, the officeholder can adopt the seventh strategy, circle the wagons. According to this strategy, a political leader diffuses the blame-generating issue 'by spreading it among as many policymakers as possible' for fear that s/he will take the lead in blame. Finally, the eighth strategy, in which political leaders 'know that they are doing is wrong, but they can't help themselves' is defined as stop me before I kill again (Weaver 1986).

Even though blame avoidance has been studied by social scientist, religion's use by politicians for blame avoidance has not been systematically analysed. This paper addresses this gap by examining rich empirical data, derived from the Friday sermons of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs that are prepared at the Diyanet headquarters and delivered every week in more than 90 thousand mosques in Turkey and several hundreds of mosques in the Western countries. The paper will focus on the tragic deaths, terrible destructions caused by either wars or deathly accidents at the workplace, natural disasters (fires and floods), economic crises and the constant efforts of the Diyanet to alleviate the incompetence of the government on theological grounds through sermons.

The paper starts with a summary of the Turkish state's political instrumentalization of religion via Diyanet. Then, it moves on to explain our methodology, which is followed by a section titled "The Tests, Trials and Tribulations of the Faithful". Then, we discuss the Diyanet's role in helping the AKP's blame avoidance regarding the increased number of deaths in war and terrorist attacks. After this, blame avoidance in response to natural disasters and occupational accidents is analysed. Before concluding, the paper looks at how the Diyanet sermons sugar-coat Turkey's economic crises under the AKP's leadership.

2. The Turkish State's Political Instrumentalization of Religion via Diyanet

The Turkish Republic continued the Ottoman state strategy, in which the sultan's authority subordinated the clergy's authority. Thus, Turkish secularism was fused with Islamic identity and Islam was institutionalized in a government agency, the Diyanet, which has been a constitutional organ of the state (Yilmaz 2021; Yilmaz and Albayrak 2022). The Diyanet has been assigned a significant prominent place and role in the Turkish in the constitutions of 1924, 1961 and 1982. The current 1982 constitution states in Article 136

that Diyanet functions in accordance with the principle of secularism and works towards strengthening national solidarity and unity and promoting Turkish identity (see in detail Gözaydın 2009).

All imams and preachers in Turkey are employed by the Diyanet and it is illegal to serve as an imam or preacher if not employed by the state. Thus, through its employees the state controls all mosques in the country. Attending Friday prayers is obligatory in Islam for adult males. In Turkey, more than half of the adult males regularly attend these prayers. During these prayers, imams deliver a sermon in Turkish that lasts about 10–15 min. Friday sermons are centrally written in the Diyanet headquarters, and they are then read verbatim in Diyanet-controlled mosques in Turkey in addition to the many thousands abroad where Turks live. Imams are not allowed to write and preach their own Friday sermons and they have to read verbatim the texts written in the Diyanet headquarters. Otherwise, they will risk losing their jobs. In this way, the state aims to control Islam and propagates its own version. The state does not allow civil groups to provide religious service; only the Diyanet could carry out this duty, and even today, the texts of all Friday sermons are written by the upper echelons of the Diyanet; individual imams are still not trusted with this job (Yilmaz 2021). These sermons are always posted on the Diyanet's official website. Every year, the Diyanet produces 54 sermon texts: 52 weekly sermons plus two religious festival sermons (Yilmaz and Albayrak 2021).

The main duty of the Diyanet has been 'to control and to shape Islam in accordance with the needs of the secular nation-state to the effect of creating a secular, modern, national, and official Islam' (Yilmaz 2005, p. 389). The vast literature on the Diyanet consistently show that the instrumentalization of the Diyanet by the state aimed to control religion and spread state ideology to the masses (Gözaydın 2008, p. 221). Diyanet propagated a particular interpretation of Islam (Sunni Islam) to create a new Islamic identity that placed the 'sacred' interests of the nation and the state above all other interests and at the expense of minorities (Yilmaz and Albayrak 2021). The intention of the Diyanet's Friday sermons was to cement the sacredness of the state and mass obedience of state, producing modern Muslims raised on a Turkified version of Islam. Friday sermons constantly warned the congregation against the enemies of the nation and tried to inculcate militarist values in them. The Diyanet's audience was constantly told that 'military service is a form of worship, and martyrdom is the highest status which secures entrance to heaven' (Gürpınar and Kenar 2016, p. 67). Militarist triumphs of the nation were persistently commemorated in the Diyanet sermons. Especially four them were never skipped: 'the conquest of Istanbul by Mehmed II in 1453, the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915, the Battle of Dumlupınar in the Turkish War of Independence in 1922 and the Battle of Manzikert in 1071' (Gürpınar and Kenar 2016, p. 69).

Both the 1960 and 1980 coups strengthened Diyanet and enlarged its sphere of influence, assigning new roles to it (Öztürk 2016). Its budget was significantly increased after these coups (Fabbe 2019, pp. 175–76). After the 1980 military coup, the Kemalists decided to use Islam as a barrier against the Communist and Socialist threats. As a result, its staff numbers increased tremendously after the 1980 coup; in 1979, it had 50,765 employees, but by 1989, this number had increased to 84,712. The Diyanet's share of the general budget rose from 0.69 percent in 1981 to 1.23 percent in 1990 (Tarhanlı 1993, pp. 138, 123). After the AKP came to power, the Diyanet's budget share would rise again (Mutluer 2018).

The academic literature on the Diyanet is in consensus on the fact that the Diyanet was hyper-politicised with the appointment of Mehmet Görmez as its director in November 2010. With Ali Erbaş, the institution handed over both its body and soul to the AKP government. (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Albayrak 2020; Ongur 2020).

With the AKP's recent authoritarianisation since the Gezi events of 2013, the Diyanet has completely lost its relative autonomy and has become a propaganda machine of the AKP that has returned to its radical Islamist roots (Erturk 2022). This can be observed very well in the Diyanet's increasing Islamism and Islamist populism in parallel with the AKP (Akalin 2016; Yilmaz 2018).

After the Gezi protests and 7–25 December corruption investigations in 2013, the Diyanet ended any pretence that it held apolitical, non-partisan status. Diyanet's already instrumentalized and political status (Yilmaz 2005) was further developed, and the body moved from being a religious state apparatus to much more a political organization controlled by AKP and Erdoğan. As the AKP consolidated its hegemony of the Turkish political sphere, Diyanet turned increasingly into an instrument which Erdoğanists used 'to transmit and instil the new values of the so-called "new Turkey" to "the society"' (Mutluer 2018, pp. 7–8). For example, the interventions of Diyanet were not solely to control and regulate religion. Diyanet has been used to suppress dissent against the AKP and Erdoğan (Yilmaz and Erturk 2021a; Yilmaz and Erturk 2021b), help AKP to shift blames on others, allow sermons as propaganda tools to create new images in public eyes, more correctly produced regime-controlled images to mitigate countless negative events. In fact, by emotionalising these events in the sermons, Diyanet produces virtual criminals by clearing the government that should take responsibility for these unfavourable developments.

3. Methodology

The paper subjects the Diyanet sermons to qualitative content and discourse analysis. Friday sermons are centrally written in the Diyanet headquarters, and they are then read verbatim in Diyanet-controlled mosques, which number around 90,000 in Turkey in addition to the many thousands abroad where Turks live, such as Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. These sermons are always posted on the Diyanet's official website. Every year, the Diyanet produces 54 sermon texts: 52 weekly sermons, plus 2 religious festive sermons.

The analysis we offer in this paper is based on these textual resources. We have gathered these Diyanet sermons from its official website. All sermons between January 2010 and July 2022 have been analysed. They have been uploaded to NVivo 12 software for textual, content, and thematic analyses. When referring to a specific sermon, the paper will only mention its date.

4. The Tests, Trials, and Tribulations of the Faithful

The political events of present are shown as a part of a never-ending war on the Anatolian people. A host of enemy forces at home and abroad are in direct confrontation with 'the people' as they challenge the nationhood and faith of 'the people.' According to these conspiracies this conflict is costly which has led the country to lose many lives, its economic prosperity, isolation of the international front, and rise in instability. In such conditions, the coercive measures taken the government are deemed as self-defence against the *fitna* (test and sedition). The sermons have not only explained the current social and political realities of the time as a consequence of human actions alone but also the congregations have repeatedly warned of the divine nature of hardships as well. These 'tests', humanmade or celestial, are used to communicate with 'the people.' various challenges and current circumstances of the nation.

The loose nature of the concepts of terms such as *fitna*, 'tests', 'evil', 'crises, sedition', etc., combined with religious connotation has indoctrinated negative emotions into the public. The constant feeling of being attacked, surrounded by hardship, and need to sacrifice has led many to see it as part and parcel of their lives with a noble cause. As Diyanet would put it, 'the pure' are always tested, and these events may or may not led to a jubilant outcome for them. However, the rewards of the hereafter have kept the motivations and hopes of many alive. Such sentiments have been preceptive to the non-rational deliberations presented by the mosque and state. The belief in various social conspiracies is rooted in the underlying intergroup conflict of 'the people' and 'the others' (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). The general self-image as the ostracized or victims of 'dark' activities 'the people' have made them prone to believe in words coming from the religious *dâis*.

The 'Pure people' discourse is a very important issue and should not be missed. As it is known, when Trump was elected president, he received one of the most serious votes from the Catholic supporters. It is a fact that almost 64% of Catholic citizens voted for him as a result of Trump's pragmatic, deceptive, obscure, and highly divisive rhetoric and policies. Interestingly, Catholics support Trump together with Evangelical Christians (Lamb 2021), who are not likely to meet under the same roof; this is very similar to the fact that the Diyanet–AKP mechanism melted the once arch-rival nationalists and Islamists in a pot with the new discourse they developed. With this new formation, the Islamist–nationalist type has been created from these two groups (nationalists and Islamists), who are in fact constantly opposed to each other. It is this hybrid of AKP–MHP supporters that the Diyanet talks about when it comes to pure or chosen people of Turkey.

This 'pure people are always tested' mentality has a productive side in the understanding of victimhood (Yilmaz 2017) maintained in partnership with AKP and Diyanet and the process of politics of blame and passing the buck. As pointed out above, it is obvious that the new type of AKP–Diyanet partnership (pure people) will deal not only with the enemies of Islam, but also with the enemies of Turks and Turkey. For this reason, not only the number of enemies is increased, but the number and types of hostilities is also increased daily. The most natural result of this generative way of blame game is that the number of groups to be blamed against pure people (it is not very important at this stage whether these groups are material or virtual) is also increasing. This fertile position is first to strengthen the shared sense of victimhood of AKP supporters through religious sermons, and then to make Turkey, led by Erdogan, the hope of all victims with the same sermons. In other words, sermons try to keep them alive by presenting poison and antidote together to the mosque community. Two sermons given one after the other (11 July 2014 'Being the friend of those who are lonely/Kimsesizlerin kimsesi olmak' and 18 July 2014 'Being the hope of the oppressed') give very important clues in this context. In these sermons, in which the concept of *fitna* is handled vividly, broad topics from the internal and external enemy to the issue of Syrian refugees, Palestine's situation, and the Ummah are discussed. However, it is worth emphasizing that a country that is a permanent victim and its citizens are presented as the only sanctuary for all victims of the world. This kind of propaganda can only be carried out through sermons by blaming others for all negative developments at regular and periodic intervals in mosques.

One of the key concepts that Diyanet uses in legitimizing regime policies is the concept of *imtihān*, which means test or trial. According to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* published by the Diyanet Foundation, the test is defined as "the material and spiritual distress, trouble, burden God gives to try people" (Uludağ 1992). According to this definition, the test has two elements. The first element is the cause or source of these tests, which are both divine and human made in nature. A natural disaster such an earthquake would be a test from Allah, whereas the *fitna* is more human in nature created by a host of 'otherized' groups which are non-divine. These tests can lead the 'faithful' to face a host of material and spiritual distresses, troubles, and burdens. However, being 'the righteous' followers, the people will eventually triumph over these. One sermon from 2020 warns the congregation of these tests and gives them hope that the endurance will only lead them to pass these tests:

"Let us not forget that *insha Allah* (God willing) we will come out victorious from this challenging test and be the addressees of rewards as long as we observe the measures taken" (20 November 2020).

Through the sermons the faithful are constantly reminded to show preservation under these circumstances, as one can fail these tests too:

"Allah will test us with both the existence and lack of something and that every test and trial can be overcome with effort and patience. Let us never give up our hopes that Allah (swt) shall help us and be merciful to us" (3 July 2020).

It is decisive in terms of whether the test they will take will be passed successfully. In this context, Diyanet describes the crises caused by terrorist acts, economic troubles, security crises and foreign policy fiasco in the country as a 'test', and, in fact, gives the message that the source and reason of these crises should not be questioned. It is suggested to be patient with the community against the material and moral distress, troubles, and burden caused by the test, to sacrifice life and property, to fight by protecting unity and solidarity, and it is implied that the test will only result in success if followed in this way.

5. Blame Avoidance in the Increased Number of Deaths in War and Terrorist Attacks

It is known that the AKP has a dynamic team of friends and enemies in line with its changing domestic and foreign policy. It is much easier to follow the daily and pragmatic AKP politics from weekly sermons rather than daily political newspapers in Turkey. Frequent changes in the country, where being friend or foe is a matter of time, has also forced the Diyanet to take new positions or adapt any changes quickly. The most natural result of this is the compulsory change of the subjects of the blame game. Taking significant steps in the name of Kurdish initiative in the country, AKP excluded it by blaming not only the gains it made but also half of the country when it switched from version AKP 1.0 (democrat) to 2.0 and 3.0 (authoritarian). For example, especially after 2015, the year the AKP government lost its chance to take power alone in the 7 June 2015 general elections, against this backdrop, the AKP regime suspended the peace process regarding the solution of the Kurdish issue. This led resume of the clashes with the PKK while ISIS's suicide attacks were shaking the country deeply. These events explained to the congregation in a sermon on 15 September 2015 as follows "today we are going through a difficult process and a heavy test". In another sermons on 15 January 2016, regarding the incidents of violence and terrorism the sermons reads "Today, as a country, as a nation, we are going through the heaviest tests". In another sermon dated 18 March 2016, the sermons states, "... Just as there are tests of people as individuals, nations also have tests. As a nation, we have passed through difficult tests in almost every period of history". In the sermon at the beginning of 2016, it is said:

"The fire of strife is fuelled with all its violence every day by those who mean our unity and want to set us against each other. Many of our brothers and innocent people die with the treacherous attacks caused by sedition and the limitless savagery of those who have lost their conscience and mercy. An understanding that legitimizes all kinds of violence and murder with the bigotry of ignorance that is guided by some certain circles, stabs our hearts like a dagger day by day" (15 January 2016).

Here, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) is described with the words 'those who want to turn us against each other', and the phrase 'certain circles' points to an uncertain enemy behind the PKK. In addition, these virtual enemies have the potential to gain a real identity in the future sermons that Diyanet will carry out in close partnership with the government. The power of persuasion tactic used by Diyanet in sermons also opens a wider space for potential new enemies. Similarly, by focusing on national unity to distract ordinary mosque community from understanding of what happened, Diyanet says in another sermon:

"We have never given an opportunity to those who want to destroy our brotherhood, unity, solidarity, and strength with strife and hostility. It is our duty to all of us in these difficult days, when our heart-breaking events are experienced, once again, it is to hold each other tightly; not to allow games played on our religion, our beautiful country, our nation, and our brotherhood" (21 August 2015).

Disturbingly, Diyanet has used religious terminology to legitimize the worst aspects of AKP rule, essentially bringing the party's authoritarianism under the banner of Islam. In this context, a sermon dated July 2015 and titled 'Today is the day of unity and amity' described the acts of terrorism that took place in Turkey as an extension of a global war, and therefore inevitable. The sermon reads as follows:

“Our country is also affected from time to time by a great war on a global scale, which is staged to stir a great *fitna*. [People of] Our nation who have been brothers, neighbours, and lived side by side hand in hand for centuries, is wanted to be turned against each other. On the other hand, our duty is to never give an opportunity to those who try to sow seeds of *fitna* and sedition in our beautiful country. It is always to be prudent against this great and cruel game. It is to act with precision. The day is the day to bond with each other” (24 July 2015).

During this period, the spiral of violence, which Turkey has fallen into, was explained to the congregation with similar rhetoric. Terms such as “game”, “tricks” and “trap” have been added to the concept of *fitna* and the perception of international trap against the country and cooperation against Turkish nation in particular and Muslim ummah in general has been strengthened. Additionally, with the terms such as “centres of evil” and “[foreign] forces”, the perpetrator(s) have been attributed a more mysterious and ambiguous character. This attributed ‘ambiguity’ to the perpetrator(s) has also performed many different functions. The most practical utility of this mentioned ‘ambiguity’ has been its power to easily relate any existing or potential opposition, any sort of negativity or socio-economic deterioration to a ‘network of evils’ and avoid responsibility in the eye of the public in a sermon in 2015.

A similar discourse was used in a sermon after one year, and attention was drawn to the size of the threat Turkey faces. The congregation is urged to keep the unity and solidarity against this emerging threat with the following words:

“Let’s never forget that terrorism and its evil forces that use it all mean our country, our nation, our sacred and our future. As long as we should be alert to all kinds of mischief, deceit, trap and game. Let’s stay away from any kind of discourse and action that will harm the love and brotherhood between us. Otherwise, let’s never forget that we will be a tool for terror and the dark centres that direct it” (18 March 2016).

In explaining causes of violence and acts of terrorism Turkey has been exposed to, addressing the congregation, the sermon emphasised that Turkey has an exceptional place and position in the world politics, and with this it gives hope to all of the victims and the oppressed in this respect. It is also stressed that, because of this, Turkey has been the target of “centres of evil” and exposed to their attacks. In this regard, what we observe as the role of Diyanet in contemporary Turkey is emphasizing and exaggerating an enemy, which might be real or imagined, and directly or indirectly referring to the current regime as the safe haven against this enemy as an act of survival. In this regard, the sermon in 2015 highlights the following:

“There are those who attempt to intimidate, harass, divide and destroy this beloved nation with their dark tricks. There are evil forces who exploit our children for their treacherous ambitions, kidnap our daughters from their mothers and take our sons off their fathers. There are those who try to defeat religion and put grudge and hatred on their tongue and sow hate seeds in the land of peace” (11 September 2015).

With these words, as well as acts of terrorism and violence, the refugee crisis too is linked to/accused of ambiguous external enemies/forces. The magic word here is Diyanet’s frequent manipulation of these ‘evil forces’. This definition of an ambiguous virtual enemy by the Diyanet gives the mosque community the opportunity to shift blame in a wide range. If the mosque community is coming from a hardcore nationalist background, they understand it as Kurds in Turkey; if it is patriotic, it is understood as foreign powers; if it is Islamist, it is associated with America or Israel; if it is a typical fanatic, it associates this enemy with the LGBTQ community.

There is another point that should not be overlooked in the short sermon passage above. Diyanet put further blame on ‘others’ by dramatizing the perception of threat against the Islamic world. The extension of a local problem to the Ummah is one of the original findings of the AKP-Diyanet partnership. While the circle about the people to be

taken on the problems is expanded, in parallel, the region where the problem is experienced (here Turkey actually) is generalized and turned into a common problem. Which of the shifting blame methods exactly corresponds to such an approach is a matter of debate? However, this practice, which is used skillfully and frequently by the Diyanet, turns the source of the problem (Turkey) into a monstrosity of presenting it as the only solution and hope. The struggle against these dark forces, on the other hand, is presented as protecting the honour of the (country and ummah) and mobilizes all religious and national feelings in the mosque community. In other words, AKP is the guard of honour of Turkey and the Ummah; if anything happens to it, the honour of the country and Muslims will be damaged. A sermon was given in which the heroic honour guard AKP is placed against all enemies and implicitly referred to the clash of civilization paradigm while defining the extent of the assaults with the following sentences:

“What happened in the Islamic geography today clearly shows the point reached by those who are trying to destroy our women, children, lives, values, history, culture and civilization. In Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, the unity of the ummah, the honour of the nation, the respect of the country are trampled” (11 September 2015).

When Turkish armed forces, with the aim of creating a safe zone, entered to the north of Syria on 9 October 2019, Diyanet argued:

“Those who want to open fire pits in all corners of the Islamic geography have played off brothers against each other with weapons of sedition, terror and betrayal. Our existence and survival, our independence and our future have been targeted with various tricks and deceptions, plans and traps” (11 October 2019).

This rather intense masculine discourse seems to be a product of the mind-set that connects the troubles s/he experienced in adolescence and adulthood with a Freudian mentality to his/her family, childhood, upbringing, and environment. Similar statements can be found in the sermon read after the death of more than 30 TAF members, who were killed in an attack perpetrated by the Syrian army during the TAF’s Idlib operation:

“As a nation, we are going through great troubles today, as we were yesterday, and we are giving heavy tests. As in the Dardanelles and the War of Independence, today we are fighting a relentless struggle against the forces whose conscience is atrophied, who have lost their mercy and humanity, and those who want to erase us from the stage of history. Again, as it was yesterday, we will not let down our flag with every member of our nation, men, women, young and old, and we will not let our prayers fall, we will not tramp our country” (28 February 2020).

The loss of TAF soldiers is an act of glory rather than a tragic event because it has been the government’s initiative to defend the ‘pure homeland’ and the faith of ‘the pure.’ The AKP government is provided with a ‘free pass’ to carry out its authoritarian policies in the domestic realm as well as the international arena. Just like Momus, the primordial Greek god of blame, the Diyanet spun conspiracies that blend Islamism, antilogism, and pre-existing fears of ‘the others’ to ensure the constant sift of blame to the AKP’s ‘otherized.’ Left in anxiety, identifying as sufferers and prey of uncontrollable circumstance, the congregations seek a defender/leader of ‘the faithful’ and ‘historically oppressed’ rather than question the actual source of the socio-economic-political challenges. The concept of ‘trial/test’ used in the sermons is also a useful concept in the legitimization of military operations in Syria. In a sermon published on 26 January 2018 at the beginning of Operation Olive Branch: “In recent years, we are going through the circle of testing again, both as an Islamic ummah and as a nation” (26 January 2018).

We would like to end this section with a striking example of how the Diyanet is an apologetical carrier of AKP’s hybrid nationalist–Islamist ideology. Diyanet delivered a sermon about a mafia leader, who was responsible for doing the dirty work of the current government for a long time, prepared in response to the revelations he delivered after he parted ways with the government. As often occurs, Diyanet came to the rescue of the AKP

government and used its influence to deflect criticism of the government, and downplay the allegation made against them. The directorate's role here was crucial, because the mafia boss's allegations had the potential to cause the AKP great damage. Diyanet, in the sermon titled 'Almighty God is the assistant of the believers' dated 28 May 2021, suggested that as long as 'we' are in unity, separation or sedition cannot enter 'us'. The sermon suggests that if all countries of the world attack us, they will not be able to divide our homeland, they will not be able to lower our flag, and they will not be able to stop the call for prayer (*adhan-ı Muhammedi*). The sermon, which suggests any kind of separation that would disrupt unity should be avoided, excites the feelings of the mosque community with religious-national populist rhetoric and various historical heroic anecdotes, and then tells them to support the government in the name of unity. Clearly, in this sermon we witness Diyanet responding to a mafia leader and priming its audience to respond to any new allegations against the AKP by threat.

6. Blame Avoidance in Natural Disaster and Occupational Accidents as a Test

Frequently used blame-shifting manoeuvres of the Diyanet, in terms of hiding or keeping the government's deficits, conceal the astronomical numbers of deaths due to domestic violence (specifically against women) and occupational accidents; the lack of adequate precautions in coal mines during the AKP period are 'stonewalled' fact-finding efforts, employing the jargon of force majeure, and redefining the issues by mixing them with various religious sentimentalities. According to official figures in Soma, 301 miners lost their lives in one day. A Friday sermon read after the Soma mine incident told the congregation that this incident was indeed part of the cycle of life, and they should be patient and pray to God:

"The world is a mortal world. Death somehow comes and finds man. Death has no age. [...] At such times we should take refuge in patience and prayer" (16 May 2015).

Sermons also remind the congregation that this is a test from God. Diyanet redefines and emotionalises the event, but does not actually talk about who is responsible for such a calamity.

The propaganda of the AKP government in the sermons and other publications of the Diyanet, to put it in religious terminology, is a flawless presentation that accepts no mistakes, does not make mistakes, and is always supported by God, similar to the prophets' main feature of *'iṣmat* (immune from sin). Just like the prophets, someone can do wrong to them, but they themselves never do wrong. In other words, the prophets can be victims but not make a mistake. Two important examples of sermons about the Diyanet not missing any opportunity in favour of the AKP government in the context of blame game are those given recently on 6 August 2021 and 12 August 2021. As it is known, the Diyanet is always the first institution to come to the aid of the AKP government, which remained insensitive to the wounds, loss of property and life caused by countless fires in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions of Turkey. Ali Erbaş, a current director, in his sermon at the city of Muğla at Şeyh/Sheikh Mosque, reminded that the difficulties will be overcome together and called the community to unity and solidarity and to stand by the Turkish state. Erbaş did not say a word about how the victims were brought to this hopeless situation, about the criticism of a state that prevented even the civilian from attempts to help to put out the fire, let alone the state aid, against hundreds of fires. Even he never signalled the helplessness of the state and did not bring up the agenda for those who did not have any preparations for extinguishing the fire. Indeed, using the perception of collective victimhood in a professional way, he delivered the Friday sermon on 6 August 2021 with a banal approach to the congregation, saying indirectly that, in fact, everyone is a victim, and that we need to support each other and stand next to our state. In conclusion, there is no need to blame anyone because there is no one to be blamed, in accordance with the director of Diyanet.

In many regions of the Black Sea, people suffered from floods caused by excessive rainfall. There were people who lost their lives, property, and homes. Especially in the

Bozkurt district of Kastamonu, the whole town almost disappeared due to the wrong settlement (by allowing the construction of buildings on the stream bed) and uncontrolled HES construction (facilities to generate electricity from the rivers) by the government and AKP municipalities. Unofficial figures say more than 500 people died. Erbaş, again, chose to seize the opportunity, and travelled to the region to give a Friday sermon at the Yeni (New) Mosque in Bozkurt district on 12 August 2021. Interestingly, Erbaş delivered a sermon that resembled Erdogan's speech when hundreds of miners died under the ground in the Soma mine in 2014. In a theological sense, he takes refuge in the issue of fate/destiny (*qadar*) and reminds the victims that grievance comes from Allah, and that they should be patient, persevere, consent, and submit to the will of God. He often emphasized with the nationalistic religious sauce that everything would be overcome with the determination of the state and the determination of the nation with the discourse of a beautiful country and a saintly nation (*aziz millet*). When the sermon is listened to carefully from the beginning to the end, the only thing that can be seen is the depersonalization of the residents of the region and ignoring of the real victims with the approach that the holy nation is always with all the victims in the world. Interestingly, Erbaş also wants the victims to stand by the state by saying 'Let's not leave the beautiful homeland (Turkey), the last refuge of Islam, under the invasion of the enemy'. It is really difficult to find such a professional sermon that distracts attention from the main issue (disaster).

Diyanet, as a state apparatus, tries to make large masses adopt this discourse of shifting the blame in almost every opportunity (no matter whether this is a disaster or happy event).

7. Sugar-Coating Turkey's Economic Crisis in the Diyanet's Sermons

Diyanet sermons have become instrumental in explaining the economic problems that the country has been struggling with, particularly since 2015, from a religious perspective. The best example of this situation is seen in 2018 when Diyanet conveyed the AKP government's discourse inspired by conspiracy theories about the economic problems facing the country in a sermon. Diyanet has joined the AKP in producing various conspiracy theories blaming external powers for downturn in the economy, which led to high unemployment, rising inflation and depreciation of Turkish Lira. This became particularly apparent during the currency crisis in 2018, which was instigated by the rising tension in U.S.–Turkish relations due to the jailing of an American priest. As the Turkish Lira's sudden plummet against the dollar added to Turkey's existing economic troubles and disturbed even the religious conservative base of the AKP, Diyanet stepped in to bestow the responsibility on anyone but the AKP and rescue the party through strong Islamic rhetoric. A Friday sermon delivered by Diyanet on 24 August 2018 suggested that:

"Our noble nation will resist the traitors today thanks to their astute and with the help of Allah just as they brought the powerful nations of the world (*yedi düvel*) on their knees in the past despite the gravest conditions. Our noble nation will fearlessly stand against any kind of economic and technological attacks today, just as they shielded their chests against the July 15 invasion attempt" (24 August 2018).

When the AKP accused the supermarkets and wholesalers of hiking the prices unreasonably, Diyanet gave the following statement in a Friday sermon delivered on 31 August 2018:

"Our religion forbids laziness, irresponsibility and any sort of forgery aiming at making money without doing any work. It certainly does not approve any means of unjust earnings including bribe, usury, stockpiling, black-marketing and forgery in shopping, which totally disregard society's moral values and disturb peace and undermine trust" (31 August 2018).

The Diyanet also suggested congregations be measured in their spending and avoid waste and showing off. After some citizens committed suicide due to economic strain and unemployment in 2019, Diyanet delivered another sermon titled "Believers' attitude in the

face of calamities" in which the congregation was reminded that "The difficulties, ordeal, grief, material and moral challenges we have been experiencing in our lives are inevitable (*mukadder*). Because the earth is a place where we are tested" (22 November 2019). Critics say that as an institution with a hefty budget the Diyanet wastes Turkish citizens' tax money recklessly, with the body involved in the purchase of luxury cars, construction of a training complex in Bodrum, a famous resort town in Turkey, and building and funding many mosques abroad, while turning a blind eye to corruption and the luxurious spending of the government. However, the body, these critics charge, advises ordinary citizens to lower their spending, to be content with what they have, and to not complain about economic hardships.

As the impact of the economic crisis increased, the frequency of sermons with similar content also grew. Diyanet dedicated the content of Friday sermons delivered on 27 March 2020 and 26 February 2021 to advising the congregation on how to behave in the face of challenges and economic troubles. The latter sermon, for example, suggested that: "We live through many troubles, grief and calamities throughout our lives. Notwithstanding their results each trouble is part of the test in this world". The sermon also recited a verse from Quran: "We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives and crops. Give good news to those who endure with fortitude" (26 February 2021).

Curiously, when Diyanet's conservative audience began to question AKP economic and foreign policy. The directorate sought to persuade its audience to trust the government and explained that the people should sacrifice for 'freedom and independence', and that the economic crisis the country was going through was merely the price to be paid for "freedom and independence". This theme resurfaced in July 2020, when Turkey was in the grasp of the first COVID-19 wave due to AKP's early denial of the virus and later mismanagement. It is also a common phenomenon that when they cannot find anyone to blame or are stuck both politically and economically, AKP and Diyanet try to shed the blame by taking refuge in some intangible themes. Here, they clearly redefine the issue by prioritizing the notions of freedom and independent.

Clearly, the advice of Diyanet within the framework of religion is designed to turn economic hardship in the country into a pure test from God, but also to encourage people to believe that, should they pass this test, they will be rewarded. The sermons and related fatwas thus describe these troubles to the people as a test from God, rather than the result of the poor economic and monetary policies of the AKP government.

8. Conclusions

Blame avoidance has been studied by social scientists from different perspectives. According to this study, when they are faced with challenges and need to escape their failures, politicians instrumentalise blame-avoiding strategies known as 'agenda limitation', 'redefine the issue', 'throw good money after bad', 'pass the buck', 'find a scapegoat', 'jump on the bandwagon', 'circle the wagons', and 'stop me before I kill again' (Weaver 1986).

The paper has shown that when tragic deaths, terrible destructions caused by either wars or deathly accidents at workplace, natural disasters (fires and floods), and economic crises occurred, the state-controlled Diyanet has employed blame-avoidance strategies by using religion to help the authoritarian populist incumbent AKP to evade these failures.

These sermons, the article shows, are designed to alleviate the burden on the AKP government by tying those responsible for all kinds of negativities in the country to either God or to outside powers, inside traitors, or imaginary actors. Sometimes, all three groups are united in a grand conspiracy theory involving 'dark forces' which hate Turkey and Islam. Since the Gezi protests in mid-2013, and the 17–25 December corruption case, the West has been framed as Turkey's 'external enemy', as well as invoking conspiracy theories which blamed the 'interest rate lobby' (a global Jewish conspiracy), leaders in the Islamic world who outsourced to the west, and every kind of opposition inside the country, such as the Gülen movement, Kurdish people, Alevis, secularists, etc., who were attempting to destroy country.

Friday sermons have constantly warned and cautioned the congregation of a variety of spiritual tests and worldly hardships. This has intensified especially after the AKP's authoritarian turn in 2013 as a response to the peaceful Gezi protests and the 17–25 December corruption investigations. This has helped the AKP in its efforts to demonise the opponents which supposedly pose threats to the faith and the country's security. At the same time if AKP fails to uplift the economy or its policies lead to great losses of life, the sermons also term these happenings as tests. The arbitrary nature of these 'tests' has made them flexible in terms of interpretation making conspiracies fit in easily with them.

Explaining away the deteriorating political and economic situation in Turkey with the concept of sedition (*fitna*), test/trial (*imtihān*) by God, which is very frequently used in sermons, Diyanet indoctrinates the public by consciously ascribing a religious meaning to every crisis. In the sermons, Turkey is said to be under constant attack.

Diyanet describes every kind of crisis caused by terrorist acts, economic troubles, security crises and foreign policy fiasco in the country as a 'test', and informs its audience that the source of these crises should not be questioned. Similarly, in order to avoid taking responsibility for the Government's actions, Diyanet constantly blames others by using almost every single strategy developed in identifying the blame games.

The AKP's use of religion to avoid blame is a text-book case of how both a religious institution and religious discourse can be used to help the incumbent avoid responsibility. When the AKP was not able to to succeed a blame-generating issue off the agenda, the Diyanet tried to help the AKP by attempting to 'reshape and redefine the issue' (Weaver 1986). Here, by arguing that humans do not have agency, all disasters are act of God and these are all tests by God who is examining people if they are eligible for heaven. This also aims to 'diffuse or obfuscate losses' (Weaver 1986). With this strategy, what the Diyanet also does is actually 'passing the buck' (Weaver 1986), first, to God as the maker of all things including disasters and economic problems, and second, to the citizens since this is their test to succeed, and third, to internal and external conspiratorial powers. Here, even Weaver's fifth strategy is at work: 'finding a scapegoat' (Weaver 1986), the scapegoat being either God or internal/external enemies. Religious explanation is also fits to the sixth strategy, 'jumping on the wagon' (Weaver 1986) which is avoiding blame if there is any other working popular alternative. So, through Diyanet's sermons the AKP's narrative of shifting the blame to God, citizens and conspiratorial enemies would be achieved if this religious explanation is popularized.

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Note

¹ According to the Qur'an, both of them (Adam and Eve) admitted their mistake and repented (See 20:120–121).

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