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Religion as an Authoritarian Securitization and Violence Legitimation Tool: The Erdoğanist Diyanet's Framing of a Religious Movement as an Existential Threat

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Abstract: The paper shows how a state controlled religious institution used religion, fear, trauma, insecurity, grievances, and conspiracy theories to dehumanise a religious community, and presented it as an existential threat to the nation, the global community of believers and religion, by investigating the case of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs' (the Diyanet) securitizing role under the authoritarian Islamist Erdoğanist rule. The article provides an empirically rich analysis of the Diyanet's construction of the Gülen Movement (GM) as a source of sedition (*fitne*), corruption (*fesat*), mischief, a social disease, and finally, as a traitor and puppet of the West that constantly conspires against Turkey, Islam, and the Muslim World. By securitising the movement, the Diyanet legitimised the authoritarian and violent actions of the Erdoğanist regime against the alleged movement members.

Keywords: securitization; Islamism; Erdoğanism; Diyanet; Turkey; authoritarianism; violence; Gülen Movement



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1. Introduction

Since its foundation, the Turkish Republic's ruling elite have embarked on a journey of 'self-construction' by constructing as a 'threat' everything they believed was opposed to the 'right thing for Turkey'. This journey is defined by an ontological insecurity, where a self-construction of the secular Sunni Turkish identity is defined by the fear and the anxiety of Sevres Syndrome—the belief that the West has torn Turkey and former Ottoman lands apart. This is particularly interesting because the Kemalists, the dominant regime of the last century, defined the foundation of the Turkish republic as a better alternative to the Ottoman Empire while still claiming the Sevres Agreement, which ended the empire, tore Turkish lands apart. Other fears and anxieties have also been associated with Sevres Syndrome, such as the fear (and threat) of Christianization and division.¹ To these fears, Alevis, Kurds, and conservative Muslims have been added as possible collaborators that the parties of the Sevres Agreement (the European powers) can use to further weaken Turkey.

Conspiracy theories, victimhood, and resentment of the West have all been used to develop this self-construction. However, these concepts have been only loosely defined. While the Kemalist regime constructed the desirable citizen as a secular, non-practicing, Sunni Muslim Turk who idolized Atatürk and the Kemalist values, the Erdoğan regime's desirable citizen is a practicing, Islamist, Sunni Turk, who idolizes Erdoğan and anything that he says, rather than his values, which are constantly changing (see in detail [Yilmaz 2021a](#)). Throughout this self-construction, the state has always had actors that are designated as 'threats' to the security and wellbeing of Turkey and the Turkish nation. Some were the 'usual suspects', such as the Kurds and the Alevis, and others were temporary,

such as Islamists, Kemalists, nationalists, and communists, among others. In all these ‘securitization games’, certain institutions have played crucial role. Among them, the most important have been the Ministry of Education, which decides on the curriculum, books, and the state propaganda that is propagated in schools, and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which is the governing body of all religious affairs in Turkey.

The Diyanet has the official monopoly over Islam in Turkey and even abroad, among the Turkish Diaspora. It controls all mosques (about 90,000) and employs all imams, preachers, muftis (the fatwa givers), and Qur’an literacy course teachers at mosques (in total, about 140,000 staff). Other than through mosques, the Diyanet reaches people through its TV channel, website, social media accounts, periodicals, books, pamphlets, reports, brochures, leaflets and posters (Yilmaz 2005).

Since its foundation, the Diyanet has served as one of the most important securitizing actors in Turkish politics as the Diyanet has a wide audience, with the overwhelming majority of people in Turkey interacting with the Diyanet, whether through regular prayers in mosques for practicing Muslims, through Friday prayers and sermons for those somewhat less-practicing Muslims, and through religious and national feasts, funerals, and these latent practices for non-practicing Muslims. The Diyanet has always been controlled by the state. The Diyanet does not only use the sermons for propaganda purposes. The fatwa hotline, publications, websites, and other tools have been used to legitimize its power and centralize the ‘interpretation of Islam’ into one institution. These fatwas have centralized the power of interpretation, have designated the West, missionaries, and other religious communities as threats or potential threats, and have also legitimized the power of the statesmen (Yilmaz 2005).

Throughout this saga, with existence of Islam and the Turkish Republic intrinsically linked, whoever is designated as an ‘other’ will be framed as a threat, or a possible threat, to this existence. This article focused on the role that the Diyanet has played as a securitizing actor under the ‘Erdoğanist’ (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018) rule. The Diyanet’s part has been crucial, serving as a platform for securitizing actors to propagate the state agenda to the wider public. Fear, trauma, nostalgia, ontological insecurity, grievances, and conspiracy theories have been widely used in these securitization narratives. Thus, the article first summarises securitization theory and its application in Turkey. Then, the article discusses how the Gülen Movement (GM) has been constructed as an existential security problem by the AKP and how the Diyanet has helped the AKP in this endeavour. The article then proceeds to analyse the empirical material to show how the Diyanet has framed the GM as a source of sedition and mischief, as a social disease and, finally, as a traitor and puppet of the West that constantly conspires against Turkey, Islam, and the Muslim World. Then, the paper concludes.

2. Securitization Theory

Securitization theory argues that security must be understood as a speech act (Austin 1962, p. 63), not only a sociological and explanatory tenet (Waever 1995; Buzan et al. 1998; Buzan and Waever 2003). According to the theory, security is not an objective condition but the outcome of a process: the social construction of security issues. An issue becomes securitized as a result of the speech acts of influential actors, such as the state and political elite. These actors present the issue as an existential threat, which may or may not correspond to a real security situation. In other words, because of securitizing speech acts, an issue is transformed into a problem of security after being constructed, framed and presented as an existential threat (Buzan et al. 1998; Buzan and Hansen 2009).

Political elites use securitization to justify and legitimate extraordinary measures. They argue that without coercive, repressive and extraordinary measures to deal with the threat(s), the referent object cannot be saved. In other words, securitization requires ‘the state of exception’ (Agamben 2005) that legitimates extraordinary measures beyond the rule of law. By uttering the word ‘security’, the political elite claim a special right to use ‘whatever means necessary’ to prevent the existential threat to the community,

nation or the state that are the referent objects (Waever 1995, p. 55; Buzan et al. 1998, p. 26). Securitization equates the survival of the referent object to the survival of the wider community, the people, nation, or even humanity. Traditionally, the state and the nation have been constructed as referent objects (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 26), but they are not the only possible referent objects. Securitization does not only expand the realm of possible threats but also extends the actors or objects that are threatened ‘well beyond the military security of the territorial state’ (Williams 2003, p. 513). After issues are securitized and set in the agenda—and once the audience has accepted them as issues of existential importance—the security actors build coalitions among different audiences (Leonard and Kaunert 2011, p. 67), including different publics, political audiences, and political supporters (Balzacq 2005; Roe 2008).

In some cases, association with different groups, discrimination, marginalization, and context increases the efficiency of the securitization. For instance, the grievances or legitimate demands of ethnic, religious and political minorities are constructed and presented as the conspiracies of foreign powers using these minorities as pawns, and thus these minorities are claimed to be existential threats to the nation, its identity, state security and territorial integrity (Williams 2003).

In Turkey, political Islam and Islamists were historically constructed as existential threats to the secularity of the state (Bilgin 2008, p. 593) and the national identity, but Islamist populists (Yilmaz 2018), led by President Erdoğan and his AKP (Justice and Development Party), have recently been trying to construct their opponents, including secularists, leftists, democrats and Gülenists, as existential threats to their referent object(s). In the Erdoğanist narratives, the referent alternates depending on the context. Sometimes, it is the state, the people, the nation, but sometimes it is religion (Islam) or the ummah (global Muslim community); the referent object can even be Erdoğan himself, as he is presented as the embodiment of the will of the people and leader of the ummah (Yilmaz 2021a).

While Turkey and the Turkish nation has been the referent object for Kemalists, and Turkey, the Turkish nation, and Islam have been the referent object for the old-school Islamists, Erdoğan and AKP have managed to make themselves referent objects by claiming that the existence of the self-identified and practicing Muslim Turks is bound to the existence of Erdoğan and his AKP (Yilmaz et al. 2020, 2021a). Erdoğan and AKP have even constantly propagated that to protect these referent objects, people must be ready to sacrifice their lives and also ready to kill (Yilmaz and Erturk 2021a, 2021b). In all of his election speeches, Erdoğan has blamed the West for plotting against him and all the groups that compete with him, or that do not agree with him, as the co-conspirators of the West. His discourse that makes himself a referent object of securitization revolves around two narratives: (1) the West does not like me because I do not bow to their requests, but they like my opponents because they made a deal with them. Thus, the West will occupy Turkey (either de facto or by having satellite players out of the opposition); and (2) remember that if I and AKP leave, you will go back to the ‘dark ages’ of Kemalism, where you will be prosecuted for what you believe (appealing to the practicing Muslims). With these two narratives, Erdoğan and the AKP have made themselves referent objects of securitization with existential importance, at least in the eyes of their voters.

3. The AKP’s Securitization of the Gülen Movement

Right after the 17–25 December 2013 corruption scandal and investigations into AKP members, the AKP leadership began to make sympathisers of Gülen Movement the most dangerous securitization issue. In this vein, the AKP has employed a three-layered strategy in its fight against the movement. First, Erdoğan made a sharp turn in the aftermath of the 17–25 December corruption investigation, declaring the movement a ‘parallel state’ and then a ‘terrorist organization’ that allegedly sought to topple the government under the guise of prosecuting corruption. After the mysterious 2016 coup attempt, however, Erdoğan’s rhetoric got harsher as he promised to crush this ‘armed terrorist organisation’

until it retained no members (see in detail [Yavuz and Öztürk 2019](#); [Watmough and Öztürk 2018](#); [Öztürk 2019](#)). Erdoğan also likened the movement to a ‘virus’ that had exploited religion and moral values to mask its real intentions for decades ([Stockholm Center for Freedom 2017](#)). Secondly, after arguing that the movement and its members were deviant and non-Islamic, the AKP strived to criminalize and incriminate the movement in the eyes of the public, accusing it of perpetrating almost all crimes and misdoings that had rocked Turkey over decades. Thirdly, particularly in the aftermath of the coup attempt, the AKP has skilfully incited the public against the members of the movement, calling them to help the state in the fight against this ‘armed terrorist organisation’. The involvement of some pro-Gülenist civilians in the coup made Erdoğan’s propaganda easier (see in detail [Taş 2018a, 2018b](#); [Yavuz 2018](#)). Essentially, AKP has prompted every Turkish citizen and members of the international ummah, in different speeches, to report members of the GM to the police without hesitation as they are ‘traitors’ and deserve severe punishments for their treason as they continue to ‘threaten’ peace and security. This Erdoğan-led otherization of the GM is the epitome of populist ‘otherization’ ([Yilmaz 2021b, 2021c](#)). Erdoğan has gone as far as to say that members of the movement deserve no mercy, crying out his famous slogan, ‘if we show mercy today, we beg for mercy another day’ ([Stockholm Center for Freedom 2017](#)).

As a power ideological apparatus of the state and imposer of state ideology ([Öztürk 2016](#)), the Diyanet has become instrumental in all three layers of the AKP’s securitization strategy of the GM. While the Diyanet avoided directly targeting the movement before the 2016 coup attempt, it turned into a populist ([Yilmaz et al. 2021b, 2021c](#)) politburo of the AKP right after the coup attempt, preparing reports and giving fatwas in line with the state’s defamation campaign about what the movement represented. On the 3–4 August 2016, the Diyanet’s Religion Council (*Din Şurası*) held an extraordinary meeting in Ankara and declared that the GM was not a religious movement but an anti-Islamic terrorist organisation.

After the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the state began sacking and suspending school teachers and principals, among others, due to their ‘secular, left-leaning or Kurdish identity’ or sympathy for the GM, and replacing them with loyalists. The securitization of Gülenists and blaming them for the 2013 corruption scandal, the failed 2016 coup, and anything else that went wrong in Turkey, is a matter of topic for an entire article or book, and is beyond the scope of this article. But what suffices to say is that, because of the existent security atmosphere in Turkey and the already securitized communities, such as the Alevis and the Kurds, it was easy for Erdoğan to place the Gülenists, or anyone else for that matter, at the centre of this security atmosphere. Today in Turkey, there is no need to further securitize a person, a community, or a group by explaining why they are a national security threat, as a group can simply be securitized with the claim that they are part of the Gülenist plot, or that they support the Gülenists.

Since one of the important aspects of securitization in certain policy areas is the vilification of opponents, the Diyanet play a vital role in solidifying this ‘alterative reality’. This alternate ‘truth’ is an elaborate account of the threats faced by the people of Turkey. To weave this narrative, sermons have relied on historical events, religious references, and current occurrences to present the case of antagonists of ‘the people’. However, this situation has made the Diyanet increasingly dependent on conspiracy theories and securitization notions to explain the problems facing Turks and Muslims to the public. The Diyanet keeps GM on the agenda at the discourse level to create fear and hatred about this hypothetical enemy both in the minds and hearts of the congregations and society. Fictitious tales are used to explain various occurrences, including acts of terrorism, violence, political turbulence, and economic crises. Thus, the Diyanet uses nationalistic-religious rhetoric to draw the attention of the community away from the actual causes of current crises—and the responsibility of decision makers—to the semi-invisible imaginary causes, putting all responsibility on the shoulder of the semantic construction of the GM. Against this backdrop, the semantics of the Diyanet’s sermons have increasingly lost touch with

reality and has come to rely on conspiracies. In line with the intrigues described by the AKP, the Diyanet appeals to a diverse and varied sub-theme of victimhood in its discourses. The nation and the ummah suffer the malevolent plotting against them. The inducers of these 'plots' have varied over time, but the victims in all of these conspiracies have remained constant.

4. GM as a Source of Sedition and Mischief

The notions of *fitne* (sedition) and corruption/disorder (*fesat*)² have been two of the most useful religious concepts employed in the Diyanet's sermons. This concept, which is mentioned many times in the Qur'an, has different meanings, but as it is used in the Diyanet's sermons, it generally corresponds to the corruption, separatism, provocation, and rebellion against a 'rightful leader'. Indeed, 'sedition' is a generic word with broad utility in the Islamic discourse, but the prime target of this conceptualization in the sermons is the GM, though the concept has also been invoked in conjunction with violence and terrorist attacks perpetrated by the PKK and Gezi Park Protests. The concept of sedition has been mentioned with an increasing intensity in the Friday sermons produced after the 17–25 December 2013 corruption investigations into AKP ministers and close associates of Erdoğan. In general, the concept of *fitne* is used in the sermons to conceptualize a current situation, or to describe a hardship the Islamic world has faced, or a form of behaviour that Muslims are advised to avoid. The frequency of use of this concept in sermons over the years runs parallel with the Diyanet's institutional transformation and the process of repositioning itself in line with AKP policies.

When we examined the texts of sermons from the past decade, we found that the concept of *fitne* was not used frequently in sermons before 2014. After the 2013 corruption case, however, this concept was used in 78 sermons.³ In the sermons before 2015, the concept of *fitne* was used without referring to any particular perpetrator but in general referring to all sort of calamities facing Muslims. For example, a sermon dated 4 October 2014 stated: 'Believers should be alert to all kinds of *fitne*, the chaos, uneasiness and disasters that will bring about it, they should oppose all these with prudence and foresight, and should not allow them'. Similarly, a sermon from July 2015 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 was inevitable.

In the following period, the spiral of violence that Turkey had fallen into was explained to the congregation with similar rhetoric. Terms such as 'game', 'tricks', and 'trap' have been added to the concept of *fitne* and the perception of 'victimhood' has been strengthened. Moreover, with 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 performed many different functions. The most practical utility of this 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' to avoid government responsibility in the eye of public. In this context, the following statements were made in a sermon in 2015:

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)

This pattern is a clear indicator of the Diyanet's intention to raise the same topic consistently in its fight against the GM, even before the 15 July coup attempt in 2016. For example, the sermon entitled 'The Name of the Trial is Sedition (*fitne*)' suggested: 'Let's keep our brotherhood, unity and togetherness above all kinds of belonging and interests' (15 January 2016). Now, the coup anniversary sermons are the most anti-GM in nature, where overt charges of sedition and moral corruption are blatantly ascribed to the GM in the sermons. Nearly four years later, the Diyanet continues to relive the coup night with the words:

[FETÖ] is not a religious group, but rather a home to sedition. They abused and exploited our devoutness to Allah, our love for His Messenger, our sadaqah, our qurbani on Eid al-Adha (sacrificial festive), and many values of ours we consider sacrosanct. They turned our young people, the apples of our eyes, into enemies against their parents and their nation with their insidious plans (10 July 2020)

Similarly, in 2020, on the occasion of the 2016 coup anniversary, the sermon read, 'It should be known very well that GM, which attempted against the sovereignty and future of our nation on 15 July, is a network of corruption and corruptors' (10 July 2020). The terms 'corruption' and 'corruptors' are quite flexible, as both can encompass a range of meanings depending on how the sermon contextualises it.

In explaining the causes of violence and acts of terrorism Turkey has been exposed to, the 2020 sermon emphasised that Turkey has an exceptional place and position in world politics and with this, gives hopes to all the victims and the oppressed. The sermon also stressed that, because of this, Turkey has been the target of 'centres of evil' and has consequently been exposed to their attacks. In this regard, what we observe is that the role of the Diyanet in contemporary Turkey emphasises and exaggerates the enemy, be it real or imagined, and directly or indirectly presents the current regime as the safe haven from this enemy, necessary for survival. It does this clearly, using AKP language to create division between the Diyanet and the GM.

In this context, in addition to the concept of sedition (*fitne*), which is used to explain the challenges facing the country, the Diyanet's narratives, such as 'the country's survival is under threat', or 'homeland is targeted by evil forces' are employed in the sermons in a way that blurs the line between reality and imagination. Essentially, after 15 July, *fitne* is increasingly given a tangible securitization dimension by assigning a face to the loose concept.

The failed coup was described in one sermon as an effort targeting 'the existence, peace, unity and solidarity of the nation', and an action of 'a great betrayal and invasion'. The sermon says, 'we were saved from rolling into the pit of fire and sinking into darkness [. . .] our nation did not allow the enemy to violate and trample over its land, dignity and honour [. . .] we came back from the brink of a great disaster' and 'we did not allow the invasion attempt' (22 July 2016). Another sermon declared:

It should be known that these treacherous attacks targeting the existence, peace and trust, unity and solidarity of our nation, will never discourage our beloved nation and will never reach its goal. We believe that our nation will overcome these difficulties with its faith, spirit of unity and solidarity, and foresight. May our Almighty Lord make our unity, solidarity and brotherhood forever (19 August 2016)

Effectively, jingoism and religious rhetoric have been merged with the sermons' sensationalist and conspiracy-ridden tone to explain events of political significance. Another sermon close to the coup anniversary read: 'let us remain conscious, have common sense, and be resolute. Let us not give any opportunity to those who try to abuse and exploit our national and spiritual values' (10 July 2020). The references to 'those' who 'exploit', effectively adds ambiguity and at the same time directs the blame of current events to the 'other'. Some sermons clearly demonstrate the Diyanet's ability to blend conspiracies with faith-driven references and historically significant national events, such as the Battle of Karbala and the War of Independence. The Diyanet, through the concept of *fitne* and discourse on those who create unrest in society, has constructed various 'national causes' that are heavily shaped by its conspiracies. This existential approach consciously both terrorizes the community and makes the issue of security the top priority. For the first time in the history of the Republic, Turkey has witnessed the Diyanet declaring jihad against the imaginary enemy created by the AKP government.

Apart from the heavy use of sedition and mischief in its discourse, it is a well-known fact that those who cause disorder, in the Islamist understanding, must be crushed. The

Diyanet sermons do not only marginalize the ‘other’ but also call for their punishment. Islamic history is full of examples of draining sources of sedition. For this reason, internal strife (*fitne*) was perceived as much more dangerous than outside mischief. What the Diyanet is trying to do is to identify GM with corruption and show that it is more dangerous for Islam and Muslims than for non-Muslim groups. If one looks at the details of the seminars organized by the Diyanet under the title of ‘Struggle with the terrorist organizations that exploit the religion’ to inform public officials and representatives of non-government organizations (NGOs), the prime theme was the GM, which was likened to ISIS, Al-Qaida and Boko Haram, and was unequivocally accused of exploiting Islam with impunity and attempting to destroy the state (Milliyet 2016).

Attributes such as a ‘movement of dissension’, ‘those plotted against the existence of the nation’, or ‘those that exploited the religion’ were commonly used in the Diyanet’s sermons. Rather than using the word ‘terrorist’, the Diyanet preferred to let real or imagined actions and activities speak for themselves. However, as of 2018, the abbreviation ‘FETÖ’ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization) has been introduced into the discourse of the sermons and has been used repeatedly. One sermon around the anniversary of the coup attempt stated that: ‘the FETÖ Terrorist Organization, which looks outright but serves the falsehood, abused our faith, moral sensitivity, love of the prophet, zakat and allegiance, our victims, and all of our religious values and concepts’ (12 July 2019). It is interesting to note that, although FETÖ stands for ‘Fethullahist Terrorist Organization’, the sermon needed to further highlight its extension of ‘terrorist organization’ along with the abbreviation to indicate the magnitude of the security measures to be taken against them.

5. Hypocrisy of GM as a Social Disease

In the opening speech of the Diyanet’s extraordinary High Board of Religious Affairs (*Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu*) meeting, Member of Parliament, İsmail Kahraman said:

Let us not forget that Anatolia is our home and it is our duty to ensure our home is safe. It would be misleading to ensure safety just with police and military measures. We should also greatly focus on such fields as social security, religious policy and psychological security. When we neglect the social and psychological aspect of safety, we find bombs raining on us from F –16 s which we normally should feel proud seeing fly in our skies. (Diyanet 2017, p. 21)

Although more than one million people have been subjected to judicial investigation, 130,000 people have lost their jobs without question, more than 100,000 people are imprisoned⁴, and the workplaces and properties of countless businesspeople have been hijacked by the government, Kahraman’s security advice clearly presents the codes related to the struggle of the new Diyanet against GM. With his words, he encourages the Diyanet to make all kinds of preparations to fight against this newly determined enemy with all instruments, because the enemy in question has targeted the existence of the state and religion. In addition to using sedition to demonize GM, another important othering concept that is used in the discourse of the sermons is ‘hypocrisy’. This new rank (hypocrisy) gained by the GM has been used by the Diyanet by taking it out of the Qur’anic context and giving it socio-religious meaning, as a product of the religious and psychological security that Mr. Kahraman has pointed out.

Since December 2013, Erdoğan’s first step in defaming the movement was to accuse Gülen and the high-ranking cadre of the movement of treason, hypocrisy, and corruption. The Diyanet has employed this same terminology to convince congregants that GM followers indeed have deceived people and sowed the seeds of sedition and division in a sermon delivered after the coup attempt, entitled ‘The Servitude but for God: hypocrisy (*nifak*) and being a hypocrite (*münafıklık*)’. Curiously, the sermon was summed up with a prayer assaulting the GM:

Dear Lord! Do not let the hypocrites and troublemaker who pretend to be people of true path but want to sow the seeds of sedition and disorder. Do not make us

one of those who are deceived and deceives other with belief, Qur'an and the Prophet' (5 August 2016).

What the Diyanet implies in such sermons is that the followers of this movement are more dangerous than idolaters or infidels, and that their opposition should be dealt with based on religious deviation, rather than simple civil disobedience. The repeated warnings are still issued from the Diyanet through Friday sermons:

Stay away from lying, hypocrisy, pomposity, deception, and unfairness' or else God's blessing of barakah will disappear from your life (18 September 2020).

The constant dichotomy of loyal versus hypocrites or self-sacrificing versus selfish has helped cement the fate of GM, through constant dehumanization and demonization in severely nationalised and securitized contexts.

While simultaneously casting the GM as villains, the Diyanet pointed towards 'the people' as the representation of 'the true path' (*sirat-ı müstakim*). The sermons have kept telling the congregation that there are people who appear in the image of righteous but always sow the seeds of corruption and mischief among the nation; it is the duty of the people to differentiate and, consequently, to always chose 'the true path'. For example, a sermon in 2020 read:

From past to present, however, there have been people who have tried to exploit and abuse Islam, the religion of right, and true path, for worldly interests and benefits' and it urges the faithful to assume a proactive role to keep to the rightful path by saying: 'what falls upon each one of us is to act in an insightful and prudent manner. We need to stay alert to distinguish the exploitation attempts from sincere efforts' (11 September 2020).⁵

Clearly, a warning to the mosque community to 'stay alert' is not just simple advice. This warning, which is listened to by approximately 25 million people, is serious propaganda from the Diyanet to undermine the legitimacy of the GM under the guise of homeland security. In this regard, another sermon warned:

Let's not forget that FETÖ, which survives through methods such as hiding itself, appearing different from what it is, hypocrisy, lies, threats and blackmail, is never an Islamic structure (12 July 2019).

The selection of the Qur'an verses that the Diyanet uses in sermons while marginalizing the GM, especially during the 15 July celebrations, requires particular scrutiny. All the verses are highly planned choices built on the concept of 'us and them'. The Diyanet's artificially created boundaries between themselves and their rivals (here, the GM) need strong religio-political statements to show the polarisation clearly. Thus, the verses used by the Diyanet systematically demonize the GM and demonstrate what kind of security problem they are dealing with. If we are to state in turn, verses 3:139 and 2:11–12 (in 2016), 5:11 (2017), 2:11–12 (2018), 10:17 (2019), and finally 22:38 (2020) made headlines for sermons. At a sermon in 2017, by mentioning verse 5:11, the blessings of Allah reminded believers that the desires of those who want to do evil by the grace of Allah are prevented. There is an emphasis here on the innocent's trust in God rather than a focus on the guilty's crime. This sermon directly stated that God saved the country from the evil of the 15 July coup. Moreover, it says indirectly that the faith of the government and administrators, and then of the people, was instrumental in bringing the help of Allah against wrongdoings. Here, the GM is the wrongdoer. On the 15 July sermon in 2018, the Diyanet used the same verses (2:11–12) that were used just after the 2016 coup. Here, too, GM is accused of hypocrisy. In 2019, the tone became even harder. In summary, members of the GM were described as cruel (*zalimin*). In 2020, verse 22:38 was selected. The GM here is accused of treason, ingratitude, and infidelity. It really requires particular skill to refer to the members of the GM with this verse, which describes the polytheists and pagans of Makkah, who put a lot of pressure on the believers and constantly persecuted the Muslims in Mecca in the early period of Islam. The hadith, mentioned at the beginning of the same sermon,

uses the expression *khawwan* (the most treacherous). This is one of the best examples of how the Diyanet has become heavily politicized by taking out the verse and the prophetic tradition from their historical contexts to support the AKP's divisive discourses and to serve so-called security measures.

One of the heaviest analogies in the context of hypocrisy in relation to securitization is the issue of the mosque of harming (*masjid al-dirar*). According to the Qur'an, this mosque was built by hypocrites for the purpose of assassinating the Prophet and his close friends. The Diyanet's report associated the people who established this mosque with the GM. We observed that this issue had been brought up by countless members of the Diyanet, especially in the 15 July commemoration programs:⁶

The Qur'an says 'And there are those who put up a mosque for causing harm and disbelief and division among the believers and as a station for whoever had warred against Allah and His Messenger before. And they will surely swear, "We intended only the best". And Allah testifies that indeed they are liars. Never stand for prayer in there!' (vol. 9, pp. 107–10). When these hypocrites' real purpose was understood, upon this divine warning, the Prophet immediately had the mosque torn down. (Diyanet 2017, p. 49)

To explain from a security perspective, with this analogy, the Diyanet recommends that the GM should be destroyed just as the mosque of harm was demolished. They even make many unfounded inferences that are clearly aimed to securitize the GM. In fact, with this and similar religious justifications, many people's property, even the lives of some people, have been wasted within this framework.

6. GM as a Traitor and Puppet of the West

Another important feature in securitizing certain policy areas is to appeal to the notion of the conspiracy that Western countries, or any foreign power, are collaborating with domestic traitors to undermine the socio-political harmony of the country. The creation of this 'us' and 'them' (which includes domestic and foreign traitors), through Friday sermons, has enabled the Diyanet to cast the AKP as the protector of the faith and nation against overwhelming attacks by traitors at home and overseas. In this process, the Diyanet's sermons have successfully targeted and demonized every potential opponent. Furthermore, the Diyanet's sermons have served the function of covering up and not questioning the AKP government's responsibility in the face of social problems and crises faced by the country, as well as legitimizing the anti-democratic steps taken by the AKP. This position of the Diyanet has also become evident in its attributing the causes of the economic crisis in the country to 'foreign powers/conspirators' and normalizing the crisis by diverting the attention of the public from the performance of the government to outside. The alleged attacks, and their acceptance by the public, demonstrate the power of the Diyanet as the official storyteller for the AKP. Its ability to form chronicles favourable to its patron has led it to render others as the adversaries.

The securitization approach of the Diyanet, which associates the language of polarization with the national unity and solidarity—even the ontological existence—of the country, has been showing itself intensely in recent times, especially since the AKP has tightened its ranks with its nationalist partner, the MHP. According to the political discourse of the AKP, almost the whole world is hostile towards them, especially the ancient enemy of Turks, namely the West. Thus, the effort to stay alert to its enemies, which is the strongest reflection of the Turkish subconscious, has created an environment of natural and ontological distrust towards the Western world. As seen in the political language, a new security discourse with a religious flavour has emerged by establishing domestic connections of insecurity in the Diyanet's sermons. The scapegoat of this new scenario is of course the GM. Portrayed as the Trojan horse of the West in the political language, the friends of Christians and Jews in the religious discourse, the GM has been presented as the tool of foreign powers within Turkey.

In the case of GM, its alleged ‘dark’ plans and activities along with ‘collaborations’ with foreign powers have played with multigenerational fears that have existed in the Republic since the aftermath of the World War One. The anger of being ‘played’ by the GM and the fear of losing the country’s youth to ‘deviant’ ideas planted by the GM have helped sow the seeds of victimhood—how the pure have been exploited and potentially harmed. Defining the 15 July coup attempt as a plot against the homeland, independence, and future of the nation, one sermon noted that:

Those who tried to destroy the parliament of the nation on the night of 15 July and take our youth and our future captive did this in the guise of religion (12 July 2019).

Such narratives have only played a part in increasing public apprehension.

The GM, which was often referred to as an ‘insider abroad’ (*hariçteki dahil*) became an ‘outsider inside’ (*dahildeki hariç*) in the sermons. This stark contrast and striking accusation brought against the GM post-2016 led to the conclusion that the GM does not belong to Turkish land and does not represent the nation. This goes beyond religious excommunication to the ambit of denying the group members of their national identity. The Diyanet’s sermons have done this by portraying the GM and its affiliates as an ‘external enemy’ that submits itself to the ‘invaders’ (*müstevli*). Thus, a new angle is added to the securitization of the GM: it not only conspires, but it also co-conspires with the ‘foreign enemy’ to supposedly destabilize the nation and hurt the faith. One sermon, preached on 14 July 2017, reminded the congregations that: ‘We have witnessed at the night of 15 July that the betrayal network which pretended to be righteous but exploited the religion, faith, values, feelings, charity of this nation for 40 years plotted the existence of this nation. Having spoiled a few generations this movement of dissension targeted the existence of our country in line with the agenda of invaders’.

Clearly, the fight is not one of Turk against Turk or Muslim against Muslim, in the case of GM and AKP supporters, rather, it is framed as an infinite struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Those who side with the ‘traitors’ are no longer ‘worthy’ humans, thus the hostility and slander towards them is justified. In one sermon discussing the 15 July coup attempt, there is an obvious attempt by the Diyanet to declare it a ‘fight’, by mixing in the rhetoric battles and victories that paved the way for foundation of the Turkish Republic. The emphasis in the sermon was that this nation, which did not give way to the many ‘traitorous attempts’ from past to present, also did not and shall not give any opportunity to attacks such as a coup. The sermon noted that:

As a nation, we passed through great troubles and heavy tests. Just yesterday in Çanakkale, Sakarya and Dumlupınar, the inhumane forces with no mercy came over us to wipe us from the stage of history. We were subjected to one of the biggest betrayals of our history on 15 July (28 January 2018).

One of the places where the Diyanet has made the GM the most obvious security problem and declared it a hopeless terrorist organization is in the eighth article of the report they prepared (Diyanet 2017). Here, the movement is analogous to the organization called the Assassins (*Hashashin*), founded by Hasan Sabbah in the 11–12th century, or to the structure called *Opus Dei*, which was founded at the beginning of the 20th century. The report says that the Order of Assassins’ Hasan Sabbah paralyzed the ruling Seljuk government with his group of assassins, scared government officials into doing what he wanted and eliminated those who opposed (Diyanet 2017, p. 68). When it comes to *Opus Dei*, there are more details and the claims that:

Using government facilities and buildings’ became an indispensable strategy for *Opus Dei*. It is reported that the movement adopted the philosophy ‘The ends justify the means’ and therefore resorted to illegal activities. This is why they are often referred to as the ‘white glove mafia’. *Opus Dei* has up to 15 universities as well as hundreds of primary and secondary schools in various countries. Escriva, *Opus Dei*’s founder, convinced people around him that he was ‘Padre’ or ‘Father’,

with its obvious meaning in Christianity, and said he had received a sign from God to establish this community. Opus Dei's strict hierarchy and secrecy inspired by Freemasonry are also striking in terms of similarity to the Gülen Movement. (Diyanet 2017, pp. 67–69)

Using this populist dichotomy of 'pure' and 'evil', the Diyanet's reports and sermons are very detailed in the description of 'the enemy'. They not only talk about the GM in general, but target the leader, Fethullah Gülen. He holds a symbolical place in the eyes of GM volunteers, thus, by targeting the spiritual leader, the Diyanet has been directly vilifying the GM and making it a major security problem from top to bottom. The aforementioned report (Diyanet 2017) says, indirectly, that there is no other organization that poses a more dangerous security threat than the GM. In fact, many AKP-oriented media outlets present Gülen as a Jew, Armenian, a secret cardinal and sometimes a Freemason, and point out that he does not belong to Anatolia. The prime attack has focused on portraying Gülen as a 'cult' leader, mahdi or messiah, who uses religion as a guise to amass followers for 'dark' plans and activities (Diyanet 2017, pp. 63, 69).

There are two important stigmatizations made by the Diyanet on this issue: one is the accusation that the GM sees itself as superior to other Muslims, and the other is that GM members do not belong to either Islam or the Ummah. The earliest criticism of the movement in the sermons is related to their alleged fanaticism. The sermons implicitly projected sympathisers of the movement as people who consider themselves 'superior' due to their relation to the movement over other religious groups in Turkey. This sermon (5 June 2015) is less harsh in its efforts to otherize the movement, as it only portrays GM as an egoistic and narcissistic faction in society, compared to later sermons when it is labelled as a 'terrorist' organization. One such sermon from 2015 cautioned that 'the number of those among Muslims who put their sect, disposition, race and ideology ahead of Islam isn't few', while hinting at the GM (5 June 2015).

Another sermon in 2016 echoed this sentiment, for instance, with the verse: 'They have preferred their rabbis, priests and Messiah, son of Mary, as their lords instead of God . . . ', alleging that followers of the movement also attributed Godly holiness to Gülen (12 August 2016). In this regard, the sermon implied, without pronouncing Gülen's name, that he distorted, trivialized, and destroyed Islam and created some sort of new belief system, and then declared that:

It should be known that; those who try to establish a new religion by putting themselves before the Qur'an and Sunnah, and those who blindly follow such are the passengers of a futile road' (12 August 2016).

The Diyanet's objection to making divine attributions to humans can be considered a grave matter on principle grounds that violates Islamic rules. Sermons have continuously used the topic of 'prioritising one's own group over belongingness to the global Muslim ummah' as means to criticize the movement.

In a sermon delivered on 13 July 2018 on this last point, it was clearly mentioned that the GM's major sin is to destroy the consciousness of the ummah. It is truly an issue worth dwelling on. According to the Diyanet, the AKP is the last stronghold and living representative of the ummah. Whereas the GM is not only being driven from Turkey by the Diyanet, but also from the entire ummah. Thus, it is not uncommon for sermons to warn the congregations of the potential 'evils' of following 'fake' Islamic influences and rather seek 'authentic' information regarding their faith. In one such sermon, the Diyanet urges:

We need to learn and know the strong and reliable vessels of spirituality that have been feeding our religious life for hundreds of years'. And the sermon ends with a solution to this problem, 'Let us know their ["the enemy"] value and not waste our treasure. Let us learn about our religion from experts, well-intended and authentic sources in order to prevent exploitation' (11 September 2020).

It is also worth noting that the AKP–Diyanet cooperation against the GM has resulted in portraying the movement as a disease not just for the Turkish nation or Muslim ummah,

but all humanity and civilization. For this reason, they try to legitimize their discourses against the GM with the assumption that they are protecting humanity.

7. Conclusions

The Turkish state's securitization narrative is not fixed but changes according to time and the socio-historical conditions of the country; new actors can enter as a part of speech act while other actors' (such as the Kurdish, Alevi, or non-Muslim citizens of Turkey) status is neutralised with temporary de-securitization. In this context, the new securitization problem constructed by the state, led by the AKP, and strongly supported, religiously legitimated and then disseminated by the Diyanet, has been the GM. The Diyanet is one of the most effective apparatuses of both the AKP government and Erdoğanism on a global scale. It has been seen that, with strong nationalist-Islamist reflexes, the Diyanet has identified the GM as the most dangerous security 'threat' in its Friday sermons and in some reports. The Diyanet's delegitimation, vilification, and securitization efforts of the GM were intensified when an irreparable rift between the AKP and GM surfaced. The GM was increasingly discredited as a religious organization and cast in the role of a villain in sermons. The early sermons aimed at only casting out the GM as the hypocritical enemy that challenged the democratic choice of the people by misleading them through religion. In conjunction to the changing political tide, the Friday sermons grew bolder and direct securitization of the GM prevailed.

During the post-2016 period, the GM's leadership, members, and sympathisers have been labelled as 'traitors', sources of sedition, and the biggest threat to Turkey and Islam. They are conceived as part of the 'dark' plots against the 'noble nation' and 'pure faith'. From hypocrites, they have been transformed into traitors and finally terrorists. With labels such as FETÖ, the GM members are no longer seen as citizens, but rather they are part of a dehumanised group that is 'the enemy', thus the deflection of anger and hatred is justified due to the 'evil' and gravely 'dangerous' nature of this group. Feeding on fears of losing the nation's youth to 'dark forces', and being a 'nation exposed the malice of those who want to harm it and their faith' and to be tarnished by 'evil', the Diyanet has given faces and names to these ideas and emotions. In conclusion, like the former elites who made the state their referent object via the Diyanet, the AKP elites and the Diyanet as securitizing actors play a significant role in framing the GM as the biggest existential threats to the Turkish nation, state, Muslims and Islam.

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¹ A crucial component of Turkey's victimhood nationalism is based on the Treaty of Sèvres which was signed on 10 August 1920 in Sèvres, France, as one of a series of treaties that the Central Powers signed with the Allied Powers after their defeat in World War I. The treaty aimed the renunciation of most of the territory not inhabited by Turks, leaving to the Turkish sovereignty on a fraction of modern Turkey in Central Anatolia. It was chosen by the nation-building Kemalist elite as a powerful symbol of the West's desire to annihilate Turks. This victimhood and siege mentality is called the Sèvres Syndrome (Jung 2001; Göçek 2011), encapsulating the social collective wounds, traumas, fears, anxieties, insecurities and victimhood of the Turkish national psyche maintained, augmented and emotionally reproduced in everyday life (Yilmaz 2021a).

² The Qur'anic terms sedition/*fitne* occurs 74 times, corruption and disorder/*fesat* 33 times, and the word division/*tefrika* 8 times.

- ³ The use of the concept 'fitne' in the sermons according to the year is as follows: 2010: 1, 2011: 0, 2012: 3, 2013: 4, 2014: 9, 2015: 17, 2016: 10, 2017: 9, 2018: 9, 2019: 9, 2020: 7.
- ⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/01/turkey-coup-dismissed-civil-servants-fight-rights.html> (accessed on 23 June 2021).
- ⁵ Various other sermons discuss this such as 5 August 2016, 12 August 2016, 14 July 2017, 11 August 2017, 12 July 2019.
- ⁶ See <https://ilkha.com/15-temmuz/kozluk-muftusu-mescid-i-dirari-hedefleyen-kisilerin-niyetleri-ne-ise-feto-nun-de-o-idi-131764> (accessed on 23 June 2021).

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