

The Friday Sermons (*hutbe*) of the Presidium for Religious Affairs in Turkey

Spiritual Care, Religious Service, or an Instrumentalisation of Religion?

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Executive Summary

The interest of the world increasingly focuses on Islam, a process often dominated by wholesale mutual recriminations and suspicions that occasionally culminate in the inference that Islam and terrorism are one and the same thing. In the Federal Republic of Germany, a certain sensitivity towards Islam has evolved by now, although the dialogue is not yet quite free of prejudices and clichés.

Some months ago, some stir was caused by the address of a preacher in a Berlin mosque in which the Imam called the Germans a dirty and stinking people and advised his congregation against making any contact with the ‚infidels‘. While there can be no doubt that statements like these are not acceptable, we must differentiate between ‚official‘ Friday sermons (*hutbe*, or *hutba* in Arabic) and addresses given by dubious hedge priests. In this context, it may be helpful to analyse the 54 official Friday sermons published by the Presidium for Religious Affairs in Turkey (DIB) in 2005.

The purpose of establishing the presidium in the first place was ‚to organize all matters relating to religious convictions, the exercise of religion, and moral to manage the affairs of the houses of prayer‘. Mentioned for the first time in the Turkish constitution of 1962, the DIB enjoys an extraordinary influence that extends to many political and administrative areas. Thus, all mosques are bound by its instructions, and itinerant priests and sectarians can only perform in private.

While Muslims are bound to pray five times a day, it is not requisite for each prayer to be offered in a mosque. The only exception is the midday prayer on Friday which, obligatory for every adult Muslim, plays a crucial role in religious life. This religious service, which is covered by different rules in the four traditional legal schools of the Sunni persuasion, revolves around the sermon. In formal terms, this should consist of two prayer sessions lasting ten to 15 minutes. The DIB has defined the criteria for the content of these sermons in a general decree, according to which the subjects addressed should mainly serve to strengthen the unity of the faith and the nation, and to educate society in religious, scientific, and moral matters. It is forbidden to misuse a sermon for political or personal purposes, and domestic and foreign- policy issues are taboo as well.

The DIB’s most important consultative body is the High Council on Religious Affairs which ranks immediately below the president in the hierarchy of Turkey. Consisting of 16 members, it is responsible for material religious issues such as religious decrees (*fetwa*), investigating religious questions, and drafting sermons for the Friday service.

The title of a sermon consists of a verse from the Quran in Arabic. Each sermon includes three or four sections introduced by a salutation to the faithful. The first section explains the subject of the sermon, which is described and analyzed in the

second and possibly third section. The final section contains a concrete appeal to the Muslimin.

In 2005, 33 percent of the *hutbe* sermons dealt with religious instruction and the explanation of the cult and its rites, according particular importance to *ramadan*, a lunar month in which daily fasting is understood as an act of contemplation and permanent prayer. *Hac*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, may be the greatest event in the religious life of a Muslim, being regarded as one of the five pillars of Islam. *Kurban bayrami*, the feast of sacrifice, forms the ceremonial end of the month of pilgrimage; its celebration serves to strengthen the community of Muslims. Islam further prescribes two kinds of alms – the alms tax, *zekat*, and *fitre*, which is not tied to a Muslim's income. Giving alms purifies a person, since it is a good deed. Other subjects addressed include prayer as an act of devotion to Allah, prescriptions and proscriptions, the day of judgement, and paradize.

35 percent of the sermons of 2005 dealt with moral and ethical principles quite different from those addressed in religious instruction. Issues of importance include the family as the core of society, the institution of marriage, family relations, and neighbourliness. Further issues include work, honesty, modesty, and self-restraint as well as the negative effects of wastefulness.

Societal issues were discussed in ten percent of the Friday sermons of 2005. Misdirected developments in society were placed in a religious context and criticized. Human rights were praised as a particularly important asset, and any infringements condemned as sinful and un-Islamic. The same holds true for the environment, which was given to man by Allah to manage responsibly. Only one of all the sermons dealing with political issues raised international protest – the *hutbe* of March 11, 2005. It describes Islam as the last revealed religion addressing all humankind, which some people attempt to destroy for that reason. This attempt was said to be the reason for the creation of 'holy armies' and the missionary system in Turkey, which was put on a level with the crusades of history. Ambassadors from America as well as some European nations condemned the sermon as a 'religious discrimination'.

13 percent of the sermons of 2005 dealt with historical descriptions from the life of the prophet, developments in Islam and Ottoman history, and events from the founding era of the republic. Among the issues discussed we find the prophet's flight from Mecca, the conquest of Constantinople, and the achievements of Kemal Atatürk.

Much criticism is levelled at the Friday sermons. Thus, doubts are cast upon the independence of the DIB, which many believe to be politically influenced. Furthermore, the presidium is charged with instrumentalizing its sermons, one of which asked the faithful to invest Turkish Lira in their bank accounts rather than foreign currency. Yet again, there are examples demonstrating that the religious establishment is anything but eager for conformity with the state. Thus, a *fetwa* from 1981 ordered Muslim women to wear a headscarf, although the laicist state forbids headscarves for women civil servants and students.

In point of fact, the DIB fulfils its duties of religious care in its Friday sermons independently of state doctrines. Whenever a religious statement happens to harmonize with the demands of politics, this does not automatically imply that religion

is being instrumentalized. Another bone of contention is the fact that sermons are formulated by a central authority. Until 1965, Imams were free to choose their subjects. However, as many Imams are badly educated in theology, it was decided to publish ready-made texts. Even so, the presidium keeps pointing out that preachers are by no means bound to the letter of each sermon which, as it says, constitutes no more than a guideline. However, even the content of the Friday sermons is criticized by both Imams and the faithful. Many believe that more and more sermons are ineffective and address superfluous issues, stating that the selection of subjects should be based on the actual needs and problems of the community. In response, the presidium is currently developing a form of Friday sermons that is new in terms of both style and content.

The conclusion is that, as described above, a large majority of Friday sermons serves purposes of religious care and thus may be regarded as a religious service. Any talk of instrumentalizing religion is definitely inappropriate, although the fact that the texts are prepared by a central hierarchy may arouse suspicions of governmental interference. It remains to be hoped that future reforms will give Imams all over the country the freedom to write their own texts. While the religious content of the sermons itself is certainly not negotiable, the debate about hermeneutics, the interpretation of the Quran, is noticeably reformist in character. Turkish Islam in Germany is of particular importance in this context. Should its influence prove fruitful and receptive towards reforms, this might provide important impulses to efforts to reform Islam in Turkey.