

Just how ‘revolutionary’ is Turkey’s *hadith* project?

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A project by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) – Turkey’s official religious authority – has received considerable attention from international media in these last three weeks. In the words of the Directorate’s President, the *hadith* project aims to “offer the contemporary audience the Prophet’s message in a comprehensible language while taking into account the interpretations concerning *hadith* narrations, making necessary amendments in cases of misconceptions and omitting the issues and interpretations which do not have current value”. This description requires further elaboration in order to understand where the project stands with respect to attempts to combat radical strands of Islam. It is also desirable to qualify some commentaries, such as that of the BBC, which has gone as far as to describe the initiative as “a revolutionary reinterpretation of Islam” and “a controversial and radical modernisation of the religion”.

Hadith, in short, are oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed.¹ While the Koran provides broad guidelines on how Muslims should lead their lives, the *hadith* contain all the details on how these guidelines should be interpreted and practiced in daily life. More than 90% of Islamic law (*Sharia*) is based on the *hadith*, including the very controversial practices such as stoning adulterers and banning the fine arts. Their authority, however, has often been called into question. This is mainly due to the fact that they were compiled two centuries after the Koran was first handed down, long after the Prophet Mohammed’s death in the 7th century. It is often argued that during this time, various sayings and actions that do not belong to the Prophet were attributed to him by those seeking to exercise social control. Newly emerging customs and social norms and the need to justify them in Islamic terms are also found to be reasons behind these false attributions.

This is where the significance of the project lies. It is the first substantial attempt to prepare a revised, extensive (six-volume) collection of *hadith*, purged of those words and deeds that do not belong to the Prophet, including those that blatantly discriminate against women. More importantly, it employs a scientific approach in the endeavour, by employing 85 scholars from different theological faculties specialised in the field of *hadith*. The Western media attention, with its suggestion of a coming revolution, is

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¹ Linguistically the word ‘*hadith*’ (حَدِيث) means: that which is new from amongst things or a piece of information conveyed. The Arabic plural is *ahādīth* (أَحَادِيث). In English academic usage, *hadith* is often used in both the singular and the plural.

therefore understandable, given the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Europe and its neighbourhood, and the perceived need to find measures to challenge the much-debated 'clash of civilisations' thesis. The project has only recently attracted the media's attention, despite the fact that it was started in 2006, when there was very little coverage in the Turkish press. This in itself testifies to the increasing concerns about Islam in Western public opinion. Whether this initiative can be characterised as a 'revolution' or simply as a 'reform' of Islam, however, is another matter requiring more cautious analysis.

First of all, this project does not involve a reinterpretation of the Koran, which according to Muslim belief, is the divine source of Islam, and which remains unchanged to this day. Hence, for Muslims to describe the project in terms borrowed from the Christian Reformation implies questioning the divine roots of the religion itself. This largely explains the harsh reaction of the Directorate's President to commentaries in foreign media, when he protests that this is not an attempt at reform – since Islam itself cannot be reformed – and that it is only specific cultural practices that are susceptible to reform. Thus the purging of scientifically invalidated hearsay from the new *hadith* collection points less to the reform of the Islamic religion and more to the decoupling of religion from tradition and custom.

In addition, exaggerating the significance of the project serves to neglect the problematic nature of secularism in Turkey. The Directorate of Religious Affairs, under whose auspices the project is carried out, is the site where a 'state Islam' becomes institutionalised. It is responsible for administering the mosques (approximately 76,000) and appointing religious personnel (approximately 75,000) who function as civil servants. It instructs Imams on what to say during the Friday prayer – sending out political messages where it is deemed necessary – and the head of the Directorate is also often a figure close to political authority. Hence, this recent initiative may very well be seen as yet another case of the excessive intrusion of the Turkish state in religious affairs. The danger that this poses is that it makes it harder for such initiatives to be emulated in other Islamic settings, which often criticise Turkish Islam as a state-regulated national religion, distanced from its 'true' form.

On the more positive side, the project can be considered a modest response to essentialist conceptualisations of the Islamic world as static and resistant to change, due to the very nature of Islam, and also to oppose accounts that portray Islam as an intrinsically oppressive religion. One could even take the argument a step further and claim that the project could set a small example, which some of the moderate Islamic movements within and outside Europe could emulate in their quest for legitimacy. But it should be kept in mind that initiatives like the *hadith* project can hardly be evaluated independently from the changing social and political context in Turkey, where increasing rates of urbanisation and social mobility challenge the limits of traditional Islamic practices. Hence there is ground for hope that a limited influence can be incrementally exerted in favour of reformist forces in those Islamic settings where there are shifts in socio-economic and political dynamics, although the mechanisms through which such influence can be exercised still remains an open question.