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# Islam, the State and Turkey's Syrian Refugees: The Vaiz of Bursa

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TIM JACOBY

*Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom*

[tim.jacoby@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:tim.jacoby@manchester.ac.uk)

ROGER MAC GINTY

*Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom*

BÜLENT ŞENAY

*İlahiyat Fakültesi, Uludağ University, Turkey*

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This study looks at the work of Turkey's network of state 'preachers' in the management of Syrian refugees in Bursa—a city in the north-west of the country. Based on interviews and workshops undertaken between 2015 and 2017, it traces out how these civil servants have approached a rapidly changing social situation in which belief and organized religion continue to be highly important. It focuses on the role of Islam in the provision of basic assistance programmes, the management of local conflicts and broader efforts at ensuring long-term integration. In each of these areas, our research reveals that faith remains a significant motivational element in the Turkish state's response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

**Keywords:** Syria, Islam, Turkey, Faith

## Introduction

International assistance to those affected by war has long had close ties with organized religion. Henry Dunant's 1862 book, *Un Souvenir de Solferino*, for instance, pointed to a need for the creation of relief societies 'both from the humane and Christian standpoint' (cited in Perna 2006: 34). With the expansion of Western aid efforts following the Second World War, it was, as Anne-Marie Holenstein notes, missionary societies that were 'among the first institutions in the 1950s and 1960s to become partners of the newly created governmental donor agencies' (2005: 367–368). This shift in focus—from eliciting charitable support from those who largely shared their values to competing for commissions and contracts from state agencies—drove a conjoined process of professionalization and secularization. As a commitment to

neutrality and impartiality became preconditions for funding, ‘organizations with varying connections to faith traditions... generally adopted an approach and discourse that rendered it difficult to distinguish them on many criteria from secular agencies’ (Ager and Ager 2011: 457). Some, such as TearFund and Catholic Agency For Overseas Development, assumed acronyms that obscured their respective evangelical or Catholic roots, while others changed their names completely—the Catholic Institute for International Relations became Progressio in 2006, the Christian Children’s Fund became ChildFund International in 2009 and so on.

Alongside this trend, however, have been regular efforts to reappraise the role of religion in humanitarian action. A World Faiths Development Dialogue was established by the World Bank in 1998, the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development doubled its funding for faith-based organizations in 2005 and the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assembled 400 representatives for a Dialogue on Faith and Protection in 2012 (Ager and Ager 2015: 6–7). A growing sense has emerged that the separation of faith from reason cannot be universalized, and that such a move would significantly limit humanitarian space. As Alastair Ager observes, ‘there is an increasing acceptance that the world of faith cannot be pragmatically or legitimately confined to the private sphere’ (2014: 17). To do so would, after all, foreclose the possibility that ‘values such as democracy, freedom, equality, inclusion and justice may not necessarily be best pursued within an immanent secular framework’ (Mavelli and Petito 2012: 931).

Nonetheless, and notwithstanding recent claims that we are entering a ‘post-secular’ age (Wilson and Mavelli 2017), religiously oriented humanitarian work remains ‘rarely well documented and [are] generally poorly understood by national and international actors’ (Ager and Ager 2017: 47). Specifically, ‘there is still little serious consideration or understanding of the potential contribution that faith *discourses* and *values* may make to practically improving protection and provision for forced migrants’ (Kidwai 2017: 178, emphases in original). The view that revealed scripture is ‘beyond the legitimate scope of humanitarian[ism]’ and that religious beliefs are merely ‘effects of more ‘basic’ units of reality’ remains dominant (Ager and Ager 2015: 17). This has tended to subsume the ideational content of faith-based organizations’ approach beneath narratives of identity, improved access and localization. A recent 19-point joint statement from the UNHCR and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, for example, makes only one brief reference to religious teachings, while an 84-page special edition of *Forced Migration Review* entitled ‘Faith and Responses to Displacement’ from 2014 contains just four mentions of God. Given that ‘local faith communities are often at the forefront of humanitarian engagement with displaced populations’, this represents a significant lacuna (Kidwai 2017: 178). As Alastair Ager continues, the ‘secular script’ that structures international engagement with refugees has little social resonance in much of the non-Western world

(where polls regularly record religious affiliation rates of more than 90 per cent), thereby 'creating a disconnect with many local resources relevant for their recovery' (2014: 17).

Our study focuses on these local resources. It seeks to cover the acutely under-researched area of state-sponsored religious humanitarian providers. There are practical arguments in favour of the Turkish government's use of its religious resources to disburse assistance to refugees: they are close to the ground, are already in place, know how the system works, may be culturally close to the recipient population and tend to take a joined-up approach to needs. But the case study also raises questions about the role of the state in areas of society that might be regarded as civil in other contexts, as well as additional issues about the meanings of humanitarianism and its place within the responsibilities of the state and civil society. Questions about religious–state relations in particular are useful in that they provoke further inquiries about the assumed universalism of Western models of humanitarianism.

Specifically, we focus on the religiously derived motives, values and policies of Turkey's *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Directorate of Religious Affairs) in the management of Syrian refugees in Bursa—a major industrial and trading centre of 1.8 million in the north-west of the country. It looks at the work of one of the *Diyanet*'s largest and busiest Muftiate offices—particularly its team of *vaiz* (a role typically translated as 'preacher' but, as this article will show, their social role is actually much wider and more difficult to define). We worked with Professor Mehmet Emin Ay, former Mufti of Bursa, his (female) Vice-Mufti, Sedanur Sezen and their team of approximately 100 *vaiz* between 2015 and 2017. We focused on accessing the six head-*vaiz* and 20 senior-*vaiz* who play the largest role in developing the Muftiate's social policy, as well as those officials working in the city's Yavuz Selim, Görsü and Çarşamba neighbourhoods, where the numbers of Syrians are believed to be greatest. Through interviews and workshops, we heard how the presence of the Syrian refugees both affected their work and, inversely, how they attempted to have an impact of the newcomers' lives. These were held in the Turkish language and notes were taken by hand. The workshops were in public spaces, and the interviews were in a mix of public spaces and the offices of the participants. Notes were taken by hand and later typed up. All participants in the research were voluntary and no children or persons considered 'vulnerable' were involved in the research. Contributors seemed keen to be interviewed and did not declare any issues to be off-limits. The research plan was approved by the University of Manchester's ethics committee.

Despite constituting around 4,000 of the *Diyanet*'s 120,000 employees, the literature dealing with the *vaiz* is miniscule. Only three empirical studies have been carried out to date and all relate specifically to the work of female *vaiz* (Tütüncü 2010; Hassan 2011; Maritato 2015). There are no English-language studies of Bursa's Muftiate and no studies at all of how it relates to the city's burgeoning Syrian minority. More broadly, most wider studies either compare the operational priorities of religious and secular civil society organizations

(Ferris 2005; De Cordier 2008) or relate to particular scripturally derived ethical ideas in motivating humanitarian action (Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci-Orellana 2008; Marfleet 2011). Few, if any, analyses consider the role of the state in funding or directing religious groups that engage in such work. Even attempts at substantiating typologies of faith-based organizations based on wide-ranging literature reviews do not include the public sector (see Ronald Sider and Heidi Rolland Unruh's (2004) or Gerard Clarke's (2006) otherwise comprehensive taxonomies, for instance).

This study is thus quite different from the existing literature, focusing very much on the approach of civil servants. Having located the vaiz's work within Turkey's overall response to the Syrian refugee crisis, this article will first trace out the key role Islamic ideas and traditions play in structuring this area of state policy. Contrary to broader trends in the current literature discussed above, we argue that, not only does the primacy of these motivational factors necessitate analysis in their own right, but also they are not an impediment to approaching social problems generally experienced by refugee communities. In this case, the Islamic values of the vaiz network are, we propose, contributions to, not detractions from, the Turkish public sector's developing policy response. Specifically, our findings suggest that, in Bursa at least, these values play a key role in three important and inter-connected areas—dealing with the tension between integration and multi-culturalism, managing local conflicts and securing access to social support, health and education services.

### **Turkey, Refugees and Asylum**

Always traversing trade routes, multiply invaded and periodically ascending to regional dominance, Turkey's peoples have regularly accommodated large numbers of new arrivals. In the republican era, from the 1920s onwards, the state has tended to encourage the settlement of those it sees as sympathetic to its nation-building project—Pomaks, Tartars, Bosniaks, Circassians and other 'outside Turks' (İçduygu *et al.* 2008). Although the original legislation of 1934 that formalized this predilection has been abrogated, Turkey placed stringent geographical limitations to its ratification of the 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 New York Protocol on the status of refugees. Influenced by NATO's Cold War imperative of receiving émigrés from the communist bloc, these restrict the state's legal commitment to granting applications from Europeans and, at the government's discretion, those it considers to be of Turkish descent (Öner and Genç 2015: 253–254). For instance, whereas 1.5 million Iranians were permitted to stay temporarily without visas following the fall of the Shah in 1979, around 300,000 Bulgarian citizens deemed to be of Turkish origin were offered the chance of citizenship when they fled from Zhivkov's increasingly repressive regime in 1989 (Gokalp Aras and Mencutek 2015: 197). The result has been the emergence of a 'two-tiered asylum policy', which has been maintained in more recent legislation passed in

1994 (Law 6169) and 2006 (Law 5543), following the arrival of as many as 500,000 Iraqis in the wake of the 1991 war and 2003 invasion (İçduygu 2015: 4–5).

Syrians began arriving in Turkey and applying for asylum under these laws in significant numbers from April 2011 onwards. As part of an initial ‘open-door’ policy, the government announced at a UNHCR conference at Geneva in November 2011 that it would offer unobstructed entry without travel documentation and temporary accommodation in camps with neither individual status determination nor forcible return (Ihlamur-Öner 2013: 202). Assuming that the Assad regime was on the verge of collapse, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu promoted a narrative of brotherhood, referring to refugees as welcome temporary visitors and suggesting that Turkey could easily house up to 100,000 ‘guests’ in newly built camps along the border (Gokalp Aras and Mencutek 2015: 202). When this figure was rapidly exceeded and the scale of the displacement became apparent, however, ad hoc access restrictions emerged, culminating in the closure of the border completely in 2015 and the introduction of a visa regime the following year. By then, the government had built more than 20 camps housing over 200,000 people managed by a much-enlarged Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (*Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı*, AFAD). It was also becoming clear that the Syrian conflict (or more precisely conflicts) was likely to be long-lasting and without a neat conclusion.

Only around 10 per cent of Turkey’s registered Syrian refugees are resident in these camps, though, and are thus not best served by a relief agency principally mandated to respond to natural disasters. Responding to criticism that ‘the government had clearly made no allowance for [such] an eventuality’, new legislation on Foreigners and International Protection (Law 6458) was passed in April 2013 (Kirişçi 2014: 16), Article 103 of which established a General Directorate of Migration Management (*Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü*) within the Ministry of Interior with overall responsibility for the over 2.5 million Syrians living across the country (Erder 2016: 125). However, while this new administrative structure succeeded in greatly ‘expanding Turkey’s protective scope towards forced migrants’ (Soykan 2012: 41), it also solidified its two-tier regime by identifying non-Europeans as ‘conditional refugees’ who may only be admitted temporarily until they are resettled to a third country (Öner and Genç 2015: 254). The specific rights of those within this category were subsequently spelt out in the government’s Regulation on Temporary Protection issued later the following year. It legally enshrined Syrians’ access to the labour market, health care and education based on biometric foreigner ID cards, but did so firmly within the narrative of hosting guests (Dağtaş 2017). With only 2,500 work permits being issued to Syrians by 2014, further measures were introduced in January 2016 that attempted to strengthen the formal employment sector by extending minimum-wage stipulations, exempting employers from Syrians’ health-insurance costs and clarifying recruitment procedures (Erder 2016: 125; Baban *et al.*

2017: 51). Conversely, though, it also limited the proportion of refugees salaried within any one workforce, thereby underlining the temporary character of Ankara's protection regime. This perception was further reinforced two months later by the European Union 'one-in one-out' agreement, which promised to formalize resettlement processes in return for visa-free travel and €3 billion towards the \$5.6 billion estimated to have been spent by the Turkish government up until mid-2015 (Kirişçi and Ferris 2015: 3; İçduygu and Millet 2016: 5).

So, in all, while the Turkish state has responded to the Syrian crisis very robustly (the 2013 legislation was passed with an extremely rare unanimous parliamentary vote and its implementation has been personally overseen by a former Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Beşir Atalay), it ultimately has not addressed the country's two-tier asylum system. While it remains the key institutional structure governing the social position of its refugees, the extent to which this is likely to stay so, however, is open to some question. As far back as November 2014, Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş conceded that 'the Syrians are here to stay and that the refugees are permanent' (quoted in Memisoglu and Ilgit 2017: 316). President Erdoğan, whose wife (Emine Gülbaran) is of Arab descent, has also voiced the possibility of Syrians being offered the chance 'to acquire Turkish nationality', telling a 2016 *iftar* gathering in Kilis that 'Turkey is also your homeland'—plans he repeated in 2017 with the announcement that the Ministry of Interior would shortly be beginning an initial 'screening process' (al-Jazeera 2016; al-Jazeera 2017).

### **Syrians, the *Diyanet* and the AKP**

In mid-2011, there were around 19,000 registered refugees in Turkey, the majority of whom came from Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran. Of these, two-thirds were of working age (18–59 years old). By early 2018, the country was home to the greatest number of refugees in the world, with more than 3.7 million Syrians registered with the authorities (Memisoglu and Ilgit 2017: 1; European Commission 2018). While the demographic structure of the former remains broadly unchanged, more than half of Turkey's Syrian refugees are under the age of 19 (more than 360,000 of these have been born in Turkey) (İçduygu 2016: 11–14). Around one-third are believed to live outside the country's southern and south-eastern provinces. The most popular destinations are Istanbul, Ankara and Konya. The city estimated to have the fourth largest population of Syrians is Bursa, the locus of our study (Erdoğan 2014b: 14).

Located in Turkey's wealthy Marmara province and the Ottoman capital from 1335 to 1363, Bursa has long been a centre of migration. Although far from the Syrian border, it is believed to have received over 50,000 refugees. Most are thought to come from the Aleppo region, with which Bursa has a long history of trade links. It is difficult to be certain about overall numbers,



though, as many remain unknown to the authorities. The facts that the process of registration with AFAD is convoluted and city-specific, combined with an ongoing fear that, as Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel note, this information could be obtained by the Syrian regime or appear 'in European databases that could lead to their deportation back to Turkey' should they decide to apply for asylum elsewhere (2017: 49), mean that the actual total number of Syrians in the city may therefore be much higher than official figures. While many have opened small businesses visible across the city (sometimes as a result of local authorities expediting the usual registration procedures), those only in receipt of informal assistance and/or working in the grey economy are especially difficult to access. As a result, little is known about their lives. Many only come to the attention of statutory bodies when they approach neighbourhood mosques for help. Since all places of worship are managed by the Turkish state, they are typically passed onto officials employed by the *Diyanet*.

At the city level, this means the Muftiate and its team of *vaiz*. They have their roots in the creation of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in 1924 following the abolition of the Ottoman *waqf* foundations (Law 429). Staffed with clerics who had backed the war of independence (others had sided with the incumbent Ottoman government functioning under occupation) and modelled on the post-revolutionary French model of *laïcité*, it was subsumed within the Ministry of Interior as a kind of *Bureau Central des Cultes* (Gözyaydın 2008: 218). Initially, its principal *modus operandi* was to relegate religious practice to the private sphere. Without a pronounced public profile and thus needing few professional staff, it retained large numbers of voluntary roles encompassing a broad range of social functions. As it gradually took up a more political position as protector (or, some would say, imposer) of state religion, these became professionalized by means of the *Imam-Hatip* school system and then, more recently, closely associated with university education through the parallel development of divinity faculties as the principal replacement of Ottoman religious training structures (Yavuz 2003: 146).

The *vaiz* are key functionaries of the republican system. Frequently holding graduate degrees and enjoying high levels of social authority, their role is four-fold: (i) presenting talks (*va'az*) on various aspects of Islam within mosques and the community; (ii) leading educational events and cultural activities associated with Islam—festivals, summer camps, conferences, etc.; (iii) offering legal opinions (*fatawa*) as the Mufti's representative (the most senior female *vaiz* frequently serves as his deputy); and (iv) working with individuals, families and organizations to resolve local conflicts and promote Islamic values. Their overall aim is to elaborate and disseminate a "'true" understanding of Islamic knowledge' as defined by, and in the service of, the Turkish state (Maritato 2015: 438). Their work is thus quite different from the Islamically inspired non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that make up the bulk of studies of welfare and faith in Turkey (such as Göçmen 2014: 94). Rather, as Mona Hassan notes, the *vaiz* are a

pious political agency enmeshed in a deeply complicated and shifting set of power relations between the laic Turkish Republic and its citizens in the active management of religion in Turkish society (Hassan 2011: 454).

Running contrary to a more general picture of state retrenchment and increased marketization, these efforts have advanced considerably under the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) government since 2002. Connected to the wider political dynamics that have marked President Erdoğan's leadership—most notably the ongoing tensions between the secular republican establishment and the religious orientation of many AKP voters—the *Diyanet* has enlarged its profile, responsibilities and resources considerably. Growing from 80,000 to more than 120,000 employees since 2005 and currently managing over 86,000 mosques with a budget of over 3 billion lira, it is now larger than the Ministry of Interior. Under the leadership of Mehmet Görmez from 2010 to 2017, its senior staff started to take on a much higher-profile political role, offering forthright moral commentaries on contemporary social issues generally in line with the government's policy preferences (Öztürk 2016: 626–627). The Syrian crisis has not gone unnoticed. Görmez, who was born in the town of Nizip just 30 kilometres from the Syrian border, frequently visited refugee schools, organized the disbursement of overseas funding (most notably from the Qatari government) and signed an agreement with AFAD placing the *Diyanet* at the centre of the Turkish state's social response. Perhaps following Erdoğan's lead, he also regularly implied that the Syrian minority will be permanent, telling a social support centre in Ankara that the refugees 'are not guests', that Turkey is their 'own home and country' and that its citizens must host them 'as a human, Muslim and neighbourly duty' (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2017).

### Islam, Refuge and the Vaiz

Scholars have put forward multiple ethical reasons for extending assistance to refugees: from security-oriented self-interest to social contract theory, utilitarianism and liberal universalism (Boswell 2005). The principal finding from our research, though, is that Islamic notions of assistance appear to outweigh other possible motives. The vaiz were unanimous in emphasizing the ethical obligations that all Muslims have in assisting refugees, especially if one's neighbours are in difficulty. At the most general level, this is based on a fundamental reciprocity between human beings. The Mufti was keen to point out that the Qur'an principally addresses 'people' (*insa'an*), not just 'believers' (*mu'minin*). Its injunctions are therefore intended both to provide for, and guide the behaviour of, humanity in general—not simply Muslims. A number of vaiz referred to the well-known *hadith*: 'none of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself' (translation from Imam Nawawi's collection).



This is, they stressed, 'particularly so in the case of forced migration'. The prophet, himself, was a refugee—obliged to flee persecution in Mecca for the sanctuary of Yathrib (later renamed Medina) in 622. Those who helped him (known as the Ansar) are especially blessed. Then, as now, religious orientation is unimportant. The vaiz pointed out that, since Yathrib was a diverse town made up of Jews and pagans (Donner 2002–03), 'there should be no differentiation between Muslim and non-Muslim Syrians, nor Shi'a and Sunni'. This is, they argued, 'very much in keeping with Turkish tradition'. Sultan Beyazid II offered sanctuary to 150,000 Spanish Jews following the Alhambra Decree of 1492, perhaps as many as 200,000 non-Muslim Russians arrived in the Ottoman capital or its Black Sea cities after the Bolshevik revolution and no one questioned the confessional identity of the Iranian émigrés of the early 1980s (Lewis 2014: 135–136). The Qur'an itself is clear, the vaiz reminded us—even to the point of assisting one's opponents. The first half of Chapter 9: Verse 6, for example, reads: 'if any of the idolaters ask you for protection, give them protection until they have heard the words of Allah' (Bewley and Bewley 2013: 172).

To emphasize this universalist message, the vaiz we spoke to mostly preferred to describe the Syrian refugees as *muhacir*, defined in the Qur'an as 'those who make hijra [leave their homes] for Allah's sake after being wronged' (Chapter 16: Verse 41 (Bewley and Bewley 2013: 253)). This differs from the more common Turkish word, *mülteci*, in three key ways. First, it is more closely connected to Islamic notions of travel, including the annual pilgrimage to the Hijaz (Lewis 1988: 106). Second, the term is also used to refer to the 5 million or so migrants who arrived in Anatolia from former Ottoman territories during the last two centuries of the empire. These included Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the republic, as well as many others considered to be central to the emergence of the modern Turkish state (Çağaptay 2006: 82). Third, whereas *mülteci* involves crossing a border, usually as a result of forced displacement, the *muhacir* may have simply moved within Muslim lands, perhaps through choice.

The term thus implies a legal or legitimate undertaking that has come to include economic migration (for, as Chapter 62: Verses 9–11 make clear, believers are expected to spread throughout the Earth in pursuit of Allah's bounty) (Dündar 2015: 227). Presenting fewer connotations of need in this way better represents the socio-economic spread of Bursa's Syrians, the vaiz argued. Some, particularly those who left nearer to the start of the civil war, are—they point out—very wealthy and have made substantial investments in the city's economy. It also connects them to longer-term patterns of population movement within a region hitherto dominated by Turkey. One interviewee, noting a long-shared heritage, mentioned how Syrians fought alongside Turks in the Gallipoli campaign. Some also used the term *göçmen*—defined by Pusch and Sirkeci as a reference to 'recent migration movements of people of Turkish descent and culture... [who may have]

certain rights for incorporation in Turkey’—as a means of unsettling the two-tier asylum structure in which they work (2016: 14).

Indeed, this distinction between those refugees covered by Turkey’s conditional ratification of the Geneva Convention and those who are not is ignored by the *vaiz* who prefer, instead, to emphasize the universality of Islamic teachings and its foundational notion of *aman*, the provision of sanctuary/asylum (al-Dawoody 2011: 129). Just as Negus, the Christian King of Ethiopia, sheltered a small group of early Muslims around the period of 613–616 (including the future Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan) despite enticement and intimidation, so should the Turkish state continue to welcome Syrians, the *vaiz* argued, with regard to neither the identity of the migrants nor the resultant strain on public services (Lings 2006: 81–84). The implication here is that an inviolable principle of *non-refoulement* should be accompanied by an undifferentiated asylum policy that ensures long-term integration based on the provision of adequate public goods. This would seem to be fullest means of meeting the Qur’anic injunctions to ensure that the *muhacir* should ‘find many places of refuge on the Earth and ample sustenance’ as well as ‘good lodging in this world’ (Chapters 4 (Verse 100) and 16 (Verse 41), respectively (Bewley and Bewley 2013: 83, 253)). After all, the *vaiz* concluded, ‘those who have given refuge and help’ to the migrant are, the Qur’an makes clear, ‘the true believers’ (Chapter 8: Verse 74 (Bewley and Bewley 2013: 170)).

### **Transiency, Permanence and Conflict**

In helping to provide ‘refuge’ and ‘good lodgings’, the *vaiz* have had to balance two powerful concerns. The first is the tension between the need to absorb Syrians into Turkish life while also seeking to preserve their own cultural orientation. As such, the *vaiz* have concentrated on combining basic assistance initiatives with longer-term efforts aimed at integration. The deployment of a religious discourse to encourage local companies to distribute free bread or worshippers to donate money (single Friday collections at the larger mosques regularly raise in excess of 300,000 Turkish lira (approximately €75,000) they report) has thus operated alongside a successful campaign to pressure the government into issuing foreign guest identification cards that allow Syrians to access community health centres, schools, social services and so on (eventually incorporated into the legislation discussed above). A comparable balance is apparent in the sponsorship of youth events. Joint activities for Turkish and Syrian children and young people remain the preferred policy, but are organized together with an annual nationwide summer camp specifically for young Syrians. Hosted collaboratively by the Youth and Sports Ministries in the town of Kırşehir, it attracted over 400 attendees in 2015 and included *vaiz* from Bursa who assisted with lessons, prayer leadership and so on.

Similarly, the Muftiate’s consistent promotion of the Turkish language (especially to older arrivals who are struggling to pick this up) is thus

placed alongside the obligation for all believers to learn Arabic in order to access key religious texts. After all, the vaiz reminded us, the Qur'an solely exists in Arabic and instructs the prophet to speak only 'in a clear Arabic tongue' (Chapter 26: Verse 195 (Bewley and Bewley 2013: 357)). The implication here is that Turks' inability to communicate with Syrians is thus their own shortcoming. This was perhaps an element in the government's recent announcement that Arabic would be offered to all primary-school children nationwide. First suggested in 2011, the vaiz see the proposals as an important element in Turkey's three-year plan to incorporate the 600,000 or so Syrian children still not enrolled within the state-school system (International Crisis Group 2018: 18). Since, at present, the law does not permit the establishment of places of worship outside *Diyanet* control, this encouragement of Arabic is also seen by the vaiz as a way of bringing congregations together within mosques.

As such, the Mufti reported that he had rejected requests to hold separate prayers (he also said that he feared different forms of Islamic practice might become a source of divisiveness), but had donated a building to the Syrians for their informal use—categorically not a mosque, he underlined. Some of the vaiz, however, mentioned that such restrictions may be likely to change in the near future. The state has, they pointed out, recently recruited around 1,000 *mele* (Kurdish religious leaders) 'to establish better contact with Kurdish speaking people', thereby effectively permitting Kurdish mosques (Yildiz 2013: 665), while the *Alevi* minority's campaign to gain state funding for their places of worship has also been endorsed by deputy AKP leader, Ayhan Sefer Üstün, 'without preconditions' (Yalman 2016). All the vaiz we spoke to maintained the view that the AKP has been more pluralist in this regard than other parties—in loosening restrictions on Islamic practice more generally, they argued, more social space becomes available for cultural expressions of all kinds.

The second key concern structuring the work of the vaiz is balancing the tension between meeting the Syrians' acute social needs and the management of local conflicts. Public opinion surveys in Turkey have regularly recorded comparatively high levels of xenophobia (Erdoğan 2014a) and there was a widespread fear amongst the vaiz that Bursa could suffer the kinds of mass protests and violence that have marked cities such as Gaziantep, Adana, Izmir, Manavgat and Reyhanlı (Toğral Koca 2016: 67). All reported growing tensions and encountering low-level hostility across the municipality. However, perhaps because Bursa has traditionally been a strong supporter of the AKP and its pro-refugee policy position (11 of its 18 parliamentary deputies are currently members of the party), reported incidences of hate crime have been few—even from areas of the city in which the proportion of Syrian refugees is at its highest, such as the satellite town of Gürsu. That said, however, a nationwide survey carried out in October 2014, of which 10 per cent of its respondents came from Bursa, found that more than three-quarters agreed with the statement that 'Syrians who stay in Turkey

may cause major problems' and only 23 per cent believed that they are not involved in crime (Erdoğan 2014b: 32–34).

Vaiz working in the predominantly Kurdish neighbourhoods of Bursa's central district of Osmangazi reported the highest numbers of problems. The refugees' arrival in this part of the city coincided with a catastrophic earthquake in the Kurdish city of Van and the emergence of what Memisoglu and Ilgit call a 'rival victim' mentality (2017: 327). When the government began issuing temporary identification cards in time for the local elections of March 2014, the press predicted that full citizenship would follow, thereby 'turning [Syrians] into potential voters'—a concern that intensified when similar reports suggested that refugee camps were being constructed in areas where the AKP had traditionally received little electoral support (Göktuna Yaylacı and Karakuş 2015). Unease rose higher still later that year during the siege of Kobanî/Ayn al-Arab amid allegations that Ankara was doing little to help the Kurdish militia fighting a predominantly Sunni Arab coalition that might be regarded as difficult to distinguish from the bulk of Syria's émigrés to date (Ihlamur-Öner 2013: 206). This contributed to the collapse of the intermittent ceasefire between the state and Turkey's principal Kurdish insurgent group (the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) costing more than 1,700 lives over the next 12 months and increasing tensions nationwide. It also prompted perhaps as many as 500,000 Syrian Kurds to cross the border, complicating the PKK's opposition to the government's resettlement programme and creating a new dimension to the management of inter-communal relations in Turkey's cities (Kılıçaslan 2016; Mandıracı 2016).

The vaiz pointed to the localization of these broader conflict dynamics as both a key policy challenge and a primary cause of neighbourhood opposition within Bursa. Refusing to be drawn on the criticism that Turkey has been able to meet neither international norms nor the terms of its own 1994 and 2006 legislation in separating combatants from civilians within its refugee population (Naftalin and Berg Harpviken 2012), they maintained that most of the former combatants within Bursa's refugees are 'moderates from the Free Syrian Army'. All agreed, however, that the city is also home to former and current operatives of the Syrian state, as well ex-soldiers from the Islamic state. At the local level, the vaiz have responded to such a patchwork of tensions with recourse to traditional Islamic notions of *sulh* (compromise). Following Chapter 49: Verse 9 of the Qur'an, which states that 'if two parties of the believers fight, make peace between them', they reported that much of their time is spent 'emphasising toleration, universalism and forgiveness, as well as the advantages of mediation over litigation' (Bewley and Bewley 2013: 506). After all, as one vaiz pointed out, it was Ottoman clerics who first codified Islamic arbitration conventions, through the compilation of the *medjella* in 1869—a treatise that still influences negotiation practices across the (Hanefi) Muslim world today (Kutty 2006: 568).

### **Social Support, Work and Education**

This commitment to tactical conflict management, coupled with a strategic dedication to guiding Turkish society towards an acceptance that its Syrian presence will remain long term, are the over-arching principles that structure the vaiz's approach to the major policy areas in which they work. In terms of social support, for instance, they have encouraged landlords to provide low-cost housing for refugees, while also dealing with local resentments over resultant rises in rental costs across the city (a nationwide issue blamed on the Syrians (Öner and Genç 2015: 255)). A similar situation exists in accessing primary and emergency health care. Since this is available free for the refugees—many of whom have very complex treatment needs—already overstretched provisions in some parts of the city have suffered, leading to delays for local people and a subsequent increase in antagonism. Recent survey data, for instance, suggest that more than 70 per cent of Turkish citizens regard the refugees as an economic burden (Erdoğan 2014b: 28). To try to ameliorate these problems, Bursa's vaiz have joined a city-wide association of more than 60 local NGOs operating together—despite widely differing approaches to the public place of religion, local issues and party politics. Supervised jointly by the Mufti, the provincial governor and the city council, the aim, they told us, is 'to offer a more joined-up approach to the practical difficulties of immigrant life, while also promoting closer inter-communal relations'.

A growing element of these interactions, the Mufti suggested, is matrimony. All the *Diyanet* employees we spoke to agreed that marrying local people is an especially enduring means of integrating the refugees. They pointed to three main benefits here: (i) 'grounding' the large numbers of young Syrian men within Turkish familial convention, (ii) protecting vulnerable unaccompanied Syrian women and providing an additional parent for their children and (iii) lessening local prejudice, particularly perceptions that Syrians are involved in theft and prostitution. However, some of the female vaiz pointed out that Syrian women's reputation for beauty and domestic management have prompted issues of jealousy, as well as infidelity and increases in divorce rates (Orhan and Senyücel Gündoğar 2015: 16). Significant here is the legacy of the 'natasha' discourse of the 1990s when migrant women from the former Soviet Union became associated with prostitution, leading to a widespread harassment and even violence—sometimes from Turkish women (Gülçür and İlkkaracan 2002: 414). According to Bruce Stanley, Bursa remains an important trading post in the illegal trafficking of Eastern European women (2007: 103). This has added to anti-Syrian prejudice, especially where some Turkish men have married Syrians polygamously, occasionally seeking to justify their actions on the grounds of Islam or humanitarianism. There have also been reports that some of those involved have been underage or coerced (see Kirişçi 2014: 29, for instance), but the vaiz knew of no cases locally and, as M. Murat Erdoğan observes, the number of officially confirmed incidents has tended to be very low (2014b: 21).

Working at a very local level, the vaiz have responded to these issues by developing highly sensitive conflict management approaches based on a combination of faith references and pragmatism. First, they have emphasized that polygamy in Turkey (unlike in Syria) is illegal and, second, they have underlined that, in order for a marriage to be legitimate Islamically, it must be entered into freely—necessitating, in other words, independent volition, informed consent and mental capacity (none of which is applicable to a child). In an effort to diminish this kind of *in camera* arrangement, Muftiate staff have also used their *ex officio* influence to circumvent some of the state's normal procedures regarding statements of no impediment, birth certificates, etc. and to register weddings for couples unable to provide the usual documentation.

The vaiz have also campaigned hard to find Bursa's refugees jobs and to bring those already working into the formal sector. Unemployment is a major issue for Syrians across the whole country, with the provinces in which they predominantly reside experiencing rates of joblessness at double the national average of 10 per cent. Their presence within the unregistered employment sector has also helped to increase this area of the labour market to around 32 per cent of the workforce (İçduygu 2016: 9–10). In Bursa, the vaiz reported some success in assisting refugees into work. A reputation for excellence in joinery has allowed some to access Bursa's furniture factories, while *Diyanet* officials have advised many others on how to register small businesses with local chambers of commerce. Significant problems of Turkish literacy and qualification accreditation remain, however, frequently obliging the Syrians to work for a fraction of the minimum wage (Sert 2016: 108). As Kemal Kirişçi notes, those 'willing to take lower wages and work longer hours face a higher risk of exploitation with little recourse while provoking resentment among locals' (2014: 22). While the vaiz reported that some of Bursa's local businesses have benefited from cheap labour—especially to do the so-called '3D' jobs (dirty, dangerous and difficult) of the construction, textile and agricultural sectors—they remain worried about exploitation and have regularly reported suspicions to the regulatory authorities (who, in keeping with a nationwide rise in enforcement, have imposed heavy fines for breaches of the law (Baban *et al.* 2017: 52)). This is important, they argued, if, first, the general feeling that Syrians are 'taking away or stealing jobs... [by] establishing tax-free businesses and depressing wages' is to be redressed (Toğral Koca 2016: 68) and, second, if the right to work is to be extended (nearly half of respondents to a nationwide survey in 2014 held the view that work permits should never be granted to refugees (Erdoğan 2014b: 30)).

Of particular concern to the vaiz is the fact that Bursa's grey economy includes a growing number of working children—a feature already 'common in Turkey among migrant workers' (Şenses 2016: 981). Data recently released reveals that less than half of the country's registered refugee children of school age are enrolled in education, even though the right to receive this free of charge is specifically written into Turkish law, leading United Nations



Children's Fund to warn of an imminent 'lost generation' (Kirişçi 2014: 23; İçduygu 2016: 25). In Bursa, the Syrian community has responded by establishing their own Arabic-medium schools, taking advantage of European Union harmonization legislation (principally directed at the country's Kurdish-language speakers) that permits education in minority languages. At the time of our research, there were around 30 of these operating in Bursa. Most are small and informal, but three—*Risalet*, *Fecr Ikra* and *Mühabbet*—are relatively large, with several hundred pupils in each. A full curriculum is taught with a particular emphasis on Turkish language. The objective is to gain entry into the mainstream education system, with many students going on to *Imam-Hatip* schools. Mainly serving the estimated 4,000 or so Syrian children not enrolled at one of Bursa's state schools, they are registered as NGOs and co-operate closely with similar establishments in Reyhanlı, Gaziantep, Kilis, Mersin and Istanbul.

Unlike in these other cities, though, Bursa's former provincial governor, Münir Karaloğlu, refused to grant official status to Syrian schools, preferring instead to promote the merits of combined education. Arriving in post at the height of the displacement crisis in 2013, he was, perhaps, responding to public unease over curriculum content and gender segregation within the schools. As Kemal Kirişçi notes, 'content and delivery is vulnerable to politicization due to resentment, prejudice and sectarianism triggered by the war in Syria'. We saw no evidence of this in the schools we visited in Bursa and it might be possible that Karaloğlu was concerned that validating Arabic-medium establishments would raise what Kirişçi calls 'accusations of double-standards' over the ongoing difficulties that Kurds have had in sustaining minority-language provisions—all five Kurmanci-medium primary schools set up since deregulation have now closed amid an acute deterioration of security in the south-east of the country (2014: 25). As a result, Bursa's Syrian schools cannot host public exams, are forced to seek funding from overseas (notably the Bahraini humanitarian organization, *Jasad Wahed*) and must send their students to be assessed in Istanbul.

Opinion within the *vaiz* appeared to be divided on the issue of separate or combined education. Some worried about the long-term social effects of offering official recognition to Syrian schools, while others pointed to the more acute practical difficulty of including (especially older) refugee children in mainstream classes that they cannot understand. All were agreed, however, that greater levels of public funding will need to be allocated to the state-school system in order to incorporate refugee children long term, without increasing class sizes or lessening academic attainment (already important concerns amongst local people) (Orhan and Senyücel Gündoğar 2015: 35).

The Muftiate has attempted to deal with this unease by emphasizing the centrality of education to Islamic thought and action. The first word of the Qur'an, the *vaiz* reminded us, is not 'believe' or 'obey', but 'read/proclaim' (*ikra*). It then goes on to mention the value of learning 865 times, making clear, for instance, that only those 'with knowledge have fear of Allah'

(Chapter 35: Verse 28) (Bewley and Bewley 2013: 422; Saiful Islam 2016: 6). In practical terms, the vaiz have also organized the establishment of Arabic-medium courses combining religious education with intensive Turkish-language instruction, utilizing Bursa's bi-lingual communities from Turkey's southern cities. Using their Arabic-language skills (a common—but as yet not entirely universal—aspect of university divinity programmes), the vaiz have interviewed voluntary teachers and supported them with training as more and more Syrian nationals take up employment within the *Diyanet*'s Qur'anic education sector. The appointment process focused on fairly standard aspects of religious knowledge, but included subtle questions designed to uncover the types of politicization described by Kirişçi above. None had been found at the time of the research but, if discovered, it would, the vaiz reported, be a criterion for rejection.

## Conclusion

This article can be read as part of wider reflections on the meanings and ownership of humanitarianism. The sector is under-going rapid and far-reaching change, and the case of the vaiz—and many other actors in other contexts—necessitates a rethinking of humanitarian space. In relation to our case study, that space is occupied by the state, a religious organization and a religious belief system all encompassed in one body. Our case study encourages a thinking-through of the heterogeneity of charitable actors, and the implications this has for the meanings and direction of humanitarianism.

In particular, there is, as Alastair and Joey Ager have recently pointed out, a general 'invisibility' of local faith organizations within studies of how host communities engage with displaced people. They call for 'an attempt to re-envision the[ir] role ... [as] core to the understanding of refugee experience and support' (2017: 47). This study has tried to do just that. It has looked at the almost completely ignored contribution of the vaiz to the management of Turkey's Syrian population in one of the country's largest cities. Following Ager and Ager's three-part call for greater recognition, it has focused first on how the vaiz sought to establish relationships with the refugees through a shared understanding of Islamic values and narratives. While our study only concerned Muftiate employees and therefore did not assess how their work was received by the Syrians themselves, it is certainly possible to conclude that, for the former, building connections with Bursa's refugee population is—as Ager and Ager suggest—not simply about developing coping strategies based on a shared identity, but also a profoundly spiritual experience. In all, what is surprising and revealing here is not that vaiz's work is embedded in Islamic values—after all, relations between people either side of what is now the Turkish-Syrian border have been heavily influenced by religious thought and institutions for many centuries—but that their role within the Turkish state's response to the refugee crisis has received so little attention.

The vaiz have, we argue, also mobilized what Ager and Ager call 'spiritual capital' in the development of hospitality as a moral imperative—the second part of their call to re-envision the role of faith in humanitarian response. 'Far more than the provision of resources relevant to a predetermined agenda of refugee reception', the *Diyanet*'s narrative of 'welcoming the stranger' has placed Islamic notions of cordiality at the heart of Turkey's role as a regional host (Ager and Ager 2017: 49). Taking a lead from President Erdoğan, who has called upon his citizens to 'serve as ansar to the muhajirun ... [and] open their houses exactly like it happened at the time [of the prophet]', the vaiz have focused extensively on the Islamic responsibility to offer assistance to those in need (quoted in *Hürriyet Daily News* 2016). Facing comparable challenges to any other ('secular') agency, they have, we suggest, balanced the need to absorb Syrians into Turkish life while also seeking to resolve related local conflicts by deploying religious teachings that advocate values not dissimilar to those of international humanitarian norms.

In doing so, the vaiz have also embraced 'a third key role for local faith communities: advocacy for the displaced and challenge of governmental policies that fail to respect their shared humanity' (Ager and Ager 2017: 50). Their emphasis on the universal moral imperative of offering sanctuary disputes Turkey's two-tier asylum system and its premise of temporariness—or what, in cultural terms, Seçil Dağtaş (2017) has recently called the *misafir* (guest) narrative. Concurring with Ager and Ager's conclusion that religion is 'one of the most powerful potential sources of [such] critique' (2017: 50), our interviewees were unanimous in asserting the refugees' right to permanent residence. They see their role as, in part, preparing Turkish society to accept the fact that many will never return. Although circumscribed by their position as public-sector officials, Bursa's vaiz have, as such, aimed to fill the (frequently extremely wide) gaps in the state's response. Using its command of scriptural sources, its social status and its exceptional ability to reach into Turkish society, the Muftiate has, we argue, constructed sophisticated religious narratives aimed at realizing a wide range of policy objectives. These have not only been focused on the universal concerns of humanitarian intervention—housing, employment and education—but also on gender relations and spiritual welfare.

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