

THE EMERGENCE OF THE “FATHER STATE” IN GERMANY

A FEMINIST POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON TURKISH-SUNNI MOSQUES

The state-like significance attributed to DİTİB that manages over 900 Turkish-Sunni mosques in Germany has long been a subject of criticism. However, for hundreds of thousands of Turkish-Sunni community members who had migrated to Germany, these mosques represent a paternalist figure of the father state. But even more so, they serve as a second home.

Devran Koray Öcal



An exterior view of the DİTİB Berlin Şehitlik Mosque.
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When I arrived in Cologne in 2016 for my field research on Turkish mosques in Germany, I was guided by a critical question: *What significance do these mosques hold for the Turkish community here?* My first conversation was with Hakkı, a fifty-something restaurant owner and regular mosque-goer in Cologne. Our dialogue quickly shifted to the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB), a key association managing over 900 Turkish-Sunni mosques across Germany. DİTİB claims around 800,000 members from the nearly four million people of Turkish descent in the country. Sitting in his restaurant located near DİTİB's central mosque in Cologne, he gestured towards the mosque and shared: "DİTİB symbolizes the state; it represents our second home here."

Just like other diaspora spaces, such as restaurants or cultural centers, I had anticipated that mosques could serve as gathering and exchange hubs for Turks beyond their religious significance. Still, Hakkı's response surprised me. Why did he mention the state when talking about a religious space? How did the concepts of *state*, *mosque*, and *home* merge so fluidly?

During two different field research periods between 2016 and 2018, I conducted interviews in several cities across Germany, including Berlin, Cologne, Wuppertal, Düsseldorf, and Duisburg. The participants, predominantly first and second-generation men aged between 40 and 65, were members of different DİTİB mosque associations. Similar to what Hakkı mentioned, most of my interviewees emphasized the same point: They associate DİTİB with the Turkish state and view mosques as spaces that embody the roles of *father*, *home*, and *homeland*.

The state-like significance attributed to DİTİB, which has long been a subject of criticism in Germany, is often explained in German media and public discourse by the organization's organic ties to the Turkish state. According to an agreement between the German and Turkish governments that has been in place since the 1980s, imams are sent from Turkey to DİTİB mosques in Germany with the status of Turkish state officials. This arrangement, along with the extraterritorial connections that Turkish President Erdoğan has attempted to establish with mosque congregations in Germany since the 2000s, are fundamental reasons behind these suspicions. Allegations in 2017 that a few imams serving in DİTİB mosques were spying on behalf of the Turkish state significantly strengthened claims that DİTİB acts as an extended arm of President Erdoğan.

However, what I observed from the interviews suggests a narrative rooted in a more grounded historical process that transcends mere international agreements and geopolitical/diplomatic maneuvers. For the hundreds of thousands of Turkish-Sunni community members who migrated to Germany through worker migration programs since the 1960s, mosques have served as the only available public spaces where they could seek refuge and recover from their traumas amid loneliness, deprivation, and discrimination. Consequently, mosques began to represent the paternalist figure of "devlet baba" (father state) in their eyes, reflecting a more affective perception of the state.

Feminist Political Geography: Merging the Global and the Intimate

It became clear to me that the traditional academic concepts that would explain the quasi-state role of the mosques only through interstate relations and diplomacy were not sufficient to grasp the phenomenon I observed. But moving beyond the dominant view in media and academic literature about DİTİB through more grounded historical, emotional, and everyday life realities was also not an easy task. To achieve this nuanced understanding, I decided to engage with the concepts of state and geopolitics as articulated in feminist political geography literature.

Feminist political geographers challenge the superficial understanding promoted by traditional narratives that define the state solely through its military, bureaucracy, borders, and laws. Instead, this scholarship perceives the state as deeply embedded within societal relations. It reads the state as an entity operating within the fabric of social life while emphasizing that perceptions of the state are shaped by individuals' specific locations, their intimate and embodied encounters with state processes, and how the state manifests in their everyday lives.

Feminist political geography incorporates the dictum that *the personal is political*, which originates from feminist activist Carol Hanisch's 1970 essay of the same title on an array of political concepts and phenomena. This perspective, described as the "global intimate" by feminist political geographers, argues that the formation, structures, and functions of the state, along with the imagination and implementation of



The courtyard of the DİTİB Berlin Şehitlik Mosque. A crowd gathering for midday prayer. © Devran Koray Öcal, 16/05/2018

geopolitics, are deeply interwoven within the personal realms of its citizens. For instance, as feminist scholar Joana Nagel emphasizes in her book *Masculinity and Nationalism* (1998), when we consider how nationalism and masculinity are constructed through concepts like honor, bravery, sacrifice, and protection, we see how the public and the private, or the political and the personal, continuously overlap.

A brief history of migration from Turkey to Germany

Mass migration from Turkey to Germany started in 1961 with a bilateral labor agreement that catalyzed an influx of Turkish guest workers to Germany. This migration movement, extending over more than five decades, saw approximately 10 million individuals relocating to Germany, with a portion of these migrants eventually returning to Turkey.

Predominantly originating from rural areas in Turkey and often with limited formal education, these immigrants faced significant challenges upon their arrival. They were primarily engaged in labor-intensive roles, lived in inadequate housing, and most of their social interactions were limited to fellow Turkish nationals. The lack of sufficient public services and social spaces exacerbated their sense of isolation, discrimination, and indignity. Language barriers hindered their assimilation into German society, complicating even rudimentary daily interactions.

These distressing experiences were primarily due to the failure of both the German and Turkish states to recognize these workers as individuals with social lives. The guest-worker policy of the German state, predicated on the notion of “temporariness,” neglected the development of social support or integration initiatives, such as language or integration courses. Meanwhile, the Turkish state economically benefited from the remittances sent home by the migrants and did not prioritize their needs.

The Establishment of DİTİB and Emergence of the “Father State”

This neglect continued until 1984, when DİTİB was established through a bilateral agreement between the Turkish and the German governments. This initiative began to address the long-standing issues faced by Turkish-Sunni workers in Germany. Two main factors drove its establishment. First, the changing foreign policy of Turkey necessitated closer relations with its diaspora communities. Second, both the Turkish and German governments viewed the spontaneous emergence of radical Islamic organizations among Turkish Sunnis in Germany as a security threat that needed to be addressed. DİTİB aimed to bring all existing mosques under one umbrella, creating a sense of order and control.

However, by the time DİTİB was founded, the diaspora community had already begun to establish their lives in Germany, and its needs extended far beyond religious services. Its members grappled with feelings of anxiety, loneliness, or discrimination, alongside cultural concerns about raising their children without their national and religious values. The Turkish consulates lacked the capacity to respond to the social needs of their community, leaving a significant gap in their support.

The establishment of DİTİB filled this void, at least for Turkish-Sunni mosque regulars. The bilateral agreement facilitated the official dispatch of imams from Turkey to DİTİB mosques, thereby providing both religious and formal authority within these spaces. Moreover, DİTİB’s robust institutional framework as a nationwide civil society organization was instrumental in resolving numerous legal and institutional challenges that mosques throughout Germany faced, such as issues with construction permits.

The mosques under the DİTİB umbrella began organizing a variety of community events, including soccer and billiard tournaments, arts and crafts bazaars, and iftar gatherings during Ramadan, which cultivated a sense of unity among congregants. Finally, with membership fees, a substantial social service network was established that offered a wide range of services accessible to all DİTİB members. These services included free psychological and family counseling, religious and cultural education for children, arrangements for funerals and pilgrimages, as well as financial and legal aid and consultancy services.

Over time, DİTİB mosques transcended from merely religious spaces into expansive diasporic cultural spaces that inclusively catered to women, children, and youth. This was significant for the Turkish-Sunni community in Germany with its painful diaspora experiences. As many of my research participants expressed, they no longer felt “orphaned” and “abandoned”; they now had a *home* where they could find shelter and a *father* to protect and care for them.

The concept of the “father-state” is central to Turkish nationalism. It became a cornerstone of the relationship between the state and its citizens following the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 under Mustafa Kemal’s leadership. This approach drew from Ottoman traditions but was repurposed to foster a unified, homogeneous national identity, sidelining ethnic, religious, and class differences. The surname “Atatürk,” meaning “father of the Turks,” which was bestowed upon Mustafa Kemal, epitomized this benevolent protector role. The surname fostered a familial bond between the state and its citizens, where love and mutual responsibilities were central themes—although it must be noted that this familial metaphor has faced criticism for excluding non-Turkish-Sunni groups like Kurds and Alevis, highlighting the state’s failure to embrace all its “children equally.”

We can understand the “fatherly” role attributed to DİTİB by the first and second-generation Turkish-Sunni communities in Germany against this historical backdrop. Through its community engagement, DİTİB fostered an environment reminiscent of the paternal state back in Turkey, providing a space of unity and care amidst challenges. This reimagined familial concept of the state within DİTİB not only offered a sense of home but also became a new lens through which the diaspora viewed state-citizen relationships. This perspective blended memories of the



A Ramadan Iftar event at the DİTİB Berlin Şehitlik Mosque. The presence of many children is notable because special activities were prepared for them that day. © Devran Koray Öcal, 25/05/2018

Turkish familial state with their current experiences in Germany, reshaping their understanding of community and authority.

Deciphering the State through the Prism of Home and Care

In the interviews I conducted for my research, the dialogue often steered towards comparisons between DİTİB and the Turkish consulates in Germany. The consulates were viewed by the community as the go-to authority for a myriad of needs. At the same time, my interviewees’ stories frequently depicted the consulates as impersonal, elitist, and demeaning. For example, Tarık, a senior DİTİB official in his 50s, shared a poignant critique of the consulate’s approach, saying: “Do you know what offended me the most and still makes me feel like crying? [The consulate officials] were treating us like animals!”

This sentiment underscores a deep-seated expectation among the diaspora for dignified treatment from what they regard as “their state,” an expectation unmet by the consular services. By contrast, the establishment of DİTİB marked a significant shift in the diaspora’s relationship with the Turkish state. Hakkı, highlighting DİTİB’s role, noted:

Back then, a factory stood there. The [Turkish] state was absent. We found no one in the consulates to converse with. A barrier existed between the [Turkish] na-

tion and the [Turkish] state. With the advent of DİTİB, that barrier has dissolved. People have found their state in DİTİB.

Echoing Hakkı's words, numerous interviewees drew parallels between the state and the notion of home, invoking the dual Turkish interpretations of "home" as both "ev" (house) and "yuva" (nest). "Ev" denotes a tangible dwelling that furnishes a sense of belonging for family members, while "yuva" embodies the concept of a nurturing nest. I vividly recall the zeal with which Hacer, the chair of the women's branch of a DİTİB mosque association in Cologne, guided me through her mosque, showcasing the kitchen and the meeting room that had hosted a wedding ceremony just the day before my visit. Her excitement mirrored that of a homeowner proudly presenting their abode to a cherished visitor. "Without our mosque, we would be orphans here," she said. "It is just like the father's home (*baba ocağı*). It helps us not long for our homeland (*vatan*)."

While Hacer did not explicitly mention the "state," the interplay she highlighted between the concepts of orphanhood, the father's home, and homeland suggested a deeper narrative: Turkish citizens—envisioned as children—risked becoming "orphans" in the absence of the "state," represented in Germany by DİTİB. This relationship underscores DİTİB's role in cultivating a sense of "homeland" far from Turkey's shores. This dynamic is reminiscent of a plea from the 1930s, where a citizen appealed to the Turkish state as a "benevolent father," asking, "Aren't you the father of the nation? Are orphan hearts wrong in looking for consolation in your embrace?", as quoted in Yiğit Akin's article, "Reconsidering State, Party, and Society in Early Republican Turkey: Politics of Petitioning" (2007).

The metaphor of the father's home further intertwines with the nuanced concept of "yuva," signifying a place of safety and closeness. This conceptualization positions mosques as bastions of security and moral fortitude amidst the vulnerabilities encountered in the diaspora, such as isolation, xenophobia, and the threat of "cultural degeneration." Within the mosque's confines, a multifaceted sense of safety emerges, encompassing protection, trust, and refuge, all of which resonate with the familial notions of statehood.

Erkan, associated with a local DİTİB mosque in Kiel, articulated this perspective by characterizing mosques as sanctuaries for those in distress. By de-

scribing DİTİB as a "yuva" Erkan drew parallels between the supportive roles traditionally played by state institutions in Turkey and the comprehensive care provided by DİTİB in Germany:

"Where do people go in Turkey when they are in trouble? They go either to the municipality (belediye), district governorship (kaymakamlık), or the police. People here come to DİTİB when they are in trouble. There is nowhere else to go [...] Mosques in Turkey do not have such concerns because the state handles these issues. But here we [DİTİB] do everything.

[He recounts an incident where a woman sought refuge in the mosque after being harmed by her spouse, underscoring the mosque's role as a haven]:

A few days ago, a woman came to the mosque in tears. Her husband had beaten her. She had relatives in Berlin. After they heard about the incident, they recommended her to go somewhere safe and wait for them. Where is this safe place? It is here! This place becomes a police station when it needs to be [...] This is what we call yuva!"

The narratives from my research participants reveal that the perception of DİTİB as embodying a paternalist state is crafted and sustained through memories, emotions, and intimate connections. Despite DİTİB not being a state entity in any formal or legal sense, the intricate blend of diasporic experiences, nostalgic reminiscences of the homeland, and daily engagements between the Turkish-Sunni community and DİTİB foster a profound sense of DİTİB representing the Turkish "state."

My research participants seldom characterized the German state in such intimate terms—even amidst reforms in German citizenship laws that enable Turkish-origin residents to acquire citizenship and despite the lengthy residence of many in Germany across generations. This does not necessarily imply that they hold antagonistic attitudes towards the German state. However, returning to the arguments of feminist geographers, the DİTİB case illustrates that the concept of the state is not limited to legal frameworks and formal institutions; it is much more organic, woven with emotions and everyday practices. Consequently, DİTİB emerges as a de facto state.

The most critical aspect highlighted by the "father state" narrative is how diaspora communities emphasize their own agency by establishing a "third space," a term developed by Indian critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha, situated between their home country and host country. Indeed, DİTİB is neither entirely a German association nor merely a foreign policy instru-

ment of the Turkish state, as it is often portrayed in the German media. Rather, DİTİB represents a cross-cultural diasporic structure that is established and operated by the communities themselves, showcasing their social and political autonomy.

BIO



Devran Koray Öcal is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bern's Institute of Geography. As a geographer specializing in political geography, his research, writing, and teaching encompass a wide range of topics, including state geographies, critical geopolitics, feminist geography, migration, religion, and diaspora studies. Devran Koray Öcal earned his BA and MA in Political Science in Turkey and completed his Ph.D. in Geography at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2020. After a tenure at TED University in Ankara in 2021, he joined the University of Bern in 2022. Devran Koray Öcal's doctoral research examined the political and social significance of Turkish-Sunni diaspora mosques in Germany. Subsequently, he collaborated with Dr. Banu Gökarıksel and Betül Aykaç on a project that explored geopolitical discourses surrounding the bodies of Afghan and Syrian refugees in Turkey. Currently, his research focuses on the dynamics of state violence through a feminist-embodied approach, continuing to offer significant contributions to the field of political geography.

FURTHER READING

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