

## Turkey's fresh look at Prophet nears end

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Turkey's religious authorities are close to completing a significant revision of the reports and interpretations of what the Prophet Mohammed said and did, in a project likely to generate fierce debate in the Muslim world and the west.

The three-year project to reinterpret the *hadith* - reports and commentary on the words, deeds and opinions of Mohammed - is expected to be completed this year. Its aim is to edit out those *hadiths* that are used as justification, among other things, for the oppression of women in Sharia law.

Mehmet Gormez, deputy director of the Diyanet, Turkey's state body for religious affairs, said yesterday the "reinterpretation" was aimed at making the proverbs, sayings and commentary that constitute the *hadith* more suitable to 21st century Turkish people and more scientifically and historically accurate.

"The main idea is to make the *hadith* more understandable by today's people with a new interpretation, which is the correct term for what we are doing," he said in a telephone interview. He said a team of 35 scholars was working on the project, which began in 2006 but has received little attention so far. Turkey is 99 per cent Muslim but has a strict constitutional separation of religion and the state.

Much of Sharia law is based on the *hadith* and not on the Koran, which is the literal word of God for Muslim believers. A substantial body of *hadith* is used to justify the oppression of women, the stoning of adulterers and other controversial aspects of Sharia law. Compilations of *hadith* were collated two centuries after the Prophet's death in the 7th century.

Turkey's socially and religiously conservative government, which won a landslide re-election victory in July last year after a fierce clash with the country's hardline secular establishment, appears keen to show its reformist credentials in the area of religious belief by encouraging the Diyanet project.

Mustafa Akyol, a commentator who has written about religion in modern Turkey, said the project reflected the fact that "people who speak on behalf of Islam [in Turkey] have to take on board modern notions of equality in society".

Much of the government's reform initiative is based on its initial goal of getting the country into the European Union, though this ambition may be fading somewhat. However, it has done more than its secular predecessors, for example, to stamp out honour killings in rural Turkey and to ensure that girls get an equal education to boys.

This month, parliament passed by an overwhelming majority legislation to allow girls at state universities to wear the Muslim headscarf, which had been banned on campus after a military coup in 1980. The headscarf move has caused a furore and split the academic establishment into those fiercely opposed to lifting the ban and those who argue that the issue is one of civil rights for individuals.

Prof Gormez said the reinterpretation of the *hadith* now under way was the second to have been carried out by Turkey. The new republic's first parliament revised the *hadith* after the country was founded in 1923.

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