

**Yunus Emre Institute President
Prof. Dr. Şeref ATEŞ:**

COVID-19 HUB Raises the Awareness of the Entire World Against the Corona Pandemic¹



Prof. Dr. Şeref Ateş was born in Malatya in 1964. His teenager years passed both in Turkey and in Germany. After completing his undergraduate degree at Selçuk University, he started his academic career at Gazi University. Ateş completed his master and PhD in Ankara University, Faculty of Language and History-Geography, Western Languages and Literatures. He then completed his second PhD at Marburg University in Germany. His academic career continues in various universities and research institutions both in Turkey and abroad. Prof. Dr. Şeref Ateş has participated in several national and international projects. After becoming professor in 2011, he continued his professional career at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Sakarya University. Moreover, he serves as the President of Yunus Emre Institute since 2016. Professor Dr. Şeref Ateş's areas of expertise include international relations, cultural diplomacy science diplomacy, civilization and art, media communication, multiculturalism, cultural politics Turkish language education and non-governmental organizations (NGO). He has published several articles in the national and international arena. He also plays an active role in numerous scientific and social institutions. He is married and the father of four children.

¹ This interview (by Deniz Renkveren from trdergisi.com) was retrieved from <https://covid19.tabipacademy.com/2020/04/28/covid-19-hub-raises-the-awareness-of-the-entire-world-against-corona-pandemic/> and published with the approval of the Yunus Emre Institute.

Yunus Emre Institute has established a site called COVID-19 HUB in order to support the fight against the corona pandemic affecting the entire world within the scope of the Academic and Scientific Cooperation Project of Turkey (TABIP) executed by the Institute under the auspices of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. Conveying the developments regarding the measures taken against the coronavirus and the treatment methods used, the site is uniting the experiences of scientists and technology developers from all over the world. Thus, the enriched pool of knowledge is presented to the benefit of the world. COVID-19 HUB incorporates not only medicine and sciences but also the perspective of human sciences such as psychology and sociology and administrative and economic sciences such as economics into its solution-oriented approach. Being one of the best examples of the helping hand extended by Turkey to the entire world in the fight against the coronavirus, COVID-19 HUB is proving that the only way of sorting out global problems affecting the entire world such as pandemics is unconditional mutual assistance.

Yunus Emre Institute has established a portal named COVID-19 HUB in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. What is the aim of this portal? Who is the target audience of the site? What is the content thereof?

As Yunus Emre Institute, we have launched a website called covid19.tabipacademy.com in order to support Turkish and foreign scientists fighting against the new type coronavirus pandemic threatening our country and the world alike. The site has different categories such as medicine, vaccine development, drug use, the use of artificial intelligence, test kits, respirators, face masks, biology, chemistry, technology, sociology, and economics. Under these categories, we are publishing the latest developments on the corona pandemic. We have also built an ecosystem. In this way, we would like to reach engineers, pharmacists, scientists as well as those who want to invest in medical equipment. In order to be a part of the solution, we aim to convey the most accurate information assembled from the best sources to the doctors, scientists, medi-

cal equipment manufacturers and all people racing against time to save the lives of patients, and to accelerate their studies. Considering the information pollution on the internet, COVID 19 HUB has been positioned as a site replete with academic and scientific publications and news articles to contain no baseless, false or speculative elements.

Culture Asks Why While Science Asks How

We are rather used to hearing Turkish language and culture-art projects from Yunus Emre Institute. A project related to COVID-19 HUB is actually a project beyond expectations. Why is Yunus Emre Institute executing such a project?

As Yunus Emre Institute, we are generating culture and science. We are connecting with people around the world through culture and science. Culture has more than 850 definitions. One of these definitions draws attention to the role of culture in making sense of incidents and processes. More importantly, culture seeks the

answer to the question of why. Science looks for the answer to the question of how. Considering the example of coronavirus, science asks questions such as “How did the virus appear?”, “How many days does it take to complete its development?”, and “Where does it spread?”. In other words, it usually looks for the answer to the question of how.

While launching such a site within the framework of TABIP, we are focusing on how we respond to this universal problem faced by humanity and why we respond in that particular way instead of another one.

On the other hand, culture is a much broader concept and takes on a much broader meaning considering humanity as a whole. The question “What does this virus pandemic mean?” is important for the culture. This question concerns us directly as a cultural institution. While launching such a site within the framework of TABIP, we are focusing on how we respond to this universal problem faced by humanity and why we respond in that particular way instead of another one. Therefore, instead of telling people, “read this, read that”, we are acting in a particular manner. Maybe this may sound surprising but how we act against and how we respond to difficulties is the most important mental heritage that we leave to future generations and our cultural memory shapes it. In other words, our current behaviors and emotions will be a part of our future cultural heritage. For this reason, we are trying to contribute to the solution of this problem for the benefit of humanity by using the TABIP portal, the TABIP team, and the 58 centers of Yunus Emre Institute.

A Disaster Gave A Great Lesson to the World

The current system of the world is a power-based system. Accordingly, a power-based hierarchy was established in international and intranational relations. Generations raised within this hierarchy are shaped according to this hierarchy during their socialization processes. This criterion of social hierarchy, which is prevalent all over the world, does not consider and question the nature and reason of power. Even if it is disturbed, it accepts this as data. Education systems also strive to train people accordingly. The role of science here is mostly to reveal only the ways of achieving the assigned goal or, in other words, embracing the power and to devise appropriate technologies. So, “why” will we achieve this power? What will we do with this “power”? The answer to this question is usually explained by competition, which is decisive in international relations. There is a famous saying: “If you pity others or show compassion, you will fall into a state of pity and compassion.”

In this international system created and designed depending on the concept of power, it does not matter what your religion, race, or gender is, whether you are Western or Eastern or what your ideological or political priorities and colors are. Any means devised for achieving power follow a rising trend within national boundaries or in international communities. To achieve such power, it is legitimate and necessary to use any means from the arms industry to building an energy corridor, from monopolizing in certain sectors to media campaigns you will develop to defeat your opponents, from unethical behaviors to surrounding your borders with walls or wire fences and establishing diplomatic alliances.

In this equation, the opposite of power is always defined as a weakness. However, power is questioned in our cultural codes. We are considering the adventure of becoming a person as a process leading to embarking on the world from the womb. We know that human beings must be born out of themselves in order to have a smooth transition from becoming a person to humanity. Our greatest test is the assumption that power belongs to us. Therefore, we constantly say “*lā hawla wa-lā quwwata illā bi-llāh* – *There is no power nor strength except by Allah*”. The purpose of this is to purge one of “power” and to put him/her in his/her place. The freest people are those who can purify their minds from power. They always put weakness against or to the opposite of power in order to legitimize power. However, this is a big mistake. There is compassion, not weakness, in the face of power because power enslaves its holder. S/he sacrifices everything in order not to lose it. In the universe, there is power at the heart of every movement, every occurrence, and change. It is not possible to move on without power. But this power is not ours, its holder is the great will also covering us. Power is also granted to us within causality. Just as a woman suffers great distress and difficulties and brings a human being to the world from her womb, and yet does not carry any power in herself, one should also use the power entrusted to him/her mercifully. Having knowledge, money, or authority, all of them, make us powerful.

The greatest freedom is to get rid of power. Power gives its holder a sense of ownership. Mercy naturalizes man and makes him/her feel that s/he is part of the universe s/he lives in. In our culture, whether a person remains human or whether s/he is born out of himself/herself and turns into a human being is concluded by whether power or mercy outweighs in his/her relations with three different factors.

What are these three relations?

The first of these three relations is the relation of man with himself/herself. How does one see his/her own body, soul, and essence and how does s/he act? What is the predominant factor: mercy or power? Secondly, what is prevalent in the relation of man with other people? Is it power or mercy? Finally, is there mercy or power in the relation of man with nature and the environment? In order to know and differentiate a person, one must look at these three relations. What is decisive in all relations, irrespective of being horizontal or vertical is how we make use of the power that we think belongs to us.

If you approach things only from the perspective of science, the collective consciousness of humanity cannot make any progress at all because science does not ask “why”. When faced with a problem, science only asks this question: “How can I sort it out?” Science also produces weapons that are capable of destroying people. Science can produce both the coronavirus and its drug because science only asks “how” while solving the problems. Science generates whatever its ruler – employer – wants. The level of consciousness that will make science ask “why” to its employer is culture. Consciousness is the subject of culture. Culture always raises the question of “why” when building consciousness. Purge is not rejecting power or putting weakness against



it, but placing “mercy” against power. Mercy is what it takes to understand that every creature is connected with each other and unique. Culture gives meaning to incidents, situations, attitudes, and processes. It seeks the reason for everything. According to the understanding of power, what is small does not matter. However, we have observed through the outbreak of this virus that even the most powerful weapons cannot eliminate such a small impact. The breath we inhale 24 thousand times every day on average is the most important power as we clearly see today.

The Concept of Power Replaced by Fellowship in International Relations

Does COVID-19 HUB only deal with people’s survival against the coronavirus or does it also address economic, political, psychological, and sociological problems that occur or may occur worldwide after the pandemic?

These issues are also among our categories and especially developments regarding the social and individual impacts of the coronavirus will be present on our site. What we call as culture comes into play here. As a cultural institution, the Yunus Emre Institute is directly interested in the question of how these developments will be reflected in international relations. Will power-centered relations prevail in international relations? Unfortunately, the coronavirus is doing what people cannot do and uniting all people regardless of religion, language and race because this virus is “opening the eye of the heart” just like old people used to say or, in other words, creating the eye of contemplation. In this sense, the little virus is making us question our relationship with ourselves. It allows you to listen to yourself and turn into yourself. Thirdly, it makes one question his/her relationship with

the people s/he lives with because international relations have always been considered to be power-centered up to now. What Yunus Emre Institute is doing is called “soft power”. In fact, power is impure or, in other words, not humane. As Yunus Emre Institute, we have always told about it but how real it manifests itself now. In my opinion, this pandemic is eliminating the concept of the power of international relations. Neither the USA nor China, the superpowers of the world, can solve this problem because there used to be a power-centered order of international relations. In this respect, the virus stopped all these powers.

This virus eliminated both international and interpersonal competition. In other words, we have turned into follows, not rivals. We actually accompany each other in this fight because “I can live when I protect you”.

In other words, this whole system of relationships with people is being redefined. There was a mentality of competition in international relations. Following World War II, international relations were based on a completely hard-featured competition. In order to adapt to this competition, each individual was seen as an opponent to another one. This virus eliminated both international and interpersonal competition. In other words, we have turned into follows, not rivals. We actually accompany each other in this fight because “I can live when I protect you”. States are at this stage now. As an initial response, all states closed their borders, but they will have to open them 6 months later. Enemies will have to protect each other. In this regard, the virus

requires a holistic approach. From a cultural point of view, all of our routines have turned upside down. Everything based on show-off and all our showcases has been destroyed. Therefore, the phrase “Memento mori” (“remember that you must die”) commonly used in Europe once upon a time when faced with major difficulties is reminding one of the holism of life. Right now, people are facing their inner worlds they never want to meet. We must understand this as regards the cultural aspect of the problem.



Every country across the world is using different methods in tackling the coronavirus. There are also some disagreements among physicians because there is no clear-cut treatment for this disease yet. Different drugs and methods may be used in both the prevention of transmission and the treatment of the disease. Will COVID-19 HUB help with comparing these methods and finding the most accurate methods? How will this contribute to combating the pandemic worldwide, especially technology development and drug development processes?

As Yunus Emre Institute, our particular goal is to show that Turkey, the Turkish culture and, especially, Turkish people are working for all people. While doing that, we must share this knowledge with each other. Scientists can generate solutions if everyone shares their knowledge.

We have an ecosystem within the COVID-19 HUB: The site brings together technology developers and scientists. Thus, we are looking for a solution together with the stakeholders in our country and abroad because a single developer cannot achieve it by itself. This is the most basic modus operandi in this ecosystem. In other words, Turkey can be certainly a part or a stakeholder of the solution. COVID-19 HUB is a site bringing together not only scientists but also stakeholders.

We are sharing all our experiences with the world and we are also sharing experiences in other countries such as the USA and China. We are sharing experiences in different countries. As the coronavirus spreads quickly, the solution must also be a rapid one. By ensuring quick information flow, we are supporting both practitioners and those treating the disease. We are offering this opportunity to scientists, researchers, manufacturers, and engineers in a freeway.

Our second social contribution can be summarized as follows: We are receiving electronic mails from the individuals infected with this disease or treated for this disease from all around the world through which they are sharing their experiences.

In the second stage, we will also share them if they give consent. This subjective experience and perception are very precious. Each individual can have a tackling method against the disease developed with both his/her personal and cultural richness and perspective. These experiences can inspire other people. When they see that they are fighting against the same enemy, the thought and belief of coexistence crossing borders and languages can develop among people. In this respect, we believe that those who want to share their individual experiences will make an ethical contribution to common human knowledge. We also

think that these experiences will help all patients see what must be taken into consideration.

Are there any special teams working for the COVID-19 HUB?

8-10 of our own staff are working for the COVID-19 HUB. Apart from that, we are in constant contact with both scientists and the members of TABIP scientific committee. There are also people who support us on a voluntary basis. We are also talking to people working in the field of medicine and drug development. We would like to make a contribution to all people across the world even if it is the slightest one. Culture is identified by the intention forming the basis of each behavior especially from how we respond in the face of the most difficult times to how we manage the relevant processes. Therefore, culture is a way of doing things. At this stage, we consider COVID-19, which is a problem for all humanity, as a case study within the framework of TABIP because we, as TABIP, see the science generated in Turkey as the common heritage of humanity. For this reason, we are sharing our knowledge with all people without considering any of them as a rival. Likewise, we also believe that the knowledge and experiences in the world should be shared with other nations.

Do you foresee any collaboration with international organizations for the COVID-19 HUB?

As the entire world is tackling with this virus, these collaborations are only going on through the digital environment as institutions in western countries and our Institute have introduced the working from home model. We are still discussing these collaborations. We will continue to maintain our collaborations all

over the world. At the moment, lots of promotional materials are being published in many countries especially including those in both the western world and Arab geography. We are also planning to launch concrete collaborations with research institutes and universities in the upcoming period.

Is it planned to develop a mobile application for the COVID-19 HUB?

COVID-19 HUB has been renewed every day and new developments have been added to the site since it was released about 10 days ago. Data is being updated on an hourly basis. Of course, both its design and technological infrastructure are being constantly developed. Work on the mobile platform is going on.

When the corona pandemic loses its significance, will the COVID-19 HUB be used to tackle other pandemics? What is the broader function and purpose of this site?

The peculiarity of COVID-19 is that it threatens the whole world. The mortality rates of former pandemics such as Ebola and SARS affecting some countries were much higher. Since the balance in nature is constantly changing from a cultural perspective, I always express this phrase in parentheses: science answers the question “how” while culture answers the question “why”. If the question of why is not answered, new viruses come up because nature encompasses such imbalances. The international system is a part of the universe so we have to strive to read this book of the universe. In other words, unless we read the message of the universe, new viruses will emerge in the future in the long or short run. Maybe there will be more

dangerous viruses than this because we must answer the question “why”. In this respect, unfortunately, we will have to continue operating this site, and even now, it is assumed that it will take 18 months to complete vaccination development studies. Therefore, we will continue to meet this need.

No Discrimination in Turkish Healthcare System

What is the place of Turkey in the fight against the coronavirus across the world? How do you evaluate the work done by authorities, especially the Ministry of Health?

Turkey has taken it seriously since its inception. We have had the great advantage of Turkey’s very advanced healthcare system. Besides, the social nature of the state has become prominent in Turkey’s healthcare sector. The procedures intended for diagnosing and treating the coronavirus are free of charge, unlike most developed countries. In this sense, Turkey has a social security system open to not a certain segment of the society, but the entire society. This is the biggest advantage for Turkey. Secondly, we do not seem to have any problems with preventive healthcare equipment, respirators and the intensive care units of hospitals. Another important aspect is that all healthcare professionals in Turkey are composed of the top quality and intelligent individuals of Turkey. This is also a huge advantage. For around 40 years, Turkey has directed its high-achieving individuals towards the healthcare system depending on its university admission exams through which a social screening and filtering is performed. Thus, we have a highly-qualified human resource base that can quickly adapt to any emerging situation, build networks among themselves and ra-

pidly generate medical solutions to any problem. This is our biggest advantage. We may not have been so successful in any other field or sector. The number of deaths has escalated in European countries due to the lack of respirators. As long as the number of intubated patients does not go over a certain threshold, we have no problem in terms of respirators. In other words, we are self-sufficient. Therefore, the number of patients should not increase anymore. Again, culture is very important: Our nation has a great advantage as individuals support and helps each other.

If Man Flourishes, the State Will Also Flourish

As you have mentioned, we see that Turkey is in a good position especially in terms of medical equipment and hospitals. Likewise, this is also reflected abroad in the form of medical aid. How do you comment on the helping hand extended by Turkey to Spain, Israel, the UK, and Balkans at a time where humanity is in a dire situation as a whole?

This is very valuable for us and it is the most important feature that distinguishes us from other cultures. We do not do this for showing off, we do it since we believe in it because we have a saying “Either exists as you are, or be as you look” and this thought summarizes our basic approach. If we have an essential material that can be useful for humanity, we always share it. This is the basic approach of the state because if man flourishes, the state will also flourish. This person may be Turkish, Arab, or English, which makes no difference. We see all humanity as a single entity in this sense. For this reason, we are very pleased to see many positive feedbacks for our colleagues from a myriad of countries from the UK to Poland. 🌸