1 Introduction

It is a hot summer day. Every Thursday from 10:00 a.m. to noon, a group of middle-aged women meet in the basement of the Beşiktaş Müftülüğü for Qur’an exegesis (tefsir). Their Arabic Qur’ans are underlined, full of notes in the margin and Post-its. While they listen, they write down explanations in Turkish in their notebooks. Today’s lesson deals with dress code. After sharing personal experiences and anecdotes, Zeynep, the vaize, sums up the discussion by saying, “What is important is to wear clean and cotton-made dresses; every woman should follow her own moral responsibility.” Suddenly, a middle-aged woman takes the floor: “Here in Turkey, it is not like in Iran, where women are obligated to cover themselves. … I have often seen Iranian women in the airport: as soon as they arrive in Turkey, they take off their veil!” Another woman continues: “Thankfully, we had Atatürk! I mean, even under the Ottoman Empire, it was not as strict as it is in Iran today …”

Such female religious sessions, although they take different forms, take place every day in Turkey, as well as in many Muslim communities around the world. In most cases, there has been a well-established literature on these women gathering in the shade of the mosque that refers to the debates on Islamic feminism and female empowerment. The main idea is that religion might be both a source of domination and resistance in that, through religion, women could find experiences of liberation. However, as I will show, despite some common elements,
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This literature focuses mainly on women preaching autonomously in private places, strengthening their authority and asserting themselves beyond the religious hierarchies. In this sense, it does not entirely fit the context of the present work, as bureaucrats, the Diyanet’s preachers do speak of a number of concepts calling into question, first and foremost, the state and its institutions or, rather, its *art de gouverner.*

In my approach to this research topic, one particular point stands out: Zeynep, the preacher who weekly provides religious services to women living in Istanbul’s Beşiktaş Municipality, is a religious officer (*din görevlisi*) employed by a Turkish state institution, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, hereafter Diyanet).

Established on March 3, 1924, following the suppression of the Islamic caliphate and the abolishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Diyanet is a chameleon institution that has played an active role while simultaneously adapting itself to the changing nature of both the religious and the secular realms. While being the largest state agency tasked with managing religion, it is actually one of the emblems of Turkish laicism, a fundamental principle in the Turkish constitution representing the will of the state’s ruling elite, which at the time was Kemalist–positivist–nationalist, to bureaucratize and control the expression of religion in the public sphere. This control occurred by hiring religious officers, supervising the activities carried out in mosques and developing a “true” Turkish understanding of Islamic knowledge (*doğru din*)—that is, the Sunni Hanafi interpretation. Thus, the fact that women

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İstır Gözaydın, “Management of Religion in Turkey: The Diyanet and Beyond” (article presented at the Italian Political Science Association’s Conference [SISP], September 11, 2014).


There are four widely recognized Islamic schools of law (*mezhep* in Turkish) for Sunni Islam (Hanafi, Hambali, Maliki, and Shafi’i) and two for Shia Islam (Ja’fari and Zaidi).
participating in the session were referring to Mustafa Kemal, later called “ Atatürk,” the father of the secular Turkish Republic, should not raise eyebrows. It is exactly the secular state that gives them the possibility to express one of the main features of their religious engagement: to be a conscious believer by choice, not forced to perform practices (as in Iran, they said).

This participation by women, which occurs within the framework of a state institution, the Diyanet, piqued my attention. At an academic level, especially in the field of social sciences, it had scarcely been investigated before, even by Turkish scholars. When I started this research, only two scholars, Mona Hassan and Fatma Tütüncü, had recently examined the topic of the Diyanet's female preachers (vaizeler). According to Hassan, the employment of women in the official preaching workforce should be related to the vaizeler’s professionalization9 and their “double role” of both religious scholars (hoca) – experts on matters of religion – and civil servants (devlet memuruğu). Tütüncü10 explicitly refers to the Turkish state and describes state-appointed female preachers as a tool “to understand the sovereign power of the Turkish state, which exceptionally defines legitimate religious subjectivities, politicises religiousness, and mobilizes on women campuses.”11

This aspect is crucial: throughout the history of Islam, figures such as sheikhs, muftis, teachers (muallim), imams, preachers, and pilgrimage guides have been responsible for disseminating religious knowledge. Because of gender segregation, women were traditionally involved in teaching other women about Islamic rules and practices.12 Although documented and recently reevaluated by Islamic feminist scholars, the transmission of religious knowledge to women has been mainly the task of trustee women like the imams’ wives or volunteer preachers.13 Focusing on the increase in the number of female preachers (vaizeler) in the

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11 Ibid., 611.
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Diyanet’s religious bureaucracy, the work critically investigates how a traditional activity has turned into a full-fledged profession. In short, the main proposition of this book is twofold. On the one side, it investigates why and how the Diyanet opened new positions for women officers. On the other side, it disentangles the various meanings of this policy, which reconfigures the relationship between women, religion, and the secular establishment in Turkey today. Attention is paid to the Diyanet’s policies for religious services, which have evolved substantially, particularly with regard to women and the family.

This operation started in 2003, when Ali Bardakoglu was appointed president of the Diyanet. At that time, a “turn towards women” occurred, consisting in a set of policies aimed at providing new positions for women within an institution that had traditionally been dominated by men. The number of women on staff significantly increased, from 2,696 in 2004 to 17,833 in 2018. As for the female preachers, 76 were employed by the Diyanet in 2003. By the following year, the number had grown to 182 and reached 403 in 2010. At the beginning of this research, in 2013, 453 vaizeler were working for the Diyanet; one year later, there were 726. In 2018, 833 vaizeler were appointed to Turkish mosques. Besides the numbers, the role and competence of female religious officers have also been reorganized: national exams test their competence and allow promotions, and women have been appointed as vice-muftis and as heads of departments at the Diyanet’s head office in Ankara. Moreover, the feminization of the personnel went hand in hand with an increase in religious education, a professionalization and a consolidation of an “academic” religiosity. The vaizeler spread a religiosity grounded not only in evidence arising from the official interpretation of

religious texts but also in a refusal of any “superstition” and false beliefs deriving from tradition. This aspect differentiates them from the volunteer preaching carried out by preachers belonging to Sufi orders (tarikat; pl. tarikatlar) and religious communities (cemaat; pl. cemaatlar)\textsuperscript{18}. With respect to religion, the term cemaat indicates both a community of people, not necessarily a fixed group, praying together in a mosque and the followers of a specific religious group established around or affiliated with a leader (hoca, şeyh). By virtue of their professional belonging to a state institution, most of the vaizeler I met stressed their “academic” religiosity via the faculties of theology, as well as their status as religious “experts” (din uzmanı) and scholars (hoca). They refuse the familial categorizations, like “elder sisters” (abla) or “sister-in-law” (yenge), employed for voluntary female preachers within Sufi orders or religious communities.\textsuperscript{19} The traditional Qur’an readings, prayers, and exegesis sessions organized for and by women in private houses came to the fore and entered the public and “official” place of the mosques. Moreover, in the early 2000s, the Diyanet supported projects and publications aimed at spreading the image of a “new religious woman”\textsuperscript{20} who is modern and educated, works outside the home, and is actively engaged in the mosque’s public dimension. This woman consciously performs practices and attends religious seminars, sermons, and Qur’an courses; she is pious in her everyday life and views her religious commitment as consistent with her active participation in society. The vaizeler both embody and spread this “new vision” (viziyonu): on the one hand, they are an “instrument”\textsuperscript{21} through which the Diyanet’s broader strategy of reaching the female population is implemented; on the other hand, they bear witness to the fact that the Turkish state institutions have not


downplayed their role in the policies governing women and religion. Since the early 1960s, enlightening society about morality has been one of the Diyanet’s primary tasks, Qur’an courses and Imam-Hatip religious vocational schools have mushroomed, and the number of students has increased significantly. Therefore, as Deniz Kandiyoti brilliantly affirms, “it is quite simplistic to maintain – except by excising large swathes of contemporary history – that the rise of Islamic actors owes its momentum exclusively, or even primarily, to dynamics emanating from the grass roots of society while the state remained secular.” Not only has the state been actively involved, but the cooperation with Islamic actors mostly occurred within and via state institutions. The state has continued to exert its power while delegating it to a number of (private or public) agencies, such as the Diyanet.

This aspect allows me to contextualize this research within the framework of the now seventeen-year rule of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). Since its foundation in 2001, the AKP has attracted a vivid academic debate about its collocation vis-à-vis Turkish secularism and religion. Established from the ashes of the Islamist Welfare Party, the AKP has officially presented itself as a “conservative-democratic” party, pragmatically denying any Islamist pedigree. However, a strong legacy of Islamism permeates both the party’s discourse – largely imbued with religious references – and several areas of policy making.

Since 2003, the Diyanet has unveiled a plethora of projects providing religious services (din hizmetleri) and moral support targeting women and families. This engagement is carried out through the network of Diyanet’s local and provincial mufti offices (ilçe ve il müftülüğü) and includes projects and seminars in mosques and/or in municipalities’ culture centers, religious consultancy for families operated by both the imams within the framework of the family imamate (Aile İmamlığı) project and the Family Guidance and Consultation Bureaus (Aile İrşat ve Rehberlik Büraneleri, AIRB), and the fatwa online/phone call services (Alo Fetva 190).

I decided to scrutinize the various religious services sponsored and organized by the Turkish state in a comprehensive manner.

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As a result, I strove to disrupt and break down the conceptualizations that are mainly associated with the decision to establish new offices for women within the Diyanet. In particular, I sought to contextualize the feminization of the religious sphere in Turkey within the broader political framework in which the process has been taking shape. In her analysis of how the actors engage in a deliberative process, Deborah Stone calls for a consideration of “causal stories” that occurred prior to the policy formulation in itself. Going beyond the formulation of policy in a descriptive term, Hal Colebatch defines policy as a concept in use: “understanding ‘policy’ means understanding the way in which practitioners use it to shape the action.” Therefore, I started to look for causal stories related to this policy formulation – that is, to investigate the ways in which the Diyanet’s policies toward women have come to light and unfolded: How exactly was the decision made to include women in the Diyanet’s bureaucracy? Who initiated it and why? Was it the result of a “concession” by the state? What role have the religious hierarchies played? Did they promote a sort of “female quota” policy for female representation? What about women’s contributions to the process? Were they passive spectators or actively engaged in it? According to Jacques Rancière:

Politics indeed, is not the exercise of, or the struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience … Politics is the very conflict over the existence of that space, over the designation of objects as pertaining to the common and of subjects as having the capacity of a common speech. … But the whole question, then, is to know who possesses speech and who merely possesses voices.26

Besides these questions, which might be summarized as “Why and how, in concrete terms, did Turkey’s Presidency of Religious Affairs open new positions for female religious officers?”, I turned my attention to the meanings of this decision. Again, Colebatch’s approach to policy helped me to move the reasoning from the level of description to one of interpretation. What does it mean to allow an increasing number of women to

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work as preachers in the Turkish religious bureaucracy? Or, in the words of Dvora Yanow, “How does [this] policy mean?”

When I set out to do the research, the lack of literature on the topic forced me to examine my thoughts and suppositions attentively. Before introducing the hypothesis and the literature the work refers to, it is important to clarify some key words and concepts: “religious”/“secular” as adjectives qualifying people; “Islamist,” again with reference to people (i.e., “Islamist woman”); “Islamization”; and the Diyanet’s “women’s policies.” Although their various meanings will be extensively explored throughout the work, here the intention is to provide plain and operational definitions I could safely refer to.

Firstly, “religious”/“secular” people: There is an old proverb in Turkey that might be adequately translated as “You can never be sure about who has wealth or faith in God” because both are aspects that one tends to avoid shouting from the rooftops. However, the distinction between “secular” and “religious” people needs to be clarified since, very far from the meaning of this proverb, on many occasions they seem to mark real belonging. Laikler (secular people) and dindarlar (religious people) are categories and, of course, anything but monolithic; on the contrary, they are subject to internal and external evolutions. For the sake of clarity, when I employ “secular” as an adjective qualifying the behavior of an individual, I am referring to a person who not only is not practicing and does not follow religious principles in their everyday life but who also explicitly refuses, for whatever reason, to do so; conversely, I refer to “religious” people as not only those who live according to Islamic rules and practices but also those who are pious Muslims and explicitly refer to these rules, for whatever reason. Going beyond the convenience of these labels, I would like to stress—and the research will insist on this point—that the idea of two separate fields unable to talk to each other is often far from the reality. This does not mean to reject a polarization that might often result in noncommunication between “us” and “them.” On the contrary, it warns of the risk of having easy definitions and categorizations: to define “secular” people as unreligious.


28 In Turkish, “para ile imanın kimde olduğu belli olmaz.” I am really grateful to Fatma Tütüncü for this quotation.
would be misleading, as it would be to qualify “religious” ones as antimodern.\textsuperscript{29}

The second term, “Islamist”\textsuperscript{30} (İslamcı) – and, in particular, the female “Islamist woman” – might be used in everyday life to indicate both women wearing head scarves and religionist (dinci) people.\textsuperscript{31} In this work, I follow the lead of Nilüfer Göle, who defines Islamism as the “re-appropriation of a Muslim identity and values as a basis for an alternative social and political agenda (to that of the state).”\textsuperscript{32} This definition is relevant because it pays attention to both a redefinition of a Muslim identity and the elaboration of a bottom-up process aimed at “challenging” the Turkish secular state. In this sense, however, it should be noted that the Turkish Islamist groups have evolved to support forms of passive revolution, which Cihan Tuğal brilliantly defines as “a war of position against the secular system.”\textsuperscript{33} The use of “Islamist” as an adjective seems inappropriate to qualify the Diyanet’s vaizeler: They are indeed, first and foremost, state employees. In an investigation from within of the Diyanet’s institutions and projects for women, the idea of Islamization from below seems rather dubious. Far from being a place of contestation, the everyday of the preachers’ sessions results in a locus where state discourse and practices are consolidated and reproduced. In line with Göle, I will thus prefer to focus on religion, since the term


\textsuperscript{31} Ayşe Saktanber describes how these terms have literally defined the “other” in Turkey, fostering the binary opposition between religion/tradition vs. state/modernity. Ayşe Saktanber, “Becoming the ‘Other’ As a Muslim in Turkey: Turkish Women vs. Islamist Women,” \textit{New Perspectives on Turkey} 11 (September 1994): 99–134.

\textsuperscript{32} Göle, “Secularism and Islamism in Turkey,” 47.

“Muslim,” which expresses a religious identity, seems to me closer to an individualist focus than “Islamism” as not only a membership in an Islamist political organization but also “a sense of belonging and a group identity.” This view is also shared by Gül Aldıkaçtı, who employs the term “Islamist” to underscore the use of Islam as a source of political activism rather than practicing it as a nonpolitical daily ritual. As she notes, “most of the population in Turkey is Muslim, but for the majority, religion is not the catalyst for becoming politically involved. This majority can be considered Muslim, but not Islamist.” As a general rule, in this work, when referring to individuals, I prefer the term “Muslim” (“Muslim woman” or “devout Muslim”) as opposed to “Islamist.” Although the latter is again nothing but a category, this decision is also informed by the fact that my interlocutors never mentioned any personal affiliation to Islamist movements and/or parties; I met them as Diyanet functionaries – often while performing their duties – and I respected their role as civil servants without directly referring to personal political orientations.

Thirdly, “Islamization”: I consider Islamization to be a practice aimed at (re)affirming religious values in everyday life. This approach is based on works of political Islam and considers how radical Islamist movements from the 1970s and 1980s have become a grassroots re-Islamization. Penetrating society, they attempted to promote public virtue by means of reforming mores in step with religious practices. In this sense, the Islamization process has been commonly referred to as “bottom-up,” consisting primarily in both individual attention to preaching as a pillar of more complex pious behavior and an external struggle for the creation of an Islamized space. However, the term requires further discussion that takes into account the context and the multiple facets of its meaning. In the case of Turkey, Islamization was also conveyed and directed from above through the Diyanet’s network of mosques and local muftis widespread in any corner of the country. Thus, the

37 Gilles Kepel, La revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde (Paris: Seuil, 1991). The paradigm of a “retour” or “revival” of the religious has been criticized by authors who point out that Islam “never disappeared.” For more on the re-Islamization of Muslim societies, please see also Olivier Roy, “The Paradoxes of the Re-Islamization of Muslim Societies,” The Immanent Frame, accessed March 2, 2015, and Olivier Roy, La laïcité face à l’Islam (Paris: Stock, 2005).