The Women Preachers of the Secular State: The Politics of Preaching at the Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity and Sovereignty in Turkey
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In recent years, the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, Diyanet) has dramatically changed its politics and discourse on women, particularly by integrating them as official preachers and vice-muftis into its predominantly male ranks. Gender equality, women’s rights, as well as elimination of violence against women have been articulated unexpectedly in the sermons of preachers and the speeches of the Head of Diyanet. In the south-east region, mostly populated by Kurdish citizens, the gender-sensitive character of the sermons has gained an ethnic twist, targeting female suicides, honour killings and the illiteracy of girls in the region, and emphasizing the peace and unity in Islam and fraternity of Muslim believers, Turkish and Kurdish alike within the boundaries of the Turkish nation-state. In this process, the newly appointed women preachers and vice-muftis have played significant roles as the object as well as the subject of change and changing preaching activities in contemporary Turkey.

Since the early years of Islam, preaching has been central to the Muslim life because the religious rituals, ethical imperatives and spiritual anecdotes narrated by preachers have been critical in the making of ordinary Muslim believers. The contents as well as the forms of preaching have changed over time, but the very practice of preaching has remained intact all over the Muslim world. In the modern Turkish context, preaching has been centralized and strictly regulated by the state institution Diyanet. All mosques, all mosque activities as well as the state officers working in the mosques and mufti offices, such as muftis, imams, muezzins, and preachers, have been under the control of Diyanet. Women as lay believers and as religious scholars and public servants have been marginalized, if not totally excluded. In this article, by focusing on the phenomenon of women’s preaching, I will show how the context, the use and the interlocutors of preaching turned an age-old religious activity into a distinctive political practice related to gender, ethnicity and different religiosities in contemporary Turkey.

In the secular state of Turkey, where women wearing a headscarf have no right to access public education or to take public office, making headscarved women into state preachers and vice-muftis has brought a new twist to the insoluble knot of the
headscarf debate. Within the extensive scholarly works on the headscarf debate in Turkey, the relationship between the state and women has often been analyzed within the boundaries of liberal democratic discourse. The headscarf problem has been tied to the illiberal and authoritarian character of the Turkish state, which lacks the liberal ethic of tolerance, erases Islam from the public realm, and silences the religious voices of women from the discursive democratic sphere. In a similar vein, the headscarved women have been considered as autonomous individuals, who fight for their freedom of choice and faith and the right to education and public office, which are the primary goods of genuine liberal democracies. Interestingly enough, the headscarf ban has also been justified by resorting to the same conceptual frameworks such as the neutrality of the state and state servants before all religious-based claims, the protection of religious freedoms of people who have different religiousities, and the right of individuals to develop their own autonomous beings and free wills apart from their cultural and religious settings. The liberal democratic discourse has been operative in both advocating and opposing the headscarf ban. And, in fact, this discourse has partially made explicable the contested demands of rights and freedoms of different groups and individuals in Turkish society and their relationship with the state. However, liberal democratic discourse alone cannot explain the claims of women within piety movements, because these claims cannot be reduced to the right, choice and interest-based language of liberalism. In the same vein, this discourse cannot be fully operative in grasping the sovereign power of the state, which suspends its own laws and rules in order to maintain its sovereignty, a peculiar power of the state that cannot be translated into the language of liberal neutrality, indifference and tolerance.

Scholars of religion and secularism in Western liberal democracies have started to uncover the ‘illiberal’ face of the state, which regulates religiousities from above, a characteristic usually attributed to non-Western states. Among others, Saba Mahmood, inquiring into the contemporary American discourse on secularism, underlines how the state involves itself with religion beyond its public appearances, acts as modern theologian and reshapess the forms of religiousities, religious subjectivities and religious epistemologies. Studying religious conversion in the new Europe, Esra Özyürek shows how religious converts, despite their small numbers, alerted the Turkish as well as the German states to take action for and control of their citizens’ religiousities as a matter of national security. In the same vein Talal Asad, analyzing emergent discourses attached to the headscarf ban in France, emphasizes the ways the state oscillates between ‘withdrawing from all matters of religion’ and ‘forming secular citizens’, and acts exceptionally for the sake of secular citizenship. Asad argues that ‘Laïcité is made up of exceptions, and it is the function of sovereignty to identify and justify them – to forestall thereby the Republic’s “disintegration”’. Put briefly, as the new political theology in the West and the non-West reveals, states are involved with their citizens’ religiousities beyond the limits drawn by liberal political discourse, and concludes that without integration, shared values and legitimate religiousities that the sovereign power imposes, there cannot be political stability and national security and harmony.

In this context, the women preachers of Diyanet are an interesting case for understanding the sovereign power of the Turkish state, which exceptionally defines legitimate religious subjectivities, politicizes religiousities, and mobilizes women
preachers of Diyanet for that purpose. As the most significant interlocutor of the religiosity promoted by the state, Diyanet has been considered paradoxical and exceptional in a staunchly secular state because of its obvious Islamic function.9 Diyanet’s role is defined as ‘to execute services regarding Islamic faith’ and to illuminate people about the truth of Islam by eliminating superstitions and bidats (innovations). However, for more than 80 years it has devoted itself to (religiously) protecting the ‘secular’ establishment of Turkey.10 The seemingly exceptional and paradoxical character of Diyanet reappears where its women preachers are concerned. Although the headscarf is deemed one of the main indicators of the Islamic threat and its wearing is banned in public office, the women in Diyanet wear headscarves and perform their public services without being considered an Islamic threat. In contrast to arguments which underline that the headscarf turned out to be a matter of Turkish national security,11 the women preachers of Diyanet disseminate sermons on fraternity in Islam and the unity of Muslims among Kurdish women to religiously secure national peace and harmony.

Another controversial interpretation of the headscarf in contemporary Turkish secular thought is that it connotes women’s subordination and lack of agency.12 Some secularists think Islamist patriarchs oblige women to wear the headscarf. Others are particularly astonished by women’s desire for the veil in spite of the conditions created by the so-called feminist (Kemalist) state conducive to the emancipation and empowerment of women.13 The women preachers and vice-muftis undermine these interpretations because making religious decisions and guiding Muslim believers is nothing but an expression of agency and power that equates them with men in power in the religious domain.

Furthermore, the peculiar pietistic and political positions of the women preachers show that the headscarved women are not homogeneous among themselves, and their relationship with the state is not necessarily controversial; in fact, the women preachers occupy a position in between Islamist religiosity and politics and the sovereignty of the secular state. In investigating this peculiar case, I will follow three tracks. After outlining the emergence of Islamist women as voluntary preachers in the 1980s in Turkey, I will first focus on the making of women as state preachers, which produced rich discussion related to power, gender and Islam in the Turkish context. Second, I will map out how women preachers are connected to the Kurdish question when they preach in the south-east, another issue of the Turkish state concerning its sovereign power. Lastly, I will examine women preachers in terms of their piety, femininity and knowledge-based discourses and will show how their discourse is imprinted with the sovereign power of the state.

The politicization of Islam in Turkey in the 1980s became most visible by the protests of young women wearing headscarves in front of universities.14 For the Islamist women, who were banned from the universities, the most fruitful activity turned into voluntary preaching. As the famous Islamist woman Cihan Aktaş underlines, ‘the whole 1980s were the years of preaching’.15 The passionate Islamist women then sought to satisfy their hunger for religious knowledge by reading whatever was available, including primarily the ‘original sources’, which used to be under the monopoly of religious ulema (male scholars), and began to share their knowledge.
with women by preaching whenever they could. As a matter of fact, the return to ‘original sources’ was a practice of Islamism in Middle Eastern countries as well as in Turkey, where both secular Westernists and traditionalist religious authorities became the object of intellectual and political critique. Women’s ‘return to original sources’, however, was more radical and spectacular on the ground that they had to wage war on three fronts: against the secular Westernists, traditional Islamists and their own male companions in the cause of Islam, all of whom were different but shared patriarchy in common.

Gender equality is the main area of conflict between Islamist men and women in Turkey. Despite the objections of male interlocutors of political Islam, some Islamist women consider feminism to be an element of Islamism, on the ground that it rejects all cultural relations of hierarchy. They argue that Islam supports the equality of all human beings before God, because superiority is not an ascribed but an achieved status, which is open to all believing women and men alike. More particularly, it is argued that Islamism changes the place of women in society from periphery to centre, for in all Islamist movements women are at the centre and very active.¹⁶

In their battle with the traditional religious authorities, Islamist women and men have different ideas. Islamist men, similar to traditional religious authorities, frequently consider Muslim women as the unchanging kernel of Islam. Islamist women find this consideration inconsistent. The main inconsistency of their male companions and the traditional authorities on Muslim women lies here: although seen as faithful, women are seen as weak due to their potential to confuse their righteous way. Although viewed as weak, women are seen as bearing the heavy weight of the Islamic tradition, a tradition reinvented by political Islamists as the Golden Age of Islam. And more significantly, the components and contents of this tradition contain contentious issues for the sake of women. The ‘return to original sources’, in this regard, as Asma Barlas perfectly underlines, would allow women ‘to challenge oppressive readings of the Islamic tradition’ and would make women search for a ‘legitimate counter-voice to the authoritarian voice’¹⁷ in Islamic tradition, at times borrowing vocabularies and missions from the left and feminist discourses.

In the Turkish context, Islamism and feminism as significant movements emerged simultaneously in the 1980s when the leftist politics was harshly suppressed by the military regime. The suppression of the left, in this sense, created a niche for both Islamism and feminism to mobilize and change the society in accordance with their own claims that borrowed elements from the leftist discourse, particularly its claim for equality. Some women in the Islamist movement integrated feminist claims into their discourse. Their enthusiastic and voluntary preaching activities aimed at illuminating and saving ordinary Muslim women emerged in this context and paved the way for a new type of woman preacher who is devoted, political and knowledgeable. Although Diyanet has monopolized preaching activities and recruited men as preachers to its rank, there have always been women generally attached to certain religious sects and acted as preachers in the traditional sense. The emergent Islamist women as the new preachers, however, brought a new criticism to the traditional religious authorities and understandings by questioning earlier women preachers. According to them, the old interlocutors of religion did not voice the political dimension of Islam, traded religious service, and propagated their
own religious sects and male sheikhs. More particularly, the qualities and attitudes of earlier women preachers were in question: Since their religious knowledge was picked up here and there, their speeches were irrelevant to the everyday lives of ordinary Muslim women who were in need of concrete religious guidance in a secular culture. They were authoritarian and hierarchical, and thus they delivered the message of God in an intimidating voice.

The new voluntary preachers, on the other hand, had a different mission: they wanted to disseminate the words of God with inspiration and love; they aspired to be egalitarian and approachable; they grounded their religious knowledge in a wide range of readings on Islam, politics and sociology, which signified their distinction in a cultural and intellectual sense.

One of the women preachers defined the distinctiveness of the pioneer women preachers of the 1980s as follows:

I remember the woman preaching in Izmit Central Mosque. The whole community including my little heart was charmed. Her charismatic posture on the stage, the beauty of her voice and the soundness of her arguments were incredible. I wanted to be like her. Twenty years ago there were only a handful of women officers at Diyanet. Almost all of the women preachers were voluntarily working for the cause. They were not expecting any material or spiritual gain. They were travelling nationwide and illuminating women believers. They were meeting with incredibly crowded communities wherever they went. They were reciting the Koran perfectly, singing religious songs perfectly, and answering the questions of women believers perfectly.¹⁸

The narrated memories indicate that the style of Islamist women as voluntary preachers was derivative: the consciousness-raising aims of the feminists and the populism of the leftists were incorporated in order to increase the self-esteem of Muslim women as opposed to the male supremacy in the politico-religious realm and to gain the hearts of ordinary Muslim women as opposed to the secular supremacy in the public/political realm. When one of the leading Islamist men insulted the Turkish feminists by citing a misogynist proverb, which mocks women as having long hair and short intelligence, the Islamist women took the side of the feminists on the ground that regardless of being leftists (feminists) or Islamists, all women in Turkish society suffered from common humiliations and discrimination.¹⁹ In the 1980s a significant number of the Islamist men did not support the headscarf protests of women and in doing so they shared common ground with secular groups of men and women: ‘if they are veiled, women should stay at home, what is their job at universities?’²⁰ Since then Islamist women have endured harsh criticism from secular as well as Islamist patriarchal circles, and yet they have never given up their claim for power, authority and positions in both secular and religious domains.

The women’s claim for power and authority in secular and religious domains bore fruit when Diyanet appointed 100 women as preachers in 2004 and two as vice-muftis in 2005 charged with illuminating women believers and providing them with appropriate religious knowledge.²¹ Being a headscarved woman in a state institution with authority to religiously guide and give fatwa to people has its own challenges, especially when the headscarf is still forbidden in public office and university
In fact, being a civil servant has been one of the fundamental features that differentiates the women preachers of Diyanet from the voluntary preachers of the 1980s. According to the politico-religious romanticism of the Islamist youth in the 1980s, being a civil servant, wearing a silk scarf, having a bank account and shopping at the grocers that sold alcoholic beverages, among other things, were morally wrong. For the voluntary preachers in the 1980s being a civil servant of the secular state was neither desirable because of the politico-moral discourse, nor was it possible because of the institutional logic of Diyanet. When Diyanet opened its ranks to women preachers, however, its institutional expectations were high. For instance, a diploma from a theology department is required. Neither earlier (traditional) preachers nor their critics, the voluntary preachers of the 1980s, could satisfy the current requirements for preaching. Ironically, once the traditional preachers were challenged on the ground that their religious knowledge was insufficient, picked up here and there, and now the voluntary preachers of the 1980s would face the same kind of challenge. The women preachers of Diyanet are expected to be expert in an extensive religious knowledge including the Koran, Hadith, classical texts and main themes in sociology and culture as well as the art of rhetoric for properly transmitting the knowledge to ordinary believers. Besides their differences, the women preachers have commonalities with the women who have been involved with religious preaching and religious movements in Turkey, which makes their appointment as civil servants quite interesting.

In order to decipher the exceptional case of women preachers as civil servants of the secular state, I conducted interviews with four women preachers. I sketched the media coverage and interviews related to the women preachers and vice-muftis. Additionally, I followed the website www.vaizemder.com, started by women preachers in 2005, where women preachers open forums on political, personal and religious issues, share their experiences in preaching, and discuss their institutional and individual problems.

‘Can women religiously guide and give fatwa to Muslim believers?’ has been the primary question related to women’s appointment as preachers and vice-muftis given their long-lasting exclusion from positions of authority in the religious realm. Certain patriarchal interpretations of Islam assume women’s incapacity to make good judgements because, it is claimed, the pressure of menstruation periodically affects women’s judiciousness. Women’s exemption from daily prayers and fasting and from time to time their exclusion from mosques and reciting the Koran during their menstruation are interpreted as their imperfect judgemental capacity and limited public abilities arising from their biological difference. When these interpretations were mentioned after women’s appointment as vice-muftis, the Head of Diyanet explained that religious guidance and delivering fatwas is not a matter of gender, but a matter of knowledge. Fatwas have never been subjective arguments of muftis, but rather are the result of proper religious judgements. In fact, what is at stake here is sharing or not sharing power and authority. This became obvious when the appointment of women as vice-muftis caused a big debate among religious and Islamist circles. The appointment of two women preachers as vice-muftis in September 2005 drew widespread press coverage. In these accounts,
the appointment was celebrated as significant for Turkey as well as for the whole Islamic world. Underlying them, however, was a question: To what extent would women claim authority in the religious realm – can they be mufti; can they be the Head of Diyanet; can they be imam? Except for the position of imam, male religious scholars seemed positive towards women holding positions of religious authority, but in the last instance they considered women’s appointments as preachers and vice-muftis enough. Some of them approved women’s appointments in Diyanet for they consider Diyanet not a religious but an administrative institution of a secular state, where women would occupy very important positions including the prime ministry. All of the women scholars as well as newly appointed vice-muftis interpreted the appointments as a belated requirement. All of the scholars interviewed, including the Head of Diyanet and vice-muftis, consider women’s appointment necessary for the illumination of ordinary women believers. Women preachers and vice-muftis would reach more and more women so that the truth of Islam would be known better by the mothers who educate future generations.

The women preachers I interviewed explain that women’s long-lasting exclusion from positions of authority as well as their limited visibility in mosques makes their job quite difficult. The women preachers, like their male colleagues, are appointed to mosques, prisons, dormitories, factories, hospitals and orphanages. They participate in informative programmes, seminars, panels, symposia and conferences. They give courses for Diyanet’s internal training programmes and the Koranic seminars. In the mufti offices they provide religious guidance over the phone. Although preachers provide a wide range of services, in practice they focus on disseminating religious knowledge to women in mosques. Kadriye Erdemli, a former preacher, now a vice-mufti, explains:

Since men perform their prayers in mosques, they know preachers very well and they benefit from their spiritual guidance. However, women generally do not go to mosques except for the prayers performed during Ramadan, and since the illuminating services are not given outside of the mosques, it is unfortunate that women do not know much about women preachers.

Women preachers in general object to the exclusion of women from mosques. Mosques are central in the life of Muslims, for Muslims raise their consciousness as believers and recognize the meaning of the subject (kul) of God within the spiritual and communal climate of mosques. Mosques are the places to learn genuine religious knowledge and to unlearn superstitions. Concomitantly, women preachers emphasize the importance of mosques as the symbol of social freedom for the believing Muslim community. In addition, it is argued that Islam obliges all Muslims, women and men alike, to be responsible for learning religion and praying properly. Gender does not exempt women from their responsibility. Among others, Nevin Meriç ties women’s exclusion from mosques to the peak of male dominance, when fake hadiths appeared prohibiting women’s entry into mosques in particular and into social life in general. Apart from male-dominated discourses in the Islamic tradition, she argues that modernization weakened the link between women and mosques. The architectural design of modern mosques alienated women because the places constructed for women are generally on the ground floor, at the rear, or in the
reserved corners. This means women have to perform their prayers separate from the community, not seeing and being unseen by the community. According to Meriç, one could trace the very modern secular understanding in the construction of modern mosques, which excludes religion from the public sphere and women from public religious places. In modern secular times both women and religious rituals are positioned in the private sphere, and the absence of women in mosques as well as in public life is normalized.28

Women preachers in general question a secular organization of time and space, which the state enforces.29 However, they are part of the state machinery. They occupy an in-between position, being nurtured by Islamism as a political movement and by Diyanet in a secular interpretation of Islam. This in-between position becomes clearer in the following sermon by a woman preacher relating to the ban on the headscarf. Starting from an explanation of why the Koran narrates various anecdotes, which would seem odd to many lay readers, the woman preacher suggests the anecdotes are related to the personalities the Koran aims at cultivating. Prayers, faith and piety are not enough for being a good Muslim. A certain personality, specific character traits and attitudes toward hardship are essential for the making of a good Muslim. In this sense, she claims that:

If one could not be a complete Muslim in her complete being, her appearance as Muslim [wearing headscarf] is not what God wants... All our values and our very simple deeds in life give us a clue about our self-understanding and personality. We generally choose to relieve ourselves by pitying ourselves, by blaming the unjust attitudes of others and by cursing the hardships in life. But we never consider that we could trigger the very hardships and rude attitude of others. The best example is this: Some barriers [the headscarf ban] in our country are used as an excuse for the under-education, cultural weakness and passive lifestyle of some headscarved women.30

The main message of the sermon is to encourage women to be more active in life, and that the Koran contains anecdotes to encourage believers to shoulder hardships without cursing their conditions, life, or other people. She further maintains that:

The type of human beings that the Koran wants to bring up cannot be the person who justifies her own banality, failure, humiliation, even worse, her departure from living up to a life of her own principles, when she faces undesirable conditions of life. The model people of the Koran as the anecdotes indicate are always in the worst conditions, but they never become the slaves of hostile conditions.31

This does not mean that the women preachers support the headscarf ban. Rather, they object to the idea that headscarved women are victims. Since a Muslim’s whole life is a test involving hardships and difficulties, the proper Muslim attitude towards the difficulties should not be giving up to live in accordance with one’s own principles and faiths. One should know that genuine faith is not an outward show. In arguing so, the women preachers encourage women to develop their knowledge and personality, which in turn would elevate their status in society.
The gendered division of labour and men’s privileged position in society challenges women preachers’ effectiveness. The women preachers criticize their male colleagues, particularly the muftis and imams because of their gender-biased attitudes. Women preachers and muftis are in the same rank in terms of educational background as the graduates of divinity schools. Mainly because of their common educational and cultural capital, women preachers expect the support of muftis. However, some muftis, instead of seeing preachers as colleagues and companions having common backgrounds and aspirations, consider women preachers simply as women and discriminate against them. Some muftis disregard the ideas and suggestions of women preachers, who know how to reach women believers and to religiously educate and illuminate them. Similarly imams are not always friendly to women preachers, for example not announcing the exact date of sermons delivered by the women preachers, and not providing necessary heating and lighting in the mosque during the women’s sermons. The main reason for such negative attitudes, according to women preachers, is that sermons targeting women are considered unnecessary. A number of imams believe that ‘women should stay at home, look after their children and obey their husbands, then they would go to heaven’.

Another major obstacle for women preachers is directly related to their status as state officers. In the first place, the women preachers recognize an essential problem between preaching and officedom. Preaching, by their accounts, demands total commitment and energy in a similar vein to the voluntary preachers of the 1980s. However, officedom curtails energy, voluntarism and industriousness. One woman preacher explains this dichotomy as follows:

To be a happy state officer, one needs to be mediocre ... Do we have the right to disturb our colleagues by exceeding the standards [of working time]? ... Another important way for an official preacher to survive is to do as others do. So that people cannot alienate you ... I have found a reasonable way for those like me who insist on the principle that one should not do misdeeds while working in such a sacred role. Pretend you were doing wrong [like your colleagues]. Hide your success. Never let your colleagues see proof of your successful acts ... The safest way (to survive as an official preacher) is that: Do not attempt to correct anyone or anything. Keep spending your time altogether as if everything was on track.32

The second challenge women preachers face as state officers involves institutional boundaries. The long-lasting battle over authority amongst different religiosities in Turkey obliges the women preachers to take sides. The religious sects have been very critical about the religious judgements and knowledge of Diyanet scholars and imams. In the regions where religious sects are dominant, the Diyanet preachers cannot attract the attention of the community. Women preachers especially suffer from the lack of audiences in these regions because of the double bind of gender and state officedom. One woman preacher describes this as a problem of ‘popularity’. The women preachers appreciate the significance of addressing crowded communities, because attendance proves their success in spreading the commands of God among Muslim women: in this sense popularity is proper. However attracting more and more women would oblige preachers to compromise as soon as the so-called
‘sensitive issues’ or controversial religious judgements are concerned. The judgements on veiling, polygamy, and the rights of women – let alone the relation between Islam and politics, secularism and the legitimacy of the republican regime, and/or democracy and sharia – are the points of departure for various religious groups and scholars. The members of Diyanet, including the newly appointed preachers, who are graduates of divinity schools, face resistance because of alternative religious judgements disseminated by certain religious sects. One woman preacher explains her own strategy of ‘gaining the hearts of women’ as follows:

My own method for launching sermons and establishing communication with the community of women gathering is not touching on sensitive issues at all, despite the fact that their knowledge is mistaken. However, inadvertently, the sensitive issues are at stake. This happens when replying to a question. This happens when I consider that ‘My community so far must have respected me, now it is time to explain my own ideas about these issues’. When I expose my ideas on the sensitive issues, I have to start all over again [building the community’s trust]. Or, with the happiness of telling the truth, I head toward a new community because I cannot stay there anymore [having told them my ideas]. That is why it is almost impossible for us to be ‘popular’ preachers. That is why we never feel the physical and spiritual relief of belonging to a group or a community.33

The women preachers are aware that they are in between the state and society, between the Islam of the state and the Islam of different sects and groups in society, which puts them under double pressure. Additionally, their personal qualifications and missions and their self-defined function as ‘intellectuals’ (mu‘nevver) increase their burden. Their self-image as the knowers of Islam thanks to their degrees in theology and their widespread intellectual inquiry and readings obliges them to make their own assumptions and create their own perspectives concerning the political and social problems in Turkey. Beyond their theoretical and scholarly knowledge, the women preachers believe that they have unique practical knowledge about the ‘real suffering’, ‘the real needs’, and ‘real solutions’, due to travelling around the whole country in their profession.

Our experience and faith is similar to this country, the country to which we belong. A while ago, one of us went to a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Istanbul to preach. There was no water supply, no electricity, and no mosque. There several citizens were hardly surviving: Is this part of Istanbul? … Another colleague was invited to a very luxurious five-star hotel to preach. The nature of the religious service we have been involved in is something like that [facing the different realities of our country]. We accept invitations and we work. We work hard, and take support from God, and we trust nobody but God … we work for this religion, for this country, and for making our day of judgement easier.34

Beyond their self-identification as the knowers of questions and holders of solutions, the discourse of women preachers bears an obvious imprint of Islamism blended
with left-wing populism. As to the women preachers, populism is integral to preaching because without loving people, without going to people and without knowing people, one cannot be an effective preacher. ‘Knowing people’ requires a genuine care for people as well as spending time amongst them. The women preachers observe that if they discount the conditions and expectations of people, if they share nothing with people but the place of preaching, then they cannot reach the people. However, reaching people, or populism, in this sense has a risk, which some call ‘being like people’ or ‘going native’. The dilemma of populism, as the women preachers experience, it is that people expect to be understood, to be cared for and not to be humiliated, which requires the preachers to be humble. However, the same people do not respect the preachers who are very common, who are like the next-door aunts in their neighbourhood. That is why the women preachers feel obliged to express a degree of ‘distinction’ in their look, attire, conduct, speech, acts and the like.

What happens when the distinction of women preachers takes an ethnic twist? In what follows, I will analyze the politics of preaching to Kurdish women. I will show how the women preachers are considered a remedy for the Kurdish question in its feminized form and how they reflect on their experience in the eastern and south-eastern regions of Turkey.

When Diyanet recruited women preachers, some of them were sent to the cities and towns in the east and south-east to preach to Kurdish women and to teach them the truth of Islam, especially that Islam is a religion of peace and fraternity. It was assumed the preachers would educate these women, prevent female suicide, end honour killings, and soothe the pain of fratricide amongst Muslims (Kurdish and Turkish). Concomitantly, the Kurdish question gained a psychic, therapeutic dimension. One woman psychologist appreciated the possible function of the women preachers as follows:

The south-east is a region of intensive superego (because of heavy control of instincts by traditions and values) . . . The women preachers would be very important for helping the women in the Southeast to alleviate their feelings of guilt, of inferiority. The most efficient way of eliminating female suicide would be preaching . . . Preachers should be very careful about their language, attitude and manner of disseminating their messages. They should develop their pedagogical capacities. There is no culture of therapy and there are no psychologists in the south-east. The women preachers would reach the women we (psychologists) cannot reach.

In fact, the women preachers observed that language was the main obstacle to reaching women. This became visible when the famous Meliksåh Mosque unexpectedly welcomed women believers for a sermon given by the first woman preacher appointed to Mardin. This event drew considerable press coverage. The appointment of women preachers to the region as well as the women believers’ presence in the mosques of the east and the south-east were quite appealing and thus were reported heavily. What is more significant is that the media accounts of the
women preachers endlessly exoticized and othered the people and the region, despite the integrative aim of Diyanet, to underline the sameness rather than the difference of the people in the region. Consider the following media report on the first sermon by the woman preacher in Melikşah Mosque:

Although there is much time for the noon prayer, one would easily notice a gathering of women in the mosque. The old and young women with tattoos on their hands were circling for the approaching sohbet (religious talk, or sermon) . . . In a short while, a young woman who was obviously different from the native people came into the mosque.39

Although the women preachers intentionally express some of the ways they are different in order to influence the women believers, this time the difference was unintended. It was an unassimilable indication of Kurdish ethnicity that differentiated the preacher from the Kurdish women. The language created a barrier because at least half of the women did not understand Turkish and the preacher did not speak Kurdish at all. Similar events occurred in other cities. For example, one woman preacher wrote of her visit to the region:

I tried to use a purer and clearer language (Turkish) than I used in Istanbul. Although I tried to speak slowly and I frequently repeated my words, I met a huge hurdle that I had never imagined: the LANGUAGE. In the towns and villages 50–60 per cent of the community understood my sermon, whereas 20–30 per cent of them were like ‘Hocahanım (woman preacher) is talking about good things, if only we understood!’ And the remaining 10–20 per cent were like ‘Hocahanım came here from Istanbul, from far away, to speak to us. Even if we do not understand what she says at all, it is better for us to be there, to say ‘’amin’’ when she prays and get benefit from her prayers.’ This last group was coming with good intentions and at the end of the talk – although I do not deserve their flattery – they were hailing me as ‘Hoca’, they were trying to kiss my hands without paying regard to my young age, they were kissing my face and eyes, they were forcing their children to kiss me, by begging, ‘Will you please come every day?’40

Although flattered by their respects, the woman preacher was deeply annoyed by women’s lack of knowledge about Islam. In her account, the religiosity in the region was mostly superstitious, mainly dominated by the cult of the tomb and imprinted with ignorance. When seeing the women in the region, the woman preacher thanked God that she was not one of the ignorant. In her opinion, pairing Islam with ignorance and the Muslim with the ignorant is an ‘ontological impossibility’. Her populist sentiment directs her to blame the conditions instead of the persons, for ignorance cannot be a deliberate choice.

The women preachers in general report that in the region they spend most of their time on non-religious problems. For instance, one of the women preachers of Kurdish origin, but who could not speak Kurdish, preached in Şırnak for a year. She found out, when nobody attended her sermons for the first three weeks, that the women in Şırnak were not accustomed to a female preacher. Then, she had to knock
on doors one by one to introduce herself and invite women to her sermons. At first she was able to attract only five women, but slowly the number reached 30. Her efforts were fruitful in Silopi, İdil and Cizre where the community in total reached approximately 1,000, which made her cry with happiness. Another young preacher in Siirt stated that, ‘I was born and live in Istanbul, Siirt seemed to me quite different’. She noticed that almost all of the women in Siirt were religiously guided by a male sheikh or a hodja. In fact, the difference of the discourse and knowledge of the woman preacher and the sheikhs caused confusion rather than illumination for women believers. For example, the woman preacher stated, ‘Women believe that if they do not cover their hair inside their home, the angels will leave their home. I explain that they do not have to veil at home. They would uncover their hair in accordance with the boundaries of helal.’ Another preacher noted that, ‘In the west (the western part of Turkey) the effect of the sheikhs and indigenous religious men is limited, whereas in the east sheikhs are very strong.’ They noted women’s high level of illiteracy and restricted participation in public and social life. One woman preaching in Şırnak explained that ‘the main problem of the women in Şırnak is polygamy. Women, regardless of their age, cannot bear their husbands’ other wives. Another problem is birth control … The local religious men who inform women consider birth control to be murder and thus significant sin.’ The women preachers also emphasized the strong patriarchal structure in the region that makes women consider their femininity as inferiority. One of the preachers used an overtly feminist sentence in describing the situation of women in the south-east region: ‘The woman here really has no name. And most women are not aware of their namelessness.’41

The accounts of the women preachers in the south-east replicate the state discourse on the Kurdish question: the emphasis on the inferiority of women in the region imitates the idea of cultural backwardness; the emphasis on the influence of the sheikhs and unqualified hocas repeats the cliché on religious reactionism; the emphasis on superstition and bidats copies the image of the unenlightened people of the unenlightened region. The state preachers attempted to conceal the ethnic character of the Kurdish question. One woman preacher’s account of travel to ‘exotic’ Siirt is about the limits of the discourse of ‘fraternity in Islam’ circulated by DİYANET. An excerpt from her diary, published on the website of women preachers, reads:

I was in Siirt in May 2008. The main reason of my being there was to guide (irşad). Siirt, where I went for the first time in my life, is a small city between mountains . . . As a team of illumination [of DİYANET] we were going through mountains, through valleys as well as through boundless plateaus, the rivers: this land charms you. We took a break near an even more charming site where the pomegranates and grapes were blossoming, the river and the birds were singing. We kept praying in the meantime thinking of the life-threatening events in the region. The religious songs of Celaleddin Hoca were soothing our fears, cheering up our trip. At one point we were appalled when we saw the caves in the mountains. When the driver announced a flat tire, thank God we met our soldiers . . . They served us hot tea. The tea I had from the hands of our soldiers was so delicious that I will never forget its taste . . . That day was just a day after Mother’s day. I whispered to the ear of Celaleddin Hoca that ‘Hocam please do
not sing the song *My Mother* now.' He already knew what to do, by starting to sing: 'Do not give this heavenly homeland...’ a piece from our National Anthem. I was listening to him in tears while hiding my tears from our soldiers. At the end the driver fixed the tire and we left this place where we experienced such emotional moments by praying our most sincere prayers and left our soldiers: We also have a duty to our homeland.42

The women preachers’ discourse is a religious discourse blended with Turkish nationalism. In line with the foundational aim of *Diyanet*, which secures the secular character of the republican regime through Islam, the women preachers of *Diyanet* play a significant role in securing the national territory through Islam when the Kurdish question is concerned.

On 3 March 2008, a special day, the women’s chorus of the mufti office of Istanbul, a chorus of 51 women religious experts and preachers, gave a concert celebrating the coming World Women’s Day by choosing pieces by women musicians. The organizer of the event Erdemli, a former preacher and then one of the first women vice-muftis, stated that, ‘The women of the world have struggled hard to enjoy certain rights. Islam has already given these rights to Muslim women.’43 The celebrations of the women’s days as well as the appointment of women as preachers and vice-muftis indicate the changing discourse of *Diyanet* concerning women. *Diyanet* started to advocate women’s rights and gender equality on certain occasions, such as international women’s days and mothers’ days. In the Friday sermons, the members of *Diyanet* started to advise Muslim men to behave well towards their wives and daughters, particularly refraining from using violence against them, for God created all human beings equal.44 The head of *Diyanet* speaks out about gender equality, explaining that women can occupy all positions including his own and those of mufti, muezzin and imam. It is not the state or the Islamic rules but traditions that create obstacles to women’s progress in the religious realm.

Despite the efforts of *Diyanet*, the patriarchal character of Turkish society particularly challenges the position of women preachers. One woman preacher, who gives religious guidance over the phone, explained that, ‘Once a man called and asked a question. When I started to answer, he stopped me by asking “Will you give the fatwa?” People tend to believe that women cannot be religious authorities. Or if your voice seems like the voice of a young woman, they would say “Is this girl entitled to give a fatwa?”’45 Men who express prejudice about women offend the women preachers. In her book, one woman preacher noted the following dialogue with a man, who sought guidance: “‘Are not men superior to women?’” he asked. When I retorted disapprovingly ‘Why do you think so?’ he was shocked and stated “Because men do not get pregnant.”46 The women preachers are aware of the social structure that discriminates against women, but they do not understand how a truly believing Muslim would justify his prejudices by women’s biology, which is created by God. They believe that God does not discriminate against women, as he does not discriminate against any human being. Moreover, they believe that superiority in God’s eyes could be achieved only by *takva* (refraining from sinful acts) and by carrying out good deeds.
The women preachers are particularly offended by seemingly pious men who sexually abuse young women by distorting religious requirements. In one case, a young woman asked for guidance about a marriage proposal from her married boss, who explained to her that their being alone in the same office as woman and man is sin, and that only a marriage would save them from being sinful. Among many cases, Meriç noted a representative call from a young woman:

I got married to my boss with a condition: This marriage would go on until someone proper asks for my hand. This marriage happened without the permission and knowledge of my family. After a few years, I found someone to marry ... When divorcing me my boss told me that ‘I am divorcing not because I want to divorce but because you want to divorce.’ That is to say, he unwillingly divorced me. Is this divorce legitimate? Can I marry someone else now?

Appalled by the naivety of the young woman, the woman preacher reminded her that the secret marriage is not legitimate in Islam. It was not the divorce, but the marriage that made the whole process illegitimate. All women preachers support monogamy and see polygamy as the exploitation of women, while defending the idea that Islamic permission for polygamy was valid for special conditions such as war and the like. Kadiye Erdemli, the vice-mufti, states clearly that, ‘Today polygamy means the exploitation of women’s rights’. She even argues that monogamy is God’s demand, for Islam holds a strict condition on polygamy – that the husband must be just to all his wives – which is practically impossible.

However there is a limit to women-friendly discourse. In their preaching, the women preachers still defend marriage as the best way of life for women and motherhood as a sacred duty, because every newborn proves the idea that God still keeps his hope for humanity. They even believe that to be a good preacher, a woman should be married, preferably with children. One of them overtly expresses her disgust with feminism, because of the exaggerated feminist emphasis on the strict equality of women and men. In her opinion, the strict equality of women and men is impossible, because

there is no equal (identical) creature in the world. Even two tulips are not created as equal, identical. Then how is it possible to consider women and men as identical? One human being is not equal to another. They all have negative and positive sides, and that is why they need each other ... Leave equality aside. Everyone should try to perform his/her own role properly.

Substituting what is identical with what is equal, the woman preacher aims at emphasizing the importance of different roles women and men play, particularly in the maintenance of marriage and family institutions. In her diary, Fatma Hale Liman mentions the harm caused by divorce and the importance of happy marriages, and curses women who have children outside marriage by using donated sperm. The women preachers also harshly criticize homosexuality on their website by opening a forum entitled ‘I am both headscarved and lesbian, so what?’ In this forum, the general editor of the website clearly states the need to protect Turkish
youth from this ‘disease’, despite the fact that psychiatrists around the world do not consider homosexuality or lesbianism to be a disease. She adds:

I got tired of reading the cliché that Islam does not discriminate against anyone. If this is so, who is kafir (non-Muslim), who is müsrik? Islam forbids harming the harmless. It does not punish someone because of her different choices but Islam prohibits the spread of such choice and prohibits its poisonous effect on society. If otherwise, what is the point of the importance of the family, of legitimate choices? The rules of Islam (Sharia) are the determined rules for the emancipation of humanity. These rules cannot be distorted because of individual choices and conditions.54

Another woman preacher continued the dialogue on lesbianism and legitimate sexuality by referring to when a woman living with a man out of wedlock asked for guidance as follows:

We generally mention how our God warns us about the right of his human subjects (kul hakkı) over one another. God forgives us for our sinful acts against his commandments but he leaves the forgiveness of offences against human beings to human beings. Completely misunderstanding God’s forgiveness, the woman asked me, ‘When I fight with my sexual partner, I occasionally kick him out of the house, which hurts him. Is this within the boundary of the right of the subject (kul hakkı)?’ This was the question! I was like ‘Let us talk about your illegitimate sexual life in the first place.’ . . . She was like ‘Well, this is my private matter. This is between me and my God. My God forgives me if I ask for forgiveness. My main problem is the right of the subject, which is not forgiven by God’. I was speechless . . . Now I am thinking what if we are asked ‘This is not even an issue of rights of others (the subjects of God). We as men live together as sexual partners without abusing each other. We ask for forgiveness if necessary, that is all.’ If we say, ‘Are you that sure about God’s forgiveness?’ They would reply ‘God says he will forgive our sins if we regretfully pray. . .55

Entangled in the anti-feminism of patriarchal Islam, the legally oriented feminism of the state and their own concrete situations as women, the women preachers are in an in-between situation in defending the equality of women and men. Raising a strong feminine identity lies at the core of their discourses. They defend equal rights in terms of education, divorce, inheritance and the like. They harshly criticize polygamy and physical and moral violence against women. They encourage women’s participation in public life, and they believe women are entitled to fill the same career positions as men. However, they express a strong conservatism when it comes to sexual freedom and women’s roles in the family and as mothers. They justify their criticism of homosexuality, for instance, not based upon a mere reactionism, or labelling it as an unforgivable sin, but on their knowledge of the true path of peace and happiness of all human beings on earth. In the same way, they advocate motherhood, because only mothers can implant the seeds of good deeds in future generations. But only knowledgeable mothers who know their religion as well as their rights are appreciated. In a nutshell, they demand genuine knowledge for
women in religious and everyday terms, which, they believe, would strengthen women in public and in private.

In this article I have elaborated on the in-between situations of a group of headscarved women who have been integrated into Diyanet 80 years after its establishment. Yet Diyanet has been the only institution to open its ranks to the women whose headscarves have been considered controversial by the secular state. The women preachers occupy a relatively autonomous position between political Islam and the secular state, between Islamist women and feminist women, and between institutional religiosity and the religiosity of various sects in society on the ground that they have been nurtured by the rising Islamist movement in Turkey and shaped by the legitimate religiosity of the secular state. Further, they have incorporated elements from leftist and feminist discourses.

The women preachers’ peculiar in-between position and their preaching activities in the mosques may be compared with the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, which emerged approximately 25 years ago.\(^{56}\) Obviously the preachers in Turkey and Egypt have been nurtured by increasing Islamism in the Middle Eastern countries. They are both motivated by populist yearning to illuminate and empower ordinary Muslim women who have no access to genuine religious knowledge. What makes these two movements so different is that the state influence on the discourse of the Turkish women preachers is so strong that their otherwise faith-based discourses incorporate nationalist and statist elements to domesticate the Kurdish demands by channelling religious faith and fraternity for the sake of state security.

Scholars of political Islam and women in Turkey in general see women wearing headscarves as a uniform group with common political aspirations, equivalent economic backgrounds, comparable social statuses, and similar religious understandings. Furthermore, the headscarved women are homogenously pictured as either the victims of the secular state or as rebels threatening the established order. However, the women wearing headscarves in no sense constitute a unity in terms of their discourses on politics and religiosity: some incorporate nationalist elements; others are anti-nationalist by their attachment to the umma, the imagined Islamic community worldwide. Some articulate the leftist arguments, while others are quite conservative. Some use feminist discourse without apology, while others voice overt patriarchal statements. Some follow established religious sects, while others pay tribute to the state-oriented religiosity, and still others choose an autonomous path.

My study explored one facet of the complicated issue of preaching and the headscarf in secular Turkey by analyzing how the headscarved women who are seen as outside of the Turkish state, contribute to its maintenance. Yet many of them are still aligned and in dialogue with Islamist groups, rather than Kemalist secular groups. Their points of departure from one of the other groups of women wearing headscarves became more visible when a group of well-known Islamist women and university students revealed their ‘Declarations of Freedom’, stating:

We, the women who are subjected to discrimination because of our headscarves will not be happy by entering universities with our headscarves until the
establishment of the necessary conditions for the Kurds and other marginalized
groups to feel like a genuine part of this country . . .

The women preachers are significantly different from those headscarved women
who demand widespread freedoms for all. Unlike the latter who are the interlocutors
of universal human rights and multiculturalist freedoms, the former's discourse of
freedom is restricted between the politics of the Turkish state and the boundaries of
Islam as interpreted by theological scholarship.

To conclude, headscarved women's occupation within the state, which otherwise
prohibits them from public office and schools, appears to be a success if one
evaluates it through the lens of liberal democratic discourse as the achievement of
rights, the distribution of authority and the establishment of tolerance. However,
this case shows that the raison d'etre of the state has found a fruitful strategy for
absorbing the challenges directed by political Islam and Kurdish separatism against
the sovereign power of the Turkish state.

Notes
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Turkey.

1. In September 2004, Diyanet announced that it would recruit 100 women, who must be graduates of
theology departments, as preachers. More than 1,300 women applied for the positions. After the
recruitment of women preachers, in 2005 two of them became the first women vice-muftis of Turkey.
Since then Diyanet has periodically recruited more and more women as preachers and vice-muftis,
underlining the needs of 35 million Turkish women who expect religious guidance.

2. J.P. Berkey, Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Near East (Seattle and

Politics (Fall 1999), pp. 370–87. More specifically, C. Delaney, in her ‘Untangling the Meaning of Hair
in Turkish Society’, in H. Eilberg-Shwartz and W. Doniger (eds.), Off With Her Head: The Denials of
Women Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995),
pp.53–75, clearly observed how the women who demand the right to wear the headscarf use Western
liberal democratic arguments.

4. For a rich discussion among liberal and anti-liberal feminist intellectuals on cultural/religious
difference, which includes veiling, please see J. Cohen, M. Howard and M. Nussbaum (eds.), Is


7. E. Özyürek, ‘Convert Alert: German Muslims and Turkish Christians as Threats to Security in the


9. For a defence of Diyanet’s compatibility with secularism please see A. Bardakoğlu, ‘The Structure,
Mission and Social Function of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA)’, Muslim World, Vol.98
(April/July 2008), pp.173–81. However, beyond the compatibility of Diyanet with secularism, the very
secularism of the Turkish state has been considered controversial, please see A. Davison, Secularism
and Revivalism in Turkey: A Hermeneutic Reconsideration (New Haven, CT and London: Yale

10. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between politics and the Presidency of Religious Affairs, please
Women Preachers of the Secular State

20. Ibid., p.50.
21. Diyanet’s first announcement of recruiting 100 women as preachers attracted 1,300 applicants. In a year the number of women preachers reached 196. Since then Diyanet has periodically opened its ranks to women preachers on the ground that, as the Head of Diyanet explained, women constitute half of the population and yet their access to religious knowledge is very limited. By recruiting women preachers, Diyanet aims at reaching 35 million women in Turkey. There is fierce competition for the positions at Diyanet. A diploma from the department of theology and achieving the highest points in the KPSS (Public Officer Selection Exam) are minimum requirements.
23. Many Islamist women consider Süreyya Yüksel an exemplary voluntary preacher. She devoted herself to the cause of Islam, she studied astronomy, rather than theology at school.
24. Many Islamist women especially Süreyya Yüksel and Hidayet Tuksal criticize Islamic scholars who define woman as incomplete in terms of wisdom and religiosity.
31. Ibid.
36. In 1997 Diyanet recruited only 27 women as preachers and none of them was working in the south-east. ‘Kadın Vaizler Görev Başında’, Sabah, 10 March 1997. Also the word vaize, a masculine word was used for female preachers.
37. Scholars of the Kurdish question indicate the ways the state attempts to cover the ethnic side by emphasizing religious reactionism, regional backwardness and extensive illiteracy. Please see M. Yeşen, ‘The Kurdish Question in Turkish State Discourse’, The Journal of Contemporary History,
Vol.34, No.4 (1999), pp.555–68. Now it seems the Kurdish question has gained a new religio-therapeutic dimension to be healed by women preachers.

39. Ibid.
44. Bardakoğlu astonished many feminists when he instructed preachers and imams to discuss honour crimes and violence against women, and particularly when he asked for guidance from feminist organizations about preparing a sermon for International Women’s Day on 8 March 2004. See N. Kardam, Turkey’s Engagement with Global Women’s Human Rights (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), p.131.
47. Ibid., p.153.
48. According to Turkish Civil Code religious marriage is not valid and in fact parties can only enter into a religious contract after a civil marriage. The young woman on the phone asked about her secret religious marriage.
53. This forum was opened after the showing of Parvez Sharma’s film A Jihad for Love narrating the stories of gay and lesbian Muslims. See www.ajihadforlove.com for more details about the film and its reception.
55. Ibid.
56. S. Mahmood, ‘Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt’, Social Research, Vol.70, No.3 (2003), pp.837–66. As part of the Islamic revivalism (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) in Egypt, the women’s mosque movement aims at educating Islamic scriptures and cultivating virtuous Muslims in daily life and attracts women from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Since the 1970s, mosques have been very effective locations in the emergence and dissemination of Islamism in Egypt. The use of mosques by pious women has been significant on the ground that women started to study scholarly religious sources, which means they have claimed authority in terms of theological knowledge. In terms of politics, the women’s mosque movement has been considered as an alternative to more radical Islamist groups and yet it has never expressed a harmonious relationship with the secular and liberal aims of the state.