

## Article

# Old Wine in a New Bottle: Navigating Religion and Politics in Türkiye

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**Abstract:** While there is a large body of literature on different models of secularism and religion and politics, relatively scarce attention has been devoted to the experimentation of the moderate secularism model in authoritarian and Muslim-majority countries. This article brings a novel insight into the literature by unpacking the complex relationship between secularism, politics, and religion in Türkiye. The Turkish Republic was founded on the norm of authoritarian secularism that promulgates the exclusion of religion both from the political and public spheres. After the Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power, Türkiye appeared to be moving toward moderate secularism through policies, such as the liberalization of the headscarf and the expansion of non-Muslim rights. By examining the transformed role of the Diyanet (the Presidency of Religious Affairs), Imam Hatip schools, and the conversion of church-turned-museums into mosques, this article illustrates that rather than moving in the direction of moderate secularism, the JDP has rather instrumentalized it and has eventually worked toward infusing Islamic norms into the Turkish state through bureaucratic and political initiatives. By examining and contextualizing the trajectory of secularism in Türkiye, this study contributes to the literature on religion, authoritarianism, and secularism in general, and ongoing debates on Turkish politics in particular.

**Keywords:** authoritarian secularism; moderate secularism; religion; politics; JDP



**Citation:** Öztüğ, Laçin İdil, and Umut Can Adisönmez. 2024. Old Wine in a New Bottle: Navigating Religion and Politics in Türkiye. *Religions* 15: 836. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070836>

Academic Editor: Jeffrey Haynes

Received: 25 April 2024

Revised: 1 July 2024

Accepted: 8 July 2024

Published: 11 July 2024



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## 1. Introduction

Secularism, as understood in the modern context, is the final product of multilayered developments that gradually began to unfold in Europe following the Enlightenment era (Casanova 2009).<sup>1</sup> The spread of a secular mindset went hand in hand with the church's declining authority. While the separation of religious and political authority could be found in Europe and the Islamic Empires in the medieval era to a certain extent, in the modern era, secularism emerged as a political doctrine that presupposes new concepts of 'religion', 'ethics', and 'policies', and new imperatives associated with them (Asad 1993). Broadly speaking, secularism is a sociological phenomenon that influences the ways in which societies conduct their daily routines and political practices (see Vicini 2020; Cannell 2010). It is inherently political, as it envisions the infusion of a rational mentality (rather than religious beliefs) into statecraft (Habermas 1987).

Secularism is not a monolithic phenomenon. There are variegations within it. For example, authoritarian secularism is based on the regulation of religion through political means. It treats religion as a private matter and aims to offer a neutral public sphere by confining religion to the private sphere (Stepan and Taylor 2014). Moderate secularism, however, offers a rather nuanced approach that permits a certain level of interplay between religion and politics, while preserving the fundamental principles of a secular state (Modood 2010). Importantly, compared to authoritarian secularism, moderate secularism offers more tolerance to religious expression in the public sphere in the context of free speech,

social cohesion, and intergroup harmony. Put differently, moderate secularism refers to the state's neutrality towards all religions through its tolerance of their public visibility (Modood 2010).

While there are nuances in the practical implications of these two models, they fundamentally differ in the degree of tolerance shown to religious visibility and expression in the public sphere. For example, in France (which constitutes a paradigmatic example of authoritarian secularism), wearing a face veil in public and wearing headscarves, cross necklaces, and Jewish skullcaps in public schools is banned (Breedon 2023). On the other hand, countries that follow the path moderate secularism, like the US and the UK, tend to allow for more freedom in displaying religious symbols and expression of religious beliefs in the public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

There is a large body of literature on different models of secularism (see Stepan and Taylor 2014; Modood 2010; Kuru 2009) and religion and politics (see Norocel and Giorgi 2022; Giorgi 2022; Öztürk 2019; Elshtain 2009; Casanova 2001; Fox and Flores 2009; Cesari 2004). The relationship between secularism and Islam has generated hot debates in academia, with some arguing that the totalizing worldview of Islam is incompatible with secularism (see Weiner 1987; Lewis 2002; Huntington 1993). This line of thinking treats Islam and secularism as complete opposites, with the former associated with freedom and gender equality, and the latter with oppression (see Scott 2018). Some scholars, on the other hand, vehemently opposed this argument by focusing on the compatibility between Islam and secularism (see Salvatore 2005; Shamsul 2005).

This study builds on and contributes to the growing body of literature that empirically analyzes the experimentation of secularism in authoritarian and Muslim-majority countries (see Mahmood 2015; Agrama 2012; Iqtidar 2011; Tambar 2009, 2014). Türkiye represents an interesting case in this research domain with respect to the quiddity of the application of secularism, the rise and fall of liberal democracy, and the convoluted relationship between religion and politics over time.

Partly inspired by the French *laïcité*, authoritarian secularism in Türkiye constituted the basis of the country's transition to a modern republic. Early Kemalist elites developed institutions and mechanisms to exclude religion from both the political and public spheres (Adisonmez 2019; Öztig 2018a, 2018b). Interestingly, rather than building on the complete separation of religion and politics, the Turkish mode of authoritarian secularism operated through strict control and regulation of the "religious sphere" by bureaucratic mechanisms of public authority (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018). After the JDP came to power, it countered authoritarian secularism and adopted a discourse that promoted religious freedom in the context of moderate secularism. Especially the first period of the JDP appeared to have witnessed an increase in religious freedom through the liberalization of the headscarf and the construction and restoration of churches and synagogues, and the opening of the first Protestant church in Türkiye's history (Cagaptay 2006).

The main argument of the article is that the JDP, instead of moving towards moderate secularism, instrumentalized it for a brief period and has eventually treated Sunni Islam as a hegemonic project of statecraft, actively working for the expansion of the religious sphere in line with Sunni Islamic norms. While Kemalist actors confined religion to the private sphere, the JDP actors aim to dominate the public sphere through the top-down diffusion of Sunni Islam norms.

We illustrate this argument by closely examining the transformed roles of the Diyanet and Imam-Hatip schools, as well as the transformation of churches into museums and mosques. This study contributes to the literature on religion, authoritarianism, and secularism in general, and ongoing debates on Turkish politics in particular (Kuru 2009; Kuru and Stepan 2012; Bekaroğlu 2015; Taş 2015; Başer and Öztürk 2017; Arisan 2019; Öztürk 2019; Yavuz and Öztürk 2019; Korkut and Sarfati 2020) by mapping out and deepening our understanding of the trajectory of an authoritarian and Muslim-majority country away from authoritarian secularism.

This article is organized as follows. The first section gives an overview of religion and politics in Türkiye. The second section explicates how the JDP challenged authoritarian secularism in its initial terms by appearing to favor moderate secularism by focusing on policymakers' discursive practices. The third section focuses on policy practices by analyzing the liberalization of the headscarf and the expansion of non-Muslim rights. The fourth section illustrates the authoritarian diffusion of Sunni Islam into state structures, institutions, schools, and public spaces by analyzing the practices of the Diyanet, Imam Hatip schools, the modifications made to the school curriculum, and lastly, the conversion of church-turned-museums into mosques across Türkiye. The following sections discuss the implications of the study.

## 2. An Overview of Religion and Politics in Türkiye

In the Ottoman Empire, Islam and state authority were entwined as sultanic laws coexisted with religious law (Nadolski 1977; Yavuz 2003). Shari'a (a body of Islamic laws) constituted the basis of Ottoman family law (Nadolski 1977). The ulema (the Muslim clergy) legitimized the authority of the Ottoman sultan over its subjects (Yavuz 2005). The Ottoman society was organized based on religion (the millet system) as different laws applied to Muslims, Christians, and Jews (Ortaylı 1999).<sup>3</sup>

The secularization process in the Empire began in the 19th century through the Tanzimat reforms realized in the domains of administration, education, military, and justice (Kern 2011). While this process halted under Sultan Abdülhamid II, who promoted pan-Islamist policies to foster an Islamic identity among the Ottoman-Muslim population (Deringil 1991), it gained pace following the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 (Walter 2014). During this period, women were encouraged to play a more active role in society and allowed to remove their headscarves in public places (Ahmad 1993). Shaykh al-Islam (the chief authority on religious matters) was removed from the state cabinet. The authority of secular courts increased at the expense of religious courts (Inalcık 2016).

The secularization process reached its climax with the creation of the Turkish Republic. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk aimed to modernize Turkish society in accordance with secular norms (Walter 2014). Authoritarian secularism, which promulgates rigid state control over religious expression and institutions, constituted the basis of the Kemalist reform. Religion was excluded from both politics and the public sphere (Hurd 2013). Early Kemalist elites pitted the modern lifestyle against the Islamic way of life (Göle 2014). Authoritarian secularism, as such, was built upon the transformation of the traditional social imaginary, constituted by religious identity and beliefs and the creation of a new social imaginary fed by Western cultural codes (Öztig 2018a).

Authoritarian secularism, in general, had been diffused into Turkish political, bureaucratic, and social culture through a number of political, social, and bureaucratic reforms. Radical changes were made with the secularization of family law, the prohibition of making anti-secularist propaganda, wearing religious attire in public, and the conversion of *ezan* (Muslim call to prayer) from Arabic to Turkish. With the incorporation of laicism into the 1924 Constitution in 1937, Türkiye became a constitutionally secular state (Öztig 2018b). These radical reforms provided an institutional background for the Kemalist cadres to adopt "a secular rationalization" during the state- and nation-building processes (Adisonmez 2019, p. 1383).

The secular measures that started during the Atatürk era were maintained and reproduced under President İsmet İnönü between 1938 and 1950. During this period, questioning secular norms was discouraged. A law in 1941 forbade praying *ezan* (Islamic call to prayer) in Arabic. Additional measures were adopted to prevent religious propaganda and the mobilization of Islamist groups (Dikici 2008). However, considering their plummeting popular support, the ruling cadres sought to appeal to the conservative class and opened Imam Hatip schools (religious vocational schools) for training imams (Tanilli 2016). Although the Imam Hatip schools contradicted the agenda of authoritarian secularism of the Kemalists and added another perplexing layer to Türkiye's secularism experiment, the obliteration

of religion from the public sphere continued. The most prominent development was the headscarf ban imposed by the military-led government in the early 1980s.

The period after the 1980 coup witnessed a further convoluted relationship between religion and politics. By the 1980s, Islam had become a powerful tool of opposition for the marginalized groups in Türkiye. These groups actively used religious narratives and symbols to challenge authoritarian secularism. In the 1980s, under Turgut Ozal's liberal Motherland Party (ANAP), conservative and Islamist ideas and concerns began to be heard by the center (Yavuz 2005). Parallel to this development, the coalition government was formed by the Islamist Welfare Party and the center right True Path party in 1996, enhancing the sensitivities of Turkish state actors about secularism. On 28 February 1997, the National Security Council (a state agency that determines the national security agenda in Türkiye) published a memorandum that highlighted the Islamist threat in Türkiye by referring to the increasing role of Islamists in bureaucracy and the increasing number of Imam Hatip school graduates (Narli 2000). This memorandum led to a process that ended the coalition government.

The subsequent coalition government led by Mesut Yılmaz complied with the demands of the military. The sections of Imam Hatip schools, which were equivalent to secondary schools, were closed. Restrictions were imposed on the activities of Qur'an courses and the headscarf ban was implemented in schools, universities, and public offices (Narli 2000). Under the last government before the rule of the JDP (the coalition government led by Bulent Ecevit), the issue of the headscarf turned into a political crisis as Merve Kavakçı, a member of the Islamist Virtue Party, attempted to take an oath of allegiance before the Parliament wearing her headscarf. She left the Parliament after her oath-taking was disrupted by protests (Öztiğ 2018b).

In general, during the pre-JDP era, the military, the Turkish Constitutional Court, and the Council of the State acted as the main defenders of authoritarian secularism at the state level. Secular civil society organizations, such as the Atatürkist Thought Association and Association for Supporting Contemporary Life, actively participated in the diffusion of secularism in the society. In addition to bureaucratic/institutional frameworks, the secular mindset dominated the public sphere through excessive emotions and rituals that revolved around Atatürk posters, badges, statues, complementing "the rational and ordered terms of an analytically reified modernity" (Navaro-Yashin 2002, p. 203).

It is important to emphasize that the secularization process in modern Türkiye has not operated progressively. The socialization of the ruling elite (including bureaucrats, military actors, and civil servants) into secularism showed a difference from a significant portion of the population (Hale and Özbudun 2010). To put it bluntly, the deep divide in society manifested itself in normative clashes, with the secular elites assuming the role of the protector of secularism and the conservatives demanding more rights, emphasizing particularly the norm of religious freedom (Zürcher 2017; Yavuz 2009). The struggle to balance authoritarian secularism with Islamic traditions has remained a central issue in the country. This dividing line, described as "center-periphery polarity" by Serif Mardin (1973), constitutes one of the most important sources of tension in Turkish politics.

Domestic and worldwide developments in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the surge in electoral support for Islamist parties and the global revival of radical Islam in the post-Soviet world, went hand in hand with the rise of Islamist movements in Türkiye (Kumbaracıbaşı 2009). These major developments at home and abroad offered a maneuver area for the political Islamist movement in Türkiye, a harbinger of its gradual relocation from the periphery to the center of the state. With the JDP's rise to power in 2002, the discourse on moderate secularism has gradually gained legitimacy and influence, eventually becoming a dominant discourse. The following sections shed light on how the JDP countered authoritarian secularism at the discursive and policy levels.

### 3. The JDP's Challenge toward Authoritarian Secularism

Prior to the 2002 elections, Erdoğan made controversial remarks about secularism. For example, a year before the JDP came to power, he stated that “one cannot be a Muslim and laic at the same time. If this society [Turkiye] demands, laicism, of course, will be removed” (Milliyet 2001). However, after coming to power, Erdoğan refrained from making such remarks. From 2002 onward, the JDP actively promoted moderate secularism. In his speeches, Erdoğan repeatedly underscored the association of secularism with religious freedom. In 2012, then President Abdullah Gül asserted that the state must maintain neutrality towards all religions and ensure the equal treatment of people with different religions as well as atheists (Haber Turk 2012). When asked about the participation of politicians wearing headscarves in parliament, he stated that “in the past people’s lifestyles and dress styles in line with their beliefs were considered a threat. Today, Turkish laicism resembles Anglo-Saxon secularism” (quoted in Öztig 2018b, p. 10). *The Political Vision of the AKP (2023)* also stresses the importance of religious freedom:

... [Secularism] should be understood as a principle that keeps the state in equal distance to all religions and religious groups, prevents the dominance of one religious group over others, and takes the freedom of belief as an indispensable part of democracy. ... For the JDP, [secularism] is a principle of religious freedom and conscience that works as a principle of freedom and peace, a guarantee for both religious and non-religious people to live and organize their life and beliefs freely, to explain and practice their beliefs freely.

Overall, the JDP initially portrayed itself as an actor that values the religious freedom and liberties of all Turkish people. This all-encompassing mentality not only helped the party form a wide sociopolitical coalition with conservative and liberal enclaves in its challenge against authoritarian secularism, but also helped the JDP elites to showcase that Islam and democracy could peacefully coexist. The party elites aimed to illustrate this coexistence by referring to “conservative democracy” (Alpan 2016). This governance model would not only powerfully blend traditional Islamic values with democratic norms in Turkish politics. It would also help the JDP leadership promote greater social and economic opportunities along egalitarian lines.

Externally, the JDP’s political identity tapped into the “moderate Islam” project in the Middle East that was promoted by the US following the rise of radical versions of Islam after the 9/11 attacks. Furthermore, the initial commitment of the JDP to the Copenhagen criteria and its active efforts to comply with EU standards appeared as a perfect indicator of the compatibility between Islamic identity and democratic values and practices (Türkeş 2016).

### 4. From Authoritarian Secularism to Moderate Secularism?

As can be seen in the discourses and practices of the JDP officials, the JDP appeared to be moving Turkiye away from authoritarian secularism towards moderate secularism. In addition to discursive practices, the JDP adopted policies that are compatible with its moderate secularism discourse. This study gives the liberalization of the headscarf and the expansion of non-Muslim rights as examples of the policy implications of this discourse and approach.

#### 4.1. *The Liberalization of the Headscarf*

The headscarf ban was gradually relaxed starting in 2011. In the 2007 elections, the JDP received almost 47% of the votes. Encouraged by its increased electoral power, the party proposed a constitutional amendment to liberalize the headscarf in universities in 2008. With the support of the Nationalist Movement Party, the amendment was approved in parliament. However, the public support for the JDP did not coincide with a decrease in social tensions with respect to the headscarf. Mass protests were held against this amendment, with angry protestors shouting phrases like “Turkiye will be laic and stay

laic'. The Constitutional Court annulled the amendment in 2008 (see Köker 2010; Öztig and Aydın 2017).

Since 2001, civil-military reforms and plot investigations have contributed to the weakening of the military's political power (Bardakci 2013). The most notable plot investigations unfolding in this period were the Ergenekon (2008) and Sledgehammer (2010) cases in which hundreds of military officers, including some high-ranking military generals, were accused of involving in a conspiracy to overthrow the JDP. This accusation later led to legal proceedings following which many defendants were convicted (Bianet 2019), resulting in the transformation of power dynamics in favor of the JDP.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the party's winning almost 50% of the votes in the 2011 general elections created a permissive environment for the liberalization of the headscarf. Universities began to accept students wearing headscarves in 2011, following a statement from the Higher Education Council. In 2013, a legislative change liberalized the wearing of a headscarf in public offices. In the same year, four headscarf-wearing members of the JDP participated in the general assembly of the Parliament. A headscarf-wearing attorney became a member of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors in 2014. In the same year, another legislative change liberalized the headscarf in public secondary and high schools. In 2015, for the first time in Turkish history, headscarf-wearing parliamentarians took their oath in parliament, indicating a sharp change in the parliament following the Kavakçı affair. In 2016, an amendment to the dress code regulation liberalized the headscarf for policewomen (Öztig 2018b).<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.2. The Expansion of Non-Muslim Rights

Most of the legislative changes to improve the lives of non-Muslim minorities in Türkiye occurred under the EU reform policies. In 2003, under the fourth EU harmonization package, the foundation law was again changed to further facilitate the purchase of property by minority foundations. The zoning law was changed to replace the term 'mosque' with 'the place of worship' as a consequence of which churches and synagogues gained the same legal status as mosques (Öztig and Aydın 2017). The Directorate General for Religious Affairs established a multireligious committee to increase communication between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Antakya (Commission of the European Communities 2004). Under the seventh EU harmonization package, the Higher Council for Minorities was abolished. In its place, a Council of Minority Problems was created to find solutions to the problems of minorities (Öztig and Aydın 2017).

While several reforms for non-Muslim minorities were realized under EU harmonization packages, the JDP made significant efforts to increase the rights of non-Muslims, including non-minority non-Muslims. The JDP actively encouraged the construction and restoration of churches and synagogues. For example, in 2006, a Turkish Protestant (non-minority) church was opened for the first time in Turkish history (Internet Haber 2006). After restoration works, which began in 2005, were completed, a historic Armenian church in Van (Akdamar Church), which is situated in the eastern part of Türkiye, was opened as a monumental museum in 2007. The first annual ritual by the Armenian Orthodox Community began in 2010. The third largest synagogue in Europe (and Türkiye's biggest) synagogue in Edirne was reopened in 2015, opening its doors to worship after more than four decades (Euronews 2015).

With the 2008 legislative change, churches and synagogues could now benefit from free water and electricity facilities such as mosques (Karaosmanoğlu 2010). In a circular published in 2010, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan stressed that non-Muslims are an indispensable part of Turkish culture and identity, and that they have the right to maintain and practice their identities and culture. He recommended municipalities to take the utmost care of non-Muslim cemeteries. He also advised that legal measures should start immediately against publications that encourage hatred and animosity against non-Muslim minorities (The Official Gazette 2010). Following these reconciliatory moves towards non-Muslims, for the first time after 54 years, in 2015, three Armenian deputies entered parliament representing the JDP, the Republican People's Party, and the People's Democratic Party.

## 5. The Top-Down Diffusion of Sunni Islam

A cursory look at the liberalization of the headscarf and non-Muslim rights might be read as indicators signaling Türkiye's transition from authoritarian secularism to moderate secularism. However, the religious freedom granted by the JDP proved to be problematic. Legal regulations were made regarding the improvement of the rights of "non-Muslim" groups. However, the state has not reached out to these groups in the same way as it has done to Muslims through the Diyanet. The state institutions did not conduct surveys to understand their demands and their evaluation of recent changes in their rights. Moreover, the cultural and religious demands of the second largest Muslim sect in Türkiye, i.e., Alevi, were systematically dismissed under the JDP rule (Erol 2015), even though the JDP organized various workshops in 2009 and 2010, listening to the needs and grievances of the Alevi communities of Türkiye (Aljazeera 2014). These events did not evolve into a meaningful development, even though Erdoğan repeatedly claimed that the JDP was preparing a plan (named the "Alevi Opening") to significantly improve Alevi rights (Cumhuriyet 2021).

Importantly, focusing on the JDP's discourse on moderate secularism and its policies that are compatible with this approach only gives us a biased view of the relationship between religion and politics under the rule of the JDP. At this juncture, our study aims to provide a better understanding of the convoluted relationship between secularism and religion under the JDP rule. It is grounded on an analysis of significant shifts and transformations internal to institutions such as the Diyanet, the Imam Hatip Schools, and church-turned-museums.

### 5.1. The Diyanet

In Türkiye, the exclusion of religion from politics did not operate through the complete separation of religion and politics. The state intervened in the religious sphere to prevent its influence on the political and public spheres. In this context, the emergence of the Diyanet was related to the secular state's aspiration to control, regulate, and nationalize Sunni Islam (Yavuz 2005). Therefore, one can interpret the initial Diyanet as the state's attempt to bureaucratize and rationalize religion (Gözyayın 2008; Maritato 2016). The controversiality of the Diyanet derives from its coexistence with secular institutions in a constitutionally secular state (Adak 2020). The Diyanet promotes the Hanafi version of Sunni Islam; as such, it does not represent other sects such as Alevis or Sufis. Functioning in the religious sphere, the Diyanet was equipped with the role of the protector of Turkish laicism by insulating the state and society from a radical and undesirable understanding of Islam (Öztürk 2016).

It is important to highlight that the Diyanet's institutional structure and functions did not remain static. Over time, it became more institutionalized, and its missions increased (Yavuz and Öztürk 2019).<sup>6</sup> The 1980s witnessed a change in the relationship between religion and politics in Türkiye in the context of the promotion of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis against communist ideologies (Eligur 2010). The financial and institutional capacity of the Diyanet expanded against the backdrop of this dynamic. However, under the JDP rule, this institution underwent a massive transformation. In the pre-JDP era, Diyanet's employees mainly consisted of career civil servants with a secular mindset. During the JDP era, however, conservative people have been increasingly employed (Öztürk 2016). The Diyanet's statistics indicate that as of 2021, 84% of the Diyanet's staff either went to Imam Hatip schools or received religious higher education (The Presidency of the Religious Affairs 2021 Statistics). The Diyanet's budget is a clear indicator of its privileged position among other state ministries and institutions. In 2023, the Turkish government submitted to parliament a budget proposal aimed at increasing funds allocated to the Diyanet to almost 35 billion Turkish liras (Duvar English 2022). Furthermore, the Diyanet propagates the Sunni version of Islam through Diyanet TV, which opened in 2012. Its programs consist of teaching the Quran, Arabic letters, religious chants, etc. Sunni Islam is also taught to children through cartoons (The Diyanet TV 2023).

Overall, over the last two decades, the Diyanet has almost reached the level of "a state within a state" with its expanded budget, increased number of employees and foreign

missions, and its engagement with local communities through formal and informal networks (see [Sommer 2013](#)). Parallel to its institutional transformation, the Diyanet has been equipped with new missions. For example, in 2011, the Diyanet signed a protocol with the then Ministry of Family and Social Policy (now the Ministry of Family and Social Services) that included the recruitment of Diyanet's religious staff into the institutions headed by the Ministry and the incorporation of religious and moral guidelines into the social services provided by the Ministry ([Adak 2020](#)). The Diyanet opened Quran memorization courses for children between 4 and 6 years of age in 2012, and recently signed an agreement with the Ministry of Family for inter-ministerial cooperation on these courses ([The Ministry of Family and Social Services 2023](#)).

The Diyanet has dramatically enhanced its capacity by employing female preachers and the Family and Religious Guidance Offices, expanding the scope of religion beyond the private sphere.<sup>7</sup> Echoing this mindset, the Diyanet requires female preachers to reach as many women as possible ([Maritato 2016](#)). Women participate in religious activities organized by female preachers to practice piety, increase their religious knowledge, and socialize ([Maritato 2016](#)). By giving sermons to women, organizing meetings and religious seminars, the Diyanet's female preachers (who are required to strictly follow the Diyanet's guidelines) give direction about how to be good Muslims ([Mariato 2018](#); [Adak 2020](#)). The fact that these preachers give sermons in places other than mosques, such as hospitals, women's prisons, detention houses, reformatories, women's shelters, student dormitories, and factories, has contributed to the Diyanet's improved capacity to diffuse Islamic knowledge and values ([Adak 2020](#)).<sup>8</sup>

The Family and Religious Guidance Offices were established in 2003 under the JDP rule. Today, they operate in all provinces of Türkiye. The objective of these offices is to provide religious advice to citizens. The staff employed in these offices consists of Quran course teachers, Imam Hatip graduates and preachers, answering questions face-to-face, by phone, or by email. The Diyanet also opened a "Fatwa hotline" to answer religious-related questions of citizens in 2014. After this date, the staff in the family and religious guidance offices started to direct questions regarding religious jurisprudence to the "Fatwa hotline". Most questions directed to the staff revolve around issues of marriage, divorce, family, health, children, youth, and social situations ([The Presidency of Religious Affairs General Directorate of Religious Services 2015](#)). Over time, citizens' applications to these offices increased. For example, in 2017, 9213 people applied to these offices, while in 2021, more than 30,000 citizens made applications ([The Presidency of Religious Affairs General Directorate of Religious Services 2021](#)).

These offices are visible in the public space as well. They organize a wide range of social and educational activities, including Quran courses, religious conferences, TV and radio programs, sermon writing/reading, and mosque meetings ([The Presidency of Religious Affairs General Directorate of Religious Services 2021](#)). In line with the political orientation of the JDP, these offices seek to raise Islamic awareness and propagate norms and values centered on Muslim identity. The Diyanet also pays particular attention to diffusing Sunni Islam norms to the youth. In its quest to reach the youth, the Diyanet cooperates with the Ministry of the Youth and Sport, offering religious advice services in state-owned dormitories. Following its protocol with the Ministry of Education, it gives trainings to middle school children. The Diyanet Youth Department organizes conferences, social media programs, and social activities (such as camping and picnics), morning prayer meetings, mosque meetings, and courses on Islamic clothing, privacy, and communication. Lastly, the Diyanet opened "Diyanet Youth Centers" in major cities and districts, offering social and educational activities. At these centers, young people are encouraged to spend time in mosques. Under a youth project, each Diyanet staff (who works as a teacher in Imam Hatip schools, Quran courses, or muezzin trustee) is required to reach at least 10 young people in order to give religious advice and mentorship ([The Presidency of Religious Affairs General Directorate of Religious Services 2021](#)).

## 5.2. Imam Hatip Schools and School Curriculum

Imam Hatip schools in Türkiye were established in 1951 for the purpose of training imams to be employed at mosques. Although these schools were partly founded to reconcile the turbulent relationship between the conservative majority and the Kemalist cadres (Tanilli 2016), they have added a new layer of complexity to the sociopolitical situation in Türkiye. These schools eventually became an alternative to the secular educational system (Okçabol 2008). Concomitant with the growing popularity of Imam Hatip schools, then-ruling Democrat Party took initiative to open more Imam Hatip schools in seven different provinces in the 1950s (Ilkadam 2016).

The number of Imam Hatip schools increased even after the 1960 coup. This dynamic changed after the 1997 Memorandum. Following the memorandum, the political purge known as *the 28 February Process* started in Türkiye. During this process, the military put pressure on the civilian government and forced the latter to follow strict measures to diminish the growing profile of political Islam. One of these measures was the implementation of compulsory primary school education and the elimination of the secondary school system in Imam Hatip schools (Karapehlivan 2019). As a result, Imam Hatip school enrolment declined dramatically (Çakmak 2009), while the number of Imam Hatip schools decreased until 2002 (Ilkadam 2016). Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that during this period, Imam Hatip graduates occupied central positions under the ranks of the Welfare Party. This case demonstrated how the expansion of Islamic discourses in the public space relatively undermined the impact of another military intervention, while improving the resilience of the pious segments of the society.

However, under the JDP rule, the role and status of Imam Hatip schools have changed significantly. These schools became important actors in the dissemination of the political and normative vision of the party. First, parallel to the consolidation of JDP's power in Turkish politics, the number of Imam Hatip high schools soared, a stark contrast to the period between 1997 and 2002. Their number jumped from '450' in 2002 to '1623' in 2019 (Gerçek Gündem 2019). Furthermore, a new Imam Hatip secondary school category was introduced in 2012, whose numbers quickly reached '3394' within a decade (SODEV 2020, p. 3). Following these developments, the JDP transformed over 900 primary schools into Imam Hatip secondary schools (T24 2014). This line, the JDP has steadily increased the funding of these schools, offering them the opportunity to include more courses on traditional Islamic subjects in their curriculum, such as Islamic law, and to expand their physical facilities. This pattern even reached a point where some pro-government religious orders (such as the Naqshbandi order) have started to cooperate with the Ministry of Education in organizing extracurricular activities and distributing schoolbooks that promote Islamic "beliefs" such as jihad and faithfulness (Yilmaz 2022).

Second, the popularity and prestige of Imam Hatip schools have reached their zenith in this era. Given the opportunities their graduates have received in politics and high bureaucracy, this is not surprising. Their graduates have occupied various key posts, important examples being Mustafa Şentop, the Speaker of the Turkish National Assembly, and Mehmet Aktaş, Director General of Security (Cumhuriyet 2022). Thus, Imam Hatip schools have become a recruiting base for the JDP in reshaping the political and bureaucratic sphere with an Islamic vision. This trajectory is designed powerfully to undermine the influence of the secular mindset in decision-making processes.

Third, and last, the substantial transformation of Imam Hatip schools went beyond their scope, penetrating the structure of public education in Türkiye. This case must be read together with Erdoğan's mission to create "pious generation" (Yenişafak 2016). In creating a new generation of Türkiye with Islamic values, religion-based modules were introduced into the secular education system, including "the Quran, the Life of Prophet Mohammed, and Basic Religious Knowledge" (Karapehlivan 2019). This was accompanied by the revised education policy of the Ministry of Education, arranged in 2014. Accordingly, regular high schools and vocational schools were turned into Anatolian high schools, which only accept high-achieving students. It meant that thousands of students who could

neither enter Anatolian high schools nor afford to go to private high school had to enroll in Imam Hatip school or Open high school (Cumhuriyet 2014). This top-down arrangement promoted Imam Hatip schools, while indirectly preventing many children from attending public schools with secular curriculum. In turn, these efforts would contest the basis of pro-Western and secular Turkish collective identity at the expense of promoting the JDP's own desirable generation.

### 5.3. The Conversion of Museums into Mosques

Neutral places like museums have also become a target of the JDP's Islamization project. At a closer look, several historically important Christian sites, which later were converted into museums, i.e., the Hagia Sophia museums across the country, were turned into mosques. For example, in 2011, the Hagia Sophia Museum in Iznik was converted into a mosque. The Hagia Sophia Museum in Trabzon underwent the same status change in 2013. Not encountering a meaningful backlash from the secular segment of the society, the JDP continued its Islamization process in Istanbul by permitting for the first time the Muslim call for prayer in the church-turned-Hagia Sophia museum in 2016.

Later, in 2020, the Hagia Sophia Museum, an integral symbol of the newly founded laic and Western-leaning self-image of Türkiye, was reconverted into a mosque with a presidential decree issued by President Erdogan. However, this status change was not an ordinary decision. On the contrary, it arrived at the time of diminishing popular support for the JDP, signaling the party's efforts to consolidate its voter base by exploiting existing debates that revolve around Hagia Sophia. In this sense, the site has been at the center of heated discussions in Turkish politics for decades. On the one hand, some conservative intellectuals, such as Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1966), a well-known poet and novelist, evaluated Hagia Sophia as a prominent mark of Ottoman grandeur and Islam, situated at the former imperial capital. On the other hand, secular and liberal thinkers, such as Orhan Pamuk (Duvar English 2020), claimed that it is a symbol of modern Türkiye, also positing that: "to convert [Hagia Sophia] back to a mosque is to say to the rest of the world that unfortunately we are not secular anymore" (ibid.).

Echoing these incompatible civilizational readings surrounding Hagia Sophia, following Erdoğan's decree, the JDP vice chairman Cevdet Yılmaz said that Hagia Sophia belongs to the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Foundation and served as a mosque for a very long time, implying that its importance is associated with the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul (T24 2020). The Hagia Sophia case constitutes the latest development of the JDP's Islamization of the public sphere. It is an attempt to erase the cultural memory of Christians from the public space of Türkiye (Öztig and Adisonmez 2023). Its desacralization should then be read together with the JDP's Islamization process of Türkiye's public space in general and of Istanbul more specifically considering two recently constructed gigantic mosques in Taksim Square and Çamlıca Hill. Furthermore, shortly after the Hagia Sophia decision, another church-turned-museum in Istanbul, namely, the Chora Museum, was desacralized as a mosque after eight decades. Together with the "Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque" and "Kariye Mosque" these two structures are located at particularly well-observable places in Istanbul, becoming prominent ideological symbols of the JDP in its effort to dominate the public space with an "Islamic seal". In general, these practices are prime examples of the top-down imposition of Sunni Islam by the JDP in neutral spaces. They not only promote the party's ultimate objective of Islamization of the public sphere, but also weaken Türkiye's secular legacy and cultural diversity.

## 6. Discussion

This study offers important insights into the experimentation of the moderate secularism model in Türkiye, an authoritarian and Muslim-majority country. It demonstrates that the moderate secularism model offered the JDP actors rhetorical and instrumental power, through which they have attributed a hegemonic role to Sunni Islam. In their path to hegemonizing Turkish society in accordance with Islamic norms and values, JDP actors

strategically used moderate secularism and policies that appeared to favor state neutrality towards all religions. This strategic maneuvering occurred simultaneously with the JDP's efforts to consolidate its power by appealing to both religious and secular segments of society. During this time, by and large, the party successfully balanced the intricate relationship between religion and politics in the country. By projecting itself as a moderate and inclusive party, the JDP was able to gain support from a large segment of the society. This approach enabled them to gradually shift schools, institutions, and societal norms towards a more Islamic framework while maintaining a facade of secularism.

After a brief period of instrumentalization of moderate secularism, the JDP has infused Islamic norms into Turkish political culture and society. The JDP's top-down imposition of Sunni Islam on the society has taken place against the party's drift into authoritarianism following major developments that occurred both at home and in Türkiye's close geography. The Gezi Park protests, the 2016 coup attempt, and the subsequent purging of Gülenists further increased political and social polarization. Especially after the coup attempt, the party leadership felt extremely vulnerable and turned to silence all opposing voices. They aimed to receive the full support of the conservative and nationalist segments in the name of "saving the state and society" against the Gülenists and the PKK (Adisonmez and Onursal 2020, 2022). The coup attempt was followed by a state of emergency during which thousands of public officials were either suspended or sacked (Esen and Gumuscu 2018).

The party also increased its control over the media as pro-government businesspeople purchased major media outlets (Kirişci and Sloat 2019). The party used measures such as taxation, debt collection, and trusteeship to erode the power of its opponents among entrepreneurs (Esen and Gumuscu 2018). The initial populist discourse of the party, that tapped into a dichotomy between the victimized masses versus the ruling elites, gradually transformed into a polarizing one (Özbudun 2014). Erdoğan otherized his opponents by describing them "as traitors and collaborators of external forces seeking to undermine Türkiye's prosperity and stability" (quoted in Kirişci and Sloat 2019, p. 6). After Türkiye switched to the presidential system in 2018, the president's powers have increased substantially (Üstüner and Yavuz 2017), paving the way for one-man rule. The new system has expanded the executive's power at the expense of the noncore executive and the legislature (Bolukbasi and Ertugal 2019).

In parallel to the JDP's solidifying its power base in the society, Sunni Islam has emerged as a pivotal bureaucratic mechanism of public authority and domination. In analyzing Islamization in Türkiye, it is important to underscore the importance of global broader context. On a macro level, the domestic developments in Türkiye tap into the global resurgence of religion over the past thirty years (Sandikci 2018). This study focuses on processes and instruments geared towards shaping societal identity and solidifying political power.

While the position of the Diyanet has always been controversial since its creation, as this study shows, under the JDP, it has taken on the role of a missionary actor, working to make Sunni Islam a way of life. While Imam Hatip schools were politicized institutions before the JDP came to power, the role of Imam Hatip schools has changed dramatically as these schools have evolved into a hub for the JDP's recruitment base, strategically designed to effectively weaken the impact of secular mindset on decision-making processes. Last, the JDP's Islamization project has gravitated around the physical transformation of Türkiye's public space. The construction of huge mosques in the prime location of major metropolises such as the "Ataşehir Mimar Sinan Mosque" in Istanbul, "Ulus İtfaiye Medyani mosque" in Ankara, as well as the conversion of previously Christian sites into mosques, are architectural reflections of a hegemonic role ascribed to religion under the JDP rule. These mosques, strategically placed in key locations, function as symbols of the JDP's endeavors to Islamize public spaces and impose religious influence in the society.

## 7. Conclusions

The Turkish laicism experiment stands out as a unique case due to its distinct characteristics and historical context. It began as a top-down project, but at the hands of the early Kemalist state elites, it became a tool of authoritarianism. These elites positioned themselves in a hierarchical place where they decided what is desirable and acceptable based on their subjective interpretation of progress and modernity. The Kemalist elites conditioned modern Türkiye to forget the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and disassociate from the so-called archaic traditional institutions and backward practices, aiming to create a homogeneous society with a secular-nationalist outlook. Laicism became a “civic religion” at the hands of Kemalists, and became a hegemonic project that expected certain behavioral and cognitive codes from individuals. According to the Kemalists, a desirable citizen was someone who adopts the Western way of life and clothing and disassociates himself/herself from superstition beliefs and adopts a rational understanding of the world (Öztig 2018a).

This hegemonic project was turned upside down under the JDP era. The JDP actors and Kemalists share similarities in the way they adopt an authoritarian approach toward religion and establish the parameters of a desirable citizen. In this context, the Kemalist founding elites adopted radical policies to confine religion to the private sphere and imposing their own interpretation of Islam in a top-down manner (see Öztürk 2021). Under a completely different context, but paradoxically in a similar manner, the JDP has sought to increase the visibility and observance of Islam via dominating the public space. All in all, both the Kemalists and the JDP share similarities in their reliance on the state’s capacity to disseminate their own subjective understandings of Islam in a top-down way.

For the Kemalists, the desirable citizen was someone who embraced secularist mindset and modernist outlook and aimed to keep his/her religious beliefs and practices away from the public sphere as much as possible. For the JDP, on the other hand, the desirable citizen is someone who adheres to the Islamic norms and values in all aspects of life. As this study demonstrated, while the JDP treats religion as a hegemonic statecraft project, top-down diffusion of Islamic norms has occurred after a brief period of instrumentalization of moderate secularism. Rather than treating religious freedom and the state’s neutrality toward all religions as fundamental values, the JDP has moved on to prioritize the promotion of Islamic values in the society.

The Diyanet stands out as the principal state apparatus that diffuses this social imaginary informed by Islamic cultural codes. This institution not only distinguishes between what is considered appropriate or inappropriate and desirable or undesirable, but also actively works to enhance Muslim identity consciousness on a large scale. In sharp contrast to the Kemalists, who equipped themselves with a “civilizing mission” by molding the society in line with Western norms and values, the Diyanet operates as a missionary actor with the ultimate objective of increasing the number of the JDP’s desirable citizens. In the same vein, Imam Hatip schools and the revised curriculum promote the Islamization project through religious education and extracurricular activities. Lastly, the project of mosqueification consolidates the JDP’s sociopolitical vision through the spatial transformation of Türkiye’s public sphere. All these developments have not only changed the political and social trajectory of Türkiye, but have serious repercussions for “the Turkish model”, which was hailed across the world due to the compatibility of secularism, democracy, and Islam (Öztürk 2022; Tugal 2016).

President Erdogan’s proposal for a referendum to constitutionally safeguard the liberalization of the headscarf in 2022 (Euronews 2022) exemplifies the strategic use of religious freedom for political purposes. This maneuver by Erdogan reflects the continued erosion of secularism in Türkiye and further ossification of the JDP’s agenda of Islamization. This maneuver fits into Erdogan’s objective of garnering popular support at the cost of blurring the distinction between religious freedom and political manipulation. Speaking in response to the recent round of protests in support of sharia, President Erdoganequated hostility toward sharia with hostility toward religion (quoted in Sancar 2024) is another poignant

example of how the state's neutrality toward all religions was once instrumentalized as a discursive strategy.

Overall, this study focused on the processes through which the Turkish laicism experiment has taken on different shapes across time, highlighting the complexities of Turkish politics, state–society relations, and the role of religion in public life. It shows how “laicism” and “religion” are susceptible to instrumentalization in the hands of political actors who aim to control society in an authoritarian manner. The authors of this study note that the politicization of religion can have detrimental effects on the democratic process and disrupt state–society relations and social harmony.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, L.İ.Ö. and U.C.A.; Resources U.C.A. and L.İ.Ö.; Formal Analysis L.İ.Ö. and U.C.A.; Writing, review, and editing L.İ.Ö. and U.C.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> That being said, [Pollack \(2016\)](#) traces the roots of European secularism to the competition between the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. [Salvatore \(2005\)](#) examines the trajectory of secularism starting with the Spanish Reconquista and religious wars in the 15th and 16th centuries. For further alternative perspectives on secularism in pre-modern context, e.g., Japan and India, see [Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr \(2020\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> The relationship between politics and religions is entangled and convoluted in both contexts. For example, in France, several pastors, priests, and rabbis are paid by the Ministry of Interior ([US Department of State 2021](#)). The head of the UK (and the Commonwealth) is also the head of the Anglican Church.
- <sup>3</sup> After the Rashidun Caliphate in the 7th century, the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Mamluks, and the Ottomans held the caliph title. The Ottoman Empire witnessed a transition from a multi-religious empire into a predominantly Islamic empire during the 16th century, after acquiring the caliphate from the Mamluks. In the 19th century, Sultan Abdulhamit II placed significant emphasis on his caliphal authority ([Deringil 1991, 1999](#)). He preferred to be referred to as the ‘Shelter of the Caliphate’ ([Hanioglu 2011](#)). Abdulhamit II’s focus on his caliph title aligned with a period during which the Empire had significant territorial losses in the Balkans, which were predominantly non-Muslim. As a result, the Empire shifted its focus towards uniting the Muslim population under Pan-Islamism ([Deringil 1991](#)).
- <sup>4</sup> Another incident unfolded in 2016 where the religious group in Turkish military affiliated with the Gülenists, who were in collaboration with the JDP between 2001 and 2013, attempted to stage a coup in Turkey. Following this coup attempt, more than 20,000 military personnel were purged, further shrinking the military’s influence over politics ([Anadolu Agency 2021](#)).
- <sup>5</sup> It should be emphasized that the process of the liberalization of the headscarf coincides with a period of Türkiye’s growing authoritarianism. The Gezi park demonstrations, the coup attempt in 2016, and the ensuing expulsion of Gülenists intensified political and societal polarization. Following the 2016 coup attempt, the government proclaimed a state of emergency and dismissed or suspended almost 100,000 public personnel ([Esen and Gumuscu 2018](#)). The state of emergency continued until 2018, accompanied by a variety of emergency decrees that encompassed nearly all facets of public life ([Yilmaz 2022](#)). The imposition of a state of emergency led to the disruption of legislative and judiciary proceedings ([Yilmaz 2022](#)). The media faced further constraints as a result of the closure of numerous media establishments and the apprehension of journalists ([Esen and Gumuscu 2018](#)).
- <sup>6</sup> For the evolved role of the Diyanet since 1924, see [Öztürk \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> Even though female preachers started to be employed by the Diyanet in the 1990s, the number of female preachers exponentially increased under the JDP rule. For a comprehensive analysis of the theory and practice of sharia, see [Hallaq \(2009a, 2009b\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> There is a flourishing literature which focuses on the role of the Diyanet as a foreign policy actor (i.e., [Öztürk and Sözeri 2018](#); [Yurdakul and Yükleven 2009](#); [Yükleven 2011](#)). This study, on the other hand, focuses on the role of the Diyanet within Türkiye’s borders.

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