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Rethinking Piety and the Veil Under Political Islam: Unveiling Among Turkish Women After 2016

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ABSTRACT
This paper covers how the merging of political Islam and the Turkish state led to the monopolization of public Islam and describes how the erasing of diverse meanings underlying Islamic ethical practices has led pious Muslim women to unveil as part of their search for their own subjectivity without falling into the binary of Islamist and secularist political projects. Towards illustrating the search for non-politicized piety, I refer to the narratives of six informants. Their stories reveal that the attempt of cultivating non-politicized piety still takes place within, and in relation to the political upheavals created by the political rule as it shifts into authoritarianism. Contrary to the framing of unveiling as a repudiation of Islamic norms, the cases of unveiling in this study aim to show how acts of unveiling communicate an intricate form of political and religious agency expressed from within an insecure, vulnerable position. More than all, they express the difficulty of establishing and maintaining an Islamic self-cultivation regimen under the shadow of a political symbolism that has been hoisted upon a major tool of this pious self-construction.

KEYWORDS: Muslim women, piety, veiling, unveiling, secularism, Islamism, Turkey.

> Authenticity is about more than a layer of cloth on one's head. To be acknowledged as more than our headscarves is the right of every Muslim girl and woman.
>
> Mona Altahawy, "My Unveiling Ceremony"

Introduction: Non-Politicized Piety

As political rule continuously shifts between authoritarianism and democracy in modern Turkey, the politicization of everyday life presents new challenges and opportunities for ordinary citizens, as certain practices receive different levels of acceptance by the Turkish state. The issue of Islamic public visibility, in particular, has undergone the stages of "non-toleration, toleration, and respect-recognition"[2] (Rougier, 2013, p. 153) in the last three decades, as seen in the official policies towards Muslim women's veiling. The final stage, however, co-occurred with the sharp authoritarian turn of the Islamist rule, particularly after the coup attempt in 2016, which gave rise

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[2] These categories were formulated as an analytical tool to assess European responses to the challenges of diversity, but also can be applied to Turkish state's responses towards Islamic public visibility, particularly women's Islamic head covering (i.e. hijab).

to a new phenomenon of unveiling/deveiling/dehijabization as an act potentially challenging the Islamist political project.

This study sheds light on the complexity of unveiling at a time when the headscarf has finally received ultimate respect and recognition by the state, after decades of non-toleration and humiliation. In the first part, where I discuss the ending of the headscarf ban in Turkey, I will explain how the merging of political Islam and the Turkish state led to the monopolization of public Islam by erasing the multiplicity of meanings underlying Islamic ethical practices. After demonstrating the shifting power positions of Islamism and secularism in Turkey, as well as the withdrawal of secular liberal values in the face of state-endorsed public Islam, I will analyze the in-depth interviews I conducted with six Turkish women who quit the headscarf after July 2016, and I will attempt to portray how pious women search for their own subjectivity without falling into the binary of these two grand political projects.

I call this a search for non-politicized piety, in the sense that the informants in this study are aware of the instrumentalization of the women's sartorial styles by utilitarian political discourses, and they actively desire to distance themselves from these by an act of unveiling. What makes this act particularly interesting for me is that they give up the headscarf while maintaining their adherence to Islamic ethical norms. As the narratives in the second part will reveal, the attempt of cultivating non-politicized piety still takes place within, and in relation to the political upheavals created by the political rule as it shifts into authoritarianism. Contrary to popular accounts of unveiling as a total repudiation of Islamic norms, the cases depicted in this study aim to show how their act of unveiling communicates an intricate form of political and religious agency expressed from within an insecure, vulnerable position.

Part I: The Bittersweet Victory of the Headscarf

In February 2017, Turkey announced its plan to lift the last remains of the headscarf ban by allowing it in the military.[3] This was supposed to be a victorious, celebratory moment for many Muslim women who had been close witnesses of the discrimination created by this ban. However, the gradual lifting of the headscarf ban in the Turkish public sphere had simultaneously been taking place with the rapid descent of Turkey into authoritarianism under the unchallenged rule of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The 2018 report of the Freedom House explained Turkey's fall into the Not Free category as being a result of

> *escalating series of assaults on the press, social media users, protesters, political parties, the judiciary, and the electoral system, as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan fights to impose personalized control over the state and society in a deteriorating domestic and regional security environment.* (Abramowitz, 2018, p. 7).

In other words, the absolute victory of the headscarf was achieved in the same year when Turkey's score in political, civil, and individual liberties dropped to the bottom, at a time when one can "safely assert that the country is now in the process of exiting the most basic provisions of a democratic regime" (Oktem & Akkoyunlu, 2016, p. 469).

[3] See: "Turkey lifts military ban on Islamic headscarf" *The Guardian*, February 22, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/22/turkey-lifts-military-ban-on-islamic-headscarf (October 30, 2018)

This unexpectedly decisive political victory for the headscarf was a surprise to many observers of the case, considering that, from 2002 to 2008, the AKP did nothing in the legal sense about the headscarf ban "in order to rebuff the [secularist] opposition through a moderate stance and achieve other political goals with high priority such as winning elections" (Unal, 2015, p. 14). When the AKP gained enough power in the parliament to form a single-party government in 2002, there was a great expectation among the conservative right-wing voters for a decisive and swift end to the headscarf ban, which had been imposed by the Kemalist[4] state to curb the rise of the Islamist movement. The ban was first introduced by the National Security Council (MGK) during the 1980 coup, to be kept on and off until its strict implementation after the military intervention in 1997, which forced the first Islamist prime minister Necmettin Erbakan to quit his two-year service. The ban was implemented in the public sector and the universities so strictly that it even became widespread in the private sector, denying headscarved women almost any possibility of having a job unless they removed their headscarves.[5]

The headscarves worn by urban, educated, professional women disturbed the secularist establishment, which went against the ideal Turkish woman of the Kemalist ideology, as she was supposed to be in Western-style clothing yet maintaining her modesty by hiding her femininity and displaying loyalty solely to the Turkish nation and the secular Republic (Gole, 1996; Ozyurek, 2006). While the opponents of the ban, mainly headscarved women, carried out public campaigns through various ways of activism which stressed the right to education, freedom of religious expression, and even gender equality, the secular Turks, including the Kemalist and socialist feminists, regarded the headscarf as a symbol of the impending "Islamist takeover" which would erode all the progress achieved by the secular state (Kutuk-Kuris, 2021, p. 4). The Turkish military perceived it as a matter of "security and risk governance" based on a distinction between "radical (excessive and deviant)" and "enlightened (proper and safe) Islam." (Arik, 2018, p. 317). Again, the "centerpiece of the security discourse" was the "idealized femininity" that would combine Western appearance with Islamic sexual morality, and thus present "a normative modern and secular Muslim identity" (Arik, 2018, p. 317). In this way, the official discourse established the modern headscarf worn by urban, educated Turkish women as a political symbol manifesting their allegiance to the Islamist political project as opposed to the Kemalist one. The most ardent and powerful supporter of the headscarf ban, the military, thus rejected any liberatory or individualistic interpretation of the act of covering the head, forcing Turkish Muslim women to face a strongly politicized experience of veiling throughout the 90s and early 2000s.

The first move of AKP to lift the headscarf ban came in 2008[6] and was limited to university students, framing the legal provision as "a matter of individual rights, contending that all Turks should be able to attend universities no matter what they wear or believe" (Tavernise, 2016, para. 8). Although they aimed to avert a further accusation of undermining the principle of secularism

[4] Kemalism refers to the ideas and principles of the founder of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. These principles were declared to be six, in the Third General Congress of Ataturk's Republican People's Party in 1931, and were enshrined in the constitution in 1937 as Republicanism, Nationalism, Populism, Secularism, Etatism, and Revolution. For a comparative analysis of Kemalism as a "national developmentalist" ideology, see: Berk Esen. "Nation-Building, Party-Strength, and Regime Consolidation: Kemalism in Comparative Perspective," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp.600-620, 2014.

[5] For more information about the headscarf ban in Turkey, see: Dilek Cindoglu. *Headscarf ban and discrimination: professional headscarved women in the labor market*. Istanbul: Tesev Publications, 2011; and Hilal Elver. *The headscarf controversy: secularism and freedom of religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

[6] AKP's first official attempt to remove the headscarf ban came after their election victory in 2007, which was held as an early election to counteract the popular and institutional opposition from the secularist establishment to Erdogan's proposal of replacing the staunchly secularist President Ahmet Necdet Sezer with Abdullah Gul, whose wife Hayrunnisa Gul was a headscarved woman.

by such a liberal framing, they still befell what they feared, and barely survived a judiciary attempt for the closure of the party. In their defense statement, the AKP advocated for the accommodationist Anglo-Saxon secularism as opposed to the separationist French *laicite*, which had been the model for the Turkish *laiklik* thus far (Topal, 2012). It was a call for a "passive secularism" (Kuru, 2007) where the state would be indifferent and at equal distance to all religions, hence not attempting to restrict freedom of religion including material forms of its expression.

After the constitutional referendum of 2010[7], which allowed the AKP government to break the hegemony of the secularist establishment in the judicial bureaucracy, the headscarf ban in universities came to a "quiet end" after a statement by the government saying that "it would support any student expelled or disciplined for covering her head" as reported by Jonathan Head of BBC News (2010, para. 3). This would mean an end to the humiliating experience college students experienced on and around campuses, by having to take off their headscarves in public, and maybe putting on a wig or a hat, an appearance which never matched their personhood. When they were able to cover their heads in the way they desired, the fashionization of the Islamic dress gained momentum, so much so that the first Islamic lifestyle and fashion magazine *Ala* (meaning nice and beautiful in Ottoman Turkish) was initiated in 2011 to facilitate and celebrate the "normalization" of the headscarf. The lifting of the ban for university students also emboldened Muslim women activists to ask the political parties to nominate headscarved women in the upcoming 2011 elections, which was deemed an untimely and selfish act by the "male-governed party politics" (Kutuk-Kuris, 2021, p. 5). Muslim women were beyond impatient for the total liberation of the headscarf, which had long been "turned into symbolic weapons in both the secularist and Islamist imaginaries," thereby erasing women's agency and individuality by pitting them as a political group against the secularists, who claimed the public sphere and the state institutions for themselves (Topal, 2017, p. 3). Despite being urbanites with a high level of education and professional degrees, and even having considerable wealth due to the neo-liberal economic policies, headscarved women had been made to feel like "interlopers" due to the "popular [class] division between the 'white Turk' secularist Kemalist elite and those disparaged as 'black Turks,' the uncivilized, unmodern peasants (even if long urbanized) whose habitual religiosity is read as evidence of their lack of evolution" (Lewis, 2015a, p. 107).

For decades, studies about headscarved women and Kemalist women neatly divided them along the Islamist vs. secularist lines and failed to acknowledge the internal differences amongst women in these categories or acknowledge the experiences of veiled and unveiled women in between and outside of these categories (Arat, 2005; Gole, 1996; Ozdalga, 1998; Ozyurek, 2006; Saktanber, 2002). In that sense, focusing on "the aesthetic and stylistic choices" of headscarved women in relation to the "multiple subject positions" they inhabited, allowed a possibility of understanding the concept of Islamic fashion and Islamic dress beyond the "issues of piety and modesty" (Moors & Tarlo, 2013, p. 7). In other words, the commodification of the headscarf that gained momentum in the early 2000s (Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Sayan-Cengiz, 2016) was also a sign of its potential for individualization, and of becoming a non-political, polysemic mainstream phenomenon in the Turkish public sphere.

However, the expected normalization (i.e., the depoliticization) of the headscarf that would cut across the secularist versus Islamist division (meaning that the headscarf did not mean support

[7] The constitutional amendments "assigned greater power to Parliament and the president to choose members of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors" which was seen by their critics as "a barely veiled attempt to erode the separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary." Sebnem Arsu and Dan Bilefsky. "Turkish Reforms Pass by Wide Margin" *The New York Times*, September 12, 2010. https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/13/world/europe/13turkey.html (August 20, 2022)

for/opposition to either side) was highly damaged by the Gezi Park[8] protests in June 2013. The nationwide anti-government protests transformed this long-existing polarization into another one, along the lines of pro- vs. anti- AKP/Erdogan. Especially, the event that came to be known as the "Kabatas lie" signaled to many, the political hijacking of the headscarf by the Islamist government. The Foreign Policy article written by Berivan Orucoglu in 2015, explains the incident in detail, reminding that a 25-year-old headscarved woman, named Zehra Develioglu claimed to have been attacked with her baby by a large group of anti-government protestors, and in an exclusive interview with a pro-AKP journalist who also wears a headscarf, she described her attackers as "dozens of protestors (mostly half-naked men with leather gloves) who insulted her Islamic attire, kicked her baby, and urinated on her" (Orucoglu, 2015, para. 4). Develioglu was later revealed to be the family member of a mayor who was declared by Erdogan to be his close friend; therefore, Erdogan used this narrative in rallies multiple times to "demonize the Gezi protestors to his followers" while repeatedly using the phrase "*benim başörtülü bacım*" (my veiled/headscarved sister), as Orucoglu further reports. Because the alleged attack took place in the very busy Kabatas district of Istanbul, the videotape which showed the exact time and location of the event was released two years later, and it proved Develioglu's account to be completely inaccurate. In the videotape, she was simply seen walking peacefully with her baby, having no protestors or attackers around (para. 6). The central role played by these two headscarved women in this political deception which had the aim of rallying the right-wing Turkish voters around Erdogan against the Gezi protestors, among whom were also headscarved women who did not support the AKP policies, clearly showed the new political direction of this contentious symbol. The *başörtülü* woman that was constructed by the Islamists as a monolith in response to the secularist opposition was now divided into good and bad *başörtülü* woman. Erdogan's phrase of "my veiled/headscarved sister" therefore, did not include the veiled women among the protestors. While the headscarf previously conveyed a political statement of "challenging restrictions on public expression as well as the secularist principles of the Kemalist republic," in the context of the new polarization in the Turkish public sphere, the headscarf "has become a political image associated with AKP supporters" as the AKP was criticized by its opponents for exploiting this issue "in order to increase its own political appeal and to generate followers" (Vanderlippe & Batur, 2013, p. 225).

In this context, the lifting of the headscarf ban for public service workers in 2013—except for those in the police, judiciary, and the army—that came soon after the violent suppression of the Gezi Protests, fell short of conveying a strong message of democratization, even though it was announced as part of a "democracy package."[9] Nor did it bring the country any closer to the promised Anglo-Saxon secularism, as the AKP had, by then, fully incorporated the Diyanet[10], the ideological state apparatus of the secular state, "to advance a much more clearly defined and more explicitly ideological political agenda at the best of the ruling party" (Ozturk, 2016, p. 620).

[8] "The Gezi Park protests initially aimed at protecting the Gezi public park in the middle of Istanbul" in the district of Taksim from the AKP's "plan to eliminate it and build a shopping mall in its place." This small-sized environmental protest quickly turned into nation-wide anti-government protests "after the police intervention against those peacefully protesting in the park." Selin Bengi Gumrukcu. "The Aftermath of the Gezi Park Protests: Rising Populism and Mobilization for Autocracy," *Jadaliyya*, June 16, 2021. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42978 (August 20, 2022)

[9] See: "Turkey lifts decades-old ban on headscarves", *Al Jazeera*, October 8, 2013. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/10/turkey-lifts-decades-old-ban-headscarves-201310814177943704.html (October 29, 2018)

[10] Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi (Directorate of Religious Affairs), shortly known as Diyanet, is an official state institution established in 1924 with the task of regulating the religious arena. Refer to Walton (2017) for detailed information about this institution.

Even though it was not unprecedented for the Turkish state to control and regulate the religious realm by way of "employing the Diyanet as the true representative of Islam and forging alliances with religious communities" says Salim Cevik (2019), "the AKP's policies during the last decade constitute a certain rupture" which has greatly erased the autonomy of the religious realm (p. 8). Building on the Kemalist state's legacy of constructing "state-friendly" religious subjectivities, the AKP has openly declared its intention to construct a pious generation, which would ideally carry loyalty to Erdogan and the party to future generations. The "multi-faceted and comprehensive" policy of Erdogan includes pouring unprecedented amounts of funding into the Diyanet, the Imam Hatip Schools (IHL) and religious communities and foundations (both old ones which manifest their loyalty to the AKP, and the new ones established and run by Erdogan's inner circle), while treating each of these institutions as complementary, rather than alternatives to each other, finally merging them all with the party and making them lose their autonomy. As a result of these policies, the influence of the Diyanet and the religious foundations extended into the state ministries of education, health, and youth, further blurring secular and religious realms (Cevik, 2019, p. 8).

In a similar way, Jeremy Walton (2017) claims that, the merging of the "partisan Islam of the AKP" and the "bureaucratic Islam of the DIB [Diyanet] as a privileged form of state power (p. 68)" did not give space to independent modes of public Islam, as they constituted potential threats to the state hegemony. This was clearly seen in the December 2013 rift between the AKP and the Gulen/Hizmet movement[11] that claimed to represent civil Islam in Turkey, after a series of massive corruption investigations were made public, implicating the involvement of Erdogan himself in the corruption scheme:

> *Despite the overlapping origins and demographic bases of the AKP and Hizmet, Erdogan has vociferously denounced Gulen's enthusiasts as a menace to both state and nation. This condemnation of Hizmet amounts to an assertion of the AKP's monopoly over public expressions of Sunni Islam as a political and cultural identity.* (Walton, 2017, p. 68)

In this political rift, the Diyanet took a clear side with the AKP and Erdogan and accused the Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen and his followers of religious heresy, thereby "instrumentalizing its religious authority in order to criminalize the other group" (Ozturk, 2016, p. 631). The elimination of the Gulen/Hizmet movement became a catalyst in the weakening of democratic institutions as of 2014. Erasing the widespread and long-established civic presence of the movement via education, media, civil society, and business enterprises, as well as a large number of followers in the state institutions and bureaucracy, required a deviation from the path of the European Union membership and the formation of a pluralist democratic public sphere.[12] The failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, which was blamed on Gulen and his followers, led to a massive purge in bureaucracy and civil society, and two years of emergency rule (OHAL) by executive decrees, leading to

[11] This is a socio-religious movement, active in civil society at the national and global level. Their activities include education and interreligious dialogue. The movement is founded by Fethullah Gulen (b. 1938) and inspired by the teachings of Said Nursi (1876-1960). Although it calls itself "Hizmet" (service), espousing a peaceful mission, the Gulen movement has been recently categorized as a terrorist organization named "FETÖ," by the Turkish government and been blamed for masterminding the failed coup on July 15, 2016. For more information on Gulen, and the movement, see Jon Pahl. *Fethullah Gulen: A Life of Hizmet*, Clifton, NJ: Blue Dome Press, 2019, and M. Hakan Yavuz, *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gulen Movement*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

[12] For detailed information on the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey during the AKP era, see Bahar Baser & A. Erdi Ozturk. *Authoritarian politics in Turkey: elections, resistance, and the AKP*. London : I.B. Tauris, 2017.

the dismissal and arrest of thousands of people (Caman, 2020; Demir, 2020; Ogurlu & Avincan, 2020).

Currently, there remains no legal restriction on the wearing of headscarves in the once militantly secular Turkish public sphere; however, the liberation of the headscarf did not result from a widespread social consensus, nor did it allow the headscarf to hold diverse meanings in the public sphere as evidenced by previous ethnographic studies (Lewis, 2015b; Sayan-Cengiz, 2016; Topal, 2017). On the contrary, the post-coup crackdown and the environment of insecurity it created in the ordinary lives of Turkish citizens, forced headscarved women to face being labeled as supporters of either the AKP and Erdogan or the incriminated Gulen/Hizmet movement. While the former implied complicity with the oppressive acts of the government, the latter ran the serious risk of being dismissed from a job, arrested for terrorism affiliation, or being socially ostracized (Aydin & Avincan, 2020, 2021).

Part II: Building a Pious Self in the Setting of Islamist Authoritarianism

The last two decades witnessed the AKP's successful monopolization of diverse forms of public Islam[13] with the help of the state power and Erdogan's personal charisma, as he came to be called *reis* (the chief), by his supporters. This shift of power, which gained momentum after 2013, gradually eliminated the challenges to one's sense and embodiment of piety brought by the secularist regime, such as the ban on headscarves, the social marginalization of religious views and practices, and the absence of allocated time and space for the proscribed ritual prayers.

The increased freedom and space for religious practices, with political power to reshape the public sphere in a more accommodationist fashion, also resulted in the shifting of the headscarf's Islamic meaning (which was carefully crafted as an act of individual piety against the claims of the secularists) into an Islamist one, as the AKP and its leader grew to merge religious and political meaning under their banner. As Cevik claims, the politicization of religious practices under the current AKP rule has been much more pervasive than during the earlier periods of Islamism, mainly because the Islamist actors could not obtain the state power to regulate public Islam according to their own interests, until the last decade (2019, p. 2).

In this research, I intend to explore the impact of the "authoritarian turn" of the Islamist ruling elite in Turkey on the personal journeys of Muslim women who decided to take off their headscarves, especially after July 2016, yet maintained their desire for cultivating Islamic piety in the absence of this bodily practice. It would be a facile and reductive conclusion to explain that this decision was based on security and survival concerns. However, even if we come to this conclusion, we cannot ignore the existence of a particular self-cultivation process whereby the subject is in search of alternative technologies and discourses to maintain her journey towards becoming pious and getting closer to the divine.

This search for a plurality of meanings underlying the engagement with Islamic ethics beyond the Islamist-secularist binary, however, does not necessarily exclude the possibility of understanding unveiling as a form of political agency. In this case, particularly, the existence of a grand politico-religious project deeply impacting everyday life is undeniable. Furthermore, ordinary Muslims are pushed to take theological positions in Erdogan's political wars against his opponents, who are frequently accused of blasphemy and nonbelief. Therefore, the boundaries between religion and politics, secular citizens, and pious believers are already blurred, whereby each religious

[13] Walton (2017) describes "four modalities of public Islam" in Turkey. These are: "statist/bureaucratic Islam, mass Islam, partisan Islam, and consumerist Islam" which "correspond to four distinct models of the Muslim subject: the passive Muslim citizen, the Muslim crowd, the Muslim political activist, and the Muslim consumer." (48)

act is already a political act —and vice versa. Still, the extensiveness of the political does not consume the entire meaning of my informants' decision to unveil, as there are many other concerns and desires at stake in their decision, on the individual, psycho-social, and/or religious levels.

The chaotic political environment in post-2016 Turkey poses a new challenge to study everyday life when the ethics of the self is often sacrificed for an abstract group morality, and the present is made into a mere passing tool for a teleological project in the future. In other words, the act of veiling and unveiling are reduced to their supposed political purposes —either to establish an Islamic state or to prevent the establishment of an Islamic state in the future by maintaining a secular public sphere. Against this backdrop, it becomes difficult, yet even more significant to analyze unveiling as an act of self-cultivation, carried out in parallel to one's changing sense of piety, as a political choice in relation to one's changing positionality in society accompanied by feelings of vulnerability, and finally, as an agentic process with individual, subjective implications —all juxtaposed in relation to each other. Such an analysis borrows from the ethnographic accounts of piety discourses and practices of self-discipline which locate agency in the intentional cultivation of Islamic virtues embodied through repeated bodily movements (Frisk, 2009; Hirschkind, 2006; Mahmood, 2005,), and/or in their relationship with the "Others" who may be the secularists, the state, rival Islamic traditions, or God (Deeb, 2006; Mittermeier, 2010; Topal, 2017). While these accounts are helpful in conveying "a more nuanced and heterogenous view of Muslim majority societies" and "the variety of the forms of Islamic commitment and the multiple variations possible in the articulation of religious experience" (Abenante & Cantini, 2014, p. 8), they still end up prioritizing veiling as an authentic marker of Muslim identity over other sartorial choices by Muslim women. Having a deeper look at the individual experiences of "piety without the headscarf" is a rather unexplored theme, with the notable exception of Fadil's (2011) study on "Not-/Unveiling as an Ethical Practice", which focuses on second-generation Moroccan immigrant women in Belgium. In her research, Fadil (2011) makes a significant remark about the risks of "restricting the analysts' lens to orthodox Muslim conduct like veiling and leaving other forms of (pious) conduct unexplored" which might result "in a situation wherein only practices that *fail* to correspond with 'secular ways of life' are turned into the object of research" (p. 85). Additionally, in two recent studies by van Nieuwkerk (2021) and Kutuk-Kuris (2021), we get the chance to see comparative case studies of unveiling in Egypt and Turkey, which both raise the significance of seeing unveiling as part of a journey towards personalized and privatized piety for some ex-hijabis, along with religious doubt and unbelief that drove most of their informants to take off the headscarf.

The ethnographic discourse on piety, therefore, has yet to pay equal attention to the non-veiled Muslim women living in Muslim minority and Muslim majority contexts. Most scholars who write on non-veiling, unveiling, or deveiling, point at the influence of a power structure that promotes the absence of the veil as a sign of progress, liberty, and modernity, as opposed to veiling as a symbol of backwardness, oppression of women, and Islamic fundamentalism (Ahmed, 2011; Amer, 2014; Eltahawy, 2015; Eum, 2000; Fadil, 2011; Hamzeh, 2013). According to this scheme, unveiling is usually seen in the form of a movement encouraged by a government that believes in the modernizing and enlightening power of donning Western-style clothing. In a similar fashion, veiling also takes place as a movement under the influence of mass political resistance, or as a result of coercion by Islamist regimes. Islamization of the public sphere, therefore, is seen as the main reason for Muslim women's veiling, which suggests that unveiling must be related to the de-Islamization of the public sphere. While these political-religious accounts are mostly accurate in Muslim-majority countries and Western diasporic contexts, the cases of unveiling I will explore in this paper stand completely outside this binary scheme for various reasons.

First, my interviewees' decision to no longer wear the headscarf came at a time when the secularist oppression of the Islamic headscarf had ended, and the headscarf ban had been eliminated. Secondly, the current political structure and the state actors openly advocated for women's veiling and elevated it to a prestigious status in society by increasing the visibility of female members of the ruling elite who wore elegantly designed headscarves. Thirdly, there was the element of displacement and symbolic or literal exile from the Islamic community in Turkey due to my informants' political opposition to the AKP, which culminated in their alienation from the Islamic headscarf, as it symbolized membership in the Islamic community (*ummah*), from which they feel shunned. In other words, their unveiling was an individual action in the absence of a meaningful and welcoming religious or political community, hence, far from constituting a social movement. On the other hand, unveiling also formed part of their search for emplacement and self-making in their new communities after July 2016, whether in the Islamophobic Western diaspora or in the ultra-secularist neighborhoods of Turkey. And finally, their decision to take off the headscarf did not result from a crisis of faith, or a rejection of the Islamic faith, even though it involved some level of questioning and rethinking about the particular dogmas of the Islamic orthodoxy where they were socialized into veiling.

Unveiling from the Lens of Six Turkish Women

This research has been facilitated by my social media contacts, who shared my observation that the number of unveiled women in their networks increased exponentially after the July 2016 crackdown. The commonalities they all shared were that they did not support the Islamist government, they were highly educated and urban Muslim women between the ages of 24 to 40, who either maintained their veiling practice during the non-toleration period or have been socialized into veiling in the respect-recognition period. In both cases, the question was a straightforward one: Why now?

To begin with, in writing my interview questions which were to be forwarded to their networks by my social media contacts, I avoided using the popular words referring to unveiling and veiling in Turkish: "açılmak" and "kapanmak," as they carry derogatory meanings of revealing and covering oneself and parts of one's body. One of the meanings of "açılmak" in Turkish is to be at ease, to be relaxed. In that sense, this term conveys judgment for the person who unveils, by implying that she failed in self-disciplining and self-restriction. From a secularist point of view, this meaning confirms their thesis that veiling is oppressive towards women and unveiling means being free, relaxed, and at ease. There are also various English neologisms "emerging to describe these alterations to modest presentation, including dejabbing, dehijabbing, dehijabifying," as Lewis (2015b, p. 245) explains. She maintains that these neologisms are "unstable and contested, with some Muslim women concerned that the *dejabi* formulation implies a total repudiation of Islamically inspired modesty rather than an alteration in spiritual interpretations and practice within the frame of consciously Muslim behavior" (Lewis, 2015b, p. 245). For that reason, in my interviews, I employed the Turkish word *başörtüsüzleşme* (dehijabization), as it implies a process and gradual non-existence of something. At the end of the day, the decision to unveil is an ongoing process even after taking off the headscarf (Eltahawy, 2015).

The unveiling issue has already been hotly debated in Turkish media since 2019, triggered by a BBC News interview[14] that drew attention to a blog page with the title of *Yalniz Yurumeyeceksin* (You Will Not Walk Alone) which receives letters from Turkish women sharing their experiences with unveiling.[15] The debate became viral on social media when many women used Facebook's #10YearChallenge hashtag campaign to share their veiled and unveiled photos side by side.[16] The attention of the mainstream media on the unveiling issue, once again, reflected the undertones of the secularist vs Islamist competition to claim the bodies and sartorial choices of Muslim women, with an "Orientalizing rescue narrative that threatens to swamp the complex reasons of *dejabi* women themselves" (Lewis, 2015b, p. 252).

I made this research in 2018, with fifteen in-depth interviews I conducted with recently unveiled women, known to me through my friends and students, who sent their written responses to five open-ended questions. My interviewees included a few young women who openly admitted not being a follower of Islam anymore or having not believed in the religious meaning of veiling but simply were forced by their families to cover their heads. Although this sentiment aligns with the media coverage of unveiling by the international outlets like BBC or Deutsche Welle, and the few remaining anti-AKP websites like Diken.com and tr24.com, I was more interested in the cases where these women maintained their path of Islamic piety without the headscarf. For this article, therefore, I picked six informants who all quit the headscarf after experiencing significant changes in their lives due to the July 15 coup attempt in 2016. Only two of them still reside in Turkey, while the rest left shortly after the coup, and sought a new beginning in Europe, Canada, and the United States, after having to leave their homeland due to loss of employment, security, and hope for a future in the post-2016 Turkey.[17] Mainly because of their political opposition to the AKP, they all went through displacement and possible trauma; however, it is beyond my area of specialization to consider the psychological effects of their experience or establish a correlation between their unveiling decisions and their experiences of trauma. Besides, this would undermine the agency of these women in their self-making trajectory that spanned a time before and after the shattering effect of the coup and the ensuing displacement. Additionally, it would create a hierarchy between unveiling and remaining veiled if the former is associated with a traumatic self, while the latter is seen as the sign of a coherent, un-fragmented "healthy" self.

It is essential to consider all these facts together in the unveiling narratives of the Turkish women in order to avoid framing the abandoning of the veil as a necessarily emancipatory act, or an embracing of a "secular way of life" instead of an Islamic one as if these two exist as a mutually exclusive binary. Instead, my questions aimed for multiple points of comparison: life with and without the headscarf, life under a secularist regime and an Islamist regime in Turkey, and finally, life in Turkey and in the West from the lens of a practicing Muslim woman. Additionally, my questions also allowed for the recognition of "imperfection" in religious practice, within the definition of a practicing Muslim. In other words, I did not expect them to abide by the injunctions of the orthodox Islamic legal tradition perfectly and continuously in order to be categorized as such, especially considering the legal fluidity within Islamic practice. As Schielke (2010) writes, in the ethnographic studies on Muslim piety,

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[14] Cagil Kasapoglu, "Başörtüsünü çıkaranlar: Neden bu kararı alıyorlar, neler yaşıyorlar?" *BBC News Turkce*, January 4, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-46758752 (May 21, 2019

[15] https://www.yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/ (May 20, 2019).

[16] Cagil Kasapoglu, "#10YearChallenge; Turkey puts spotlight on the headscarf" *BBC News*, 20 January 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46933236 (May 20, 2019)

[17] My interview questions did not ask about their political affiliation other than asking their opinions about political Islam. Therefore, it is not the aim of this article to put a label on their dissidence even though they have all been victimized by the blanket accusation of Gulenist affiliation due to the institutions they worked or studied at.

> *there is a tendency to project Islam as a perfectionist ethical project of self-discipline, at the cost of the majority of Muslims who —like most of humankind— are sometimes but not always pious and who follow various moral aims and at times immoral ones.* (pp. 2-3)

The rest of this article will present the narratives of these six informants, whose names have been changed to protect their privacy and safety. They have submitted written responses to the following interview questions:

1. Demographic data: Your age, education level, profession, and current residence.
2. Your story with the headscarf: When and why did you start wearing the headscarf? What did it mean for your sense of piety? Were you affected by the headscarf ban in Turkey? If so, what was your reaction to this ban (uncovering the head, wearing a wig, dropping out of school, going abroad to study, etc.)?
3. Your story of giving up the headscarf: When did you first start having thoughts about not wearing the headscarf? To what extent were the thoughts arising from socio-political pressure (headscarf ban and fear of discrimination) or internal personal questioning (textual reinterpretation about the obligatory status of veiling in Islam)?
4. The experience of unveiling: What did you feel the first time you went out to the public sphere without your head covered? What reactions did you receive from your family and social circle? What changed in your everyday life, and how? How did you experience the difference between being a veiled and a non-veiled Muslim woman? Has there been any change in your religious practices (prayer, fasting, dhikr, etc.) compared to your previous situation? If so, what was the role of the lack of the headscarf in this change?
5. Has your idea about the role of veiling in Islam and piety changed according to the political situation? Do you think that your interpretation of the headscarf differs from the AKP's Islamist interpretation? If so, how would you describe this difference? What are your reference sources in this matter?

Nuran (33, Theology Degree, Former Teacher, Europe)

Nuran was educated in the *Imam Hatip* school[18] and started wearing the headscarf at a very young age. She was so attached to the headscarf that when she went to college for *ilahiyat* (theology) degree during the headscarf ban, she wore a wig instead of showing her real hair. "Until two years ago," she said, meaning the coup attempt, "the headscarf had a very important place in my life."[19] She was a religion teacher who was dismissed from her job during the post-coup purge, and because she sensed the danger of imminent arrest, she left Turkey for a country in Europe that she preferred not to disclose in her response.

She explained her decision to give up wearing the headscarf in her new place (and new life) with two major reasons: "Reactions against the headscarf by the Europeans here" and "Europeans putting us on the same scale with political Islamists." From her first days, Nuran faced the racialized treatment of Muslims, which forced her to "make an effort to break the association between

[18] Secondary and high schools that combine Islamic and secular curricula: originally established in the early Republican era to raise new personnel for the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) after the abolishing of traditional *madrasah*, but quickly turned into a popular alternative for the right-wing voters who wanted their kids to move into secular professions with a background in religious education.

[19] Interview via email on September 7, 2018.

being Turkish or Arab, and being a Muslim, mainly because of the increasing Islamophobia that treats Muslims along with their traditions as completely alien and anathema to Europe" just as European converts and European-born Muslims were "Othered" as noted by Ozyurek's (2015, p. 18) study in Germany. Nuran's experience of alienation from the Islamic community in Turkey due to the oppression of the Islamist AKP rule, now extended to her new place in Europe at the hand of the hostile migrant Turkish community, which showed strong support for Erdogan and his Islamist vision.

"When I first went out in public without my headscarf, I felt shame. It felt like everybody's eyes were on me," is how she describes her first public appearance without the headscarf, which she wore since her adolescent years. The reactions she received from her European neighbors were quite positive, whereas her neighbors from the Turkish migrant community showed some covert negative reactions. This sartorial change was also challenging for Nuran, as she had to revise her wardrobe choices. It was very important for her to maintain a modest outlook while not covering her hair, which meant she still felt the need to cover the rest of her body in a modest way. But most importantly, she did not feel any difference in her self-identification as a Muslim woman, because she believed that her choice of unveiling was justified by the Islamic legal principle of *dharura*[20] (necessity) and it did not result from a deviation from her commitment to the Sunni tradition. She was very clear in her mind that it was not an act of weakness regarding her spiritual commitment, but an active ethical decision, taken as a result of her individual reasoning. This obviously included a rethinking of veiling, as she admits that "I could not think of piety without the headscarf, but my opinion changed after Islamists turned it into a political symbol." She criticizes Islamists for ignoring the essentials of religion while trying to portray a symbol like a headscarf as one of the most important obligations (*fard*, [*farz* in Turkish]) of Islam: "For instance, the most important foundations of religion [Islam] are the obligations of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage. Wearing the headscarf means nothing for someone who does not perform the prayers regularly."

Nuran embodies the voice of civil Islam when she makes an extra attempt to explain that her decision to unveil was in line with the essential principles of the orthodox Islamic legal tradition, in which she was trained as a theologian. She establishes her argument on the *maqasid al-Shari'a* (the purposes of Islamic law), which are commonly accepted in the Sunni tradition as the protection of life, faith, honor, lineage, and property. According to Nuran,

> *all the obligations and prohibitions in religion have been made obligatory or prohibited with the purpose of protecting these essentials. Therefore, if a believing woman is living in oppressive conditions, if her freedom has been taken from her and if she is facing the constant danger of being killed or kidnapped, she can then be exempt from even the roots of religion [usul al-fiqh], not to mention the branches [furu al-fiqh] under such circumstances.*

In other words, she considers the unconditional and universal endorsement of veiling by Islamists as being contrary to the orthodox Islamic legal tradition, which she defends as civil Islam. She carefully slips the theological rug under the headscarf battle, fought by Muslims in the modern age against secular governments, especially in places where Muslims live as a religious minority:

[20] See: Hussein Mutawi, "Necessity Removes Restriction." *Sunnah Online* https://sunnahonline.com/library/fiqh-and-sunnah/105-necessity-removes-restriction (May 22, 2019)

> *We look at Islam through the headscarf only and think that Islam cannot be lived without it. This is because we do not have sufficient knowledge about our religion. Why would a religion that even allows for shortening the prayer during a battle, that allows Muslims to eat pork when they have to, force a Muslim woman to veil when she does not feel herself safe in that? When we look at the Qur'anic verse that includes the injunction of veiling for Muslim women, we see that it has the condition of protecting women from harassment and oppression.* [The Qur'an, 33:59]. *So, tell me now, would a Muslim woman be better protected from harassment with, or without the headscarf, in a non-Muslim country?*
>
> *Muslim women living in non-Muslim countries may use their own initiatives more comfortably by relying on reasons such as security, social pressure, harassment, feeling uncomfortable in society, etc., considering that religion is always on their side. As a Muslim woman, I believe that my religion, my Allah, and my Prophet are always on my side, so that I can protect my life, my honor, my property, and my lineage.*

Nuran distinguishes herself from Islamists by imagining a piety that is possible without the headscarf, or other bodily practices that can be abandoned when the basic principles of Islam are at stake. Without any clear attempt of associating herself with a progressive interpretation of Islamic texts, she uses her textual knowledge as an empowering source in defending her decision to unveil after facing the oppression of the Islamist state in Turkey and the threat of discrimination in a non-Muslim country. By adopting the pragmatic *maqasid* approach, which puts "emphasis on adapting norms to broader religious goals" she attempts to find her way out of the "twin dilemmas of religious accountability and secularist acceptability," commonly experienced by Muslims in Western diasporic contexts (Bowen, 2010, p. 13).

Nazan (36, Master's Degree in English, Unemployed, USA)

Nazan started wearing the headscarf during the year she spent at a private Quranic boarding school, by taking a gap year in her official education before beginning high school. Because of the headscarf ban, she uncovered her hair at the school gate throughout her education in high school, college, and graduate school in Turkey. She says "I was insulted many times in Ankara, where I went to college. But I did not care about those insults, because I believed that I would be committing a great sin if I had not covered my hair."[21]

Nazan's husband worked at a school that was closed by the AKP government during the post-coup purge, which made them move back to the United States, where they had lived between 2009-2013. All those years during the headscarf ban in Turkey, and living as a religious minority in the West, she insisted on wearing the headscarf as a religious practice and never considered unveiling —until the authoritarian turn of the AKP rule in Turkey. She explained:

> *My view towards veiled women changed dramatically after the Kabatas incident. I knew that deveiling would make my life much easier, yet I still did not consider it then. After the coup attempt in Turkey, the number of "political Islamists" and those who had no tolerance for other opinions*

[21] Interview via email on August 21, 2018.

> *increased, as well as the number of people who pretended to be religious in order to gain favors from the government. These made me hate those who wear headscarf, and I did not want to look like them anymore.*

Ironically, Nazan expressed her own "hijabophobia," while she herself was still a veiled Muslim woman. As she was pondering the possibility of taking off her headscarf for a year between 2016 and 2017, she experienced disdain on the part of the Americans for her own appearance as a headscarved woman. She felt "an underlying sexist/racist discourse within Islamophobia that is complicit in essentializing constructions of *muslim* women and mainly those who are visible with the headscarf they are wearing" (Hamzeh, 2012, p. 9). This is seen in the way Nazan describes her experience after unveiling with a sense of relief:

> *The first time I went out in public without my head covered, I thought I would feel naked. But I was wrong. I was relieved to see that nobody looked at me as if I were an alien. People were warmer in their interactions and tried to communicate with me, which encouraged me to hold on to my decision. I found it very comfortable to see that those who thought I was a radical Muslim when I wore the headscarf, suddenly had no idea which religion I followed. It was as if they looked at me as an ordinary person for the first time, without labeling me with any specific identity.*

Contrary to the positive reaction she felt from complete strangers, Nazan felt more nervous about "coming out" as a non-veiled woman in her conservative Turkish-American community. In the cases of unveiling, Muslim women usually must face the challenge of a conservative family who would consider this act dishonorable. In many of the letters sent by Turkish women who desire to remove their headscarves to the website forum *Yalniz Yurumeyeceksin*, the conservative parents or extended family members are pointed at as the main obstacle.[22] Luckily for Nazan, she had no relatives in the US who would challenge her decision or any "rude" person in the immigrant community who would ask openly why she took off her headscarf, saving her from the burden of making any explanations. In her case, too, giving up the veil has not brought a corresponding decline in her religious practice, as she has been maintaining her daily prayers from a very early age. However, her feeling of alienation towards the religious milieu in which she was raised, has recently challenged her ability to maintain her commitment to piety, as she confesses, "since July 2016, I have been carrying my prayers out of habit, without feeling the level of desire that I used to feel." She adds that seven of her friends have also chosen to unveil within the last two years (between 2016 and 2018), meaning that her experience of alienation from religion due to the massive post-coup crackdown has been widespread. Implicating the politicization of religion in Turkey, she further admits: "We have been alienated from religion. We have started to question things that we perhaps should have questioned much earlier."

Although she is well-versed in Islamic legal tradition, she does not feel a strong need to revisit the issue of veiling in legal terms. Holding an ambiguous opinion about what the Qur'an and the Sunnah state regarding this issue, which allows for the possibility of diverse modalities of veiling, is preferable to her rather than finding out that she has made an incorrect decision by unveiling. Her main point of reference in justifying this decision to herself is the question of discrimination, and her desire to protect her children from the possibility of discrimination because of having a "different," in other words, a veiled mother. Although she had lived in the US previously

[22] See: https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/12/30/you-never-get-used-to-the-things-you-cannot-internalize/

between 2009 and 2013 as a veiled woman, she could not find the same strength to carry this religious identifier in her second time there. The vulnerability she felt after running away from the political witch-hunt of her country has forced her to seek invisibility for protection. "This way, I believe I am invisible," is how she sews together her broken self. The sociopolitical context she lived in, and her social role as a mother became the dominant motivations that informed her decision to give up the practice of veiling, while she carefully avoided defying a clear injunction of the Islamic legal tradition by willfully not informing herself about the details of veiling issue in the legal sources.

Zeynep (25, Ph.D. Student in Sociology, Canada)

Zeynep also started wearing the headscarf at a very early age, thinking that it was a religious obligation, as well as a practice of self-discipline. She observed, throughout the years she wore the headscarf, that it made her "a more pious person, because of the auto-control it maintained on her."[23] She underwent the headscarf ban in the first three years of her college education in Turkey, an experience she describes as "starting the day already defeated" as "it obviously hurts not to be accepted for who you are." The breaking point, in her case too, came with the 2016 purge.

When her school was closed down after the coup attempt, Zeynep left Turkey to study and build a career abroad. She first went to the Netherlands, where she had some family members. Faced with overt anti-Muslim discrimination there, she was convinced that she would keep "starting the day already defeated" if she wore the veil. The existence of laws aiming to remove or prevent discrimination against Muslims did not change much regarding the day-to-day discrimination against those who looked "different." At this time Zeynep felt, just like Nuran and Nazan, already too tired of her headscarf experience and its politicization in Turkey, to bear the burden of becoming "the Muslimwoman" —a neologism configured by Miriam Cooke (2008) to describe the collectivization of Muslim women in the face of growing Islamophobia:

> *The veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference that Muslim women today cannot escape. The neologism Muslimwoman draws attention to the emergence of a new singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity. A recent phenomenon tied to growing Islamophobia, this identification is created for Muslim women by outside forces, whether non-Muslims or Islamist men. Muslimwoman locates a boundary between "us" and "them." As women, Muslim women are outsider/insiders within Muslim communities where, to belong, their identity increasingly is tied to the idea of the veil. As Muslims, they are negotiating cultural outsider/insider roles in Muslim-minority societies.* (p. 91)

Soon after taking off her headscarf, Zeynep moved to Canada for a Ph.D. program, which relieved her from the trouble of explaining herself to her family members and relatives back in Turkey and Europe. She first shared her non-veiled image with a limited number of people, who were still holding conservative beliefs about the headscarf. Therefore, she had to justify her decision to them with external conditions rather than a personal questioning of the obligatory status of the headscarf in religion. In this way, she also avoids the risky path of engaging in a textual reinterpretation, regarding the status of veiling in the Islamic faith to which she still sincerely adheres.

[23] Interview via email on August 10, 2018.

She describes non-veiledness as something that can only be understood with experience, as the feeling of physical comfort is simultaneously killed by inner conflict. Her first time in public without the headscarf, she says, made her feel "naked" and "exposed" as if her protective shell was broken. The guilt she feels for committing a sin by uncovering her hair creates a feeling of nostalgia when she temporarily dons the headscarf during the ritual prayers:

> *Sometimes I have such a feeling…I remember how the veil made me feel protected. But I am not sure if I could choose to be a 'veiled' woman under these circumstances. Do I miss the feeling of being veiled? Yes. But I am not sure about the appearance of being veiled.*

What does she mean by "under these circumstances"? Although she recognizes the role of the headscarf as a mnemonic device in constructing a pious self, Zeynep thinks that religious symbols, including the headscarf, have been overpowered by the Islamists with a top-to-bottom approach, and made people in Turkey move away from religion.[24] She says the headscarf is no longer at the top of her list of practices that would make her "get closer to the Creator." In other words, the political meaning of the headscarf under Islamist rule totally eclipses its religious meaning and function in her experience.

Zehra (26, Ph.D. Student in Social Anthropology, USA)

Zehra practiced veiling at the age of 21, as a college student in Turkey, at a time when the headscarf ban was not in effect anymore. The recent political history of the headscarf in the late 1990s and early 2000s were merely stories that she heard from others and did not have a direct effect on her understanding of the headscarf as a necessary component of becoming a pious Muslim woman.

Zehra's initiation into veiling was a carefully considered act of piety, a "technology of the self" she appropriated to her project of self-cultivation, modeled on a particular Islamic piety. She expected some physical hardships and social challenges that would result from being a *başörtülü* (headscarved) young woman, and she was ready to tackle them as part of a scheme of self-restriction. However, by the end of her first year of wearing the headscarf, she got tired of it: "I was extremely disturbed by the fact that a practice I performed with a religious motivation included so much social connotations. Both the religious and non-religious people pass judgment about you and see your headscarf before anything else."[25] She spent approximately three years from 2013 to 2016 as a *başörtülü* woman in Turkey, increasingly coming to the realization that "the headscarf was a huge image blocking me and everything else about me, which was not helping me to cultivate the virtues of modesty in myself but hurting me as a feminist subject." The feeling of obstruction, due to the over-symbolic feature of the headscarf, caused her to fall into depression, which hampered her ethical journey, which was in opposition to what she had hoped to achieve through veiling. While she was considering the possibility of unveiling, the coup attempt took place. She then lost her position as a research assistant at the university and had to return to her hometown. This unfortunate displacement served, nonetheless, as an opportunity to unveil, after three years of wearing the headscarf.

[24] See: Ahmet Kulsoy, "What is pushing half of Turkey towards Deism?" *Ahval News*, May 6, 2018. https://ahvalnews.com/islam/what-pushing-half-turkey-towards-deism (October 29, 2018); Selin Girit, "The Young Turks Rejecting Islam" *BBC News*, May 10, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43981745 (October 27, 2018)
[25] Interview via email on August 27, 2018.

Zehra is a social scientist, and her engagement with religion has been mostly an individual quest, as she was not raised or educated in a religious family. She spent most of her life as a non-veiled Muslim woman and forced herself to veil in order to cultivate piety, which, in the end, did not work out for her. When she took off her headscarf, she did not feel bad, nor felt a need to find power in the textual authority of the sacred sources of Islam for her decision. This was partly because she did not have an emotional investment with any social group that expected her to be veiled, which is usually composed of one's family and immediate social circle. She was even more relieved that she did not have to endure any prying comments from distant relatives or acquaintances, when she moved to the United States for a graduate degree, two months after unveiling.

Her commitment to religious practice had already waned during her years with the headscarf, partly due to the feeling of alienation and disconnect between her inner self and her appearance. "Unveiling did not make them worse," she says, stating that the only Islamic pillar she currently carries out is fasting for the month of Ramadan. The decline in her observance of religious practices, however, is not an act of resistance against an oppressive regime, religious authorities, or the state. She had already submitted herself to a set of rules (including wearing the headscarf) which, she believed, were designed to make her a virtuous human being. It was the oppression she felt due to the social and political meanings attached to the headscarf, which were outside her control. Even though she decided to unveil, she nonetheless still believed veiling to be a religious obligation (*fard*). However, she later came to believe, with the influence of her critical pedagogical learning, that veiling might actually be merely a historical practice/custom. Once again, political instrumentalization wins over the textual ambiguity of the practice of veiling. Covering the hair might or might not be a Qur'anic obligation depending on the various interpretations, however, it has become impossible for Zehra to fight against the political meaning of the headscarf and its association with the authoritarian practices of the state: "I still have not clarified my thoughts on this issue, but I can say that I have negative feelings towards the headscarf due to the political situation in Turkey, and Erdogan's instrumentalizing of the phrase *başörtülü bacılarım* (my veiled sisters) that made veiling equivalent to being an AKP supporter."

Hatice (24, Law Degree, Intern at a Law Firm, Turkey)

Hatice is also an "early veiler" who wore the headscarf from age 14 to 22. She was socialized in a conservative religious family from a small town in inner Anatolia; therefore, she explains, "veiling was something that needed to be done, and that needed to be put up with for God's sake."[26] Because of her age, by the time she got to college, the ban was no longer in effect. She did not experience the headscarf ban, but she felt the social pressure that dictated certain acts such as riding a bike, to be unacceptable for *başörtülü* women.

Hatice had just graduated from the faculty of law at another purged school after the coup attempt. Her feeling of discomfort with the heavy politicization of the headscarf in the last couple of years turned into a profound sense of alienation from her own headscarf, which led her to question its status in the Islamic legal traditions. Seeing that the scholars were divided over the issue, she could not find the certain answer she was looking for. Despite that, she still carried out her wish to unveil:

> *This was not a feeling of physical discomfort; I simply did not want to veil anymore. I took off my headscarf hoping for Allah's forgiveness. I said, "O Allah, you know my heart, I can't withstand this anymore." After taking it*

[26] Interview via email on August 21, 2018.

> *off, I went to a hairdresser and had my long hair cut a little. My feeling: freedom! I still can't explain that feeling, but I still feel no remorse, either. My father respected my decision. My mom felt sad at first, but she got used to it. Some of my relatives ostracized me, but did I care? No!*

She was adamantly dismissive of the moral norms of her conservative society, in the pursuit of her own ethics of the self. The ideal Islamic community which was supposed to enjoin good and forbid evil, was not a valid reality for her anymore. Hatice recounts her confrontation with her conservative social circle as such: "I was condemned for unveiling by people who had done such horrible things. And solely because they wore the headscarf, they considered themselves better Muslims than me." This experience made her more aware that veiling had been taken to an extreme. Women veiled without questioning why or feeling any need to learn the religious/ethical reasons underlying that practice. She protests that the religious morality that surrounded her, does not include any individual reasoning:

> *This is exactly what ignorance is. I was late to realize it, as I also had adopted many practices without questioning them. Why? Just because someone I trusted said so, everyone does it like that, or this is our tradition.*

Hatice insists that taking off her headscarf does not make her immodest, or less pious, because she still wears the same clothes, but just does not cover her hair. She began to experience that people in her conservative hometown would behave more respectfully towards veiled women, especially since she herself no longer wore the headscarf. Hatice explains: "On the bus, a man did not give his seat to me, but instead gave it to a veiled woman who was around my age. And I had many other experiences like this." Hatice's experience of discrimination displays a stark contrast with her peers in Europe and North America, where unveiled women are unlikely to lose respect for that choice by the greater society; in fact, they gain acceptance and even social capital.

The story told by the Turkish-American journalist and author Elif Batuman (2016) in the *New Yorker Magazine*, appears to be a mirror image of what Nuran, Zehra, Nazan, and Zeynep felt as unveiled Muslim women in Western societies. Batuman explains how she felt more respected in a conservative town in Southern Turkey, after temporarily wearing a headscarf.

> *As I walked on, I felt a rising sense of freedom, as if for the first time I could look wherever I wanted and not risk receiving a hostile glance. So, I kept the scarf on. And then I went back into the city. …walking through the city with a head scarf was a completely different experience. People were so much nicer. Nobody looked away when I approached. I felt less jostled; men seemed to step aside, to give me more room. When I went into a store, a man held the door for me, and I realized that it was the first time anyone had reached a door before me without going in first and letting it shut in my face. Most incredibly, when I got to a bus stop shortly after the bus had pulled away, the departing vehicle stopped in the middle of the street, the door opened, and a man reached out his hand to help me in, calling me "sister." It felt amazing. To feel so welcomed and accepted and safe, to be able to look into someone's face and smile, and have the smile returned—it was a wonderful gift.* (Batuman, 2016, para. 24-25)

This story illustrates what Hatice had to face, after deciding to be a non-veiled woman in a similarly conservative society. She gives up such social comfort by deciding to unveil, merely because of her strong opposition to political Islam, and the instrumentalization of major religious phenomena for "cheap political games." She confesses that the equation of religiosity with political support for the AKP and Erdogan has made religious symbols irritating to her, as she does not "want to see or hear them anymore." The headscarf has also been derailed from its fundamental purpose of covering the body and protecting it from illicit gazes, she claims, as she has even witnessed a friend of hers wearing the headscarf "to look sexier." Hatice's blue jeans and plain cotton t-shirt, according to her, are way more modest than the long dress in bright colors, embellished with sequins, which her veiled friends are wearing. Moreover, she dislikes the use of the headscarf as a divisive symbol, and as a key indicator of who is pious and who is not. The overwhelming state control and management over the religious realm during the AKP era has made her extremely sensitive to protecting religion from state intervention, too. She carefully expresses her disdain for both situations in her concluding remarks:

> *I believe that one can be pious without the headscarf, too. I see religion as very pure and sincere, and as something that can easily be polluted when exposed to vanity. It is also a social phenomenon and should remain so. The state should never intervene in religion. Just as wearing the headscarf does not make us pious by itself, not wearing it does not make us sinners, either. Only Allah knows our hearts.*

Hatice's act of unveiling, therefore, is not a deviation from her path to building a pious self, but an attempt to save that path from societal pressure and state intervention, which she believed, were corrupting the purity of religion. In this context, one can even claim that taking off the headscarf is a pious act to reaffirm the purity and sincerity of her faith.

Eda (40, English Instructor, Turkey)

Eda's story of veiling and unveiling illustrates the political history of the headscarf in Turkey, from the 1990s to the current day. Having a secularist family background, she decided to wear the headscarf in high school, after being influenced by her teachers and her classmates in the private tutoring center, which was established by the pietist Gulen/Hizmet movement. She lived through the harshest days of the headscarf ban while studying at a public university, where she had to uncover her hair every day at the campus gate, just to enter. She endured all that in order to become a teacher and had to repeat that experience when she started her professional career as an English instructor, too. She felt guilty for having to uncover her hair because of the ban, and that guilt made her wear clothes that covered her from her neck to her toes. She was not the only one; many veiled women who were forced to take off their headscarves commonly wore turtlenecks under their blouses for more coverage.

Eda also had first-hand experience of the rise of Islamophobia in the United States when she lived there between 2001 and 2005. She was physically attacked at a mall by a group of teenagers. She was also victimized by insults and slurs during those years. Despite all these terrible experiences, though, she never considered unveiling until a few years ago. By 2013, the headscarf ban was no more in effect in the public sector, but the private sector still maintained its policy of not hiring veiled women. Removing the ban did not "normalize" the headscarf at the grassroots level; on the contrary, the perception of the headscarf among the secular, urban middle class changed from a symbol of backwardness and lower-class status into a symbol of "corruption and

dishonesty,"[27] as Eda puts it. She was well aware of this perception among the opposition to the AKP when she was about to move to a new cosmopolitan neighborhood, which was dominated by secularist CHP (Republican People's Party) voters. She could see that the political division in Turkey after 2013, offered her only two binary subject positions: either keep the headscarf and appear to be an Islamist AKP supporter or remove the headscarf and practice her religion in private, in order to appear to be a secularist CHP supporter. When the secularist (*laik*) vs conservative (*muhafazakar*) distinction in Turkish society shifted into a distinction of anti vs proErdogan/AKP, people like Eda, who were Erdogan opponents, and pious, could not identify with either of these positions. The merging of the political and the religious by Erdogan and the AKP Islamists meant that ordinary people had to merge their political and religious subjectivities as well. For Eda, the solution was to accommodate her religious subjectivity within her political subjectivity, leading to conflicting feelings. She says:

> *I took off my headscarf to survive in Turkey. The first time I went in public without my headscarf I had double feelings. I felt remorse when I looked at veiled women, but that feeling was gone when I saw unveiled women on the street.*

She enjoyed the social capital provided by being a non-veiled, professional, self-confident woman in the urban culture of Istanbul, as she admits "receiving non-prejudiced attitudes, and being more respected in society –by both the secularists and the Islamists." Regarding the adverse comments she received from some of her friends in her former, conservative social environment, she defends her decision by declaring that only by taking off her headscarf could she maintain an active social life in Turkey, particularly in the unsafe atmosphere of the July 2016 coup attempt.

After adopting a privatized form of Islam, where her devotion was no longer seen publicly and which was authentic to herself, Eda has managed to put herself back on track on her journey towards piety. Although she still believes in the traditional view of veiling as a religious obligation, she thinks it is possible to be a pious Muslim woman without the headscarf: "I still continue my religious practices regularly, which is the most important thing for me. I gave up the veil, not believing in Allah."

Conclusion

These narratives by no means exhaust the factors underlying Turkish women's decisions to unveil, nor do they suggest an unveiling movement *en masse*. Nonetheless, they open windows for multiple lenses of analysis, in order to understand the day-to-day impact of shifting power dynamics in Turkey in recent years. Against a backdrop of a totalizing and absolutist veiling discourse, propagated by the Islamist AKP and its leader Erdogan, my informants have sought varying tactics to mold an authentic political and religious subjectivity. These tactics included: Nuran employing textual empowerment, Nazan highlighting her motherhood, Zeynep and Zehra pursuing education and employment on equal ground, Hatice drawing a boundary between piety and conservativism, and Eda shielding herself behind a secular appearance in public while remaining pious in the private sphere. All these stories undeniably reveal that there cannot be a one-dimensional relationship between power and subjectivity, whether it arises from political or religious authority. Notably, apart from Zehra who approached veiling as an ethical instrument, all my informants still held a

[27] Interview via email on July 30, 2018.

belief regarding the obligatory (*fard*) status of veiling in Islamic law. However, they made a calculated choice by willfully remaining uninformed about the particulars of its implementation, or by deliberately emphasizing the universal principle of modesty and veiling over its historical and local implementations. Even though most of my informants are not currently residing in Turkey (because they did not want to stay after July 2016), their religious views about veiling and unveiling have been greatly shaped by their political experience in Turkey, first under a secularist, then an Islamist regime.

With the perspectives gained from these narratives, I looked at the complex reasons behind Muslim women's unveiling after the lifting of the headscarf ban in Turkey, and in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in 2016. While the historic struggles against the headscarf bans in Turkey were previously leaning on liberal and democratic narratives, bringing religious freedom and equality of opportunity for Muslim women to the fore, the Islamist AKP fell short of meeting the expectations of women to be liberated from the state discourse. Instead, Erdogan and other prominent party members increasingly embraced the headscarved women as partisans, creating this assumption shared by many in Turkey that covering one's head religiously meant also being an AKP supporter.

Under the shadow of the AKP government's unprecedented hegemony over the religious realm in Turkey, the piety journeys of these Muslim women were influenced by various factors that eventually led them to continue this inevitably imperfect journey without the headscarf. These factors included security concerns, fear of discrimination, physical and mental exhaustion from the hyper-visibility of the hijab, disconnection from the highly politicized religious community, and displacement, accompanied by critical engagement with religious and political authorities. By highlighting these six unveiling stories, I hope to bring another level of complexity to the study of piety and understanding religious commitment while keeping in mind that "the ideals and aspirations people express and the everyday lives they live are characterized by complexity, ambiguity, reflectivity, openness, frustration and tragedy" (Schielke, 2010, p. 2).

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Judith Butler (2005) writes that "prior to judging another, we must be in some relation to him or her" (p. 45). These narratives allow for the possibility of establishing a connection to these women, prior to judging their unveiling as an act that is pious or impious, religious or secular, and emancipatory or submissive —which is what they mostly come across when they "come out" without the veil in their respective publics. Contrary to the stigmas around the existence and absence of the headscarf, these women are not the beacons of secular modernity, nor the prodigal daughters of Islam, soon to remorsefully return to veiling. They are Muslim women in search of non-politicized piety.

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