RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN TURKEY:
HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE

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It is easy to characterize the Islamic public sphere in Turkey as monolithic due to the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) hegemonic status in the country’s religiopolitical sphere. Despite this common (mis)perception, however, there are religious authorities that challenge AKP’s dominant position in Turkey’s Islamic public sphere. One such religious scholar is Ihsan Eliaçık, who embraces pluralistic, egalitarian, and tolerant interpretations of Islam and challenges the AKP’s authoritarian Islamism, which recently turned more exclusionary and nationalistic. Eliaçık is influential in numerous social movements, platforms, and networks that can loosely be defined as the Islamic Left (Koca 2014; Sarfati 2018). As such, focus on Eliaçık—and, more broadly, the counterhegemonic discourses created and circulated by him and the Islamic Left in Turkey on numerous issues such as minority rights, women’s empowerment, religious pluralism, freedom of expression, and corruption—is instrumental to understanding the nuances of Turkey’s Islamic public sphere, its multivocal character, and the ideologies of the religious opposition in Turkey, particularly how they contrast with the AKP. Eliaçık and the Islamic Left embrace more democratic interpretations of Islam than the AKP, and this religious pluralist egalitarianism is reflected in Eliaçık’s supporters’ attitudes, as demonstrated by survey findings.

In what follows, I first summarize the results of a survey on religious authority in Turkey and discuss how much credibility and trust Turkish citizens confer to different public figures as sources of religious authority. Then, I discuss the role of official religious authorities such as the Diyanet (the Directorate of Religious Affairs) and state religious schools in bolstering the AKP’s political hegemony. The third section examines Eliaçık’s Islamic political philosophy and delineates his pluralist, egalitarian, and democratic interpretations and how these differ from the AKP’s authoritarian Islamism. Lastly, I map AKP sympathizers’ views on key issues such as religious tolerance, belief in multivocality of religion, corruption, democracy, gender equality, and the role of religion in politics, and compare their perspectives to those of supporters of the religious opposition in Turkey in an attempt to understand whether and how Eliaçık’s liberal democratic Islamic ideology resonates with his social base.
The survey results show that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan commands the trust of 40 percent of the survey respondents as a religious authority, despite being a lay figure. This authority stems from a combination of his public performance of piety, charisma, and his status as a graduate of Imam Hatip school (state religious high school), in addition to his political clout as the leader of an Islamist party. However, it is also crucial to emphasize that 42 percent of the respondents indicate that they do not trust Erdoğan as a religious authority, showing the widespread polarization around him. Nihat Hatipoğlu, a religious scholar, academic, and popular television personality, follows Erdoğan in popularity with 31 percent of the public’s trust. Mehmet Görmez, the former head of the Diyanet, received the trust of 21 percent of the survey respondents, while Hayrettin Karaman, one of the most popular religious scholars among AKP and Imam Hatip circles, is trusted by only 11 percent of the respondents. Eliaçık, a writer and activist who embraces a reformist Islamic position and openly challenges the AKP, commands 16 percent of the public’s trust as a religious authority. Abdulbaki Erol, the current leader of the Menzil Naqshibendi Sufi order, commands only 9 percent of the public’s trust. This is in line with the broader trend of weakening popularity and political clout of religious orders in contemporary Turkey. Fethullah Gülen is the least trusted Turkish religious figure, with only 4 percent of survey respondents declaring their trust in him, and a whopping 77 percent claiming that they do not trust him at all, the highest distrust score among all religious leaders included in the survey. This should not come as a surprise as Gülen’s Hizmet movement is completely securitized by the government and the opposition alike, particularly after the failed 2016 coup attempt for which it was held responsible.

**Table 1. Trust in Religious Authorities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eliaçık</th>
<th>Erdoğan</th>
<th>Karaman</th>
<th>Görmez</th>
<th>Hatipoğlu</th>
<th>Gülmen</th>
<th>Erol</th>
<th>Ghannouchi</th>
<th>Khaled</th>
<th>Tayeb</th>
<th>Nasrallah</th>
<th>Baghdadi</th>
<th>Qaradawi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 (Do not trust at all)</strong></td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5 (Completely trust)</strong></td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Don’t know this person</strong></td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s analysis

The survey findings also indicate that religious authority in Turkey is very much confined to national borders, as the low scores for international religious figures shows. These low scores might indicate that Turkish citizens are not familiar with Arab religious authorities. For instance, Rachid Ghannouchi of Tunisia, Ahmed El Tayeb of Egypt, Hassan Nasrallah of Lebanon, and Amr Khaled of Egypt each are trusted by only 5 percent of survey respondents, while Egypt’s Yusuf Al-Qaradawi commands slightly better levels of trust at 9 percent. The leader of the Islamic State (IS), Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, is the least trusted...
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figure. The fact that the leader of IS is trusted by a mere 3 percent of the respondents is encouraging and shows the very limited public appeal of IS in Turkey; this result is also supported by the endorsement experiment we conducted. However, in response to a question in our survey, 5 percent of the Turkish respondents claimed that suicide bombings or other forms of violence against civilians are always or often justified, and an additional 10 percent claimed that these actions are occasionally justified. Compared to other countries in the survey, Turkey has the highest percentage of support for violence against civilians, potentially exposing an undercurrent of the appeal that some extremist religious ideologies enjoy in Turkey. The contagion of the Syrian civil war, coupled with the Turkish government’s alliance with certain jihadist opposition groups at different times during the conflict, might have boosted these groups’ ability to propagandize and recruit from within Turkey.

In addition to measuring levels of trust for religious figures, the survey also asked how much respondents “approve” of the same set of religious leaders. The response to the approval question mirrors the trust question, although the approval rates are somewhat below the trust rates (see Figure 1). A noteworthy finding is that 45 percent of the respondents declared that in general, they “do not approve of religious leaders.” Such a high negative response rate indicates a broad skepticism of religious authority in Turkey and can be explained in several ways.1 Historically, state-promoted Turkish secularism, which displays a general dislike of societal religious actors, might account for the broad-based skepticism of religious figures. Simultaneously, certain contemporary developments such as rampant corruption and clientelism by an Islamist government, the legitimation of corruption in fatwas issued by popular religious scholars, the Diyanet’s antiquated fatwas on women and children’s rights, and the government’s cover-up of a child abuse scandal at an Islamic foundation2 might have contributed to Turkish citizens’ suspicion of religious authorities in general.

With regard to the relationship between Islamist actors and the state, Turkey diverges from other surveyed Arab countries in certain ways that might affect perceptions of religious figures. As Brown (2017) states, Islamist movements are mostly seen as oppositional forces vis-à-vis the state religious establishment in the Arab world. State religious officials mostly paint Islamists as politically motivated actors who distort the “true meaning” of religion, thereby positioning themselves against political Islam. In Turkey, a similar divide existed between state Islam and political Islam from the 1970s—when the first Islamist party in Turkey was formed—until the early 2000s, although various Islamist actors found refuge within state institutions (Sarfati 2013). However, with the AKP’s control of the state since 2002, the Diyanet, which controls the entire state religious establishment in the country, became more conservative in its religious interpretations and embraced political Islam.

1 The respondents in our sample are wealthier, more educated, and more urban compared to the general Turkish society, thus this skepticism might not necessarily reflect the poorer, less educated, more rural segments of the country. See Survey Appendix: http://bit.ly/2TNDpdP.

2 Forty-five male students reportedly have been raped or sexually assaulted in Karaman, Turkey, while staying in the dormitories of the Ensar Foundation, a religious foundation close to AKP circles. After these allegations were unearthed by Turkish media outlets, AKP politicians and ministers publicly defended the foundation’s reputation while condemning the sexual assaults as isolated incidents.
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(The Economist 2018). Thus, due to Islamist control of the state, we observe a notable overlap between official Islam and political Islam in Turkey. The positive correlation (0.613, p<.000) between trust in Erdoğan and trust in Görmez, the former head of the Diyanet, illustrates the public’s perception of Islamists and official religion as being two sides of the same coin. In line with this finding, a survey conducted in 2014 by KONDA Research and Consultancy shows that AKP supporters declared the highest level of trust in the Diyanet as a source of religious authority compared to supporters of other political parties (Helsinki Yurttaşlar Derneği 2014).

Figure 1. Approval of Religious Leaders

Our survey included a series of endorsement experiments as a third way to assess the relative influence of religious authority figures. In these experiments, survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a statement, which was randomly endorsed by one of the 13 figures included in the trust and approval sections or assigned no endorser. Because the endorser is the only variable part of the experiment, we can attribute variation in level of agreement with a statement across respondents to the variation in endorsers. The experiment shows how much a particular religious figure (the endorser) shapes respondents’ interpretation and acceptance of the statement. This indirect way of measuring the effect of religious figures aims to eliminate a social desirability effect in the findings and assess a behavioral measure of each figure’s sway over respondents.

The results in Figure 2 show the combined effects of the 14 endorsement statements. Higher endorsement effect values indicate respondents’ higher levels of agreement with statements attributed to a specific endorser. Erdoğan has the largest positive effect on survey respondents, though his endorsement does not significantly impact respondents’ views. In contrast, statements endorsed by Fethullah Gülen reveal a dramatic negative effect. When respondents were presented a statement endorsed by Gülen, they were much more likely to disagree with that statement (by almost 1 full point on a five-point scale) compared to the control group (statements with no endorser). This result is not surprising,
as Gülen is almost universally viewed negatively in Turkey since the failed 2016 coup attempt, for which the overwhelming majority of Turkish citizens hold him responsible. In addition, the discrepancy between the Gülen movement’s public activities around charity and Gülen’s clandestine way of leadership contributed to his public perception as an untrustworthy figure. Similarly, Islamic State leader Al-Baghdadi has a large negative impact (-0.8 on a five-point scale), reinforcing the earlier finding that Turkish citizens do not view the message of IS favorably.

**Figure 2.** Endorsement Experiment Effects, Religious Figures in Turkey

![Figure 2](image.png)

Source: Author’s analysis

**The Religious Public Sphere in Turkey: AKP’s Hegemony**

As the results show, Erdoğan and the AKP hold a hegemonic position in politics and the religious public sphere in Turkey. Before analyzing the oppositional discourses directed toward AKP’s Islamism from within the religious sphere, it is important to explore the political and institutional sources of AKP’s hegemony in the religio-political sphere in Turkey. This hegemony is constructed through AKP politicians’ populist Islamist claims, the Diyanet, Imam Hatip schools, and the AKP’s co-optation of Islamic civil society organizations. While the AKP deemphasized the political role of religion earlier in its tenure, the past decade witnessed Erdoğan and AKP officials morph into more assertive promoters of a religious nationalist vision.
For instance, the power of the Diyanet increased under AKP rule. Currently, the agency employs 117,000 people, and its budget has increased fourfold since 2006 (The Economist 2018). Initially established by the secular Republican elites to control religion and Islamist tendencies in society, the Diyanet turned more conservative in its religious interpretations and increasingly embraced an Islamist discourse over the past decade (The Economist 2018). Since it represents the official voice of Sunni Islam, the Diyanet wields significant influence in Turkish society. According to a poll conducted in 2014, 73 percent of the population stated that they trusted the Diyanet’s fatwas, while only 12 percent declared their distrust (Helsinki Yurttaşlar Derneği 2014).

Imam Hatip schools also play a significant role in providing the AKP with both religious legitimacy and mobilization capacity. Many AKP politicians, including Erdoğan himself, are Imam Hatip graduates and keep close contact with networks formed around these state-run religious schools. With the reopening of Imam Hatip middle (junior high) schools, the percentage of students in religious schools increased from 5.6 percent of all students in 2011 to 9.6 percent in 2014 and 11.3 percent in 2017 (Sarfati 2016; Butler 2018).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Turkey had a vibrant religious public sphere, which included Islamic civil society groups, charities, religious congregations, and media outlets. In the past decade, however, the government coopted most of this civil society by forming clientelistic relationships with these groups. Particularly since 2011 (AKP’s third term in government), both state religious institutions and Islamic civil society have aided the AKP in constructing a religious discourse that is majoritarian, nationalistic, and suspicious of foreigners and minorities.

**Opposition to AKP’s Hegemony from within the Religious Public Sphere**

Despite the AKP’s grip on state religious institutions and its cooptation of Islamic civil society, there are notable groups with a Muslim identity that challenge the party’s hegemony in the Islamic public sphere. This includes the counterhegemonic discourses created and circulated by the Islamic Left in Turkey. Since 2010, numerous social movements, platforms, and networks coalesced around a democratic, egalitarian, and socially conscious interpretation of Islam. The figure at the center of these networks is Ihsan Eliaçık, a religious scholar, author, and activist. Youth movements such as Anti-capitalist Muslims and the Labor and Justice Platform, Islamic feminist platforms such as Reçel Blog and the Muslim Initiative Against Violence Toward Women, Islamic human rights advocacy group The Right Initiative, and Istanbul Think-House collectively form a counter-public (Fraser 1990) that crafts and spreads oppositional discourses against the AKP’s neoliberal authoritarian Islamism. They contest the AKP’s hegemony on various issues such as neoliberalism, democracy, women’s rights, religious pluralism, and limits of state power.

In the following analysis, I examine Eliaçık’s religious discourse on these themes and juxtapose them with the AKP’s dominant narrative. This comparison is significant for two major reasons. First, it illuminates an understudied dimension of religious authority in
Turkey. Scholarship on religious politics in Turkey overly focus on the AKP and the Gülen movement (or the latter’s conflict with the AKP) without commensurate attention to alternative religious interpretations that might constitute a more democratic and egalitarian interpretation of Islam. Second, a study of Eliaçık and the networks around him show that Turkey’s religious public sphere is not univocal and harbors grassroots egalitarian trends that pose a serious critique to the AKP’s brand of authoritarian, majoritarian Islamism.

As a reformist religious scholar, Eliaçık argues that Muslims need to reform the way they view Islam. He suggests that there are two different approaches to Islam: restoration (ihya) and construction (inşa). The restoration approach takes the Islamic culture of the past and tries to implement it to the current day. According to Eliaçık, this Islamic culture is heavily influenced by the political conditions of past Muslim empires and includes many misguided, unjust precepts. This approach of restoration, which is embraced by current mainstream religious authorities in Turkey (as well as in most of the Muslim world), is defensive, punitive, and authoritarian, and diverges from the Quran (Eliaçık 2015, 34-35). As an alternative, Eliaçık proposes using a construction approach, which should address the wrongs of this past Islamic culture and reconstruct the Quran’s messages for the contemporary world (ibid., 35).

Eliaçık asserts that there are five perennial questions of political philosophy: Why does the state exist? What is its meaning? Who should rule the state? How should the state be ruled? And what are the boundaries of state authority? (Eliaçık 2014, 244). According to him, the Quran emphasizes five central concepts that basically provide answers to these five questions: “Justice, custody, competency, meshveret (consultation), and maslahat” (ibid., 244). Hence, according to Eliaçık, the goal of government is justice; the government is an institution that is trusted by the people [to the rulers] and not a property given by God; those who are competent and meritorious should govern the affairs of the state; the government should be democratic, open, transparent, and accountable; and finally, the government should condone good and be positioned on the side of the oppressed against the oppressors (Eliaçık 2014, 16).

These concepts can be found in different Quranic verses. For Eliaçık, the verse “Indeed, Allah commands you to render trust to whom they are due (the competent ones) and when you rule between people to rule with justice” (Nisa 58) shows that “the only rationale of being a state is to rule with justice” (Eliaçık 2014, 241). Similarly, according to Eliaçık, the verses “It [the state] should not become a fortune circulating among the rich among you” (Al-Hashr 7) and “We want to make those who are oppressed the leaders in this world” (Al-Qasas 5) have significant egalitarian messages, and he warns that membership in the state apparatus should not become a source of wealth accumulation or status nor used as a tool of oppression.

Eliaçık suggests that these five broad concepts outlined by the Quran cannot form the foundation of the contemporary political arena as long as rule of law is based on 1,000-year-old fiqh rulings (Eliaçık 2014, 245). Rather, these rulings need to be revised based on
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the contemporary period and according to society’s needs, because “law is a dynamic process” (ibid., 245). Every member of a society should be equally part of this dynamic process without religious scholars (who should not be excluded from the process a priori either) being granted privileged status. Based on this interpretation, Eliaçık suggests that the proponents of political Islam misinterpret Islam’s political message. Islamists, who claim they want to create a religious state, mainly aim to enforce a certain morality on the population. However, according Eliaçık, Islam’s central message is based on universal principles and opposes coercive state practices that undermine pluralism.

Eliaçık’s stance against using state power to facilitate religious indoctrination runs contrary to AKP’s Islamization agenda. This agenda found its most clear manifestation in 2012 when then-Prime Minister Erdoğan claimed that the AKP’s aim is to raise a pious generation (Cumhuriyet 2012). Accordingly, the AKP initiated several Islamist policies, such as the de facto banning of abortion in all public and most private hospitals, increasing funding for state religious schools, and increasing the role of religion in regular school curricula. For instance, the history of national battles like those at Manzikert, Gallipoli, and Sarikamis were rewritten with an Islamic emphasis to bolster religious nationalism and extol the concept of martyrdom among the youth (Lukuslu 2016, 641-642). Hayrettin Karaman, who is dubbed “AKP’s Islamic jurist of choice” (Akyol 2014), also endorses the view of using state power to legislate Islamic morality among the public. For instance, Karaman claims: “The best [thing] for Muslims [who live] in societies where people of different beliefs and worldviews live together is not allowing for behavior that goes against their morality” (Karaman 2012, 34).

Eliaçık, in contrast, proposes that Islam prioritize democracy, decentralization of authority, and pluralism. In the introduction of his book Democratic, Libertarian Islam, Eliaçık describes the perspective proposed by the Covenant of Medina as “Democratic Islam” (Eliaçık 2014, 12), and claims the covenant ensured each participating community freedom in religious and tribal affairs (ibid., 38). According to Eliaçık, the most important aspect of this covenant was that it accepted all sides as subjects, rather than objects (ibid., 38). Compared to earlier Islamists’ viewpoints on the Covenant of Medina, Eliaçık’s interpretation is more progressive and foregrounds a radical pluralism. Eliaçık asserts that the Quranic verse “And of his signs is the diversity of your languages and colors” (Ar-Rum 30:22) indicates that God values diversity in mother tongues, identities, beliefs, rituals, and traditions (Eliaçık 2014, 14). Thus, the best system to fulfill this aim of diversity, he argues, is democracy, wherein the state must be held accountable to its citizens, state institutions must avoid becoming tools of tyranny, and leaders must incorporate the diversity of voices in a society into decision-making (ibid., 16).

Eliaçık argues that there is a need to decentralize authority and create separate assemblies in all provinces of Turkey: “Hence, like wealth and information, political power needs to also be distributed to the base [masses]. This is the meaning of ‘property belongs to God’” (ibid., 17). Eliaçık’s position echoes theories of participatory democracy and progressive pluralism (Young 2000; Fraser 1990). Thus, regarding Turkey’s perennial question on the treatment of Kurds, Eliaçık challenges the AKP’s nationalist positions and its emphasis on
Eliaçık also adopts a more inclusionary position with regard to the rights of religious minority groups and freedom of conscience. He suggests that the foremost criterion to judge a person is his/her moral character, rather than piety. He sums up his ideas succinctly in an interview:

> Only four actions require a punishment in the Quran: killing someone, stealing, slandering, and committing adultery. When we look at these, we see that these are totally regarding human rights. Not believing in Allah or afterlife, not praying, not fasting, not going to hajj, not wearing the veil do not have any punishments in this world. These rituals are left to people’s voluntary commitments and beliefs (Eliaçık 2015, 31).

This is a rather radical interpretation of Islam, which suggests that ritualistic aspects of the religion are not relevant for societal justice and are secondary to the Quran’s universal message. Eliaçık supports religious pluralism by claiming that certain universal values constitute the core message of the Quran, and these universal values, which can also be informed by other religious or non-religious worldviews, should be taken as the yardstick for judging a person. This interpretation creates a discourse that is inclusive of marginalized religious identities in Turkey, such as Alevi, non-Muslim minorities, and atheists.

This progressive view on pluralism contrasts sharply with the official religious authority of the Diyanet, which recently defined atheism (deism) as a deviant ideology (Cumhuriyet 2018a), and still does not recognize Alevi cemevis as places of worship (Girit 2016). Hayrettin Karaman’s Islamist political philosophy provides theoretical grounds for the Diyanet’s restrictive views on religious pluralism. Karaman (2014a) suggests that “At the basis of pluralism lies equality between hak and batıl, true and false, good and bad. This goes against the nature of Islam.” According to Karaman, a political disagreement between Muslims and non-Muslims is ideally solved when “the other side adapts to Islam and embraces the Islamic system” (Karaman 1997, as cited in Yenigün 2014). This majoritarian view undermines both pluralism and tolerance toward minorities.

Eliaçık also supports freedom of conscience, even in areas deemed taboo among most mainstream religious figures. For instance, Eliaçık suggests that there is no worldly punishment assigned to those who commit apostasy. He claims that the most one can do in such an instance is to advise, guide (irşad), and remind an individual of the afterlife (Eliaçık 2014, 207). He claims that capital punishment for apostasy is a made-up rumor circulated by state authorities to deter dissenters (ibid., 207-8). Eliaçık’s liberal
interpretation of freedom of conscience was illustrated during the debate that ensued after the Charlie Hebdo attacks. In an interview he delivered after the killings of journalists at the satirical magazine’s offices in Paris, he not only condemned the violence (as did most religious opinion leaders in Turkey) but also evaluated the caricatures through the lens of freedom of expression and freedom of thought. Eliaçık suggests that the Quran does not enjoin punishment for ridicule, and that verse 140 of Al-Nisa encourages one to leave a place where the Quran is ridiculed and not come back until the conversation ends (Eliaçık 2015, 31). He suggests that there is a distinction between slander, which might require criminal punishment after the conclusion of a court trial, and ridicule (ibid., 32). Eliaçık adds that drawing pictures of the prophet and making statues of him are not forbidden in the Quran, and notes that the prophet defined himself as “a human like you” (Eliaçık 2015, 16). Therefore, Eliaçık supported the right of two Turkish columnists to publish Charlie Hebdo’s cover depicting the prophet in their columns in the Cumhuriyet newspaper. In comparison, Erdoğan—while condemning the violence—argued that the Charlie Hebdo caricatures depicting the prophet were disrespectful to Muslims’ sacred values and “a provocation punishable by law” (Al Jazeera 2015). Similarly, Mehmet Görmez, the then-president of the Diyanet, claimed that the caricatures could not be “considered under freedom of expression” as they humiliated what is sacred to Muslims (Cumhuriyet 2015).

Lastly, Eliaçık also embraces an egalitarian position on women’s rights, although his views on this issue are not as unconventional as his stance on freedom of conscience. Eliaçık claims that Quranic verses challenged the unequal power relations between men and women in the Arabian Peninsula (Eliaçık 2014, 275). He suggests that the verses of Al-Nisa recognize women’s rights to inherit wealth, advocate for the improved division of labor in the family in favor of women, and strongly discourage domestic violence against women (ibid., 280, 284-285). He claims that the Quran rejects the biblical story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s ribs, but rather asserts that man and woman were created from the same origin, nefs-i vahide. This indicates an equality of status between men and women from the time of creation (ibid. 276). This claim draws a contrast with Erdoğan’s repeated claims that men and women are not equal due to their differing natures (BBC Türkçe 2014) and that a woman’s life is incomplete without bearing children. Similar claims are often repeated by AKP politicians in public and have turned to a form of “discursive governance of population politics via the creation of normative mechanisms supported by an encompassing argument about [women’s] morality and responsibility” (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2015). Similarly, the religious scholar Karaman, who claimed that women who do not dress modestly bear responsibility in their own harassment and that a woman’s “nakedness is harassment” (Karaman 2012, 159-162), embraces misogynist positions toward women’s role in the society. These rulings aim to discipline women’s bodies and behavior in the public sphere.

Due to his fierce critique of the AKP and nationalist Islamist ideologies, Eliaçık has received significant societal and political backlash. On October 21, 2017, he escaped a mob attack at a book fair in his conservative hometown of Kayseri, where he was signing copies of his books (Bianet 2017). According to Eliaçık, Kayseri’s AKP mayor targeted him in his speeches prior to the incident. Several months later, the mayor of Isparta barred Eliaçık from a book fair in which he was slated to participate because of Eliaçık’s criticism of
Turkey’s offensive toward the Kurdish city of Afrin in northern Syria. Eliaçık’s antimilitarist and pro-Kurdish positions earned him the wrath of the government, and he recently received a prison sentence of six years and three months for a speech in which he stated that the Turkish military’s treatment of civilians in the country’s southeastern region was against Islamic morals and principles regarding conduct of war (Cumhuriyet 2018b).

Survey Findings: Reformist Islam vs. State Islamism

This section examines whether Eliaçık’s reformist message and his democratic, egalitarian interpretations of Islamic teachings resonate with his sympathizers. In particular, I discuss the attitudes of respondents who indicated trust in Eliaçık on issues of religious tolerance, democracy, political Islam, gender equality, multivocality in Islam, and corruption, and how their attitudes differ from respondents who indicated trust in Erdoğan and other pro-AKP religious figures. The differences between the attitudes of the two sets of respondents can help us to understand whether Eliaçık’s religious and ideological critique of the political-religious establishment has any bearing on public opinion and impacts the broader society.

Table 2. Relationship Between Trust in Religious Authorities and Various Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Eliaçık</th>
<th>Erdoğan</th>
<th>Gormez</th>
<th>Hatipoglu</th>
<th>Karaman</th>
<th>Abubaki Erol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent agrees with son marrying a non-Muslim</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent agrees with daughter marrying a non-Muslim</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent disagrees with the statement: “There is one way to interpret religion”</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent thinks corruption is a serious concern</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent claims that democracy is the best political system</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent favors implementation of sharia law</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent favors religious leaders’ influence on politics</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent disagrees with the statement: “Wife must always obey her husband”</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The numbers in the table are the mean scores of the corresponding variables (on a five-point scale) for the respondents who said that they trusted or completely trusted each religious figure (i.e., those who chose 4 and 5 in the trust question).

Source: Author’s analysis
Based on the discussion above, my expectation is that those who indicated trust in Eliaçık should declare more support for religious tolerance, democracy, multivocality of religion, and gender egalitarianism as well as less support for political Islam compared to respondents who indicated trust in Erdoğan, Karaman, and Görmez. All of these expectations found support from the survey data.

Table 2 shows that respondents who are more likely to trust Eliaçık are more comfortable with the idea of their children marrying non-Muslims (i.e., more tolerant of other religions); are more gender egalitarian; are more likely to think that there are multiple ways to interpret Islam; are more likely to agree that “despite its flaws, democracy is the best political system”; and less likely to support implementation of sharia law or the influence of religious figures on governance compared to respondents who declared trust in Erdoğan, Görmez, Karaman, Hatipoğlu, and Erol.

These results suggest that Eliaçık is more popular among religious Turkish citizens who are more egalitarian, democratic, pluralist, and less Islamist. This might indicate that his reformist messages resonate with their worldviews. These results also show that citizens generally are aware of the different messages religious authorities espouse, whether they are pro-state or pro-opposition.

How broadly have Eliaçık’s ideas spread in the general Turkish society? As discussed earlier, 16 percent of survey respondents in Turkey declared that they trust or completely trust Eliaçık as a religious authority, while 34 percent declared lack of trust in him and a further 37 percent said they don’t know him (see Table 1 above). One way to interpret these results is that Eliaçık’s message does not circulate enough in the society as over a third of the population do not know him. However, given that 40 percent of the population also claimed to not know Hayrettin Karaman, a religious scholar favored by the AKP, the share of the population who are unaware of Eliaçık is not distinctively high. This high number can also be a sign of potential growth, whereby the Islamic Left can still earn the trust of a significant part of the population who as of yet have not been exposed to its message.

Another noticeable finding is the respondents’ views on corruption. Those who indicated trust in Erdoğan were least likely to think that corruption is a major concern in Turkey (mean=3.54). This finding is not entirely unexpected, considering the AKP has developed an extensive crony capitalist network with pro-AKP business owners by favoring them in non-transparent public bids and waiving their tax debts. Similarly, the AKP demanded that business owners entering public bids contribute to Islamic civil society organizations led by close family members of party leaders, such as the Turkey Youth and Education Service Foundation (TÜRGEV) (Yıldırım 2015). Karaman defended these contributions (Karaman 2014b) and claimed that “corruption is not theft” (Karaman 2014c). Strongly criticizing these practices, Eliaçık claims that the AKP’s corruption and crony-capitalist practices are not only against the Quran’s message of egalitarianism and justice, but also harmful to the perception of religion among citizens. Unsurprisingly, those who trust Eliaçık were more likely to think that corruption is a major concern (mean=4.04) compared to those who trust in the other religious figures.
Conclusion

Based on the findings of a public opinion survey conducted by the Baker Institute, this paper examined the levels of trust Turkish citizens attribute to different public figures as sources of religious authority. It also compared the views of pro-Erdoğan respondents and respondents who conferred their trust to İhsan Eliaçık, a religious opposition figure. Some of the key findings are highlighted below:

- Despite being a lay person, Turkish President Erdoğan commands the highest trust among respondents, with 40 percent saying they trust him as a religious authority. Fethullah Gülen (4 percent trust and 81 percent distrust) and Abu-Bakr Al Baghdadi (3 percent trust and 61 percent distrust) are the least trusted religious figures.

- Forty-five percent of the respondents stated that in general, they “do not approve of religious leaders.” This indicates a broad skepticism of religious authority among the Turkish survey respondents and may be explained historically by state-promoted Turkish secularism and more currently by the clientelistic and crony relations between the Islamist government and Islamic civil society.

- Due to the AKP’s control of the Diyanet and Imam Hatip schools and its co-optation of other Islamic societal actors, a great overlap exists between official (state) Islam and political Islam in Turkey. The positive and strong correlation between trust in Erdoğan and trust in the former head of the Diyanet, Mehmet Görmez, shows that the public perceives Islamism and state religion as two sides of the same coin. Similarly, AKP supporters indicate higher levels of trust in the Diyanet’s fatwas.

- While the AKP is clearly in a hegemonic position in the religiopolitical sphere, its brand of authoritarian, nationalist Islamism is contested by the Islamic Left. In the past decade, worker’s rights movements, youth groups, Islamic feminists, and human rights groups have coalesced around İhsan Eliaçık, who espouses a reformist view of Islam. Eliaçık’s democratic, liberal, and egalitarian religious interpretations challenge statist, intolerant, majoritarian discourses of the AKP and pro-AKP religious figures, such as Hayrettin Karaman. Sixteen percent of the survey respondents declared that they trust Eliaçık as a religious authority, which shows that the reach of Islamic Left is limited, although by no means negligible.

- The ideological differences between the AKP’s statist Islam and Eliaçık’s liberal Islam are also reflected among their social bases. Survey results demonstrate that those who trust Eliaçık are more supportive of democracy, more gender egalitarian, more tolerant of religious minorities, more likely to claim that there are multiple ways to interpret Islam, and less likely to support political Islam in comparison to respondents who indicate trust in Erdoğan and other pro-AKP religious figures.

- Survey respondents who indicated trust in Erdoğan were the least likely to think that corruption is a major concern in Turkey, while those who trusted Eliaçık were the most likely to think that corruption is a major concern.
References


