Resistence Through Nonperformance
Atheism and Nonreligion in Turkey

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the concept of resistance and hegemony in relation to atheism and nonreligion in Turkey. It highlights how the dominant discourse in Turkey commonly denies the existence of atheism and nonreligion while promoting the country’s Sunni Muslim identity as synonymous with being Turkish. Still, the article argues that a significant number of people in Turkey have left Islam in recent years. Leaving Islam can be risky and met with discrimination, hate speech, and even physical violence. The study highlights the difficult situation faced by nonbelievers who must navigate between personal convictions and societal expectations. It contends that being atheist and choosing not to conform to dominant religious norms represents a form of discursive resistance against the Sunni Islamic hegemony in Turkey. The article concludes by asserting that the nonperformance of religious rituals can be seen as a form of resistance and a challenge to the ruling elite’s claim to power.

**KEYWORDS:** atheism, hegemony, nonperformance, nonreligion, resistance, Turkey

Religious identity has always been a contentious issue in Turkish politics. Dominant discourse commonly denies the existence of atheism and nonreligion and emphasizes the Sunni Muslim identity of the Turkish nation. In this scenario, being Turkish equals being Muslim. Being atheist, on the contrary, means representing the Turkish nation’s virulent adversary spawned by Western imperialism. Turkish nationalism’s ideological fixation on Islam has yet obscured the fact that, in recent years, a significant number of people have left Islam.

Leaving Islam in a religio-normative context is a potentially contentious, risky endeavor. Nonbelievers suffer from a lack of public visibility, discrimination, hate speech, and sometimes even physical violence. This article investigates the discursive construction of atheism and nonreligion in Turkey and focuses on the question of what makes the nonreligious political. I argue that the choice to not conform to dominant religious routines implies a contestation of Turkey’s Sunni Islamic hegemony. The investigation starts off by revisiting the concepts of resistance and hegemony in the works of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and James C. Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. It then details the socio-political context in which the discursive meaning of atheism and nonreligion takes shape and, on a related note, addresses the relationship between religion, secularism, and the state in contemporary Turkey.

Resistance is a commonly used but often vaguely defined term that signifies insubordination or political activism against domination and oppression. The field of resistance studies is broad and complex. It stretches over a wide array of academic disciplines and follows various theo-
retical and methodological approaches (see, e.g., Baaz et al. 2018; Johannson and Vinthagen 2020). Resistance studies were first popularized by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) when Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson edited a collection of essays entitled *Resistance Through Rituals* in 1975. The book, which became one of the seminal works of cultural studies, was devoted to the study of youth subcultures in post-war Britain. The authors of the book viewed style-based youth subcultures as a response from the subordinate classes of society or, differently speaking, as a form of working-class resistance to structural inequalities such as youth unemployment, educational disadvantages, low pay, and changed working conditions (Clarke et al. [1975] 2006: 35–38). The CCCS’s notion of resistance drew on the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony and the argument that political power works on both a mental and a physical level. For Gramsci, ruling through consensus rather than coercion provided the key to power (Clarke et al. [1975] 2006: 28–31). Hegemony, in a Gramscian sense, describes an ideal condition under which the particular worldview of the dominant ruling elite has been naturalized as the commonly accepted norm throughout society. The premises of the dominant culture in this scenario are no longer questioned and go without saying. The process of establishing hegemony, even though it involves negotiations between dominant and subordinate groups (Storey 2012: 181), is less about negotiating consensus based on societal compromise than establishing the worldview of one particular group as the uncontested norm. It thus appears that consensus through dominance, rather than through compromise, determines Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Ultimately, then, hegemony depends on the ruling elite’s ability to establish and maintain control over public discourse and popularize its narratives at the expense of alternative, counter-hegemonic interpretations of the world.

The focus on spectacular youth subcultures in *Resistance Through Rituals* also drew attention to style as a symbolic form of resistance. “Style in subculture,” as Dick Hebdige (1979: 18) so famously pointed out in his work on punks, skinheads, mods, and Rastafarians, “is pregnant with significance.” The CCCS’s approach to subcultures was largely based on the semiotic theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and their adaption by the French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes. Subcultural styles (e.g., the use of safety pins in punk or Dr. Martens boots in skinhead culture) were therefore seen as signifying practices. They were interpreted as stylized forms of resistance that signaled dissent within society and, related to Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, a “breakdown of consensus” (Hebdige 1979: 17). The style of a spectacular subculture, even though it embodies resistive signification, must not necessarily be interpreted as a form of intentional communication. Living a punk or queer lifestyle, for instance, does not inevitably rest on the intention to actively resist dominant norms. Only if perceived as deviant by the dominant classes does a particular way of life signify an act of resistance that holds the potential to challenge and change the hegemonic order.

Another seminal approach in resistance studies is James C. Scott’s notion of ‘everyday resistance’ as laid out in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990). Scott assesses the discursive relationship between dominant and subordinate groups in society by studying everyday acts of resistance. However, in contrast to the CCCS’s focus on spectacular forms of resistance, he draws attention to what he calls the “hidden transcripts of the weak” (Scott 1990: xii). Scott argues that subordinate groups often exhibit fugitive forms of political conduct in the presence of the powerful. Prudence and fear make them adopt a strategic pose of disguise to conceal their actual discomfort or urge to rebel. The ordeal of the weak creates a hidden transcript which functions as a protective mechanism and confines any criticism of power to a semi-public realm invisible to the ones who rule. Scott differentiates between ‘hegemonic public conduct’ and ‘backstage discourses’ (Scott 1990: xii). Public performance, as he ascertains, is thus the result of subordination. In other words, the public behavior
of subordinate groups is shaped by the expectations of the powerful who look for the subordinate to conform to their will (Scott 1990: 2). However, nonconformity is a rare sign of crisis within the hegemonic order. What Scott describes as a hidden transcript is a form of disguised resistance from below that requires the discursive freedom of a secluded space concealed from the gaze of power. Discursive resistance, to borrow Scott’s wording, comprises performative acts in the form of “off stage speeches, gestures, and practices” (Scott 1990: 4). These acts contradict the ‘public transcript’ of the powerful, whereas the ‘hidden transcript’ functions as a "site of nonhegemonic, contrapun[c]tual, dissident, subversive discourse" (Scott 1990: 25). In Scott’s argument, the public performance of deference and loyalty toward the powerful is nothing but a delusion of hegemony.

Scott’s work on domination and resistance obviously also borrows from Gramsci but has little in common with the Gramscian idea of hegemony as deployed in cultural studies. Gramsci models his notion of hegemony against the backdrop of modern capitalist societies in which power emanates from the will of the people. The public is rather persuaded than coerced to conform to the hegemonic project. The CCCS’s focus of interest, therefore, lay on issues of ideological abuse and, on a related note, the manipulative character of naturalizing particular norms, virtues, and beliefs within society. Scott’s model, in contrast, suggested focusing on the structural coercion and intimidation of the weak. In an interview for Upping the Anti, (Holtzman and Hughes 2010), Scott acknowledged that he had misused the concept of hegemony to a certain degree. In Domination and the Arts of Resistance, he builds his argument on studies of slavery, serfdom, caste hierarchies, and racial supremacy. His work almost exclusively adduces examples of local communities whose livelihoods depend on premodern agricultural structures and hierarchical patterns of preordained social relationships (Scott 1990: 20–21). Hegemony as outlined in his book describes a discursive relationship that is defined by the coercive domination of the weak by a clearly defined dominant group. Performative acts of class-based behavior mark the spheres of the powerful from the spheres of the weak in everyday life. Performativity, in Scott’s work, therefore, appears to be highly ritualized (Scott 1990: 23).

The idea of resistance through nonperformance favored in this article follows the Gramscian idea of hegemony as applied in the field of cultural studies. ‘Resistance’, and here I also agree with Anna Johannsson and Stellan Vinthagen (2020: 7), “consists of practices that have the potential to undermine dominant power relations.” In other words, we are talking about everyday acts and behavior of subordinate groups that are perceived as a challenge by the ones in power. These practices of resistance reveal a breakdown of consensus and thus signal a crisis of hegemony. This crisis either results in the temporary use of coercive measures by the powerful against subordinate groups or initiates a phase of renegotiation that finally transforms the hegemonic order. ‘Resistance’, as also pointed out by Johannsson and Vinthagen (2020: 6) “is always situated in a context, a historic tradition, a certain place and/or social space formed by power.”

In the following, I shed light on the particular context formed by power in present-day Turkey. But first I will ask a few questions that relate to the aforementioned discussion of resistance and the political relevance of religious rituals in the Turkish context: To what extent does the performance of religious rituals constitute a political act at all? And, vice versa, how can the nonperformance of religious rituals amount to an act of resistance? Doing nothing can hardly be considered an enactment of resistance at first glance. How, then, can the nonorganized, informal absence of individuals from Friday prayers, for instance, or an individual decision not to fast during the month of Ramadan be political? One might argue that the political primarily relates to the cause of one’s absence from Friday prayers (or one’s decision not to fast respectively), and thus claim that to absent oneself from collective prayer rituals is a conscious decision of refusal. One might further emphasize the role of the public in a person’s refusal to perform, or the
collectively organized way in which nonperformance is ‘carried out’ (if collectively organized). Does the political thus arise from the public refusal of a particular group of people to perform religious rituals? This article argues that the everyday performance of religious rituals does not necessarily signify faith and devotion but, in some contexts, loyalty to the ruling elite. From this perspective, nonorganized individual acts of nonperformance, even if conducted out of mere indifference to religion, can pose a challenge to the hegemonic order.

Secularist Modernity and Political Islam: A Dialectical Relationship

The discursive construction of atheism and nonreligion in Turkey is closely linked to the dialectic of secularist modernity and political Islam. The Republic of Turkey looks back on a long tradition of secularism. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the founding fathers of the Republic were committed to building a modern nation-state modeled on contemporary discourses of nationalism, secularism, and parliamentarianism. The proclamation of the Republic of Turkey on 29 October 1923 was followed by wide-ranging reform efforts that not only shaped the country’s political system but also the discursive construction of national identity. In addition to the iconic reforms of abolishing the Sultanate (1 November 1922) and the Caliphate (3 March 1924), granting equal civil rights to male and female citizens (17 February 1926), adopting a secular legal system based upon the Swiss Civil Code (17 February 1926) and the Italian Criminal Code (1 March 1926), removing the constitutional provision designating Islam as the state religion (9 April 1928), Turkish modernization and nation-building processes prompted a radical change in the lives of ordinary people. The Republican state enacted cultural reforms on men’s and women’s clothing, introduced new forms of public entertainment (opera, ballet, dance, etc.), altered and nationalized written and spoken language, and intervened in children’s religious socialization, foremost by banning traditional religious education as offered by dervish convents and private madrasahs (see Azak 2010: 11–12; Yılmaz 2013).

The Turkish model of secularism emphasizes the separation of religion and politics and strives for control over religious institutions through the state. The aim of early Republican secularism was to obtain absolute dominance over religious matters. Religious identity furthermore played a dominant role in the process of nation-building (Azak 2010: 7–10). The Constitution of the Turkish Republic acknowledges secularism as a permanent, unalterable principle (Art. 4), protects the right to freedom of and from religion (Art. 24), and guarantees that no one may be forced to participate in religious practices or ceremonies (Art. 10). This, however, does not mean that religious and philosophical beliefs are treated equally. Turkish secularism does not follow the principle of neutrality. It favors Sunni Islam over other religions and systems of belief. The Directorate of Religious Affairs only administers and promotes Sunni Islamic concepts and basically ignores other religious and nonreligious groups in society (Alevism, Shiism, atheism, etc.). In Religious Politics in Turkey, Ceren Lord (2018) concludes that the Directorate of Religious Affairs plays a major role in establishing a Sunni Muslim hegemony in state and society.

Turkey’s secularist modernity has been often described as statist, elitist, and, first and foremost, anti-democratic (Yılmaz 2013; Zürcher 1993). Pious conservative groups, which suddenly found themselves in a subordinate position, popularized the image of an anti-religious secularist elite that sought to oppress Islam. Modern Turkish history was said to be characterized by a confrontation between an authoritarian secularist state controlled by a ‘Westernized’ minoritarian elite and a subordinate Muslim majority deprived of its hereditary right to rule (Kandiyoti 2012; Lord 2018). Turkish Islamists, in the words of Deniz Kandiyoti, therefore used to cast the state as
“a secular behemoth disallowing the legitimate expression of religious observance” (Kandiyoti 2012: 514). This narrative of the pure but oppressed and victimized believers forms one of the ideological cornerstones of the incumbent president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s ruling party.

President Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) has been in power since November 2002. Since then, Turkey underwent a transition from a parliamentary democracy to an authoritarian presidential system that no longer operates on the basis of the functional separation of powers (Öztürk and Gözaydın 2017; Yılmaz 2018). Turkey’s ‘authoritarian turn’ gathered speed after the crackdown on the nation-wide pro-democracy protests in 2013 (see Ayata et al. 2013; David and Toktamış 2015; Özkırmızı 2014) and the attempted coup d’état on 15 July 2016, which is widely attributed to the AKP’s former political allies of the Fethullah Gülen-movement (Yavuz and Koç 2016). The subsequent transition from a parliamentary democracy to an authoritarian presidential system resulted in a concentration of power in the hands of the president. This went hand in hand with an ideological transition toward a utopian ‘New Turkey’ that would be led by a newly educated ‘pious generation’. By reviving Turkey’s most pervasive fault line of the past—the secularist-Islamist divide—Turkey’s Islamically-rooted ruling bloc set out to reverse the achievements of secularist modernity and erase the cultural legacy of Kemalism. Inspired by a sense of Neo-Ottomanist nostalgia, Sunni supremacism, and traditional patriarchalism, ‘New Turkey’ seemingly aims to restore the nation’s re-imagined former greatness under the banner of Sunni Islamic hegemony. This became tangible in February 2012, when Erdoğan publicly announced that the key objective of his government was to educate a new pious generation. Erdoğan’s proclamation provoked an outcry among secular groups of society. Erdoğan described his ‘pious generation’ as modern and respectful to other religious beliefs, but he also made it abundantly clear what he thought of those who opposed his vision: He scornfully described them as those who sought to raise a generation of ‘glue-sniffers’ and ‘atheists’ instead. Following a critical remark of opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, he defiantly replied: “I am committed to raising a pious generation! Do you expect us, a party with a conservative democratic identity, to raise an atheist youth? This may be your objective, but it is [certainly] not ours.”

Erdoğan has used the label ‘atheist’ on frequent occasions, usually to denounce his political opponents. During a campaign rally in Balıkesir in 2014, for instance, he insulted protesting students at Ankara’s Middle East Technical University as ‘leftists’ (solcu), ‘atheists’ (ateist) and ‘terrorists’ (terrörist). The protests were later violently crushed by the police. In the run-up to the 2019 municipal elections, he discredited the oppositional Peoples’ Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) as “an irreligious, faithless, atheist gang.” In response, Turkey’s Atheism Association published a statement condemning the president’s use of the terms ‘irreligious’ (dinsiz), ‘faithless’ (imansız), and ‘atheist’ (ateist) for the purpose of humiliation and insult. The association further reminded Erdoğan of being the president of a secular country supposed to equally represent all sections of society, including atheists. Shortly thereafter, the president reiterated his political agenda of raising a pious generation in front of a large audience of dignitaries and students at the Ankara Faculty of Theology:

Back in the day, when I said [let’s raise] a pious generation, I was even attacked by graduates from Imam-Hatip schools. . . . We want a pious youth! We will raise a pious youth! Today, I say the same thing: God willing, a pious youth, a pious generation will be raised with the help of your hands.7

His words emphasize the significance the ruling bloc still attributes to the project of raising a pious generation, and they underline the importance ascribed to schools and educational institutions in making society more religious. Erdoğan’s reference to religious high schools (Imam-
Hatip schools) also implies that the vision of a pious generation has long surpassed the time of criticism: the mission may not have been accomplished yet, but it is a commonly shared goal for the future.

The key to achieving this aim is to increase the visibility of religion in the public sphere and obscure what contradicts the ‘Muslim nature’ of the Turkish nation. The ruling bloc’s control over the state enables its supporters to make school curricula more religious (Coşkun and Şentürk 2012; Gençkal Eroler 2019; Karakaş 2021; Özgür 2012), expand control mechanisms over alcohol consumption (Waldman and Çalışkan 2017: 57, 73; Furman 2022), construct mosques in iconic places (e.g., Istanbul’s Çamlıca, Taksim, or Marmara University mosques), promote visions of conservative womanhood (Aydın Yılmaz 2015; Çakıl Dinçer 2022), produce agitprop videos rife with religious and nationalist references, and allow private madrasahs and religious associations to flourish. Another pillar of the ruling elite’s strategy of desecularizing the public sphere is to encourage ordinary citizens to sanction the nonreligious behavior of others in everyday life.

**Hegemonic Encroachments on Nonreligion**

The ideological endeavor to establish cultural hegemony has a direct impact on people’s everyday lives. Yael Navaro-Yashin was one of the first to point to the competing narratives of Turkishness that are “entangled in a history of multiple constructions” (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 10) and often verbalized through the public display of particular lifestyle practices. Dress and conduct have indeed been ascribed ideological meaning since the early days of the Republic. Its transformative function in terms of promoting a particular form of ‘Turkishness’ has been used and acknowledged throughout the political spectrum. (Göle 1991; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Yılmaz 2013). Deniz Kandiyoti describes the politicization of everyday cultural practices under AKP rule with the following, drastic words:

> [T]he ‘everyday’ of Turkey has become a space where daily battles . . . are waged not only in the lofty corridors of power but on buses, in parks, on the streets, in tea gardens and on beaches, where we are treated to tales of stand-offs between women in bikinis and the wearers of the hashema, the all-enveloping dress used as Islamic swimwear. These public appropriations of and contestations over ways of life are accompanied either by a clamorous discourse of Muslim injury (crystallized, in particular, around the now lifted ban on the wearing of head-scarves in universities and public offices) or by an increasingly alarmist narrative of encroachment on secular spaces and intimidation of its citizens. (Kandiyoti 2012: 514)

Several other studies consolidate Kandiyoti’s observation of a gradual encroachment on secular spaces. Esra Özyürek (2006) examines how ordinary citizens shifted the formerly dominant culture of Kemalism to the private sphere of the home. She argues that the public visibility of secularist modernity has been replaced by “the privatization of state ideology,” or simply the privatization of politics (Özyürek 2006: 4, 7). This notion of a reversal of power relations aligns with the findings of a survey conducted under the supervision of Binnaz Toprak (2009) at Boğaziçi University in 2009. This study aimed to analyze the relation between religiosity, conservatism, and neighborhood pressure (mahalle baskısı). It reached the conclusion that the otherization and repression of individuals whose lifestyles differ from the pious conservative norm (e.g., non-Muslims, Alevis, homosexuals, secularists) can be directly associated with the AKP’s rise to power. This also indicates that the former secularist pressure on Islamist lifestyle practices has been reversed. The ruling class’s claim to be in sole possession of the right to
define what ‘Turkishness’ means has thus spawned resistance toward its new hegemonic project on various levels, especially among those sections of society that see their individual lifestyle choices under threat.

As related to the public discourse on atheism and nonreligion, a report by the Istanbul-based Hrant Dink Foundation on *Hate Speech and Discriminatory Discourse in the Media* (2019) highlights the significance of branding the political other as ‘gavur’ (infidel). *Gavur* is a derogative term that originates in Islamic theological discourse. It is meant to mark those who do not acknowledge the ‘truth of Islam’. Accordingly, *gavur* signifies inferiority to the believer. But it can be also used to declassify fellow Muslims who supposedly do not follow the ‘true path’ of the Islamic faith. The report sees these acts of ‘gavurization’ as part of an attempt by the ruling class to (re-)establish the dominance of Turkey’s Sunni majority over the nation, thereby reviving the Ottoman principle of *Millet-i Hakime*, the dominant nation (the term ‘millet’ originally means ‘religious community’). All the aforementioned studies highlight the discursive supremacy of religious concepts in everyday life.

**Atheism and Nonreligion: A Counterhegemonic Bloc?**

To believe in God and identify with a particular religion, preferably Islam, is the common norm in Turkish society. A person may not be coercively compelled to perform religious rituals in everyday life but is widely expected to do so, and to conform to religious norms ‘out of respect’ to Islam and the believers. Having said this, religious belief is not something that goes without saying, that is ‘natural’ or acquired at birth. People need to be socialized into religion if they are meant to develop a particular religious belief. Nevertheless, faith in God is frequently treated as something that is essential to human existence and, in the present case, to Turkish national identity. Being atheist or choosing not to perform religious rituals in a social environment that is characterized by religio-normativity can be a potentially contentious endeavor.

The confession ‘I am an atheist’ or terms like ‘nonreligious’ (*dinsiz*), ‘faithless’ (*imansız*), or ‘godless’ (*allahsız*) are not neutral categories. They are loaded with negative meaning and evoke disapproval if not open hostility. Stereotypes that brand atheists as immoral or inferior to religious believers are common. Coming out as an atheist, therefore, carries significant stigma, and hiding one’s nonreligious identity by performing religious rituals is widespread. Potential consequences of being a non-believer include social ostracism, the risk of job loss, and possibly physical violence.

Against all odds, the number of atheists has increased over the years. Surveys by the private research companies MAK Consultancy (2017) and KONDA Research Consultancy (2018) reported the number of atheists at 4 percent and 3 percent of Turkey’s population respectively. MAK also included the category ‘deist’ (6 percent), while KONDA further differentiated between ‘atheists’ (3 percent) and ‘non-believers’ (2 percent) (see Hecker 2022: 69–73). Both findings contradict the official statistics of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, according to which 99.2 percent of the Turkish population profess Islam, while 0.4 percent adhere to other religions and another 0.5 (!) percent list as ‘unresponsive’ to the question of religious identity (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanı* 2014: 3–4). ‘Atheist’ or ‘none’ do not even appear as categories.

Turkey’s atheist population does not form a homogenous, easily identifiable class or community like the subordinate groups described by Scott (slaves, peasants, etc.). People hail from and have been socialized into different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds and, thus, do not represent a well- or predefined group. Turkey’s so-called ‘authoritarian turn’ under AKP rule (see Başer and Öztürk 2017) and the repression of the country’s pro-democracy movement
in the summer of 2013 (‘Gezi Park protests’) sparked fears that the constitutional right to freedom from religion might no longer be protected in the future. The Gezi Park protests brought together individuals from various parts of society. For the first time, like-minded people who had been scattered across different social strata and places realized that they were not alone and had to act and resist if they wanted their lifestyle choices to remain untouched. This situation created an ‘atheist awareness’ among some of the people who participated in the protests. As a result, they founded Turkey’s first official representation of atheists and non-believers on 14 April 2014. The so-called Atheist Association tries to defend the interests of the nonreligious members of society and provide legal support when their rights come under attack. The Atheism Association has succeeded in creating temporary visibility for Turkey’s atheist population. However, the association has been severely suffering from state repression and activist exhaustion in recent years.

Between 2017 and 2019, I conducted three dozen biographical interviews with self-professed atheists and spoke to some of the founding members of Atheism Association and Bilgi University’s Atheism Club. These encounters revealed a group of mostly nonorganized individuals who had been raised and educated in different socioreligious contexts. Some of them came from Sunni, others from Alevi and Shiite, some from fully or partly atheist families; some of them described their families as ‘secularist’ (laik) or ‘leftist’ (solcu), others as ‘conservative’ (muhafazakâr) or even ‘radical Islamist’ (aşırı islamci). Most of them held a university degree and had spent their formative years in an urban environment, even though a few had also lived their childhood, teenage, and early adult years in rural areas in central and eastern Anatolia. The group was comprised almost equally of women and men aged between 20 and 70. Placing labels on my interviewees might be an oversimplification, but their life stories showed certain recurring patterns that made me differentiate them into three groups: There were: (1) the ‘natural born atheists’ with no (or almost no) religious upbringing; (2) those who may be best described as ‘post-secularist atheists’—that is, individuals who grew up in secular Muslim families and, at a certain point in their lives, have gradually moved out of religion, losing not only their personal connection to faith but also the need for religiosity; and (3) the ‘disillusioned true believers’: those who left religion after a prolonged process of reflection, doubt, fear, and, finally, intellectual emancipation from and rejection of religion. This last group is the most contentious in terms of hegemony. The disillusioned represent a serious threat to Sunni Islamic hegemony. What concerns pious conservatives in Turkey most is the loss of faith among young people from conservative families. The ‘religious fatigue’ among young people (Subaşı 2016; Böhürler 2017) is commonly blamed on the trivialization and commodification of Islam in the form of pious consumption practices (fashion, food, holiday, music, etc.) and lack of commitment to resisting secularist modernity. The formerly clear-cut line between secular and religious ways of life begins to fade and the young are eventually becoming nonreligious.

The stories and trajectories of becoming and being atheist are multifaceted and diverse, and the following examples are certainly not representative of Turkey’s atheist field as a whole. Turkish atheists are united by their absence of belief in the divine, but they form no coherent counter-hegemonic bloc and do not follow a tacit agreement to resist the hegemonic order. They are neither united by an overarching atheist narrative and distinctive way of life nor by the idea of a commonly shared fate, and history. Some take an activist stance and attempt to defend their right to live a life free from religion or, in a sense of secularist nostalgia, mobilize to ‘reclaim the Republic’ from the pious conservative bloc. Many, however, choose to remain invisible in both public and private spheres, and this is where the forces of domination and subordination take full effect.
Subordination or Resistance?

Subordination, in the present case, is not ascribed by birth or economic status, and it does not build on unequal or separate rights for different groups in society (all citizens have been granted equal civil and political rights by the Turkish Constitution). It also does not relate to a coherent group of people who share the same living conditions and subscribe to the same ideological concepts. Subordination rather works on the level of constituting ideological superiority through naturalizing particular conventions, virtues, routines, and norms that are no longer critically questioned and thus go without saying. To naturalize pious conservatism as the commonly accepted norm enables the ruling elite to claim moral superiority over those who oppose them by labeling them ‘nonreligious’ or ‘atheist’ (see Erdoğan’s aforementioned verbal attacks against political opponents). Sunni Islamic hegemony operates on a dialectical relationship between superiority and inferiority and can thus be used to legitimize action against those who do not conform to its premises or who challenge those who claim to preserve the Muslim nature of the Turkish nation.

“Being an atheist,” a female activist for Bilgi University’s Atheist Student Club explained to me, “is off-limits,” and, after a short pause: “You can be anything. You can be a sinner. You can conduct adultery. You can do whatever you want . . . But you cannot be an atheist. Within the scope of Islam you can be anything you want,” even if you behave in a morally corrupt way, she concludes. Subordination in terms of submitting to religious norms also works on the level of social and economic dependencies, and public acts of individual religiosity are frequently deployed to demonstrate moral integrity and thus increase one’s personal social and economic capital. This ‘mechanism’ is based on the premise that a person who is Muslim ‘naturally’ has to be a good, trustworthy person for the very reason that he or she is Muslim and believes in the existence and word of God. The concept of the ‘good Muslim’ and the ‘bad atheist’ was raised frequently during interview sessions and conversations and is aptly encapsulated by one of my interlocutors in the following way:

It’s only good people who are Muslim . . . [and] people also think that atheists are totally immoral. If you want to be a successful individual in society or a celebrity, you have to be Muslim. And you have to pray, you have to go to the mosque. . . . you have no chance as an atheist . . . [some people] just want to be seen as Muslims. They do not believe in God but they pretend to believe. They want to be seen as good Muslims. So they go to the mosque but they never pray at home. . . . It’s also political. You have to be a good Muslim to get a government deal [i.e., win a tender or contract]. If you want to be a state employee, you have to pray [i.e., perform ritual prayers]. That’s the idea!

‘Ordinary atheists’ apparently often feel compelled to perform religious rituals in the workplace. Let’s take the case of a journalist, for instance, who had been fired over his government-critical writings and at the time of the interview worked in real estate. He admitted that he joined his (pro-government) boss and colleagues for everyday ritual prayers out of fear of being fired if he did otherwise. There was also the young intern for a state-owned enterprise who was told by his supervisor, who was also his uncle, that he should demonstrate loyalty to the government by conforming to religious norms (daily prayers, religious greetings, fasting, etc.). A young atheist woman who worked for the then AKP-run Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality mentioned that she only took off her headscarf after leaving her workplace for the sake of avoiding conflicts with her superiors and colleagues. Most of these workplace narratives encompass a political moment in the sense that the nonperformance of religious rituals is interpreted as an act of disloyalty toward the ruling elite. All research participants seemed well aware of this political dimension of (non)performance.
The workplace narratives also reveal the various ambiguities and ambivalences nonreligious individuals have to deal with. They face religio-normative expectations, which they have to reconcile with their personal convictions and identity. This goes for the realm of work but also for the realm of the family. A woman in her early thirties, who had recently abandoned wearing the Islamic headscarf, described the emotional strife she encountered as a result of her decision. At first, she only went ‘uncovered’ when she was away from the family—at work, in other neighborhoods where no old friends or family members would recognize her. When she finally made her decision public, she experienced negative reactions from several family members. Her beloved aunt stopped talking to her and some friends kept their distance. She also described a loss of common ground and estrangement from her husband, a religious believer, as a result of her leaving Islam. At the same time, she mentioned the joy of building a new circle of friends with women who are in a similar situation of moving away from (organized) religion. But she also recalled temporary feelings of guilt for not conforming to the societal norm. Other interviewees revealed how entering the realm of the family required an instant code-switching from the nonperformance of religious rituals to their performance. In this case, it is not the fear of social ostracism or job loss that prompts nonreligious individuals to conform to religious norms; it is the affection for their loved ones. They perform everyday religious rituals for the sake of their grandparents, who could not bear the thought of their grandchild burning in hell, or for the benefit of their parents, who would be unable to cope with the social stigma of one of their children being an atheist.

I further complement my argument with the help of several empirical cases. These are, on the one hand, meant to illustrate the aforesaid and, on the other, to point out the complexity and multidimensionality of everyday experiences as related to nonreligion as a form of discursive resistance. Economic dependencies and family affection forcing individuals into subordination are part of a bigger picture. The nonperformance of religious rituals and the public visibility of nonreligion are often met with acts of denigration, insult, and violence. To rationalize the discrimination of non-believers on the basis of claims to religious superiority is common as well. Nonreligion, as described by an atheist from a Nurcu-family-background, is perceived as an insult and a challenge to the superiority of religion:

Piety is a serious issue in society. Actually, it is ignorance rather than piety. Most people believe without reading the Koran in either Turkish or Arabic. As soon as they think that someone insults the Koran, they become aggressive. There is such a side to faith: in the eyes of a believer, the unbeliever may have offended his beliefs simply by saying that he does not believe; there isn’t even any need for an [actual] insult or humiliation. . . . I guess therefore most atheists hide their non-belief at least from their family. . . . I am comparing our situation to the situation of homosexuals [in Turkey]. It is by no means easier to say that you are atheist than to say that you are gay. . . . Unfortunately, there is this serious lynch culture in Turkish society. Someone from society may point a finger and say this person is an atheist or traitor to the nation, and they will directly attack. Calling a person an atheist amounts to saying that he is a dishonorable, devilish person.

This aggressiveness toward nonreligion may take extreme forms and not only involve ‘ordinary believers’ in the streets but also bring to the scene radical Islamist groups that are tacitly tolerated by the government. An activist who used to work with Istanbul’s Atheism Association recalled the following situation:

I was living in Fatih [a conservative neighborhood in Istanbul]. And in Fatih . . . [pauses] Really, in Fatih, there was an office of Daesh [ISIS]. It was so terrible, so scary. All black flags . . . I had problems with these jihadists. They drew the flag of Daesh on our door. Like they
[came] two, three times at night. I called the police. The police didn't come the first time. The second time, they came and said: “Yeah, but this is a Muslim society. You should give up [living in Fatih] . . . ” In this neighborhood, everybody knew I am an atheist . . . One day, me and my friend noticed that we were being followed. [pauses] I am really sure that I saw this guy. Everywhere. At every corner. I am going to Sultanahmet and he's there, smoking. Taksim. He's there. And then it started, knocking at the door at night [mumbles]. One day, we noticed that they [the jihadists] had entered our flat. We came home and there was no door handle. [The door] was totally open. Everything was like [ransacked].

This encroachment of a militant Islamist group on the private home of a nonbeliever who had made himself visible through public activism is certainly unusual. However, the indifference of the authorities toward the emergence of militant Islamist groups and their reluctance to intervene on behalf of protecting the constitutionally guaranteed rights of a non-believer may indicate an impending aggravation of the situation.

The final example to be discussed here is the case of an atheist student of Islamic theology in his early twenties. He knew the Koran by heart from an early age and grew up in an Eastern Anatolian town. A few years ago, he moved to Istanbul to pursue the study of Islamic theology and become an imam. He did not have much contact with people from beyond his faculty and claimed that a whole group of students at his faculty considered themselves atheists. For him, being atheist was a highly sensitive issue that must not be revealed to his university teachers or parents. He feared both being expelled from the university and bringing grief and shame to his family. The only person in his family who knew about his atheist identity was his older sister, who had also recently left Islam. They both hid their atheist identity and continued to perform religious practices in everyday life. The following interview excerpt provides insight into the volatile situation of being an atheist in a religio-normative society:

Back then, I experienced a couple of problems. I was working somewhere [during the summer break]. I was talking to my friends at work. They [were uneducated and] had only finished primary school. They asked me “Do you drink vodka?” “I do,” I said. And I drank [some vodka with them]. I am not really used to it, but from time to time I drink alcohol. While drinking, I started to talk. About faith and so on. I told them that I did not believe. “So you don't believe in anybody? You don't worship anybody? You also don't venerate God?” they asked. “No,” I said. [What I felt next was] a punch in the middle of my nose. Five people attacking me. I started to run. They were chasing after me. I fell and tried to protect my head. They kicked and beat me. “Are you aware of what you are saying? This is a Muslim country! You will have to renounce! Don't come here again,” they said. There were five of them. And they also had weapons to kill . . . Now, think: They are Muslims. They drink alcohol. They commit adultery. Things they are not supposed to do. They don't pray. They don't fast. They lie. They behave in ways that contradict Islam. And when an atheist comes along, they suddenly forget about all that [their own illicit behavior].

The violent incident depicted here is not so much about exposing double standards of moral behavior as it is about pointing toward an ideological understanding of Islamic supremacy that puts atheists and non-believers in a highly volatile situation. What this particular portrayal of violence comes down to is that a person is allowed to do whatever he or she likes (‘drink alcohol’, ‘commit adultery’, ‘lie’, resort to violence against others) as long as the issue of faith remains untouched. A Muslim can be a bad person, and he may be punished for his sins in the afterlife, but as long as he acknowledges the existence of God, he is still considered superior to a non-believer or, as one of my interviewees sarcastically put it: “You can be anything as long as you are Muslim.” The risk of being exposed to hate crimes in a religio-normative environment does indeed ‘persuade’ many non-believers to conceal their identities and conform to religious
norms. However, it also needs to be stressed that in some situations non-believers dare to contest the hegemonic system openly. Against this backdrop, religious nonperformance signals a ‘breakdown of consensus’ and a potential challenge to hegemony. Similarly to how other cultural practices—e.g., the clothes a person wears, the way a person speaks or behaves—can signify a group allegiance and/or a particular ideological commitment, religious nonperformance also marks a particular identity and provides visibility to nonreligion in everyday life.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the issue of resistance through nonperformance. It argues that the individual choice to not conform to dominant religious norms constitutes a challenge to Sunni Islamic hegemony in Turkey. Turkey’s ruling bloc, as represented by president Erdoğan’s supporters and government, has sought to ‘naturalize’ Sunni Islamic norms in state and society. The myth of the ‘Muslim nature’ of the Turkish nation puts atheism and nonreligion at odds with dominant notions of ‘Turkishness’ and identity. This alleged antagonism places Turkey’s non-religious population in a difficult and volatile situation. Nonbelievers have to constantly navigate between their personal convictions and the religio-normative expectations of the state and society. Being atheist and choosing to not perform religious rituals in everyday life, therefore, constitutes a mode of discursive resistance to Turkey’s present-day Sunni Islamic hegemony and the ruling elite’s claim to political power. This ‘breakdown of consensus’ might also point to the potential failure of the hegemonic project.

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NOTES

1. Religio-normativity denotes the hegemonic dominance of religious concepts in public discourse. To believe in the divine and identify with a particular religion represents the commonly accepted norm in religio-normative societies. The individual is expected to respect the dominance of religious values and act accordingly. Religio-normativity commonly privileges those who conform to the hegemonic dominance of religion and discriminates against others who deviate from the expected norm. Non-religious groups and individuals remain marginalized and actively excluded from public discourse. Religio-normativity is also based on various institutionalized mechanisms of control that aim to persuade and convince the public of the legitimate dominance of religious concepts (e.g., media regulations, school curricula, religious principles in the constitution and legal system). These mechanisms also seek to coerce nonreligious groups and individuals into not challenging the hegemonic dominance of religion in society.
3. All quotes in this chapter have been translated by the author from Turkish to English.
5. Meydan TV https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CodivCeL0g.
6. Erdoğan's talk was broadcast on Ülke TV: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x74oz22 (accessed 2 June 2023).
7. This speech was broadcast on Diyanet TV, 6 November 2019: https://www.diyanet.gov.tr/tr-TR/Kurumsal/Delay/26080/ankara-universitesi-elahiyat-fakultesi-70inci-yil-kutlama-toreni-yapildi.
8. Turkey's Atheism Association (Ateizm Derneği) is only one of many civil society organizations and initiatives that emerged during and after Gezi. The environmentalist organization Northern Forest Defense (Kuzey Ormanları Savunması, https://kuzeyormanlari.org/kuzey-ormanlarini/), the #ResistComics initiative (#Dirençziyromani https://m.facebook.com/direncziyromani/), and the Vote and Beyond (Oy ve Ötesi) initiative, which is fighting for a “libertarian, equitable, just, and sustainable” participatory democracy (https://oyveotesi.org), are other popular examples.
9. *Nurcu* or *nurculuk* refers to a fragmented but powerful religious reform movement that is based on the writings of Sunni theologian Said Nursi (1877-1960), the so-called Risale-i Nur. Nursi was an outspoken critic of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and worried that the Kemalist reform efforts would undermine people's faith in Islam. He, therefore, called for a religious revitalization of Turkish society.

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