Governing the Family through Religion:
Secularism, Expertise, and the Politics of the Family in the New Turkey

On a hot summer day, I met Fatma Hodja, a female preacher employed by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, in her office located in a concrete modernist government building adjacent to the Kocatepe Mosque, the largest mosque in the Turkish capital Ankara. Apologizing for the interruption, she answered the phone that rang incessantly during our interview with a monotonous, automatic phrase in formal Turkish, which made her sound more like a government employee or a customer service representative than a traditional preacher: “Hello. This is the Family Guidance and Religious Counseling Bureau of Ankara. How may I help you?” Overhearing the phone conversation, my eyes wondered around the room that was furnished with a stately office desk, a brand new computer, and a bookshelf full of religious as well as self-help books on the family such as How to Lead a Happy Family Life, Prophet Mohammed’s Family Values, Conflict Resolution within the Family, and Catechism on Women and the Family (Kadin ve Aile Ilmihali). This room was not any different than other state offices in Turkey: the wall behind the preacher’s desk was decorated with the Turkish flag, the framed lyrics of the national anthem, and the portrait of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the secular Turkish Republic. However, it was staffed by a female preacher wearing a long black trench coat and the Islamic headscarf during a time when state employees were banned from wearing the headscarf due to the secular state’s restriction on the display of religious symbols in

\[1\] Hodja is a title of reverence used to refer to wo/men of religion who are respected for their knowledge of Islam and who may perform a specific duty within an Islamic community.
state buildings. I was struck by how this set up itself provided enough clues about the peculiarity and contradictory nature of this state institution responsible for administering the religious sphere in an avowedly secular country.

Having listened to the caller for several minutes, Fatma Hoja started responding to his inquiry:

So, you’re wondering … is it a sin to stay in the same house with your ex-wife? Have you had sexual intercourse? [Pause] Yes, unfortunately, in that case you committed fornication (zina), which is a sin. [with a slightly aggravated tone] Well, because you had sex with someone to whom you are no longer wedded. [Pause] I mean, there is no remedial action you can take. Just pray to Allah for forgiveness and hope that he answers your prayers! And don’t do it again unless you remarry her. [Pause] No! Religious matrimony (dini nikah) is not sufficient. You need to remarry her through state matrimony (devlet nikahi).

After a long pause during which I presume the caller went on talking about the details of his relationship with his ex-wife, the preacher sighed with empathy and added: “I suggest you see a professional who can help you reconcile. Ankara Metropolitan Municipality provides couple’s therapy services for free. I can give you their number if you want. Please write it down.”

This vignette illustrates one among many different kinds of inquiries made through calls, emails, and personal visits to the Family Guidance and Religious Counseling Bureaus (Aile İrşat ve Rehberlik Büroları, Family Bureaus hereafter), which the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, Diyanet hereafter) started establishing since 2003 in every major city. These Family Bureaus provide pious Sunni Muslim Turkish families with spiritual guidance (irşat) as well as advice and counseling (rehberlik) on matters pertaining to the family such as

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2 In 2013, one year after my fieldwork, the Turkish state has relaxed its decades-long restriction on wearing the headscarf in state institutions.
marriage, divorce, inheritance, relations with in-laws, responsibilities of spouses to each other, care of the elderly, and so on. As illustrated above, preachers and other religious functionaries employed in these offices are meant to assist the families who visit, email, or call them in three ways: 1) by answering family-related questions of a religious nature and adjudicating decisions about the permissibility of a certain act according to Islamic jurisprudence; 2) by providing spiritual counseling and advice on family-related matters; and 3) by referring families to other, non-religious, institutions and experts that would assist them in solving their domestic problems. Moreover, they play a crucial role in promoting not only Islamically appropriate but also state-sanctioned gender norms, sexual and reproductive behaviors, and forms of kinship care.

Established approximately one year after the Muslim-conservative Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP hereafter) came to power, these Family Bureaus have reignited ongoing debates and contestations about the role of Diyanet as an institution in particular and the proper scope and jurisdiction of religion in a secular state in general. Although Turkey has often been considered the paradigmatic example of secular governance in the Muslim world, maintaining laiklik — the Turkish brand of secularism — has been a constant source of consternation. Since Diyanet was established in 1924, only one year after the foundation of the secular Turkish Republic, the very existence of a state institution involved in regulating religion has often been considered paradoxical and problematic. While earlier debates about Diyanet mostly focused on the state’s monopoly on the administration of religion, its imposition of orthodox Sunni Islam on all citizens, and its exclusion of religious minorities and heterodox religious orders; recent debates have tended to focus on the involvement of religion with the family, which is also central to regulating gender and sexuality.
Diyanet’s Family Bureaus have caused much dismay among secular Turks who consider it as a sign of the expanding encroachment of religion under the ruling AKP, founding members of which mostly consist of former Islamists. In fact, prevalent disputes about secularism that centered around the participation of Islamic actors in parliamentary politics have largely been settled in recent years as a result of the Islamists’ gradual integration into the global neoliberal economic regime and into secular state power (Tuğal 2009). Recently, however, the involvement of Islamic actors and institutions in what can be broadly construed as the politics of the family has become a flashpoint in public debates over secularism. Rather than the macropolitical domain, the supposedly private sphere of intimacy and the family has become a key site through which the role of Islam in governance and the proper jurisdiction of religious expertise in a secular state have been debated and reconfigured.

Such anxieties and debates have been exacerbated by the AKP’s pledge to form a “New Turkey,” presented as the antithesis of the preceding Kemalist era, which is known for its authoritarian form of secularism antagonistic to the public expression of religion. Secularist concerns have also been fueled by the government’s justification of several conservative policies in the name of protecting so-called family values, such as those attempting to restrict the public consumption of alcohol, mixed-gender student housing, divorce, abortion, and cesarean sections. Furthermore, the last three female parliamentarians appointed as the Minister of the Family and Social Policies wear the hijab, which has been a constant source of secularist apprehension.

By situating these debates and controversies within the context of Diyanet’s historical role in governing the religious sphere in Turkey, the article provides insights about the current transformations in the religious sphere, changing constellations of religion and secularism, and
emerging forms of governance and expertise in the so-called New Turkey. The article is based on
the multi-sited research I conducted throughout 2012, which included formal interviews and
casual conversations with the employees working for Diyanet’s family offices in Istanbul and
Ankara and executives at the Diyanet headquarters in Ankara; participant observation in the
training sessions of the Family Office employees as well as watching video archives of past
training sessions; reviewing the legal documents that outline the duties and responsibilities of
these offices; and collecting news articles. In attending to the entwinement of religious and
secular forms of expertise in the regulation of gender, intimacy, and the family through the figure
of the state-employed religious functionary, this article sheds light on the underlying
assumptions, irresolvable contradictions, and predicaments of Turkish secularism.

**Laiklik, Diyanet, and the Politics of the Family:**

A strong body of ethnographic work on Turkish secularism, i.e. *laiklik*, has flourished in
recent years, exploring Islamic movements and civil society organizations (Silverstein 2011,
headscarf and its significance for debates over secularism (Çınar 2005, Gökarıksel 2009, Göle
1996, Secor 2002); state control of religious education (Ö zgür 2012, Shively 2008); the
predicaments of religious minorities (Brink-Danan 2011, Dressler 2013, Tambar 2014); the
political and everyday practices of secularists (Navaro-Yashin 2002, Özyürek 2006, Tambar
2009); and the politics of religious healing (Dole 2012). In much of this scholarship, laiklik is
characterized as a political doctrine or a state ideology which not only strives to separate religion
from state affairs but also seeks to diminish the influence of religion from various spheres of
political and social life by policing, restricting, or prohibiting forms of piety and religious expression (cf. Dole 2012, Silverstein 2011). Thus, laiklik is usually depicted as a disciplinary or interdictive form of state power (modeled after the French *laicité*), which Islamic political actors, non-secular Turks, and religious minorities have challenged or contested. While this dominant narrative about Turkish secularism has cogently illustrated the tensions, contradictions, and contestations caused by the secular state’s surveillance of and intervention into religious life and its manifestations in politics and the public sphere, it does not adequately account for the complexities of state-Islam relations in the AKP-ruled New Turkey.

As a result of the increasing visibility of Islam in the public sphere, politicians’ use of religious rhetoric and symbols in their speeches, and the intensified prominence of Diyanet and its increasing interaction with other state bureaucracies after the AKP came to power, many observers consider laiklik to be compromised or in crisis, or at best, transformed from an “assertive” or “authoritarian” model into a “passive” one (Kuru 2007). Some scholars have even defined the AKP’s New Turkey as a “post-secular” era due to the proximity of religiously motivated actors to state power (Bilgili 2011, Gole 2012). I argue, however, that such a perspective is inadequate, since it focuses solely on the restrictive regulatory capacities of laiklik vis-à-vis Islam, assumes that laiklik was once able to separate religion and state successfully, and overlooks the entanglement of the Turkish state with religion in the preceding Kemalist era.

The involvement of the state with Islam is not unique to the AKP government, as evidenced by the presence of Diyanet, a state institution with an undoubtedly theological character that has been considered the official representative of Islam since the earlier days of the Turkish Republic. Due to evincing the lack of a complete separation of state and religion, various
scholars have described Diyanet as aberrational (Gozaydin 1993:159; Kuru 2009: 166–68) and thereby, characterized laiklik as contradictory (An-Naim 2008: 219), semi-secular (Toprak 1981: 47), incomplete (Parla and Davison 2008), or not genuine (Fuller 2004: 52). This article problematizes this aberration narrative and questions the supposedly exceptional status of Diyanet in particular and laiklik in general vis-a-vis the norms of an assumedly definitive secularism.

A growing body of scholarship has illustrated the incongruities between the normative claims of political secularism and its actual practices and emphasized that secularism should be characterized less by the separation of religion and the state than by a continual administrative regulation of and intervention into religion (Agrama 2012, Asad 2003, Bilgrami 2007, Connolly 1999, Mahmood 2010, Sullivan 2005, Taylor 2007). In this revisionist scholarship, rather than referring to an abandonment of religion or the elimination of its influence from public and political spheres, secularism is described primarily as a matter of reformulating religion as well as its proper place and role according to a normative model of religiosity. Building on the insights of this scholarship, I propose to redefine laiklik not as a fixed and static state doctrine characterized by its desire to eliminate Islam from governance, but as a dynamic and contingent governmental assemblage (Dean 1999, Deleuze and Guatari 1987, Li 2014, Rose 2000) aimed to reconfigure Islam in a fashion that is commensurate with the demands of the state and its regulatory power to (re)organize social life for the sake of sovereignty and effective governance. I argue that Diyanet is not an exception or an aberration within this governmental ensemble but integral to its operations.

Like other governmental assemblages, laiklik is not static but manifests “a hesitant,
incomplete, fragmentary, contradictory and contested metamorphosis” that is predicated on “the abandonment of some old themes, the maintenance of others, the introduction of some new elements, [and] a shift in the role and functioning of others because of their changed places and connections with the assemblage” (Rose 2000: 322). As a constant fixture of this contingent assemblage, the role and jurisdiction of Diyanet have been subjected to a continual reconfiguration based on the “expedient role” determined by incumbent governments for Islam to play “in the process of forging a new governing and moral order” (Wanner 2014). In the current configuration, Diyanet has assumed an instrumental role in assisting the state (and its various institutions and experts) regulate and “strengthen” the family, which is central to consolidating the new governmental and moral order and the emerging regimes of truth in the AKP’s New Turkey.

As Foucauldian scholarship has illustrated, policing and regulating the family is central to modern state power since the family acts as a nexus for the implementation of sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical governance: it is a key site for inculcating docility, controlling sexuality, cultivating moral subjects, implementing demographic changes, and managing the population’s productive capacity (Dean 2009, Foucault 1991, Donzelot 1979, Martin 2012). In fact, the Turkish state has been governing and disciplining the family through juridical and legislative reforms since the rise of modern forms of governance in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire (Aytac 2007, Dogan 1993, Kandiyoti 1991, Yildirim 2005, Yilmaz 2002). What is novel about the configuration of the politics of the family in the New Turkey, however, is what Donzelot (1979) calls “governing through the family,” whereby the family has become both an objective and an instrument of governance. In order to transform families so that they behave in
conformity with its health, security, demographic, and economic needs, the modern state refrains from governing the family through coercion but instead strives to have families evaluate and normalize their own lives and conduct by assuming responsibility through the guidance provided by experts such as doctors, psychologists, counselors, pediatricians, and so on (Donzelot 1979; Rose 1990: 132).

One of the defining features of the New Turkey has been the proliferation of discursive and institutional investments in “strengthening the family” and protecting “family values,” as well as both secular and faith-based initiatives aimed at alleviating the so-called “crisis of the family.” While the family crisis discourse situates the family as the source of socio-economic problems and risks that threaten the integrity of the social and moral orders (and by extension the Turkish nation,) strengthening the family is offered as the primary solution to these threats, since the family is conceptualized as the foundation of a wholesome society due to its pedagogical role in producing and sustaining desired moral outcomes. Within roughly the past decade, a plethora of family-related social and pedagogical projects have been designed and implemented by a diverse assemblage, comprising not only secular institutions (such as the Ministry of the Family and Social Policies, AKP-governed municipalities, and other state bureaucracies) and experts (such as lawyers, pediatricians, therapists, etc.) but also various religious or religiously-inspired organizations (such as Islamic civil society organizations, Islamic media institutions, and Diyanet) and experts (such as Islamic televangelists, preachers, and other religious functionaries).

Thus, the AKP’s politics of the family is a heterogenous governmental assemblage comprised of unexpected encounters, proximities, and alliances between diverse institutions,
policies, and forms of knowledge, authority and expertise — both religious and secular. In this ensemble, Diyanet emerges as a nodal point that connects religious and spiritual forms of knowledge and expertise with (social) scientific and secular ones. I contend that the Turkish state’s attempt to govern the family with the assistance of Diyanet should not be dismissed simply as an aberration from secularism or the inefficacy of the state to sustain Islam within its proper boundaries. In what follows, I explore how the deployment of Diyanet to assist with regulating the family has led to the jurisdiction of religious experts to be a source of anxiety and consternation for all stakeholders involved in this assemblage, including the executives and employees of Diyanet. Rather than aiming to regulate the family through sharia by replacing secular forms of expertise, providing family-related religious guidance is inextricably bound up with the task of distinguishing between the civil and religious dimensions of family-related issues and dealing with the intractable question of how and where to draw the line between religious and secular forms of authority and expertise for fear of trespassing the boundaries drawn around religion. Moreover, Diyanet’s Family Bureaus act as a bureaucratic conduit for introducing religiously observant families to non-religious state institutions (such as hospitals, psychiatry clinics, and courts) and experts (such as psychologists, doctors, lawyers, pediatricians, and so on). While the involvement of Diyanet in the sphere of the family may appear as the overreaching of Islam beyond its proper scope and jurisdiction, I argue that the deployment of religious authority and expertise simultaneously enables the encroachment of the sovereign power of the state not only into the religious beliefs and practices but also the intimate domains of pious citizens’ lives and render them more visible and proximate for the state.

This article builds on and contributes to the anthropological and interdisciplinary
scholarship on secularism, expertise, and the politics of the family. A growing body of anthropological scholarship has explored the involvement of state power with the supposedly private sphere of intimacy and the family by regulating sexuality, conjugality, reproduction, and child rearing (Aretxaga 2003; Boellstorff 2004; Mody 2008, Inhorn 2012; Povinelli 2002, 2006; Sehlikoglu and Zengin 2015, Stoler 2002). Scholars of the Middle East have also explored how secular-national projects have provided legal, moral, and discursive frameworks for disciplining and reconfiguring the family for the sake of modernizing the polity and cultivating proper citizen subjects (Ali 2002; Aytac 2007; Hasso 2010; Kandiyoti 1991, 1997; Joseph 2005; Pollard 2005). However, the participation of theological institutions and other faith-based groups in the politics of intimacy and the family has been either unacknowledged or understudied in much of this literature (cf. Hasso 2010.) Recent years have also witnessed a proliferation of scholarship on the reproduction and family-focused welfare policies of the AKP government (Acar and Altunok 2013, Çarkoğlu, Kafescioğlu, and Mitrani 2012, Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011, Gurtin 2016, Korkman 2016, Öztan 2013, Yazici 2012, Yılmaz 2015a, Yılmaz 2015b), the content of which is limited to discourse and policy analysis and devoid of ethnographic insights about how such policies are implemented by state institutions (cf. Yazici 2012). My work, which is one of the rare extensive ethnographic studies on family-focused theological actors and organizations (cf. Agrama 2010, Harding 2001), remedies such gaps in these bodies of scholarship by explicating the imbrications of religion and state power in the policing of intimacy and the family.

Rather than explaining away the involvement of religious discourses, actors, and institutions in the politics of intimacy as antithetical to secularism (cf. Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003), my work is aligned with the burgeoning scholarship on secularism that has critically
explored the co-implications of religion, gender, intimacy, and secular governance (Agrama 2010; Cady and Fessenden 2013; Fernando 2014; Mahmood 2012). Specifically, my research is informed by recent anthropological work illustrating how the privatization of religion under secular governance for the sake of marginalizing its influence in civic and political affairs has paradoxically caused religion to acquire its strongest influence in disciplining the private sphere, considered to be the proper domain of faith, intimacy, and the family in secular polities (Agrama 2010; Mahmood 2012). While these scholars are concerned with tackling the contradictions involved in the persistence of religion-based family law in post-colonial Egypt despite the circumscription of religion from other spheres of policy and legal decision-making, this paradoxical arrangement is thrown into sharper relief in Turkey, since the sharia was abolished altogether with the foundation of the secular republic and family law was adopted from the Swiss civil code. By focusing on the family-related spiritual counseling and pastoral care provided by the Turkish state, this article expands this scholarship by explicating the imbrications of religion and secular governance in a family-related theological practice that lies outside the domain of law and legislation — a topic that remains largely unexamined.

By exploring the anxieties, debates, and contestations caused by the arguable expansion of the jurisdiction of religious authority and expertise, my work also contributes to the anthropological studies on expertise. While earlier anthropological investigations of the social figure of the expert focused on “religious experts” and “ritual experts” (Howell 1953; Hanks 1996, Knutsson 1963; Lambek 1993, Lewis 1963; Lienhardt 1962), with the proliferation of interest in science and technology studies, anthropologists have shifted attention to professional, technocratic, techno-scientific, and bureaucratic forms of expertise (Fischer 2003; Fortun 2001;
Franklin and Roberts 2006; Gusterson 1996; Helmreich 2000; Knorr Cetina 1999; Latour 1988; Rabinow 1997; Sunder Rajan 2006). This article bridges these two diverse bodies of scholarship by examining the ways in which religious experts are enmeshed in webs of bureaucracy and entangled with secular forms of expertise as a result of their integration into the assemblage of actors called upon to assist the Turkish state in governing the family.

**Diyanet: A State Institution Mediating Islam and Secularism**

Despite the vastness of studies on institutional and public forms of secularism and its assumed rival Islamism, few scholars have tackled the central role of Diyanet in presupposing a particular understanding of what religion is and circumscribing the sphere within which the religious may operate (cf. Hassan 2011b, Tutuncu 2010). Delimiting religion by formulating it as individual faith has been central to secular forms of governance (Asad 2003, 1993). Diyanet has been instrumental in reconfiguring Islam as a “religion” according to this secular formula and relegating it to the private sphere by formulating it as a system of beliefs that has to do primarily with matters of personal faith and conscience. This emphasis on “religion” has been significant in the discussions, anxieties, and contestations about the proper jurisdiction of Diyanet’s Family Counseling and Religious Guidance Offices as well.

The very existence of a state department responsible for religious affairs in a secular state has been deemed paradoxical (Tutuncu 2010: 597) or viewed as “an aberration from and contamination of secularism” (Hassan 2011a: 455). To make things even more complicated, not only has Diyanet acted as a religious authority and the official voice of Islam, but it has also been instrumental in protecting the secular nature of the state and preventing the intervention of
religion in politics and affairs of the state. To use Islamic studies scholar Ismail Kara’s (2000) insightful description, as “an institution stuck between religion and the state”, Diyanet illustrates the interdependence of modern secular governance and religion as well as the porous and paradoxical relationship between the two. This contradictory entanglement has been highlighted even more boldly as a result of the state’s deployment of Diyanet in administering the family sphere.

Soon after the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the new regime undertook several reforms to secularize the new polity. Such secularizing reforms aimed to displace Islam from political, economic, legal, and educational domains and to submit religious actors and institutions to the authority of the state (Davison 2003, Kadioglu 2010). The Ottoman office of the Şeyhülislam (or Sheikh ul-Islam), the highest religious authority responsible for implementing the shariah, was abolished through the Abolition of the Ministries of Islamic Law and Charitable Foundations (Şeriat ve Evkaf) Act on 3 March 1924 and established the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in its place with the aim of governing the religious affairs of the new state. On the same day, the Caliphate, the sharia, and the Islamic medrese school system were also abolished. Within the next couple of years, these reforms were followed by the closure of religious orders and their convents and lodges as well as the replacement of the sharia with secular legal codes based on European models (which also outlawed Islamic polygamy and introduced civil marriage).

In the constitution of the newly established regime, Diyanet was authorized to oversee “all cases concerning the Islamic Faith which relate to beliefs (itikadat) and rituals of worship (ibadat)” and was made responsible for the “administration of all mosques . . . as well as the
appointment and dismissal of all imams, orators (hatipler), preachers (vaizler), leaders of sufi lodges (seyhler), callers to prayer (müezzinler), sextons (kayyimler), and all other employees of a religious character” (Davison 2003: 337). Diyanet was formed as a state institution that would operate under the Prime Minister’s office, and its director was to be appointed by the President on the recommendation of the Prime Minister (Gozaydın 2009). With the founding of Diyanet, “traditional articles of clothing associated with religious functionaries and scholars were either banned or restricted for use only in places of worship,” and the use of the term ulema to refer to these religious authorities was officially abandoned within the next decade (Bein 2011: 106), turning these men of religion into “paid employees of the state” (Toprak 1995: 35). Moreover, through Diyanet, the republican administration centralized and bureaucratized the religious establishment and limited its traditional jurisdiction and scope (which used to include educational, judicial, and even political functions) only to matters that concern belief and worship. The choice of the term diyanet instead of its alternative diniye in the name of this institution is significant in this regard. While diyanet refers to “religious” affairs and issues that pertain to worship and personal belief, the term diniye would have “implied the new institution’s religious responsibilities in the fields of economy, society, policing, and education, which were intentionally distributed to other branches of government” (Hassan 2011b: 455, Kara 2000). This intentional naming and the definition of Diyanet’s proper jurisdiction in the constitution signified a delineation of the proper boundaries of Islam by formalizing it as a matter of belief and worship and thereby relegating it into the private sphere.

Since its inception, Diyanet has centralized religious authority and expertise by interpreting, overseeing, and administering religious doctrine and practice as well as constituting
itself as the voice of “official Islam” (Mardin 1982: 179). It has monopolized religious authority by claiming that the official version of Islam that it validates and disseminates is based on “sound religious knowledge” while simultaneously discrediting folk or mystical doctrines and practices by labeling them with such derogatory terms as “superstitious, fanatical, reactionary, and obscurantist” (Davison 2003: 341). “Indeed, secular Turkish republican institutions have repeatedly asserted the absolute necessity for [Diyanet] to supervise and encourage what is understood to be the correct form of religion in order to ensure the modern and civilized formation of the Turkish nation” (Hassan 2011b: 455).

After the 1980 military coup, there were “state-led efforts to formulate, partially through the agency of the Diyanet, an integrationist Turkish-Islam synthesis that … aimed at producing a more religion-friendly Kemalism and at assisting the suppression of the rising tide of Islamism, Marxism, and Kurdish nationalism” (Bein 2011: 158). In fact, after each military coup aimed at restoring the centralist Kemalist state, Diyanet was allocated more funding and responsibilities to act as a safety valve against religious reactionism and unwelcome interpretations of Islam (Sunier et al. 2011: 34). While it is stated in Article No. 136 of the Turkish constitution that Diyanet is supposed to distance itself from any political views or ideologies, several commentators have noted how the state has always instrumentalized Diyanet for political ends and used it as an instrument of supervising, disciplining, and governing its citizens’ conduct (Bein 2011, Kadioglu 2010, Kara 2000). For example, Turan (2008: 42) has illustrated how Friday sermons are used to encourage citizens to pay their taxes or show their support to the armed forces.

The emergence of the pro-Islamist AKP as the ruling party since 2002 has refocused
attention to the function and scope of religion as well as Diyanet’s role in a secular state. The increase in the number of civil servants working for Diyanet and its massive annual budget, which was approximately 4.5 billion Turkish liras (around $2.1 billion) in 2013, throughout the tenure of the AKP have been interpreted by observers as the proof of the government’s motive to expand religious authority. The AKP government has also promised to give Diyanet greater autonomy by introducing constitutional changes with regard to Diyanet’s status, jurisdiction, and functions (Bein 2011: 159). However, throughout the thirteen years of AKP’s incumbency, Diyanet has remained a centralized, bureaucratized, monopolistic, and state-governed institution and an instrument for the advancement and popularization of government-sanctioned national policies. The AKP government has sought to instrumentalize Diyanet in “outreach initiatives aimed at the Kurdish … citizens of the republic, and in ideological and educational campaigns against ultra-conservative and militant interpretations of Islam” (160).

Since the AKP came to power, there has been a remarkable transformation in the workforce of Diyanet with the hiring of significantly larger numbers of women. While female preachers and other religious functionaries comprised only four percent of Turkey’s official clerical cadres in 1990, as of 2010 female preachers represented almost twenty-eight percent (nearly one-third) of all tenured clergy (Hassan 2011b: 457). In fact, Diyanet claims to employ the highest number of female civil servants in the country (Tutuncu 2010). The AKP’s recruitment of female preachers and other forms of female religious functionaries into Diyanet cadres has been necessitated by the increasing feminization of religious higher education and the ensuing need for employment for these trained women of religion (Hassan 2011a). The growth in the number of religious educational institutions (Imams and Preachers Schools and Theological
Faculties in universities) from the 1950’s to the 1980’s also increased the formal religious training of girls coming from conservative families who opted to send these girls to religious schools due to the headscarf ban in other educational institutions (Bozan 2007; Tutuncu 2010: 599). After the 1980 military coup, the theological faculties in universities were mandated to recruit female students, who had been previously excluded (Hassan 2011a). Since these women could not be employed as civil servants due to the headscarf ban in public institutions, the “professional demands of these highly educated and qualified generations of female graduates of Turkish theological faculties, combined with diverse societal demands for women’s religious services (articulated by some Turkish women and some secularist institutions)” have led Diyanet to hire increasingly higher numbers of female religious functionaries (Hassan 2011b: 457).

The recruitment of large numbers of female preachers and other religious functionaries has destabilized the historical dominance of male religious authority figures and transformed the nature of religious services rendered by Diyanet. With the hiring of female preachers into Diyanet’s cadres, religious services have acquired dynamism by going out of the confines of worshiping places and offices and opening up to the public. In addition to preaching in mosques, female employees of Diyanet provide religious guidance and answer the intricate private religious questions of their congregations in fatwa offices at local muftiates, through fatwa hotlines, and at Family Bureaus. As part of their Family Bureau duties, these female preachers also take part in outreach programs aimed to give spiritual guidance and pastoral care to people who do not live in traditional family homes such as orphans, battered women, inmates, and nursing home patients. Moreover, through female preachers and other female religious authority figures, the AKP government has tried to increase awareness about gender equality, women’s
Anxieties and Objections: Should Religion Be Involved with the Family Sphere?

Despite transformations in Turkey’s political landscape, secularists and Islamists alike have continuously criticized Diyanet since its inception. Islamists and ultraconservative Muslims have often been critical of Diyanet as being subservient to the secular state and acting as the mouthpiece of the government (Bein 2011: 158). For example, according to Kara, one of the most prominent Islamist commentators,

Throughout its history, which is almost as old as the Republic itself, Diyanet has been loyal to the place and boundaries assigned to it by the state, and has acted as an institution which has attended to ‘the religious affairs of the state’ rather than those of Muslims, commented on religious matters depending on the tendencies of the government and sometimes as a result of state repression, and aimed to transform the public understanding of religion [in order to align it with the official version of Islam] (Kara 2000: 45).

Some Islamists have even called for the disestablishment of Diyanet and its replacement with private religious communities (cemaatler) (Bein 2011: 161). On the other hand, many secularists see the existence of Diyanet in a secular state as an anomaly and view it as an indication of the inadequate secularization of the Turkish polity. They criticize the expansion of Diyanet’s workforce as an attempt to allow “‘Islamists’ to in-filtrate state bureaucracy and to benefit from its dispensations” (Öncü 2005: 229). Alevi minorities are also critical of Diyanet in terms of its promotion of orthodox Sunni-Islam as the official religion of the country through its mosques, publications, and preaching activities as well as its exclusionary policies against Alevi and unorthodox religious denominations (Tambar 2014).
Diyanet’s opening of Family Offices has further inflamed anxieties about the role and function of Diyanet as an institution in particular and the proper place and role of religion in general. Many provocative news stories aimed at triggering secularist anxieties have appeared in the popular press. One news article, titled “A Family Imam May Knock on Your Door,” claimed that each family would be assigned an imam in the same way that each family has a family doctor, and these imams would come to people’s homes without being invited or giving any prior notice in order to listen to their family problems and give them religious advice (2011). These claims are not accurate since Family Offices only provide services to those who call them via their hotline or those who voluntarily visit these offices. However, such news stories are significant in terms of illustrating the extent of the anxieties caused by the assumed expansion of the scope of Islam from the confines of a mosque to barging into people’s homes. The reactions of social service experts working on family-related issues are also included in such news stories. These experts’ objections to the involvement of Diyanet with the family indicate their internalization of the delineation of the spheres of authority and expertise into secular and religious domains. For example, Abdullah Karatay, the president of the Social Services Experts’ Association, was cited in a news article stating that “Just as I am not telling [Diyanet] that I will give a sermon in a mosque because my dad taught me how to be an imam, they shouldn’t provide social services, which is the jurisdiction of another area [of specialty].” Among the groups who voiced their objections were also feminist organizations. Nazan Moroğlu, the coordinator of the Association of Istanbul Women’s Organizations, told a newspaper that they would expect a democratic and secular state like Turkey to solve women’s domestic problems “through international agreements, the constitution, and [women and family] related legal
regulations rather than [by referring to] the Prophet’s Last Sermon” (Tahaoğlu 2011).

The secularist anxieties caused by Diyanet’s involvement with the family sphere were to such an extent that the Ankara Bar appealed to the Presidency of the Council of State (Danıştay) demanding that the legislation of Family Offices be cancelled and that the operations of these offices be halted until the case is closed. In the legal petition submitted to the Council of State, it was claimed that the establishment of these offices constitutes a violation of the constitutional duties of Diyanet. The claimant’s objection was based on the grounds that, by opening these family offices, Diyanet was serving the political agenda of the government party and thereby violating the principle of secularism, according to which a religious institution should not be involved in matters of the state. Nevertheless, the Council of State ruled against most of the objections in this case, stating that the duties of Family Offices, defined in their legislation as “informing the public about the family from a religious perspective” and “contributing to the solution of the family-related problems with a religious content”, do not constitute an overstepping of its jurisdiction or a breaching of the description of its duties in the constitution. Since one of Diyanet’s duties is defined in the constitution as “enlightening the public about religion,” the emphasis put on “religion” on the official directive about the jurisdiction of Family Offices seems to have fended off the secularist objections about Diyanet’s “mingling with the affairs of the state” and “overstepping its proper boundaries.”

It is not just the secularists and other family-related experts that have voiced their concerns about the establishment of Family Offices. There have been significant uncertainties and resistance from within the institution of Diyanet itself. As Mehmet Görmez, the Director of Diyanet, mentioned in a keynote speech, “When we initiated this project, all of us felt a little
uneasy” (Diyanetbasin 2011). Some of the Family Office employees I interviewed told me that they first had to convince their own branch administrators (muftis) of the legitimacy of these offices. Some administrators initially questioned the necessity of opening offices dedicated specifically for solving family problems. The Family Office coordinator of Istanbul told me in an interview that some muftis would say, “We already give religious knowledge about the family through our sermons (vaaz). We give religious advice and warnings in Friday sermons (khutba). What is the point of doing more than that?” Some of my interlocutors claimed that muftiates usually give higher priority to other Diyanet activities such as preaching, religious guidance, and Qur’an classes than the activities of Family Offices, and some consider these offices unnecessary and even illegitimate. As one Family Office staff member stated, “Sometimes we even get reprimanded for organizing events since these require extra expenditures from the muftiate’s budget.” In fact, in his keynote address during the training session of the Family Office personnel, the Director of Diyanet asked the muftis that attended the meeting to warn their fellow muftis about giving Family Offices the importance they deserve. Görmez stated,

> There are muftis who still do not recognize the full worth of these offices. During the national muftiate meetings, you need to tell [other muftis] how much importance we [the Directorate] give to these [offices.] When you visit other muftiates, immediately ask them to show you the Family Office, and go inspect them. Does it look like it is stuck in a tiny remote corner of the muftiate building? Or are they located in a nice central place where they can comfortably host families coming from different corners of the city? Are five people stuffed in a tiny room? If five Family Office employees are stuck in a small office while another employee sits in an office large enough to accommodate twenty people, there is a problem there. [Please let us know.] If necessary, we will prepare a memo about this issue and send it to all of the muftiates (Diyanetbasin, 2011).

During my fieldwork, I personally observed the discrepancy between the physical conditions of
Family Offices in different muftiates. For example, the Family Office in one of the biggest and
most central districts of Istanbul consisted of a common desk shared by the other employees of
the muftiate who worked in the office in rotation. When I asked the male preacher working there
how many people visit him each week, he responded contemptuously: “Are you kidding? Look
at this place. We can hardly find a seat to have this interview. How do you expect someone to
come here and talk about their private life in such a setting?”

Both the secularist anxieties and the resistance from within Diyanet are based on their
internalization of the secular formulation of religion as a matter of individual belief, ritual/
worship, and morality that is distinct from other spheres (such as the state, economy, education,
etc.) In the following section, I will explore how the emphasis on this privatized notion of
religion determines the scope of religious guidance provided by Diyanet in the form of fatwas as
well as the anxieties and contentions caused when the fatwa does not abide by this circumscribed
notion of religion.

Issuing Fatwa on the Family:

One of the ways through which Diyanet provides religious guidance on issues that pertain
to the family is issuing fatwas on family related religious questions. A fatwa refers to the legal
pronouncement or learned interpretation of a qualified jurist in Islamic law (mufti) that pertain to
a question asked by an individual in order to resolve an issue or learn whether a certain act or
behavior is permissible and legitimate according to Islam. It entails giving authoritative
responses to “questions about how to live rightly” (Agrama 2010a: 2) according to the normative
conceptions of an ethical Muslim subjectivity. In his seminal work on the anthropology of the

fatwa, Agrama argues that the fatwa should be considered not merely as doctrinal pronouncements and formal expressions of judicial opinion but also as an ethical practice—more specifically as “a mode of the care of the self, as a practice by which selves, in the multiplicity of their affairs, are maintained and advanced as part of Islamic tradition” (2010: 13). However, in the Turkish context, the act of issuing fatwa has been restrained by the state to be mainly about providing authoritative information to adherents about correct religious practice.

Diyanet has recently attempted to popularize the practice of seeking fatwas and make it more convenient for Muslim citizens by appointing its preachers and religious services experts to fatwa hotlines (called Alo Fetva in Turkish). These hotlines are dedicated to answering fiqh-related questions, which Diyanet employees describe as questions about the formal aspects of Islam such as religious rules, rituals, and worship. While fiqh technically refers to the body of Islamic law extracted from detailed Islamic sources that are studied in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, it is noteworthy that Diyanet relegates its definition to this limited notion of religion so as to ensure not to trespass into the jurisdiction of secular civil law that regulates the personal and family affairs of Turkish citizens. Despite the truncated jurisdiction of fatwa, fatwa seekers nonetheless tend to ask questions regarding their familial affairs. These family-related fatwa questions may also be directed to Family Offices when the staff working for the fatwa hotline are busy, the question requires a more detailed explanation than giving a straightforward response, or the caller dials the Family Office extension number from the main menu.

According to a fatwa hotline employee I met in Istanbul’s Nuriosmaniye Mosque complex, which houses both the Fatwa Hotline and the Family Office, it is difficult to distinguish between family-related and fiqh-related questions, since she believes that almost all fatwa
questions involve the family in one way or another. She told me that

Daily prayers and fasting also have to do with the family. A religious practice is not something done just individually. It also has an impact on family members. Or family members influence religious practices. For example, one’s spouse or children might not allow him/her to fast because they’re concerned about his/her health … But sometimes the family encourages these religious practices. So it goes both ways.

She maintains that answering fatwa questions satisfactorily and effectively also influences one’s family life because “if you don’t answer his/her question properly, it may cause that person to have an unhealthy mental attitude toward life and to lead a poor quality of life within the family.”

Like her, other fatwa and Family Office personnel do not tend to see a clear distinction between fatwa questions related to religious rules and worship and those related to the family, since they believe that one’s family life influences his/her faith and religious practices and vice versa. In a way, within the context of fatwa, Diyanet treats domestic problems and religious practices as two sides of the same coin. Due to this conflation of religion and the family, the jurisdiction of the fatwa seems to have relatively expanded. However, it is worth noting that it is still confined to the private sphere, which is deemed the proper domain of religion, intimaey, and the family according to modern secular governance (Asad 2003, Mahmood 2012). Moreover, as I will discuss further below, fatwas on family issues with possible legal ramifications cause anxieties and uncertainties among religious functionaries due to the fear of overstepping into the jurisdiction of secular domains of law and politics.

A senior female preacher who works for the fatwa hotline in Istanbul told me that more than half of the questions they receive are family-related questions on such issues as Islamic marriage (*dini nikah*), Islamic divorce (*talaq*), adultery (*zina*), birth control, inheritance (*miras*),
and so on. All of my interlocutors working for Family Offices maintain that fatwa questions that inquire about divorce and matrimony according to Islamic law constitute not only the most popular but also the most challenging religious questions to be answered. The complications in issuing a fatwa on matrimony and divorce are not merely about the theological and doctrinal complications involved in adjudicating a decision. The practice of issuing a fatwa on these issues is fraught with uncertainties and challenges because, as civil servants working for the secular state, Diyanet’s religious functionaries are caught up in a double bind. Not only do they need to make sure that their pronouncements are in accordance with the norms and mandates of Islam, they must also practice caution to avoid possible contradictions with secular civil law.

Since the adoption of the Swiss civil code in 1926, Turkish couples have been required to sign a marriage contract during an official ceremony officiated by a civil servant (known as nikah memuru) specifically assigned by the municipality for this task. No man of religion is involved in this official ceremony, and no references to Islam are made. It is solely a legal contract meant to validate the marriage and to protect spouses legally in the event of a divorce or a legal dispute. While Islamic matrimony is not recognized by the state, it is customary for most couples (including non-practicing, secular ones) to have a separate religious ceremony, colloquially referred to as imam nikahi, right after the official ceremony. The popularity of this double matrimonial practice attests to Turkish couples’ desire to have their marriage to be considered valid in the eyes of both the state and divine law. While couples may choose to get married without the religious ceremony, they are not allowed to get married without the official state ceremony. The Turkish Criminal Code dictates a sentence of two to six months in prison for couples who live together after a religious wedding without a civil marriage as well as for imams
who perform a religious wedding ceremony without verifying a civil marriage with official
documents. While state-appointed imams are well informed about this law, Diyanet is not able to
police and regulate all Islamic wedding ceremonies, since any male authority figure
knowledgeable in Islamic law, such as a pious elder in one’s family or neighborhood, can
officiate an Islamic marriage ceremony. Moreover, religious functionaries get trained not to issue
any fatwas that could potentially contradict the aforementioned marriage requirements. In what
follows, I will illustrate how the incongruity between Islamic jurisprudence and secular civil law
caused arguments, uncertainties, and contestations during a training session on how to handle a
fatwa question regarding Islamic matrimony.

During the Family Office personnel training that took place at a convention center in
Istanbul, Meryem Kaya, a female preacher employed as the coordinator of Istanbul-based Family
Offices, reflected the following power-point slide on the projection screen:

**Question:** My wife and I got separated. But our divorce trial has been going on
for the past four years. I have two kids. In the meantime, I met another lady. We
decided to get married. Her parents approved. But we cannot get married
officially before the court approves my divorce. In the meantime, can we get
married through a religious ceremony?

**Answer:** This is permissible according to our religion. But it shouldn’t be
considered a temporary marriage, and both of your families should be informed
about your marriage.

Kaya presented this example to advise Family Office personnel that they be wary of male fatwa
seekers who abuse Islamic matrimony with the ulterior motive of exploiting women sexually by
giving them the false promise of marrying them through a state-sanctioned ceremony in the
future. The female deputy mufti of Istanbul, who is hierarchically at a higher executive level than
Kaya, interjected from her seat and said: “Religious marriage ceremonies are not recognized officially in our country. We are a state institution! And we are the official representatives of this institution! The official directives of our institution are based on the laws of this state. There is no such thing as religious marriage in our law.” Following this statement, murmurings of discontent and confusion ensued and dominated the conference hall.

Looking distraught, Kaya protested that their primary duty should be answering whether an act or behavior is permissible according to Islam. She added, “This is my scholarly opinion. I’ve studied Islamic law for many years now, and I know that this fatwa is acceptable. But, from an administrative perspective, it is true that what our deputy mufti mentioned is something you need to be cautious about. You could be held liable.” Fearing that she will not be heard from her seat, the deputy mufti jumped onto the stage with an expression of urgency on her face and grabbed the microphone from Kaya’s hands. She stated:

I apologize for interrupting but I have to make a statement that concerns our institution. If this were only about our esteemed preacher’s scholarly opinion, we would respect that. But because this training is given on behalf of [Diyanet’s Family Offices], this is unacceptable. The Family Office employees should be informed that it is illegal for them to give such a fatwa, and they could be held liable for that in a court of law.

After explaining that religious marriage without an official marriage license is a crime that is punishable by imprisonment for both the couple and the imam officiating the ceremony, she highlighted that Family Office staff should be cognizant that the secular juridical system is the ultimate guarantor of citizens’ rights. She stated:

Rights that are not guaranteed by laws are not really rights. Is there any legal body that recognizes the rights of husbands and wives married through religious ceremonies? No! Why should we insist on official marriage ceremonies? Because
that is the only way to guarantee spousal rights! … So, if this woman gets married to this man through a religious ceremony before he gets divorced officially, what will happen to her if he leaves her too? Who will grant her any rights? Can a court of law make the guy pay this woman alimony? Of course, not! Because they are not legally wedded! … We must make sure that we issue fatwas based on the legal norms of the [secular] state system we live in.

After the deputy mufti went back to her seat, Kaya corrected herself by stating that,

Our priority is to ensure that we provide religiously correct answers to fatwa questions. But we can’t give short answers like ‘yes, it’s permissible’ or ‘no, it’s forbidden.’ We should also make sure that our pronouncements don’t lead people to unintentionally commit a crime. Because they may not know the law. So, you should tell them what is right and what is wrong both according to Islam and according to state law.

In this example, religious functionaries are discouraged from issuing a fatwa that would contradict secular law not merely because of the interdiction imposed on Islamic matrimony by the state but also in terms of protecting the legal rights of citizens and preventing them from any potential harm.

However, Diyanet employees are also advised to be cognizant of people who exploit the fatwa to circumvent the law; thus, in a way they are asked to defend the interests of the state against devious citizens. To illustrate, in a training session of the Family Office personnel in Istanbul, the deputy director of Diyanet warned the employees to practice extra caution while answering the question of whether getting a divorce in a secular court of law would also annul Islamic matrimony. In his speech, he gave the example of a couple wanting to get divorced in a court but wishing to maintain their marriage union according to Islamic law. The reason for their wish to get a divorce in a civil court but still retain their religious marriage is that the woman can then legally obtain the pension of her deceased father, as she would legally be considered a
divorcee who is in need of financial support. Although the illustrated marriage would be considered legitimate according to Islamic law, Diyanet issued a fatwa that required the couple to get legally married as well in order to be considered lawfully wedded. In order to avoid any legal liability, the Family Office staffs are urged to transfer such problematic fatwa questions to the High Committee of Religious Affairs in Ankara.³

Unlike in other Muslim majority states where the fatwa remains largely disengaged from secular power and indifferent to the question of where to draw the line between religion and politics (Agrama 2012), in Turkey the practice of issuing fatwa on the family is highly contentious as it is deeply involved in the question of the proper scope and jurisdiction of religion in a secular state. Such anxieties and contentions arise not when the fatwa concerns issues that have to do with faith and religious practice but when it addresses familial matters due to being perceived as contravening the secular civil law.

**Diyanet as a Governmental Apparatus:**

In addition to issuing fatwas and providing religious guidance, one of the most significant functions of Diyanet’s Family Offices is to cooperate with the relevant public institutions, universities, and civil society organizations. Family Offices cooperate with these institutions in three ways: 1) by referring individuals to these other family-related institutions and experts when

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³ While most fatwa and Family Office staff members are formally trained in divinity schools, sometimes they are not able to answer a certain religious inquiry about the family especially if the question is a particularly challenging one. In such a case, an employee tells them that s/he needs to investigate the issue further in order to give the caller/visitor a sound religious advice and asks him/her to call back later. First, s/he transfers the question to other specialists in the region and they discuss the issue at length to decide what the appropriate fatwa would be for that particular question. If these specialists do not know the answer or the issue may require further investigation and research, they contact the High Committee of Religious Affairs in Ankara, which is the ultimate authority in issuing fatwas that are based on sound religious knowledge.
their problems are beyond the scope of Diyanet’s jurisdiction, 2) by organizing family education seminars in their communities with the participation of experts, and 3) by taking part in family-related social projects organized by other institutions. According to the 2011 annual report of Diyanet’s Family Offices, people with lower educational backgrounds visit or call these offices significantly more than those with higher levels of education. Out of the 6,488 visitors/callers, 1,941 of them had elementary school education, 1,114 of them completed middle school, and 1,795 of them have a high school diploma, while only 128 of them hold a college degree (2011, p.96). Thus, Family Offices act as a significant bridge institution that make it possible for other institutions to reach the religiously observant citizens with low levels of education who, they believe, would not otherwise be aware of the services of these institutions or have the aspiration to seek professional help like their higher-educated counterparts.

As Donzelot (1979) showed in his study of 19th century France, in modern liberal governance, the family has become an instrument and objective of governance whereby the state refrains from governing the family through coercion but instead implements “government through the family” by aiming to have families manage their own conduct and pursue their own well-being. A great deal of the interventions and social programs aimed at the family, therefore, “rely upon the aspirations of those toward whom these interventions are directed” (Dean 2010: 67). These interventions seek “to elicit and then work through the active commitment and cooperation of families and family members to pursue their own well-being, and to collaborate with medical, educative and hygienic norms” (p.67). They also reinforce the value of state institutions as well as non-governmental and philanthropic organizations as a source of support and protection for families. Thus, wives of irresponsible husbands, parents of delinquent and
unruly children, and the children of negligent parents are made to seek the assistance of institutions so as to manage their own conduct (Dean 2010: 25, 36, Hasso 2010: 133). In this context, I argue that through Diyanet’s Family Offices religion is instrumentalized as a governmental apparatus aimed at assisting with the administration, regulation, and control of families through diverse scientific disciplines (e.g. psychology, medicine, law, etc.) and various institutions (e.g. hospitals, psychiatry clinics, courts, etc.). Family Offices serve as a gateway to introducing religiously observant families with low levels of education to experts and institutions and making them desire their assistance in providing them with the necessary means that would help them manage their own conduct and pursue their own well-being.

One of the ways through which Family Offices act as a bridge between families and other state institutions is referring them to these institutions especially when their problems are beyond the proper jurisdiction of Diyanet, i.e. not of a “religious” nature. Rather than merely addressing the “religious” aspect of a question or a problem, Family Offices staff members are advised to ask further questions to see whether the individual might have other problems that require professional assistance and thus cannot be resolved by just religious guidance. During a training session of the Family Office personnel of Istanbul, Feyza Güner, the head of Diyanet’s Family and Religious Guidance department at the time, illustrated how a Family Office employee can figure out whether an individual who calls them to ask a religious question might have other problems and which institutions s/he should be referred to. In her hypothetical example, a woman calls the Family Office and asks whether it is a sin to steal money out of her husband’s pocket. According to Güner, it is not sufficient to simply answer whether this particular act is a sin or not and hang up the phone. Güner advised the Family Office employees to inquire why
that woman felt the need to steal her husband’s money; only then, they could get a sense of what
the underlying problem is. When asked to explain her situation, the woman might reveal that

Her husband is an alcoholic and he gambles. She doesn’t work. She has a disabled
child. She can’t take care of her child properly because her husband doesn’t give
her any money. There are times when they don’t even have a single slice of stale
bread at home. Her neighbors lend her money. When the husband comes home
drunk, she secretly takes money from his pocket and uses that money to buy food.

Having acquired further information about the kind of assistance this particular family needs, the
Family Office staff can then refer them to the relevant institutions. The husband can be counseled
to consult a medical institution that specializes in addiction; the woman can be referred to an
organization that provides welfare assistance such as the Social Charity and Solidarity
Foundation (Sosyal Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Vakfı) and be helped with the process of
applying for free health care from the Ministry of Health (Sağlık Bakanlığı); and the disabled
child can be referred to the Institute of Social Services and Child Protection (Sosyal Hizmetler ve
Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu). The Family Office personnel are urged during such training sessions
to familiarize themselves with the services provided by various legal, medical, judicial, and
social service institutions. Moreover, they are provided with a list of those institutions that
provide their services free of charge so that families who cannot afford to seek professional help
can benefit from them.

In certain cases when a person with a psychological problem does not want to seek
professional help, the Family Office personnel convince them to consult a therapist or a
psychiatrist. In a country where seeing a family counselor or a psychiatrist is not common
especially among people with lower educational and socio-economic backgrounds due to
financial restraints and the social stigma associated with it (since some Turkish people tend to equate psychological therapy with mental illness), the Family Office employees also help instill in pious citizens the aspiration and the habit to seek professional psychiatric or psychological counseling. Thus, although they refrain from naming their guidance as formal counseling, in the eyes of many Family Office employees, their family-related assistance helps with and complements professional psychological or family counseling. In one of our interviews, an Istanbul-based Family Office employee described how she tries to convince people to see a therapist or a psychiatrist:

Sometimes I realize that the person might have a psychological problem. For example, I observe that s/he shows sudden bursts of anger when recounting his/her problem. I tell him/her that s/he might have anger management issues. Or a woman tells me that she is such a neat-freak (aşırı düzen meraklısı) that she doesn’t even allow her husband and kids to sit in the living room without changing their clothes and washing their feet first. I warn her that these could be signs of obsession [obsessive compulsive disorder]. I tell these people that it is not within our expertise to address these issues and try to solve their psychological problems, and that they need to seek professional help. I try to convince them by saying that I have also been to a therapist and that there is nothing wrong with it according to our religion.

While this employee tries to convince people who visit the Family Office by stating the permissibility of seeking psychological help according to Islam, in one of the training sessions of the Family Office staff working in Istanbul, Istanbul’s Family Office coordinator at the time, went so far as to advise the staff members to tell people who visit their offices that seeking professional psychological assistance is “some sort of a religious imperative (bir nevi dinin emri).” Most of my interlocutors working for Diyanet’s Family Offices told me that, since it is people with religious sensibilities who call or visit these family offices, they tend to follow the
advice of a religious authority to seek professional help, especially when that religious authority
tells them that doing so is permitted, advised, or even mandated by religion.

Another way that Family Offices serve as a gateway to introducing the religiously
observant families to experts that would help them manage their conduct and pursue their own
well-being is by organizing family education seminars, public lectures, and the like in their
communities with the participation of experts. Within Istanbul, for example, each district’s
Family Office is required to organize at least one such event per month. According to the annual
report of Family Offices, 802 family-related education programs were organized throughout
Turkey in 2011. In these events, families are educated in a variety of topics including pedagogy
(e.g. how to discipline unruly children, helping children with their homework, adolescent
psychology), health (e.g. obesity, common child diseases, hygiene), law (e.g. divorce,
inheritance, alimony), psychology (e.g. obsession, anger management, depression),
communication skills (e.g. how to resolve conflicts within the family), sexuality (e.g. birth
control, sexually transmitted diseases, gynecology), security (e.g. how to prevent burglary,
mugging, home invasion), and so on by experts who specialize in these topics. One of the
significant ways through which the muftiates attract audiences to these seminars is to advertise
them during their traditional services such as sermons (vaaz) and religious lessons.

Family Offices are also requested to participate in projects organized by other state
institutions and cooperate with these institutions to assist them with the popularization and
implementation of these projects. To illustrate, as a part of the government’s effort to fight
against domestic violence and honor killings, memorandum No. 2006/17 circulated by the Prime
Minister’s Office assigned Diyanet and its Family Offices the duty to write Friday sermons
(khutbas), publish print materials, and organize events aimed at discouraging religiously observant male citizens from violence against women and children and educating them about ways to prevent honor killings. Moreover, in 2010 the Ministry of the Family and Social Policies signed a joint protocol with Diyanet, aimed at requesting the contribution of imams and preachers to the prevention of domestic violence. Through in-service training sessions, mosque imams, preachers, and Family Office employees have been educated in gender equality, the history of women’s rights movements, common perceptions of women in the Islamic tradition, the Turkish civil law No. 4320 on the Protection of the Family and Preventing Violence Against Women, ways to recognize signs of domestic violence, how to approach a victim of domestic violence, and how to report domestic violence cases to the appropriate authorities. As part of this joint protocol, the Family Offices are required to send reports to the Ministry every three months detailing the kind of activities they have organized regarding the prevention of domestic violence.

According to Kadriye Erdemli, the vice mufti of Istanbul, the decision of the Ministry of the Family and other institutions to cooperate with the Diyanet to fight against domestic violence is quite appropriate because it is the only institution that can reach the largest number of men. Since violence is mostly inflicted by men on women, according to Erdemli, it is imperative to reach men and aim to change their behavior. Because preachers are expected to preach their congregation about these issues and mention them in their Friday sermons (khutbas), they need to be familiarized with the projects organized by state and civil society organizations. That is why they are informed about the projects carried out by the Ministry of the Family, the General Directorate on Women’s Status, as well as the United Nations. They are provided with written
materials on domestic violence; the information in these materials is then disseminated to the congregation through sermons (vaaz), Friday sermons (khutbas), and religious lessons and conversations (sohbet). The Diyanet also publishes informational brochures on domestic violence to be distributed through Family Offices and mosques. In these brochures, there are religious correctives about how certain sayings of the prophet (hadith) justifying violence against women are either fabricated (maudu) or misinterpreted and how certain verses in the Qur’an on the same issue are misrepresented in certain Turkish translations and catechism books (ilmihal). Moreover, these brochures also aim to warn men that violence against women is a crime punishable by law through citing the relevant clauses from the Turkish Civil Law No. 4320 on the Protection of the Family and Preventing Violence Against Women and the Turkish Crime Law No 5237. Diyanet and its Family Offices also have taken part in a joint project of a similar nature with the Ministry of Justice, the General Directorate of Security (i.e. the national police), and the Ministry of the Interior, which is aimed at protecting sexually abused children and providing them with psychological support. The Family Office staff and other employees of the Diyanet are trained about how to recognize signs of abuse in children and how to report these incidents to the appropriate authorities.

These institutions use Diyanet and its facilities in order to popularize and implement their family-related projects due to two main reasons. The first one is that Diyanet is a state institution with the widest reach throughout Turkey; even the remotest village in Turkey has a mosque in which a state-appointed imam is employed. This, through Diyanet, the conduct of religiously

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4 In the past, the Ministry of Education also had a wide reach since almost every village had at least a primary school. But after the implementation of minimum eight years of compulsory education, most village schools were shut down since they were not equipped with the necessary infrastructure and the teaching staff, and the students started to be transported from villages to the schools in the cities.
observant families from even the remotest parts of Turkey could be managed, disciplined, and corrected. The second reason is the trust pious people feel toward men and women of religion. According to my informants, families are comfortable speaking about their domestic problems with their neighborhood imams and the Family Office personnel because they trust them. This feeling of trust is based on their congregations’ perceptions of them as opinion leaders (*kanaat önderleri*) whose ideas and behavior serve as a model for their communities and whom they can consult for advice. Because of religiously observant public’s feeling of trust toward Diyanet employees and their perceived role of serving as opinion leaders in their communities, other institutions view Diyanet and its Family Offices as an indispensable source to popularize their projects and reach a large number of citizens.

**Conclusion:**

Through the above exploration of the legal status and activities of Family Counseling and Religious Guidance Offices as well as the controversies and anxieties about the involvement of an institution overseeing religious affairs with the family sphere, I have explicated how the family has been central in the discussions, debates, and contestations about the current transformations in religious affairs and the proper jurisdiction of religion in a secular state. Secularists are concerned that Diyanet’s mingling with personal and family affairs points to the increasing desecularization of the Turkish polity and the expansion of the scope of religion to govern other spheres of life (not just issues that pertain to individual faith and worship). It is true that there have been significant transformations in the role of religious functionaries in that their jurisdiction is no longer limited to the confines of a mosque. Through Diyanet’s initiatives to
make (wo)men of religion more proactive in disseminating religious knowledge to the public, the scope of religious affairs have undoubtedly expanded. Nevertheless, I have argued that Diyanet’s religious guidance and counseling services focusing on the family does not amount to an overstepping of its constitutionally defined jurisdiction or a breaching of secular principles.

As recent scholarship problematizing the relationship between religion and secularism has shown, not only does secularism presuppose a particular understanding of what religion is — based on Protestant Christian understandings of religion as disembodied, individual faith, and as inner states rather than outward practice — but it also circumscribes the social and political space within which the religious may operate (Asad 1993, 2003; Mahmood 2012, Taylor 2007). By situating these recent controversies within the history of Diyanet, I have illustrated how Diyanet has been instrumental in relegating Islam to the private realm through its formulation as a personal belief and worship, thereby aiming to prevent the intervention of religion in politics and affairs of the state. It is significant that the statutes that provide the legal basis for the foundation of Family Offices is delimiting the jurisdiction and operations of these offices to issues that pertain to religion. I have argued that such an emphasis on religion points to the ways in which religion is relegated to the private sphere and allowed to deal with issues that have to do with the personal and the family, as mandated by modern secular governance.

Finally, I have also illustrated how religion provides opportunities for governmental intervention in the family sphere and how the Turkish state has used it an instrument of supervising, disciplining, and governing its citizens’ conduct for the sake of increasing efficient governance and promoting development and well-being. Thus, I have argued that, through Family Offices, the Turkish state has situated religion as a nexus of administrative intervention,
disciplinary practices, and biopolitical governance that aim to have families manage their own conduct and pursue their own well-being.

REFERENCES:


