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## The Headscarf Controversy in Turkey

Metin Toprak\* & Nasuh Uslu\*\*

**Abstract.** This article is based on a monographic field study, which was conducted in October 2007. In addition, the results of other studies on the headscarf issue conducted at different times between 2003 and 2007 have also been used to follow the development over the course of time. The study found that the headscarf prohibition has no strong social basis. As it would be a mistake to see the headscarf prohibition as an element of the secularism project, defining an ideology on the basis of the headscarf, an important religious symbol in Turkey, presents a risk to the progress of democracy, and only serves to increase political polarization. Formulating public policies on the basis of the headscarf prohibition will only help destroy social peace. Social engineering projects which aim to change or destroy political, religious and ethnic positions of citizens are not permitted in Western-type contemporary democracies. There is no headscarf problem in Turkey in a sociological sense, the real problem lies in the totalitarian/authoritarian approach which stems from groundless fears and/or ideological choices of the social elite or economic power centers.

**JEL Classification Codes:** D71, D79.

**Keywords:** Headscarf, hijab, Islamic fundamentalism.

### 1. Introduction

#### a. Background

Historically and from a religious point of view, the hijab or headscarf is not a phenomenon first faced by mankind with the emergence of Islam. The headscarf has been part of pagan cultures as well as monotheistic religions

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(Çiğ, 2005; Çiğ, 1995). In monotheistic religions, the headscarf has primarily been the trademark of free and virtuous women whereas female slaves did not cover their head and wore low-cut dresses. For centuries the headscarf has carried a religious, sexual, social and political meaning regardless of whether it has been used as a means of eroticism, insult, romanticism, piety or purity (Shirazi, 2001). Naturally, women wearing the headscarf have carried the meanings symbolized by the headscarf. In our age, it is interesting that, when compared to Western societies, in Islamic countries important political debates are primarily carried out by men about women as women are considered hierarchically in the secondary position (Arat, 2000). Although the hijab or turban has also been used by men throughout history, men as dominant actors of the public sphere were exposed to a greater level of social evolution. In different societies, while men in the public sphere were exposed to evolution, women who were excluded from the public sphere continued to be “historical” and resisted evolution.

Although the headscarf has undergone a great deal of change in Muslim societies up until now, it is, in fact, a phenomenon which has strongly resisted its removal and has protected its existence strongly (Erdem, 2007a).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the use of the headscarf in public life has become even more common in the countries such as Turkey (Erdem, 2007a: 10; Göle, 2000).<sup>2</sup> The headscarf has caused intensive debates not only in Muslim countries, but also in Western non-Muslim countries over the last 30 years (Maussen, 2007); it has been dealt with in such different contexts as public sphere-private sphere, religious context-human rights, secularism, the religion-state relationship and politics (McGoldrick, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to the research of Tarhan Erdem, conducted in 2003 and published in the daily *Milliyet* between 27 and 31 May 2003, there is at least one woman wearing headscarf in 77.2% of families; 64.2% of women aged 18 and above cover their heads in social life and the number of women wearing headscarf increases considerably in older age.

<sup>2</sup> Nilüfer Göle claims that discussions regarding the relationship between the public sphere and Islam are conducted around the issue of women’s place in society.

<sup>3</sup> Debates on the headscarf or hijab cover a wide variety of aspects: religious obligation, oppression of women, religious extremism, political symbolism, evidence of the failed integration of immigrants, the relationship with terrorism, human rights perspectives, freedom of religion, political rights and civil freedoms, gender discrimination, minority rights and cultural rights, and secularism and neutrality are the most prominent debates.

The emergence of headscarf as a problem in public life (Mandell, 1989; Smith, 2007) is, in fact, related to the evolution of public sphere. With the development of civil society and democracy, a differentiated public sphere emerged. While this phenomenon and discussions around it were witnessed in Western countries at earlier times (Roy, 2007),<sup>4</sup> it began to be seen in the Muslim countries after 1980 in parallel with democratic evolution. The headscarf issue is a phenomenon that emerged during this socio-political evolutionary process (Çaha, 2005).

The level of academic and political attention which the headscarf has attracted in Western countries in the recent years is striking (Shadid and van Koningsveld, 2005). Headscarves of women and loose robes and beards of men have begun to carry political meanings due to the rise of Islamophobia after the 9/11 attacks, and Western people have begun to see these symbols as the signs of political Islam, fundamentalism or even terrorism (Yaqoob, 2008). This excessive reaction by Western people has also been witnessed in Muslim countries to a lesser degree and with a different tone. For example, courts in Turkey have punished women in headscarves on the grounds that they violate the right to education of people who do not wear headscarf (Yavuz, 2000). An interesting point in this context is that the attitudes of state authorities in Turkey and France toward the headscarf have great similarities as compared to the attitude of other Western countries (Hancock, 2008; Scott, 2007).<sup>5</sup>

The history of the the hijab or headscarf issue in Turkey dates back to the establishment of the Republic. In prior to this, in the Ottoman era, revolutions in clothing were solely concerned with men. The Ottoman state used separate law systems for civil society and state affairs because of its intensive relations with Western societies. For example, it used the Gregorian calendar in state affairs whereas it kept the Muslim calendar for civil society. While secular law was in force for state affairs, Sharia law was implemented in the affairs of the civil Muslim society. Christians and Jews were allowed to implement their religious law. During the Ottoman Empire, the costume revolution was initiated by the Sultans themselves and the fez, trousers and other Western-type clothes were made compulsory for civil

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Roy thinks that expecting a consensus among groups or individuals with regard to complying to rules is natural, but expecting the same consensus on values is wrong.

<sup>5</sup> Students wearing headscarves who attended public schools in France faced legal proceedings in 1989, 1994 and 2003. This issue was presented to the French public as a problem of Islam.

servants. Actually, Sultan Mahmut II was named the ‘infidel sultan’ by people because of the dress code reforms he initiated. In the light of this history, the concept of dress reform had a long association with revolution, a fact not forgotten by the rulers of the new Turkish republic.

Since women did not have serious place in the civil life, no dress reform was imposed on women by the state. During the initial period of the Turkish Republic, in which intensive reforms were initiated, the symbol of the costume revolution was the hat. Although Atatürk wanted Turkish women to dress as European women, he did not initiate any reforms on their dress habits (Kandiyoti, 1991). Atatürk prohibited the fez and made hat wearing compulsory. In fact, the fez was considered unacceptable from a religious point of view when it first began to be used. Modernization of society through symbolic costume reform was attempted during the Ottoman and republican periods (Breu and Marchese, 2000). In the first years of the republic, today’s turban or headscarf was not used by Turkish women. In those days, local costumes such as the charshaph (a garment covering a woman from head to foot), ihram (a seamless white woolen garment) and shawl were commonly worn. The turban emerged in those years as the modernized form of the covering adopted by Christian people.

In Turkey, the first incident involving the turban or headscarf was seen during the 1968 student riots when a student wearing a headscarf attended classes in the Divinity Faculty of Ankara University. However, at that time, there was no broadly implemented prohibition in place.<sup>6</sup> The use of the headscarf in universities or highschools giving religious education did not become a problem until the 1980 military coup. Only when the military rulers chose to regulate university education in the 1982 constitution, the headscarf began to become a problem (Weil, 2004; Judge, 2004; Joppke, 2007; Gallala, 2006).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The founder of modern Turkey, M. Kemal Atatürk, enacted the dress code in 1934 and he did not include women in it. The wife of Atatürk, Latife, wore the traditional dress (charshaph) covering her whole body. In fact, Latife Hanım was given as an example in the process of legitimizing the headscarf by President Abdullah Gül’s wife. An ironic comparison is made by referring to the Virgin Mary and it is claimed that the headscarf is also a legitimate phenomenon in Christianity by putting forward the question “Would you ask Mother Mary to remove her Headscarf?”

<sup>7</sup> The headscarf is prohibited even in Western countries in parallel with discussions on secularism. In fact, the French Parliament enacted a law prohibiting the headscarf in the schools. Joppke and Gallala compare the legal position towards the headscarf issue in France and Germany in the context of neutrality of state.

However, the 1980s discussion on the headscarf differed from today's discussion. By getting the support of a working group in which the State Minister, Prof. Ekrem Pakdemirli, the chancellor of Istanbul University, Prof. Cem'i Demiroğlu, the head of the Council of Higher Education, Prof. İhsan Doğramacı, and Prime Minister Turgut Özal persuaded President Kenan Evren that the headscarf should be used in universities in a uniform and orderly manner rather than the use of the headscarf in different shapes, forms and colors. The group also succeeded in getting the approval of the army generals by persuading them that it was a part of fashion in countries such as Italy as proved by the pictures in fashion magazines. President Evren agreed with Doğramacı that the turban of the wife of State Minister Mehmet Keçeciler would cause no harm in universities. Doğramacı stated that they gave university lecturers and authorities who were against headscarf on secular grounds notes they had received from shops saying that 'they are turbans' (Doğramacı, 2008). In fact, in public speeches in different parts of the country, Kenan Evren said that the use of different styles and colours of headscarves in universities was not good for eyes. He further stressed that the turban, which was worn in a uniform style, was more modern and simple and only the turban could be used by university students to cover their heads.

Nevertheless, some universities prohibited the headscarf. The prohibition was implemented differently in different universities rather than it was implemented in a uniform manner throughout the country. When the coalition government faced military intervention with the decision of the National Security Council on 28 February 1997, Turkey entered a new phase of fundamentalist secularism, having radical effects on the headscarf issue in universities. The prohibition of the headscarf was implemented strictly in universities and even in highschoools providing religious education and consequently tens of thousands of female students left schools and some went to foreign countries to continue their education (Kentel, 2007; Arat, 1998).<sup>8</sup> Among those who chose to receive foreign education were there the daughters of the current prime minister, ministers, parliamentarians, prominent businesspersons and bureaucrats. In fact, the interaction between

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<sup>8</sup> Actually fundamentalist secularists state that they are not against the use of the headscarf by traditional uneducated housewives, but they oppose its use by educated politically active women who are employed in public jobs. This gives important clues about the modernism project. Kentel analyzes this attitude in the context of authoritarian secularism. Arat's work represents a detailed study on the political, economic and social adventures of women during the Republican period.

these conservative circles and the West is an interesting topic, which should be studied separately.

The February 28 process, which aimed at engineering social life once again, was interrupted at the end of 2002 by the election victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which had a conservative, religious identity. During the AKP rule, the initiators of the February 28 process and their supporters fell into real distress. The local elections in 2004 and the general elections in 2007 witnessed a radical increase in the power of the AKP. The military's intervention in politics in April 2007 to prevent the election as president of a person whose wife wore the headscarf deepened the division in society and resulted in a record increase in the votes of the AKP in the July 2007 elections (Falk, 2007: 51-55).<sup>9</sup> After the elections, Abdullah Gül, whose wife wears the headscarf, was elected as president and a law allowing wearing headscarves in universities was passed by the parliament. The law was supported by rightist parties and opposed by ethnic Kurdist, leftist and fundamentalist secularist parties. Eventually, the Constitutional Court annulled the law on the ground that it violated the principle of secularism in the constitution and the Principal State Counsel at the Court of Cassation brought a case on 16 March 2008 to the Constitutional Court demanding the dissolution of the AKP since it played role in the enactment of the headscarf law. The case was concluded on 30 July 2008 with the judgment that the AKP had been at the centre of activities violating secularism. However, the party was not dissolved; it was only deprived of half of the grant provided by the Treasury.

Thus, the headscarf issue had become such a serious problem that it nearly caused the dissolution of the democratically elected governing party. In this context, contrary to the claims of people who oppose the headscarf, the issue is not only an ideological problem, but it is a problem with a considerably strong social base. A problem not having a social basis would not be so explosive and long-lasting (Çaha, 2007).

In Turkey, there are numerous theoretical and empirical studies conducted on the turban or headscarf. There is a common and strong belief that Turkish people do not see anything wrong with the use of headscarf by women because they do not consider the headscarf as something contrary to secularism or as constituting a threat to the secular state structure (Hazar Eğitim Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği, 2007; A&G Research, 2008b;

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<sup>9</sup> The victory of the AKP is occasionally depicted by the Western media as a victory by Islamists against secularism.

Oğuzhan, 1998).<sup>10</sup> There is even strong support for allowing the use of the headscarf by people working in state departments. In this context, it could be said that headscarf is a problem created artificially by the state elite rather than being a problem that emerged in the social sphere. In fact, the main opposition party in Turkey has reached the point where it defines its identity on the basis of being opponent of the headscarf.<sup>11</sup>

The present study is based on a monographic field research conducted in the third quarter of 2007. However, the results of some other studies conducted on the headscarf between 2003 and 2007 have been used to provide a picture of the change over time.

## **b. Research Methodology**

*Respondents:* This study is based on fieldwork conducted in October 2007 (Table 1). Face-to-face interviews were carried out in 12 cities, which constitute a NUTS-1 regional system developed by the Turkish Statistical Institute to represent the whole of Turkey. Sex, marital status, age and the provinces of the sampling are listed in Table 1. We excluded the institutional population and sampled only adults over 18. The number of registered voters as of the July 27, 2007 general election was 42,799,303. Our sample size was 2903, with a confidence level of 99%, and confidence interval of .02391.

*Sampling Design:* While constructing the sample, we applied multi-staging, stratifying and clustering techniques. After determining provinces (stratified), districts and blocks (clustered, proportional to population), we also applied gender and age quotas. Once the blocks were fixed, then we selected the first dwelling units randomly and then followed systematic numbers.

*Questionnaire Design:* The questionnaire was structured and composed of both open-ended and close-ended questions. Almost all of our questions have been tested and implemented several times in various surveys in the past so reliability and validity of the questionnaire's items were assured.

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<sup>10</sup> Oğuzhan demonstrates that the social lives of tens of thousands of women have changed radically because of the prohibition of the headscarf.

<sup>11</sup> The CHP applied to the Constitutional Court on 27 February 2008 for the annulment of the law allowing the headscarf in universities.



*Procedure:* We used a cross-sectional survey method to gather data. A well-known and well-respected pollster (Pollmark Research) implemented and coded the survey. We, as researchers, accompanied Pollmark staff during every step of the fieldwork. A face-to-face interview technique was used to fill out questionnaires. Pollmark field inspectors fastidiously audited the interviewers. Experienced interviewers were used and retrained for the questionnaire. Besides telephone checking in the survey field, after collecting all questionnaires at the coding center, we carried out telephone checking to randomly selected interviewees as a second quality control. Data processing and debugging were the ordinary procedures.

*Data analysis:* Initially, we carried out a non-parametric test (chi square) for variables, which would be used later in more complex analyses. Then we conducted multi-dimensional scaling and factor analysis for data reduction. Thirdly, we analyzed the findings (new variables) obtained from factor analysis and implemented an ANOVA test to determine significance level.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics**

<i>Sex</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Female	1383	47.7
Male	1520	52.3
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Married	1876	64.6
Single	900	31.0
Widow/Divorced	127	4.4
<i>Age Structure</i>		
18-25	769	26.5
26-35	715	24.6
36-45	585	20.2
46-60	567	19.5
61 and over	266	9.2
<i>Provinces (NUTS 1)*</i>		
Adana (7 districts)	355	12.2
Ankara (11 districts)	340	11.7
Bursa (5 districts)	284	9.8
Erzurum (3 districts)	110	3.8
Gaziantep (5 districts)	186	6.4
Istanbul (18 districts)	516	17.8
İzmir (11 districts)	401	13.8
Kayseri (4 districts)	170	5.8
Malatya (3 districts)	97	3.3
Samsun (4 districts)	184	6.3
Tekirdağ (4 districts)	130	4.5
Trabzon (3 districts)	129	4.4

\*NUTS-1 - The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics.

## **2. Secularist Perception of Headscarf and the Nature of Demands of Women Wearing Headscarf**

In Turkey, the secular elite as well as women organizations including feminists do not have any sympathy toward women wearing the headscarf

and do not promote their welfare or do not support them in getting an education, participating in public life and benefiting from public goods (Seçkinelgin, 2006: 764; Marshall, "2005: 109). These groups have no plans to integrate the large headscarf-wearing part of society into community life and state structures and ideology. On the contrary, they act with hatred and enmity to the extent that they do not want to see women in headscarves in any part of community life, virtually leaving them to the mercy of their husbands and the Islamists. Demands for recognition and public participation coming from women in headscarves are delegitimized and rejected with the use of state feminism and state secularism (Arat, 2007: 17-23). In the eyes of secularists and feminists, the headscarf is the symbol of backwardness rather than of women conscious of their rights and freedoms and demands on this issue carry the threat of radical Islam and a theocratic state.

In secular and feminist minds, a society governed according to Islamic codes of conduct adopted and defended by Islamists cannot escape from becoming a backward society because the Islamist ideology envisages an unequal division of labor between men and women. Men fulfill duties in the public place while women are isolated from outside and are mainly responsible for bringing up children and doing daily housework. The headscarf serves as a symbol of this division of labor and the banning women from public life (Genel and Karaosmanoğlu, 2006; Göle, 1991).<sup>12</sup> According to this view, women do not cover their heads out of personal choice, but they are forced to do so by Islamist men. Islamist men do not want to see Islamist women publicly active and try to promote the view that all women should cover their head by insisting on the headscarf issue and encouraging Islamist women to defend the right of head covering. Their real purpose is the establishment of an Islamic regime in which all women have to wear the headscarf and are excluded from the public (Marshall, 2005: 109-110). According to this way of thinking, women defending the right to wear the Muslim headscarf are not seeking citizenship rights, but are initiating a revolt against the system. Therefore, they should be denied this right and should be excluded from the distribution of public goods. This is in fact a species of gender-based discrimination since Islamist men are not controlled and excluded from the public for their Islamic views and actions (Seçkinelgin, 2006: 763-764). Women are denied any role in the public

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<sup>12</sup> However, woman with headscarf is the indispensable element of the emergence of a new educated-conservative urban class. Göle takes woman as a focal point to explain the evolution of Islamic social experience.

sphere unless they adopt the secular codes of the state ideology and give up covering their heads. This view amounts to ignoring the dynamic nature of Islamist women's demands for receiving education and joining the workforce to improve and realize their personality. This also strengthens the patriarchal structure in the community, deserts women who are indeed wearing the headscarf because of family pressures, and deprives the community of the contribution of women wearing the headscarf for personal reasons including religious ones.

The simple desire of women wearing the headscarf is to enjoy the freedom of covering their heads and thus fulfill their religious duties. In this sense, the demands of women with the headscarf are related to the expression of cultural group rights and recognition by the society and the state (Keyman, 2007: 226). They feel that the headscarf is an indispensable part of their identity and they want to cover their heads in public in order not to experience a clash or division of identity in their inner lives. Tolerating the existence of different identities within the society and state is a requirement of pluralism and democracy and women who wear the headscarf merely want to be a part of this pluralism maintaining their distinct identity and appearance. In their eyes, covering their heads is not the denial of their personality as women, nor does it destroy their identities or make them useless for the community and humanity. Head covering does not limit a woman's actions and does not exclude her from public life, but, on the contrary, it justifies her presence in the public sphere and enables her to participate in community life actively and freely (Marshall, 2005: 111). Thus, like feminists and secular women, Islamist women are in favor of active participation of women in community life, which is dominated by men, whether Islamist or non-Islamist, and the improvement of the place and position of women in society. They represent "a rather liberated sort of identity which is not necessarily in line with the patriarchal relations usually represented within more conventional party political engagements" (Seçkinelgin, 2006: 763-764). Since Turkish secularist women and feminists are adamant supporters of the state ideology formulated predominantly by men, Islamist women are at least not behind their secularist and feminist counterparts in terms of rising up against or adopting a system formed outside their wills and actions.

Women who cover their heads are aware that a secular, democratic and plural state guarantees the recognition of their identity rights, too. Therefore, they are not intent on toppling the existent system – in fact, they do not have the power even if they wanted to do so – and their demands do not represent an uprising against secularism, democracy and modern life,

from which they benefit. On the other hand, they are determined to resist the efforts to have a certain ideology like the one preferred by the Turkish traditional secularist elite imposed on them. They do not challenge the secular order, but rather challenge the imposition of a particular identity adopted by a certain section in the society, which actually contradicts the secular and democratic approach. Women who wear the headscarf are opposed to state control over their Islamic identity and even over their bodies. They do not want the others to tell them what they should wear and what they should not. And yet, they seem to ally themselves with male-dominant pro-Islamic circles not only because they feel closer to them on the ideological grounds, but more importantly, they find themselves isolated and deserted within the community because of the negative attitudes of secular circles and especially women organizations and feminists.

### **3. Public Perceptions of Wearing the Headscarf**

The prohibition against wearing the headscarf in universities has been the focus of discussions on secularism in Turkey (Plesner, 2005; Akyol, 2007; Kuru, 2007).<sup>13</sup> While the headscarf, an object worn by women, not women themselves, is involved in politics heavily, women are excluded from the public life and politics by this object (Erdem, 2007a).<sup>14</sup> Political parties try to gain the votes of the people by either defending or opposing the right of women to cover their head, but women wearing headscarf cannot participate in political life as deputies in the parliament and they cannot attend universities in order to get influential jobs to improve their situation. Their exclusion from universities and public jobs is justified by state authorities on the grounds that they and their attitudes constitute a serious threat to the survival of the regime. This means that the existence of women wearing the headscarf is itself a threat to the regime and their right of freedom of dress is tolerated at the expense of interests of the state. While state authorities maintain this way of thinking, the perceptions of the public on the issue gains importance in terms of demonstrating the difference between ordinary

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<sup>13</sup> Defending the freedom to wear the headscarf at universities has been the primary excuse to close down political parties in Turkey. Akyol accuses secular fundamentalism of constituting real threat to democracy, freedom and security not only in Turkey, but across the world. Kuru deals with affirmative evolution of a political party and a religious NGO.

<sup>14</sup> Headscarf wearing by women is very popular in Turkey. About 70% of women wear a headscarf. In recent years this ratio has been rising.

people and the elite concerning threats to the state. The rate of people who believe that allowing the headscarf in universities is contrary to the principle of secularism is 26%, while 31% of people believe that allowing the headscarf in the state sector conflicts with secularism. Thus, the Turkish people strongly support the freedom of women to wear the headscarf not only for university students but also female civil servants and wives of statesmen and bureaucrats. It can be concluded from this that the headscarf is seen as a subject of private life (Table 2 and 3) (Erdem, 2007a; A&G Research Company, 2008b).<sup>15</sup>

As this data demonstrates, the great majority of Turkish people does not see anything wrong or perceive any threat in allowing female university students and civil servants to cover their heads. In their minds, the headscarf issue does not undermine secularism, which they consider it an important element of the Turkish state order. If there were any doubts about this perception amongst the Turkish people, the election process of the Turkish president in 2007 removed them. When the Abdullah Gül's candidacy for presidency was announced in April, his election was prevented by an extraordinary intervention of the military and the judiciary, who opposed it because Gül's wife wore the headscarf. The general elections in July 2007, which were moved forward because of the deadlock in the Parliament on the presidency election, brought the AKP back to the power with an even greater majority because of the people's sympathy toward Abdullah Gül and the injustice done to him. Abdullah Gül announced his candidacy for presidency again by stating that the people approved of their position by increasing their support. The people showed no negative reaction to the election of Abdullah Gül as president even though his wife covered her head. The referendum was organized to prevent the intervention of non-political powers (such as the military and the judiciary) in presidency election on the grounds of secularism and other issues concerning religion and the people ratified this move by believing that such issues did not undermine the nature of the state (Çavdar, 2007).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Tarhan Erdem obtained closely parallel data from a survey. While the percentage of people against the freedom to wear the turban at universities is only 22%, the percentage of people against this freedom at government services is about 19%. In addition, only 16.7% of people think that the turban is a symbol of anti-secularism. Adil Gur's findings are also similar to these conclusions.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, the headscarf worn by Gul's wife is allegedly a barrier for the president. Çavdar studies cases of other civil presidents.

In the eyes of the traditional elite, the election of someone, whose wife covers her head, as president would be a serious development, which would undermine the regime and would replace the existing one with a theocratic regime. However, it should not be forgotten that the scope of the issue was more comprehensive than this. The presidency was the last position in the hands of the traditional elite. Losing it would bring serious repercussions for them. The presidency was the symbol of the Turkish Republic and a president of religious origins would not be good in terms of the secular Turkish Republic's prestige at home or in the international arena. Moreover, the president had comprehensive powers in appointing officials to high levels of state authority and could change the character of the state by appointing religious people to such important positions. The traditional elite has experienced a real difficulty in adapting itself to such a change, which has led some marginal groups to initiate inclusive violent and non-violent actions aimed at interrupting and reversing the process. At the same time, the people have been persuaded that the president is sincere in complying with and working for the secular and democratic structure of the state. They believe that a first lady covering her head does not constitute any problem for the state. In fact, there are even some people who believe that wearing the headscarf in universities and state positions is contrary to secularism but that the headscarf of the president's wife does not undermine secularism. In fact, those who perceive it as a problem constitute only one fifth of the Turkish society.

**Table 2. Attitudes towards the Headscarf: University Students, Civil Servants and Spouses of Statesmen**

	Yes	No	No Opinion	Total	Chi-Square
If university students who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	26.3%	70.3%	3.4%	100.0%	2126.235 (.000)
If state officials who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	31.3%	64.0%	4.7%	100.0%	1615.492 (.000)
Does the headscarf of President Abdullah Gül's wife constitute a problem for you?	20.9%	76.8%	2.3%	100.0%	2744.698 (.000)

Asymp. Significance levels are in parentheses.

**Table 3. Opinions toward the Headscarf (Statesman, Bureaucrats, Students)**

		2003-11 %	2005-1 %
Do you support freedom of the headscarf at universities?	Yes	63.0	71.8
	No	30.9	22.7
	No Opinion	6.1	5.6
	Total	100.0	100.0
		2003-11 %	2005-1 %
Do you support freedom of the headscarf for civil servants?	Yes	51.7	65.0
	No	40.1	29.0
	No Opinion	8.2	5.9
	Total	100.0	
			2006-5 %
Do you think the freedom of the headscarf for university students would be a problem for secularism?	Yes		26.1
	No		68.9
	No Opinion		5.0
	Total		100.0
			2006-5 %
Do you think the freedom of the headscarf for civil servants would be a problem for secularism?	Yes		30.1
	No		64.5
	No Opinion		5.4
	Total		100.0
			2006-3 %
Do the headscarves of some high ranking bureaucrats' wives constitute a problem for you?	Yes		22.6
	No		73.3
	No Opinion		4.2
	Total		100.0
			2006-3 %
Would the headscarf of a future president's wife constitute a problem for you?	Yes		24.1
	No		72.9
	No Opinion		3.0
	Total		100.0
			2006-3 %
Does the headscarf of the prime minister's wife constitute a problem for you?	Yes		22.8
	No		74.4
	No Opinion		2.7
	Total		100.0



### a. Sociopolitical Identities

The rate of belief that allowing university students to wear the headscarf is contrary to secularism is the lowest in conservative-nationalists (17%), higher in modernist-Kemalists (33.1%) and the highest in social democrats (40.4%). The same rates are seen in the belief that allowing state officials to wear the headscarf is contrary to secularism. And finally, the same order is observed among different sections of the society in being unhappy about the headscarf of President Abdullah Gül's wife, but the rates for all the sections are lower on this issue (Table 4).

**Table 4. Attitudes towards the Headscarf: Sociopolitical Identities**

		Modernist-Kemalist	Conservative-Nationalist	Leftist-Social Democrat
If university students who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	Yes	33.1%	17.0%	40.4%
	F test	87.446 (.000)	149.075 (.000)	65.465 (.000)
If state officials who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	Yes	39.5%	20.7%	44.1%
	F test	103.868 (.000)	174.842 (.000)	54.972 (.000)
Does the headscarf of President Abdullah Gül's wife constitute a problem for you?	Yes	25.8%	11.3%	36.3%
	F test	53.751 (.000)	208.549 (.000)	79.881 (.000)

Significance levels are in parentheses.

### b. Socioeconomic Statuses

The rate of belief that allowing the headscarf in both universities and public offices undermines secularism is higher with a high economic status. It seems that consciousness of and sensitivity with regard to secularism increases in higher parts of the social ladder. If it is evaluated from the perspective of enlightenment, it might be asserted that people have a greater tendency to understand the evolution and importance of the principle of secularism through education and that people whose level of education and income is lower cannot appreciate the importance of secularism for the state and society. The rate of people who consider the headscarf of the President's

wife as a problem, too, rises with the rise in the socio-economic level (Table 5).

**Table 5. Attitudes towards the Headscarf: Socioeconomic Statuses**

		Low SES	Middle SES	High SES	F test
If university students who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	Yes	22.3%	28.7%	34.6%	11.675 (.000)
If state officials who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	Yes	25.7%	34.0%	44.0%	27.388 (.000)
Does the headscarf of President Abdullah Gül's wife constitute a problem for you?	Yes	16.6%	22.1%	33.0%	20.973 (.000)

Significance levels are in parentheses.

### c. Political Party Preferences

It is possible to divide people in terms of their political party preferences into two groups with regard to their approach to permitting the headscarf to be worn in universities and public offices. There is a great distinction between the followers of other parties and CHP supporters, who think in considerably high rates (61% and 66%) that wearing the headscarf in universities and public offices is contrary to secularism. The rates of people defending the freedom of head covering are much higher than the rate of those who do not defend this freedom among followers of other parties. The CHP followers also consider the headscarf of the president's wife a problem at the rate of 56% (Table 6). The CHP's vote rate in the July 2007 elections was considerably lower than the number of leftist and socialist people in Turkey and probably includes the sections which have higher levels of income and education and which fear being replaced by people belonging to the periphery of the political, social and cultural elite. Since the votes of the CHP do not include the votes of people who suffer economic and social difficulties (traditional power sources of socialist parties), the high rate of CHP followers on secularism and headscarf issue comes as no surprise. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the attitude toward the headscarf is shaped by political party preferences rather than socio-political identities and is directed by the rhetoric of these parties.

**Table 6. Attitudes towards the Headscarf: Political Party Preferences**

	AKP	CHP	MHP	DTP	Others	Undecided/ None.	Total	F test
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
If university students who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	6.9%	61.2%	27.5%	36.2%	38.7%	36.5%	26.3%	100.360 (.000)
If state officials who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	9.6%	65.7%	35.5%	39.7%	43.9%	45.3%	31.3%	95.645 (.000)
Does the headscarf of President Abdullah Gül's wife constitute a problem for you?	3.9%	56.3%	22.6%	30.9%	31.7%	25.0%	20.9%	107.350 (.000)

Significance levels are in parentheses.

#### d. Ethnic Structure

The approach to the headscarf issue differs greatly according to ethnic origins (Erdem, 2007c; Erdem, 2007b).<sup>17</sup> The rate of Turks who consider allowing the headscarf in universities and public offices contrary to secularism is considerably higher in comparison to the rate of Kurds (Table 7). Similarly, Turks view the headscarf of the president's wife as a problem at a considerably higher rate than Kurds. The attitudes of Kurds on the AKP and secularism conform to the general model, but their approach to the headscarf issue is very mild. Kurds generally live in rural areas and have been less successful in adopting modern life. Kurdish women cover their heads not only for religious reasons, but more often as a requirement of tradition. Therefore, Kurds are more inclined to accept the wearing of the headscarf by university students, public officials and even the president's wife. Actually, they also seek recognition of their cultural rights and are more interested in getting their rights than the denial of the rights of others.

**Table 7. Attitudes towards the Headscarf: Ethnic Structure**

		TURK	KURD	Others	Total	F Test
If university students who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	Yes	27.1%	17.0%	28.8%	26.3%	3.869 (.021)
If state officials who want to cover their heads are allowed to do so, will this be contrary to secularism in your opinion?	Yes	31.8%	21.2%	37.3%	31.3%	5.510 (.004)
Does the headscarf of President Abdullah Gül's wife constitute a problem for you?	Yes	21.7%	11.6%	22.7%	20.9%	6.439 (.002)

Significance levels are in parentheses.

#### 4. Conclusion

It can be said that the headscarf is a tool in the power struggle in Turkey. It is a procedural tool used in the struggle for power rather than an essential

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<sup>17</sup> Erdem provides detailed demographic findings on Turkey.

element of the conflict with the actual representatives of the democratic/secular regime. In fact, that head covering should be left to individual choice is widely approved by the society. Politicians who make the headscarf a tool of political power struggle become either winners or losers of the polarization the issue creates. The headscarf is a good example of the fact that the manufactured conflict between the state elite and social leaders is symbolized through religious values. This struggle represents that power struggle and the competition for economic power which are conducted through the ways and the means run contrary to the democratic idea. It has been tried over and over again and has proven to produce beneficial results. While those who demand freedom of choice with regard to the headscarf have come to power through legitimate means, leftist secular people want to come to power through illegitimate ways such as encouraging the military to capture power through a military coup and calling the judiciary and the media to come to their help.

The data on which this article is based were collected during fieldwork conducted in October 2007 throughout Turkey. In addition, the results of other studies on the headscarf issue conducted between 2003 and 2007 were also utilized in order to see the development over the course of time. The following conclusions were reached at the end of the fieldwork: a great majority of Turkish society thinks that the demands of university students, wives of statesmen and civil servants to wear the headscarf do not contradict secularism and further that an individuals' choice to wear headscarf is not a problem. Those who are offended by the freedom of the individual to wear the headscarf or who believe that it contradicts the tenets of secularism constitutes a small part of the society. Thus, a social consensus on the freedom of headscarf can be said to exist in Turkey.

The approach of people of differing socio-economic statuses (SES) toward the headscarf issue demonstrates a meaningful differentiation. The positive attitude toward the freedom to wear the headscarf decreases as the SES increases. This is an interesting finding because, contrary to traditional theoretical and empirical views, leftist-socialists in Turkey generally belong to the high SES and generally hold an anti-freedom attitude in social contexts.

The attitude of socio-political groups was also observed in political parties having parallel tendencies. While the supporters of conservative-nationalist parties defend the freedom to wear the headscarf in higher rates, the supporters of leftist-social democrat parties have serious doubts about this freedom.

With regard to ethnicity, higher rates in defending the freedom to wear the headscarf were observed among people of Kurdish origin, while other ethnic groups and Turks supported this freedom at relatively lower rates.

Consequently, it can be seen that the headscarf prohibition has no social basis. As it would be a mistake to see the headscarf prohibition as an element of the secularism project, defining an ideology on the basis of the headscarf, an important religious symbol in Turkey, presents a risk to the progress of democracy, and only serves to increase political polarization. Formulating public policies on the basis of the headscarf prohibition will only help destroy social peace. Social engineering projects, which aim to change or destroy political, religious and ethnic positions of citizens, are not permitted in Western-type contemporary democracies. There is no headscarf problem in Turkey in a sociological sense, the real problem lies in the totalitarian/authoritarian approach which stems from groundless fears and/or ideological choices of the social elite or economic power centers.

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