

# SECULARISM AND ATHEISM IN THE TURKISH PUBLIC SPHERE

*As a relatively new actor in Turkish civil society, the Atheism Association has been active since 2014 as the first legally recognized organization of atheism in Turkey and in all majority-Muslim countries. This piece is an investigation of how this public assertion of atheism is put into practice in the context of rising religious conservatism. The recent atheist activism and advocacy for human rights of those who do not adhere to any theistic religion aim at pushing the limits of the freedom of expression/belief/conscience as well as expanding the secular in public space. This makes atheist activists both radical critics of a deeply institutionalized secularism in Turkey and forerunners of a future secularism embedded in a pluralist democracy.*

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“I nvisibility” was what political scientist Binnaz Toprak and her research group emphasized in their report about “neighborhood pressure” on secular groups in selected Anatolian cities. After conducting face-to-face interviews in 12 Anatolian cities for this research between December 2007 and July 2008, they found that many Alevis as well as the few remaining non-Muslims of Anatolia were obliged to be “invisible” as a survival strategy: They effectively isolated themselves from the city’s life dominated by Sunni Muslims.<sup>1</sup> It would not be difficult to speculate that the increasing visibility of Sunni Islam in recent years has accentuated this involuntary choice of invisibility for not only Alevis and non-Muslims but also for non-religious groups or conscious unbelievers who are outside of the Sunni-Muslim norm. However, one can also observe a few but critical reverse trends that have emerged in reaction to the state-led Islamization of the public sphere under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government.<sup>2</sup> An important development in this respect has been the foundation of the Atheism Association (AA) in the spring of 2014. The association was founded by nontheist citizens who chose to be visible in public and began to take action as a solidarity group defending their constitutional rights under the secular regime. This piece will focus on this new civil society organization’s expansion of the secular space in today’s Turkey and will be followed by a discussion on its tense relationship with the secularist legacy.

### *Atheism Unveiled: The Foundation of the Association*

The first Atheist Association in Turkey was founded a few weeks ago. This is not only the first atheist organization in Turkey, but also the first one in the large region of Middle East and Caucasus. And the first one in a country with a predominantly Muslim population. In a way, this is a historic event. History books in the future may mention this as a note.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Binnaz Toprak et al., *Türkiye’de Farklı Olmak: Din ve Muhafazakârlık Ekseninde Ötekileştirilenler* [To Be Different in Turkey: Religion, Conservatism and Otherization] (Istanbul: Metis, 2012), p. 116. English version of the report can be reached at <http://aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr>

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the recent Islamization in the field of education via reforms aimed at “Strengthening National Values and Islamic Morality,” see Deniz Kandiyoti and Zühre Emanet, “Education as Battleground: The Capture of Minds in Turkey,” *Globalizations*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (2017). For an analysis of Islamization with a focus on social policies centered increasingly on family and faith-based voluntary organizations, see Ayhan Kaya, “Islamisation of Turkey under the AKP Rule: Empowering Family, Faith, and Charity,” *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 47-69. For accounts of the institutional restructuring of the *Diyânet* (Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey) and its recent expansion with a conservative agenda, see Ceren Lord, “The Story Behind the Rise of Turkey’s Ulema,” *Middle East Report*, No. 283 (Summer 2017), [www.merip.org/mero/mero020418](http://www.merip.org/mero/mero020418); and Sevgi Adak, “Turkish Secularism Revisited,” *The Middle East in London*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (October–November 2017), pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Aydın Türk, “The First Atheist Association in Turkey is founded,” Personal blog: [turkishatheist.net](http://turkishatheist.net), 3 May 2014. Another association under the name of “*Ateistler Derneği*” [Association of Atheists] was also founded in May 2014. This association is no longer active (<http://ozgurduşuncehareketi.org/ateistler-derneği/>). Romano claims that this second atheist organization merged with the AA in 2016. Onur Romano, “Örgütlü Ateizm, Aydınlik Bir Yarın İçin Tek Seçenek,” [Organized Atheism, the Only Option for an Enlightened Future] *Ateist Dergi* (January 2017), <http://ateist-dergi.com/yazi/ateist-dergi-21-sayi-ocak-2017/orgutlu-ateizm-aydinlik-bir-yarin-icin-tek-secenek>

In his blog, this was how Aydın Türk – an atheist internet activist for Turkish atheism since 1999<sup>4</sup> – celebrated the foundation of the AA in Istanbul in April 2014. Soon after its foundation the AA was recognized by and invited to a meeting of the Delegation of the European Union to Turkey and has had considerable media appearances since then. According to the description offered in the association’s website:

*“There has been a growing Turkish atheist presence on the Internet in the form of discussion groups with tens of thousands of members.”*

Atheism Association, is a legal institution, organizing educational projects on science, philosophy, theology; which is purified from dogmatic prejudices and beliefs that the general public agrees upon; struggles institutionally against religious, philosophical or ideological constraints imposed over the society; encouraging the free expression of thoughts of Turkish atheists on legal ground.<sup>5</sup>

Currently, the AA has around 290 registered members from various cities in Turkey and abroad. In addition to Istanbul, there are regular meetings organized in Ankara, İzmir, Antalya, and Eskişehir.<sup>6</sup>

Atheism in Turkey and the debate around it date back to the 19th century when the early waves of materialism, positivism, secular modernism, socialism, and communism had their impact in Ottoman intellectual, social, and political life, as elsewhere in the Islamic world.<sup>7</sup> However, although atheism has been intrinsic to ideologies such as various interpretations of socialism, anarchism, or feminism, it has been very rarely asserted in the public because of the risk of alienating the pious majority of the society. The overwhelming tendency among secularist and/or leftist intelligentsia throughout the 20th century has been a reformist strategy aiming to accommodate Islam with the needs of the specific ideological agenda.

In the last century, on the other hand, expressions of atheism and non-religion have become much more visible, especially because of the global rise of the internet in the

<sup>4</sup> Aydın Türk is the founder of two most well-known atheist online platforms, “Ateizm.org - Ateizm ve Din” [Atheism and Religion] and “Ateistforum” [Atheist Forum], and the author of the book *Ateizmi Anlamak* [Understanding Atheism] (Istanbul: Propaganda, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The Atheism Association homepage: <http://www.ateizmdernegi.org.tr>

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication with Süleyman Karan, one of the founders of the AA, Istanbul, 1 February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of atheism in Muslim-majority countries see Samuli Schielke, “The Islamic World,” in Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 524-533.

21st century. As Schielke notes, the more recent radical expression of atheism “has partly to do with new media that make it easier to communicate controversial views, and partly with the conditions of the Islamic revival that give atheism a different critical edge.”<sup>8</sup> Since the late 1990s, there has been a growing Turkish atheist presence on the Internet in the form of discussion groups with tens of thousands of members. Online communities emerged from among the most popular of these websites, such as *turandursun*, *ateizm*, and *Ateistforum*, which have been continuously exposed to threats and cyber attacks. The foundation of the AA was a response to an important need, as pointed out by Türk: to take action against the persistent intolerance, discrimination, and harassment against the members of atheist or non-theist online platforms.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the slogan that appears on the main page of the AA’s website is “We are not alone anymore!” As a matter of fact, advocacy and legal support for atheists subject to offenses, threats, hate crimes, and unjust treatment is the first objective of the AA:

Atheism Association; aims to encourage the free expression of philosophical views of people who reject the religions, denominations, and dogmatic beliefs without concerns, prevent these people from being oppressed, lynched, insulted, humiliated by members of the religions, because of their philosophical standings, both at home and in social and public circles, and defend their legal rights by volunteering or paid attorneys, if necessary.<sup>10</sup>

Founders of the AA emphasize on every occasion that they do not intend to promote or propagate atheism.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, among the objectives of the association is also to inform the Turkish public of “a strong and widespread misinformation about what it means to be Atheist.”<sup>12</sup> Since its foundation, association members have been asked about their understanding of atheism in interviews by several journalists in newspapers and TV programs as well as being invited to meetings in university campuses such as the one in the Theology Faculty of Istanbul University, where they were engaged in intense debates with students.<sup>13</sup>

The absence of a single common understanding of atheism and the diversity of individual positions within the organization, which reflects its pluralist approach,

<sup>8</sup> Schielke (2013), p. 529.

<sup>9</sup> Aydın Türk, “The First Atheist Association,” Personal blog: [turkishatheist.net](http://turkishatheist.net), 3 May 2014.

<sup>10</sup> “Objectives of Atheism Association,” <https://www.ateizmdernegi.org.tr/dernek/amac>

<sup>11</sup> Tanıl Bora et al., “Ateizm Derneği üyeleri ile söyleşi: ‘Bizler varız ve buradayız demek istiyoruz’” [Interview with the members of the Atheism Association: “We do exist and we want to say that we are here”], *Birikim*, June-July 2015, No: 314-315, pp. 146-158. See also, “Türkiye’de ateist sayısı neden arttı?” [Why did the number of atheists increase in Turkey?] *Radikal*, 23 August 2015, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/turkiyede-ateist-sayisi-neden-artti-1420188/>

<sup>12</sup> Report presented in a roundtable discussion of the Delegation of the European Union to Turkey: “The Association of Atheism on Legal Personality in Turkey,” Istanbul, May 2014, <https://www.ateizmdernegi.org.tr>

<sup>13</sup> “İstanbul İlahiyat’ta Ateizm Konferansı’nı ayakta izlediler,” *Gazete Vatan*, 26 November 2015, <http://www.gazete-vatan.com/istanbul-ilahiyat-ta-ateizm-konferansi-ni-ayakta-izlediler-888299-yasam/>

often led to ambiguity and many misunderstandings – more often to confusion among those who expected a single and convincing definition of atheism. This disappointment could be observed in reactions and comments given to such interviews in online discussion groups or video sites such as YouTube. The spokespersons of the AA explained in many interviews the impossibility of representing an all-encompassing atheist position and emphasized the variety of philosophical standings related to atheism.<sup>14</sup>

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In the first months of their foundation, The AA also tried to distinguish itself from other existing atheist initiatives involved in specific political undertakings or online youth groups engaged in a vulgar defense of atheism. The AA defined the “axis of their organization as atheism/non-theism beyond any political and ideological divisions.”<sup>15</sup> By announcing that they were “open to all non-theists,” the founders of the AA attempted to appeal to all individuals who did not adhere to theism. Put differently, members of the association shared a non-theist position which denotes the *absence* of a belief in a supreme creator/god giving revelation to humans; a position that applied to all varieties of atheism.<sup>16</sup> The Turkish translations for atheism and non-theism, *Tanrıtanımazlık* and *Tanrı’sızlık*,<sup>17</sup> though they can be used by AA members to explain their positions, are not often preferred.

<sup>14</sup> For one of several such TV interviews available online, see: Ceviz Kabağu - Ateizm Derneği Kurucularıyla Söyleşi, Sokak TV, 2 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogUOwWuYk24>. A member of the association, Alper Öçkoymaz, argues that they do not “accept any discriminatory categorization between atheists” and “they represent both atheists and non-theists as well as agnostics and deists who all go through different paths along their research on science, religion, and culture, but they all end up in the inevitable conclusion that the universe cannot and need not to be explained by an intelligent design.” Tanıl Bora et al., “Ateizm Derneği üyeleri ile söyleşi,” [Interview with the members of the Atheism Association] pp. 149-150.

<sup>15</sup> Ateizm Derneği Girişimi Basın Açıklaması, “Ateizm Derneği bağımsız bir girişimdir,” [The AA initiative press release: The Atheism Association is an independent initiative] 24 April 2014, <https://www.ateizmderneği.org.tr/haber/ateizm-derneği-bağımsız-bir-girişimdir>

<sup>16</sup> In one of the most recent scholarly collective works on this topic, *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, atheism is defined as “the absence of the belief in the existence of a God or gods.” In the introductory chapter to the Handbook, Stephen Bullivant argues that this definition of atheism “permits it to function as an umbrella concept, comprising a range of significantly related positions and phenomena” which include both “negative atheism,” i.e. absence of belief in any god (a category which includes agnosticism), and “positive atheism,” i.e. belief in the absence of any god (a category which includes positions such as Soviet scientific atheism or New Atheism). Stephen Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism’” in Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 25-26.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the terms Atheism (*Tanrıtanımazlık*) and Non-Theism (*Tanrı’sızlık*), see Ahmet İnel, “Tanrıtanımazlık mı, Tanrı’sızlık mı?” (Atheism, or Non-Theism?) *Birikim*, No. 314-315 (June-July 2015), pp. 14-18. İnel describes non-theists as those “do not adopt atheism as a doctrine but pursue a life without any recourse to and place given to the idea of God and religion.” Accordingly, atheism (*Tanrıtanımazlık*) as a doctrine which rejects the existence of God (i.e. positive atheism, defined above by Bullivant) should be differentiated from non-theism (*Tanrı’sızlık*) which implies the absence of the belief in god’s existence (i.e. negative atheism).

“Atheism” is, in other words, an umbrella term for the members and sympathizers of the AA who have a wide range of positions, from agnostics to apatheists, or non-religious.<sup>18</sup> The insistence on the use of this term and not any other is deliberate. This conscious choice reflects the determination of the founders of the association to challenge the widespread denigratory use of the word atheism in an attempt to reclaim it and challenge the related negative stereotypes. In the report that the AA presented in the roundtable discussion of the Delegation of the European Union to Turkey in May 2014, the association provided an explanation of the term “atheist” as used in the association’s name: “The name Atheist does not solely represent the individual Atheist but in a broader sense is a reaction to the abuse of the term ‘Atheist’ in defamation and application toward all non-Muslims.”<sup>19</sup>

The AA offered an empowering platform for atheists in a context in which examples of hate speech against atheism have been common even within the highest ranks of the government.<sup>20</sup> The association itself has been targeted several times, receiving insults or death threats. Its former chair, Tolga İnci, was threatened by the chair of the Sharia Association in 2015, who was later tried in court and fined. The AA’s current chair, Zehra Pala, has been exposed to insults and various cases of hate speech, as well.<sup>21</sup> Many members of the board of the AA have lost their jobs or have been accused and tried on the charges of offending religious values on the basis of the penal code.<sup>22</sup> The Turkish Penal Code contains an article (Article 216/3), which can be interpreted as detrimental to the freedom of expression of atheists. A primary objective of the AA is to push for the amendment or the total abolishment of this law, which is used to prosecute atheists for expressing their opinions in public.<sup>23</sup> Even the website of the AA was shut down in March 2015 on the basis of this article for a few months.

<sup>18</sup> Personal Communication with Süleyman Karan.

<sup>19</sup> Atheism Association Report: “The Association of Atheism on Legal Personality in Turkey,” <https://ateizmdernegi.org.tr/upload/TheAssociationOfAtheismOnLegalPersonalityInTurkey.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> The most notorious of these was that of the then Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s statement in February 2014 targeting METU (Middle East Technical University) students who resisted the building of a highway passing through their campus. Speaking at a rally in the western province of Balıkesir: “We opened a boulevard in Ankara on Monday [Feb. 24] despite the [protests of] leftists, despite those atheists. They are terrorists, but the [main opposition Republican People’s Party] CHP is calling them ‘our youth.’” “Turkish PM Erdoğan called protesters atheists, leftists, terrorists,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 28 February 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-erdogan-calls-protesters-atheists-leftists-terrorists-63068>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the AA chair Zehra Pala with IBKA (International League of Non-religious and Atheists), 17 August 2016, <https://www.ateizmdernegi.org.tr/haber/ibka-uluslararasi-dinsizler-ve-ateistler-birligi-danisma-konseyi-uyesi-arzu-tokerin-ateizm-derneği-baskani-zehra-pala-ile-roportajı>

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication with Karan.

<sup>23</sup> The third section of the article 216 states that “Anyone who openly denigrates the religious values of a part of the population, if the act is susceptible to breach public peace, shall be sentenced to imprisonment of from six months to one year.” Report: “The Association of Atheism on Legal Personality in Turkey”. An internationally known pianist Fazıl Say, a self-declared atheist, was put on trial for violating this law was sentenced to serve 10 months of prison - a sentence that was later on suspended- in April 2013. “Pianist Fazıl Say Receives Suspended Prison Sentence,” *Bianet*, 16 April 2013, <http://bianet.org/english/english/145879-pianist-fazil-say-receives-suspended-prison-sentence>

The AA's call to atheists for "coming out" and speaking out despite the risks of defamation, stigmatization, and even death threats could reach sympathizers of atheist activism who outnumber the relatively small group of registered members of the association. An online monthly publication *Ateist Dergi*<sup>24</sup> (The Atheist Magazine), which was published in 21 issues from January 2014 to

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January 2017 (albeit lapses in publication), became another channel through which atheists could feel less isolated. *Ateist Dergi* included a special page titled "How did I become an atheist?" for those who wanted to share their story of "enlightenment" and their experiences of "conversion" from theism to atheism. In these pages, atheists – mostly using pseudonyms – reflected on their personal journey, how they began to question religion generally in their teenage years, and how they came across sources – books, blogs, documentary films, etc. – which radically changed their worldviews. A strikingly common turning point in these experiences of questioning and consequent loss of faith in the existence of God is the exposure to the Turkish exegesis of the Qur'an and disappointment with its content.<sup>25</sup> Another turning point during atheists' "awakening," as experienced by the writers of the magazine, is their discovery of the works of Turan Dursun (1934-1990), a theologian and a fierce critique of Islamic texts and the prophet Muhammed. Dursun was assassinated in 1990 in Istanbul, and his books have sold tens of thousands of copies since his murder. For many atheists, scientist Carl Sagan or pioneers of New Atheism such as Richard Dawkins provide further exposure to a scientific cosmology, which replaces the theological one.<sup>26</sup> Although these "conversion" stories reflect interesting overlaps among different individual experiences, more systematic research on this issue is needed.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The magazine "Ateist Dergi" began to be published in January 2014 by the initiative "Ateistler Meclisi" [Atheist Assembly] who a few months later would found the Association of Atheists. Romano, "Örgütlü Ateizm."

<sup>25</sup> 16 out of 30 personal accounts reflect this often "shocking" experience resulting in an atheist or non-theist conviction. According to the survey conducted by a pro-government research company in the summer of 2017, only 17 percent of the respondents said that they read the Turkish exegesis of the Koran. The writer of the "research report" describes this finding as "astonishing" and notes "Unfortunately, we live in a country where people do not know the meaning of the prayers although they recite them in average 40 times during their 5 daily prayers and they repeat this incessantly for years." MAK Danışmanlık (Mehmet Ali Kulat), *Türkiye'de Toplumun Dine ve Dini Değerlere Bakışı Araştırması* [Research on the Society's Approach to Religion and Religious Values in Turkey] (Ankara, 2017), p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> "How did I become an atheist?" page of several issues of the Atheist Magazine. The online archive can reach at <http://ateistdergi.com/sayilar>

<sup>27</sup> For a recent qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015 and 2016 with 12 self-identified Turkish atheists, reached using a snowballing technique, see: Tayfun Kasapoğlu, "Religion and Politics in Contemporary Turkey: Attitudes of Atheists," *KÜLTÜR İR VİSÜOMENÉ. Sosyaliniş yirimiş žurnalas*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (2017), pp. 97-113.

### *Atheism and Secularism*

Is this recent visibility of Turkish atheism an inevitable result of the radical secularist legacy of the Republic? If so, why was such an association not founded until 2014 despite there being no official obstacle for it within the legal framework of the existing secular democracy? Throughout the history of the Republic, the popular stigmatization of atheism – associating it with deviance, immorality, and degeneracy, as in the case of Alevis and non-Muslim minorities<sup>28</sup> – has resulted in violent assaults, massacres, and assassinations against intellectuals known as atheists such as Turan Dursun. These are understandable reasons to delay the formation of any association, which makes the establishment of AA a courageous step in the history of Turkish democracy. In other words, while secularization made it possible for people to adopt atheism as a private disposition, this has not created a secure living space either for atheists or for religious minorities in Turkey.

Put differently, atheism is not an inevitable extension of Turkey's secularist policies. Rather, the peculiar characteristics of Turkish secularism prevented atheists from "coming out of the closet" for many decades. Unlike what Islamists claim, proponents of Turkish secularism have promoted neither atheism nor irreligion. On the contrary, any association promoting such views have been secularists' biggest fear. Secularists have countered their religious/conservative/Islamist opponents' accusations of irreligion or atheism by returning the same "offense" on them by claiming to be the upholders of "true" Islam.<sup>29</sup> The secularist tradition of suppressing religious opponents by returning the tag of "irreligion" (*dinsizlik*) back to them, has been a legacy of the Ottoman intellectual polemics of the late 19th century and has in the long run eroded the political legitimacy of "irreligion" or an atheist position, as indicated by Burak Onaran.<sup>30</sup>

Secularism as a political agenda for diminishing the role of religion in public life has been circumscribed from the early Republican era onwards within the discursive boundaries of Islam. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) could be framed as an institution of the secular state as long as it promoted the "true" Islam as imagined or projected by Kemalist secularism. Although constitutionally citizenship has not been grounded on any religion, Islam – specifically its Sunni-Hanafi school – continued to be seen as a major constituent of Turkish national identity and a firm base for national unity. *Diyanet*, through its expansive administrative network of

<sup>28</sup> Toprak et al. give an example to how Alevis are perceived within religious conservative bureaucrats and academics, citing the words of a university's principal who called Alevis "devils, separatists, and atheists." Toprak et al., *Türkiye'de Farklı Olmak* (2012), p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> Umut Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010)

<sup>30</sup> Burak Onaran, "Dinsiz Dindarlık," [Irreligious Religiosity] *Birikim*, Vol. 314-315 (June-July 2015), pp. 174-179.

mosques and state-employed imams, as well as the Ministry of Education, through the compulsory religion courses in primary and secondary schools, has reinforced the Islamic/Sunni/Hanafi bias of Turkish secularism and further delegitimized any non-Muslim creed or unbelief. In short, as noted above, atheism could be adopted as long as it remained a private personal disposition.

The members of the AA can operate today thanks to and within the legal and institutional structure of the secular state in Turkey. However, they also struggle against the inconsistencies intrinsic to the same secular establishment, which violate the human and civil rights of atheists.<sup>31</sup> Freedom of religion is understood and put into practice by today's conservative and Islamist proponents of

*“Is this recent visibility of Turkish atheism an inevitable result of the radical secularist legacy of the Republic?”*

secularism in Turkey as the freedom of the majority Sunni Muslims instead of religious minorities or non-religious groups. Violations of these groups' rights can be justified even on legal grounds. As mentioned above, Article 216/3 of the Turkish Penal Code can be used to limit the freedom of expression of non-Muslims.

Despite constitutional secularism assuming equality among citizens of all religions, in practice laws and state institutions have been shaped in favor of the Muslim majority, while non-Muslim citizens have been either ignored by Diyanet, which recognizes and serves only Sunni/Hanafi Muslims or have been subject to numerous instances of official discrimination and daily hate crimes. It is in this context that the AA raises its voice against hate speech targeting atheists such as associating them with immorality or violence; as well as against the absence of a legal status for atheism and non-religion, circumstances which automatically leads them to be categorized as Sunni Muslims not only in schools but also on state identification cards, birth certificates, funeral rites, and compulsory military service.

The struggle for the exemption of children of non-Sunni and atheist parents from compulsory religious education in primary and secondary schools is another area where members of the AA have been active. Recently, one member won a case against the compulsory religion class that his daughter had to take in fifth grade. The school had denied the man's request that his daughter be exempt from the Culture

<sup>31</sup> Primary goals of the association are summarized as “to amend certain laws that violate the human and civil rights of Atheists and Non-Theists; to apply for certain bills that protect or create freedoms for Atheists and Non-Theists; and to defend the rights of victims of religious and non-religious discrimination.” Report: “The Association of Atheism on Legal Personality in Turkey.”

of Religion and Moral Knowledge class based on the family's religious belief (or unbelief). In the verdict of the 10th Administrative Court of Istanbul, citing the European Human Rights Agreement and the Constitution, it was stated that the content of "the teaching is based on the understanding of a particular religion," and hence, the student could be exempt from the course. The chair of the AA, Zehra Pala, stated that this was only one among thousands of people who are asking for the same assistance from the association in taking legal action.<sup>32</sup>

### *Zoom Out: Atheism and Nonreligion in Surveys*

Determining the number of atheists in Turkey, as elsewhere in the world, is imbued with many methodological limitations, primarily due to the potential difficulties related with the self-designation of "atheist" or "non-religious" in predominantly conservative societies like Turkey, even despite the assumed guarantee of anonymity in surveys. Still, a look at the existing statistical data on atheism and levels of religiosity can help one to situate atheism in the wider panorama of religiosity in today's Turkey.

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According to a nationally representative survey conducted in June 2017 by a consultancy company closely associated with the AKP government, the percentage of atheists (i.e., respondents who claimed that "they do not believe in God") was six percent. This was an alarming result, noted the director of research, "showing that there is an urgent need for a spiritual development campaign against the erosion of belief in the

society."<sup>33</sup> However, the results of a more periodical and representative polling series conducted by the KONDA research and consultancy firm in the same year were different. According to the KONDA Barometer Report<sup>34</sup> published in August 2017 and titled "If 100 people were to live in Turkey," every three persons in 100 could be considered

<sup>32</sup> Hacı Bişkin, "Ateizm Derneği: Binlerce kişi din dersinden muaf olmak için bize başvuruyor," [Atheism Association: Thousands of people are asking us assistance for being exempted from the religion class] *Gazete Duvar*, 15 November 2017, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2017/11/15/atezim-dernegi-binlerce-kisi-din-dersinden-muaf-olmak-icin-bize-basvuruyor/>

<sup>33</sup> Mehmet Ali Kulat MAK Danışmanlık, *Türkiye'de Toplumun Dine ve Dini Değerlere Bakışı*, [The Society's Approach to Religion and Religious Values in Turkey] p. 4, available online at [www.makdanismanlik.org](http://www.makdanismanlik.org) According to the same research, the ratio of those who "believed in the existence of God who created us and make us live" is only 86 percent.

<sup>34</sup> KONDA Research and Consultancy is a prominent research and consultancy company in Istanbul. The KONDA Barometer is a periodical and representative polling series, conducted in the first week of each month regularly since March 2010. Each month 1,800 to 3,600 subjects representative of Turkey's adult population above the age of 18 were interviewed face-to-face in their homes.

as a “nonbeliever,” as they “do not believe in the requirements of the religion,” a category which included atheists.<sup>35</sup> These categories of religiosity were created by KONDA researchers according to the self-declared positions as stated in Table 1:

*Table 1: Levels of religiosity used by KONDA Barometer*

<b>How would you describe yourself in terms of religiosity?</b>	<b>KONDA Category</b>
Does not believe in the requirements of the religion	Nonbeliever
Believer, but cannot fulfill the requirements of the religion	Believer
Religious person who tries to fulfill the requirements of the religion	Religious
Religious person who fulfills all the requirements of the religion	Devout

This three percent ratio for nonbelievers, which included atheists and other nonreligious individuals, was in line with the findings of research conducted by Toprak and Çarkoğlu in 1999 when the ratio of those who consider themselves as “not religious at all” was 2.8 percent while that of atheists was below one percent.<sup>36</sup> Another survey conducted by KONDA on “Life Styles” in February 2015 found a similar figure of 3.1 percent, as the ratio of nonbelievers. In this research project the fifth category of “atheist” (“does not believe in religion”) was included in the questionnaire, and 1.3 percent of respondents fell in this category.<sup>37</sup> Data from the World Values Survey on religiosity in Muslim-majority societies in 2008, on the other hand, showed that 0.5 percent of the adult population in Turkey could be categorized as “convinced atheist.” Turkey is the only Muslim-majority country, along with Indonesia, where the presence of atheists is above 0.1 percent or zero.<sup>38</sup>

The KONDA Barometer’s aggregated data<sup>39</sup> of monthly and representative polling between March 2010 and December 2017 indicate that the ratio of nonbelievers

<sup>35</sup> According the survey, 24 percent were considered to be a “believer” while 73 percent as “religious” or “devout,” <http://konda.com.tr/en/rapor/if-100-people-were-to-live-in-turkey/>

<sup>36</sup> The question in the survey is: “Kendinizi ne derece dindar biri olarak görüyorsunuz? [How would you describe your level of religiosity?]. Answers: Very religious: 6.1 percent; quite religious: 25.1 percent; considerably religious: 54.9 percent; not that religious: 9.6 percent; not religious at all: 2.8 percent; no answer: 1.7 percent. This data is from a survey conducted in February 1999 with a representative sample of the Turkish electorate (3053 people above the age of 18) Ali Çarkoğlu ve Binnaz Toprak, *Türkiye’de Din, Toplum ve Siyaset* [Religion, Society and Politics in Turkey] (Istanbul: TESEV, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> “Life-Styles Survey,” KONDA, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> The same data indicates that those categorized as “not a religious person” in Turkey constitute 16.9 percent of adult population in Turkey. The figures for “not a religious person” and “convinced atheist” are for other countries, respectively: Indonesia 15.2 percent and 0.3 percent, Iran 16.2 percent and 0.1 percent, Morocco 8.2 percent, Jordan 7.7 percent and 0.1 percent, Egypt 7.5 percent in World Values Survey 1981–2008, (2009), World Values Survey Association, database available online at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org> . In Schielke, “The Islamic World,” (2013), p. 531.

<sup>39</sup> The data offered here are aggregated data from 231975 interviews conducted for 82 surveys between March 2010–December 2017 as part of KONDA Barometer is a periodical and representative polling series. More information about the polling series is available online at <http://konda.com.tr/en/konda-barometer/>. I thank Bekir Ağirdir, Ebru Şener and Eren Pultar for providing me with these data and crosstabs.

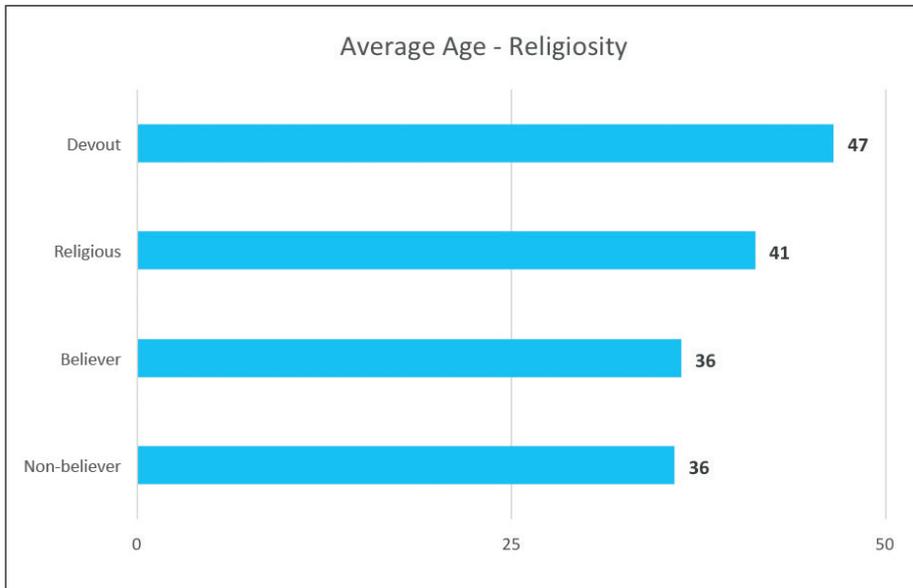
is 2.6 percent, while the ratio is never below two percent in the months after April 2014. The most recent (December 2017) figure in this dataset is 4.4 percent, while the latest figure (January 2018) is 4.1 percent.<sup>40</sup> Although variations in the percentage of nonbelievers throughout 82 months can be considered as minor, one should also note that the average ratio for nonbelievers in the period before May 2014 is 2.1 percent, while the same average is three percent in the period after this date.

*Table 2: KONDA Barometer (2010-2018)*

Nonbeliever	2.6%
Believer	27.3%
Religious	58.8%
Devout	11.4%

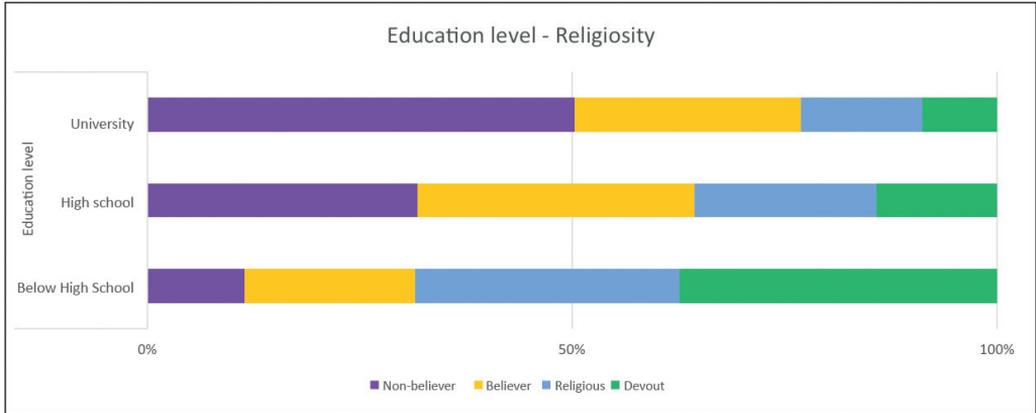
A more detailed look at the most recent KONDA Barometer data reveals various socio-economic characteristics of individuals categorized as “nonbeliever” or “atheist.” Crosstabs based on KONDA data show that nonbelievers are:

- predominantly male (approximately 62 percent);
- relatively young (half below the age of 32);

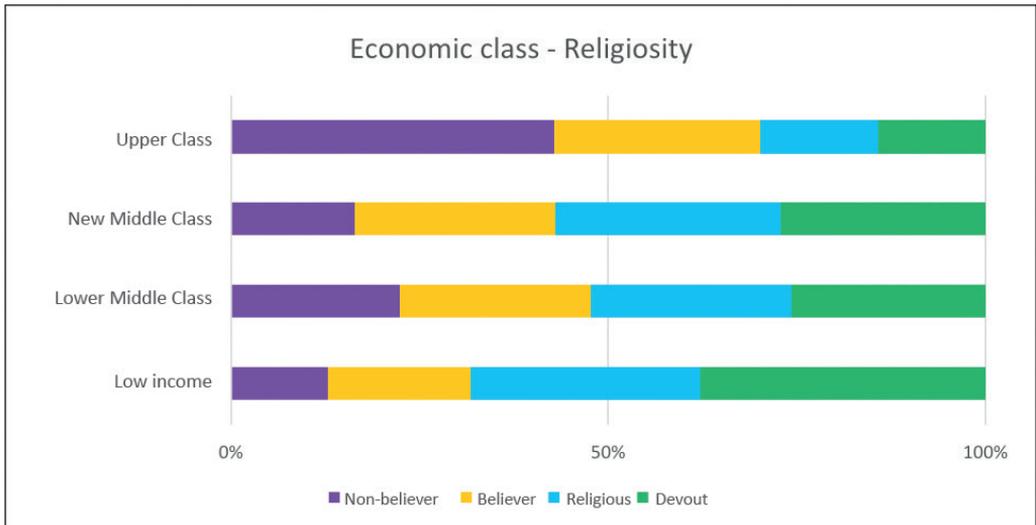


<sup>40</sup> In the latest Barometer polling in January 2018, the question about the level of religiosity included the fifth category that is designated as “atheist” (“does not believe in religion”). The percentage of “atheists” is in this last month is 1.8; and that of the nonbeliever is 2.3.

- overwhelmingly urban (the majority grew up and/or live in cities);
- highly educated (39.5 percent of nonbelievers are university graduates compared to 14.1 percent of the total population).



As for the class dimension of atheism or non-belief, we see that almost half of the atheists and nonbelievers are categorized as upper class (46.9 percent), while the latter’s ratio within the total population is only 21 percent.<sup>41</sup>



<sup>41</sup> Income groups are calculated according to monthly income per person: Upper class: 20 percent of the respondents with highest incomes; lower class: 20 percent of the respondents with the lowest income; middle class: those in the middle 60 percent, not owning a car; new middle class: those in the middle 60 percent, owning a car.

A final interesting finding of the KONDA dataset derived from the Barometer poll conducted in January 2015, is that unlike those in the devout category, 86 percent of nonbelievers in Turkey believed that “the government interferes with how people live and it imposes its own lifestyle.” This result is in line with the findings of Tayfun Kasapoğlu’s qualitative study conducted in 2015-16 demonstrating how the increasing hegemony of religious politics resulted in the perceived sense of “social exclusion” by self-identified atheists.<sup>42</sup> However, it should be noted that this high ratio is no less significant within believers (71.9 percent) and religious persons (41.3 percent). Only 28.1 percent of devout people think there is that the government interferes in people’s lifestyles. This concern of nonbelievers and atheists is shared by exactly 50 percent of the total population.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

To conclude this preliminary evaluation of Turkish atheist activism today, I argue that although still a marginal voice in the context of an overwhelmingly religious population and in an increasingly Islamized public sphere of the AKP’s “New Turkey,” the recent visibility of atheists opens up a new pathway for the future of secularism in Turkey.

The AA is challenging the legal and institutional infrastructure of Turkish secularism, which paved the way for today’s state control over religion and infringements of civil and human rights. As a matter of fact, the historical experience of Turkish secularism cannot be understood solely in the framework of a dichotomy between an authoritarian secularizing state apparatus versus the forces of Islamization. As Toprak notes, “there has been a repressive state mechanism throughout the history of the Republic, but not all incidents of repression are limited to the state. Pressure by ruling parties, religious communities and the ordinary public also exists.”<sup>43</sup> As the boundaries between all these forces and the state have never been clear-cut through incorporation mechanisms, the secularist state has itself been a major Islamizing agent. Today, we are experiencing the peak point of this process. While secularism is still a constitutional principle, the AKP’s official claim to a “secularism with an equal distance to all beliefs” does not reflect the current situation in Turkey. The “Sunni-majoritarian bias”<sup>44</sup> of the state via public education and the religious directorate, Diyanet, has been fully consolidated under the AKP rule.

The recent ascent of atheism, as suggested by Taner Edis, one of the contributors

<sup>42</sup> Kasapoğlu, “Religion and Politics,” (2017), pp. 109-110.

<sup>43</sup> Toprak et al., *Türkiye’de Farklı Olmak*, (2012), pp. 208-209.

<sup>44</sup> Ertuğ Tombuş and Berfu Aygenç, “(Post-)Kemalist Secularism in Turkey,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, 20017, pp. 70-85.

to a recent book on atheism published in Istanbul, is a reaction to the success of Turkish Islamism in the new millennium rather than a sign of secularization.<sup>45</sup> As also expressed by many representatives of the AA, atheist mobilization needs to be seen as an offspring of the Gezi movement of June 2013, which was a mass popular response to the AKP's illiberal as well as Islamizing policies. Atheist activism and advocacy for civil rights of nonbelievers today challenge the government's Islamist agenda along with other actors, such as Alevi organizations' struggle for official recognition of their places of worship and demand for equal citizenship rights, teachers' trade unions and parents' associations leading mass campaigns for secular education, as well as socialist and feminist groups who advocate for a pluralist secularism inclusive of religious as well as non-religious approaches.<sup>46</sup> By opening a space for atheist and non-religious voices in the public sphere and fighting for equal civil and human rights, the AA represents a more radical diversion from the legacy of Republican secularism and a greater challenge to the recent policies of Islamization. It is on these grounds that the recent rise of atheist voices is vital to reformulating secularism for a future democratic Turkey.

<sup>45</sup> Taner Edis, "Çöküş Döneminde bir Altın Çağ mı?" [A Golden Age in the Period of Decay?] in Tufan Çelebi, ed., *Ateizm: Teori ve Pratik* [Atheism: Theory and Practice] (Istanbul: Propaganda Yayınları, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> Ece Öztan, "Söyleşi: Veli-Der Başkanı İlknur Kaya Bahadır," *Sosyal Demokrat Dergi*, No. 83-84 (Special issue on Secularism) 25 December 2017, <http://www.sosyaldemokratdergi.org/soylesi-veli-der-baskani-ilknur-kaya-bahadir>. Yüksel Taşkın, "'Bize Özgü' İslami Gelenek İnşa Çabaları ve Laiklik Reddiyelerine dair bir Eleştiri" [A Critique of the Attempts to Construct "Native" Islamic Tradition and Anti-secularism] *Birikim* (Laikliği Tartışmak/Discussing Secularism), No: 333-334 (January-February 2017), p. 17; Ahmet İnel, "Nülüfer Göle ile Röportaj: Laiklik bir kimlik değil beraber yaşamının düzenlenmesidir," p. 23; Bülent Özçelik, "Özgürlük için Laiklik" [Secularism for Freedom] and Fırat Çağlıyan ve Bülent Özçelik, "Temel Çıkış Yolu Kadınların Mücadelesi: Pınar Ecevitöğlu ile Röportaj" [The main way out is women's struggle] in *Ayrıntı*, Vol. 16 (June-July 2016), pp. 55-58; 68-73.

**APPENDIX:****Dataset from KONDA Barometer (March 2010- December 2017)**

<b>Table 3</b>		Nonbeliever	Believer	Religious	Devout	Total
<b>Gender</b>	Women	38.0%	41.6%	51.2%	52.0%	48.3%
	Men	62.0%	58.4%	48.8%	48.0%	51.7%

<b>Table 4</b>		Nonbeliever	Believer	Religious	Devout	Total
<b>Age</b>	18–32	50.7%	47.0%	32.1%	22.8%	35.4%
	33–48	28.3%	33.1%	37.2%	31.9%	35.3%
	49+	21.0%	19.9%	30.7%	45.4%	29.3%

<b>Table 5</b>		Nonbeliever	Believer	Religious	Devout	Total
<b>Location</b>	Rural	9.7%	15.8%	20.0%	23.0%	18.9%
	Urban	24.9%	31.4%	32.1%	31.4%	31.6%
	Metropolis	65.4%	52.8%	47.9%	45.6%	49.4%

<b>Table 6</b>		Nonbeliever	Believer	Religious	Devout	Total
<b>Where were you brought up?</b>	Village	15.1%	19.1%	33.8%	44.7%	30.7%
	Small town/ District	17.7%	24.3%	25.7%	24.9%	25.0%
	City	40.9%	36.3%	29.3%	22.7%	30.7%
	Metropolis	26.3%	20.3%	11.2%	7.8%	13.6%

<b>Table 7:</b>		Nonbeliever	Believer	Religious	Devout	Total
<b>Level of education</b>	Below high school	23.3%	41.1%	63.8%	76.4%	58.0%
	High school	37.2%	38.0%	25.0%	16.6%	27.9%
	University	39.5%	20.9%	11.2%	6.9%	14.1%

<b>Table 8</b>		Nonbeliever	Believer	Religious	Devout	Total
<b>Economic class</b>	Low income	8.8%	13.0%	20.9%	26.0%	19.2%
	Lower middle	29.6%	33.2%	35.1%	34.0%	34.3%
	New middle	14.8%	23.9%	26.8%	24.5%	25.5%
	Upper	46.9%	29.8%	17.2%	15.5%	21.0%

<b>Table 9</b>		Nonbeliever	Believer	Religious	Devout	Total
<b>Opinion on Government Interference with Citizens' Lifestyles</b>	The government interferes with how people live; it imposes its own lifestyle.	86.4%	71.9%	41.3%	28.1%	50.0%
	The government does not interfere with how people live; everybody lives as s/he wants.	13.6%	28.1%	58.7%	71.9%	50.0%