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From Molar to Molecular Politics in Women's Islamic Movements in Turkey: 'Women who Get Together' to Defend the Rights of 'Others' (2003–2013)

Abstract

A significant evolution in women's Islamic movements (WIMs) became apparent after the process of the 'normalisation of the headscarf' in Turkey. With the lifting of the headscarf ban, starting from 2008, in universities, public offices and finally in parliament, WIMs became more independent of the 'protection' of the religious and conservative communities and have regained time and energy to deal with other women's and human rights issues. The issues have become diversified, and their discourses and forms of contention against the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) governments have varied and become disruptive. This article analyses selected blogs and activities of Women who Get Together (*Buluşan Kadınlar*) platform, a group of self-identified religious women, and attempts at making sense of its emergence, development and demobilisation. In its active years (2003–2013), the platform defended the rights of 'others' and developed a discourse of co-existence within a double framework of religion and equal citizenship. The article aims to contribute to the literature on WIMs by highlighting their contributions to others' rights beyond their oft-studied perspectives and activities on women's issues. It shows the limitations of building a unified/molar women's Islamic movement by revealing singular/molecular fragmentations within WIMs. The article is built on an analysis of blog posts, news media, participant observation, and personal interviews conducted between 2011 and 2016 in Turkey.

Keywords: Religious women, movement, human rights, AKP, co-existence, Turkey

1. Introduction

The headscarf ban enforced in Turkey as part of its secular outlook led to a division within women's movements along the dichotomy of religion and secularism. Some university faculties barred female students wearing headscarves in the early 1980s, however, the harshest measures against women wearing headscarves in public spaces were taken during the military intervention in 1997.[1] The mobilisation against the ban constituted the central stream and the symbol of women's Islamic movements

1 Known as 'the February 28 Process' the National Security Council forced the ban in all universities and public positions in 1997. For the history of the headscarf ban and its political and social repercussions in Turkey, see Tuksal 2000, Cindoglu and Zencirci 2008, Eraslan 2009, Vojdik 2010.

during the 1980s and 1990s.[2] Women with 'religious sensitivities' (*dini hassasiyetler*) – as they defined themselves – and women with headscarves were at the forefront of this mobilisation.

The ban limited the access to higher education and civil service of women who wore headscarves. This situation increased these women's socio-economic and psychological dependency on their Islamic communities – what is popularly called 'the neighbourhood' (*mahalle*). Mobilisations against the ban took their energies away from focusing on other political issues until the late 2000s. The headscarf ban was at the top of their agenda throughout the 1990s, even though some of them organised local and international charity campaigns, as well as demonstrations against the atrocities committed against Muslims worldwide, such as in Palestine and Bosnia.

The discursive themes of the mobilisation against the headscarf ban were 'exclusion from the public space' and 'demands for public rights.'[3] The repertoires of contention became increasingly varied and disruptive with each passing decade. Students protested with silent sit-ins in front of the university gates during the 1980s. Hunger strikes and classroom boycotts were reported to be successful in 1987 in Ankara University's Theology Faculty, and they spread to other faculties.[4] Women organised marches, demonstrations and other campaigns. After the imposition of the ban on all universities during the February 28 Process in 1997, the students continued their resistance against the ban with more vocal demonstrations where they marched, shouted slogans and raised their fists, in contrast to the silent sit-ins of the 1980s.[5] The police used violence to suppress the protests, and detained many activists throughout the country.[6] Some women were tried in State Security Courts (*Devlet Güvenlik Mahkemeleri*) and jailed for several years.[7]

The Islamist-rooted AKP came to power in 2002 and WIMs channelled their efforts on national and international lobbying against the headscarf ban. The tensions with some secular feminist groups (e.g. Kemalist feminists) in a national CEDAW (United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) meeting triggered religious and conservative women's groups to create a nationwide movement in 2003. I call this a molar/unified movement – deriving the term from Deleuze and Guattari[8] – since the movement aimed to build on the commonalities of the religious women and highlighted their differences from others.

The parliament voted against the ban in universities in 2008, during AKP's second term in power. The lifting of the ban and the 'normalisation of the headscarf' process led to a diversification of issues dealt with by women's Islamic movements (WIMs), a greater variety of discourses and repertoires of contention among them. The diversity

2 Diner and Toktaş 2010, 42.
3 İlyasoğlu 1994, 8.
4 Tuksal 2000, 142.
5 Eraslan 2009, 249.
6 Bianet 2014.
7 BBC 2019.
8 1987.

is connected to the fact that women who use headscarves could enrol in universities and become active in the public sphere in larger numbers. Many women claimed or reclaimed jobs in the private, public sector and in universities. This meant that they have become less dependent on the socio-economic and psychological protection of the religious 'neighbourhood' and that a large number of women were practically empowered through the lifting of the ban[9].

This article analyses the period after the normalisation of the headscarf in Turkey and attempts to create a genealogy as to what happens to a social movement when one of its main uniting causes has been resolved. How have women's Islamic movements evolved in terms of issue areas, mobilising structures and repertoires of contention after the normalisation of the headscarf? How did they envision a molar politics and how did this molarity dissolve and pave the way to molecular/singular fragments? Diversity of stances and activities within WIMs about gender relations and women's rights in Turkey vis-à-vis AKP governments have been well demonstrated in the extant literature[10]. In contrast, this article concentrates on human rights activism of Women who Get Together, (*Buluşan Kadınlar*, BK) as one of the starkest examples of the evolution in WIMs in Turkey. BK has challenged AKP's increased authoritarian discourses and practices and organised campaigns for the rights of 'other' discriminated groups in Turkey. Some women from BK supported the Gezi Park protests against the government in the summer of 2013. The protests divided the Islamic 'neighbourhood' in general which long had a more or less unified stance in supporting AKP. The Islamic motivation and the mobilisation against the headscarf ban that once tied WIMs politically together could no more align them on the same position on issues such as the Kurdish problem, ethno-religious minorities, and especially on AKP's authoritarian practices.[11]

9 We should mention here the amplification of conservative and misogynistic state discourse since the second term of AKP government in Turkey which has threatened the existing empowerment level of women with and without headscarves.

10 Aksoy 2015, Aslan-Akman 2013 and 2008, Aldıkaçtı-Marshall 2008, Karaca 2018, and Yılmaz 2015 studied in detail Islamist and/or religious women's changing relations with AKP, democratisation, feminism, and gender equality discussions in Turkey, and highlighted the differences among Islamist and religious women in their approach to women's and LGBT rights, and challenges they face in their relations to AKP. Tütüncü (2012) also discussed the debates between male and female Islamist intellectuals on gender relations in detail. Therefore, this article does not focus on the divisions among WIMs on the axis of gender equality and women's rights, except for the campaign 'No Vote If There is no Candidate with Headscarf' in order to show the divisions among women in relation to their opposition to AKP.

11 We should also note a vivid convergence of Islam and feminism in this period. A younger generation of activists have especially focused on masculinity, violence against women and sexuality. However, this is beyond the scope of this article. See Karaca 2018, chapter 5.

2. Women's Islamic Movements

There have been three main worldwide debates around women's Islamic movements since the 1990s regarding (a) the place of women's Islamic movements within liberalism, democratisation and modernity,[12] (b) the kind of agency of pious female actors,[13] and (c) whether the Islamic ideologies of women – particularly Islamic feminism – are emancipatory.[14] Since this article aims to situate WIMs in terms of their social movement dynamics that change with contextual constraints and opportunities, it mainly expands the first and the last fields of debates by focusing on the movement changes and contributions of WIMs to the rights of 'others' with a discourse analysis and social movement theory perspective.

By women's Islamic movements, I refer to women and women's groups which raise an Islamic voice on societal perceptions, governmental discourses or state regulations via advocacy. I regard *Islamic references* in their discourse and activities as defining, rather than personal religious orientations. If women systematically use religious discourse to advocate reform, I define them (individually or collectively) as part of women's Islamic movements. I also refer to them as 'religious women' (*dindar kadınlar*) to denote those who openly refer to themselves as such in their public speeches. This should not indicate a higher level of piety vis-à-vis other women.

I build on social movement literature which has agreed on four main elements in movements: a) frames and meanings; b) political opportunity and threat structures; c) mobilising structures, such as networks and organisations; and d) forms and repertoires of contention.[15] The main processes of mobilisation, then, involves 'framing' a cause, perceiving opportunities and threats, 'creat[ing] or appropriat[ing] resources, organisations, and institutions,' and engaging in collective action in different forms and repertoires[16]. The article touches upon these four elements of mobilisation of BK (*Buluşan Kadınlar*) and demonstrates how they change in time. Campaigning, coalition formation, and diffusion can also be found in processes of mobilisation.[17] Social movements scholar Sidney Tarrow also delineates processes and mechanisms of demobilisation. The processes of demobilisation can be due to repression, facilitation, exhaustion, radicalisation, and institutionalisation.[18] While we can demonstrate campaigning, some levels of coalition formation, and a limited diffusion in the case of BK; we observe that facilitation of some of the demands by the state, along with

12 For extensive analyses on this issue, see: Arat 2005; Deeb 2006; Gole 1996; İlyasoğlu 1994.
13 Ben Shitrit 2013; Deeb 2006; Hafez 2011; Mahmood 2005.
14 For a positive review of Islamic feminism see: Ahmed 2011; Badran 2009; Cooke 2001; Gray 2013. For a cautious review of Islamic feminism, see: Al-Nakib 2013; Mojab 2001; Moghissi 1999; Yılmaz 2015.
15 Tarrow 2011, 28–9; McAdam 2001, 14–5; Ferree and Mueller 2007, 587.
16 Tarrow 2011, 188–9.
17 Tarrow 2011, 189.
18 Tarrow 2011, 185, 190–2.

exhaustion, and 'radicalisation' of some participants in the eyes of others led to the demobilisation of certain women among WIMs.

In addition to these processes noted in the classical social movement theories, I find metaphors of molarisation and molecularisation derived from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari[19] useful for their visualisation capacity to demonstrate some of the changes of WIMs in Turkey. While molarisation refers to the practices that regulate connections and make movements predictable and stable,[20] molecularisation is about transformation and open-ended experimentation. Deleuze and Guattari argue that evolving or radical change happens at the molecular level.[21] These concepts help to visualise the processes of unification (molarisation) and process of change and experimentation (molecularisation) in movements without having to name what kind of change or unification is happening. Another important issue in social movement studies is the effectiveness.[22] What kind of forms of contention or discourse produce useful results is a pressing question for movements. The result-orientation is a primary feature of most molar movements, but molecular movements may also prioritise effectiveness.

Most social movements emerge based on demands of its participants for themselves and their own grievances. For women's Islamic movements in Turkey, the main demand has been about being present in public spaces wearing headscarves without limitations. From this angle, they have contributed to the debates on women's rights, gender equality and freedom of religious expression. We also observe that the discourse of equal citizenship has been a part of the language of WIMs in Turkey as equally as a language of religion and God-given rights. Being more than a legal status, citizenship is the practice where individuals and groups demand rights for themselves or others. This is a performative and interactive side of citizenship where social actors communicate to one another.[23] 'Communicated images of self and others' are important performative sides of citizenship.[24] Movements may emphasise, mobilise for or ignore the rights of the others in the same polity in their discourses. In this sense, some groups within WIMs in Turkey had a say on the rights of 'the others.'

The structure of the article is as follows: to present WIMs to the general reader, I firstly give an overview of the primary concerns and repertoires of action of WIMs during AKP's first term in power, from 2002 until the Constitutional Court rejected the party closure lawsuit in favour of AKP in 2008. Secondly, I look at the variation of the concerns, framing, and repertoires of action after the lifting of the headscarf ban in universities and public offices. Here, I concentrate on the campaigns and blogs of BK which focused on 'other' discrimination issues in the country. Finally, I assess the demobilisation of BK as an example of the diversification and molecularisation

19 1987, 11, 304.
20 Montgomery 2010, 45
21 1987, 11.
22 Molyneux 1998; Tilly 2004.
23 Fairclough et al 2006, 102.
24 Hausendorf and Bora 2006, 2.

among women's Islamic movements in Turkey on the axes of supporting or keeping distant to AKP governments, and how they approach minority rights and state authoritarianism.

The article is based on data collected for a period of over 16 months from 2011 and 2016 in Istanbul, Ankara and Bursa. I conducted interviews with 28 female activists, along with participant and non-participant observation in multiple public activities during the Gezi Protests in 2013, and in between the years 2015 and 2016. I used the interviews to historically trace the evolution of the women's Islamic movements in Turkey, and analysed the accounts for making sense of the formation and demobilisation of BK. I received permission from the respondents to publish their quotes during the interviews, and confirmed these permissions in 2018 and 2023. I anonymised some of the sensitive quotes to protect the privacy of the respondents. I also analysed the online blog posts of BK, as well as some newspaper column publications. I conducted discourse analysis and assessed the representations of self and the other on the blogs, which require 'a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge.'[25]

3. Molarisation: Formation of Women's Gatherings, Great Expectations, and Silent Repertoires of Action (2002–2008)

We witnessed a tense contestation for authority between the popularly elected Islamist-rooted AKP government and secularist-dominated state institutions between 2002 and 2008 in Turkey. In this period, AKP was reluctant to introduce serious policy changes, including the lifting of the headscarf ban, as it was surrounded by formal and informal checks from the secularist camp, consisting of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer (2000–2007), the Constitutional Court – the majority of whose jurists were secularists, and the Turkish Armed Forces, which has defined itself as the defender of secularism.

During this secularist-AKP contestation, women's Islamic movements supported AKP by voting for it and suspending their street activism.[26] They had faith in the Parliament to lift the ban, and they silenced their protests and mobilisation over the ban with some exceptions.[27] They kept silent on many issues so as not to damage the reputation of the government from *within* against the strictly secular state institutions which threatened to close down the party on alleged violations of the principles of secularism. Even though they suspended the protests, several NGOs within WIMs lobbied intensively during the first two terms of AKP. They followed the legal proceedings, engaged in international lobbying through the EU and CEDAW shadow report preparation meetings in Ankara and organised solidarity projects. Berna Turam

25 Gill 2000, 173.
26 Interviews 2011, 2015, 2016.
27 The Islamist Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*) continued the mobilisation against the ban (Interviews 2015–2016; Turam 2008; Sakin et al. 2008).

defines this period as 'pious non-resistance'[28]. Turam recounts that they engaged in passive resistance against the ban instead of vocal mobilisations to avoid creating a 'social disturbance,' which in return 'helped them to acquire more recognition and power' at a time when religious communities were regarded with suspicion.[29]

It is during this period of international lobbying when 50 women from different women's organisations and female activists who define themselves as 'Muslim' or 'religious' initiated an informal network named Women's Gatherings (*Kadın Buluşmaları*). They came together after the nation-wide CEDAW gathering in Ankara in 2003 where they had joined feminist and secular women's NGOs to draft the CEDAW shadow report for Turkey.[30] The two reasons behind the formation of the Women's Gatherings were the alleged discriminations they experienced during the CEDAW meeting due to their headscarves by some secularist women, as well as the need they perceived to get to know each other better as religious women and organisations around Turkey.

These nationwide women's gatherings aimed at creating a *molar* and unified movement among religious and conservative women in Turkey. Acknowledging the common problems they faced and their shared religious sensitivities, the group's initiators hoped to define common issue areas and coordinate activities together. The participants emphasised the importance of these meetings to get to know their problems 'beyond' the headscarf ban, and strengthening the network of 'religious and conservative' women's groups.[31]

There were eleven Women's Gatherings between 2003 and 2013 respectively in: Ankara (2003), Çorum (2003), Antalya (2003), Istanbul (2004), Batman (2004), Afyon (2005), Bursa (2006), Istanbul (2007), Konya (2008), Gaziantep (2010), and finally Diyarbakır (2013). Each gathering had a different theme, influenced by the political agenda at the time, such as the war in Iraq (Çorum 2003), the reconstruction of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Antalya 2003), family and women (Istanbul 2004), women's suicides in Batman (Batman 2004), the EU accession process (Afyon 2005), global politics in the Middle East (Istanbul 2007), or the Kurdish peace process (Diyarbakır 2013). As seen, their agenda was not limited to women's rights and women aimed to talk about different political issues from women's perspective. 118 people attended the first gathering in Ankara, representing 24 organisations. Participant numbers ranged from 90 to 300 at the gatherings, representing diverse cities and organisations around Turkey.[32]

Mobilising structures, such as organisations and networks, influence social movements' capacity for contention.[33] They can range from formal organisations to interpersonal networks and cultural affinities.[34] The planning process of the Women's

28 Turam 2008, 475.
29 Turam 2008, 486.
30 Interviews 2015–2016, Kerimoğlu 2010.
31 Interviews 2015–2016.
32 Kerimoğlu 2010.
33 Tarrow 1998, 123.
34 Tarrow 1998, 123–4.

Gatherings were informal and flexible. It depended on the women and organisations that volunteered to organise.[35] They communicated via a private e-mail group named 'Women who Get Together' (*Buluşan Kadınlar, BK*). This e-mail group would later raise the main dissenting voice among WIMs in Turkey where some of the participants addressed issues that were at the heart of the democratisation in Turkey (discussed in the next section).

While the initial planning was informal, the gatherings were mostly executed by the better funded organisations in Ankara and Istanbul such as BKP[36], Hazar[37] and AKDER[38] with collaborative support from the hosting organisations at localities. While these three organisations, BKP, Hazar and AKDER, focused on legal reform and women's rights besides educational activities, the majority of the participant organisations were from Anatolia and predominantly focused on charity and raising moral values.[39] BKP was established in Ankara in 1995 by a group of middle-aged women with 'religious sensitivities' who questioned their roles as mothers, wives and working women.[40] It was a platform that aimed to correct 'wrong interpretations' of Islam regarding women. The founders were mostly members of several civil society organisations and other women's initiatives, but there were also members who did not belong to any other organisation. Women from the theological faculties in Ankara, mainly the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University –known for its rationalist approach to religion– joined the platform. There were women in the association who openly called themselves feminists or 'religious feminists' such as Berrin Sönmez, Zeynep Göknil Şanal and Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal. BKP had to focus on the ban soon after its foundation due to the increased restrictions on headscarves after 1997.[41]

Hazar and AKDER were formed as a direct response to the headscarf ban, unlike BKP. Hazar was founded in 1993 by Ayla Kerimoğlu and her friends in Istanbul. It was envisioned as an educational centre for young girls and women whose access to education and public life were constrained because of the headscarf ban. Kerimoğlu states that they have started to 'work on women's problems, though not yet from the point of view of woman's identity.' Their first activist engagement involved getting in touch with and helping Bosnian women during the Bosnian War.[42] AKDER was founded in 1999 in Istanbul mainly by students from Istanbul University's Faculty

35 Interviews 2015–2016.
36 The Capital City Women's Platform Association (*Başkent Kadın Platformu Derneği)*, mentioned as BKP hereafter.
37 Hazar Education Culture and Solidarity Association (*Hazar Eğitim Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği*), mentioned as Hazar hereafter.
38 Women's Rights Association against Discrimination (*Ayrımcılığa Karşı Kadın Hakları Derneği*, AKDER)
39 Interviews 2015–2016.
40 Interview with Semiz, 2011.
41 After 25 years of women's rights activism, BKP recently ended its activities due to the polarisation among its members regarding their stance towards human rights activism and AKP (Aktaş and Tuksal 2021).
42 Interview with Kerimoğlu, 2015.

of Medicine, a group that was active during the headscarf demonstrations. AKDER has kept and published records of women who were discriminated against in public life due to headscarves. It also sent some students with headscarves abroad for higher education through donations.[43] All these three organisations engaged in national and international lobbying against the headscarf ban, including the UN and CEDAW reporting processes which led to the start-up of Women's Gatherings.

There were some exceptions when WIMs dissented against the actions of AKP in this period. Many Islamist women objected to the government's bill to send troops to support the Iraq War in 2003, despite the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's readiness to do so. Over ninety women unanimously condemned the bill during the third women's gathering in 2003 in Çorum.[44] Some of them also individually protested such as such as writer Yıldız Ramazanoğlu who joined several initiatives against the war such as the Eastern Conference (*Doğu Konferansı*) and the Global Peace and Justice Coalition (*Küresel Barış ve Adalet Komisyonu*). AKP founder and BKP member Fatma Bostan Ünsal also went to Iraq to become a human shield, and many women in their circles were in favour of these efforts.[45]

4. Molecularisation: Exhaustion and Diversification of the Causes (2008–2013)

Despite the pressures, AKP did not place the headscarf ban issue on the agenda until 2007.[46] As BKP member Nesrin Semiz states, 'this was understandable, although not acceptable.'[47] In contrast to its verdicts for the preceding Islamist parties in the past, the Constitutional Court rejected the closure case against AKP in 2008. After that, and during its second term in office (2007–2011), the AKP government took a stronger hold of power and became free-handed in its Islamist discourse and policy proposals.

In this period, some Islamist and religious women became more vocal in their demand for headscarf freedom. The calm was broken with disruptive protests that not only targeted the secular camp but also the government. Some women openly and collectively began to criticise the government for its slowness in lifting of the ban, along with other human rights issues. Also, in this period – for the first time ever – secular and feminist women's rights activists and academics collaborated on several occasions to protest the headscarf ban at the universities.[48]

The Parliament voted positively for a constitutional change to lift the headscarf ban at universities in February 2008. Even though the Constitutional Court cancelled this

43 Interviews 2015.
44 Hazar 2003; BKP 2003.
45 Interview with Bostan Ünsal, 2015.
46 Sakin et al. 2008.
47 Interview 2011.
48 Some feminists had joined the protests during the 1990s (Eraslan 2009, 249), but platforms such as Feminists are not Sleeping (*Feministler Uyumuyor*) (2007) and 'We Protect Each Other' (*Birbirimize Sahip Çıkıyoruz*) (2008) were the organised efforts of secular and religious women against the ban.

decision four months later, the ban has informally been relaxed at many universities and public offices since 2008.[49] This change has led to a process of the 'normalisation of the headscarf' in Turkey. This process refers not only to the legal relaxations but also to an incremental social acceptance of the presence of women with headscarves in those public positions, including among secular circles. The lifting of the ban, without a doubt, has been the most important outcome of the decades of mobilisation and national and international collaborations women built around it. This has been an undeniable instance of empowerment for the 60% of women in Turkey who use some type of headscarf in public.[50]

One of the reasons of demobilisation of social movements is facilitation of 'at least some of the claims of contenders' by the state.[51] The lifting of the ban in universities led to organisational and cause-related changes in women's Islamic movements in Turkey. I call this process as *molecularisation* of the women's Islamic movement, as women diversified their priorities, political causes, repertoires of contention and organisations in this period.

Secondly, we observe exhaustion in women who mobilised and lobbied against the ban for decades. Sidney Tarrow defines exhaustion of a movement as 'the simple weariness of being in the streets or, more subtly, irritation and the strains of collective life in a movement.'[52] However, for the women who gained the right to enter universities and workforce, the reasons of demobilisation has simply been the desire to experience a normal life. 'Life has started again as if it had stopped,' as theologian BKP member Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal puts it,[53] and women started to re-enrol universities or go to work to complete their 'mundane' dreams and aims. The associations that lobbied against the ban such as BKP and AKDER had fewer numbers of women left to volunteer on other causes, as women returned to their daily lives which had been put on hold.[54] Similarly, a BK participant and previous AKDER member describes the faction lines in her organisation in 2010:

> Everyone started to work and concentrate on their own lives, such as working as doctors. Some did not want to be very active in social life after the headscarf protests. We [a group of women in AKDER] tried to continue, but we left the association when others did not want to. They thought that 'our work is done and we got our dues, and other problems do not concern me'. We thought even if the headscarf problem was solved, other problems still concerned us.[55]

49 Some universities applied the ban until 2012.
50 Çarkoğlu and Toprak 2007, 63.
51 Tarrow 2011, 190.
52 Tarrow 2011, 190.
53 Interview 2016.
54 Interviews 2015–2016. However, opportunities of funding and institutionalisation for women's organisations close to the government have increased.
55 Anonymous interview #2, 2015.

As such, a noteworthy result of the relaxation of the headscarf ban has been an increase in the variety of political causes among WIMs. The founder of Hazar Association, Ayla Kerimoğlu, claims that they began to see the problems of 'the others' more clearly after the relaxation of the headscarf ban:

> The most important success of the republican ideology was to divide the public into Alevi people, Kurds, pious people, or Armenians. It made each of them 'the other of the other.' We always saw each other as the other… Especially during this government we faced the Kurdish, the Alevi, and the Armenian problem. Because we had crossed the limits imposed on us and begun feeling as equal citizens. We could find opportunities to concern ourselves more closely with our country. This is a very big opportunity.[56]

As mentioned earlier, several women with religious backgrounds had addressed some of these issues individually or collectively in different platforms. Kerimoğlu defends WIMs that they could collectively address other human rights issues only after the relaxation of the ban that had directly blocked their lives.[57]

Here we should note other important reasons as to why religious or Islamist women in Turkey began to address human rights issues in a collective manner – as religious women – unlike their counterparts in some other Muslim majority countries. First, they witnessed an Islamist government taking power for a longer time, unlike in Egypt or Tunisia. Secondly, as an unexpected effect of the ban, some women developed a sensitivity to broader social problems and 'others' being discriminated. They have become accustomed to organizing street activism and challenging authorities. Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal argues that the ban led the victims to increasingly engage with civil society, and in legal cases and lobbying efforts abroad, which in return made these women more self-confident and active in the public space.[58]

Also related to the ban, women who wore headscarves were 'forced' to show a sensitivity to human rights due to the polarisation in society around the ban. They had been put on a 'litmus test' by liberal and secular camps as to whether they likewise defend the rights of other discriminated segments of society whenever they defended wearing the headscarf as a human right of religious freedom. For example, as Evren Savcı vividly demonstrated, the LGBT rights were often put forward as a sincerity test for WIMs during the 'democratic opening' processes initiated by AKP in its second term.[59] During the discussions of headscarf freedom in 2008, 888 academics from metropolitan state and private universities signed a declaration named 'Both Freedom and Laïcité' (*Hem Özgürlük Hem Laiklik*). The academics wrote that they defended students' right to receive education regardless of their clothes; however, they were also concerned that 'raising this issue alone and with forced legal measures would rein-

56 Interview 2015.
57 WIMs were active at street demonstrations and conferences about atrocities against Muslims in Bosnia and Palestinians since the 1990s.
58 Tuksal 2000, 144.
59 Savcı 2021, 36.

force the increasing trend of conservatism and polarisation.'[60] They added that this liberty should have been given in a package of democratic rights for different 'othered' (*ötekiler*) segments of society such as Kurdish, Alevi and non-Muslim minorities as well as workers and the poor.[61] This declaration well represented the general sentiment of the liberal and secular parties: women wearing the headscarf could be free, but only when all other oppressed would also be.

One of the earliest and popular responses to this debate and examples of the diversification of political causes among religious women was the signature campaign 'We Have Not Become Free Yet' (*Henüz Özgür Olmadık)*. Three days after the parliamentary vote to lift the ban at universities in 2008, university students Havva Yılmaz, Hilal Kaplan, and Neslihan Akbulut, who would have become active in BK campaigns later, initiated an online signature campaign. They wrote that as Muslim women they would not be content to enter universities with their headscarves until the problems of 'othered' (ötekileştirilmiş) segments in society, such as the Kurds, Alevis or religious minorities, were also solved.[62] Havva Yılmaz argues that they wanted to go against a 'hierarchy of importance' among societal problems in a context where the secular advocates of the headscarf ban and liberal opponents of the ban both agreed that it was *not* the most important problem in Turkey, reading between the lines in the academics' declaration.[63] They promised to support the causes of 'others':

> As people who know what it means to have your freedom restricted, we will continue to be against all kinds of discrimination, violation of rights, oppression and impositions.[64]

Yılmaz explains that they had prejudices about themselves as women with headscarves whether there would be enough among them to sign such an inclusive text, since it also addressed some of the sensitive political issues. However, the campaign became popular with 600 signatures, and the initiators turned the project into a book.[65] This campaign was the initial signal that the concerns of women's Islamic movements in Turkey would not be limited to the headscarf ban.

4.1. Women who Get Together: Dissenting from AKP and Raising a Louder Voice for 'Others'

We observed molecular fragmentations during WIMs' attempt to build a molar movement with the Women's Gatherings. Despite the initial motivation to coordinate acts on social problems, the experience at the gatherings, and disagreements within the e-mail group showed that the potential for a unified national and (thus molar) move-

60 Hem Özgürlük Hem Laiklik 2008.
61 Hem Özgürlük Hem Laiklik 2008.
62 Henüz Özgür Olmadık 2008.
63 Interview 2015.
64 Henüz Özgür Olmadık 2008.
65 Akbulut et al. 2008.

ment was limited. Already in the second meeting in Çorum in 2003, in subsequent gatherings, and in e-mail discussions participants engaged in fierce discussions and disagreements over women's place in family and society, the Kurdish issue and LGBT rights.[66] After 2008, some participants from the Women's Gatherings e-mail group organised online signature campaigns and press statements under the name *Women who Get Together* (*Buluşan Kadınlar, BK*). While other participants did not want to 'engage in politics' (*siyasete bulaşmak*), some women were keen to mobilise for contentious political issues.[67]

The blogs and signature campaigns of BK were remarkable contributions of self-identified religious women in defence of the human rights of 'others.' From 2008 until 2015, BK published eleven blogs open for signature on different public issues that were at the heart of democratisation in Turkey. The initial signatories mostly consisted of human rights activists, academics, writers, and journalists, whose numbers ranged from twenty to a hundred.[68] Compared to the crowded women's gatherings, many women refrained from adding their names as the first signatories in these political statements. The campaigns responded to specific incidents of human rights violations in Turkey.[69] The Madımak massacre, the Uludere (Roboski) bombing, Pınar Selek's trials, killing of Ceylan Önkol, religious writer Hüseyin Üzmez's sexual harassment case; the media exposure of the bodies of femicide victims were some of the topics they addressed.

Leaving the problem of the headscarf ban aside, BK has been one of the few 'religious' women's groups which publicly defended the 'others' rights by dissenting from the religious-rooted AKP government and conservative Islamism. This critical space within Islam and self-criticism as Islamists could have been possible with the strengthening rule of AKP, as the 'Islamists' were not the victims anymore. It became possible for the Islamists to criticise the acts of the governing Islamists – most of whom worked in the same political parties or NGOs in the past.

The blogs of BK depicted a tension between women's idealised Islam and the practices of the members of the government who lauded themselves as Muslims. They show religious women's 'negotiations' within religion and politics, as they presented concepts such as living together in diversity, respect for life, conscience and justice as Islamic principles against the discriminatory language and practices of their Islamist 'brothers.' In the earlier blogs they addressed then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan politely and reminded him of 'the sense of justice' in a 'sisterly' way. This tone changed drastically in subsequent blogs as BK began to put a clear distance between them and the government (elaborated below) in 2011.

The blogs of BK also employed the notions of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and 'civilian-isation' (*sivilleşme*). The last concept has significance in countries with histories of military rule, and it refers to demands to make the rule more 'civil-

66 Interviews 2015–2016.

67 Interviews 2015–2016. One interviewee said that the majority was against doing activism.

68 This is the number of the first signatories from BK. Most of the blogs were open to the public to be signed and several blogs collected thousands of signatures from the public.

69 Except for one, which was in Palestine.

ian' by getting rid of the military tutelage. They frequently referred to the concepts of human rights and 'the democratisation process'[70] to legitimise their demands. For BK, democratisation meant to face up to the injustices towards minorities and to create a country where there would be no discrimination towards ethnic and religious minorities.

BK recurrently defined justice and benevolence as emotions that were at the core of what it means to be human. Besides direct Islamic references, the blogs frequently referred to the 'sense of justice' (*adalet duygusu*), 'conscience' (*vicdan*), 'co-existence' and 'motherhood.' Emotional language enables social movements to maintain solidarity and 'transform claims into action.'[71] The blogs used very emotive language replete with vivid and graphic descriptions and references to human pain and emotions. This has been typical of women's movements worldwide.[72] Due to their identity as female, religious and (for some) mothers, BK seemed to have used such emotional language without restraint.

4.1.1. The Kurdish Issue

The Kurdish issue was one of the main contentious issues within BK.[73] Since the first attack of separatist Kurdish guerrillas in 1984 against the Turkish military stations in the southeast where dominantly Kurdish citizens live, the 'Kurdish problem' (*Kürt sorunu*) has been the biggest political and social problem in Turkey. Some participants in BK reported that they were keen to raise voice on the Kurdish issue more, however, most of the women objected to the suggested campaigns.[74] Nevertheless, BK organised two women's gatherings in the Kurdish region (Batman 2004 and Diyarbakır 2013) and published three blogs related to the Kurdish issue.

I analyse here two of the blogs and campaigns about the death of Ceylan Önkol in 2009 and the Uludere (Roboski) bombing in 2011. In 2009, 12-year-old Ceylan Önkol died due to an unknown explosion near her house in Diyarbakır. In their open letter/blog (initially signed by 41 women[75]) and written directly to Erdoğan, BK used a very emotional language with references to the pain of mothers who lose their children whom they took tremendous efforts to raise up. The blog questioned the 'sense of justice and benevolence' of those who governed. By reporting Ceylan's interest in reading the Quran, BK meant to trigger the *ummah* consciousness among the religious Turkish community. The blog questioned the 'sincerity' of the human rights discourse of the governing Islamists by comparing their support to Palestinian

70 The reforms made during the EU accession negotiations, the early AKP initiatives to curtail the military's influence in politics and the 'Kurdish opening' *(Kürt açılımı*) in 2004–2005.
71 Tarrow 2011, 153.
72 Ferree and Mueller 2009.
73 Interviews 2015–2016.
74 Interviews 2015–2016.
75 Platform Haber 2009.

mothers with their lack of support to Kurdish mothers. They voiced their suspicion as to how Turkey could start a 'democratic opening that benefits the Kurdish nation when the government fails to send a message of support to the mothers of Ceylans,'[76] meaning the Kurdish mothers. We see that BK employed a double discourse of Islamic *ummah* and democracy in the blog, by referring to the religious unity with the Kurds, but also the democratic citizenship requirements.

In this blog, BK addressed then-PM Erdoğan in a kind tone, calling him as 'our dear prime minister' (*sayın başbakanımız*) and demanded from him to give the family a call of support and to assure them that everything will be done to find the perpetrators. This approach and their hope that the PM would act on should be explained by the fact that BK was talking as a member of the Islamic neighbourhood. The sense of belonging to the neighbourhood is clear in their otherwise dissenting voice.

The polite discursive style in BK blogs significantly changed over the course of a few years. In December 2011, the Turkish Air Forces bombed a convoy of Kurdish citizens who were smuggling goods from Iraq, allegedly mistaking them for PKK guerrilla. 34 people, mostly teenagers, died in the airstrike. The incident, known as the Uludere (Roboski) massacre, received a tremendous reaction from the public after it was publicised on social media – since the mainstream media was censored. Like other human rights groups in Turkey, several Islamist initiatives and organisations, such as Mazlumder,[77] also condemned the incident and demanded urgent action in several campaigns.

Eight mother participants from BK organised a trip to Uludere to offer condolences to the victims' families. After the visit, BK published a blog with the slogan 'We want justice!' signed by 54 women.[78] In the blog, women asked for transparency and a just legal proceeding with respect to the incident. They urged the government to immediately attend to their 'brothers' shattering into pieces, as it attended to the headscarf ban that was being resolved at the time:

> While the government has been trying to open up the tightly sealed boxes which contain our pain, if it now tightly seals our brothers who were shattered in Uludere into another box, we will not believe that these boxes are being opened with the intention of making this country a home for all of us to live together![79]

Instead of appealing to Erdoğan in a sisterly manner, this time BK used a very critical tone by referring to the government with the negative connotation '*muktedir*' (potent),[80] and complained about the government's 'bragging' as a way to legiti-

76 Ceylan 2009.

77 Mazlumder (*İnsan Hakları ve Mazlumlar İçin Dayanışma Derneği* – Association for Human Rights and Solidarity for the Oppressed) is an Islamic oriented human rights organisation founded in 1991 and it has branches in several cities in Turkey.

78 Public signatures in the blog amount to 922 (last accessed 9 September 2022).

79 Uludere 2011.

80 In Turkish language *muktedir* is often used to describe the rulers who use their power to suppress people.

mise the attack. Those who paid condolences to the families from BK such as Yıldız Ramazanoğlu, Hilal Kaplan and Özlem Yağız gave statements in the press about their visit, and criticised the government for not publicly apologising from the families.

In terms of framing of the mobilisation, BK utilised a discourse of nation as a 'family' in this blog, rather than a citizenship discourse. The blog referred to the victims as 'our brothers' (*kardeşlerimiz*). The language of brotherhood has been criticised by Kurdish politicians for being patronising of the Kurdish people. This was also pointed out by Kurdish women in BK's later Diyarbakır Gathering in 2013.[81] Also, the blog, while having an intention of reparation and co-existence, used the Turkish name of the town Uludere, instead of the Kurdish name of the village Roboski in the blog, hinting that BK was not sensitised to the demands of the Kurdish political movements in terms of using the Kurdish names of the towns.

Nevertheless, the blog, campaign and visits to the region were courageous acts in a much polarised context where any support to the families of the victims could be regarded as a sympathy to terrorism. For example, the columnist Ali Akel, from a pro-government newspaper Yeni Şafak, lost his job after harshly criticizing the governments' unwillingness to apologise for the incident.[82] This shows that the women who joined this campaign, most of whom were journalists, writers and academics, risked their reputations in government circles.

4.1.2. Religious Minorities and Cultural Diversity

BK tackled the problems of religious minorities in Turkey, as well. Two other blogs, one about the Sivas Massacre and the other about the BK participant and journalist Hilal Kaplan sent inclusive messages for religious minorities in Turkey. In the 1993 Sivas Massacre, 35 people, most of whom were Alevi artists and intellectuals, were killed by an ultra-religious Sunni Muslim mob which set fire to their hotel.[83] The Alevi people are a minority religious and cultural community compared to the Sunni Muslim majority in Turkey. They have historically suffered from violent attacks by public mobs and the state. Twenty-one BK participants engaged in self-criticism about their inactivity and silence on the massacre in 1993. The blog vividly admits responsibility:

> In a state of shock, I was not responsible enough to define and question that atrocity, when I was rebelling against the accusations [for that matter] when Sunni Muslims were shown to be responsible for an atrocity that the human mind cannot grasp. That fire has also touched me and seared me. If I had the chance to go back to July 2, I would have stood at the door of the *Madımak Hotel* to be a wall.[84]

81 Interviews 2015–2016.
82 T24 2012.
83 The victims had travelled to Sivas, a city in the central eastern part of Turkey, to join an Alevi-Bektashi cultural festival.
84 Sivas 2010.

After the self-criticism, the blog ends with wishes for a country in which there would be no 'atrocity/darkness (*zulmet*) that can enslave the masses.' Despite being a 'declaration of guilt,' the blog does not directly name the perpetrators.[85] BK preferred to define the violence as *zulmet* and *zulüm*, which in Turkish political usage refer to oppression, atrocity and tyranny. There is an implication that *zulmet* as an outside force captured the imagination of the masses and made them violent, thereby the blog blurs the identity of the agents of the violence. Secondly, the incident is often referred to as a massacre (*katliam*) in Turkey, but the blog does not use this definition. Thirdly, the blog uses the word '*mazlum*' for the victims – which is a broader word for oppressed people. It puts the victims in a pitied and general position of being oppressed, instead of naming them as victims (*kurban*) of this specific incident. *Mazlum* also hides the identity of the people killed, who were mostly intellectuals and artists. In contrast, Alevi communities and press commonly refer to the victims as 'Sivas martyrs' (*Sivas şehitleri*). BK refrained from using this language and instead used a general Islamic discourse against oppression.

BK also supported cultural diversity and 'living in peace' with people of different religions. In another blog, they backed one of their participants, journalist Hilal Kaplan, who became a target of an ultra-conservative Islamist news site for being photographed in a church. BK supported Kaplan by saying that 'we acknowledge the church as a religious place and we visit it.' Again, the emphasis here is on living together with the different segments in society. They state that:

> To declare being inside a church a 'crime' and to question our 'Muslimhood' is not the business of *Habervaktim*. Moreover, this language also hurts and discriminates against the Christian citizens who make up the community of the church.[86]

The blog also stated that religious and ethnic monotypification is a project of the nation-state, and it is against Islamic principles. Here BK referred to the early Republican policies which targeted religious and ethnic identities and attempted to remove their symbols from the public space – such as the discouragement of veiling and ban on the Kurdish language and symbols. Here again we observe BK's two main sources of references: one about Islam and the other one about equal citizenship. While they criticise the discriminating practices of the Turkish state building process, they also embrace the liberal ideal and concept of citizenship occasionally as a safeguard of a peaceful co-existence among different ethnic and religious communities.

85 The trials took decades and some perpetrators managed to escape the country. 38 suspects were put on death sentence which later turned to life-long sentence in 2001 when the capital punishment was abolished (Tahincioğlu 2021).

86 Hilal Kaplan 2012.

4.2. The First Mobilised Protest against AKP and the First Divisions in BK: Women Crossing their 'Boundaries'

One of the first direct contestations of women's Islamic movements against AKP was the campaign 'No Vote If There is no Candidate with Headscarf!' in 2011.[87] The organisers of the campaign were BK participants who created a new initiative named 'We Want a Deputy with a Headscarf' (*Başörtülü Vekil İstiyoruz*), since some BK participants did not want to join the campaign. In this sense, BK experienced its first biggest internal conflict during the planning phase of this campaign.[88] The campaign had a molecularisation effect in Deleuzian terms for dividing the molar BK group (whose activist vein was already much less in number compared to the Women's Gatherings) and compelling the supporters of the campaign to create a new platform.

There has been no legal obstacle to entering Parliament wearing a headscarf; however, the expulsion of Merve Kavakçı from Parliament in 1999 and the subsequent closure of her party had discouraged political parties nominating women with headscarves. During the oath ceremony, other elected members of Parliament (MPs) had protested Kavakçı. The late socialist democrat prime minister, Bülent Ecevit had shouted, 'This is not a place to challenge the state. Please put this lady in her place'[89] while the majority of MPs shouted at Kavakçı 'Get out.'[90] Kavakçı's dismissal from Parliament had become a symbol of the expulsion of women with headscarves from public spaces. Public and private sphere discussions dominated the public discourse in the following years. Ecevit and secular MPs' discourse dominated against the objections of Islamists and a few liberal intellectuals who supported the right to veil in public.

Before the 2011 parliamentary elections, the campaign called upon political parties to nominate women with headscarves as MPs. The chief target was AKP, which was the governing party for eight years and claimed to represent the religious and conservative constituency. It was the first and largest campaign of women that targeted the Parliament for freedom to wear headscarf as MPs. Around this campaign, women organised protests in front of the Parliament, lobbied the parliamentarians, made several press statements, and created a blog.[91] They collected 35,000 signatures in support of their cause.[92] Some feminist organisations such as KA.DER[93] and some feminists who did not wear a headscarf also supported the campaign.

87 '*Başörtülü Aday Yoksa Oy da Yok!*'
88 Interviews 2015–2016.
89 Ecevit literally said 'explain to this lady her boundaries' (*Lütfen bu hanıma haddini bildiriniz*).
90 Akar and Dündar 2004.
91 No Vote 2011a, 2011b, 2011c.
92 No Vote 2011a.
93 *Kadın Adayları Destekleme Derneği* (Association for Supporting Female Candidates) is an NGO that has focused on supporting female candidates in municipal and national elections.

In their blog and public speeches, women first of all employed a rights discourse. Hilal Kaplan issued a reminder that in Turkey women have had the legal right to be elected to Parliament since 1934, but de facto 60% of women could not use this right.[94] The women sarcastically referred to their barriers (*had*) in public space, referring to Ecevit's fierce rebuke of Kavakçı. As a response, they declared that they now indeed 'crossed the authorised boundaries' (*haddimizi aşıp*) imposed on them by the secular state and social circles 'by asking for their rights.'[95]

Secondly, women referred to prerequisites of participatory democracy and direct representation. For them, democracy meant that Parliament should be a reflection of the whole society.[96] Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal states that 'it is not right that the Parliament is *that sterile*,' meaning that there were only female MPs who did not use headscarves.[97] She argued that with the women with headscarves in the Parliament and other public bodies, they would be better able to fight the visible and non-visible problems they faced in their own 'neighbourhoods.' Cihan Aktaş also stated that the representation of women with headscarves was crucial for fighting against the discriminations that they face.[98]

Several BKP members in Ankara provided a base for the campaign. The campaigners later supported an independent candidate with a headscarf, journalist Aynur Bayram, and they assisted her election campaign, including collectively renting an office and facilitating her daily commute in the city.[99] Bayram was unable to garner a sufficient number of votes and no other party positioned candidates with headscarf on the highest ranks of their closed party lists.

The women campaigning not only challenged AKP, but also the *men* in their community/neighbourhood. The campaign was harshly criticised by journalists and opinion-makers from AKP circles. For example, writer Ali Bulaç in the popular Islamist *Zaman* newspaper[100] harshly criticised the campaign by accusing women of being spies and claimed that they aimed to destroy the 'Islamist movement' from within. Bulaç claimed that 'some ladies' make the headscarf a commercial and social status object, and they victimise themselves to seek benefits from the government. Bulaç was also critical that the headscarf was no longer defended on religious grounds, but on the grounds of women's rights, personal choice and freedom inspired by feminism.[101]

94 Güneş 2011.
95 No Vote 2011c.
96 No Vote 2011a.
97 No Vote 2011a.
98 No Vote 2011a.
99 Interview with Berrin Sönmez, 2016.
100 It was a Gülenist newspaper that was closed by a decree-law in 2016. In 2013, Ali Bulaç apologised to the campaigning women and claimed that if they conducted a campaign again, he would be their first supporter (T24 2013). This change may be explained by the division between AKP and the Gülen movement since 2012.
101 Bulaç 2011.

As campaign organiser and BKP member Nesrin Semiz mentions, what is interesting in this concept of 'authorised boundaries' is that men in their own religious circles also attack them when they step outside of these boundaries.[102] Responding to Bulaç's defamation attempt, the campaigner women maintained that they are 'known by [their] names and professions in society.'[103] Women used their earlier public visibility to legitimise their campaign – as several of them were recognised academics, writers or journalists such as Yıldız Ramazanoğlu, Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal, Cihan Aktaş, Nihal Bengisu Karaca and Hilal Kaplan.

Despite its clear goal, well-organised campaign, and open support for a specific candidate, the campaign could not produce an immediate result, namely the election of an MP with a headscarf in 2011 general elections. Therefore, its effectiveness was limited.[104] However, there are also *molecular* dimensions of the campaign, in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari, for sparking a new debate and disagreement within the BK movement. First of all, the fear of the visibility of dissent played a crucial role in the formation of this campaign outside of BK. Organisers could not use BK's name in the campaign, as several BK participants did not want to be placed in a challenging position vis-à-vis AKP. As reported in the interviews, the husbands or family members of some BK participants were in AKP cadres.[105] In a way, the participants of the campaign risked their reputations in the eyes of the government circles and decreased their relative leverage power vis-à-vis the party. After calculating these risks, not every BK participant joined this campaign.

On the other hand, some BK participants claimed that they were suspicious of the rationale of the campaign in the first place. A participant in her late 20s who did not take part in the campaign was upset that some women seemed to have acted based on their own interest in becoming MPs, while the aim of BK was to do 'good things' for society.[106] Her reason for not attending the campaign was to focus on her studies, which she had to postpone for a long time due to the ban, but also to her perception about the rent-seeking attitude of some women in the campaign. In her example, we see the tension on the one hand, between distracting from her studies which she had recently found the chance to continue with her headscarf and dissenting visibly from the government. At the same time, she seems to interpret the ideal of the BK platform as doing 'good things' and for her this is to focus on 'others' rights and not on their own (potentially some BK participants') rights to enter the Parliament.

102 Interview with Semiz, 2011.

103 No Vote 2011b.

104 With a cabinet decree in 2013, AKP repealed the article that barred female public employees from wearing a headscarf in the 1982 regulation about the attire of public employees. Following the decree, four women MPs entered Parliament with headscarves in October 2013. As of 2017, women with headscarves can assume any position, including posts in the judiciary, military, and police.

105 Interviews 2015–2016.

106 Anonymous interviewee #,1 2015.

Hazar Association founder and BK participant Ayla Kerimoğlu also did not directly take part in the campaign. She defended AKP and Erdoğan by highlighting the closure lawsuit against the party at that time. She argued that AKP was careful not to create social tension and tried to convince the people and other political parties in the process. For her, this was a durable solution:

> I think that the non-aggressive method of AKP against the ban has had a lasting effect. Using a persuasion method without harming the social peace was important to make people a party of the regulation and to make the change permanent… I do not agree with the argument that AKP slowed down the headscarf reform because it did not care about women. I believe that the legislators and bureaucrats who have wives and daughters wearing headscarves cannot have such a mentality.[107]

The defence of AKP and Erdoğan hints at the complex nature of the relationship between the party and BK participants. They had their shared grievances for decades of suppression of Islamist parties and discrimination of women in headscarf. For some, this relationship was of an organic nature due to being a member of or having family members in AKP. Fatma Bostan Ünsal, a participant of BK, BKP and also a founding member of AKP, is known for her publicised criticisms of AKP governments. She had declared in one of the consultation meetings of AKP that she would nominate herself as an independent candidate in the 2011 national elections if the party did not propose a candidate with a headscarf. This remark brought her visibility on mainstream media as 'an AKP member who challenges AKP.' However, in an interview with the popular anchorman Fatih Altaylı, she explained that she had not challenged Erdoğan in that meeting. Arguing that AKP was not the party of one man [at the time], she stated that she offered to be an independent candidate in order not to jeopardise AKP's future with a possible party closure lawsuit.[108]

Dissenting visibly from AKP has not been easy for religious women who were trapped between AKP and the secularist threat of the ban which they still reportedly feared at the time of my interviews in 2015 and 2016. Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal argued that a widespread fear of exclusion immobilised women with headscarves:

> Due to the ban, the opportunities for action were so limited for many women. They had to cling to the solidarity networks to do something. To be excluded from these networks meant that they would not do anything. So, they could not cross the red lines, and this is very understandable.[109]

With this immobilising fear of exclusion among religious women, the campaign sowed the seeds of the first divisions in the larger network of BK. The campaign could be regarded as a molecular development in its experimentation of a mobilised and direct confrontation with power – a power that came from a religious and conservative base, a power that claimed to represent them, and a power that had been a network of

107 Interview with Kerimoğlu 2015.
108 Habertürk 2010.
109 Interview with Tuksal 2016.

support for them for decades. In the end, protesting women were disappointed by criticisms and lack of support from their male (and female) counterparts.

4.3. The Gezi Park Protests and the Split in Women who Get Together

The Gezi protests divided the Islamic 'neighbourhood' which had a unified stance in supporting AKP for a long time.[110] The protests began as an environmental protest aiming to protect the trees in public Gezi Park in Taksim, Istanbul. With the violent police response against the people occupying the park, it turned to a larger series of protests about freedom of speech and organisation, and against the police violence and increased conservative, neo-liberal and authoritarian discourse and practices of AKP.

Some Islamic-oriented activists verbally and collectively condemned the government for the use of disproportionate police violence. A well-known Islamic human rights organisation Mazlumder was divided with resignations and expulsions during and after the Gezi Protests. Some Mazlumder members resigned after some members, including then-general director Ahmet Faruk Ünsal (the husband of a BKP member and a BK participant, Fatma Bostan Ünsal), signed a declaration of a leftist Islamic opposition platform named Labor and Justice Platform (*Emek ve Adalet Platformu*) that criticised government's actions and police violence during the Gezi protests.[111] One of the founders of Mazlumder and a famous Islamist columnist Abdurrahman Dilipak froze his membership right after this declaration. Dilipak reflected the main government position on the Gezi Protests in an interview during the early days of protests in June 2013 that the protests were influenced and sponsored by national and international 'enemies' of the country:

> A general uneasiness, chaos, intimidation, deterrence and suppression operations are organised in the society. I don't think [Gezi] has anything to do with a civil or democratic demand… It is understood that large holdings, political parties and international connections are involved in it… Today, we are faced with a bloody scenario planned by informal economists and political experts from inside and outside the country.[112]

During the protests, BK also had significant partitions and disagreements among its participants.[113] Some participants publicly condemned the Gezi protests and deemed it violent and dangerous for the country and for the pious segments of the society. They regarded it as an attack to AKP and particularly highlighted the reports of harassment

110 'Anti-capitalist Muslims' who stood against AKP's neo-liberal policies since 2012 and the Islamist Felicity Party supporters were exceptions.
111 ET 2013.
112 Turgut 2013.
113 Interviews 2015, 2016; Tuksal 2020, 234.

of women with headscarves during the protests[114]. Among those who defended AKP was Hilal Kaplan, who was a columnist in pro-government *Yeni Şafak* newspaper at the time. While she was very critical of the government's reaction and inaction about the Uludere (Roboski) bombing in 2011, she showed continuous support to AKP during the Gezi Protests in 2013. She wrote in her columns that the outset of the protests was legitimate while the police violence against those protestors was illegitimate.[115] However, she focused on how the protests turned violent and aggressive, and claimed that the protests galvanised the secular masses against religious people and women wearing headscarves:

> The reflection of the protests that started with a democratic demand and method turned out to be Islamophobic and racist attacks and slogans in the rest of the country… The categorical opposition to AKP leads to standing against democratisation, the [Kurdish] "solution process" and the new constitution.[116]

Kaplan deemed a potential resignation of AKP government and Erdoğan more dangerous than the suppression of the protests. She highlighted in her columns that Gezi opened up the scene for the opposition who wanted to overthrow the government with illegal and undemocratic means.[117] She emphasised AKP and Erdoğan as safeguards for not only the pious (*mütedeyyin*) communities against the threat of a potential February 28 Process, but also for the democratisation process in Turkey in general.[118]

There are several dimensions of the dilemmas and divergent views of women within BK. During the Gezi protests, some participants reported that there were many discussions in BK about the role of Fethullah Gülen's community in state cadres and political affairs. Some claimed that they condemned the police violence in the beginning of the Gezi protests, but that they later saw that the police was controlled by the Gülenist infiltration in the state, not by AKP. An anonymous BK participant, who studied in Europe due to the headscarf ban, argued that Erdoğan's daughters suffered like them and had to study abroad, but the members of Gülen's community filled in the state cadres without showing their religious identity, while ripping off the benefits of being in power and without paying any price. She mentioned that they believed in the sincerity of Erdoğan and AKP cadres when they said they were mistaken about the Gülenists:

> I accept that AKP made a mistake and I accept their apology. I see that [AKP] is making an effort. However, against the parallel state [infiltration of Gülenists in the state], I see this [supporting AKP] as a homeland issue (*memleket meselesi*). Let's

114 Some women with headscarves reported that they were harassed and insulted by the Gezi protestors (Field notes, 2013). The government publicised an example of an alleged attack to damage the reputation of the protestors, known as the Kabataş Incident, whose authenticity was questioned in media.

115 Kaplan 2013a, June 9; Kaplan 2013d, June 14.

116 Kaplan 2013a, June 9.

117 Kaplan 2013b, June 10.

118 Kaplan 2013c, June 12.

say that we have a son who got involved in a gang, but he later regrets it and comes back home, should we throw him away?[119]

On the other hand, some other BK participants personally supported and/or attended the protests, and condemned the police violence against the protestors and the government's uncompromising stance. A platform founded by young Muslim women and men in 2013, Initiative of Muslims Opposing Violence against Women (*Kadına Şiddete Karşı Müslümanlar İnisiyatifi)* held two demonstrations to condemn the attacks against women with headscarves during the protests, but they also condemned the government's use of the attacks as a tool to invalidate the protests altogether. Their first protest was organised as a march from Kabataş to Taksim, with a press statement read in Taksim Square during the peak of the protests in early June. Several participants of BK joined, and some helped the organisation of the march.[120] Many experienced feminists also joined. It was highly publicised by the media. The main message of the protest was 'Stop the harassment [against women]; continue the resistance' (*Tacizi durdur, direnişi sürdür*). They chanted both well-known Turkish feminist slogans such as 'The world turns upside down, if women become free' 'We want the streets, the squares and the parks!' 'Long live women's solidarity' and some new slogans coming from religious women such as 'Those who attack the headscarf are not from us.'[121]

After offensive disputes in the BK e-mail group between the two opposing views in support or rejection of the protests, some years long friendships (beyond solidarity in activism) came to a halt among the participants.[122] Many participants from both factions left the e-mail group. Eventually, BK, as a platform, has kept a silent profile and been demobilised since 2015.[123] Pro- and anti-government participants have continued to be active in other political and women's groups, while some participants got disillusioned with politics altogether and preferred to keep a low public profile after the Gezi Protests.

5. Conclusion: From Molar to Molecular, New Fields of Contention for Religious Women

Women's Islamic movements in Turkey have evolved by reconsidering their issue areas, discourses and forms of contention after three critical junctures: AKP's coming to power in 2002, lifting of the headscarf ban in universities in 2008, and the Gezi Protests in 2013. In 2003, they attempted to form a molar movement against the sup-

119 Anonymous interviewee #3, 2015.
120 Field observations, June 7, 2013; interview with Kavuncu, 2016.
121 '*Başörtüye saldıran bizden değildir!*'
122 Interviews 2015, 2016.
123 They published two more blogs after the Gezi Protests, one against the police law which gave the police a discretion to use weapons (2014) and another one on sexist attacks against Sümeyye Erdoğan and Ayşen Gürcan who was appointed as the first minister who wore headscarf (2015).

porters of the headscarf ban and be active as a unified group. In 2008, an activist cluster among the group began to organise and mobilise for important campaigns about the human rights violations in Turkey under the name Women who Get Together (BK).

This became possible due to two parallel processes: First of all, with the relaxation of the headscarf ban beginning from 2008, WIMs could collectively occupy themselves with other women's and human rights issues after years of channelling their energies and efforts to lifting the ban and providing educational and occupational trainings for women who could not go to universities or work in public sector. Secondly, since AKP's stronger hold of power beginning from its second term (2007–2011), some women among WIMs felt obliged to criticise the shortcomings and wrongdoings of the government, as the secularist threat to contain AKP was weakened.

The attempted molar movement dissolved into molecular fragments when the discontent with AKP and willingness to protest it grew stronger among some women in BK. This was especially visible during the 'No Vote If There is no Candidate with Headscarf' campaign in 2011 and the division within BK after the Gezi Protests in 2013 about supporting or protesting the AKP government. Division lines appeared among WIMs (including other Islamic women's platforms, NGOs and groups) on four issues since AKP's third term in government (2011 and onwards): the approach to the AKP's authoritarian practices, the perception of the role of AKP in assisting the Gülenist infiltration in the state, the Kurdish issue and approach to gender equality.[124]

Compared with their counterparts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), we can argue that Women who Get Together was one of a rare kind when religious women as a group stood for the rights of others who were different from them. Islamic feminists in Egypt have focused on women's rights and among those who have spoken about human rights do so individually or in other human rights umbrella organisations.[125] Islamist women in Egypt, on the other hand, most notably the 'Muslim sisters' have mobilised for the rights of the poor, illiterate, the jailed or those killed by the security forces, but often for those of their own Islamic communities.[126] They have been reporting and protesting human rights violations against the military coup,[127] but especially for their own community members. Ennahda women in Tunisia, on the other hand, reportedly learned about the political 'other' during the constitution writing in Tunisia when they realised that they had to write the constitution for all Tunisians, not only for their Islamist constituencies.[128] While there are studies that demonstrated Islamist or Islamic feminist women's organisations' strategic collabo-

124 This article did not discuss the divisions among WIMs on the axis of gender equality due to its scope. See the footnote 10, for a list of publications on WIM's stances on gender equality debates during AKP governments.
125 Karaca 2018, Chapters 6 and 7.
126 Karaca 2018, Chapters 6 and 7.
127 Mhajne and Brandt 2021.
128 Mhajne and Brandt 2021, 26.

rations with secular feminists on gender based violence in Tunisia and Egypt,[129] I could not locate a study that shows religious women's activism for human rights of 'others.'[130]

This should be explained, not due to the unique courage and interests of BK, but rather due to the fact that unlike AKP, the Islamist parties in comparable MENA countries such as Egypt or Tunisia could not continue their hold in power for a long time and the supporters of them have been contained with violent and bloody measures as in the case of Egypt.[131] Secondly, there is the unique effect of the systematic headscarf ban and polarisations in Turkey around headscarves. Firstly, these women learned to 'get mobilised' and be on the streets or engaged in human rights activism.[132] They also developed a sensitivity towards other human rights issues. Secondly, they were also compelled to show this solidarity to prove their sincerity in democratic practices in the polarised debates between secularist and Islamists. This seems to be another stimulus that at least triggered some women into a signature/blog activism.

We see further molecularisation and new amalgams among the new generation of women's Islamic movements where they challenge the existing meanings of religious and secular in Turkey. While the earlier generation of dissenting WIMs focused on the headscarf ban, women's rights, the Kurdish issue, and minority rights, a new group of WIMs among the younger generation have begun focusing more directly on violence against women, sexual harassment, Islamic masculinities, patriarchy, sexuality and gender equality in more public and disruptive formats which transgress the accepted norms in their 'neighbourhood.' In addition to the energy saved after the lifting of the headscarf ban, the success of the feminist movement in the problematisation of violence against women since the 1980s, and the institutionalisation of gender equality agenda since the 1990s have contributed to these new discourses and focus issues. This generation of women have been raising their voice in a much more systematic and collective way with mixed repertoires of contention that reflect both the feminist tradition and also the traditions of their neighbourhood, such as performing female-led funeral prayers for femicide victims.[133] Some of them also actively protest

129 Youssef 2022, Karaca 2018, Debuysere 2015.

130 At least not in the English academic literature. I believe that there have been similar religious women's groups in countries where Islam has long been the main language of political contention such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Future comparative studies could focuse on these countries.

131 On August 8, 2013, the Egyptian military intervened in the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins at Raba'a Square in Cairo leading to 'at least 817 and likely more than 1000' human casualties (HRW 2014).

132 A similar process of socialisation of movements were demonstrated for WIMs in Tunisia and Egypt (Mhajne and Brandt 2021).

133 Initiatives and platforms such as the Initiative of Muslims Opposing Violence against Women (2013), *Reçel* (Fruit Jam) (2014), Women in Mosque (*Kadınlar Camilerde*) (2017), and Havle (*Strength*) (2018) are the new dissenting collective actors in the women's Islamic movements.

authoritarian and neo-liberal policies of AKP, support women-led strikes against the exploitation of labour.

There is a widespread premise in the literature that an agreed agenda and coordinating body are necessary to constitute a social movement –a molar movement. However, Palestinian academic and activist Islah Jad suggests that diverse small groups and associations with different agendas form women's movement in the Middle East. The existence of 'certain common goals' makes these mobilisations a movement, even when there is no 'central coordinating body' or 'agreed agenda.'[134] Similarly, Asef Bayat opts for 'a more fluid and fragmented vision of social movements' and suggests to 'go beyond mere discourse, language and symbols, especially those of the leadership, taking both multiple discourses and meanings as tools for writing histories of such activities.'[135] Bayat defends to look beyond the discourse and agenda of 'leadership' and find multiple voices within the movement. These suggestions complement the idea of looking at molecularisations in seemingly molar movements.

Many of the BK's campaign's failed in terms of effectiveness and reaching their goals. However, actors in social movements do not always act for effectiveness. Especially in authoritarian contexts, some people take action without any hope for change, but only to side with the 'right' or to show their position. Here, molecularisation concept seems to be useful with its emphasis on experimentation and the process of 'becoming.' There is a popular legend in the region about an ant who carries water to extinguish the fire for Abraham which was ordered by the oppressive king Nemrud. To those who question the effectiveness and intelligibility of her movement, the ant responds: at least it has become clear on which side I stand, or '…at least I know that I have done my part.'[136] I have noted this attitude among some actors in this study.

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134 Jad 2004, 39.
135 2005, 893.
136 Janmohammad 2011.

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