

**YOUNG PEOPLE'S
TRAJECTORIES THROUGH
RADICAL ISLAMIST
MILIEUS:
COUNTRY LEVEL REPORT
TURKEY**

**When the Salt Stinks:
The Syrian War,
Kurdish Question and
Borderline Radicalisation in
Turkey**



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DARE: Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality

Young people's trajectories through radical Islamist milieus: Country level reports

Turkey

When the Salt Stinks:

The Syrian War, Kurdish Question and Borderline Radicalisation in Turkey

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Executive Summary:

This report is a product of 18 months of ethnographic field research that took place between March 2015 and January 2018 in Istanbul, Bingöl, Mardin, Diyarbakır and a number of other Kurdish cities across the Turkish-Syrian border and the periphery of the Kurdish region. The research design of the project began at the height of the ISIS's invasion of the Kurdish North Syrian town of Kobane in October 2014, and the report was concluded in October 2019, a few days after the execution of ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi following Turkey's invasion of the Kurdish territories in Northern Syria. The report is about young people's understanding, perception and reflection of radicalisation and provides ethnography-based analysis of social and political mechanisms of radicalisation across the Turkish-Syrian borders and in Istanbul during this period. After a short historical account of radicalisation, civil society, and the Islamist politics in Turkey, the report outlines the major trajectories of the most recent period and contextualises the phenomenon of Islamist radicalisation within an intertwined mechanism of power relations, radical habitus and political subjectivity. I argue that radicalisation takes place at the intersection between the hegemonic powers' intervention in the public and political sphere (where socially conservative habitus is shaped and transformed by multiple interest groups, structural inequalities and perceived injustice) and the response of young people to injustices and discriminatory practices in the form of the adoption of radical views and ideologies. Within this conceptual framework, I have identified three interconnected pathways to radicalisation in Turkey. The first is what I call the path of *radical humanitarianism*, in which the role of the state and Islamist civil society organisations (CSOs) is essentially leading to *part-time jihad* among the young Muslim activists. Many young men are radicalised in the process of the Syrian War and Islamist CSOs' humanitarian efforts to help the Syrian refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDP). The reality of part-time jihadism is a result of Turkey's interventionist policies in the Syrian War and their facilitating position of the Islamist organisations that encouraged and supported the jihadi flow. Many young men and women engaged with the humanitarian efforts, stayed in the dormitories of the Islamist CSOs and benefitted from substantial aid and support provided by these CSOs. In the process, the youth adopted more conservative norms and found a legitimate ground for radical views and ideals that engaged with the ongoing conflict and war within and beyond the Turkish borders. The second is *the Salafi pathway* to radicalisation and is a more clandestine and secretive path. Although the state's role is limited in this pathway, many of my informants highlighted how the recruitment activities of Salafi individuals and organisations have been ignored, and even facilitated by the state authorities in recent years. The Salafi pathway provides substantial testimonies of how vulnerable youth is targeted for recruitment activities as well as the discourse of Salafi radicalism targeting youth. The third trajectory, *the Kurdish pathway*, is not a religiously motivated milieu, but has a strong connection to the first two pathways as well as the state's criminal and discriminatory practices towards the Kurds within and beyond its borders in recent years. The report provides ethnographically rich analysis on the perception and understanding of youth on issues such as: the Kurdish question and conflict between the Kurdish forces and the state; nationalism and ethno-religious conflict; gender norms and LGBT rights among the Islamists; perceptions of the West vs Islam; anti-West attitudes and conspiracy theories; various and contradictory understandings of sharia law, Islamist and Salafi radicalism, extremism and fundamentalism.

1. Introduction

Turkey has witnessed a rapid growth in the number of Islamist organisations - often in the disguise of civil society organisations (CSOs) – in the last 15 years. The rapid growth of Islamist CSOs is a result of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) policy to mobilise masses by promoting political Islam in Turkey. The AKP considers these CSOs a natural ally and an alternative to liberal organisations to realise its political ambitions. Hence, Islamist CSOs have occupied a central role in AKP governmentality. The Syrian war, the termination of the Kurdish peace process in 2015 along with urban conflict thereafter, and President Erdogan's authoritarian and neo-Ottoman nostalgia have exacerbated radicalisation processes within these CSOs, especially across the Turkish-Syrian border areas and in the Kurdish periphery. In addition, thousands of foreign jihadis, and their Salafi Turkish counterparts/collaborators, increased their activities and took part in the Syrian War by recruiting youth within Turkey as well as facilitating weapon, technology and jihadi transfers into Syria (Phillips, 2016)¹. In response to the Turkish state's hostile activities and military invasions of Kurdish Northern Syria, the Kurdish youth in Turkey joined the ranks of People Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) en masse. All these mobilisations and activities created a lasting effect on young people's perception and understanding of radicalisation and religious extremism.

Drawing on 18 months' fieldwork in these border areas between March 2015 and January 2018, my research examines the role of the state, Islamist CSOs and the Salafi networks in growing Islamist radicalisation and the response of youth to contemporary affairs. I investigate the socio-political ground of Islamist radicalisation in the border areas as well as in Istanbul where most of these CSOs have their headquarters and/or jihadi recruitment takes place. I have specifically selected three border cities to encapsulate different variations of radicalisation processes. These cities are Diyarbakır, Mardin, and Bingöl. I have chosen Diyarbakır as it is the largest city in the south-east, a cultural and political centre of Kurdish people and most national or regional Islamist CSOs had an office in the city. I have also conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the eastern city of Bingöl and south-eastern city of Mardin located on the Turkish-Syrian border. Bingöl is considered to be one of the most conservative cities in Turkey and the recruitment activities of radical Islamists in the city has increased during the Syrian war. It is alleged that, from Bingöl alone, around 400 people, mostly Kurdish/Zaza young men, joined the jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. Most of the suicide bombers who have attacked public gatherings and protests in the past few years are from Bingöl and Adıyaman. Finally, Mardin was chosen based on the considerable diversity of the city including Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, and Syrian refugees and its proximity to the Syrian border as Mardin is one of the main border cities with Syria.

I argue that Islamist civil society consists of a milieu in our understanding because of their essential role in mobilising masses, organising political events, and reaching out to young men and women through their education facilities, dormitories and related activities. Based on my interviews with members and leaders of several CSOs as well as expert interviews, I can state that Islamist CSOs, especially with the Syrian war, have become one of the main grounds for Islamist radicalisation. In addition, I analyse the role of the Salafi networks and the Turkish state's policies and positionality at the intersection of the Syrian War and the Kurdish question. Finally, I present a secular nationalist pathway, namely the Kurdish, to radical actions mostly as a response to the state's policies towards the Kurds within and beyond the Turkish borders.

¹ See also: <https://www.businessinsider.com/links-between-turkey-and-isis-are-now-undeniable-2015-7?r=US&IR=T>; <https://thepressproject.gr/exclusive-wikileaks-documents-relations-erdogan-isis-oil-smuggling/>.

2. Setting the scene

2.1 Turkey's ambivalent journey between secularism and religion

Although the creation of the Republic of Turkey is most often described as a modernist and secularist project, religion has played a major role in attempts to create a Turkish national identity. The secularist project of the Kemalists was not a separation project; it aimed to nationalise Islam and integrate it into the state apparatus. The caliphate was abolished on 3 March 1924 and from 1925 onwards, laws such as the Law on the Closure of Religious Orders (1925), Law on Headgear and Dress (1925) and the Turkish Civil Code (1926) were implemented as pillars of the secularist state (Gözyayın, 2009: 22-23). These reforms especially targeted traditional religious practices and authorities that were stigmatised as backwards and challenging to the new state authority. However, the secularist republic did not give up using religion for its purposes; the Directorate of Religious Affairs (hereafter Diyanet) was established on the same day as the suppression of the caliphate. The Turkification of the Ezan (Azak, 2010) in 1930 was symbolic of the state's attempt to use Islam as a central element of the Turkish national culture in the making.

Although the Kemalist centralising approach to religion in the 1930s and 1940s marginalised traditional religious practices and institutions, most of them survived in a less visible, often clandestine way. With a transition to the multi-party system in 1950, religion returned to the political sphere as a platform for political parties opposing the excess of top-down policies of the secularist regime. The first Islamist political party was created in the early 1970s, and ideologies such as the National Vision Movement (*Millî Görüş*), under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan and the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, gained an increasing audience. Although Islamist parties were able to participate in governmental coalitions in these years, they had limited influence on policy, as their term was relatively short and interrupted by military coups and interventions. However, with the 1980 military coup, Islam returned to the public space through a military junta, whose declared aim was to re-establish public order and fight communism. Although Islamist activists also suffered from military repression in the first years of the military regime, Islam played an important role in the official ideology of this new power (van Bruinessen, 2018: 11). According to Jenkins, in these years Turkish society rapidly moved towards a more nationalist Islamist line, illustrated by an increase in votes for the nationalist and Islamist parties from 10.1% in 1987 to 16.9% in 1991, 29.9% in 1995, 34.9% in 1999, 54% in 2002 and 66.2% in 2007 (Jenkins, 2008). National Vision Movement political parties (Welfare Party, Virtue Party, Felicity Party), the central right parties (Motherland Party, the True Path Party), and the Nationalist Movement Party formed the backbone of this increase in support in the Turkish political sphere.

By the 1990s, the rise of political Islam was perceived as a threat by political and military elites, leading to the 28 February 1997 post-modern coup (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Çınar, 2003: 309-332). After a series of political and financial crises in the early 2000s, the central right political parties, including National Vision Movement, lost their public support while power accumulated in the hands of the AKP, the successor of the National Vision Movement, from 2002. With the AKP period, the conservative periphery completed its journey to the centre, assuming power in the form of a one-party government and remaining as such for the last 17 years. Islamism gradually became one of the main components of the state's discourse over this period (Taşkın, 2017).

Due to expectations of the European Union and pressure from the Turkish military, the AKP acted sensitively with respect to the secular regime in the first years of their rule. However, as it gained more room to manoeuvre, the AKP started to implement more openly Islamist policies (Jenkins, 2008:215). Today, while the AKP retains much of the nationalist ideology developed during previous decades, its main originality lies in the use of religious discourse, practices and organisations as a resource to develop its political and economic influence. The Kurdish border region has been a major target of policy aimed at legitimising state authority in a politically contested space of ethno-religious tensions.

While the early 1990s was characterised by armed conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish Armed Forces, the emergence of Islam-referenced violence perpetrated by Kurdish Hizbullah was a significant, but less documented, political development. Hizbullah's main agenda was to overthrow the secular regime and establish a sharia-based government. However, it formed a strategic alliance with the Turkish state in a mutual endeavour against the PKK and nearly eliminated the PKK from many Kurdish towns and urban centres in the early 1990s, killing more than 700 civilians in the process. In 2000, after a series of security operations, thousands of Hizbullah members were arrested and many were driven underground. A year after the AKP's ascent to power in 2004, Hizbullah reappeared in the public arena in the form of charitable and educational CSOs and later in the form of a political party, HUDA-PAR (Kurt, 2017).

2.2 Contemporary context

In Turkey, multiple reconfigurations of contemporary radical Islamism, and its influence among youth, can only be understood in an intersectional context (Lutz, 2015: 39-44; Davis, 2008: 67-85), where both relations with the Turkish state and changing transregional dynamics play a major role. We should note that radical Islamism in Turkey is not a new phenomenon, at least on the discursive level. For many decades, Islamist groups have expressed extremist views and contemplated armed struggle as a means to achieve the establishment of a sharia-based regime. However, this expressed desire had not manifested in organised violence within the country, until a state-supported Islamist group, the Kurdish Hizbullah, started violent attacks towards critical Islamic figures, secular citizens and pro-Kurdish civilians and activists in the early 1990s (Kurt, 2017).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, numerous Turkish Islamists joined the 'jihad'² in Afghanistan and elsewhere, but avoided bringing the jihad within Turkish borders (Aslan, 2014). Aside from a few individual cases and violent acts of small groups, the Kurdish Hizbullah was the first Islamist group within Turkey to adopt violence to realise their political purpose of establishing a sharia-based regime. In the early 1990s, however, the Kurdish Hizbullah was trapped in a pattern of fratricide by the Turkish state and supported by various means to fight against the Kurdish insurgent group, the PKK, and its supporting base. As a result, the Kurdish Hizbullah executed around 700 civilians in the Kurdish region between 1991 and 1996 (Kurt, 2017).

Despite the discursive legitimisation of violence (jihad) and the secularist state's role in igniting the Kurdish conflict, Islamists in Turkey avoided excessive violent acts within the country until the Syrian war began in 2012³. The Syrian War became a turning point for radical Islamists and further mobilised youth around 'the cause' (*dawah*)⁴. Turkey's longest border is with Syria; the arrival of Syrian refugees, and the Islamist AKP's policy to overthrow the Syrian regime at all cost, as well as their alleged role in supporting the radical jihadist groups in Syria (Phillips, 2016)⁵, changed the dynamics of violence. Most of Islamist organisations in Turkey got involved in Syria, first and foremost from a humanitarian aid perspective, and later in the forms of: recruiting fighters, facilitating the transfer of western jihadists, transporting weapons via Islamist

² Jihad is an Arabic word that literally means struggling or striving. It can refer to any effort to conform to Allah's guidance, though it is more frequently associated with war on the path of god. The term can mean different forms of struggle for Sufis, literalists or radicals. However, in contemporary fundamentalist usage, it is more often used to refer to war against the enemies of Islam.

³ Although many Islamists joined the Afghan war in the 1970s and wars in Chechnya and Bosnia in the 1990s.

⁴ Dawah refers to a generic call to Islam, but has a significant value for Islamist and Salafi missionaries and is used as an ideological embodiment of an Islamic mission, which all Muslims are obliged to pursue.

⁵ See also: <https://www.businessinsider.com/links-between-turkey-and-isis-are-now-undeniable-2015-7?r=US&IR=T>; <https://thepressproject.gr/exclusive-wikileaks-documents-relations-erdogan-isis-oil-smuggling/>.

civil society organisations⁶, providing medical aid and treatment for jihadists in Turkish public hospitals, as well as providing military training within refugee camps. As a result, the Syrian War created a pattern of radicalisation in Turkey similar to the experience of Pakistan after the Afghan war (Pattanaik, 2011).

In addition, the century long Kurdish question, within and beyond Turkish borders, entered a new stage with the Syrian War. The Kurds of Syria organised self defence units and defeated ISIS from their territories, establishing autonomous administrations based on the ideology of Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of PKK. This has played a major role in Turkey's quick shift from declaration of a peace treaty between the state and the PKK to termination of the peace negotiations and reignition of political conflict that resulted in the death of 2,000 civilians and the forced displacement of half a million Kurds in 2015 and 2016. During the urban conflict between the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H) and the state's security forces, a dozen Kurdish neighbourhoods, towns and districts were partly or completely destroyed⁷. The whole Kurdish region suffered from months' long curfews, intense military presence, human rights violations and mistreatments. This triggered a rapid increase in numbers of young people joining the Kurdish forces in Syria (YPG/YPJ), Iraq and Turkey (PKK).

Another aspect of the Islamist radicalisation in Turkey is the new mode of mobilisation through charities and civil society organisations (CSOs). Turkey has witnessed a rapid growth in the number of Islamist organisations, often disguised as civil society organisations, in the course of the last 18 years. Since 2004, Turkish civil society has benefited from substantial investments from the European Union after the announcement of the 'Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)' programme as a part of the Turkey's EU membership negotiation process. The main aim of the IPA was to support the development of civil society and create a ground for an egalitarian and liberal civil society in the process of Turkey's EU membership. Approximately 4.5 billion Euros were transferred to CSOs via state institutions. However, most funds distributed via governmental institutions have gone to Islamist civil society groups, as the AKP considers these CSOs a natural ally and a palatable alternative to liberal organisations in achieving their political goals and mobilising their voting base. There are also significant testimonies and indications that 6 billion Euros Turkey received from the EU as a part of the Refugee Deal in 2016 has been, at least partly, allocated to these organisations and their humanitarian activities. These funds, together with other resources within the country, helped the AKP government to consolidate its base and accomplish its goal to 'raise pious generations' as once ambitiously expressed by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan⁸. On the other hand, political clashes with the Gülenists, a former ally and new foe of the AKP government, resulted in the relocation and redistribution of government funds towards the less powerful, but more radical Islamist organisations. After the first political clashes between the Gülenists and the AKP government in late 2013, the latter turned towards creating a loyal civil society consisting of a variety of Islamist organisations and Sufi orders (*tariqas*). This effort intensified the political clashes between the two-former-allies and ultimately resulted in the attempted putsch in July 2016.

In addition, the termination of the Kurdish peace process in 2015 and the establishment of the semi-autonomous Kurdish administration in northern Syria intensified the radicalisation process of Salafi, Islamists and secular Kurdish youth. ISIS's invasion of the northern Kurdish-Syrian town of Kobani, located on Turkish border, and Turkey's indifference to helping Kurds escaping death and execution at the hands of ISIS, intensely alienated Kurdish youth. Although Kurdish youth had been joining the ranks of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) for some time, many more joined Kurdish fighting groups (YPG/YPJ) in Northern Syria during the Syrian War following the invasion of Kobani by ISIS. In 2014, and after thousands of young Kurdish men and women crossed the border and joined the forces fighting ISIS and other jihadist

⁶ See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-arms-idUSKBN0061L220150521>

⁷ This is according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Report on South-East Turkey, 2017: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf

⁸ See: <https://www.ft.com/content/83328a4e-4317-11e8-97ce-ea0c2bf34a0b>, accessed on 01.07.2019

groups. Many died in a matter of months as a result of the intense conflict, lack of training and disproportion of weaponry.

On the other hand, during this time many Turkish and Kurdish Islamists were also radicalised, and joined the ranks of ISIS and other jihadist groups. A striking example of this was revealed when Turkish security forces raided several inter-connected ISIS cells in the Kurdish city of Diyarbakır in October 2015⁹. I was conducting my fieldwork during the time and was told, several times, that ISIS members organise around a so-called CSO in the city. Later, I interviewed several people who were old friends of these ISIS members in the Kurdish city of Bingöl. Born and raised Kurdish, the leader of the cell had made his way to a judge of Raqqa under ISIS, and returned to Turkey to carry out violent attacks. Beginning in 2015, ISIS attacked several pro-Kurdish events and gatherings resulting in around 200 civilian deaths¹⁰. This came to be the most violent period of activity conducted by radical Islamist and Salafi factions in Turkey. The following sections outline the reflections and detailed testimonies of young people affiliated to a dozen ‘radical’ and/or ‘moderate’ Islamist organisations from both the border zones and Istanbul.

2.3 Locating youth radicalisation in Turkey

This research mainly examines the role of Islamist CSOs and Salafi networks in the Islamist radicalisation milieu as part of the socio-political terrain of Islamist radicalisation in the south-east border region and eastern cities of Turkey, as well as Istanbul, where most CSOs have their headquarters and most jihadist recruitment takes place. In addition, I look at the Kurdish youth’s secular radicalisation in connection and in response to Islamist radicalisation.

For the reasons I explain in the following sections, I argue that state-Islamist civil society relations have a substantial impact on radicalisation processes in Turkey. Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian war, the refugee crisis, the termination of the Kurdish peace negotiations in 2015, and the urban conflict in the Kurdish region have all exacerbated the radicalisation processes among youth in the region, especially across the Turkish-Syrian border cities and the conservative periphery.

I selected these border cities to capture the variation of radicalisation processes. First of all, the first violent Islamist group, the Kurdish Hizbullah, appeared and recruited its members among Kurdish citizens in this region. Secondly, the proximity of this area to Syria intensified radical Islamist activities over the last ten years. The Islamist government’s strategy to deal with the century-long Kurdish question, and the government’s support to Islamist organisations, created a fertile ground for radical Islamism to flourish in the area.

I focused on five cities (Diyarbakır, Mardin, and Bingöl, in addition to a few interviews in the nearby cities of Muş and Batman) in the Kurdish East and southeast, as well as Istanbul, the biggest city of Turkey, which is central to Islamist politics and organisations. Of the Kurdish cities, Diyarbakır is the largest and is the cultural and political centre of Kurdish society, where most national or regional Islamist CSOs have an office. Bingöl is considered one of the most conservative cities in Turkey and the recruitment activities of radical Islamists in the city has increased during the Syrian War. According to some testimonies, Bingöl, alongside Adıyaman, are the top cities for jihadist recruitment. Most suicide bombers who have attacked public gatherings and protests in the past few years, as well as most of the above-mentioned ISIS cell members, are from Bingöl. Finally, Mardin was chosen based on the considerable diversity of the city, which includes Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, and newly arriving Syrian refugees. Mardin’s proximity to the

⁹ See: <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201605021022496227-isis-asker-cehennem-diyarbakir/>, accessed on 01.07.2019

¹⁰ See: <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/the-islamic-state-in-turkey-a-deep-dive-into-a-dark-place/>, accessed on 01.07.2019

Syrian border also provided ample opportunity to observe radicalisation processes and activities among the residents of and new arrivals to the city.

3. Researching the Unglamorous: Ethical, social and political challenges

I conducted a total of 18 months of field research, during which I actively travelled between these cities, over two different time periods. The main fieldwork took place between March 2015 and September 2016 as part of my post-doctoral research supported by the British Academy Newton Advanced Fellowship based at the School of Law, Queen Mary University of London. The second period of field research took place in Istanbul and Mardin in January 2018 and was conducted for the DARE project. Data from both periods of fieldwork are drawn on in this report.

The scope of my research for the Newton fellowship consisted of ethnographic fieldwork on Islamist radicalisation, civil society and state in south-eastern Turkey. I conducted 48 interviews¹¹ in five Kurdish cities (Diyarbakır, Bingöl, Mardin, Muş and Batman) both with male and female participants active in around a dozen Islamist civil society organisations operating in the region. I also attended public events and celebrations, including the biggest Islamist festival (the Blessed Birth Festival to celebrate prophet Muhammad's birthday) which takes place in the city of Diyarbakır each April. I photographed and filmed the festival and produced a 30-minute documentary film draft on this event. I also attended several conferences and panels taking place in Diyarbakır and Bingöl, i.e. the Islamic Solution to the Kurdish Question organised by the pro-Hizbullah CSOs, and several panels focusing on the Kurdish question, the Syrian War and refugee crisis. In addition, I followed the social media accounts of several Islamist CSOs and individuals to investigate the extent of Islamist radicalisation activities in the virtual world.

The majority of the participants in my research are members, volunteers and leaders of Islamist CSOs ranging from liberal to radical and Salafi worldviews. Most of these CSOs operating in the Kurdish region are affiliated with Islamic circles that precede the AKP's ascent to power in 2002. Hence, I followed a few genealogies of these circles and their evolution from underground (and sometimes armed) organisations to legal forms of CSOs. While some of these CSOs are local branches of nation-wide Turkish Islamist groups, e.g. the Ensar Foundation, Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), İlim Yayma Cemiyeti, TUGVA/TURGEV, and Özgür-Der, many others are affiliated with the Kurdish Hizbullah and other Kurdish Islamist groups (e.g. Öze Dönüş Platformu, Ay-Der and Mustazaflar Association). I have also conducted interviews with a few critical organisations and pro-Kurdish religious platforms and organisations, such as Democratic Islam Congress (DIK), Azadi Movement, Anti-Capitalist Muslims and the former Mazlum-Der members¹². I have interviewed members of Sufi Naqshbandi groups and also individuals who are not affiliated to any mentioned groups but well connected to members of these organisations through friendship, family ties and kinship. Lastly, I have spoken to and interviewed young people, whose friends, school mates, or relatives participated in jihadist groups in Syria. It should be noted that these CSOs' worldviews range from liberal, moderate to radical and extremist, and their positionalities change within circumstances and broader social and political surroundings. Hence, they do not stand in fixed categories and should not be labelled as ideal types of a certain genre in the Weberian sense. Although a majority of these CSOs are supportive of the Islamist government of the AKP, a few organisations are critical of mainstream Islamism and position themselves with the Kurdish political movement and/or secular/leftist political lines. I included these critical CSOs for comparative purposes in order to follow the extent of

¹¹ Only half of these interviews are coded and analysed for the DARE Project due to the age limit set by the DARE project objectives.

¹² The group was eliminated by the central administration due to their critical approach and reporting on state crimes during the urban conflict.

Islamic discourses and understandings of social and political issues including radicalisation, power, gender, state violence, Kurdish question, and LGBT rights.

3.1 Data collection

The data set drawn on in this report consists of 27 interviews. Of these, 21 interviews were undertaken during the first period of fieldwork (see above) but coded and analysed specifically for this report using the DARE coding tree (see General Introduction to this series of reports). Six interviews were conducted during the second period of fieldwork, focusing on young people, using the DARE interview schedule (see General Introduction to this series of reports) and coding tree. Details of the observation events included in the data set can be found in Appendix 7.2.

Table 1: Data set

	Number	Total length or brief description (as appropriate)	Average length
Respondent memos	27		n/a
Audio interviews	27	2160 mins (36 hours)	85 mins
Field diary entries (total)	30	Observed events are detailed in Appendix 7.2	n/a
Still images	50		n/a
Moving images		30 minutes	n/a

3.2 Access and researcher-respondent relations

Researching one's own society leaves the researcher in an ambivalent position. As an embedded ethnographer who worked on his own society, I enjoyed certain benefits such as my linguistic access and familiarity with social and political issues. Moreover, my undergraduate education in theology and Islamic studies and my PhD research on the Kurdish Hizbullah opened up various channels to reach potential research participants. At the time of my field research, I was affiliated with Bingöl University as an Assistant Professor of Sociology. In addition, I was on the administration committee of the Human Rights Association (IHD) in Bingöl and was volunteering for the Mardin Youth and Culture Association for several projects. With my teaching, human rights activism and voluntary work for civil society, I was already an embedded ethnographer conducting research not very accessible to outsiders. However, my positionality as an activist and my Kurdish identity in a politicised and polarised environment did not always work in my favour. First of all, society in Turkey consists of multiple interest groups divided by ethnic, religious sectarian, class and gender lines. Since any researcher is positioned within certain social and political constructs, participant research that seeks to understand the insider's perspective requires navigating one's own constructs and limitations. My quest for information often required meticulous strategies in order to gain access to potential informants willing to talk on record. Here, I benefitted by contacting gatekeepers from my previous fieldwork to further investigate the radicalisation processes in recent years. I also acquired further gatekeepers through my personal connections and reached informants through snowball sampling. My book on Kurdish Hizbullah (2017) and its positive reception helped me gain credibility for my research, but it also prevented me from enjoying the invisibility that a researcher wishes. My interviews on Islamist radicalisation in international and national media and my critical position concerning the role of the state in radicalisation processes raised suspicions among certain members of Islamist organisations, creating difficulties in accessing some informants. Despite these difficulties and

extraordinary political circumstances, I managed to gather a good sample of participants who gave their consent to speak on record. My observations and conversations with people also helped to situate the problem at hand.

Half of my interviews were conducted with women members and leaders of these Islamist organisations. Most of these interviews were conducted by three women research assistants who received intensive training on field research in such an environment. They also joined three interviews I conducted in order to prepare for their assignments. My decision to work with women researchers is a direct result of the gender segregation among the Islamist groups in Turkey. During my PhD research on the Kurdish Hizbullah, I attempted to arrange interviews with women Hizbullah members, but my requests were either rejected or dismissed by my gatekeepers and informants. Hence, I adopted my recruitment strategy to gain access to the space segregated by conservative gender norms.

3.3 Ethical practice

Ethical approval, received prior to the commencement of research, included the recognition that recorded verbal consent is the most suitable way to conduct research given the nature of the research and the general characteristics of the field. Thus, verbal informed consent was obtained at the beginning of each recorded interview through a conversation in which I described what the research was about, explained that personal information would be made anonymous and that each participant would be assigned a pseudonym. In return, respondents' explicit consent was sought and obtained in these recordings. The interviews began with a set of semi-structured questions about the socio-demographics of the respondents, their thoughts, feelings, understanding and reactions to the research questions.

Ethical challenges were encountered in the course of conversations with respondents since my own views were often at odds with those of participants. In these conversations, the most challenging issue was my respondents' claims about the state's involvement in radicalisation processes and violence. Some of these claims were also mentioned on social media and reported in media outlets. However, there was no way to independently verify this information from my end. Nonetheless, these allegations and its widespread influence reflects a common perception of the state among my critical respondents, whose views are representative of wider society, especially in the Kurdish region. On the other hand, some of my respondents did not hesitate to declare their support for jihadist groups in Syria (with the exception of ISIS)¹³. Some revealed information asserting that these jihadists are trained in refugee camps within the Turkish borders and that arms are transferred through charity organisations' humanitarian shipments. During the fieldwork period, a well-known Turkish journalist, Can Dündar, who was the executive editor of the mainstream newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, published an investigative report on one of the trucks that was stopped on the way to Syria¹⁴. The truck supposedly belonged to the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), one of the main organisations I worked with, and supposedly was carrying humanitarian aid to Internally Displaced Syrians (IDPs). It turned out that the trucks were sent by the Turkish Intelligence Service (MIT) and were carrying weapons. President Erdogan claimed that they were intended for the Turkmen minority of *Bayır Bucak* in Syria, and that those responsible for revealing state secrets would be punished severely. Can Dündar left the country, after receiving a series of threats and an attempt on his life, and sought exile in Germany. I have talked to some respondents who provided similar testimonies on weapon shipment and recruitment activities within these organisations.

¹³ I believe ISIS was treated as a scapegoat due to the depiction of brutal violence on media. However, some of my respondents were not in ontological conflict with the ISIS's views and did not hesitate to declare their support for similar groups conducting the same forms of violence.

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34939916>, accessed on 04.07.2019

The ethical challenges I faced during these testimonies are not easy to address. A Turkish idiom expresses the challenge before me: ‘if the meat stinks you salt it, but what can you do if the salt stinks!’ The role of the state, the state institutions and apparatuses in radicalisation processes and violent extremism were beyond my capacity to challenge, especially when the security and safety of my respondents and myself were at stake. Most of the time, I remained silent and kept my discontent to myself, so the respondents could reflect on their experiences, opinions, and positionalities.

I interviewed leaders of an infamous Islamist CSO, Ensar Foundation, at the height of public discussions on a rape case. In another city, the leader of the same branch of the organisation was held responsible for raping a dozen children aged 13-18. This interview impacted my mental wellbeing for a long time. Listening to the discursive piety and devotion from my respondent, and hearing the tendency to dismiss and misrepresent the rape case in a very unethical way, was very challenging. In similar encounters with those openly supportive of violent extremist groups, I sometimes challenged the narrative and expressed my own position, attempting to do so without a judgmental tone. However, I kept in mind that my role as a researcher is limited, and I am disempowered by broader political structures to be able to respond in an interventionist way. Following the attempted military coup in July 2016, members of the CSOs I worked with took to the streets in support of the government and remained so for a month. The government used this opportunity to consolidate its power and prepared for a massive purge and punishment of not only the Gulenists, but also critical groups at large.

It was only after my departure from Turkey that I realised how traumatic my experience had been. During the period of urban warfare between Kurdish forces and the state in 2015 and 2016, as well as during the post-coup environment, I had passed through conflict sites, sometimes saved by minutes from bombing attacks. I was stopped at checkpoints where masked security forces pointed their weapons at my face, as they did to all other civilians at the time. Several reports, including UN Human Rights reports in 2017¹⁵ and 2018¹⁶, document the extent of violence during the time I was conducting my fieldwork in south-east Turkey. Following the attempted coup and the massive purges that followed, I observed human rights activist friends dismissed from their jobs, colleagues and students being detained, tortured, and put in prison for participating in a protest, signing a petition, or chanting a slogan. I arrived in London to continue my post-doctoral research in an environment where I found myself alone, desperate and in despair. I observed from afar how the Islamist CSOs I worked with became the new empowered perpetrators; their activities were supported and facilitated by the state, while critical organisations were outlawed, closed and their members either suspended from their work or put in prison.

3.4 Data analysis

As noted in Section 3.1, a total of 27 interviews were analysed using the common data analysis procedures agreed within the DARE project (see General Introduction to this series of reports). I did not need additional Level 2 nodes as the current nodes covered the scope and the content of the interviews. One Level 2 node - ‘Identity: Class’ – was not populated as participants did not articulate class-related identities. Ideology and politics, networks of radicalisation, ideologised enemies and their attributes, conflictual relationships and gender and sexuality are the most populated Level 2 nodes in the interviews.

3.5 Socio-demographic portrait of the respondent set

As noted at the beginning of Section 3, interviews drawn on in this report emanate from two periods of fieldwork, the first of which pertained to a larger study funded by the British Academy Newton Advanced

¹⁵ See: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf,

¹⁶ See: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22853&LangID=E>

Fellowship while the second was conducted as part of the DARE project. All 27 interviewees included in the respondent set for this report conformed to the age criteria of the DARE project, being between 18 and 30 years old. Respondents were of Turkish, Kurdish and other ethnic backgrounds. Most of my interviewees were originally from rural areas of Turkey and they mainly came from socially conservative Muslim families. In contrast to their parents' generation – which tends to follow a folk-Islam - the younger generation is exposed to and in pursuit of a more political interpretation of Islam.

In selecting respondents, gender and other socio-demographics of participants were considered as well as the balance between leaders and ordinary members of CSOs. The respondent set is described below according to key socio-demographic criteria.

GENDER: Of the total number of under 30-year olds included in this study (27) 14 were male and 13 were female.

AGE: My respondents were usually in their early twenties. Two of my informants were 18 years old (the youngest) and the oldest was 30 years old. The median age of my respondents was 20.

EDUCATION: Eight respondents had university degrees and a further 12 were enrolled in a university degree programme at the time of the interview. Hence, the majority of the respondents were either university graduates or students. One respondent was a secondary school graduate and the remaining six had graduated from high schools.

EMPLOYMENT: The majority of my respondents were either unemployed, students or working part-time in student dormitories. There were nine full time employed people among my respondents and the majority of them were working in the field of education as teachers. All five part-time employed respondents were working in dormitories and were women. The remaining 13 were university students supported by their families.

CLASS: Although class was not raised as an issue by my research participants, it plays an important role in the likelihood of radicalisation and recruitment. The overwhelming majority of my research participants were members of lower middle-class families with rural backgrounds. Their access to education happened only through organised Islamic circles, where their ideological indoctrination shaped how they imagined the world. While class differences were not articulated, they were quite visible in the acts, thoughts and imaginations of respondents.

RESIDENTIAL STATUS: Ten respondents were living with their parents and three of the participants had lost one of their parents and were living with a single parent. Six of the students were staying in a dormitory administered by various Islamist organisations. Three lived alone, two were married and lived with their partner and child. The remaining three were sharing flats with friends. One of my informants was an asylum seeker at the time of the interview.

MARITAL STATUS: Only two of my informants were married and the remaining 25 were single, among whom one was engaged and several others had girlfriends/boyfriends.

Most of my respondents were from large families and had an average of five siblings. One of my informants had 11 siblings.

Twenty of my informants were Kurdish of whom eight spoke Zazakî, and 12 spoke Kurmanji (two dialects of Kurdish widely spoken in Turkey's Kurdish region). Three of my respondents had mixed backgrounds: two of them were Kurdish-Arabs; and one was Kurdish Turkish. The remaining four were Turkish.

All of my respondents were born in Turkey and identified as Muslim. The majority of them (21) said they were practising believers, while six stated that they believe, but do not practice.

4. Borderline Radicalisation in Turkey

4.1 Radicalisation at the Crossroads: Transformation of the Islamist Civil Society, the Syrian War, and the Kurdish Conflict

In the conservative periphery of Turkey, social relationships are determined by seniority, patriarchy and close familial ties. In many cases, young people, who are attracted to radical ideas or organisations, already have a connection or a platform that exposes them to the radical network and the content. Kinship and strong familial ties provide shelter and security to its members and creates possibilities for them to reorganise around a political ideal. The Kurdish Hizbullah relied on these assets and gained significant support among various families and tribes in several Kurdish cities at the peak of urban conflict in the 1990s. Similarly, many other Islamic organisations rely on extended networks of families, relatives and interest groups, mostly led by powerful senior men. Families usually involve themselves in political matters as a group or one member leads another into the activities.

Beyond that, Islamic organisations, with the support of the Islamist AKP government, managed to create massive networks and mobilise masses in various realms. In the case of the pro-Hizbullah organisations or other Islamist groups, public outreach and recruitment activities take place through social relationships, festivals and picnics, house visits, religion lessons, school dormitories, humanitarian aid campaigns, protests and meetings among the Islamic umbrella organisations- such as regional Islamic Civil Society Platforms or the wider National Will Platform.

Islamist organisations increased their public activities via civil society organisations after the Islamist AKP ascended to power in 2002. Although civil society was not a new phenomenon for the Islamists, they tended to keep a low profile under secularist regimes before the 2000s. As a result, there were less legal organisations in which Islamists maintained their work and activism. Most of these organisations, for instance, prioritised human rights violations, religious/cultural events and religious teachings in private circles before 2000. The ability of Islamists to reach a wider public was limited and mainly relied on personal donations and voluntary activism during this period. The main activities of Islamist organisations took place away from public eyes: in *sohbet* (religious conversations and gatherings) circles, in tea houses, in private properties, in housing for students in modestly furnished flats, or around small businesses and activities. However, the AKP's rule was a turning point for these organisations, as they no longer feared attracting the state's ire or becoming exposed to investigations and facing closure of their legal entities under secularist, and often hostile, regimes. This assurance motivated the Islamist organisations to legalise their activities via civil society organisations in the early 2000s. Soon they discovered, and were allocated, profitable state funds via projects and grants. Most of these organisations increased their charitable activities and managed to reach more people in the process. Society was in transformation and Islamists were no longer the oppressed, but the now-powerful bloc in charge of ruling the country.

During my fieldwork, I heard many times that if one wants to get a promotion or receive a benefit, he/she needs to engage with the activities of Islamist organisations or trade unions close to the government. The biggest share from the state-generated funds between 2003 and 2013, however, was allocated to Gülenist organisations¹⁷, until the first political clash took place between the two former allies, the AKP and the

¹⁷ Gülenist organisations were organised around the Islamic scholar and public preacher Fethullah Gülen in the 1960s and 1970s. Their ideology was a mixture of moderate Islamism and Turkish nationalism in the form of neo-Ottomanism. The group firstly established schools, school supporting courses (*dershane*) and student dormitories and houses and recruited the majority of its supporters among young people. In the 1980s and 1990s, they had *dershanes* and schools all around Turkey and expanded their education activities beyond its borders. The post-Soviet Central Asian countries (*Türkî devletler*), African and Middle Eastern countries were their initial targets. They soon established schools in Europe and the USA and infiltrated state institutions such as justice, education, military and

Gülenists. Most of the social support programme (SODES) and state funds were used by the Gülenist education institutions in this period. They were the most organised and influential group among the Islamists, and their worldviews, by comparison, were relatively moderate, although quite nationalist in many ways. Their educational activities and services across the world were appreciated by a wide range of people among Islamists, nationalists and liberals during this time. They started to organise their activities and services in the 1960s and 1970s, but were never able to get the full support of the state until the AKP ascended to power. In this period, the Gülenists, with the help of the ruling party, infiltrated state institutions and expanded their activities within and beyond Turkish borders to a great extent. Education, military, police, justice and media were the main targets of the group. They opened school supplementary courses (*dershane*) for university entrance exams, where they recruited hundreds of thousands of young students and kept them under close control during their period of education as well as their professional careers. In many cases, they managed to recruit adherents via undercover senior members in state institutions. The AKP government extended full support to the Gülenists, not only in Turkey, but also abroad. Diplomats and politicians frequently visited Gülenist schools abroad and praised their services in public events and TV. The Gülenists' support against the secularist state structure was valuable to the AKP government and it was the only way to survive several political crises that the AKP faced including: the Ergenekon case, where hundreds of members of military ranks were dismissed and put in prison on the allegation of a likely military coup d'état; the constitution crisis in 2007 when the former president Abdullah Gül was prevented from running for presidency; and numerous military interventions and discontent in the judicial and military ranks. For many years, pro-Gülen TV stations and organisations produced propaganda in favour of the Islamist AKP in order to mould public opinion.

The alliance was profitable for both sides and the Gülenists continued to receive the lion's share of public and state funds for a decade, until late 2013. Other Islamist organisations were dissatisfied with the lack of, or limited, support they received during this time. Hence, when the 17/25 December Crisis broke out between the Gülenists and the AKP, most Islamist organisations allied with the government and slowly replaced the Gülenists. The National Will Platform was a product of this political clash, but gained an important position as a loyalty test for the Islamist organisations in the process. The Gülenists were not welcomed by other Islamists for several reasons. Their aggressive and ambitious recruitment organisation gave no place to other Islamists. Compared to other groups, they were more organised with a clear agenda and influential structural bodies. Their tactical moves in the 1990s to distance themselves from Islamist activism against an oppressive secularist regime were often criticised by other Islamists. And lastly, the lion's share they received from the AKP government and state institutions was often seen as an obstacle that prevented other Islamists from gaining more power. As a result, it was not difficult for the AKP government to consolidate Islamist groups under an umbrella organisation, the National Will Platform, which initially stood in opposition to the Gülenists, but transformed into a loyalty test for the pro-AKP alliance and received state funds in return.

The Arab Uprisings had a huge influence on the transformation of Turkish politics. The Islamist AKP shared the same values as the Muslim Brotherhood entities across the Middle East and president Erdoğan's neo-Ottomanist ideals encouraged him to pursue his political interests in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. The Uprisings, however, were taken over by more organised radicals who flew into Syria from all around the world. Sharing a 911 kilometres borderline with Syria and hosting 3.6 million refugees, Turkey became a hotbed for radical ideas and activities following the Syrian War. It is asserted that more than 90% of the foreign fighters passed through Turkey to join the Islamic State, Al Nusra and other jihadist organisations (Neumann, 2016: 98). An ISIS member and Turkish citizen, İlyas Aydın, who is held in prison in Northern

police forces. Through their alliance with the AKP government, they obtained a power that they had never dreamed of. However, this alliance turned into a mutual hatred during the revelation of corruption in the ranks of state administration in 2013. The group initiated a failed military coup in 2016 and has since been designated as a terrorist organisation by the Turkish state.

Syria, told BBC Turkish journalist Fehim Taştekin that around 3000 Turkish citizens had joined ISIS¹⁸. The number of Turkish citizens who joined other jihadist groups is unknown. What is more known, however, is through which networks and organisations these people were radicalised and joined jihadist groups in Syria. İlyas Aydın, for example, points out several so-called civil society organisations operating across the border and maintaining secret cells in the surrounding Kurdish region, including two of the cities in which I conducted my fieldwork. In my interviews, several participants indicated that the charity and humanitarian activities of several Islamist CSOs went hand in hand with facilitating the transfer of new recruits or carrying weapons to jihadists under the cover of transportation of humanitarian aid to Syrian internally displaced people (IDPs). I was quite surprised to hear of not only underground radical Salafi groups, but also some nationwide Islamist CSOs' involvement in these activities. When I shared my doubts with Seynan (30), a former member of Mazlum-Der which was eliminated by the Turkish nationalist central administration after they published a report on Cizre Basement Massacre¹⁹, he told me that even moderate Islamists were committed to supporting Turkey's strategy to overthrow the Assad regime. He said:

I mean, Turkey has a Syrian policy and they [the Islamist CSOs] have been integrated into this policy on some level. They may have not been asked to become a fighting force, but they have been asked to act in a manner that would legitimise the government policy in the public sphere, and they have taken this on. I don't know if you've been told this, but there are serious claims that after the Syrian crisis began and groups started arming, Davutoğlu [the former prime minister who was eliminated by a powerful clique within the government, business and media (the Pelicans) in 2016] organised 2-3 meetings in Fatih with the big shots within Islamic circles and convinced them of their Syrian policy. These [meetings] were not open to the public but people who partook talk about it, that they were convinced. I don't know what they received in return for this though.

4.1.1 Radical humanitarianism and part-time jihad

It was not only Seynan who pointed out that Islamist CSOs are actively involved in the Syrian War in one way or another. Humanitarian aid and support for refugees and the IDPs was a façade for this involvement. On the one hand, these CSOs fulfilled a significant role in reaching out and helping the IDPs and the Syrian refugees. They managed to collect huge donations, in kind and cash, from sensitive religious Turkish citizens and also to mobilise young people to deliver these donations to refugees within Turkey as well as in Syria. On the other hand, this process of humanitarian aid, radicalised many young people who were able to visit Syria, accompanying the humanitarian trucks sent by these CSOs. The process formed a humanitarian pathway into part-time jihadism²⁰ and violent extremism, as indicated by Osman, a 23-year-old Kurdish university student.

Here, Osman's close friend, Mujahid's story is an illustrative case. He lost his father when he was a child and lived with a schizophrenic older brother in his teenage years. He encountered radical ideas during high school when he attended several informal religious classes in his small conservative city. He developed a bond with an organisation led by Islamists who had received their education in Egypt. For years, this organisation operated underground and was only active in organising religious classes for the understanding of the Qur'an. In the mid-2000s, the organisation became a legal entity and expanded their activities to charity and humanitarian aid. Mujahid was a freshman in college when the Syrian War broke out. He actively participated in efforts to help Syrian refugees and IDPs with the organisation but was

¹⁸ See: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-49242045>.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/11/turkey-state-blocks-probes-southeast-killings>

²⁰ I employ the term part-time jihadism as a significant number of these jihadists go back and forth to the battleground through humanitarian aid convoys and other means that facilitated and/or ignored by the state and its agencies.

radicalised by what he observed in Syria. He began to talk about the suffering and injustice taking place in Syria during gatherings with the organisation. Young men in high school and/or university were regular attendees of Islamic gatherings hosted by these CSOs.

On their first humanitarian aid visit these young men joined conversations, were shown videos of the war, and were told of the importance of supporting suffering Muslim brothers and sisters. Mujahid propagandised for the organisation and gathered young men around him in tea houses and small masjids in the corner shops of crowded passages. Eventually, Mujahid took part in jihad in Syria. Mujahid had made several trips to Syria with humanitarian aid organisations, but now was an active fighter. Several months later, Mujahid returned from Syria with a serious injury. He was saved and treated by a Turkish hospital in a border town. He returned home, changed forever. The chatty young man with the soft beard was now quiet and only spoke to his closest friends, including Osman. Osman visited his childhood friend several times and tried to cheer him up with conversation about old times. Osman said that Mujahid would speak only of ‘little fragments of conflict, after long sessions of silence’. Mujahid spent months in solitude in the back room of his widowed mother’s house. The neighbourhood surrounding their house was informally called Texas, due to the frequent conflict taking place there during the civil war in the 1990s. Both the PKK and Hizbullah had active supporters in the neighbourhood. Clashes took place between state security forces and the PKK as well as with Hizbullah²¹. In the 1990s, Mujahid’s family, like the majority of their neighbours, became displaced from their village in the mountains.

After returning from Syria seriously injured, Mujahid stopped attending activities in his organisation and later ended his relationship with them. When I asked Osman, in the mid-summer of 2019, why he severed his relationship with them, Osman said ‘their time is over. They closed the organisation, and are no longer visible in public’. Mujahid shaved his beard, went back to university for a while, and took the national employment exam (KPSS). He got a good score - good enough to be appointed as a civil servant. However, his appointment was not approved by the state because he could not get security clearance. I asked whether he was detained or imprisoned after he returned. ‘None of these happened’, Osman replied. Eventually, Mujahid dropped university once again, after learning he could not get employment with the state, and started working for a carpenter, despite the loss of three fingers on the battlefield. In Mujahid’s and others’ cases, humanitarian aid to Syrian IDPs formed a pathway to violent extremism and part-time jihadism; many young men were enabled to join the jihad in this way for a period of the time. Many died and many came back through the same route facilitated by the humanitarian aid convoys and trucks.

4.1.1.1 Borderline radicalisation and de-radicalisation

Some others did not go that far, and abandoned the CSO they volunteered for after noticing something “wrong” with their activities. Halil, a 24 years old theology student, was very active for the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, IHH, throughout his university years. When I first met him at the beginning of my fieldwork in the spring of 2015, he seemed to me quite fanatical in his Islamist views and was very loyal to his organisation. He told me that his organisation was active in more than 150 countries and was one of the major organisations helping Syrian refugees and IDPs. My request for a recorded interview was not agreed to, but he was happy to ‘chat’ over these issues. Three years later, in the spring of 2019, I met him once again. His views had completely changed. He started talking about new books ranging from contemporary philosophy to literature. I wondered what had caused this change and asked him what he had been up to since we last met. He told me that he had been promoted to head of the youth branch of his organisation and would have been responsible for several youth branches in Eastern Turkey when he decided to stop his active participation in the events and activities. He said that he started feeling uncomfortable with the strong political ties that his organisation maintained with the government. Even worse, he said, major figures of the city administration proudly spoke of their active participation in

²¹ For more details on formation and transformation of Hizbullah from an underground radical Islamist group to a paramilitary group, and eventually to legal civil society organisations and a political party, see (Kurt 2017 and 2020).

transferring weapons to what is called ‘the Syrian Opposition’ by the government and its allies. Halil seemed to be distancing himself from his organisation now, but for years, he had accompanied a prominent figure in the organisation, a public speaker, for talks he was giving across the region: in the university auditoriums, city halls, and conference rooms of Islamist CSOs. The public speaker showed videos and pictures of suffering refugees and IDPs. ‘He would cry at the right place every time and insist on our Islamic responsibilities to help our brothers’, Halil said. He, however, became very disappointed that the public speaker praised violent acts of jihadists in some closed circles. Halil told me these were exclusive meetings and only major activist figures attended these ‘consultation meetings’ (*istişare toplantısı*). There, Halil witnessed people of his organisation proudly speaking of their involvement in supporting the ‘Syrian opposition’. He started developing doubts after accompanying several visits to Syria and seeing the ground himself. His organisation was well-connected to several groups, initially to be able to reach out to Syrian IDPs. The main collaborators of the IHH were the Free Syrian Army, Al Nusra and related groups and brigades operating in and around Aleppo, Idlib and Turkish state’s-occupied territories of Northern Syria. Halil was, of course, affected by the misery and suffering he had seen, but also told me that ‘he did not like to see how his organisation maintained some dirty work on behalf of the government and the way they were welcomed by some jihadist groups in Syria’.

4.1.1.2 Ideological and extra-ideological factors in radicalisation

Like many other young men from rural and religious backgrounds, Halil’s involvement followed a similar pattern, which I frame as radical humanitarianism. He first met his organisation in his freshman year in university while looking for a place to stay. His organisation found him such a place. It was relatively cheap but required regular attendance at the religious conversation circles (*sohbet*). There, he developed more sympathy with the organisation and began attending activities such as public talks and voluntary activism and humanitarian work. He felt useful and appreciated through his role as a volunteer. With the Syrian War, his activism became transborder, involving helping refugees beyond Turkish borders. There, he was deeply affected by the human tragedy and developed radical ideas in response to the injustice he had observed. He, in return, was entrusted with more active roles within the organisation, which made him head of the youth branch in his city and assistant to a public preacher who gave talks on Syrian refugees and the human tragedy of war. Unlike many others, Halil was deradicalised after his graduation for the reasons outlined above. I also believe his new position as a field assistant for the UNHCR played a crucial role helping him step back from his radical views.

4.1.1.3 Social relationships and mobilisations

Here, I would like to mention another case of public speakers and events themed around the Syrian refugees and IDPs. A talk took place in Bingöl university, where I was working. The organiser spoke to an auditorium full of students. The event was organised by an Islamist student union active within the university. I wondered how the conference hall was full of students during classes. I was told that several academics encourage their students to attend these ‘conferences’. I was surprised, as I knew that leftist, pro-Kurdish or secular students’ organisations had difficulty organising public events at this university. Most of their activities were banned and the members of these unions were facing disciplinary punishment for the smallest of reasons.

The hall was segregated with no exceptions: men on the right side, women on the left. At the entrance of the auditorium, I was directed to the men’s side, whereas my female companions were directed to sit on the left side. I insisted on sitting together, but my request was found inappropriate by a person in charge. I had a small argument with this person and told him that ‘I am an academic, this is a university and I am free to sit wherever I want’. He replied, not very kindly, that ‘not in this event. You are free not to attend’. Quite angry and desperate, I followed this young bearded man to my place, thinking about how this segregation was forced upon us even in an institution that is supposed to be liberal. I looked at the pictures of Atatürk and Erdoğan hanging on the sides of the stage and thought how strange the setting was for

such an event. My women companions were identifiable from where I sat among hundreds of veiled students.

In his talk, the public speaker mentioned the many trips he had made to Syria and Egypt to reach out to the suffering Muslim siblings. I heard him speak and thought that he was laying out his credentials in order to speak on behalf of the oppressed. After telling his personal story, he expressed strongly that it is Islamic duty to help those in need. Donations, 'active work for the relevant CSOs, prayers, writing a poem or a story to draw attention to the situation' were named as a few examples of what we could do for 'our Muslim siblings'. His talk was accompanied by a Power Point presentation containing graphic images and videos of suffering people in refugee camps. His voice trembled and his index finger was shaking as he pointed out the eternal enemies: 'Israel and the USA, the west, the tyrannical (*tağuti*) regimes, and Russians were all responsible for this tragedy'. Towards the end of the slides, the pictures of 'role models' appeared on the gigantic screen accompanied by a rhythmic Islamic anthem. I wondered how I knew this anthem and realised that it was a well-known example of the genre heard in Hizbullah music albums. That was the moment when I realised the event was organised by a legal entity close to the Kurdish Hizbullah. Pictures of jihadists who lost their lives in Chechnia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Egypt and Syria followed.

Later that day, I wrote in my field diary:

The talk went on for a little longer than an hour. I looked around and saw young men and women surrounding me in this university auditorium. I wondered what they might be thinking and how the event influences their perception of Islamic duties. Were these 'mujahids' role models proposed by a student organisation who was hosted in a university auditorium? Were the academics who sent off their students for the conference aware of the context of the event? If so, what was the purpose of this? To skip two hours of teaching? Supporting 'the cause' or something else I was not aware of? Would some of these students further radicalise, join a jihadist group? Which one could it be? That guy on the lower right side with the beard? Or the one behind me who wore baggy pants? Or the one who scolded me because I resisted the segregation of women and men in the auditorium? Would any women radicalise as much as men? How is this gendered? I left the conference with a heavy heart and many questions in mind. I was surprised how such an event could take place in a university auditorium under the gaze of two big pictures of Atatürk and Erdoğan. (Field diary, Solidarity event with Syrian refugees, April 2016)

4.1.1.4 *Young people's own understanding of radicalisation*

Whenever I showed my surprise at these visible recruitment activities in public and state institutions back in 2015 and 2016, I was told that these types of activities had become ordinary in the city. Indeed, I met many people who claimed to know one or two people who had joined the ranks of jihadist groups. Three of Osman's friends went to Syria, one of them never returned. Two of Sergey's relatives were part-time jihadists and his brother-in-law was imprisoned by the Northern Syrian administration for years due to his involvement in jihadist groups. Omer Faruk knew a few people who joined Al Nusra. Salih's roommate disappeared one day, and he later heard that he was in Syria. Nuri had a few friends back from high school who joined ISIS; one never returned, the other was killed in an operation in Diyarbakır. Not surprisingly, it was always young men who joined the jihadists, with the exception of some women who followed their husbands or fathers to live there. Al Nusra was the most preferred organisation according to these testimonies, but I often thought that the negative image of ISIS in the media might have prevented people from revealing more about their friends. Although I have never knowingly met with anyone who admitted joining a fighting group in Syria, most of my male informants seem to know someone who joined the jihad. Based on my interviews and observations, I could observe at least two routes that led to participation in a jihadist group, humanitarian and Salafi, and a third path in response to this conflict, the Kurdish secular pathway.

The first milieu, the Humanitarian Pathway, is a less common way of joining the jihadists, compared to the second milieu, the Salafi Pathway. Based on my fieldwork and interviews, I can summarise that there is not a substantial difference between the profile of potential participants in these two groups, but the recruitment strategies and processes differ from each other immensely. The humanitarian pathway starts with the recruitment of, usually, young men at university age, and in some cases earlier during high school years if the recruit is connected to a CSO via friends, kinship or family. The first contact usually happens when a person needs housing and is offered a place in a connected dormitory or a shared flat. Or, a family member already connected to the organisation, could be a medium to the activities of an organisation. The teenager finds himself surrounded by a network of people and activities, who support and facilitate the life of the potential recruit. As briefly summarised above, some of these young men become active participants of the civil society operations, most of which are not violent or radical leaning. However, the experience of accompanying a humanitarian aid convoy to Syria seems to be a turning point for most of these young men, as they return traumatised and deeply affected by the situation there. After several trips, it becomes more likely that some of these humanitarian aiders will join the ranks of jihadist groups. The preferred organisation among these young men is what is called the Free Syrian Army, an umbrella organisation that contains several groups, most of whom became proxies of the Turkish state's operations in north western Syria, Afrin, Aleppo, Idlib and recently in Libya.

I met Omer Faruk (23) in a working-class district of Istanbul in the winter of 2018, during the second phase of my research that was conducted for the DARE project. He was originally from an Eastern city of Turkey and has a Kurdish/Zaza background. Omer Faruk's father was an imam who later became a Qur'anic teacher in the area. He studied social work in university and volunteered for a Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH). I asked him what type of work he does for the organisation and he said that 'it could range from helping with the organisation of events, setting up stalls and stands, collecting donations, medicine and other aids, loading the humanitarian aids donated by people, accompanying the aid trucks to Syria, preparing banners and hanging posters to the walls for a protest or demonstration..'. I asked Omer Faruk how many times he had been to Syria. He told me that he had been to Idlib several times in late 2016 to accompany aid trucks to the refugee camps. He and two of his friends entered Syria from the southern city of Hatay accompanying 15 aid trucks loaded with outfits, medicine and food. They were welcomed by Free Syrian Army (FSA) members and were told that 'FSA cannot take responsibility in case of an attack or bombing by the Syrian regime or Russians'. Omer Faruk and his friends agreed to the FSA conditions and followed them to a refugee camp near Idlib. Aleppo was at the time surrounded by Russian and Syrian soldiers but was still under the control of jihadist groups, or what Omer Faruk called 'the opposition'. When we talked about Aleppo, he said 'it had not fallen yet when I was in Idlib'. The perception of Omer Faruk was evident from his reference to 'the fall of Aleppo', where it was described as 'liberation of Aleppo' in secular media outlets and among critical public. The 'fall' or 'liberation' are both problematic terms to encapsulate civilians' sufferings around the time.

Omer Faruk was deeply affected by what he had seen in the refugee camps and had sleeping problems for weeks after he returned. His family objected, but he returned to Syria another time. I asked him whether it was necessary to accompany the trucks, but he told me that 'actually it was just a formality as our organisation has local people doing the work. We just wanted to see what is going on. Many people do that'. I asked him whether he went to the centre of Idlib: 'We just passed through. We had to bribe different groups at every check point to be able to pass. Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (formerly Al Nusra) was in control of Idlib and we were told that they hanged a woman in the central square on the accusation of adultery (*zina*).' Omer Faruk and his friends were offered to see the scene, but they refused to do so. At the end of our conversation, I asked Omer Faruk whether he knows anyone who joined the fighting groups. He said he knew one person from his organisation who followed a similar route as he did, but unlike Omer, this person eventually became a jihadist fighting on several fronts.

As could be seen in the case of Omer Faruk, the humanitarian route to radical extremism is not straightforward and does not necessarily end up with the transformation of radical ideas into action in all cases. However, Islamist CSOs and their humanitarian activities provide a platform and possibility for those who are willing to take the next step on a radicalisation trajectory. Although the main intention and motivation of these CSOs might not be recruiting young people to fight for jihadist groups, one effect of their activities is the radicalisation of these young people and sometimes their participation in violent extremist groups in Syria. The CSOs do not make a substantial effort towards preventing these youth from participation in the jihad, and often provide them with the necessary means and resources to go back and forth for part-time jihadism. The state and state agencies also seem to be aware of these activities, as I will show in some testimonies in the following pages, and are not necessarily against the participation of the Turkish/Kurdish youth in jihadist groups. The government seemed to have turned a blind eye during the peak time of conflict. However, in the last 2-3 years, state authorities opened investigations against some 'part-time jihadists', mostly with the intention 'to keep these people under control rather than imprisoning them' as Osman claims.

The transportation of young people is facilitated by CSOs, the humanitarian convoys are accompanied by the FSA fighters, and these CSOs have local contacts who help them to deliver the humanitarian aid to the IDPs. In case of injuries, the fighters get medical treatments in Turkish border hospitals. It is not surprising that once a person decides to join a fighting group in Syria, they can easily accompany a humanitarian aid convoy back and forth without raising suspicion or fear of facing investigation by legal authorities. Based on multiple testimonies and conversations with the young men who know at least a few examples of participation in jihadist activities, I can assert that these participations were not necessarily disapproved of by the state and security authorities as long as it remained within the government's Syria policy.

4.1.2 The Salafi pathway to violent extremism

Based on interviews I conducted with several participants (Osman, Nuri, Seynan, Mirza, Naifaga, Zahir and Sergey), I can surmise that the Salafi jihadist pathway is the more clandestine and underground pathway²². It usually starts with a Salafi person or group entering the field via a local contact. Many of these young people have spent considerable time receiving their training and education, in either Saudi Arabia or Egypt, and return to Turkey to maintain their Salafi activities. It is important for these Salafi pioneers²³ to be familiar with the culture and traditions of the region in which they intend to conduct recruitment activities. They choose to not oppose the local traditions and values, at least at the beginning stage, and behave respectfully towards local conservative values. They choose the most conservative cities and towns to facilitate their recruitment activities. Once they establish a network, they begin the *tabligh* and *davat* (propaganda and invitation) in tea gardens, coffee houses and around local mosques. The next stage is to establish their own mosque or madrasah, usually around the central squares, but safe enough to hide from public eyes. An apartment, a shop located in the back of a business centre or a passage are ideal locations for these places. The Salafis initially target like-minded young men among discriminated, oppressed or disadvantaged groups. In the beginning, they are treated lightly and advised on religious duties and prayers. The young men's sensitivities and vulnerabilities are met with compassion and they are made to feel worthy and important. Once the young men feel a close sense of affinity and importance, they begin involvement in other aspects of the organisation. I have observed that at this point, ideological training and transformation begins, promotions are fast, and the target can find themselves in charge of several issues in a matter of months, which endorses the findings of Bartlett and Miller (2012: 15).

The target then needs to be removed from his social environment which is presented as a negative influence. Not surprisingly, this change manifests itself via gender segregation as these young men end

²² To ensure the security and safety of the participants, some of the information provided in this section is anonymised and used without a direct reference to a specific person.

²³ Salafi pioneers refer to the leading figures in organisations, networks and recruitment activities in a social field.

their relationships with the females in their surroundings. Pearson and Winterbotham (2017: 68) discovered that changes in friendship circles, clothing, politics and hobbies, and isolation from family members and female friends are among the few observable transformations in the process of radicalisation. Some of these young men also have drug addiction problems. Some have been charged with petty crimes and/or are members of gangs. Once this transition begins, they quit consuming drugs, start to pray, grow beards and wear baggy trousers. All these changes are welcomed by their conservative families and do not raise any suspicion. Eroğlu also interviewed several jihadists who confirmed that they quit their bad habits (drugs and petty crimes) once they joined ISIS (Eroğlu, 2018).

4.1.2.1 *Social Relationships in the Ideological and Extra-Ideological Factors of Radicalisation*

Nuri mentioned a friend who joined ISIS and was killed during a police raid when he returned back to Turkey. This friend had been expelled from high school for smoking marijuana. Later, Nuri's friend had started attending one of the Salafi madrasahs and changed his lifestyle from that of his high school years.

Nuri: My friend was a good lad (*delikanlı*), you know, when he was in high school. He was a successful student of Anatolian High school. During high school years, there were many people using drugs [marijuana] in [name of town]. He was smoking weed, and got caught with it during a search in high school. He got in trouble, eventually dismissed from the school and had to finish his high school degree through distance education. He started attending a Salafi madrasah around that time. There was an internet café connected to this madrasah. He started working there. The owner of the internet café and all workers were connected to this madrasah. So, he regularly attended this madrasah, started praying, and his social circle and behaviours slowly changed. He used to hang out with girls before, but he stopped talking to them in the process. Then he stopped hanging out with his friends in high school. I mean, religious identity in [The name of town] manifests itself first by sexist behaviours. He became a regular attendant of the madrasah and stopped coming to the University Preparation Course (Dershane) that we used to go to together. He did not come there in the end, but managed to get into a university. There, he kept his relations with this organisation (*cemaat*). A month later I run into him and he told me that he actually does not attend classes at the university. He devoted himself, his life, everything to the organisation (*cemaat*). His clothes changed, he grew a beard and put on a silver ring. Maybe a silver ring is an important symbol for them, I do not know. He quit smoking hash. He used to bring us hash. We smoked together before.

Interviewer: ah, really? So, did not you make fun of him saying what is that dude?

Nuri: Well, you know, everyone was conservative (*muhafazakar*) during high school years in [name of town]. Every single student was conservative. It would be disrespectful to religion to say such a thing, at least in my understanding of those years. I mean, we were saying 'you are praying, you are doing good. At least you pray. Your way is better, you stay away from [bad] things'. We used to think that this change is a positive sign. After many years now, we realised that actually we made a mistake. This was wrong. We did not know that these gatherings/groupings (*cemaatleşme*) are wrong back then. No one knew. We were in high school. The social profile of the youth is obvious in [name of town]: If you pray, that is good; if you do not pray, that is bad. I do not know how to say, young people were invited to *madrasahs* by the elder brothers from madrasahs, from the neighbourhood. I could observe transformations of young fellas after their attendance at the *madrasahs*; slow changes in the discourse, in behaviours... I mean there were positive sides of this and negative sides.

Interviewer: What were the positive sides, for example?

Nuri: Positive... They tidied themselves up, for example. They quit smoking weed and taking drugs. They used to get involved in fights and gangs; but now, they were inclined to religious violence. This is another thing. They used to say we will hang, we will cut...

These positive changes Nuri mentions help Salafi recruiters to operate in a safe environment and receive the support and appreciation of families, away from the suspicious gaze of local people. In this regard, Salafi propaganda does not aim to dismantle societal values at once, but instead to further radicalise conservative norms and ‘correct’ the wrongdoings of an already conservative society. Another aspect is that the Salafis initiate businesses, such as internet cafés, reading/study groups, gyms and tea houses that young people are likely to visit. It is also obvious that religious organisations, and the Salafis, are more successful recruiting new members and expanding their bases in comparison to the left leaning, secular organisations, because most of the values propagated by the Salafis have roots in societal norms and values in the conservative periphery of Turkey.

When a young man changes, this transition in his life is usually presented as revolutionary and the person’s previous life is labelled as *jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic age of ignorance). Eroğlu’s interviews with a few Salafis who joined the jihad in Syria confirms that the perception of the previous life as *jahiliyya* is a common phenomenon (Eroğlu, 2018). This division strengthens the sense of belonging among the young recruits and motivates them to draw a starker line between their previous and current lives. The young men are encouraged to bring their friends to the *masjid* or the *madrasah* to pray or attend religious classes. These new arrivals are warmly welcomed and regarded well by Salafi *abis* (older brothers). Those who are attracted to the discourse and warm regards of the Salafi brothers become a part of the loose outer circle. Those who oppose or are displeased by what they see in the *madrasah* are labelled as people of *jahiliyya*. *Takfiri*²⁴ attitudes are quite common, but they refrain from direct confrontation with the locals and social environment of the potential recruits, at least at the beginning stage of the expansion. However, the recruited person is advised to sever his relationships with them to avoid sins and condemnation of Allah.

In small towns and cities, family ties, kinship and neighbourly culture are quite strong. This environment facilitates a quick expansion of a Salafi organisation. Nuri told me that he has observed a Salafi *madrasah* reach hundreds of people within a matter of months in his hometown. Once a danger begins due to conflict or security operations, the traditional ties and kinship help Salafi members to stay together and remain in solidarity until the investigations, security operations or threats pass. In this regard, the perceived sense of danger is kept alive and new members are frequently advised that they live in a hostile society, where almost everyone is considered to be dangerous, for one reason or another. Social categorisation and psychological distance from out-groups allow the Salafi brothers to create a close sense of in-group dynamic (Moghaddam, 2005: 166), where almost everyone could be a potential enemy or spy.

Under such circumstances, the teaching of Salafi principles intensifies and expand to the matters of jihad and its necessity for a ‘true Muslim’. Structural Injustice and inequality, ethnic and political discriminations, the refugee crisis, the Syrian War and western intervention are frequently the focus of the Salafi teachings, where these contemporary problems are discussed within selective Qur’anic references and examples from the life and practices of Muhammad. The solution to all these problems is already prescribed; a true Muslim must live according to Islamic rules; a true Muslim must fight back and help his/her Muslim companions all around the world. But how? Based on my conversation with several participants familiar with these Salafi settings, at this initial stage, it is hidden from the young recruits that their Salafi *abis* (older brothers) are well connected to jihadist groups in Syria and elsewhere. They are shown videos of the war, and told of prosperous life under the Islamic State rule, and, if they question this reality, they are told that the Western world and media does not want the reality of the Islamic State to

²⁴ A Muslim, often a Salafi, declaring or denoting another Muslim to be apostate, hence no longer Muslim and stripped of the protection of law, hence declared as bare life in Agamben’s term (Agamben, 1998).

be seen by outside world. According to this narrative, the *mujahids* and *muhajirs*²⁵ live in villas, have multiple wives and sex slaves (*cariye*). It is easier and more enjoyable to live under Islamic rules and avoid the habits of *Jahiliyya*; more importantly, it is Muslims' duty to obey the *khalif* and join the holy jihad. This romantic representation of life under the Islamic State helps young men fantasise about how their lives will be there and escape from the pressing issues of their current conditions: family problems, education and future, unemployment, and lack of hope for positive change in their lives. Once a young recruit is hooked and he shows interest in joining the jihad, the Salafi older brothers say, 'unfortunately we have no contact with anyone who could facilitate this. It is difficult and dangerous to cross the border'. As Naifaga indicates, this is to test the motivation of the young recruit, to see whether he is sincere in what he wishes for. After a while, the young recruit is told that a contact may have been found, but they need to hurry up as this contact is going to Syria very soon. In reality, the contact is already there and well connected to the Salafi *abis*. This pressure forces the young recruit to decide immediately. He is advised not to tell anyone that he is considering travelling to Syria to join the jihad, not even his own family, as 'he is free to contact whoever he wants' once he arrives in Syria and the danger passes.

The young men are aware of the ongoing war and it is likely that they know the difficult aspects and the possibility of death. But still, they are told that they would not be obliged to fight. They could do other work behind the frontline, even after they receive the compulsory military training to be able to defend themselves in case of danger. 'It is also possible if they want to be a muhajir in the Islamic State'. Moreover, martyrdom is the most desired position to obtain, and it is the key to a heavenly afterlife together with prophets, comrades and tens of *houris* (beautiful virgin girls at the service of the martyrs).

Once they join, they fall into a vicious cycle. Their ties to their families hardly survive, especially if the family is not happy with the participation of their sons. The young mujahids are told that they are not obliged to obey their parents if it contradicts the orders and wishes of Allah; many examples of the young believers from the time of Muhammad are presented to them. Mus'ab Ibn Umair (585-625 AD), a young member of a wealthy family who converted to Islam despite the objection of his parents, becomes a role model for these new arrivals or potential recruits. They are advised to resist their families and adhere to the path of 'true Muslims'. Most of these young men end their relationship with their families soon after they arrive in Syria. In some cases, their families follow them to Syria but are misguided by people in charge, and they return empty handed. Meanwhile, the young mujahids see their comrades and friends die on a daily basis. They often have to change their houses due to bombings, attacks and security operations. The trauma of losing friends, and the possibility of an immediate death by a barrel bomb, encourage some of these young mujahids to carry out *istishhad*²⁶ operations (suicide bombings).

Osman's friend, Mujahid, was especially traumatised by the barrel bombs, which were commonly used by the Syrian regime. Mujahid said that 'you have only forty seconds to escape as far as you could, once a barrel bomb is dropped by a helicopter. The whistle at the start, and the silence until the bomb hits the ground is the longest time of my life'. Mujahid managed to escape from barrel bombs several times until he lost three of his fingers from a piece of shrapnel.

Although these Salafi organisations are outlawed and clandestine, it seems that they openly carried out their propaganda for a few years during the Syrian War without any investigation from the state and security authorities. It was only after the fall of ISIS in Raqqa and Mosul that the Turkish state intensified security operations and opened investigations into these Salafi circles and networks. However, these investigations are not as intense as the ones towards Kurdish dissidents and do not result in harsh

²⁵ Mujahid and muhajir are two, sometimes, overlapping categories, where the first is an active fighter, and the latter sought refuge to live under the Islamic State's rule.

²⁶ Killing self is considered one of the biggest sins in Islam. *Istishhad* is a term coined by the violent extremists to legitimise the suicide bombings as martyrdom operations.

punishment. The strategy is to keep these groups under control and show that the state has a changing policy towards the Salafi recruitments.

4.1.2.2 Social Media

In addition to *masjids*, *madrasahs* and public gatherings, Salafists use social media very effectively, and broadcast their religious classes and teachings on YouTube, Twitter and other social media platforms. Most of these accounts were managed very professionally and broadcast religious teachings and propaganda in multiple languages. Some of these accounts were eventually suspended, but new ones were often opened to replace these and are still actively sharing content. *Tevhid Haber*, *Tevhid Magazine* and connected social media accounts have been the pioneer of these accounts and remained active during the peak time of ISIS in Syria.

Social media is one of the strongest weapons of the global jihad and its centrality in the emergence of a leaderless jihad (Sageman, 2008) in Western countries is widely discussed by the scholars of radicalisation and extremism (Neumann, 2009 and 2016). In Turkey, the number of online preachers and Salafi leaders have also flourished in the last decade. Social relations and interactions between Salafi influencers and their audience still do not heavily rely on virtual platforms as there are plenty of events, social fields and possibilities for such radical ideas to interchange, indoctrinate and circulate in Turkey. However, social media created new venues and possibilities for those preachers and Salafi leaders to promote their ideas and organisations, announce their activities and lessons, organise social gatherings and events across the country, and gradually recruit youth into the web of their relations. Among a few dozen Islamic organisations active on social media, Salafi circles and preachers are the most successful and effective groups. The quality of their images and graphics is far beyond the rest of Islamic organisations and their social media presence. Dogu Eroglu has identified four strands of online activities of ISIS networks within Turkey: instructions and guidance for everyday life of Muslims (morals, familial and social relations, behaviours and prayers), *itiqad*, responsibilities of Muslims and jihad (Salafi belief and indoctrination on jihad and related duties), propaganda against enemies (the PKK, the YPG and the Turkish state), and the context of the ongoing war (news from the Islamic State and jihad) (Eroglu, 2018: 285-95). Among my interviewees, however, only a few stated that they follow some online preachers or indicated social media and the Internet as the main source of their religious reference. They seem to be active in social media owning several accounts, among which Facebook and Instagram were the foremost, and following some religious pages and preachers - especially of those in line with their organisational/Islamic circles.

One of the best examples of this social media phenomenon is Ebu Hanzala (Halis Bayancuk), a young preacher who had YouTube channels, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages broadcasting in multiple languages, including Turkish, English, French, and Arabic. Ebu Hanzala was the son of a former Kurdish Hizbullah leader and radicalised in Egypt in the 1990s. He was among the suspects of violent attacks on two synagogues and the HSBC, which resulted in the death of around 50 people in 2003. On his return from Egypt, Ebu Hanzala started organising religious classes for young Hizbullah members, most of whom converted to Salafi worldview in the process. Ebu Hanzala was detained several times accused of being the leader of Al Qaida in Turkey, but was released each time shortly after his detention. His last detention was in 2017, when he was sentenced to 18 years in prison on allegation of being the leader of ISIS in Turkey. His followers actively maintain his social media accounts in various languages and continue their propaganda activities while Ebu Hanzala's appeal case is ongoing in the Turkish courts.

4.1.2.3 Everyday life and Encounters with Radical and Extremist Messages

Radical and extremist messages, individual or organised manifestations of radical opinions and radical demands in public space were a common feature of daily life over the course of my fieldwork. The youth, I observed, were both the target of these views and manifestations, and active agents of realising some of these ideals. I encountered radical and extremist messages, activities and actions on almost a daily

basis. Gyms, coffee and tea houses, mosques and Salafi masjids, internet cafés and school dormitories, classrooms and religious *sohbet* (conversations, lectures) circles, grocery shops, street pavement and city walls: all of these were spaces where you could see flyers, banners, brochures or graffiti advocating for ultra conservative norms, violent political views and aspirations. For example, the brochures below were widely distributed across the Kurdish cities prior to the June 2015 general elections. The title of the document is ‘Do not Vote, do not attribute a partner to your creator (*şirk*)’. A powerful Salafi group led by Abu Hanzala, and their *Tevhid* magazine, were the actors behind this distribution and advised people not to vote in the upcoming elections. The document compared verses from the Qur’an with civil laws, and threatened constituents that by voting they were declaring a war against Allah and his messenger



On another occasion, I found myself as a side observer of a Salafi training in the gym I used to attend in the city. There, I got to know a martial arts trainer and a Salafi fighter-to-be in action. Haji was a man in his thirties, muscled, loud and quite imperious towards his pupils, who were taking *taekwondo* classes and were not necessarily fanatical or religious. I would observe this man preparing these teenagers for martial arts under a military discipline, ordering them to force their limits to jump higher, hit harder, and move quicker. At the time, I could tell that Haji was a religious person: his beard, his long sleeves and his manners reminded me of fanatics I had observed throughout my life. However, it took me years to learn that Haji moved to Syria with his family and some of his siblings to live under the Islamic State. Haji himself became a Mujahid and lost his life fighting for ISIS. Whether he dragged anyone else to the conflict zone, beyond his extended family, is unknown but it is likely that he tried and perhaps was well-connected to the structured bodies.

4.1.3 A Secular trajectory of radicalisation: Kurdish youth

In this section, I would like to briefly present a third trajectory into radicalisation, among Kurdish youth in Turkey. It is not a religiously motivated path, but strongly connected to the conflict and war that has been taking place in the Kurdish region for the last decade. This path has existed in conjunction with the emergence of the PKK, but developed another dimension with the Syrian War. In a way, every young man and woman has some radical ideas in the Kurdish region. Radicalism in this regard is a response to the discrimination they face either in religious or secular forms. The symbolic violence that Kurdish youth experience through their encounters with the state, state institutions, and educational institutions turns into physical violence once a young Kurd decides to take up arms and resist. Here, perceived injustice plays a key role for young Kurds in responding to the discrimination they face.

4.1.3.1 Structural Factors and Sustained Inequalities

The foundation of the Turkish nationalist identity and nationhood is built upon criminalisation of Kurdish society. Following the Kurdish national rebellion under the leadership of Sheikh Said Pîranî in 1925 (Olson, 1989), the newly established Ankara government introduced a series of repressive policies that resulted in criminalisation of Kurdish society in the following decades. In the process, all manifestations of Kurdish language, culture and national aspirations were heavily suppressed. Denial of Kurdish ethnic identity, official assimilation programmes to convince the Kurds of their Turkishness, the exile and forced displacement of Kurds from their motherland, relocation and settlement of Turkish populations in the Kurdish regions, prohibition of linguistic, collective and cultural rights all became frequent examples of the state repression and criminalisation of Kurdish society. Throughout the last century, the Kurdish region has been governed via martial law rules, states of exceptions (OHAL), special administrations and, lastly, by state appointed trustees to the Kurdish municipalities. These measures have consistently indicated that a representative or equal rule in the Kurdish region has been an exception, whereas the state of exception has been the general norm and the feature of repressive governmentality.

The Kurdish region has been under a state of exception for more than 30 years of the last century. During the 30 years' long state of exception, repeated military interventions and operations affected the Kurdish region the most. The Kurds were not eradicated but their visibility in public was effectively diminished. In such circumstances, any expression of Kurdishness has been stigmatised as a separatist action, and heavy measures have been put in place to deal with Kurdish insurgencies - where every Kurd has experienced a discriminatory practice implemented either by the state, its authorities, institutions and proxies.

The Syrian War and the failed military coup in 2016 added new elements to the state's discriminatory and criminalising practices towards the Kurds, while simultaneously creating complicit Islamist allies. 'Divide and Rule' was the state strategy, but this time across religious identities and Islamist aspirations. In the last ten years, thousands of Kurdish civil society organisations and institutions have been shut down, tens thousands of Kurdish students, teachers, civil servants and activists have been dismissed from their schools and jobs, thousands of these individuals imprisoned, some of whom are still waiting for their final verdict behind bars. The accusations by legal bodies are generous (participating in separatist actions and helping the terrorist organisation, the PKK, is epidemically common), but the evidence is thin and prejudiced against any public manifestation of Kurdishness.

I have observed the systematic discrimination against certain Kurdish groups in higher education throughout my teaching experience in the provincial Bingöl University. I saw that the Kurdish students were prevented from taking part in leading roles in student organisations and unions, and their student clubs were banned for the smallest of reasons; for example, they were required to provide papers that were never demanded of the Islamist student unions, and they would face disciplinary punishments for chanting a slogan or participating in a legal demonstration. These systematic discriminations would occur even during peace negotiations, when there was a hopeful environment for peace in the Kurdish region of Turkey. For instance, in the early 2010s, PKK fighters would set up checkpoints a few hundred meters away from the military checkpoints; from a distance that they could wave at each other. The two sides of the conflict had a ceasefire, but an ordinary Kurd studying in a university did not have the same freedom as a result of the structural and institutionalised discriminations. I witnessed numerous investigations, interrogations and disciplinary punishments of Kurdish students for trivial reasons. I would often ask myself: what is the purpose of this systematic discrimination? I often questioned whether the people in charge were aware of how this destroys hope among the youth for non-violent, democratic and peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution. Nevertheless, most of the students would insist on peaceful and democratic means, for instance, to open another student union or platform after a closure by the school to be able to continue their activities. Many other students insisted on completing their degrees. They prepared for the national exams to be civil servants in their field. They volunteered and voted for the pro-Kurdish political parties. Whenever I talked to any student activist, I always heard about their plans for

the future. These students were mainly poor; their families were waiting for them to graduate and get a job. Some of them would return home and face families who were not aware of their activism. They did not know how to explain that they were suspended (for a period up to a year) or expelled from the university for good. Their parents were mainly practising Muslims - some of whom even supported Islamist political parties.

Kemal was in his senior year at the sociology department when he left the university one day and joined the YPG in the autumn of 2014. I was a first-hand witness of how he was discriminated against by the university and department even before he joined the YPG. He was deliberately failed from several courses due to his activism and outspoken nature. He had previously been suspended from university for participating in a protest. I also came under pressure to fail him on my course by the head of the department, who was later dismissed and put in jail due to his connection to the Gülenist organisation. I resisted but the rest of the department did not. I advised Kemal to insist on completing his degree, pointing out that he only had one semester left. Then he disappeared in the autumn of 2014. I asked his friends where he might be, but they did not tell me the truth. Three months later, Kemal was brought back to Turkey in a coffin: I saw his picture taken before the YPG flag when he first joined the group and a *nom de guerre* written under the picture. He was taken to his home village, where his family was displaced in the 1990s and buried under an oak tree. His *nom de guerre*, *Rizgar Tolhildan*, means freedom and revenge. Was he free now? Did he take his revenge? I asked myself following the news about his 'martyrdom'. 'A martyr does not die' was the most frequent slogan chanted at his funeral, as at many other Kurdish funerals.

In the course of my fieldwork, Rizgar Tolhildan's death was not the only event of its kind that I witnessed. Thousands of Kurdish young men and women crossed the border and joined the YPG forces in the mid-2010s. Most of these people were university students actively pursuing their degrees. I do not believe that it was their initial intention and plan to join the fighting forces. However, after a series of discriminatory practices by their institutions, security mechanisms and state apparatuses, they must have given up hope that there could be meaningful change in their lives and in their pursuits of a career.

4.1.3.2 A non-religious trajectory of radicalisation

In this regard, there is not just a religious, but also a secular milieu of radicalisation in Turkey, both of which share similar social and political grounds. In both cases, radicalisation begins where hope ends. The hope to get a decent job, the hope to get equal citizenship rights and treatments, the hope to intermingle with others and to not get discriminated against for ethnic/religious identity, political view or lifestyle. This is not to say that the rich and the privileged do not get radicalised as well, but they do so less often and compare insignificantly to the mainstream field of radicalisation. Whenever I heard of someone joining Al Nusra or ISIS, for instance, had a history and connection to radical medium through family, kinship or social environment: a lost father, suffering of family members at the hands of the state, mental health issues among some family members, an older brother active in the same or similar organisation, the lack of family, growing up in an orphanage, or some members' affiliation to such an organisation in the distant family. These connections served as facilitators to radical ideas and movements. On the social and political level: the experience of forced displacement, growing up in ghettos and shantytowns, observing the widespread violence, state crimes and impunity, and the presentation of the resisting forces (the freedom fighters or the guerrillas) as role models seem to be among the many reasons that youth radicalise, not only in religious mediums, but also across ethno-nationalist, Kurdish or leftist lines.

4.2 How ‘the good lad’ became a terrorist? Young people’s own understandings and reflections of radicalisation and extremism

4.2.1 From ‘good lad’ to terrorist

Between 2012 and 2014, thousands of young men and some of their wives and families went to Syria to actively fight (*mujahid*) or live under the rule of the Islamic State (*muhajir*) or another radical jihadi group. Nuri told me that at least 400 people joined the fighting groups in Syria from his city. Many times, people uttered unfamiliar names to me and said ‘he was a good boy in school’ or ‘he seemed to be fine as far as I knew’ or ‘he was a good lad. He would not harm even an ant’. They were always ‘good guys’ who were radicalised after some unfortunate events and misfortunes. In one of those conversations, an acquaintance I knew for a few years told me that he knew one of these individuals well. The person he was referring to had been recently killed during a police raid at a secret ISIS cell in Diyarbakır, a nearby Kurdish city. We were out in the countryside sitting under a willow tree. It was pitch black and the city was far away. A thick long joint was rotating between the three young men, two of whom I knew better than the one who was speaking. I asked him how he knew the person. He took a deep breath from the joint and started ‘he was a good guy’.

We grew up together. We smoked *kubar* (hash) and drank beers in the back alleys of Texas neighbourhood when we were teenagers. He went to İmam-Hatip after secondary school, and I dropped out of school to help my family with their construction business. My friend went to Egypt to study Islam after the 28 February decision²⁷. I think he was radicalised there. He met Salafis and cut relations with us when he came back (Field diary, May 2016).

The person my acquaintance was talking about was an important figure within ISIS. Allegedly, he turned out to be a *Qadi* (the Muslim Judge) of Raqqa under ISIS rule for several years. There were rumours that he had been sent back to maintain his activities within Turkey. The secret cell was connected to several others in the city. As a result of concurrent operations on these cells, seven ISIS members and two policemen were killed. Newspapers stated that those in the cells were preparing for suicide bombings. ‘You will all go to hell; you infidels!’ were the last words of the ‘good guy’ before he was killed by the police²⁸.

The hometown of ‘the good guy’, also one of my field sites, was relatively small and conservative. Everyone knew each other through schools, extended families or ghetto-like neighbourhoods. It was difficult to do something ‘unreligious’ away from the public eye. There was no space for such acts in the city centre- not a single bar to consume alcohol. Hence, these young men would go out ‘to nature’ to smoke hash and drink beers under trees. The hash smoking habit was quite widespread in the city. I always considered it a less costly way to avoid condemnation or punishment of families.

On the contrary, whoever I talked to during my fieldwork would point out that Salafi recruitment activities happen during daylight in tea houses, around bookshops, and Salafi *masjids* and *madrasahs*. However, I never heard that these were condemned by local people, investigated or punished by the state authorities during the time when young men joined ISIS and other jihadist groups on a daily basis.

Although these activities seemed to be quite public and most of my respondents know a few jihadists in their circles, I only met two people, who joined a jihadist group. In my interview with Sergey (26), in a café

²⁷ The 1997 Turkish Military Memorandum that overthrew the coalition government that the Islamist Welfare Party was a part of. The graduates of İmam-Hatip schools, as well as other vocational school graduates, were precluded from attending the higher education programme of their choice. The regulation aimed to prevent İmam Hatip graduates from other programmes attending and forced them to attend theology faculties.

²⁸ <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1259592-diyarbakirda-isisin-hucre-evine-yonelik-operasyonun-detaylari>, accessed on 08.08.2019

in Diyarbakır, I asked him whether anyone around him joined ISIS or Al Nusra. He said ‘yes, I know two people who joined these groups. One of them is my wife’s brother, who is imprisoned by the People Protection Units (YPG) in Northern Syria. The second is the brother of a friend, who you also know’. The person he meant, Cihan, was one of my former interviewees for my previous research on Kurdish Hizbullah. Cihan had gone underground for about three years in the early 2000s to escape the security operations aiming to dismantle the Hizbullah organisation. Cihan later left Hizbullah and became secular in his lifestyle. According to Sergey, Cihan’s brother had drug issues and was frequently in trouble during his high school years. He was sent to several cities to complete his high school degree. Eventually, he ended up in a provincial university and was self-radicalised through online videos and propaganda materials. Sergey told me that Cihan’s brother disappeared from college and they later learnt that he joined Al Nusra and was in Syria. His family searched and found some ‘useful connections’ among alleged Turkish intelligence members operating in a border city. The alleged intelligence officers told them that they knew where their son was, and they could put a bag on his head and bring him back home. ‘However’, they said, ‘it is costly and we will need to bribe someone to take the guy back’. The family asked for a few days to collect the requested ten thousand dollars, during which time, their son, Cihan’s brother, became injured in Syria and was brought to a hospital in a Turkish border city for medical treatment. After he was discharged from the hospital, the family held their son in captivity for several months. He was never questioned by the police (as in 2016). Sergey told me that Cihan was furious with him and beat him up several times. Several months after Sergey told me this story, I met Cihan’s brother by chance in a café in a border city. He was with his brother, Cihan, and they were smoking shisha. I recognised Cihan and went to greet him. He introduced me to his brother, who barely looked at me and kept checking his smartphone. He wore tight jeans, a dark blue t-shirt and converse shoes. His haircut was similar to the hipster style flourishing in the past few years across Europe. From appearance, he looked quite ‘cool’ and made me question the stereotypes public have about the radicals and jihadists. I hoped to have a conversation with him and kept talking to Cihan, but his brother did not look interested. He replied with short answers when I attempted to ask what he is studying and where. My attempt was unsuccessful, and I feared being seen as too keen to talk about his experience in Syria. Later on, another interviewee, Seynan, told me more about Cihan’s brother’s story.

He is more like a young and crazy person. He reminds of someone I know here. He reminds me of this person who for long years, for ten years, went back and forth. I mean he is so bigmouthed that he would tell jihad stories to women in bars and night clubs, but he is crazy enough that he could also say that the most peaceful period of his life was when he was keeping watch on mountain tops. (Seynan)

4.2.2 Young People’s Own Understanding of Radicalisation

Among my interview question sets, I included numerous questions designed to encapsulate young people’s own understandings of radicalisation, how they frame various interconnected terms, and negotiate or rationalise contradictory views. First of all, there is not a consensus on the terminology and understandings of radicalisation and related terms. My participants employed various terms to express their opinion on what radicalisation and related terms mean to them. Their understandings were mostly shaped by currently popular political discussions and should be interpreted in connection to the broader national and international framework as well as within the historical context, i.e. the topicality and historicity of the issue and the ongoing conflict in the region.

Some participants opposed the terms ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ Islam, and expressed that Islam is one unity that can only be followed through the Qur’an and the life of Muhammad. They argued that moderate and radical Islam are Western concepts enforced upon Muslims, but do not encapsulate what Muslims think that Islam is or should be. A former member of Anti-Capitalist Muslims, Ihsan, who I interviewed during the complimentary stage of my fieldwork in January 2018 for the DARE project, for instance, believes that ‘moderate Islam is a trojan horse introduced into Muslim societies by western imperialism.’ He suspects

that ‘the CIA, Open Society Foundation and powerful western institutions are among those who support the concept of moderate Islam’. I show my surprise to hear this from Ihsan as he strongly believes that ‘Islam needs a new interpretation and reform’. He both blamed the violence centric interpretation of Islam, but also shows his dissatisfaction with the concept of moderate Islam.

I am not happy with the moderate Islam project. I do not consider it well-meaning. I mean that I have concerns that the moderate Islam project aims to transform Muslims into complicit bodies for the bigger projects of neo-liberalism. On one hand, I am not happy with the violence-centred interpretation of Islam and I condemn it strongly; but on the other hand, I try to refrain from conforming to the concept of moderate Islam. I am suspicious. (Ihsan).

I continue asking Ihsan questions until he employs the term ‘radical Islamist’ referring to a group based in Istanbul. I ask him what is radical Islamism and who are radical Islamists in his view.

Ihsan: Radical Islamists are those who prioritise the political message of Islam. They want to shape both the public and personal space based on their own understandings of Islam. They express their opinions with a harsh and violent tone. What I understand from their radical Islamism is that they are against voting and democracy. They are against the liberal political systems and political parties in Turkey.

Interviewer: Are they Salafi?

Ihsan: We cannot call them Salafis. Salafis are within Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah. They follow Imam Maududi and Ibn Taymiyyah. But this group is more like ISIS or Al Qaeda. Radical Islamism has more contemporary Iranian, Egyptian and Afghani branches. They are more influenced by movements in these places and they want instantaneous, rapid and radical changes to take place in Turkey.

For Ihsan, the Muslim brotherhood and the Iranian regime are radical Islamists, but Salafis are not. On the contrary, Luha associates radical Islamists with Salafism. She says that she has met several Salafis and expresses her admiration in their ‘hardworking effort to study Islam and their consistency to attribute everything to Qur’an’ (Luha). For Omer Faruk, ‘radical Islam is deviance (*sapkinlik*) and dangerous’, whereas for Rodin the term is ‘nonsense. Because there is only one Islam and it does not exist such things like radical, social or cultural Islam’. Sevgi believes that ‘radicalism means regulating your life in accordance with Allah’s will, obeying Islamic rules, but nothing else’. She knows a few Salafis around her and has an admiration for them. When I ask her whether these Salafis support ISIS or a similar group, she strongly opposes this association and argues that ‘Salafism has nothing to do with ISIS. They are just people who adhere to the literal meaning of the Qur’an, they do not rely on reasonings and interpretations.’ (Sevgi) Then I ask her whether they have a tendency towards violence. She sadly admits that ‘they do. They have the potential of violence and they are too *takfiri* sometimes’ (Sevgi). Zehra uses Salafi and radical interchangeably and expresses her regret and sadness for them and says that ‘they are the biggest problems among Muslims’.

When I ask Fatma what she understands by Islamic radicalisation, she strongly opposes the term, and states that ‘Islam is a religion of balance (*wasatiyya*)’ in reference to a *hadith* that is employed frequently to object to the classification of radicals vs. moderate taxonomy by Muslim communities (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2009). Fatma argues that Islam is a religion of tolerance, but this tolerance is not limitless. Later on, in our conversation, I hear frequent expressions of hate towards LGBTs, the ‘separatist’ and ‘terrorist’ Kurds, the immoral western world, Israel and Jews. I come to the conclusion that for Fatma, and many other Islamists, the tolerance, balance (*ummattan wasatan*) and peace associated with Islam does not necessarily extend towards many groups, life styles and individuals. It is more a discursive construct to express that ‘Islam means peace or Islam is a religion of peace’, as well as ‘Muslims are a nation of

balance (*wasat*)'. it did not take long to hear the complete opposite of this discourse by Fatma towards many groups.

Various and sometimes contradictory understandings of Islamic radicalism and radicalisation show that there is not a consensus on the meaning of these terms among Muslim youth in Turkey. However, the predominant association with radicalisation is negative, and is in many ways a reflection of political discussions in the media about ISIS. On the practical level, radicalism, extremism, and fundamentalism are associated with ISIS due to the timeliness of the issue. However, most of my participants were more eager to express their thoughts on the PKK than ISIS when it came to issues of conflict, violence and terrorism. They condemned violence conducted by ISIS when they were asked about it, but they expressed more concern about the PKK's actions even when the focus of the conversation was not the PKK at all. Most of the interviews took place during times of urban conflict when the PKK's urban youth organisation (YDG-H) and state security forces fought for months. It is understandable for a young Islamist to strongly reflect on his/her feelings on the ongoing conflict between the PKK and the state. However, the same sensitivity was not shown to the ongoing violence implemented by ISIS and other jihadist groups at all. Rather, this violence was mildly condemned and criticised when they were asked about it.

In one of my first interviews with Habib, a city representative of the Islamist Özgür-Der (Association for the Free Thoughts and Education Rights), I asked which of the fighting groups in Syria his organisation considered radical. Habib was a Turkish medical doctor, originally from another city, and considered himself well-informed about Islam. Indeed, his knowledge of Islamic history and sciences was above average and he had a good command of the literature on Islamist ideology. He was confident and straightforward in his replies. He said he personally thinks that all fighting groups in Syria are righteous except ISIS. I was surprised and asked; 'is even Al Nusra righteous?'. He said 'yes', 'but there are of course wrongdoings among some members who join the group for adventure. The whole group cannot be condemned for singular (*ferdî*) cases'.

In the following 18 months of my ethnographic fieldwork, I encountered this reasoning of 'singular cases' of wrongdoing many times. When something troublesome was mentioned, such as crimes committed against civilians by the Free Syrian Army, Al Nusra or ISIS, or murders committed by the state and state agencies, my respondents would object and say 'but this is a *ferdî* (singular) issue. We cannot blame the whole group or the state for a singular act/wrongdoing of a member'. In similar vein, while several participants expressed their disapproval of ISIS actions and flagged them as non-Islamic, they were more forgiving of other fighting groups and employed the '*ferdî*' discourse to exonerate the group at stake.

While the violent radical acts of ISIS were condemned, similar practices were legitimised by some of the participants as acceptable under the rule of sharia law. Hence, I decided to investigate what my participants understood exactly by sharia and sharia law, and within which context they employed these terms and concepts. Puzzled by this (dis)association, I started asking the participants whether ISIS was applying sharia law under their rule: most of participants strongly objected and pointed out that the public executions and extreme violence that ISIS adopts have nothing to do with Islam and sharia practices. Sharia for them, was, in general, an ideal way of practising Islam and organising their lives accordingly. However, I noticed that most of my participants could not exactly define what sharia law entails or how it is implemented. Most of them briefly defined it as the rules and orders Allah presented in the Qur'an. They were speaking of sharia in an idealistic, but rather abstract way. Most of the time, their references to the Qur'an did not exist; it was either a *hadith*, a common practice of a certain Sunni Islamic school (*Hanefi, Shafii, Hanbali or Maliki*) or simply a traditional understanding. However, they would often insist that a practice is rooted in the Qur'an and is a direct order from Allah. They spoke of religion as if it was a magical system that could resolve all political and social problems that Muslims face. Yet what they presented as examples of sharia law were limited and contradictory. ISIS's executions were disapproved of and condemned, but sharia law was praised for providing retribution (*qisas*), as in the cases of stoning or cutting hands.

In her replies, Bênav expressed her belief, though with reservation, that sharia rules could contribute to society, support the poor, reduce crime and tackle inequalities between the richest and the poorest.

Bênav: Our religion is Islam. If one steals, his hand is chopped off. There is certain punishment for fornication. The death sentence can be executed. Those who fornicate were whipped before, I do not know what they do now. Death sentence, chopping hands off, a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye... Sharia is good. If the rapists had been beheaded, it would have ceased to exist. If the hands of the thieves had been chopped off, they would not continue. We have the tradition of giving alms (*zakat*) in Islam, for example. If this was commonly practiced, the hunger problem would be solved in the world. If this was executed in Turkey, the income inequality would be regulated. We know in Turkey the rich are so rich and the poor are so poor. They say that the average national income is 10,000 TL or dollars. No, this is not true.

Interviewer: Should the Muslims be governed by the sharia?

Bênav: I am a Muslim, and I would be happy if my country was governed by the sharia. If 99% of the country are really Muslims, they must be willing too.

Many participants were even more confident in their belief that sharia rule is an ideal solution for a Muslim society. In their responses they were defensive of sharia, and when I asked whether ISIS follows sharia rules, they would point out that extreme violence and its virtual streaming are not Islamic. 'There is of course this and that in sharia law and it is for a reason and wellbeing of society that these extreme punishments exist'. They argued that sharia is good but that ISIS tarnishes the image of Islam by the wrong implementation of sharia rules. Some participants expressed anti-Americanism and anti-West attitudes, as well as conspiracy theories associated with Western countries. The Western World, and more specifically the USA, Israel, UK, France or Germany was pointed out as responsible for extreme violence in Muslim societies. ISIS was often presented as a pawn of these countries and some participants argued that Western countries founded ISIS, or at least support it. They also believed that Western countries facilitated the recruiting of radical citizens to get rid of ISIS. Fatma seemed to be devastated by the image ISIS has created of Islam, and has difficulty associating their actions with the religion.

I think ISIS is another tool of the West. They created it to belittle Islam, and to attack the Muslim world freely. ISIS is similar to the PKK in my opinion. They have nothing to do with sharia, with Islamic law. What they do is an atrocity.

On the other hand, a few of the critical Islamists I talked to argued that it is this same sharia law that produces the violent practices characteristic of ISIS. Mirza was on the administration board of an Islamic human rights organisation, Mazlum-Der, for several years. He left the organisation after authoring a report that documented the state crimes committed against the Kurds during the urban conflict of 2015. According to Mirza, the report underscored the state security forces' role in widespread violence and was found too controversial by the other branches of the organisation in the western Turkey. When I ask Mirza about the claim that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam, he says 'this is just a defensive discourse and does not represent the fact that ISIS adheres to a literal interpretation of Islam that finds its roots among the *Kharicis*²⁹ in early Islamic history, but still influential among Muslims today.' Mirza believes that there have always been radical elements among Muslims who react in violent ways to social and political inequalities in their time and space:

²⁹ The Khawarij were members of a radical sect in the first century of Islam. Their early pioneers predate Sunni and Shia sects with an establishment date around 650. They are considered as the first Salafis who believed that 'judgement belongs to Allah alone' and assassinated the fourth Khalif Ali during the dispute with Muawiyah, the first dynasty of Umayyads.

The sharia law that people talk about today is a law that could give way to [facilitate] something like the ISIS. Without debating concubinage, slavery, and war in the context of the contemporary age, you can't reform such traditional understandings. If you can't express yourselves from a viewpoint that is both Islamic and in accordance with the current conditions of this age, then, this kind of Islamic thinking [radicalism] easily finds support among the people. For instance, this must be quite common in [the name of the town]: you go to a mosque, you learn how to read the Qur'an, some *abi* (older brother) there seems to care about you. Then he gives you a book. Then he takes you to a protest. Then he takes you to a grave. Then you become a Hizbullah member, Al-Qaeda member, or something like that. This radical vein... The sanctification of martyrdom, the sanctification of jihad, they all come with the territory. There needs to be serious discussions carried out into concepts such as *irshad* and *tabligh* [guidance and propagation of the message of Islam], fighting the 'kuffars', and the meaning of jihad in the modern world. (Mirza)

According to Mirza, the traditional approach to the Islamic law, unquestioning of historicity and the changing conditions of the social and political life, seems to be creating a medium in which an ordinary believer can be convinced of radical ideas and actions. A well-informed and critical Islamist, Seynan, also points out that ISIS has done something different from its predecessors in this regard:

My opinion is that when we saw ISIS for the first time, what they did was basically to declare a caliphate, something that did not previously exist. Normally, according to Sunni law, if there is a caliph, it is impossible not to obey him. And the caliph may seize the caliphate by force of sword. This is legitimate [according to sharia law]. If you ask me what would be done in this situation; you would obey the caliph and join his jihad within the framework he declared it. Now this is something that the Al-Qaeda did not have. This [the declaration of caliphate by the Islamic State] changed the situation quite a bit. Also, on account of internal debates there was much, much surprise within Turkey as well. "Will the caliph be obeyed or not?" It was quite troubling. But eventually, the way this affected Turkey has been that there was a group, who were gradually trying to declare Erdoğan as the new caliph, and were surprised by the fact that a new caliph has already appeared. (Seynan)

In brief, among my respondents' reflections on radicalisation and related terms, there seems to be two major clusters: one is more reflexive towards the popular understanding of these terms. They are more defensive of Islamic terms such as sharia law and sharia practices, and object to the idea that ISIS or another violent extremist jihadist group is implementing these rules. This group commonly adopts conspiracy theories. Anti-Western attitudes are more common among them. The second group, among the more critical Islamists, objects to the classification of Islam based on binary oppositions, often claiming that Islam is one and there cannot be moderate or radical versions of it. However, among this group, several participants, like Ihsan, Mirza and Seynan, are also critical of the traditional understanding of Islam and they believe and argue that Islam needs a new interpretation in line with contemporary conditions and needs. The main characteristic of the first group is that they are younger, less informed about Islam and theology, perhaps practising religion more than the members of the second group, who are older, mostly men, and more informed about theological discussions and concepts.

4.3 Gendered Radicalisation and Extremism

Based on the observations and ethnographic data I gathered, I argue that radicalisation is a gendered issue that creates a clear division between young men and women³⁰ and the ways in which they relate

³⁰ Conducting fieldwork in a highly segregated society requires meticulous attention to escape overgeneralising conclusions on the gender aspect of radicalisation. As explained above, speaking to women from various Islamist

and react to issues around radicalisation. On the discursive level, it seems there is little difference between men and women in their understanding and conceptualisation of radicalisation. However, women are less inclined to put radical views into practice. The realisation of radical ideals is seen mostly among men, while young women consider jihad to be a man's job and usually position themselves as weak subjects when it comes to putting radical ideals into practice. Moreover, looking at the radicalisation processes of young men, it becomes clear that gender dominates the first stage of the manifestation of radical worldviews. Many young men sever their relationships with women first, refrain from speaking to them and express more sexist opinions once they embrace radical views.

When asked to express what they think about the radical jihadist groups fighting in Syria conspiracy theories were more common among the women informants than male informants. Most of them believed that Islamic State (IS) and other radical Islamist groups were founded or supported by the western world, especially the USA, UK and Israel.

Gender equality, gender segregation, rights of LGBTs, and gender roles and norms were the most articulated and disputed areas among the participants. Homophobia was the subject that united most of the traditional and critical Islamists. Most of them showed disgust towards LGBTs, some of them arguing that homosexuality should be criminalised as it is a big danger to Islamic values, society and youth.

Most of the female participants asserted that women and men are not equals, but they are partners who share different and complementary responsibilities assigned to them by Allah. They would point out that 'women are more emotional and less capable of doing outside work compared to men'. Most of the women participants seem to consider gender roles as 'granted (*fitri*) and connatural (*irsi*) rather than constructed by social, cultural, political and historical conditions. They believe that God has created men superior in terms of physical endurance, power, and courage. In contrast, they argued, women are more affectionate and capable of dealing with emotional issues. *Fitrat* (creation) is a key term in understanding how women and men view gender norms and are assigned gender roles. The term is used in reference to a *hadith*, which highlights that all human beings are born with *fitra* (innate nature or natural constitution). Accordingly, men and women are created based on complementary, but different *fitrats*.

Are women and men equal? They are not equal, they are each other's counterpart, they are a match. There is a great metaphor on this issue; men and women are similar to a pair of shoes. Each has no meaning without the other in the pair. I really like this metaphor. Allah says in the Qur'an that the partners are each other's covers, you cover him and he covers you. Being a pair is something, being equal is another. Allah created us in different natures. I cannot be as powerful as a man in physical terms. He is superior to me in physical power; and also, in terms of courage. For example, I cannot drive, although I have a licence. I panic. My brother, however, can drive, although he does not have a licence, and it is a crime. Men are braver. Women tend to panic. But men are not as caring as women. Allah created women as a caring creature in order to mother their child. We are not equal. We are counterparts. (Fatma)

The widespread view on gender equality revolves around the physical difference and internalised misogyny, in which young women are inclined to accept the subordinated role imposed upon them by a patriarchal society. In this regard, there is a strong connection between patriarchy and religion, which shape a woman's self-perception and causes her to internalise gender norms. For most of the participants, this focus on gender difference creates responsibilities and duties and imposes limitations for women. For

organisations proved to be difficult as a male researcher. Hence, employing female research assistants became a necessary means to look into the gender aspect of youth radicalisation in Turkey. Most of the data in this section is gathered by three women research assistants, who were trained in conducting ethnographic fieldwork and provided with a set of research questions.

Bênav, for instance, women cannot take up administrative roles in politics because of a *hadith* indicating that ‘societies ruled by women are cursed’.

Bênav: There is no place for a woman in administration or in politics. The countries governed by women are cursed. Politics is evil, so I cannot see myself as a woman in politics.

Interviewer: What is this curse issue?

Bênav: It is in one of Mohammad’s, peace upon him, *hadith*. The countries governed by women are cursed, since the jobs appropriate for men and women are different. Governing is men’s job.

This inferior self-perception manifests itself because of the assigned roles of women in local culture and what they are allowed in daily life. Essentially, women are not considered active agents of politics and are restricted from taking up roles in public space. Several questions were directed to women participants on what they believe are the roles of women. Most represented themselves as someone who is essentially dependent on men, as a wife, daughter or sister. They thought of ‘women first as mothers.’ Obedience to men/husbands was considered a religious duty, and gender equality was objected to, based on a rhetoric of physical differences. Women were entrusted to men (*emanet*) and they have certain duties to fulfil as pious mothers and wives. Ayşe refers to the last sermon of Muhammad, which he says ‘Indeed you have rights over your women, and your women have rights over you’. Ayşe believes that men and women have certain responsibilities to fulfil towards each other, rather than rights in relation to one another. In this regard, religious references to the Qur’an and *hadith* are the two main determinants of the common discourse among the young Islamist women.

Cahide (Kurdish) is supporter of a Hizbullah related CSO, Mustazaflar Association (Association for the Oppressed). She refers to a *hadith* that says ‘if a woman prays five times a day, fasts for the month of Ramadan, cleans her house and obeys her husband, she is destined for heaven’.

Interviewer: Do you think that man and woman are equal?

Cahide: Never. A woman and a man can never be equal. They want equality, but, for example, the materialist people say that men and women are equal; feminists even claim that they are [meaning women] superior to men. But that’s not possible. A woman and a man can’t be equal. A man can carry 50 kilos of cement, but a woman can’t do that. If you want them to be equal, all right, let them be equal and women work on the construction sites. Why aren’t women equal when [men] work on the construction sites. Why is it a vocational equality? A woman... People who defend equality oppress women indeed. How? A woman will go out and work and then come home and take care of the children. Then she will clean the house and cook. Now are men and women equal? What is the duty of women? I never say that a woman should stay at home and do nothing. Women should improve themselves in terms of *ilim* (knowledge) and do something in the path of God. That could be at university or in normal life; with the neighbours or her children. In any way possible. But a woman and a man can never be equal. That’s impossible even physically. Men have a tough constitution. Because they were created like that. They can handle hard work. But women can’t do that because they are delicate. Women are very sentimental. A man can’t be as sentimental as a woman. So what? As they are not sentimental, is that the inequality which was created by God? A woman can’t be equal to man. I’ve always laughed at people defending this. How come they defend such a ridiculous thing? Maybe it sounds nice for them; they say let’s be equal and have equal rights, but it’s not like that. That’s out of the question. That’s impossible physically. One has to take care of the needs of the house. Then the woman should go and work and the man should sit home and the woman should come home. Because we cook and clean the house and sit at home. But the man works the whole day to meet the needs of the

household. Suppose that we are doing it... We would think how unfair that would be. if that had happened, they would have said “Why don’t the men work? Why do women do everything?” That’s unfair. It can’t be like that. Maybe they don’t like it. They would ask for more and look from a different point of view again.

Interviewer: Are you planning to work in the future?

Cahide: Well, I don’t support the idea of working as a woman. But I would work, in an appropriate atmosphere of course. But now there isn’t an appropriate atmosphere for me, for the veiled [the Turkish word for veiled is *çarşafli*, meaning veiling completely] women at least. There aren’t proper conditions. I would work if it were possible. Otherwise I don’t think of working frankly. I’m not a person supporting the idea of working. As I said, because a diploma isn’t something very important to me. There are other things that matter to me, such as being well-behaved and having a [good] personality. These things are more important for me. So, as I said, why not, if I can find a suitable work atmosphere. But I don’t find it appropriate to work alone with a man.

Interviewer: What kind of appropriate atmosphere?

Cahide: Nobody will interfere with my veiling; this is important because this is my choice. Now that we claim that we live in a free and secular country... They say, I don’t [believe in that]. They say that the Republic of Turkey is secular and everyone is free. Now that there is freedom, I want the freedom too. I feel myself freer this way. This is my own choice, my own way of dressing. I’m mature enough to ask for this. I want to do it that way, work that way. I want to take part in the official institutions like that. If there is freedom, I want it. I want the freedom, too. I want my privacy to be taken into account with my veiling.

Cahide, like many other Islamist women I have interviewed, does not question assigned gender roles, even under circumstances in which men and women share the same work responsibilities. She argues that it is only women’s duty to undertake housework. Metaphors were frequently employed to explain why men and women are not equal. For example, women and men are like different pairs of shoes and have complementary roles that could not be fulfilled without the other part. Veiling is considered as the most important asset for women and the essential duty a woman must obey. Cahide (22) wears a black burqa (*çarşaf*) that only shows her eyes and a part of her nose. She uses black gloves and is quite self-conscious about her body. She likens the headscarf to a castle that protects Islam from being conquered. I remark that she stresses the importance of veiling a lot.

Well I stressed it because it is something indispensable for a Muslim woman. It’s the castle. You can’t conquer a city without first taking the castle. It is the same for a woman: to conquer a woman you need to separate her from the castle. That castle is veiling. (Cahide)

The issue of body coverage is also articulated when Cahide is expressing her opinion on the Islamic State and their executions broadcast online. She was asked whether IS applies sharia rules. Like many others, she denied IS applies sharia rules and argued that IS has nothing to do with Islam.

Cahide: Of course not, never. A person who practices sharia would never behead another person. That doesn’t exist in sharia. We know a lot of wars which our prophet was involved in. Our prophet never beheaded a non-believer (*müşrik*). Yes, he killed them. If a non-believer (*müşrik*) beheaded a person, then tit for tat, the rule applies and that non-believer could be beheaded. But you can’t behead a person who didn’t behead another person. And you can’t undress a person when you execute him/her or hold a gun towards him/her. There is nothing like that in sharia. The Islamic faith is necessary. Islam has war ethics. You can’t touch women and kids even in war. Even if a person is your enemy, that person deserves being killed

decently and fairly. You can't kill the person by showing the *haram* parts of the body. But now, ISIS is doing something very different. (Cahide)

Comparing the data gathered from men and women participants, it is obvious that women and men give weight to different subjects. Men speak of politics and social matters more often than women; women refrain from expressing their opinion on these issues. Instead, they are more eager to elaborate their opinion on piety, the roles and duties of Muslim women, male-female relations according to Islam, and LGBT issues. It is when discussing LGBT issues that they show their disgust and express hatred the most. Here, they associate the pro-Kurdish HDP and the Kurdish movement with LGBT groups, and accuse the HDP of corrupting religious and traditional values with their support for LGBT rights. The government's propaganda against the HDP on these matters seems to be bearing fruit, as the perception of young Islamist women is exclusively shaped by the idea that HDP and the Kurdish movement are not only politically problematic, but also morally bankrupt and hostile towards Islamic values. In this vein, the HDP's nomination of an LGBT member as a candidate for parliament in 2015 was stressed by several participants. In all these matters, Islam was presented as an imagined political community, and the Kurdish movement was accused of undermining this unity. Considering that most of these young Islamist women indeed have Kurdish origins, I asked several questions related to how they position themselves between their ethnic and religious identities. '*Alhamdulillah*, I am a Muslim first' was a frequent reference when discussing opposing identities. The Kurdishness came later, and only when they were asked about their origins or native language. However, most of the participants who expressed their Kurdishness, did not associate themselves with the political aspects of the Kurdish identity. Kurdishness was more a cultural practice, a folkloric entity and a static/unchangeable way of being, in which Islam was the main pillar. This manifested itself several times when my Kurdish participants mentioned the Kurds as 'they or them' rather than 'us'.

Young Islamist women's reliance on conspiracy theories is an important indicator of women's exposure to government propaganda on pro-AKP TV channels and in closed Islamic circles, where men are the primary influence on young women. Several women participants blamed Western countries for the disorder and chaos in the Islamic world. For them, the conflict and war in the Middle East has a singular purpose; to pursue the West's intention to eradicate Islam, defeat Muslims and exploit their natural resources. In many cases, however, they did not indicate a specific country or action to support their point.

Several women participants referred to certain public preachers or TV programmes as the source of their information on Islam and Islamic duties. Public preachers using social media accounts to disseminate their lectures (and *fatwas*) had a greater audience among young women than men. Sageman suggests that the gender separation among 'terrorists' is starting to disappear because of the Internet (2008: 111). This change, however, creates a moral anxiety among the ordinary Muslim subjects on how to (or not to) present self, body and express opinions in an Islamic way. Some of my older participants argued that the principles of gender segregation should remain in place also in social media. Such moral anxieties created divisions and different attitudes among younger and older generations, as well as between men and women; the youth were more receptive to the idea of social media and incorporated it into their daily life, whereas the older generations were more cautious towards the Internet and social media. Some argued that social media could be benefitted from and mentioned examples of how it has helped to spread their influence. Some others complained about the moral corruption among the youth as a result of the Internet and social media. Older women seem to be more conservative, arguing in favour of a limited and controlled presence of social media. The moral anxiety about creating virtuous Muslim subjects creates a generational conflict, but the youth nevertheless challenge and recreate the norms imposed upon them.

Critical ideas concerning gender roles and norms were found among a few pro-Kurdish Islamic civil society organisations, whose members, to say the least, were less homophobic and defended gender equality. The Kurdish political movement's emphasis on gender equality and the co-chairship to host equal responsibilities at all administrative levels seem to be bearing fruit in the outer circles of the movement.

Democratic Islam Congress (DIK), former Mazlum-Der, Azadi Movement, and a few other organisations are taking a leading role in discussing gender issues in Islam and provide a fresh interpretation of Islamic terms and understandings that does not fall into the classic and predominant understanding of gender roles. It is more common to see pro-Kurdish women not in total compliance with the traditional understanding of Islam on gender roles and norms.

5. Conclusions

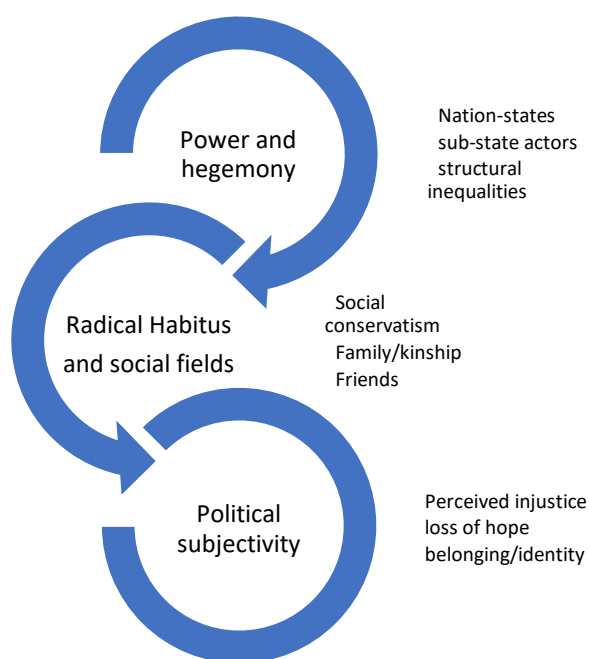
This case study addresses young people's understandings, reactions and responses to radicalisation in east and south-east Turkey, as well as in Istanbul. The majority of participants are members or volunteers of Islamist civil society organisations active in the fields of humanitarian aid, education, youth accommodation and human rights. The Turkish-Syrian border cities, the conservative periphery of Eastern Turkey and Istanbul are the field sites where I conducted 18 months of ethnographic research on youth, radicalisation, civil society and the state. During this period, I talked to the members, leaders and volunteers of Islamist CSOs, university students residing in dormitories run by these organisations, and the critical voices among liberal, anti-capitalist, and/or pro-Kurdish pious Muslims to provide a comprehensive picture of radicalisation processes among youth in Turkey. In the course of the fieldwork and continuous follow-ups, I have had opportunity to listen to young people's stories, and observe how they respond to ongoing conflict and radicalisation on both sides of the Turkish-Syrian border. I have observed the widespread conflict and political violence turning Kurdish cities into a battlefield, the rise and fall of ISIS, and the ongoing Syrian War on many fronts and formations. I have witnessed the Turkish state's responses to the Syrian War, its machinations on the ground through mass mobilisation of resources, bodies and minds. Along with participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork, I have interviewed around 50 people, 27 of whom were under 30 years old.

As mentioned in the introductory sections of this report, youth radicalisation is strongly related to the geopolitical environment of Turkey, especially in the Kurdish border zones with Syria. The physical proximity of these areas to Syria and the density of Syrian refugee populations in the border cities triggered both anti-refugee sentiments and radical views towards multiple political issues among the youth. More importantly, the Turkish state's involvement in the Syrian War and their support to the fighting jihadi groups created an environment where radical discourses move freely, and Islamist organisations recruit youth into their broad range of activities from humanitarian acts to clandestine operations. Lastly, a century long transborder Kurdish question and the collapse of the peace negotiations between the AKP government and the Kurdish political actors in 2015 resulted in the adaptation of more Islamist policies by the government. The AKP government shifted its focus to increasing support for Islamist organisations in these areas and creating loyal Islamist allies and collaborators to counterbalance the increasing discontent among the Kurds in the wake of Syrian War and the formation of autonomous Kurdish controlled territories in Northern Syria. In such an environment, anything related to Kurdishness and Kurdish emancipation has been criminalised, while the Islamist groups, from the most radical to the relatively moderate, enjoy the state's support and broaden their activities.

In such an environment, the youth of Turkey grow up with a strong sense of identity and its ideological manifestation regardless of the walk of life they come from. At a time of increasing populist religious and conservative politics, it is not surprising that young people in Turkey now identify themselves more with religion and Islamist ideologies. However, ideological discourses and identity manifestations have strong ties to the underlying structural inequalities and competitions over resources and power. It is interesting to listen to an Islamist and how she/he reclaims power via semi-structured narratives; it takes place via a discourse of victimisation, fear that the Kemalist elites are hostile to Muslim emancipation, and religious freedoms will deteriorate if the Islamist government loses power. It performs a discourse of piety that the realm (*mulk*) belongs to Allah, and they only work for prosperity of Muslims and Islam. This reclamation

of power goes hand in hand with mobilising resources for the empowerment of a hybrid ethno-religious identity: the glorious Ottoman past and nostalgia for *ecdats* (ancestors), the global Muslim *ummah* and Turkish nationalism are the new parameters of the ruling Islamist ideology in today's Turkey. Despite the predominance of Turkish Islamist ideology and identity, numerous counter-hegemonic groups compete for recognition, power and representation, among which Salafi ideology is the most influential. It is in principle anti-state but has always existed in an environment dominated by a repressive state, hence its imagination and practice rely on a repressive habitus and do not strike existential challenges to the state in action. Regardless, ideology and/or identity-oriented groups attract thousands of followers and fanatical supporters across the country in a competing field, where the state is the most powerful and manipulative.

Through data analysis of interviews with 27 young men and women, and emerging themes of the study, I have identified three pathways to radicalisation and violent extremism, namely via radical humanitarianism, Salafi and Kurdish milieus. Each milieu has its own characteristics, but they also share similar social and political commonalities. I argue that these pathways are shaped by an intertwined mechanism of power relations, which takes place in particular social fields, and creates its own radical habitus through agencies and their political subjectivities.



Power and hegemony refer to the states, sub-states and powerful non-state actors and their oppressive practices and policies. In the Western context, the colonial legacies of nation-states, Western interventions and invasions, the rise of far-right groups and parties, as well as discriminatory practices towards Muslim communities are the major forces affecting radicalisation processes. In the non-Western context, however, internal colonial practices (Kurt, 2019) - as is seen in the case of the Kurds in Turkey and beyond -, authoritarian, secularist and top-down regimes and their assimilationist and oppressive practices towards minority and underrepresented groups, systematic discriminatory practices, and sustained injustice, play a crucial role in driving individuals to adopt radical ideas and actions. Moreover, states' direct involvement and support for radical groups as well as their manipulative actions towards radicals are other factors that create a fertile environment for radical ideas and organisations to flourish. In the case of Turkey, the Syrian War and the Kurdish conflict, both within and beyond the Turkish borders, challenged conventional power structures and, in return, led the Turkish state to adopt controversial and

unlawful strategies. Turkey's determination to overthrow the Syrian regime and prevent the Kurds from obtaining any form of sovereignty led the state proxies and institutions (intelligence, security, military and justice) to form 'dirty' alliances with radical groups and/or turn a blind eye to the activities of these groups in the country. Here, sub-state actors like Al Nusra, 'the Free Syrian Army', and ISIS maintained their activities, recruited fighters and transferred jihadists without much investigation or intervention from the state authorities, especially during the intense period of conflict in Syria (Eroğlu, 2018). Moreover, the Turkish state trained and equipped some of these proxies within Turkish borders and in some refugee camps inaccessible to the media and public due to the government's prohibitions. In such an environment, many individuals and groups found a medium to operate freely, to recruit and mobilise youth around radical ideas and actions. My research provides first-hand testimonies of this alliance and connivance from the state authorities and its perception among the youth.

The second mechanism that triggers radicalisation processes could be explained with Bourdieu's concept of habitus and the way in which it shapes and (re)produces practices within certain social fields (Bourdieu, 1990). In the border zones and the conservative periphery of eastern Turkey, Islamist CSOs create, contribute to and operate within a socially conservative environment, where radical ideas and mobilisations find an ideal setting to flourish. The power of the state (and sub-state actors) have been historically shaping these social fields, manufacturing consent through proxies, local alliances and conservative/religious norms and values. The family, wider networks of kinship and circles of friends are all affected by the implementation of these norms. This radical habitus has a huge influence on minds, bodies and agencies of young people; on the way in which they are reflexive and reactive to structural injustices, and physical and symbolic violence. Violence, inflicted by the state, its agencies or hegemonic groups, is a historically widespread phenomenon in Turkey, especially in the Kurdish regions. The state's internal colonial practices, the impunity, and institutionalised discrimination towards the Kurds (as well as reactionary and 'revolutionary violence' by the Kurdish insurgent groups, and counterinsurgencies), have produced a habitus, in which 'rebellious' role models, meanings of heroism and martyrdom for the 'cause', are quite influential on the imagination of youth. In such an environment, one could easily embrace radical ideas or engage with radical groups. The Syrian War and the reigniting of the Kurdish conflict have radicalised this habitus to a great extent. Moreover, increasing social conservatism, both as a product of the relational power structures and as a reaction to it, created an environment where Salafi groups, as well as radical Islamist organisations, recruited youth without much concern that they might be investigated by the state or condemned by society. Here, young people accumulated both social and a symbolic capital through processes of recognition, fast promotion and a sense of worthiness in the circles of radical groups and organisations. Being an active agent of 'change' in a corrupt and 'immoral' society, and being able to respond to structural injustices by engaging with jihad or revolutionary violence, are becoming essential doxas³¹ of recent decades among the youth in Turkey.

In such an environment, one would wonder whether there is space for agency and individual decision-making? It would be unfair to think of individuals engaging with radical extremist ideas and actions, simply, as victims of broader power relations but not as active agents of their own decisions and lives. Here, I propose to think through the concept of political subjectivity, which allows us to think of the subject and the political in an intertwined and relational context. In his study, *Meaning, Madness and Political Subjectivity: A study of schizophrenia and culture in Turkey*, Rahimi argues that:

the subject is conceived of as political in its very subjectivity – both in the sense that it engages in an ongoing act of subjugating and conjugating the world into meaningful patterns and in the sense that the subject is continuously subjugated or conjugated by the local

³¹ Bourdieu considers doxa as 'the natural and social world appears as self-evident' and 'unquestioned' as a result of hegemonic relations within society that reproduces consent through everyday life practices (1977: 164-169).

meaning system. Politicality, in this sense, is not an added aspect of the subject, but indeed the mode of being of the subject, that is, precisely what the subject is. (Rahimi, 2015: 8)

In this regard, the political subjectivity of youth, who experience injustice, encounter human suffering as a result of political violence and war, face denial of his/her identity and collective rights, becomes a determinant asset, for radical ideas to flourish and find correspondence. In the case of youth in Turkey, especially among the poor, the lack of hope for positive change, in their personal and/or collective domains, seems to be a major alienating factor. This creates a common despair for a change within the system and makes an urgency for a 'radical solution' more feasible. Experience of loss and systematic discrimination, closeness and affinity to the radical ideas, actions and groups through a family member or a significant person, and - most importantly - perceived injustice, play a crucial role in a young person getting involved in radical actions. However, only a small minority among the large number of disgruntled people end up putting their radical ideas into action and committing acts of 'terrorism'. Here, Fathali Moghaddam's staircase model is helpful in understanding why this is the case. The model involves a metaphorical narrowing staircase, leading to the terrorist act at the top of a building. In his model, each of the five floors is influenced by a specific psychological process and upward mobility is dependent upon how people perceive the building and the doors they think they are open to them. It is proposed that the higher an individual moves up the floors, the fewer alternatives to violence they will see, ultimately resulting in the destruction of themselves, others, or both.

To understand those who climb to the top of the staircase to terrorism, one must first comprehend the level of perceived injustice and the feelings of frustration and shame among hundreds of millions of people down at the ground floor. (Moghaddam, 2005: 161-2)

Moghaddam's staircase theory is not only useful to envision the processes of radicalisation into violent extremism, but also in its appeal to prompt us to think about the level of perceived injustice and frustration among a larger swathe of society at the ground floor. Here, political subjectivity is useful when considering why some individuals radicalise, or climb the ladder, where others do not. It is simply that one's particular radical habitus makes him/her more receptive to the idea of radical action as a manifestation of structural inequalities, perceived injustice, and lack of hope for change within the system, while another may not perceive the same level of injustice and maintain hope for progress in his/her personal and collective life.

At the end of the day, however, there is not a perfect scale to measure the likelihood of radicalisation. We can identify the push factors by looking at the relational interactions of powerful hegemonic groups (such as states and sub-state actors), the habitus of a certain field where radicalisation is more likely possible and the way in which the political subjectivity of a particular person responds to all these matters.

Within this mechanism, the three pathways into radicalisation and violent extremism in Turkey are shaped and transformed. The first and foremost, among these, is the Salafi pathway, the most violent path with a clandestine agenda of recruitment and action. The second is the controversial humanitarian pathway, one of the side-effects of increasing Islamisation and Islamist mobilisation as well as the politics of humanitarianism in Turkey. The last path is the secular Kurdish route to radicalisation, mostly in response to the state's criminal activities and discriminatory actions towards the Kurds.

In this report, I attempted to contextualise the underlying mechanisms of radicalisation and provide trajectories of these three pathways to radical ideas and actions as well as the youth's perception of key themes surrounding these issues. In brief, I outlined how radical groups operate in each milieu, and how the youth is attracted to a certain group or responds to issues within the milieus. Since the secular Kurdish case is a divergent example, and not the focus of the research project, I refrained from a lengthy account of the processes of this radicalisation and only highlighted its interconnected aspects to the first two pathways and to the broader power and hegemonic relations.

I should note that despite different characteristics of each pathway, all three operate in the same settings and the socio-demographics of the respondents and recruits share certain similarities. The majority of the respondents are members of lower-middle class families, are from rural areas and spent a considerable period of their lives across the border zones and/or in the peripheral cities in the Kurdish region. More than half of the respondents are ethnically Kurdish, although their political views and affiliations vary greatly. While some of these respondents are attracted to a universal concept of the Islamic ummah, some others are pro-Kurdish, or even some of them are close to the Turkish nationalist groups and ideologies.

Although there are many parallels between the Salafi and humanitarian pathways, the first is strongly against nationalism and embraces a universal concept of the Islamic ummah, whereas the second is nationalist and acts in line with the interest and policies of the Islamist government in Turkey; neo-Ottomanist ideals determine their understanding of the Islamic ummah. Both groups hold a certain degree of hostility towards the Kurdish political movements and are more eager to elaborate on 'PKK terrorism' than extremist jihadism. The Salafis are more clandestine and organise around small units and cells. The majority of their activities take place in Salafi mosques, private houses and madrasahs, and around internet cafés and small businesses where youth attend. The humanitarian pathway on the other hand, operates in public, receives funding and support from the state and is active in the field of education, housing for students, humanitarian aid and charities. Both groups maintain a certain level of social media appearance, whereas the Salafis organise around a public preacher and promote his teaching and classes. The humanitarians, on the other hand, focus on charity activities and are more active in using social media to back the government, conducting social media campaigns. The humanitarian pathway developed networks and connections with several groups in Syria including the proxies of the Turkish state, the 'Free Syrian Army', the emergent 'Syrian National Army', and Al Nusra. The Salafis are inclined towards ISIS the most, but are not necessarily hostile to the other groups fighting in Syria. During the time of conflict or security operations, both groups draw near each other. And remain in solidarity to a certain extent, mostly as a result of family ties, kinship and close connections in the peripheral cities.

In terms of understandings and perceptions, there is no unanimity on the concept of radicalisation or moderation. Some participants strongly refuse these binaries and argue that Islam is the same – some also claim that these are the Western inventions and have nothing to do with how Muslims consider themselves. In that regard, anti-Western/anti-American attitudes are combined with conspiracy theories and usually adopted to make sense of the extremist violence and conflict. ISIS is widely considered as a pawn and product of the West and its association with Islam is strongly rejected. However, the habitus of conservative periphery and its understanding of Islamic sharia draw parallel lines and provide legitimisation of similar actions under the notion of sharia law. 'Islam as a religion of peace and balance' mostly remains as a rhetorical argument, where anything contradictory is legitimised via anecdotal references and acts of violence by radical groups are singled out as '*ferdî/singular*' cases. Accordingly, all violent acts and wrongdoings are *ferdî/singular*, whereas all the good is a result of the supremacy of Islam and sharia.

Together with anti-Westernism, homophobia is an overarching issue that unites both the Salafi and the Humanitarian pathways. The most controversial debates on morality and piety revolve around the LGBTQ rights, the 'terrorist acts' of the Kurdish movement and their support to LGBTQ groups. Gender roles and norms are strongly related to a patriarchal interpretation of religion and religious references. In that regard, radicalisation is a gendered issue, not only because radicalisation first manifests itself through a gender segregation and adaptation of sexist opinions, but also because the social construct and imagination of religious radicalisation in the Islamic context creates certain divisions, in which men are assigned the duty of jihad and are more likely to put radical ideas into action. Young women position themselves as weak subjects of politics and, instead, focus on issues of piety, devotion and individual religious duties.

Finally, radicalisation is not a fixed category, but rather a relational concept that changes according to external conditions. The binary opposition between the ‘radical’ and the moderate implies a discursive hegemony that is not necessarily reflective of the reality on the ground in any particular time and space. Of more significance than the taxonomy of radicalisation, it is argued here, are the relations of power and hegemony and the particular dynamics of the social fields and radical habitus that lie beneath as well as the political subjectivities that emerge as an outcome of, and response to, these.

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7. Appendices

Appendix 7.1 Socio-demographic data of respondents

Name ³²	Age	Country of Birth	Education	Employment	Ethnicity	Family status	Gender	Religion	Religiosity	Residential status	No. in household
Ayşe	29	Turkey	Completed secondary ed.	Full-time	Kurdish (Zaza)	Single	Female	Islam	practising	At home w parents	3
Bênav	18	Turkey	Currently at Uni.	unemployed	Kurdish	single	female	Islam	practising	dormitory	6
Cahide	22	Turkey	Completed secondary ed.	unemployed	Kurdish	single	female	Islam	Practising (ultra-conserv.)	At home w parents	3
Dijwar	20	Turkey	Completed High school	Unemployed (asylum seeker)	Kurdish	single	male	Islam	Not practising	Refugee camp	8
Fatma	24	Turkey	Currently at Uni.	Part-time	Turkish	single	female	Islam	Practising (conservative)	dormitory	N/A
Gulsin	21	Turkey	Completed secondary ed.	unemployed	Kurdish	single	female	Islam	practising	At home with parents	8
Hatice	18	Turkey	Currently at Uni.	unemployed	Kurdish	single	female	Islam	practising	At home with one parent	2
Ihsan	28	Turkey	Completed secondary ed.	Full-time	Turkish	single	male	Islam	practising	Indp. With friends	varies
Kartal	27	Turkey	Completed Uni.	unemployed	Kurdish	single	male	Islam	practising	At home w parents	6

³² All names are pseudonyms

Leyla	20	Turkey	Currently at Un.	Part-time	Turkish	single	female	Islam	Practising (ultra-conservative)	dormitory	7
Luha	26	Turkey	Currently at PG education	Full-time	Kurdish-Turkish	single	female	Islam	practising	At home w parents	5
Mirza	30	Turkey	Completed uni.	Full-time	Kurdish	married	male	Islam	practising	Live w family	9
Morsal	25	Turkey	Completed uni.	Full-time	Turkish	single	female	Islam	practising	Indp. alone	4
Naif aga	22	Turkey	Currently at Uni.	unemployed	Kurdish-Arab	single	male	Islam	Not-practising	Indp. Alone	7
Nuri	22	Turkey	Completed Uni.	unemployed	Kurdish (Zaza)	single	male	Islam	Not-practising	Indp. Alone	4
Omer Faruk	23	Turkey	Currently at Uni.	unemployed	Kurdish (Zaza)	single	male	Islam	practising	dormitory	5
Osman	27	Turkey	Currently at Uni.	Part-time	Kurdish (Zaza)	single	male	Islam	practising	At home w parents	5
Rodin	23	Turkey	Currently at Uni.	unemployed	Kurdish-Arab	single	male	Islam	Not-practising	At home eith one parent	5
Ruveyda	27	Turkey	Compl. Uni.	Full-time	Kurdish (Zaza)	engaged	female	Islam	practising	At home w parents	9
Salih	25	Turkey	Compl. Uni.	unemployed	Kurdish	single	male	Islam	Not-practising	Idpn. w firends	7
Sevgi	28	Turkey	Currently at Uni.	Part-time	Kurdish (Zaza)	Single	female	Islam	practising	dormitory	varies
Seynan	30	Turkey	Completed a PG degree	Full time	Kurdish	married	male	Islam	practising	With family	4
Tekoşin	26	Turkey	Left Uni.	Full time	Kurdish	single	male	Islam	Not practising	Indpn. W friends	8

Ubeydullah	26	Turkey	Completed a secondary school	Full time	Kurdish	single	male	Islam	Not practising	Live w pne parent	11
Yusra	20	Turkey	Currently at uni	unemployed	Kurdish (Zaza)	single	female	Islam	practising	Home w single parent	3
Zahir	26	Turkey	Currently at uni	Part time	Kurdish (Zaza)	Single	male	Islam	practising	At home w parents	7
Zehra	25	Turkey	Completed Uni	unemployed	Kurdish	single	female	Islam	Practising	dormitory	6

Appendix 7.2 Observed events

	Name of event	Date	Location	Recorded data
Demonstrations				
1.	Hüda-Par Election campaign	June 2015	Bingöl and Diyarbakır	Field diary notes; Still photos
2.	University Students' Prayer protests	April 2016	Bingöl	Field diary notes
3.	'Democracy Meetings' (Pro-Government protests of the failed military coup by the Islamist CSOs)	July 2016	Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Mardin	
Conferences and Press Statements				
1.	Islamic Solution to the Kurdish Question (two day conference)	March 2016	Diyarbakır	Field diary notes
2.	Syria and Refugee Crisis (Panel)	February 2016	Bingöl	Field diary notes
Organisation meetings				
1.	Islamic Civil Society Platforms General meeting	May 2016	Diyarbakır	
Informal meetings				

1.	Meetings with respondents for catch up (various meetings throughout years)	2015-2019	Istanbul, Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Mardin	Field diary notes
Social events				
1.	The Blessed Birth Festival (Celebration of Muhammad's birthday)	April 2016	Diyarbakır	Field diary notes; Still photos; videos