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Reconfigurations of state and citizenship in an Istanbul neighbourhood

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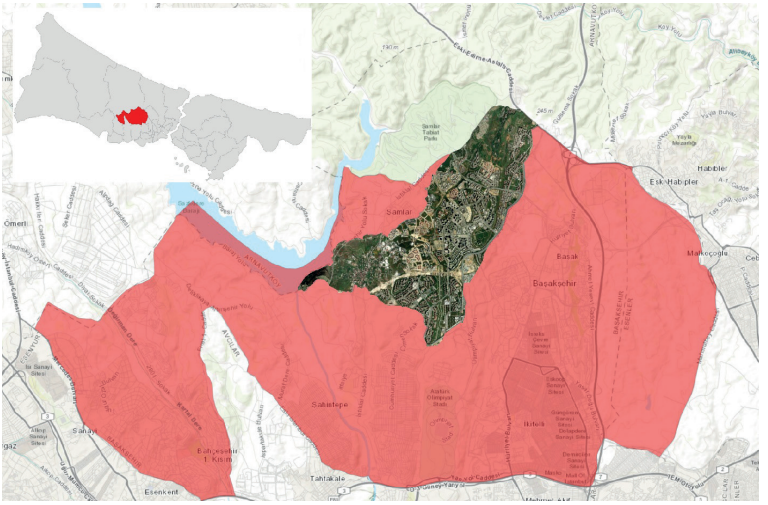
Chapter Three

Case Study and Methods

To understand the AKP's hegemonic project of post-secular modernity, I focus on the Kayaşehir TOKİ – a key site for observing how this project is enacted and how it promotes particular ideas of the state and citizenship. In this chapter, I elaborate on why this neighbourhood serves as a paradigmatic case by showing how it (1) reflects the AKP's modernist aspirations, (2) encourages Islamic ways of life through its religious infrastructure, and (3) has consistently been one of the AKP's strongest electoral bases in Istanbul. I then outline my ethnographic approach, grounded in political ethnography and feminist geography, and discuss the ethical considerations that shaped this research.

First of all, TOKİ social housing projects reflect well the modern developmental aspirations of the AKP. The Kayaşehir TOKİ, a satellite town established on the northern peripheries of Istanbul in 2011 (see Figures 1 and 2), represents the largest social housing project in Turkey. The housing estate shares similarities with modernist social housing projects worldwide, featuring high-rise buildings, uniform apartment blocks, extensive parks, and a car-oriented design (see Figures 3 and 4). High-rise apartment blocks organised into building islands, surrounded by gates and private security measures, are called *site*[18] (pronounced see-te) in Turkish. Each *site* features

18 No study has been done on how the term *site* came to be used to denote this particular form of spatial development in Turkey. Nevertheless, one of the term's meanings in French (*cité*), which corresponds to housing estate (i.e. *ensemble d'immeubles*; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), is the closest equivalent to its usage in Turkish. To illustrate, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret named their 1920s architectural project *Cité Frugès*, which translates as Workers' Housing Estate (Fondation Le Corbusier, n.d.).


Ömerli
Samlar
Başak
Başakşehir
Markaçola
Esk-Habipler
Habibler
Sahilevleri
Sahilyolu
Sahilsevenler
Sahilsevenler Caddesi
Sahilsevenler Sokak
Sahilsevenler Sokağı
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Sahilsevenler Sokağı

Figure 3. TOKİ sites separated by roads and fences. Source: author.

Figure 4. Semi-public spaces in TOKİ sites: children's parks and pergolas. Source: author.

small markets, playgrounds, and trees, contributing to a more pleasant living environment.

Kayaşehir boasts amenities such as a local shopping mall, food markets, and numerous interconnected parks (see Figures 5 and 6). These parks and roads are well-maintained by both the municipality and the state, enhancing the overall quality of life for residents. Many residents perceive Kayaşehir as an aesthetically pleasing neighbourhood compared to their previous homes, which were often characterised by substandard apartment conditions and *gecekondu* settlements. This marks a significant improvement over their former living environments, leading many to describe Kayaşehir as a 'heaven in Istanbul'.

It is important to note that the AKP, through TOKİ, developed the first comprehensive social housing policy in Turkish history. The project's emphasis on the social aspect stems from its allocation to low-income, non-property-owning residents of Istanbul, offering affordable payment schemes compared to the housing market, with long-term instalments. Before the establishment of the TOKİ social housing system in the 2000s, there was no proper social housing system for low-income residents in Turkey. Consequently, low-income and impoverished residents were compelled to seek their own solutions. *Gecekondu*s, an informal type of housing, emerged in the 1950s alongside rural-to-urban migration driven by deteriorating economic conditions. As migrants transitioned into the working class of major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, they struggled to find affordable housing. The absence of social housing and the high rents in the private sector prompted them to address housing needs through informal settlements in industrial districts and unsuitable terrains, such as steep hills. These areas received diverse incentives by the local governments, such as the right to construct additional floors and legalisation, just before every election period, often in exchange for votes. Through this patronage system, *gecekondu*s accounted for more than half of Istanbul's urban population during the 1990s (Akbulut & Başlık, 2011). The bulk of the Islamist move-

Figure 5. Kayaşehir shopping mall. Source: author.

Figure 6. Kayaşehir Millet Bahçesi: an extensive park surrounding Kayaşehir. Source: author.

ments' (Refah Partisi[19] (RP) at the time) electoral support originated from the *gecekondu* districts, home to poor and low-income residents (Yalçıntan & Erbaş, 2003).

Acknowledging the substandard living conditions of his voter base, then mayor of Istanbul Erdoğan pledged to improve housing opportunities for them in 1994, marking a significant departure from past policies favouring *gecekondu*s (Çavdar, 2016). Instead, the municipality aimed to introduce a new model of affordable housing in place of *gecekondu*s (Batuman, 2017; Tekeli, 1996). To realise this vision, the municipality established its construction firm in 1995, İstanbul Konut İmar Plan Sanayi ve Ticaret A.Ş. (KIPTAS), which operates through public–private partnerships. The municipality provided the land, and private constructors were responsible for building mass housing estates. The project, named Başakşehir (which literally translates into 'the city of the ear of grain'), derived its name from the symbol of the RP – an ear of grain (Çavdar, 2016).

Immediately after winning the elections in 2002, the AKP formulated an emergency action plan. In the housing section of this plan, they pledged to replace *gecekondu*s with social housing similar to the Başakşehir model. The timing of this proposal was critical, coinciding with the aftermath of a devastating earthquake in 1999, which heightened concerns about housing conditions. To implement the social housing system, the AKP expanded the municipal-scale KIPTAS system into the state-scale TOKİ.[20] Unlike contem-

19 The Refah Partisi (RP) was the second Islamic political party in Turkey's history. R. T. Erdoğan had been an active member of the party since its establishment in the 1980s. Following its ban in 1998, the party's cadres split into two political movements: the Saadet Partisi (SP) and the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP). The main ideological distinction between the two lies in the AKP's pro-capitalist and pro-EU orientation.

20 TOKİ was initially a state institution, albeit one that solely provided credits for cooperatives. However, under the AKP s leadership, TOKİ was restructured.

porary European models, where social housing predominantly[21] corresponds to affordable rental housing, TOKİ operates a homeownership programme with long-term instalment plans. Through public–private partnerships, TOKİ collaborates with private housing projects to finance social housing initiatives. From 2002 to 2018,[22] TOKİ produced 837,572 housing units in Turkey, with 86% allocated for social housing (TOKİ, 2018)

In short, the TOKİ social housing system has responded to the housing needs of millions of citizens and thereby constitutes one of the most important reforms of the AKP that has significantly changed what was a vital problem for a large portion of low-income citizens.

Secondly, the Kayaşehir TOKİ neighbourhood accommodates diverse Islamic lifestyles through its distinct material and social environment. In this sense, it is a compelling site for observing how post-secular neighbourhood life takes shape. Physically, Islamic institutions define the centre of the neighbourhood. Alongside the mosque, the local branch of the Diyanet (the Müftülük) is situated at the heart of Kayaşehir – and, notably, no other high-level state institution of comparable importance is present. The neighbourhood also hosts several private schools whose students often come from nearby higher-income areas; many of these schools offer Islamic education exclusively, with some providing gender-segregated classrooms (see Figure 7). Quranic boarding schools run by the Diyanet are likewise part of the educational landscape. Additionally, many Islamic charities maintain local branches in Kayaşehir, further embedding religious networks into everyday life. Moreover, numerous public schools and streets are named after prominent Islamic figures.

21 There are exceptions to this model. For instance, in the 1970s, Spain under the Francoist regime initiated a homeownership programme as part of the Second National Housing Plan (1961–1975), which was similar to TOKİ's model (Guardia-Bassols et al., 2022).

22 The last year for which TOKİ published a report about housing production was 2018.

Figure 7. Advertisements for Islamic schools. Source: author.

Within the spaces of consumption, such as local malls, shops, and cafés, Islamic symbols are quite visible. Many of the clothing shops are specialised in modest fashion, and gyms are gender segregated. Renowned secular supermarket chain Migros does not sell alcohol in their Kayaşehir branch, as opposed to the majority of their stores in Turkey, and none of the cafés and restaurants serve alcohol.

Apart from the built environment, it is possible to discern Islamic ways of life through the ways in which people dress and socialise as well. Residents often greet each other in a distinctly Islamic way, for example by saying '*Selamünaleyküm*' or '*Aleykümselam*', even if they do not know each other in person. The majority of the women are veiled and unveiled women are quite cautious about their clothes. Even if the temperature rises above 40° Celsius, their pants or skirts never go above the knee and their shirts always cover their shoulders. Unless they are part of a family, opposite sexes do

not socialise together. Moreover, most of the young boys are named after Ottoman sultans or people mentioned in the Quran.

Moreover, the presence of various *cemaat*s, through their formal and informal institutions, makes Kayaşehir a paradigmatic case for exploring the differences and similarities in religious ways of living compared to the Diyanet's vision. Followers of certain *cemaat*s have distinct interpretations of Islam, and it is often possible to identify their specific beliefs and affiliation with particular *cemaat*s through women's veiling styles. All these different material and social forms of Islamic infrastructure reflect the importance of Islamic ways of living in Kayaşehir, which allows us to observe how post-secular norms and morals circulate, are embodied, and may be challenged.

Lastly, the AKP consistently receives the majority of votes from the Kayaşehir neighbourhood in every election. This provides an important indicator for understanding how residents consent to the AKP's broader political project. Quantitative analysis by Marschall colleagues (2016) show that districts where TOKİ implements housing projects have a significantly higher likelihood of voting for the AKP compared to districts with fewer TOKİ investments. Since its establishment, the lion's share of votes in every election[23] has gone to the AKP in Kayaşehir. Unlike long-standing AKP strongholds, however, Kayaşehir did not bring the party to power; rather, it emerged after the AKP was already governing. This reversal makes Kayaşehir a compelling case: it allows us to examine how political loyalty is cultivated not through inherited networks but through newly produced material and moral infrastructures.

In earlier AKP strongholds such as Kağıthane and Başakşehir, support for the party has been explained predominantly through clientelist relations (Çavdar, 2016; Doğan, 2016; Özet, 2019). By the late 1980s – when nearly half of Istanbul's population lived in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods – these areas largely

23 Share of the AKP's votes in general elections in the Kayaşehir neighbourhood: 2015: 70%; 2018: 67%; 2023: 54% (YSK, n.d.).

supported the AKP's predecessor, the Refah Partisi (RP), and subsequently the AKP itself (Tuğal, 2009). From the late 2000s onward, the AKP initiated large-scale urban transformation projects in *gecekondu* areas. In Kağıthane – a former industrial district surrounded by *gecekondu* settlements – many local residents, including shopkeepers and small-scale business owners, entered the construction sector, accumulating capital and generating new forms of employment (Doğan, 2016). As Sevinç Doğan (2016) shows, the upper tier of this emerging construction class not only supported the party electorally but also became embedded within its organisational structure. This is widely understood as a classic case of clientelist politics, where economic mobility and political loyalty mutually reinforce one another.

Beyond these transformed neighbourhoods, the AKP and its predecessors have also relied on local networks such as hometown associations and mosque communities (Eligür, 2010; Günay & Yörük, 2019; Kemahlıoğlu, 2012; Tuğal, 2009; White, 2002). Through cultivating close relationships with the leaders of these networks – and often supporting their organisational activities – the party expanded its influence into broader social circles whose members tended to follow the political cues of their community leaders (Tuğal, 2009; see also Kuran, 2024).

Kayaşehir, however, offers a markedly different political terrain. Developed as a social housing project where residents were selected based on eligibility criteria such as income thresholds, the neighbourhood did not have the pre-existing social foundations upon which traditional clientelist relations are built. Residents did not share the same hometown origins, kinship ties, or work in sectors – such as construction – that would link them to local patronage networks. As a result, the AKP could not rely on entrenched social structures or inherited loyalties. Instead, the party had to build a new political base from the ground up.

This makes Kayaşehir crucial for understanding new methods, bases, and affects through which political consent is cultivated in the AKP era. Rather

than drawing on pre-existing networks, the AKP cultivated consent by reshaping both the material and affective landscape of urban life. Through the delivery of modern housing, the aesthetic of order and security in gated *site*s, the expansion of religious infrastructure, and the active engagement of party volunteers with residents' everyday problems, the AKP generated new forms of attachment, indebtedness, and identification. In this context, political loyalty emerges not through transactional clientelism alone but through the affective experience of modernity, religiosity, and state proximity – all woven into the lived environment of the housing estate.

Methodology

I conducted ethnographic research in the Kayaşehir TOKİ to explore how the AKP's hegemonic project is lived, negotiated, and contested. Ethnography is particularly valuable for understanding the lived dimensions of broader political transformations as it allows researchers to immerse themselves in the everyday lives of individuals and groups, observing how they make sense of their encounters with people, environments, and ideas (Wacquant, 2003). Methodologically, this research draws on political ethnography and feminist geography, both of which help trace explicit and implicit engagements with political issues in everyday life.

Political ethnography is particularly useful for capturing 'how political life and possibilities are shaped in quotidian worlds that are beyond the sight of others' (Brodkin, 2017, p. 133). Political life, in this context, includes both formal politics (e.g. political party practices) and everyday, banal, and seemingly non-political activities that 'occur outside of "normal" political channels and on terms that are not explicitly or even intentionally political' (p. 131), such as neighbours collectively organising a social space. In my ethnographic research, I focus on the interactions, transitions, and tensions between these two forms of politics as a means of observing the lived dimensions of hegemonic projects. By focusing on the spaces between two forms of politics, we can

see how certain issues become politicised while others are prevented from becoming political in everyday life. In either case, attention to what Bayat (2010) calls 'quiet encroachment' – the unintended political acts aimed at survival and improving life, which may challenge state authority – is crucial for capturing how hegemonic projects are experienced in everyday spaces.

By examining both formal and everyday political practices, we can better understand how ideas about the ideal citizen and the state are constructed. This, in turn, allows us to analyse what hegemonic projects ultimately seek to establish, how they are negotiated, and when they provoke resistance. Since this thesis aims to illuminate the generative aspects of hegemonic projects – particularly in shaping conceptions of the state – the 'variations of how the state – as an order, as an idea, as a process – appears in the daily lives of ordinary people' (Auyero, 2021, p. 475) are of central importance. Therefore, I trace the ways in which the idea of the state emerges in different domains, such as religious courses and neighbourhood meetings.

Feminist geography complements political ethnography by foregrounding the gendered nature of power relations and spatial divisions (Gökariksel, Hawkins, Neubert & Smith, 2021). It is particularly useful in recognising 'embodied, everyday, informal practices that make manifest the "place" of traditionally disempowered people—such as women, children, immigrants, asylum seekers, prisoners, and others—within all manner of ostensibly geopolitical landscapes' (Dixon & Marston, 2011, p. 445). Informed by feminist geography's attention to situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) – which emphasises the differential experiences of space and place – I examine how gendered experiences, embodiments, and struggles shape the lived realities of hegemonic projects.

Gender, particularly in relation to the temporal organisation of space and religious morality, plays a central role in everyday life in Kayaşehir. The daytime is primarily occupied by women and children as men are often the primary breadwinners. As such, everyday life is already gendered due to this

division of labour. Being attentive to this dynamic, I explore how the ideal woman – as part of the ideal citizen in a hegemonic project – is understood, enacted, and contested in Kayaşehir. This helps reveal how gender norms related to the AKP's modernisation project are experienced on the ground.

Furthermore, the relationship between religion and gender is another crucial aspect shaping everyday interactions in Kayaşehir. Given the prominence of religion in daily life, gender norms and relations are often interpreted through a religious lens. Feminist geography, particularly scholarship that critically engages with religion (e.g. Mahmood, 2005), provides epistemological guidance for this research – for instance, by encouraging attentiveness to the local religious authorities that women turn to for guidance in their daily lives.

Both political ethnography and feminist geography offer research sensibilities and methods well suited to observing place-based practices, enabling an analysis of the lived and embodied dimensions of hegemonic projects. Political ethnography's emphasis on participant observation allows for a close-up perspective on how individuals and groups create places in relation to political ideologies. Feminist geography, in turn, highlights the gendered, affective, embodied, and personal dimensions of place-making, which may remain relatively hidden from the public eye.

Methods

By adopting a gender-sensitive political ethnography approach, I focus on three interrelated domains in the Kayaşehir TOKİ neighbourhood: party politics, religious education, and neighbourly relations. These domains represent the central tenets of the AKP's political project, through which the party challenges and reconfigures the earlier secular modernity paradigm. I examine how the AKP's modernisation project materialises through place-based practices in these three domains, specifically focusing on the local organisa-

tion of the AKP, various religious educational institutions, and neighbourly relations within TOKİ buildings (see the Appendix for a detailed breakdown of my data inventory). My approach involved participant observation in the everyday engagements of local AKP activists, religious educational institutions, and residents' social interactions within the framework of post-secular modernity. For each domain, I participated in local meetings, such as the AKP's local and citywide rallies, religious courses conducted by the Diyanet and the local *cemaat*, and neighbourhood gatherings among women. During these meetings, I observed how party activists, religious teachers, students, and residents engaged with party politics, religious morality, and local social relations, paying close attention to how political discussions unfolded, the nature of the conflicts that arose, and the ways in which these were negotiated.

Crucially, I traced these engagements in relation to place, which provided insight into the lived dimensions of political projects. For instance, I explored how particular interpretations of religious morality became embedded in everyday spaces, shaping informal rules about daily life – from unwritten norms governing the use of elevators by opposite sexes to the restriction of alcohol sales in neighbourhood supermarkets. These spatialised practices illustrate how political and moral ideologies are inscribed in the built environment and everyday interactions.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted formal interviews and informal conversations as part of my ethnographic research. During my participation in various neighbourhood meetings, I met party activists, religious teachers (i.e. *hoca*), and residents who were knowledgeable about the subject of my thesis and willing to discuss it further in private. I was unable to record the majority of these conversations, as my interlocutors feared[24]

24 During and prior to my fieldwork, numerous private audio recordings related to politics were leaked, contributing to a pervasive sense of distrust in Turkey. These leaks included a phone call between Erdoğan and his son concerning money laundering (Letsch, 2014) as well as phone and video recordings of a well-known mafia leader discussing corruption with politicians (see Altınordu, 2025).

that recordings might be leaked beyond my control or circulate within local gossip networks. Given these constraints and my research's emphasis on spatial dynamics, I found the 'go-along' method particularly productive. This method allows researchers to 'observe their informants' spatial practices in situ while accessing their experiences and interpretations at the same time' (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 463). For example, I accompanied interlocutors on their daily routines, such as picking up their children from school or taking walks in the neighbourhood park. These shared activities provided valuable insights into how residents imbue places with meaning and how place-specific social structures influence their decisions and behaviours.

I also incorporated social media as a tool for observing social interactions in Kayaşehir. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the use of social media and online communication became more pronounced during my research period. I participated in various WhatsApp groups (e.g. those for religious courses or women's social interactions), where residents actively sought advice on daily matters, socialised, and organised donations. Occasionally, conflicts emerged in these groups regarding appropriate female behaviour in Kayaşehir or the role of the state. These discussions were particularly useful for my research as they provided a window into how broader political ideas, religious morality, and place-based relations were debated, negotiated, and contested in a digital space.

My fieldwork spanned six months, divided into two periods between 2021 and 2022. During the first phase (June–September 2021), I initially stayed with family friends in Ispartakule, a neighbourhood close to Kayaşehir, for one month. This preliminary stay allowed me to visit Kayaşehir daily and establish connections in the field. The family I lived with strongly supported the secular modernity project, which provided a valuable contrast with the field site I was engaging with daily. Observing both modernity projects simultaneously helped me discern their differences more clearly. For the remainder of this phase, I sublet a room in a shared apartment in the Kayaşehir TOKİ buildings via Airbnb.

Moving into a Kayaşehir TOKİ apartment marked a significant shift in my fieldwork as it allowed me to live in the neighbourhood and observe everyday life up close. I experienced daily rhythms as a local – learning when the weekly market was set up, where to order drinking water, when children played outside, which neighbours socialised together, and what kinds of issues sparked conflicts. As a result, my participant observation extended beyond planned meetings, gatherings, and events to include the mundane, everyday interactions that shape neighbourhood life.

I shared the apartment with the female owner of the house, who worked during the day. In the evenings, we often had dinner together, chatting about our daily experiences, and spent some weekends socialising in the neighbourhood. These conversations were particularly insightful, as they provided me with a local perspective and an opportunity to share and reflect on my observations. Over time, we developed a friendship, and she facilitated my access to meetings and gatherings that I would not have been able to attend on my own, such as *cemaat* meetings and her private social circles. This access granted me a unique opportunity to observe intimate relationships among women in both formal and informal settings.

During the second phase of my fieldwork (March–June 2022), I returned to the same apartment and continued my research with a more established network of interlocutors. Having already familiarised myself with the field, I focused on follow-up research, deepening my engagement with the same individuals and networks. A key difference in this phase was the occurrence of Ramadan, which holds significant cultural and religious importance in the neighbourhood. Religious rituals spanning the month – such as fasting, Quran recitations, and Ramadan festivities featuring talks, concerts, and performances – reshaped daily routines and social interactions. Synchronising my fieldwork with Ramadan allowed me to observe how the neighbourhood and its residents transformed during a period of heightened religious significance, providing further insight into the interplay between political projects, religious practices, and everyday life.

Approach to Participant Privacy and Consent

In this research, I ensured the anonymity of all interlocutors, gatherings, chat groups, and places. This involved not only using pseudonyms but also avoiding descriptions that could render individuals or settings identifiable.

Regarding informed consent, I followed a verbal consent protocol, an extension of informed consent often preferred in contexts where 'signing a document can be unusual or a very formal procedure' (Oomen, 2024). At the beginning of my research, I initially asked my interlocutors to sign informed consent forms; however, after noticing that this formal process made them uncomfortable, I shifted to verbal consent. As previously mentioned, due to the political climate in Turkey at the time of my fieldwork, recording interviews was often not feasible. Consequently, my data collection relied primarily on note-taking during and after interviews, participant observations, and 'go-along' methods.

Certain aspects of my research, particularly participant observation in religious meetings and women's social media groups, required different ethical considerations than one-on-one interviews. In these cases, I first sought verbal consent from group leaders (e.g. the head teacher or event organiser) for both my participation and my note-taking. These leaders often introduced me to the broader group and explained my research purpose, sometimes even encouraging group members to engage with me.

For WhatsApp group chats (e.g. KayaLadies, religious groups), I also obtained verbal consent from group leaders before joining, treating the chats as part of my ethnographic data. However, as Barbosa & Milan (2019, p. 50) argue, 'even when one discloses their researcher identity, the fluidity of belonging and participation in a chat app creates a situation that it is not really possible to inform every group participant about the ongoing observation'. Informed

by ethical discussions in digital ethnography, I addressed this issue by paraphrasing and roughly translating chat content into English when incorporating it into my thesis.