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# Work for the Nation, Obey the State, Praise the Ummah: Turkey's Government-oriented Youth Organizations in Cultivating a New Nation

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**ABSTRACT** Modern Turkey's emergence was a nationalist struggle that aimed to cultivate youth as secular citizens. Almost a century later, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) attempts to re-model youth through a new ethno-religious nationalist project. This study argues that different from the secular Kemalist social engineering that dominated the state's youth policy for decades, the AKP relies on the intermediary agency of Islamist-conservative and government-oriented civil society to shape young generations and convey ethno-religious nationalism to youth. Seventeen government-oriented youth organizations illustrate the extent of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) quest for a new national identity and cultural hegemony within the broader context of Turkey's steady decline into an authoritarian regime. The findings—based on original fieldwork conducted between October 2017–June 2019—demonstrate youth organizations' country-wide grassroots engagement in four categories: indoctrination, extra-curricular training, service provision in the education sector, and street activism and humanitarian work. Their self-defined goals, ideological roots and grassroots reach inject a new disciplinary ethos and statist values in youth towards shaping them as Muslim and nationalist 'ideal citizens'. The study offers insights on the societal aspects of authoritarian regime building and cautions that crafting 'successful' authoritarian regimes is not a one-way process that takes place only at the formal institutional level. A broad range of societal players and coalitions, including civil society, play a critical role in authoritarian regime building.

## Introduction

Turkey's emergence as a modern nation-state in the early twentieth century was a nationalist struggle to re-imagine politics, society, the nation, and its culture. Neyzi (2001, p. 416) argues that during the early years of the republic, 'young people were central to the ideology of Turkish nationalism because the goal of the regime was to create a new type of person

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with a new mindset, imbued with the values of the Republic'. Almost a century later, the current president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, vowed to de-throne the secular hegemony that raised young generations for decades in line with the republican ideals. Following the April 2017 constitutional referendum that sealed the AKP's total monopolization of formal political power, Erdoğan asserted a new goal of generating cultural hegemony and new 'men' needed by the country:

You can change political power through elections. We have had uninterrupted political hegemony for fourteen years. But, cultural hegemony cannot be generated through the ballot box. We are far from constituting cultural hegemony. [...] The heroes of 15 July were youngsters. They love their motherland and nation. They fought the putschist traitors. Those were not the Gezi Park youngsters. They were on the streets for the flag and prayer. [...] Cultivating men needed by our country and demanded by our nation requires belief, sacrifice, and continuity. [...] Youngsters, you will inherit this duty [of cultivating men] in the future. (Ensar, 2017b)

Erdoğan's speech has instilled yet another cleavage in Turkey between 'the 15 July youth' and 'the Gezi youth'. It is a striking depiction of an authoritarian government's polarization and marginalization strategy that targets civic dissent. Erdoğan's remarks are also a confession that beyond seizing the control of democratic institutions, the AKP seeks to implement a new social engineering project. The central aspect of it would be a new cultural hegemony. What is even more striking is that Erdoğan announced the aim of 'cultivating men' to serve 'the flag and the prayer' at the annual meeting of Ensar Foundation, an Islamist and government-oriented youth organization.<sup>1</sup> The choice of the venue was far from coincidental. It indicated that youth organizations would assume a central role in building the desired cultural hegemony.

This study offers an in-depth discussion of government-oriented youth organizations in Turkey by examining their grassroots networks and activities to understand how they influence youth and fulfil the aspiration of building new cultural hegemony. In recent years, there is a significant boom of Islamist-leaning pro-AKP youth organizations in Turkey. The paper asks what objectives these civil society organizations promote. How do they perceive, frame and elaborate youth and their problems? How do they affect young individuals' self-perceptions about participation and agency? The study will also analyse government-oriented youth organizations' goals, ideological roots embedded in statist loyalty and ethno-religious identity, and their institutional structure within the context of Turkey's steady decline into an authoritarian regime. In doing so, it explains how youth organizations have asserted themselves as empowered agents vis-à-vis the state.

The study offers contributions to understanding the dynamics of undemocratic regimes beyond the case of Turkey. It is now widely acknowledged that authoritarian tendencies have reached all corners of the world, affecting old and new democracies (Diamond, Plattner, & Walker, 2016). As Schedler (2009) highlights, there is nevertheless an institutionalist dominance in explaining the resilience of authoritarian regimes. This is problematic for two reasons. First, the institutionalist perspective exclusively focuses on executive power abuse in monopolizing formal institutions. In line with this broader trend, scholars working on Turkey have mostly highlighted formal institutions when discussing Turkey's recent authoritarian turn. Several authors argued that the AKP has built a hybrid regime with characteristics of both strong authoritarian systems and democratic pockets of resistance

by undermining institutional checks and balances (Kalaycıoğlu, 2015; Öktem & Akkoyunlu, 2017), imposing legislative majoritarianism (Müftüler-Baç & Keyman, 2012), co-opting the judiciary (Özbudun, 2015) and utilizing state resources to create clientelistic networks (Taş, 2015).

However, the institutionalist approach treats the process of authoritarianization as a formal and one-way process happening at the political level, but fail to explain how it trickles down to society and everyday life in the form of ‘social engineering’. As Somer (2016b, p. 8) rightly argues, Turkey’s ‘new authoritarianism’ under the AKP rule ‘extend[s] well beyond the increasingly uneven playing field of the political society’. This study demonstrates that authoritarian regime building is not limited to the capture of formal institutions—the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary. ‘Successful’ authoritarian systems are politically constructed across a broad range of players, middle actors and coalitions that possess different resources and relations with society, such as government-oriented civil society. These coalitions need to be maintained through political and material incentives and benefits.

Second, the institutionalist focus treats the state in authoritarian regimes as a monolithic entity. For instance, concerning Turkey, the general tendency in the literature is to assume that the AKP has conquered the state apparatus and it is now capable of autonomously manipulating society. In this approach, societal forces and civil society are considered as passive actors without a viable impact on accelerating and shaping the process of authoritarianization. This study questions the uniformity of the authoritarian state structure. As Jessop argues, the state is itself not a uniform entity:

The state is a specific institutional ensemble with multiple boundaries, no institutional fixity and no pre-given formal or substantive unity ... it has only a set of institutional capacities and liabilities which mediate that power; the power of the state is the power of the forces acting in and through the state. These forces include state managers as well as class forces, gender groups as well as regional interests, and so forth. (Jessop, 1990, pp. 267–270)

In line with Jessop’s perspective of the state, the findings show that despite the formal control over political institutions, the AKP does not have a monopoly over expanding authoritarian rule into society. Government-oriented youth organizations have complex relations with the not so monolithic state and reproduce the idea of the Muslim-Turkish nation outside the formal centres of the authoritarian state power. They work in conjunction with the regime in redrawing the boundaries of the ideal citizenry and acceptable civic participation. However, they are not finger puppets of the state but significant agents of social engineering trusted by the government in search of a youth as the pioneer and protectors of the regime’s resilience. Through their discourse and grassroots engagement, they do not only reproduce the authoritarian system but also support and legitimize neoliberal governance. The findings also demonstrate that they have also become potential alternatives to the Gülen network for the government in the education sector.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the study also contributes to the civil society literature, particularly to the understanding of the shrinking civic space and the role of civil society in the process of the worldwide rise of authoritarian tendencies. Civil society has been mostly associated with social capital, and democratic and pluralist activity in the literature (Diamond, 1994; Rosenblum & Post, 2002). As the case of Turkey’s government-oriented youth organizations

demonstrate, civil society can adapt to the changing political context, reconcile and redefine their relations with an increasingly authoritarian regime and become active agents of the undemocratic seizure of power. The study shows that the correlation between the political and cultural motivations of civil society in undemocratic systems can create distinctive models of youth participation and state-society relations.

The study proceeds with a discussion on the role of civil society in authoritarian contexts. The second section discusses the background of the youth policies and civil society in Turkey from a historical perspective before turning to introduce the criteria for identifying government-oriented youth organizations. The third section illustrates seventeen government-dependent youth organizations' ideology and discourse, and grassroots links under four categories: indoctrination, extra-curricular training, service provision in the education sector, and street activism and humanitarian work.

### **Civil Society and Youth Participation in Authoritarian Regimes**

A liberal, neo-Tocquevillian approach dominates the civil society literature, particularly since the 1990s. The liberal view approaches civil society through a normative lens, defining it virtually as a pro-democracy actor. In his much-cited work, Diamond (1994, p. 5) defines civil society as 'the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules'. This realm comprises organizations between family and the state such as religious groups, voluntary associations, service-providing foundations, professional NGOs, trade unions, mass media, and social movements and organized diaspora groups.

Civil society is valued in the liberal approach for its centrality in the consolidation and stability of democracies. In transition contexts, civil society contributes to democratization by offering alternative channels for participation (Burnell & Calvert, 2004; Fox, 1994) and producing the social capital and civility that would eventually challenge the authoritarian regime (Fukuyama, 2001; Putnam, 1994; Warren, 2001). In democratic contexts, civil society maintains control over institutions and rulers by limiting the state power (Cohen & Arato, 1994; Diamond, 1999; Gellner, 1996). In conflict contexts, it alleviates ethnic and religious rivalries and violence (Marchetti & Tocci, 2009; Varshney, 2001). In short, as White argues, in the liberal scholarship, civil society is an 'idealized counter-image' of the brutal state power and 'reserved' for openly pro-democracy groups (1994, p. 376).

The neo-Gramscian critique raises two fundamental objections against the neo-Tocquevillian approach. The first criticism rejects the underlying assumption that all individuals and groups possess sources to be active in 'the realm of organized social life', to form organizations, and express opinion. According to Buttigieg (2005, p. 45), in any given society, all individuals and groups do not have 'an equal chance of being heard, much less of having an impact'. Walzer (1990) and others similarly argue that civil society is 'an arena of inequality' that reproduces structural and historical inequalities, not a level playing field (Armony, 2004; Chandhoke, 2007). Civil society favours specific group interests while excluding others from equal and secure access and mobilization. Critical scholarship posits that the discussion on civil society should shift 'from "what" it means to the altogether more political issue of "who" owns it' (Obadare, 2004, p. 7).

The second criticism challenges the inherent assumption of civil society as a pro-democracy actor. According to this view, the contingent political context can make civil society serve democratic or authoritarian politics. For civil society to serve democratic purposes, it

should already operate within liberal democracy where the freedom of expression and association are protected (Foley & Edwards, 1996). In authoritarian regimes, civil society becomes an integral part of the effort to control society and to ‘maintain a hegemonic discourse that both legitimizes the existing regime and also renders political alternatives politically and discursively impossible’ (Lewis, 2013, p. 333). Civil society can also promote ‘particularist civility at the expense of democratic civility’ (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001, p. 845). There are various degrees of ‘partisan, parochial, or fundamentalist’ tendencies as well as ethnic and kin-based organizations within civil society, each with their solid membership base and claims (Kopecky & Mudde, 2005; Lewis, 2001).

Taking cues from the neo-Gramscian critique, some studies showed that historically, civil society had played a role in the development of social capital which later segued into democratic degeneration in interwar Italy and Germany (Berman, 1997; Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011; Riley, 2010). Empirically rich studies on contemporary authoritarian and hybrid regimes confirmed the argument that as long as civil society’s scope of action overlaps with an undemocratic regime’s goals, it is tolerated and even encouraged. While the autonomous civic space is oppressed across the world more than ever, in several countries, undemocratic rulers promote government-oriented civil society (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). For instance, in consolidated autocracies, like China, local level civic initiatives tolerated by the regime entrenched the communist party’s grip on power (Spires, 2011; Xiaojun, 2011). In the Middle East, co-opted civil society has become ‘central to regime survival’ by weakening opposition groups and controlling society and the public sphere (Cavatorta & Durac, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2000; Yom, 2005). Within the context of Islamic associations in the Middle East, civil society also acts as charitable service-providers and actors contributing to authoritarian regimes’ output legitimacy (Clarke, 2006; Harmsen, 2008; Zubaida, 1992). In Venezuela, Mexico and Central Asian Republics, undemocratic governments have established various government-oriented civil society organizations to maintain a democratic disguise at home and to lobby in favour of the government at the international level (Hawkins & Hansen, 2007; Yaworsky, 2005; Ziegler, 2010).

Undemocratic regimes are particularly attentive to controlling youth activism and youth organizations. Given several distinct ways of youth mobilization and youth’s role in anti-authoritarian grassroots revolts, authoritarian regimes perceive youth as sustained threats to their power. Contemporary youth organizations and activism diverge from the conventional forms of project-driven or membership-based civil society. Dissatisfied with traditional political participation by voting and party membership, youngsters invent and engage in alternative participation, such as protest, campaigns, occupation, boycotts, and sit-ins as well as mobilization through the internet (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; McCormack & Doran, 2014; Norris, 2002). During the early 2000s, new forms of youth activism removed authoritarian rulers in several countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine (Beacháin & Polese, 2010; Khamidov, 2006). More recently, Arab Spring was driven by successful youth mobilizations and brought down authoritarian regimes (Abdalla, 2013; Honwana, 2013).

Authoritarian rulers have realized that only by creating alternative government-oriented organizations loyal to the regime, they could shape and control political demands of youngsters, co-opt them as faithful followers of the regime’s goals and ideology and prevent potential anti-system mobilization. In this sense, Russia provides an excellent example since the establishment of the Soviet Communist Youth League (Komsomol). Following

this historical precedent, the current Russian government has created youth organizations to absorb dissatisfied youngsters, prevent them from joining anti-government protests, and create ‘the Putin youth’ (Balzer, 2003). According to Hemment (2009, p. 46), Russia’s ‘state-run youth organizations operate as a form of governmentality, inculcating new forms of subjectivity in their participants and advancing a new and distinct set of state/societal relations’.

In short, far from the predictions of the liberal approach, civil society can cultivate consent for an undemocratic political regime by ideologically preparing society to willingly concede inequalities and discrimination within the existing system of governance. Critical studies have corrected the normative optimism regarding the role of civil society. However, they mostly state that government-oriented civil society organizations are passive instruments to window-dress authoritarian regimes’ abuse of power.

However, civil society is not always a passive actor even where authoritarian tendencies determine the regime’s engagement with society. For instance, Hemment (2012) and Krivos’s (2015) studies revealed that Kremlin-controlled youth organizations actively interact with political authorities on policy issues and assume intermediary roles as ‘a transmission belt’ between the government and society. Volunteers and members of these organizations interpret the government’s ideology, policy priorities, thus facilitate both patronage and agency. Moreover, they draw on both the conceptual and practical modalities of novel and traditional forms of civil society and civic mobilization, such as mass action, tactics of carrying out PR campaigns and charitable action. Therefore, conceptualizing government-oriented youth organizations in authoritarian contexts as acting in and through the state would capture their complex internal dynamics and relations with their target groups and the state.

### **Youth Participation and the State in Turkey**

The new republican regime imbued youth with a mission to promote and protect the republican ideas in the early twentieth century (Demir, 2012). The regime simultaneously conceived youth as an inexperienced and homogenous group vulnerable to moral and cultural degeneration. Indeed, the ‘father state’ supervised young people through education and propaganda in an attempt to shape them into a hardworking and self-sacrificing social corpus of the secular regime (Lüküslü, 2016). This paternalistic approach has dominated the Turkish state’s youth policy up to date. In the 1960s and 1970s, the state tried to repress autonomous youth movements to eliminate politically mobilized leftist youth activism that challenged the political authority the state ideology. After the 1980 coup, the military junta aimed to ‘tame’ youth’s ideological mobilization further under the Islamized public education policy, consciously creating ‘apolitical youth’ (Lüküslü, 2005). In the decades following the 1980 military coup, the right-leaning governments sought to mould youth away from ‘degeneration’, ‘loss of authentic values’, radical Islam, and ‘political temptations and crime’ (Yurttagüler, 2016). The state’s approach resulted in youth’s decreased political participation and increased nationalist and religious orientation. The surge of Kurdish and Islamist youth mobilizations only partially challenged the state tradition in the 1990s (Saktanber, 2007).

The AKP government’s youth approach is not significantly different. During its early years in power, the AKP did not have an explicit youth policy. In 2011, the government reorganized the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS), signalling an increased political



interest in the youth (interview June 2019). MYS's reorganization was followed in 2012 by Erdoğan's declaration that the government wished to 'cultivate a pious youth' that would replace the secular and modern codes promoted by the Kemalist republic (Lüküslü, 2016). The AKP's youth policy was also modelled on a neoliberal outlook that resulted in increased youth unemployment, reliance on family support and precarity, and delayed independence (Acar & Ayata, 2002; Çelik, 2008; Yazıcı, 2012).

Additionally, citizenship policies requiring devotion to the state have continued to deter the agency of the youth under the AKP government (Yeğen, 2004; İçduygu et al., 1999). This situation has resulted in weak youth activism and civic participation (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2017; Gökçe-Kızılkaya & Onursal-Beşgül, 2017; KONDA, 2014; Sener, 2014). The capabilities and organizational reach of the existing youth-related and youth-led organizations remain limited (Akyuz, Gumus, Yilmaz, Cakaloz, & Yenturk, 2016). Although the Gezi demonstrations in 2013 challenged the dominant paradigm about the post-1980 Turkish youth as apolitical citizens (see Bee & Kaya, 2017; Gümüş, 2017), mass youth mobilization during Gezi was episodic. Youth's civic engagement in Turkey remains limited by the class, employment, gender, and ethnic factors (Ataman, Çok, & Şener, 2012; Sener, 2014; Yonucu, 2008).

The AKP's youth approach continues to be patriarchal and top-down. However, state policies and elite discourse do not determine how these macro-policies and discourses are circulated, conveyed, and implemented at the societal level. As this article will now turn to demonstrate, what makes the AKP era different from previous governments is that while preserving the state's paternalistic outlook, the AKP has outsourced the task of authoritarian social engineering to government-oriented youth organizations to convey statism and nationalism to youth.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

A qualitative research design was chosen to offer in-depth insights on the topic. This study is based on a mixture of sources including face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of youth organizations—both government-oriented and autonomous—as well as documentary analysis of a wide range of sources such as newsletters, reports and publications by government-oriented youth organizations, and mass media sources including blogs, YouTube and social media accounts. During the initial desk research, media coverage of government's consultative meetings with civil society, news on protests and press statements about youth issues and youth policies and the relevant literature were screened. This analysis has resulted in an extensive list of the most active youth associations in Turkey.

At the second stage, the website and publications of these youth organizations were analysed to identify organic and ideological links between the government and youth organizations. The author contacted the largest government-oriented youth organizations', prioritizing female members through a formal field protocol as the first contact point. Approaching the female representatives first aimed to overcome the potential gender bias amongst the high-level male representatives in these organizations. Further recruitment of male and female representatives followed the snowball technique whereby the author requested interviewees to provide additional names of representatives and organizations or to introduce the author to other interviewees. Snowball method allowed the author to reach out to some organizations that were initially unresponsive to the formal fieldwork



protocol. During the interviews, the representatives were asked about the philosophy and goals of their organizations, resources, outreach strategies, the profile of members/volunteers, collaborations with other CSOs, and relations with political authorities.

These data were supported by interviews with autonomous or critical youth organizations and participation in government-oriented youth organizations' public seminars, high-profile mass events and congresses, informal gatherings (*sohbet*) and charity events. Participant observation provided an ethnographic vantage point to see beyond the official narrative. Random and informal exchanges during these events with young participants have opened a window to the experience, personal motives, and agency of the participating and volunteering youth and allowed an understanding of how their involvement in these organizations has shaped their subject positions. Interviews with autonomous youth organizations have corroborated and enhanced primary and secondary data particularly concerning the organizational power of government-oriented civil society organizations and their relations with the government.

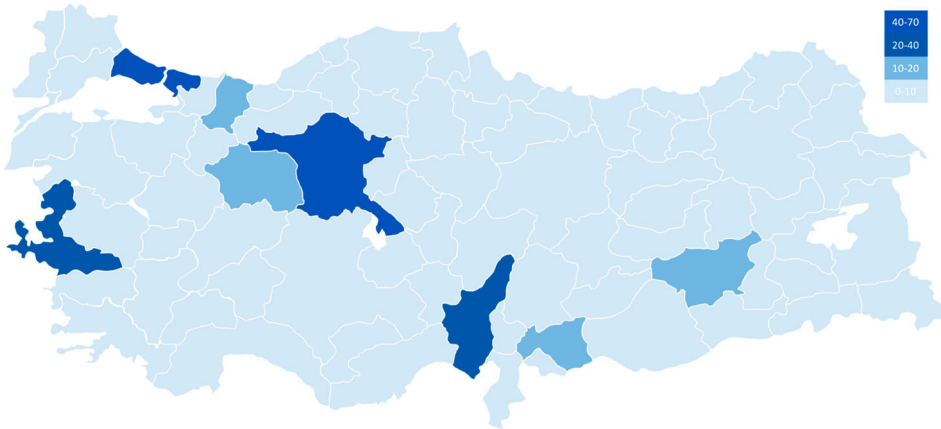
The fieldwork was conducted between October 2017 and June 2019. Content analysis of interviews, narratives and field notes was qualitatively carried out by the author to identify patterns of ideas, concepts and behaviours across youth organizations and persons under three broad categories: the government-oriented youth organizations' (i) objectives and organizational structure (ii) grassroots links with youth (iii) relations with the government. All interviews are anonymized at the data analysis phase due to Turkey's sensitive political atmosphere. Names and titles are mentioned in this study only if views and persons appeared in public sources.

### **Turkey's Government-oriented Youth Organizations**

There are 453 registered civil society organizations in Turkey, focusing on youth and youth-related issues, according to the database of the Civil Society Development Centre (STGM, 2018).<sup>3</sup> The map below plots their dispersion across Turkey's 81 cities. As the map shows, they are mostly concentrated in urban areas such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Eskisehir, Adana, Diyarbakir, and Gaziantep. According to the database, there are no youth organizations in 17 cities. The present ones typically have one or a couple of offices, which means a lack of organizational capacity to reach out to local and rural youngsters (Figure 1).

Contrary to the organizational weakness of the STGM-listed youth associations, several religious and pro-AKP youth organizations (associations, foundations, and platforms) have recently developed an extensive reach in every city and hundreds of provinces across Turkey through local offices (Yabanci, 2019). Civil society literature refers to such organizations as government-oriented civil society. Based on the extant literature on government-oriented civil society (Cumming, 2010; Greve, Flinders, & Van Thiel, 1999; Hasmath et al., 2016; Kawakibi, 2013), the main criteria to identify Turkey's government-oriented youth organizations are grouped under a three-fold analytical category in this study: (1) sources of power, (2) main activities, (3) relations with the government (Table 1). Based on these criteria, this study has identified 17 active government-oriented youth organizations (Table 2).<sup>4</sup>

Sources of power refer to CSOs' financial, symbolic, and organizational strength. According to Carapico (2000), corporatism and rent-seeking determine government-oriented civil society. In Turkey, such youth organizations foremost rely on the local and



**Figure 1.** The distribution of youth organizations across provinces in numbers. The map is produced by the author based on data form Civil Society Development Centre (STGM)

**Table 1.** Author’s summary of the criteria for identifying government-oriented civil society

1. Sources of power	<i>Financial power:</i> state grants, protocols, and contracts <i>Symbolic power:</i> political assurance and support <i>Organizational power:</i> nation-wide local and regional expansion
2. Main activities	<i>Agenda-setting:</i> away from the public eye, internal and informal pressure <i>Service-provision:</i> in sectors/areas where the government withdrew or unable to engage
3. Relations with the government	<i>Legitimacy:</i> contributing to the government’s output legitimacy <i>Government-organized:</i> born with organic ties to the government <i>Co-opted:</i> emerged earlier the AKP rule, later developed an open endorsement/support for the party.

central government agencies for grants and contracts. Between 2015–2018, nine organizations working on the youth and education fields have received \$215 million worth of immovables from the Istanbul Municipality. A large share of the donation was granted to TÜGVA, TÜRGEV, and Ensar through informal channels of pleading and lobbying with the high-level AKP representatives (Cumhuriyet, 2016a, 2016b; Toker, 2019). After the Gülen network’s schools, dorms and training institutions were forcibly shut down, the ownership of these properties was also transferred to government-oriented youth organizations (Gençkal Eroler, 2019).

Moreover, the Council of Ministers has granted public benefit status to youth organizations with closest organic ties with the AKP: Ensar, TÜGVA, TÜRGEV, Önder, İlim Yayma (IYV) and Yeni Dünya (YDV). The AKP has so far channelled 5 billion liras (780 million euros) from the state budget to foundations with public benefit status (BirGün, 2018). Until 2018, public resources transferred by the Istanbul Municipality from public sources to government-oriented youth organizations amounted to approximately 850 million liras (Istanbul Municipality, 2018). Public benefit status also provided them with tax exemption, allowing to collect contributions from private donors and run

**Table 2.** List of government-oriented youth organizations

	Date of Estb.	Mission statement	Network/local branches	Links to the AKP	Public benefit
Türkiye Gençlik (Youth) Foundation (TÜGVA)	2013	We aim to cultivate generations that would restore and rebuild our civilization.	Local offices 81 cities, 404 provinces. 58 dormitories.	Erdoğan's son Bilal Erdoğan serves in the High Consultative Committee.	Yes
Türkiye Gençlik ve Eğitim (Youth ve Education) Foundation (TÜRGEV)	2012	Our mission is to cultivate youth who know their history, identity, and goal; who ask questions, seek answers, and keen on learning, producing and taking initiatives.	65 dormitories across 36 cities. One private university (Ibn Khaldun University)	Erdoğan's two children are on the management board.	Yes
Ensar Foundation	1979	Ensar aims to cultivate a young generation that is faithful to humanitarian values and take cues from the history to leave indelible marks today and in the future.	166 local offices in 81 cities	Founding members include high-level politicians from the AKP such as Ahmet Davutoğlu.	Yes
İlim Yayma Foundation (IYV)	1973	IYV works to raise scientists, politicians, and intellectuals who would work for our country and humanity in contribution towards a world where benevolence reigns.	175 local offices in 81 cities and 177 dormitories. 69 training centres. A private university (Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim) and colleges from the pre-school level.	Members include the former PM Binali Yıldırım. The executive board comprises ex-minister Ömer Faruk Celik and Bilal Erdoğan.	Yes
Önder Foundation	1958	We aim to prepare youth for the future by cultivating their belonging and allegiance and helping them realize their individual capabilities.	500 local Imam-Hatip graduate associations, 100 sports clubs across Turkey with 2 million members. 23 dormitories in 14 cities.	Many AKP ministers and representatives, including the President Erdoğan are among the members.	Yes

Birlik Foundation	1985	We aim to ensure that our youth are raised as faithful, patriotic, cultured, and scientifically knowledgeable modern individuals and therefore, to contribute to the development of our nation in peace and unity.	Offices in 52 cities	Erdoğan is among the founding members.	Yes
Yeni Dünya Foundation	1996	Our mission is to contribute to the peaceful development of our nation, ensuring that youngsters have loyalty to the national and authentic values and grow up as knowledgeable, cultured, moral, and intellectual citizens.	15 dormitories in 6 cities, 16 local offices	The president is among the founders of the AKP and a former MP.	Yes
Türkiye Imam Hatip Graduates Foundation (TİMAV)	1994	Our unique goal is to ensure that the Imam Hatip alumni work in solidarity and have a collective voice on salient issues. We aim to extend Imam Hatips to each province and town in Turkey and to carry out lobbying activities to this end.	2 offices in Konya and Malatya	No organic links. TİMAV is a part of the openly pro-AKP platforms like the National Will Platform.	No
Genç Hareket (Youth Movement) Association	2006	Genç Hareket yearns for a generation with heartfelt attachment to God and his prophet. We dream of youth as educated and successful pioneers of the future, youth that also understands the requirements of this era.	78 dorms in 26 cities	No organic links. Its parent organization, Human and Civilization Movement endorses the AKP.	No

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued

	Date of Estb.	Mission statement	Network/local branches	Links to the AKP	Public benefit
Anadolu Öğrenci Birliği (AÖB) (Anatolia Students Union)	2011	AÖB aims to create youth who are the voice of the righteous and downtrodden, and God's oneness and omnipotence.	One headquarters in Istanbul Fatih. University student clubs across Turkey.	The youth branch of Anadolu Platform, an umbrella organization, brings together 65 pro-AKP foundations and associations.	No
Gençlik Eğitim ve Kültür Konfederasyonu (Genç-Kon) (Youth Education and Culture Confederation)	2012	We aim to support youth in their personal development, to help cultivate people who are loyal to national and moral values, love human and nature, have the virtue of honesty and would represent our country in the best possible manner.	The platform is comprised of 230 student clubs and five civil society organizations.	No organic link. It has relations with ministries through bilateral protocols concerning the education sector.	No
Türkiye Gençlik Sendikaları Platformu (TGSP) (Turkey Youth Unions' Platform)	2012	We aim for lobbying and defending rights in all issues concerning the youth.	The platform involves 93 civil society organizations and foundations close to the AKP and Islamist-conservative ideology.	The president served as the Counsellor of the Youth Minister. The board includes Bilal Erdoğan	No
Ümmet Gençleri (Ummah Youth) Association	2016	We aim to reach out to the Muslim youngsters, particularly ones attending education in Turkey to contribute to their cultivation as individuals working for society's benefit. We aim to cultivate the youth as a visionary, educated, cultured, and unitary group that would establish the 'Islamic Union'.	The organization is active in 24 cities and have coordinators for 35 Islamic countries.	The president is a high-level bureaucrat at the Ministry of Health.	No
Uluslararası Genç (Intl. Youth) Association (UGED)	2009	We aim to become a venue for youngsters who would pioneer justice and conscience.	Three branches in Istanbul, Adana, and Agri	No organic link. It has endorsed the AKP and presidential system in its statements.	No

Genç Aktivistler (Youth Activists) Association	2014	We aim to bring together young people who claim and protect their history, culture, moral values, and the downtrodden. Our association seeks to shield youth from moral and cultural degeneration.	One office in Istanbul	No organic link. It endorses the AKP and has developed close relations with the AKP's youth branch.	No
Genç Öncüler (Youth Pioneers) Association	1988	The association was established to raise a generation that respects its own values and history, understands worldwide developments, and is aware of its mission.	Local offices in 5 cities	No organic links. The parent organization is invited to AKP's civil society meetings.	No
Türkiye Gençlik Klüpleri Konfederasyonu (Turkey Youth Clubs Confederation) (GençKonFed)	2013	We aim to bring together youth from 81 cities across Turkey to imbue them with contemporary knowledge and skills as well as to create morally strong individuals.	Representations in 7 regions of Turkey, comprised of 124 associations.	It openly endorses the AKP and Milli Görüş movement, the predecessor of the AKP. The founder served as a bureaucrat at Youth and Sports Ministry.	No

non-transparent financial accounts. For instance, the 2013 corruption allegations revealed that one of the largest youth organizations—TÜRGEV—acted as the intermediary of large-scale bribery receiving 1 billion dollars from Turkish and foreign donors including from Saudi Arabia (HDN, 2014). The massive financial resources government-oriented youth organizations enjoy have put them in a clear advantage compared to autonomous or oppositional youth organizations.

Besides the financial power, government-oriented youth organizations also have symbolic power thanks to political assurance and support. High-level AKP representatives publicly endorse and encourage them through regular meetings and participation in their openings and annual conventions. Moreover, these organizations reflect the government's values and discourse in public, which gives them the symbolic power of being close to the political authority ideologically. Symbolic power and political assurance from the top sometimes even provide impudence and immunity from the law. In 2016, several government officials, including the Minister of Family and Social Policies reinstated the prestige and services of Ensar Foundation in an attempt at covering up the child abuse scandal at Ensar-run dormitories. The government's defence of Ensar resulted in the imprisonment of one person who committed the crime but no criminal or disciplinary investigation of the managerial level of the organization.

Additionally, through country-wide networks, government-oriented youth associations and foundations carry out their activities by addressing youngsters from primary school to working age. The most obvious example is TÜGVA possessing the largest and most dynamic organizational structure. TÜGVA was established in 2013 and currently has a dozen offices of coordinators addressing different needs and demands of youth from the secondary school to the working age. Some crisscrossing coordinators like education, sports, dormitories, media and communication, women and family, and strategic development aim to reach out to 150,000 active members. TÜGVA's local offices mimic the same organizational structure in 81 cities and more than 400 provinces across Turkey (interview, November 2017). Other organizations like TÜRGEV, Ensar, İYV, Genç Hareket, and Önder have carved a space within the education sector through extensive networks of dormitories, schools, and scholarships.

Government-oriented civil society's extensive organizational power is a result of two factors. First, the government implements the strict regulatory framework leniently for 'friendly' associations and foundations. Second, these organizations have internal discipline, which allows them to keep tight control over local branch activities. For instance, their annual gatherings bring together coordinators across Turkey at the headquarters for yearly planning. In each meeting, participants from branches all across Turkey receive training about organizational culture, vision, and PR strategies, followed by coordinator-specific strategic and resource mobilization planning. The selection of local representatives and members are also carefully scrutinized by the headquarters that keeps the right of veto of members and volunteers (interview, January 2018). This tight centralized control has rendered government-oriented youth associations and foundations organizationally strong but also undemocratic, centralized, and vertically organized.

Government-oriented youth organizations can also be identified by their activities. They engage in agenda-setting and lobbying. However, instead of putting pressure on the government through media, public awareness campaigns, and lobbying, they put issues on the table through informal and personal links away from the public eye. These organizations have close organic ties with the government that give them insights into the government's



internal priorities, allowing them to adjust their proposals and agenda accordingly (interview, February 2018). In contrast, since the MYS was re-organized in 2011, the AKP has effectively excluded youth organizations that work towards gender equality, LGBTQ and ethnic or religious minority from policy-making and consultation processes. In the words of the one representative from an autonomous youth organization, ‘they draw the boundaries to exclude youth organizations that aim to promote youth whose rights are systematically violated like Kurdish, LGBTQ, non-Muslim young people. The ministry has excluded us in terms of funding, invitation to events, and meetings’ (interview, June 2019).

Government-oriented youth organizations are also differentiated as service-providers from rights-based activism. Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu (2016) argue that government-oriented civil society is instrumental in testing experimental policies and contributing to governments’ output legitimacy. If policies implemented by such organizations are successful, the government gets the credit; if they fail, such civil society organizations absorb the blame as implementers and can insulate the government from adverse reactions. Eventually, they generate legitimacy for the government by delivering services and preparing the public opinion for potentially controversial policies (Richter & Hatch, 2013).

Finally, government-oriented youth organizations have two types of relations with the government. The interviewed representatives present their organizations as young people’s initiatives. However, these organizations are supported and guided by politicians and donors who are ideologically close to the AKP. The largest youth organizations were born with organic ties with the current government. Erdoğan’s son is directly involved in the top management of TÜRGEV and TÜGVA. Several other organizations have board members who are close relatives to Erdoğan or high-ranking AKP members. There has also been an attempt to establish ‘umbrella’ platforms with organic ties to the AKP to facilitate monitoring and control, such as TGSP and Genç-Kon-Fed (Table 2).

Some organizations were established before the AKP came to power in 2002, but have been co-opted. Through a corporatist strategy towards civil society, the AKP either replaced their leadership with pro-government figures or appointed their existent managers to government agencies. Some were founded as early as the 1950s to promote ‘alternative intellectuals’ loyal to moral, Islamic, and authentic values as opposed to Western, leftist and positivist values promoted under the Kemalist-secular education system. Such organizations faced a crackdown after the 28 February 1997 military intervention and scaled down their activities forcibly when the state confiscated their properties (Hürriyet, 2000). For instance, Önder suspended its operations after 28 February military intervention; Ensar and IYV closed several branches and started focusing on charity and aid until their recent revival. After years of low profile and repression under the secular state policies, these foundations have now turned their focus on education and youth policies.

### **Reimagining ‘the Nation’ through Youth: Ideology and Discourse of Government-oriented Youth Organizations**

Turkey’s government-oriented youth organizations assert their aim as cultivating ‘ideal citizens’ as the backbone of the future nation. The centrepiece of this ideal is to create a new nation in line with an ethno-nationalist and religious doctrine. Accordingly, youth should have loyalty to the nation, authentic values, history, and the state. When describing the organization, one respondent stated that

Our mission is nurturing a young generation loyal to national and moral values. This youth would be knowledgeable about the nation's history and culture and will build the future of great Turkey. It will give life to this century. (Interview, January 2018)

Similar statements, such as 'cultivating' national and authentic youth (*milli ve yerli gençlik*), 'injecting consciousness in youth' and encouraging them 'to transcend their own private interests and personal liberties' for the higher interests of the nation and the country, frequent the self-definition of all government-oriented youth organizations (see [Table 2](#) for mission statements).

The search for national and authentic youth is always justified through an apocalyptic and conspiracy-driven depiction of the current situation. According to Ensar,

Since 2013, our country is under a systematic attack. Under our president's leadership, we shout with one voice that we will not succumb. We know that after the 16 April [2017] referendum, we have more responsibility. Essentially, it is the responsibility of our state and civil society organizations to ensure youth receive the right guidance to become cultivated and generate value for the country. (Ensar, 2017b)

The 'attack' mentioned in this statement clearly refers to the 2013 Gezi protests and the corruption scandal, both of which created political crises for the AKP. However, threats are not limited to political ones in the discourse of these organizations. Not so rarely, the threat is also depicted as moral and cultural degeneration of youngsters:

Today, family ties are torn apart, values like benevolence, friendship, brotherhood, marriage are emptied of their content. We work to cultivate a generation to restore and respect these authentic values. (TÜGVA, 2018a)

Such depictions aim to communicate a sense of a great nation under constant attack. As a response to these 'threats', government-oriented youth organizations occupy themselves with building the future through youth. The claim for a 'new world', 'New Turkey' or 'new civilization' frequently appears in the discourse of these organizations. The AÖB's president claims that 'youth's mission is the impregnation of Anatolia with a new civilization which would be the harbinger of a new world (AÖB, 2018b). Similarly, writing for TÜGVA's monthly magazine, Aktas (2017) argued that youth's responsibility is a constant struggle 'to establish a new world order'. This aim signifies a deep conviction about 'the better place "we" should claim' in the world system.

This goal inherently implies a civilizational claim based on a nostalgia for the Ottoman and Seljuk past. The future new world should be built on 'our genuine lifestyle, norms, and values from the past' (Aktas, 2017). Writing for the magazine of AÖB, Kavuncu (2016, p. 16) talks about the need for a new Islamic creed and assert the centrality of educating loyal youth accordingly:

We need a new doctrine that is not only limited to the political arena. It should appeal to the entire society from the bottom to the top. It can only be constructed by individuals knowledgeable about this society and the reactions of its members to various events. We will always need [such] individuals to build the new Islamic creed and

to carry it from one generation to other. This is why leaders of this doctrine should raise their own intellectuals [for the future].

However, youth organizations do not promote Islamic values *per se* for their transcendental value but seek to unite the ‘Turkish’ youth in communal solidarity by taking cues from the Ottoman millet system, where non-Muslims minorities were given religious freedom in exchange of loyalty to the rulers. The statement below by a representative is remarkable in this sense:

Right now, it’s Friday prayer time, you know. If we go and check our cafe, you’ll see it is full. We don’t force our youngsters to attend Friday prayers. We have non-Muslim students as well as those who don’t attend prayers. We are after developing a sense of brotherhood, just like during the Ottoman times. (Interview, November 2017)

This statement indicates that instead of encouraging youth to become pious individuals practicing Islam within their private spheres, these youth organizations seek to continuously cultivate youngsters as fervent adherents of nostalgia and loyalty to the state. Therefore, in the imaginary of these organizations, youth is burdened by both the nostalgia as well as a paligenetic assignment as the missionaries of the future.

The young generations are also to be raised with an imperial and anti-Western revanchism to build the future (Yabancı, 2019). TİMAV’s statement on the 15 July coup is a typical example of the conspiracy-driven xenophobia and anti-Westernism of government-oriented youth organizations.

Those who insidiously attacked our nation and their representatives, together with their domestic and foreign collaborators, represent the crusader mentality. The war that the West stage against our country and values is a new crusade. Civil society and the Imam Hatip community are on the side of the nation and the people’s will. We are proud to be a civil society organization that serves this nation.

However, another fundamental contradiction emerges here. While national and Islamic values are considered superior in building the future and fighting ‘the enemy West’ that is considered as the source of degenerative influence that had been promoted by the Kemalist secular state, youth should also be unavoidably trained with contemporary scientific knowledge originated from ‘the West’. As GençKonFed (2017a) noted, in the service of the nation and the state, ‘national and authentic minds should develop our own defence and space programs, aircrafts, ships, industry, and advanced technology’. İYV mentions this aim even more assertively:

[Our foundation] desires to cultivate a youth who protect cultural tradition, love their motherland and nation, possess the authentic values. This youth should be aware of scientific developments worldwide and prepare themselves for the future accordingly. We feel like we are putting a crucial building block in the service of the construction of a great civilization. (İYV, n.d.)

Government-oriented youth organizations fail to solve this contradiction between creating alternative modernity or ‘new world’ based on ‘our authentic values’ and building the future by teaching youth to reproduce and even supersede the achievements of ‘the West’. Bora argues that ‘the need to protect our authentic modernity’ from Westernization while keeping up with the standards of modernity has historically been one of the most challenging problems for the nationalists and Islamists in Turkey. They have offered ‘ethno-centric nationalist civilisationism’ as the ‘recipe’ for this dilemma. Ethno-centric civilisationism reduces universal/Western civilization to contemporary technology by ignoring its Western-centric cultural roots (Bora, 1998, pp. 23–24). The government-oriented youth organizations are a typical example of this tradition. The youth as national and authentic minds is expected to be deeply conformist towards the paternalist state and Islamic values, and they are expected to learn ‘Western’ technological and scientific advances and even go beyond them. However, they should not be influenced by the ‘degenerative’ cultural traditions.

It is essential to acknowledge that these organizations do not blindly copy the AKP mottos. Although ‘national and authentic youth’ is akin to the current AKP discourse, the government has not invented the term. TÜGVA’s university coordinator’s meticulous description of national and authentic youth in the organization’s monthly magazine exemplifies these youth organizations’ ideological roots and how they weld the AKP’s discourse into the nationalist-conservative ideology that dates back to 1960s–1970s:

The master [Kisakürek] dreamed nationalist youth loyal to the sacred values. These youth are today’s ‘national and authentic youth’ and do not ignore their roots. They believe that the future is in the ‘roots’ and on this land where we have been responsible for glorifying the name of God for centuries. They are keen to protect the flag, the motherland, and her authentic values. They feel all the troubles of the ummah deep inside as if those troubles take place at home and seek a solution to them until exhaustion. They do not yield to foreign enemies. So, we should carry our country—the hope of the ummah and the entire humanity—further in the economic, political, cultural, educational, and justice fields. We should steadily work towards 2023, 2053, and 2071 targets by raising generations that possess national and moral values and understand crises of the oppressed nations. (Kir, 2018)

The reference to the writer Kisakurek shows that the ideological reference point of these youth organizations is the ‘nationalist-conservative intelligentsia’ (Taskin, 2007).<sup>5</sup> These circles were born as a reaction to pro-Western secular Kemalism in 1960–1970s. They emphasized Islam as a central aspect of Turkish national identity and promoted Ottoman/Seljuk nostalgia, racist and irredentist claims, and anti-communism/Semitism (Bora, 2017). Several youth organizations regularly take cues from nationalist and conservative intellectuals that belonged to this ideological tradition, such as Nurettin Topçu, Sezai Karakoç, Cemil Meriç, Celaleddin Ökten, who emphasized national authenticity, statist ideas and Islamic identity in their writings. Organizations like Genç Hareket, AÖB, YDV, and Birlik openly claim the inheritance of the ideological tradition, especially the National Turkish Students Union (MTTB). Others, like Ümmet Gençleri and Genç-Kon-Fed, also mention Erbakan and Milli Görüş as their reference points.

Overall, given their discourses and ideology, government-oriented youth foundations engage in what Navaro-Yashin (2002) called ‘exaltation, celebration, and reification of

the state' through the narrative of a national and authentic youth. They play a crucial role in retelling and dispersing narratives that privilege national identity weaved with Islamic themes, a new civilizational discourse, and ethnocultural/religious authenticity. In this view, Islam is an essential (but not the only) value to cultivate in youth's anti-Western Muslim-nationalist identity. Islamic values and Muslim identity are valuable so long as they are integrated into the nationalist and statist loyalties of youth. Additionally, the role of emerging national symbolism and officially constructed 'New Turkey' under the AKP rule is critical to understand their discourse. While these ideological roots and discourse 'reimagine the nation' through conservative-nationalist ideology, they also motivate these organizations to establish extensive grassroots networks across Turkey.

### **Grassroots Links**

When establishing grassroots links, Turkey's government-oriented youth organizations prioritize two issues. First, they do not limit themselves to a particular social class of youth but aim to reach out to the majority. In this sense, they consider it harmful to their mission to position themselves along the left-right ideological axis. According to one representative:

In the past, youth was divided between the radical left and right. We do not discriminate youngsters based on ideology or identity. We offer equal opportunities across Turkey and aim to reach out to 80–85 per cent of the youth through teaching, training, and cultural education. (Interview, February 2018)

Instead, promoting religious identity is considered as the panacea for left-right clashes and other cleavages that brought Turkey at the brink of a civil war in the 1970s. Another representative noted the importance of Islamic lifestyle today to protect youth from 'radical' temptations of left-wing political ideologies and degeneration:

We aim to protect youth from indifference to contemporary issues as well as engaging with evil agendas. We advise them to engage with mundane issues as Muslims. However, the Islamic lifestyle is not limited to prayers (*seccade*) or Quran courses. We encourage them to think about how popular culture creates selfish people. (Interview, April 2018)

Second, these organizations immensely value presence 'on the ground'. All interviewed representatives mentioned the importance of having local branches because, as argued by one representative, 'you cannot grasp the problems of young people in Diyarbakir from Istanbul' (interview, April 2018). During the informal interviews, the volunteering youngsters recalled getting introduced to the organization at school and through friends who already participate in their local events. Once they have a local presence, these organizations become creative and prolific in engaging young people from different age groups.

It is also essential to mention that according to youth organizations that have an autonomous and oppositional stance, government-oriented youth organizations increasingly learn and adopt strategies of internationally funded and/or secular civil society while integrating young people among their ranks. They frequently use international networking

opportunities funded by the EU as a part of Turkey's candidate status thanks to their close alliance with the government. In the words of a representative,

Especially after 2013, pro-AKP youth organizations realized that they had to participate in international networks. Now, they are the main beneficiaries of the EU-funded youth exchange programs like Erasmus+ and Youth for Europe. They have learned using right-based human rights discourse too. They prepare such well-worded project applications that funders cannot reject them but their mission and vision do not reflect a rights-based approach. (Interview, June 2019)

Government-oriented youth organizations focus on grassroots activities under four categories (Table 3 'List of activities'). Through direct engagement with youngsters of various age, these organizations do not only create exclusive arenas for socialization but also disperse a particular ideology, promote everyday nationalism and reify the state beyond formal institutions.

#### *Indoctrination: Camps and Summer Schools*

Camps and summer schools are the most common way of engaging youth ideologically. Camps are organized according to age groups at gender-segregated locations and held in

**Table 3.** Grassroots links of government-oriented youth organizations

	Indoctrination: Camps and summer schools	Training (secular)	Training (religious)	Service provision (Dormitories, schools and scholarships)	Activism and humanitarian voluntarism (protests, demonstrations)
TÜGVA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
TÜRGEV	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ensar	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
IYV	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Önder	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Birlik	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yeni Dünya	✓	✓	✓	✓	
TİMAV	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Youth Movement	✓	✓	✓	✓	
AÖB	✓	✓			✓
Genç-Kon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
TGSP	✓	✓			✓
Ummah Youth	✓	✓			✓
UGED	✓	✓			✓
Youth Activists	✓	✓			✓
Youth Pioneers	✓	✓			✓
GençKonFed	✓	✓			✓

several locations. TÜGVA runs the most extensive youth camps in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry Youth and Sports, AKP municipalities and local public education directorates. Only in summer 2017, 25,000 secondary school students and 10,500 high school students participated in TÜGVA's camps in 55 cities across Turkey (TÜGVA, 2018a). Smaller foundations often organize camps in a few cities for 100–200 students at a time.

Participants learn Quran and Islamic theology half of the day. Lectures on religious subjects convey 'real Islam so that students learn the religion from valid sources and avoid wrong paths' (TÜGVA, 2016). The rest of the day is spared for excursions, talks (*sohbet*), sports and entertainment. According to the secondary school coordinator of TÜGVA, Islamic teaching, lectures, sports, and entertainment are equally important at the camps, as the organization aims to 'shape scientific, intellectual and moral development [and] also desire to lead youth's social, sportive and cultural development' (TÜGVA, 2016).

Activities and entertainment at these camps are always managed. For instance, archery, shooting with air rifles and horse-riding are encouraged as 'ancient sports' over others (Ensar, 2016; TÜGVA, 2017a). Participants, both male and female, are taken to excursions to historic sites of national importance, visit tombs of nationalist-conservative intellectuals and attend lectures on contemporary politics. Debates taking place during the camps reflect the government's perspective, disperse nationalist and official historiography whereby minorities and the West are depicted as 'enemies', encourage communal loyalty and gendered social norms over individual choice, human rights or personal welfare. For example, topics circle around whether freedom or justice should be sacrificed for society's wellbeing, reasons behind cultural degeneration, 'roles' of men and women in family and society, Islamic criticism of Western modernity or republican secularism. In the last two years, lectures focused on political themes such as the Turkish army's excursion into Syria, the presidential system, and historical or nationalist themes. They offer a patriotically oriented and revisionist indoctrination aiming the rehabilitation of the Ottoman era, particularly the downfall years. For instance, the life of the autocratic Sultan Abdülhamid II, whose opposition to constitutionalists in the late nineteenth century is rekindled as an anti-western/imperialist struggle (interviews February–May 2019).

Youth are also injected with militarist ideas at these camps. To give an example, Gençkon's 2015 winter camp was organized to commemorate the Çanakkale War of WWI. Secondary school students joined long hikes in the snow carrying flags and singing nationalist marches. One participant stated that

Our leaders made us feel what our ancestors who fought in Çanakkale experienced. We woke up with bomb explosions and gunfire in the morning. Then we performed the morning prayer. They put henna on our heads, and we set out for a hike. It was such a great feeling.

Government-oriented youth organizations have created what Navaro-Yashin (2002, p. 119) calls 'rituals of thralldom for the state' by mobilizing youth for nationalism and militarism during these short but intensive engagements. The henna ritual represents the individuals' sacrifice for the state. Together with the mimicking of the war, it exemplifies nationalist indoctrination at camps. In doing so, these organizations act outside the official state indoctrination as agents preventing youth from turning into 'social threats' and 'deviant individuals' for the state. Another representative argued that their youth camp



was named '*diriliş*' (rebirth) to instil national and moral values in youth adding that 'we are proud that we raise individuals at the service of the ummah, our nation, and our state through these camps' (interview, January 2018).

Camps and summer schools offer alternative socializing venues away from families and shape political attitudes and self-perception of youth from an early age. As one representative argued, camps 'help students develop voluntarism as a personal value and design projects to allow them to contribute to humanity and society' (interview, April 2018). Once they become a part of these close-knit groups, participants are encouraged to socialize with each other, creating a circle of friendship and intra-group solidarity and collective identity. According to one youth leader volunteering at these camps,

youngsters attending camps discover their skills, meet others from different cities, and overcome prejudices free of charge within one week. I have never been so proud of myself. I see my skills and responsibilities grow each time I assume leadership at these camps. I invite everyone to join in this climate of friendship. (Cicek, 2018)

However, contrary to what social capital theory presumes, bonds, and trust created at these venues do not grant agency and autonomy to youth to question the state but encourage deeply conformist and xenophobic attitudes.

### *Extra-curricular Training*

The second area that pro-AKP youth organizations focus their grassroots activities is training through courses and reading groups for youth outside the formal school curricula. Training on secular subjects offers additional assistance with the coursework and help youth gain professional skills in the job market. Several organizations also provide additional religious courses of Quran and hadith (see [Table 3](#)).

Secular courses cover a wide variety of topics such as foreign languages including Ottoman, career development, project management, screenwriting, marketing and finance, IT and coding, web design and mobile application development, aviation and drones, photography, artificial intelligence, astrophysics, and musical instruments. These courses are offered free of charge and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and subsidized either in the form of direct financial support or by providing a venue.

Courses for university students have particularly received thousands of applications in recent years since they offer a long-term training parallel to higher education. In 2017, 125 university students were selected among 2000 applicants for TÜGVA's 'Media and Communication School'. The school aimed to train future journalists and qualified experts in the media sector with an opportunity to enrol for an internship in partner media organizations (interview, May 2018). Media school does not only train 'acceptable journalists' to fulfil the ranks of government-friendly private media organizations but also constitute a part of AKP's authoritarian strategy of social control. The head of the YDV's public relations and media division emphasizes this political motivation behind media-sector training:

Our political ideologies and choices are being tested under the bombardment of communication technologies. Mass media is a mighty propaganda and brainwashing instrument. Often, it threatens the national culture and integrity. It is an area that cannot be left to the enemy. (Yamak, 2017)

Similarly, the Regional Experts Program, a four-year training for university students, offer participants an opportunity to study the history, culture, politics, and language of their assigned countries, an internship at a Turkish embassy and a master's course abroad. Similar to the media training, another representative revealed the politically charged nature of the expert programme:

The regional experts will be the insurance of Turkey's foreign policy. Participants receive training to be capable of leading the foreign policy in critical regions because they will be experts on the language, politics, culture, economy, and history of those countries. We raise young people who will promote the motto: 'leader country Turkey'. (Interview, January 2018)

Interviews with the participating youth revealed that there are several reasons for youngsters to attend extra-curricular training. First, many foundations offer contemporary and scientifically relevant courses. Several interviewed participants mentioned that these courses provide an opportunity to differentiate themselves in search of jobs that would not be available through private means. Given the high rate of youth unemployment in Turkey, such courses provide talented and hardworking youth with an opportunity for upward mobility. Some of the opportunities like an internship at Turkish embassies or visiting state-owned companies of national defence and aerospace are unique networking opportunities for even urban and upper-middle-class youth.

Other youngsters mentioned candidly the opportunities to find an internship and pursue other interests such as becoming a part of the inner circle of a nepotistic and politicized public jobs market. Moreover, youngsters especially coming from provinces, also seek to establish social networks within an informal and personal setting. Finally, they also perceive extra-curricular training as free entertainment to make new friendships outside the school, particularly in rural areas and small districts where opportunities for socialization are limited.

### *In the Service of Neoliberal Conservatism: Dormitories, Private Schools, and Scholarships*

Besides their political and ideological role, pro-AKP youth organizations reach out to youth also by providing essential services in the education sector thanks to their vast network of dormitories and schools. Particularly, foundations have fulfilled the increased demand for student accommodation and scholarships in the process of rapid privatization of education and opening of dozens of new universities by offering subsidized and decent dorms across the country. Several representatives mentioned that their foundations do not only provide dormitories but 'social and educative homes' for personal and cultural development opportunities through free courses in music, Ottoman arts, and language, organize orientation, and 'coping with stress' activities for newcomers (interviews, 2018).

Some foundations, such as TÜRGEV, Ensar, and IYV, have also established their private colleges and universities. A representative implied that the motivation behind investing in private education was to offer an alternative to secular/Kemalist private colleges:

We wanted to contribute to the education sector. When we started, private schools were in the hands of certain privileged groups. At our colleges, we offer education affordable to a family with a median income. (Interview, April 2018)

Through their active involvement in private education, these youth foundations have turned themselves into strong allies of the AKP fulfilling the gap left by the retreat of the social state from the education sector. A representative of YDV claimed that ‘civil society organizations should intervene voluntarily when the state cannot fulfil services in certain areas’ (Kendirli, 2018). Another representative expressed similar remarks:

Today, we need to convey the meaning and importance of being a foundation. We believe that by expanding our influence, we shoulder the responsibilities of the social state so that the government can decrease allocations from the state budget in certain services and channel them to other areas. (Interview, May 2018)

These organizations conceive civil society as a partner to the state in a mutually dependent relationship in the process of neoliberalization and privatization of education and youth policies. In this sense, becoming an actor in private education is not only an issue of ideological competition for cultural hegemony but also represents acceptance and adaptation to neoliberal practices. The deputy head of YDV Serhat Yilmaz’s (2018) remarks confirms the neoliberal assumption that the state cannot and should not solve all social problems:

Civil society should indicate what they could achieve within their capabilities to the state and demand what they cannot reach from the state as a complementary actor. The state can utilize resources better thanks to this feedback from civil society.

By replacing or complementing the state in the education sector, pro-AKP youth organizations have unavoidably become agenda-setters and policy partners. According to autonomous youth organizations, ‘the government incorporates into the public sector-civil society cooperation only the pro-AKP youth organizations’ (interviews June 2019). They have informal and formal access to lobby ministers regarding a wide range of youth-relevant policies such as preparation of syllabi for public schools, culture and arts policies, employment, fight with drug addiction, orphan houses, and constitutional changes (AÖB, 2018c; Ensar, 2013, 2017b; Genç-Kon, 2018).

Notably, organizations working for the amelioration of religious schools known as Imam Hatip schools (IHS), such as Önder and TİMAV, have been active in pushing the government to revive the middle sections of these schools. They negotiated an increase in IHS’ share from the state budget, converting regular high schools into IHS and segregation of mixed education for adolescents during the 2012 education reforms (Gençkal Eroler, 2019). They secure lavish financial support from the Ministry of Youth and Sports to organize workshops on improving religious education and to run public campaigns to scale up the IHS’s profile to encourage youth and parents to choose religious schools.

TİMAV claims that the organization continuously lobbies the government on how to increase the funding and infrastructure of IHS, such as channelling better-qualified teachers into these schools, adding social and cultural activities in the curricula, improving cooperation between the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the Ministry of Education and segregating mixed schools (TİMAV, 2016, 2017).

Notably, in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, mutual dependency has become more critical for both sides. Government-oriented youth organizations have worked hard to become an alternative to the Gülen network in education as ‘trustable’ partners for the government. In a report on the state of youth, UGED also mentioned the difficulty of gaining the trust of youngsters and families who are worried about involving in another provider of schools, dorms, and scholarships: ‘after FETÖ, there is suspicion towards all foundations and associations. Even foundations providing scholarships cannot escape from this suspicion. Youngsters would like to accept scholarships, but they are fearful to affiliate themselves with an organization’ (UGED, 2018).

To overcome this suspicion, since the 2013 corruption scandal and the aborted coup in 2016, government-oriented youth organizations have pledged open allegiance to the AKP in ‘the fight against Gülenist terrorists’ and in cultivating future cadres loyal to the state directly in harmony with the AKP to continue and expand their operations (AÖB, 2018a; Ensar, 2013, 2017a; TUGVA, 2017b; TİMAV, 2017). The remarks by the president of Önder capture well that these youth organizations are aware of the importance of identifying themselves with the agenda of the government if they want to operate in the education sector after the coup:

In the past [before the AKP], there was a struggle for national identity. Today, we have a duty ahead of us: penetrating the capillaries of society to cultivate qualified people with the worldview that Turkey and the world need. (Basar, 2018)

Surprisingly, the idea of ‘penetrating the capillaries of society’ is not different from Gülenist network’s claims. However, thanks to their submission, the AKP perceives them more controllable and loyal compared to the Gülen network. The government also perceives them as a preventive agent against the potential appeal of both radical Islam and the PKK amongst the youth, as Erdoğan’s remarks at the 2018 annual meeting of TUGVA indicated. After praising the organization for its work, Erdoğan reminded the foundation that ‘from now on the burden of every single youth who joins terrorist organizations is on you’ (TUGVA, 2018b).

### *Activism and Humanitarian Work*

Several government-oriented youth organizations also engage young people in public demonstrations with slogans, symbols, and other performative elements. This street activism is always managed to prevent them from turning into a challenge to the state and rulers. Contentious events often focus on the conflicts in the Islamic world such as the Syrian and Yemen civil wars, the genocide targeting Rohingya Muslims, the Palestinian issue and the Jerusalem question to declare support for Muslim communities. These demonstrations can easily take an anti-Western, anti-Semitic and conspiratorial turn disguised as a protest of Islamophobia. To give an example, Young Activists mainly focuses on raising awareness among youth for the Palestinian cause with a pro-Hamas stance. In an interview, the

president claimed that the organization ‘conveys the youth the real facts about Israel that Zionists aim to destroy the Muslim presence and the Al-Aqsa mosque to establish world hegemony’. He added that ‘we are fighting with a community that tortured and killed prophets in the past. Hopefully, our struggle will eradicate Zionism from our holy lands’ (Genç Aktivistler, 2018).

Several organizations also mobilize youth through street activism concerning domestic issues relevant to the AKP’s policy agenda at home. Government-oriented youth organizations have extensively joined democracy rallies in the aftermath of 15 July coup attempt. According to a representative, ‘civil society should shoulder the duty of carrying the spirit of 15 July to the future’ (interview, April 2018). They organized joint rallies following the 2013 corruption allegations, and press statements and demonstrations commemorating ‘the martyrdom for democracy’ at the anniversaries of the coup attempt (Ensar, 2017c, p. 6). More recently, they have been active in public opinion formation concerning the military excursions in Syria in support of Turkey’s ‘peace operations’, while voices against Turkey’s incursions were violently repressed during the same period (HRW, 2018).

Remarkably, street activism is more associated with the leftist political tradition in Turkey. When asked about this issue whether the organization also contributes to cultivating activist and politicized youth, one representative agreed that youngsters’ mobilization is a positive development to make their voices heard. However, he also added that youth mobilization had been possible thanks to the government:

As a Foundation, we cannot support a single party, but we do not desire to see an apolitical and uninformed youth. So far, youth did not receive sufficient attention from the state. Under our president, Turkey has taken substantial steps to ensure the youth’s active participation not only in political life but also in social and civic life. (Interview, January 2018)

In addition to street activism, pro-AKP organizations mobilize youth for voluntarism at home and abroad, claiming that ‘voluntarism (*vakıfçılık*) is deeply embedded in our national and authentic values in accordance with Islam’ (Ergin, 2018). Similar to the neoliberal logic in the education sector, voluntarism is ideologically and practically articulated in the service of the state to raise ideal citizens with the responsibility to share the state’s burden. In Turkey, such activities often cover food and clothing delivery to the poor and Syrian refugees as well as social awareness campaigns for the poor and disabled.

Humanitarian voluntarism that youngsters engage abroad has particular political objectives targeting countries that have lately become a foreign policy priority of the AKP, such as the Balkans, Turkic Republics, Pakistan, Bangladesh and sub-Saharan Africa (AÖB, n.d.; UGED, 2016; YDV, 2017). Youth organizations coordinate their activities with the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and Red Crescent. According to a representative, in the last few years, 500 youngsters have so far been sent to 30 countries to complete over a hundred projects of repairing kindergartens and schools, carrying out health check-ups for children, planting trees and opening wells in coordination with TIKA (interview March 2018)

Many youngsters reflected on their experience of voluntarism and activism beyond the pursuit of self-interest. Taking part in these events shapes their individual and collective or national perceptions. From an individual point of view, it means assuming a dignified role by pursuing beneficial activities and thinking about social and global problems.

Supporting ‘the needy’ at home and abroad is also a source of national pride for these youngsters. During these events, young people cultivate a sense of belonging to ‘a great nation helping the ummah’. For instance, one volunteer who participated in the Africa trip of TÜGVA said that they have rebuilt schools and ‘such activities reverse prejudices and restore trust in the white man in Africa. I felt our efforts in these subjugated regions should be doubled as I saw the hope in the eyes of our distant brothers’ (interview April 2018). Another volunteer who joined a TIKA-sponsored trip in Ghana linked their efforts to the AKP’s and Erdoğan’s image in the world more clearly:

When we told that we were From Turkey, one salesman at a local market wanted to show us a video of Tayyip Erdoğan. We just wanted to buy fruits but left the shop with a lesson. There are expectations of all oppressed people from us. May God not embarrass and return us from this righteous path. (AÖB, *n.d.*, p. 11)

Engaging youth in humanitarian work and voluntarism contribute to the pro-AKP youth organizations’ dual purpose as service providers that share the government’s burden and cultivating youth with authentic values and national pride. Overall, voluntarism, as an Islamic and national virtue, encourages what Can (2013, p. 96) argues, ‘the emergence of new subjectivities that glorified civic responsibilities of citizens’ in the service of the state.

### **Conclusion: Authoritarian Politics, Civil Society and the Quest for an Ideal Nation**

If the AKP shares something common with the early republican regime, it is the absolute conviction that the youth is a malleable social force to be shaped for the sake of the new regime’s resilience. Youth is historically seen as a uniform subject to save, maintain, or restore the nation(al identity) in Turkey. The young generation is to be cultivated, moralized, and guided until they are ready to take up these responsibilities. However, different from the secular and Kemalist state that had dominated the youth policy until the early 2000s, the AKP relies heavily on civil society actors, government-oriented youth organizations, in its quest for a new nationalist project of establishing an alternative cultural hegemony.

This study offered an alternative perspective on how authoritarian regimes are built and maintained at societal level. An institutionalist focus dominates the current literature at the expense of explaining how authoritarianism is built from below through engagement with key social groups. However, authoritarian regimes attempt to monopolize social, cultural, and civic space. In doing so, they encourage, feed, and ally with civil society by utilizing their control over state institutions and resources. Turkey’s government-oriented youth organizations have provided a fruitful case study to theorize the role of civil society in the process of bottom-up building of an undemocratic regime by expanding and disseminating social control beyond the formal institutional level.

The empirical findings suggested that government-oriented youth organizations aim to transform youth into the embodiment of an imagined nation in line with conservative-nationalist ideology. The centrepiece of this goal is to construct youth as a uniform body of ‘the protagonists of the new world/civilization’. Youth would be cultivated through both Islamic morality and nationalism to counter the moral ‘threats’ against the nation and the state. The empirical discussion has also demonstrated that government-oriented

civil society organizations meld ideology, propaganda and material incentives to engage youth in four distinct ways: indoctrination, contemporary and secular training, service provision in the education sector, and street activism and humanitarian voluntarism.

These findings question the assumptions about the monolithic nature of the authoritarian state. In the process of authoritarian regime building, rulers in search of consolidation seek to intertwine civil and political society consciously to promote loyal, and ideal citizenry through youth. The Turkish case shows that by acting in and through the state, government-oriented organizations have become empowered agents sustaining, enhancing or reifying the state and often substituting for the government when reaching out the society. In this sense, the study has shown that political and civil societies have become mutually dependent on consolidating authoritarian regime through social engineering, i.e. cultural hegemony, to maintain their relevance for each other in the long-term.

The study also contributed to the theorization of civil society in hybrid regimes as agents of neoliberal governmentality. The primary aim in their engagement in street activism and voluntarism is *not* the provision of development assistance abroad or influencing the government's policies through bottom-up mobilization. Through voluntarism and street activism, they target youth as primary subjects to cultivate with national pride and pro-government sentiments, hence redrawing the boundaries of the ideal citizenry. These organizations mould youngsters' self-perceptions, identities, political attitudes, and loyalties. The management of youth morality, mission, and civic participation represent power relations in an authoritarian system instead of attributing agency to the youth because 'young people are imposed certain political and civil identities' to maintain regime's ideological and practical resilience (Krivonos, 2015, p. 45).

Besides the ideological work, these organizations provide services and mobilize youth. They take on the responsibilities of the state in neoliberal restructuring by softening the immediate effects of the state's withdrawal from education. Youth are also rendered dependent on government-oriented organizations for jobs, income, social mobility, and housing, creating a system of clientelism within civil society. In this sense, government-oriented civil society organizations represent how neoliberal practices can marry with local ideologies, moralities and subjectivities.

Government-oriented civil society does not only 'window-dress' authoritarian practices. They define their relationship with ruling authorities not in terms of subordination but collaboration and complementarity. The Turkish case showed that these organizations utilize discursive and ideological proximity to the government evermore since the coup to gain the trust of youth and also to capture the influential space vacated after the crackdown on Gülen schools and network. They also built themselves as close allies and substitutes of the AKP in cultivating the desired future nation and fighting (as well as replacing) the Gülen network. In return, the government provided them with opportunities to thrive organizationally and financially. They have organic or political links with the party and remain at the centre of a multi-layered system of clientelism between the state actors (municipalities, ministries), private donors in Turkey and abroad and youth.

At the time of authoritarian backlash and repressed civic space in and beyond Turkey, this study has cautioned against an exclusive focus on the erosion of formal institutions. Government-oriented organizations confound the hopes of a civic revival in undemocratic regimes. Their presence polarizes the civic space and disables pluralistic participation in several countries. Independent organizations continue to exist, but their reach remains meagre under authoritarian backlash on autonomous civil society. They have difficulty in



competing with resourceful government-oriented youth organizations. What is also emergent from this study is that there are striking similarities between the government-oriented civil society and autonomous and internationally supported youth organizations' in terms of the methods and strategies of engaging and mobilizing youth. Government-oriented civil society organizations will undoubtedly continue to shape societal support for undemocratic regimes and shape individuals' ideologies, partisan attitudes, and participation in the long-term. This study posited the further need for theorizing, rather than merely vilifying them as vain showcase items at the hands of authoritarian regimes.

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### **Notes**

1. Ensar also made it to the headlines in Turkey over a scandal of child abuse at its dormitories in 2016. The government's support for the foundation created a public outcry. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36071773>.
2. Gülen Community is a closed Islamic network around the US-based cleric Fettullah Gülen. The network used to be a close ally of the AKP in purging secularists from the state institutions until their fallout in 2013. The movement had a widespread network of private education institutions and dormitories in Turkey and abroad and infiltrated into state bureaucracy and military through a nepotistic and secret strategy. After the July 2016 coup attempt, Gülen schools and dorms have been closed and its members and sympathizers have been persecuted (see Yavuz, 2018 for an overview).
3. Civil Society Development Centre is an independent association and supported by the European Union within the framework of the Turkey-EU civil society dialogue. <http://www.stgm.org.tr/en>.
4. This list is not exclusive but focuses on most active and resourceful government-oriented youth organizations.
5. There were several groups inside the nationalist-conservative intelligentsia such as Milli Türk Talebe Birliği, Yeniden Milli Mücadele, and Aydınlar Ocagi that dominated the 1960s–1970s. Later, Turkish-Islam synthesis emerged as the successors after 1980 coup.

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