



“A Clean Conscience Behind the Dark Bars”:

The Iconification of an Islamist Woman Prisoner in Cold War Turkey

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Abstract

The iconification of political prisoners enhances their visibility, credibility, and power. Nevertheless, iconification may also reduce, reimagine, or otherwise distort the biographies and experiences of political prisoners. Moreover, iconicity’s blurring of the prisoner’s views and activities may result in their story being recirculated in the service of political projects that do not fully align with their own. The case of the Islamist icon Şule Yüksel Şenler’s (1938-2019) incarceration in 1971 presents an excellent vantage point from which to analyze these dynamics and how gender informs them in fundamental ways. The diverse media texts about Şule Yüksel Şenler demonstrate how historical tropes became entangled with critical references to the law, religion, and the discourses of freedom and democracy in the iconification of an Islamist political prisoner in Cold War Turkey. Şenler’s legacy and the recent references to her story show how iconification’s tendency to occlude or distort prisoners’ ideological investments and activities may in fact enhance their ability to integrate into new political projects. This case study of a right-wing political prisoner exposes how the histories of political incarceration, combined with the discourses of injustice and victimization, may also be utilized to legitimize authoritarian political regimes as well as new incarcerations.

Keywords

incarceration, iconicity, Turkey, gender, Islam

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On February 28, 2022, Turkey’s national public broadcaster the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, TRT, showed a documentary celebrating the life and achievements of the best-selling novelist, journalist, columnist, poet, public speaker, theatre maker, fashion designer, headscarf activist, and Turkey’s first Islamic style icon Şule Yüksel Şenler (1938-2019) on the third anniversary of her death. With a clever strategy, however, the documentary was broadcast not on the date of Şenler’s passing, August 28, but rather on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the military memorandum in 1997, a failed attempt to curtail the rise of political Islam in Turkey. At the gala, organized by the Şule Yüksel Şenler Foundation, the guest of honor was the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, an old friend of Şenler. Opening his talk by condemning military coups and commending the political right for its resilience, Erdoğan praised Şenler for “not fearing to pay a price for her belief and her cause.”¹ Describing Şenler as “a monumental figure for the struggle for rights and justice” in Turkey, Erdoğan emphasized the painful, difficult, and exemplary nature of Şenler’s life.² The President thus presented Şule Yüksel Şenler as the embodiment of the victimization of conservative Muslims in Turkey—a discursive strategy that Erdoğan and other members of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) have successfully utilized to garner public support and promote their sociopolitical and economic agenda throughout the last two decades.³

¹ Erdoğan, “Şule Yüksel Şenler Vakfı Tanıtımı ve *Şule* Belgeseli Gösterim Programı’nda Yaptıkları Konuşma,” Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/135832/sule-yuksel-senler-vakfi-tanitimi-ve-sule-belgeseli-gosterim-programi-nda-yaptiklari-konusma> (accessed June 14, 2022). All translations from Turkish are by the author unless otherwise noted.

² Erdoğan, “Şule Yüksel Şenler Vakfı Tanıtımı ve *Şule* Belgeseli Gösterim Programı’nda Yaptıkları Konuşma.”

³ Kaya, “Islamisation of Turkey under the AKP Rule: Empowering Family, Faith and Charity,” 9.

The greatest of the many adversities in Şule Yüksel Şenler's biography was her incarceration in 1971 for insulting the president Cevdet Sunay. Şenler's much-publicized nine-month incarceration, which bestowed on her the status of an iconic prisoner, presents an early example of Turkey's Islamist movements' critical deployment of the discourse of victimization for political ends—a strategy that would reach its apex with Erdoğan's imprisonment for four months and ten days in 1999. Referring to prison as “the School of Joseph,” Erdoğan, Şenler, and other Islamists have endowed incarceration with religious significance and transformed it into a powerful political strategy.

While providing important insights into the political and religious meanings of incarceration in Turkey, Şenler's experiences, especially the difference between her earlier political views and those of Erdoğan, also provides a critical perspective on the debates on iconic prisoners. The iconification of political prisoners is a process that harbors fundamental tensions for activism. Iconicity enhances the visibility of political prisoners and their causes, in some cases “[imbuing] them with a distinct credibility capable of motivating transformative social movements.”⁴ This enhanced visibility is also crucial for the articulation of any public demands for the political prisoner's release. This visibility and the power that comes with iconicity, however, may also lend itself to elitism and reproduce power hierarchies among prisoners.⁵ Moreover, iconicity may transform the political prisoner to an easily consumable and even commodifiable image.⁶ Scholars have argued that in such processes, iconification reduces, reimagines, or otherwise distorts the biographies and experiences of individuals.⁷ Even more importantly, iconicity distracts attention from the political views of prisoners and their conflicts with hegemonic power structures.⁸ The oversimplification of ideologies and

⁴ McCann, “Redemption in Neoliberal and Radical Imagination,” 100.

⁵ James, “Introduction,” *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, 11.

⁶ Wise and McLean, ““Pack of Thieves.””

⁷ Prestholdt, *Icons of Dissent*, 5.

⁸ James, “Introduction,” *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, 19.

actions, which is often at the core of iconification, may also obfuscate the tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences that characterize political projects and the individuals who represent them.⁹ In fact, the power of the iconic political prisoner may be utilized to silence external as well as internal critiques.¹⁰ Iconicity's blurring of the prisoner's views and actions may also result in their story being recirculated in the service of political projects that do not fully align with their own. The case of Şule Yüksel Şenler demonstrates that such reappropriations may not always be undesirable for the prisoner; they may also help iconic prisoners adapt to shifting sociopolitical dynamics, imagine and invest in new ideological formations, and develop strategic alliances. For these reasons, studying the lives of iconic prisoners like Şenler and the circulation of their stories beyond the immediate context of their incarceration can provide insights into broader power dynamics as well as the performative constitution and negotiation of social identities and political categories, where gender plays a fundamental role.

Born to a secular middle-class family, Şule Yüksel Şenler grew up in Istanbul. In her twenties, Şenler joined the popular religiopolitical movement known as the Nur movement or Nurculuk (Nurism) after its founder Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian Bediüzzaman Said Nursî (1878-1960). The Nur movement's strategy of using diverse media and performance genres for proselytization and their nationwide influence provided the talented and enthusiastic Şenler with many opportunities. In the public lectures she delivered across Turkey, Şule Yüksel Şenler emerged as the movement's female public face and Turkey's first Islamic fashion icon.¹¹ A self-taught journalist, Şenler worked as a columnist for several newspapers and served as the editor-in-chief of the youth magazine *Seher Vakti* (The Dawn) published by her brother. Her Islamic utopian Bildungsroman *Huzur Sokağı* (Serenity Street),

⁹ Davis, "Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X," 283-284.

¹⁰ James, "Academia, Activism, and Imprisoned Intellectuals," 6.

¹¹ Altınay, "Şule Yüksel Şenler."

which has enjoyed its 127th reprint in November 2021, became one of the highest selling novels in the history of Turkish literature. The novel has also been adapted to film, television, and theatre, all with significant commercial success. A playwright and director, Şenler was also one of the pioneering women in Turkey's largely ignored Islamic theatre subculture. Despite her multifarious career and her significant role in the development of political Islam, however, Şenler was ignored by scholars until the rising interest in political Islam and Islamic cultural production in the 2000s, and the limited scholarly interest she has received has been primarily for her work as an Islamic style icon, headscarf activist, and novelist.¹² Şenler's complex ideological investments, her tumultuous career, and the transformations of her image and her politics over time—which can provide important insights into the history and development of political Islam in Turkey—have received limited attention.

A critical point in Şule Yüksel Şenler's career was a trial that started in 1967 for insulting the President Cevdet Sunay in an article where she criticized the Pope Paul VI's visit to Istanbul and the official ceremonies held in his honor. The essay lamented that Turks had become a nation plagued with a sense of inferiority who now bowed before a Christian religious leader.¹³ The lengthy trial, leading to Şenler's incarceration, created much publicity and consolidated her status as an Islamic icon of dissent, an emblem of “popular dissent, social identity, and political community.”¹⁴

This essay analyzes diverse media texts about Şule Yüksel Şenler's trial and incarceration to examine the efforts to construct Şenler's image as an iconic prisoner and a poster child for political Islam. These archival materials demonstrate how historical tropes became entangled with critical references to the law, religion, and the Cold War discourses of

¹² Altınay, “Şule Yüksel Şenler”; Çokoğullar and Bozaslan, “1967-1980 Arası Dönemde Cemiyetin Kurtarılması Misyonu İle Tanımlanmaya Başlanan ‘İslamcı Kadın’ Kimliği”; Dündar, “Transforming Society with Islamist Tales”; Güven, “Spheres of Piety.”

¹³ Şenler, “Ağlayın Ey Müslüman Kardeşlerim Ağlayın.”

¹⁴ Prestholdt, *Icons of Dissent*, 2.

freedom and democracy in the emergence of an Islamist political prisoner as an icon of dissent. Embodying larger ideals and desires, icons of dissent “function as communal reservoirs from which diverse audiences draw and contest meaning.”¹⁵ The proponents of political Islam used Şenler’s story to expand their outreach and mobilize their followers in their efforts to bring about a different future. To this end, they critically engaged with prison iconography and even reappropriated and transformed cultural productions by intellectuals on the other end of the political spectrum. The critics of political Islam, primarily in mainstream media, further consolidated Şenler’s iconic status as they attempted to counter the rise of urban Islamic movements. In the debates on Şenler’s body and her political agency as well as the broader affective politics of her iconification as a prisoner, gender played a central role.

The case of Şule Yüksel Şenler shows how political groups can use incarceration as an opportunity to iconify their members, which at times renders them even more visible and vocal than when they are free. Her experiences suggest how the conflicts within religiopolitical groups as well as their negotiations with hegemony may limit the iconification of their incarcerated members. Şenler’s legacy and the recent references to her story exemplify how such stories of political incarceration may gain renewed significance consequent to the reconfiguration of power dynamics over time. Her experiences demonstrate how iconification’s tendency to occlude or distort prisoners’ ideological investments and activities may in fact enhance their ability to integrate into new political projects. Moreover, the case of Şenler reveals how the reconstruction of an iconic prisoner’s image and the recirculation of their story may have even more impact than they did at the time of their incarceration. This case study of a right-wing political prisoner also exposes how the histories of political incarceration may also be utilized to legitimize authoritarian political regimes as well as new incarcerations. Finally, the references to the Qur’an, specifically the story of the

¹⁵ Prestholdt, *Icons of Dissent*, 2 and 4.

Prophet Joseph in the narratives of incarceration about Bediüzzaman Said Nursî as well as Şule Yüksel Şenler and numerous other Islamist prisoners show how the constellations of religious and historical discourses circulate as diverse Islamist groups, with often conflicting political views, compete for legitimacy and political power in the fragmented Islamic public sphere of a highly polarized country.

The Nur Movement and the Prison as the School of Joseph

Turkey's formative years (1923-1938), also known as the Kemalist Period after the country's founding president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, were characterized by the efforts to establish a modern, European, secular yet implicitly Sunni Muslim nation-state. To curtail the impact of religion in social and political life, the government implemented a number of reforms, including the abolition of the Caliphate; state monopolization of education; the outlawing of religious schools (the madrasahs); the establishing of the Directorate of Religious Affairs as a state institution to regulate religious activities and practices; the abolition of religious courts; the outlawing of mystic orders and sects; the removal of religious law from the criminal law; the repeal of the constitutional provision that defined Islam as the religion of the state; language and script reforms; and the ban on religious garb outside of religious rituals.¹⁶ Secularist policies thus facilitated the centralization of power and the monopolization of authority. They also served the "homogenization of a national culture" as part of the broader nation-building efforts.¹⁷

¹⁶ Keyman, "Modernity, Secularism and Islam," 222.

¹⁷ Göle, "Manifestations of the Religious-Secular Divide," 45.

Sunni Islam, despite the secularist reforms, maintained its power in Turkey. Population exchanges, genocides, massacres, and migrations in the final years of the Ottoman Empire and the formative years of the Republic of Turkey ensured that Sunni Muslims not only formed the demographic majority but also maintained the political, economic, and cultural hegemony in the nation-state. Diverse discourses and practices, ranging from tax policies designed to facilitate the transfer of wealth from non-Muslims to Muslims in order to create a Sunni Muslim bourgeoisie to the refusal to officially recognize and publicly fund Alevi spaces of worship, *cemevis*, resulted in the ostensibly secular regime to remain implicitly Sunni Muslim.¹⁸

In 1945, as Turkey cultivated closer relations with the Western Bloc, the government gradually facilitated a transition “from the state-controlled and autarkist economy to a liberal, consumerist, and individualist economy.”¹⁹ In 1946, the single-party rule of the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) finally ended with the founding of the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti) as a coalition of disparate groups, including Islamic conservatives, liberal intellectuals, independent professionals (such as lawyers, doctors, and businesspeople), and landowners.²⁰ Many Democrats, including the founders of the party, were former members of the Republican People’s Party. Adopting the postwar discourses of “democracy” and “free world,” the Democrat Party elite defined the national utopia in terms of Turkey becoming a “little America.”²¹ Once the Democrats came to power in 1950, they expanded

¹⁸ Forming approximately 15 to 20 percent of the population, Alevis are the largest religious minority in Turkey, where the majority of the population is Sunni Muslim. The complex religious identity of Alevis is perhaps best seen in their conflicting classifications as “simply Islamic, ‘heterodox,’ or even non-Islamic,” see Sökefeld, *Struggling for Recognition*, 1. For *cemevis*—literally meaning the houses of cem (the name of the Alevi ritual, also meaning crowd, amass or congregation)—and the Turkish state’s refusal to recognize them as places of worship, see Çınar, *Freedom of Religion and Belief in Turkey*, 81-113.

¹⁹ Altınay, ““Carrying Our Country to the World,”” 106.

²⁰ Özbudun and Hale, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey*, xviii.

²¹ Altınay, ““Carrying Our Country to the World,”” 106.

the relatively liberal economic program. In 1952, Turkey joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), officially aligning with the Western Bloc.

As Islamic discourses and practices gained power in Turkish politics in the 1950s, religiopolitical movements found a more fertile ground to proselytize. The most influential among them was the Nur movement, founded by the Kurdish scholar Said Nursî. In response to the rapid sociopolitical transformations during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey, Nursî desired to create an Islamic revival movement that would “demonstrate the compatibility of science and religion; freedom and faith; modernity and tradition.”²² During the National Struggle Period (Milli Mücadele Dönemi) (1919-1923), he supported the Ankara Government, who would officially establish the Republic of Turkey in 1923.²³ At the time, Nursî had sympathy for Bolshevism, and he was interested in reconciling socialism and Islam.²⁴ After the inception of the nation-state, the supposedly secular government’s efforts to shape the experience of Islam in Turkey disappointed him.²⁵ Nursî was also critical of “the Western civilization,” which he described as “the civilization of cruelty.”²⁶ In the aftermath of World War II, however, he emerged as a staunch anti-Communist²⁷ and strategically aligned with the Western Bloc in the face of the Cold War political polarization that had a strong impact on Turkey. In the bipartisan system, as opposed to the Republican People’s Party’s combination of secularist discourses with policies aiming to homogenize the experience and practice of Islam, Nursî and his followers supported the Democrat Party.²⁸

²² Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 158.

²³ Bora, *Cereyanlar*, 424.

²⁴ Bora, *Cereyanlar*, 427.

²⁵ Bora, *Cereyanlar*, 425.

²⁶ Bora, *Cereyanlar*, 427.

²⁷ Bora, *Cereyanlar*, 427.

²⁸ Bora, *Cereyanlar*, 429.

Said Nursî's conflicts with the secular state resulted in three incarcerations, totaling forty months, as well as approximately twenty-three years of exile.²⁹ To this day, Nursî's supporters have used the story of his incarceration, framed in terms of unjust punishment and suffering, to legitimize his religiopolitical project. Nursî's own narrative of incarceration, however, does not associate prison with suffering only. For Nursî, incarceration is an educational experience and an opportunity for proselytization. In his *Meyve Risalesi* (Fruit Treatise)—the “fruit” of his incarceration in the Denizli Prison (1943-1944) where he discusses his views on incarceration—Nursî explicitly defines his movement as a system that efficiently disciplines prisoners. Arguing that “it is easier to rule and discipline a thousand religious men who always remember the prison of Hell than ten men who do not perform the daily prayers or believe, who only consider the earthly prison and do not distinguish between haram and halal, and who are in part used to being hoodlums,” Nursî asserts that both the prison staff and politicians should be pleased by his work.³⁰ In this instance of Nursî's signature attempts at demonstrating the compatibility of modernity and religion, he treats the prison and Islam as disciplinary technologies that complement each other in the government of individuals and especially “the government of the self by the self.”³¹ A former prisoner who continued his legally risky practices, Nursî thus presented himself as an ally to the government.

An influential aspect of *Meyve Risalesi* is Nursî's description of prison with reference to the story of the prophet Joseph from the Qur'an. In the verse about Joseph, the slave boy is unjustly accused of attempted rape by his mistress Zulaikha, who later admits Joseph's innocence and confesses her desire for him.³² Nevertheless, Joseph is still imprisoned.³³ In

²⁹ Keskin, “Inner Peace in the Life of Said Nursi,” 56.

³⁰ Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, “*Meyve Risalesi*’nden,” 11.

³¹ Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” 256.

³² Qur'an 12:23-32.

³³ Qur'an 12:35.

prison, however, Allah grants Joseph with the spiritual gift of interpreting dreams, and he preaches monotheism to fellow prisoners.³⁴ Joseph also correctly interprets the king's dream about an approaching famine, and convinces the king to put him in charge of the storehouses.³⁵

Said Nursî's reference to prison as the School of Joseph thus, on one level, reflects his utilitarian and idealistic approach to proselytization. As he knew from personal experience, prisons present fruitful sites for proselytization. Arguably, this was particularly true for Turkish prisons, where the services for prisoners were extremely limited. In fact, around the same time, other incarcerated clerics in Turkey were also propagating their views and recruiting followers among prisoners.³⁶ Nursî's reference to the story of Joseph not only defined the principles of action for himself and his followers but also confirmed their innocence in a way that attributes them religious authority and responsibility, with implications of a prophetic contact with the divine. It is noteworthy that Nursî also claimed to have prophetic dreams and he interpreted the dreams of others.³⁷ Through these practices of dream narration and interpretation, Nursî performatively constructed a parallel between Joseph and himself, which implied a claim for prophethood.

An important point in Said Nursî's engagement with the story of Joseph is the nature of the reward Joseph gains through his experience of imprisonment. Joseph does not simply develop spiritual gifts; he also successfully uses them to gain access to financial and political power. In that regard, Nursî's promise to his followers had immediate worldly implications as well. The Nur movement indeed involved economic enterprises and solidarity networks.³⁸ Even more importantly, as the movement grew, their organized power translated into political

³⁴ Qur'an 12:36-40.

³⁵ Qur'an 12:55.

³⁶ Macit, "Zor Zamanda Âlim Olma."

³⁷ Landau, "Dreams and Dream Interpretation in Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur."

³⁸ Şahinöz, *Nurculuk Hareketi*.

influence as well. By the 1950s, when they supported the Democrat Party, members of the Nur movement claimed that their number had reached half a million.³⁹ After the Democrat Party was closed following a military coup in 1960, the democratic political atmosphere secured by the liberal 1961 Constitution created a more suitable environment for the development of Islamic movements.⁴⁰ In this context, the Nur movement continued to support the Democrat Party's successors and gained representation in the Parliament.⁴¹ With the growing waves of migration from Turkey to Western Europe in the 1960s, the movement began to organize transnationally.⁴² To this day, the Nur movement and the many groups affiliated with or inspired by them have continued to play a significant role in Turkish politics.⁴³

A key factor behind the Nur movement's successful proselytization and rapid growth was their use of diverse media and communication strategies, from forming reading groups to publishing periodicals and novels to staging theatre. Even more importantly, unlike many other Islamic groups at the time, the Nur movement valued outreach to women. In these efforts, the emergence of Şule Yüksel Şenler as the movement's female public face would play a vital role.

An Iconic Islamist Woman in Cold War Turkey

Şule Yüksel Şenler's familiarity with the Nur Movement started after her older brother Özer joined them in 1952 and became a favorite disciple of Said Nursî who renamed him Üzeyir

³⁹ Dumont, "Disciples of the Light," 50.

⁴⁰ Tank, *Political Islam in Turkey*, 7.

⁴¹ Zariç and Erdem, "Türk Siyasal Hayatında Sağ Partilerde Bölünme," 1713-1716.

⁴² Şahinöz, *Nurculuk Hareketi*.

⁴³ Akyeşilmen and Özcan, "Islamic Movements and Their Role in Politics in Turkey."

after the Prophet Ezra.⁴⁴ After joining the movement, Nursî requested him to convince his family to join the movement as well.⁴⁵ Üzeyir Şenler's aggressive approach to proselytization, which included verbal and physical violence against Şule Yüksel Şenler, created conflict and resistance in the family.⁴⁶ When he got ill with hepatitis, Üzeyir Şenler finally convinced Şule Yüksel Şenler to attend the movement's meetings as his "last wish."⁴⁷ At the time, Şule Yüksel Şenler was actively involved in several nongovernmental organizations, and she performed leadership roles at Justice Party (Adalet Partisi), the center-right successor to the Democrat Party.⁴⁸ Although she had no formal education beyond the seventh grade, Şenler also pursued a career as a columnist, propagating an Islamic strand of Turkish nationalism.⁴⁹

When Şule Yüksel Şenler started attending the meetings of the women in the Nur movement around 1965, she experienced a pressure to cover her hair. Şenler initially resisted this pressure because she associated the headscarf with not only radical Islam and bigotry but also with the abjects of urban Turkish modernity, such as elderly women, domestic workers, *beslemes*—girls of rural poverty background who are admitted to urban households as unpaid domestic labor—and Kurds.⁵⁰ In order to reconcile her fantasies of modern Turkish femininity and her newly adopted religious ideals, Şenler developed an urban Islamic style. She found the inspiration in Audrey Hepburn's headscarf in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*—a film iconic for an altogether different look. Şenler extended Hepburn's headscarf style to cover all her hair and her neck. She would combine this headscarf style, which would be known as *Şulebaş* (Şulehead) after her, with matching clothes reflecting the popular European fashions of the time.⁵¹ To promote this style, Şenler painted her designs on the photographs of European and

⁴⁴ Özcan, *Ağabeyler Anlatıyor* 5, 297.

⁴⁵ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 40.

⁴⁶ Altınay, "Şule Yüksel Şenler," 111.

⁴⁷ Altınay, "Şule Yüksel Şenler," 111.

⁴⁸ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 35.

⁴⁹ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 38.

⁵⁰ Altınay, "Şule Yüksel Şenler," 113.

⁵¹ Altınay, "Şule Yüksel Şenler," 107-108.

North American fashion models she cut from magazines and published these collages in Islamic periodicals. Once she started touring Turkey with her public lectures, wearing the clothes she designed and made, Şenler emerged as Turkey's first Islamic style icon. She was not, however, always loyal to the urban Islamic style that she created; both her preferred style of head covering and what she borrowed from popular European fashions changed according to her negotiations with different publics. These negotiations would play a key role in Şenler's trials and the efforts to establish her image as an iconic political prisoner as well.

Following the broader trends in political Islam at the time, Şenler's works in the 1960s and 70s were characterized by fundamental ambivalences that reflected Turkey's complex sociopolitical dynamics as well as the impact of the global Cold War tensions on the country. On the one hand, Şenler's Islamism, while embracing the notion of *ummah*, a global community of Muslims, was amalgamated with Turkish nationalism. This approach, which had begun to gain significance under the Democrat Party rule, developed throughout the 1960s and culminated in the ideological formulation of the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" in the mid-1970s. On the other hand, as the female public face of the Nur movement, Şenler supported the Western Bloc and the United States—which she defined as "the world's most civilized nation."⁵² Şenler's Islamic Americanism is particularly striking in her attacks on the socialist Turkey Workers' Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi), whom she accused of "turning the poor against the rich, the worker against the boss, the peasant against the landowner, the public employee against the state, the youth against the government, against law and order, and against the United States and NATO."⁵³

Alongside her attacks on the strong workers' and student movements, Şule Yüksel Şenler's works also strategically incorporated the discourses of social and economic justice to

⁵² Şenler, *Huzur Sokağı*, 180.

⁵³ Şenler, *Duyuşlar*, 295-296.

present an Islamic alternative to socialism. Her popular 1969 Islamic Bildungsroman *Huzur Sokağı*, for instance, is the story of corrupt moderns who construct an apartment building in a conservative Muslim neighborhood in Istanbul's historical peninsula and threaten the utopian Islamic lifestyle there. Şenler's critique of gentrification in the novel, however, is more prominently an attack on Turkey's secular bourgeoisie than on urban inequality. Several of Şenler's texts also feature criticisms of global capitalism and consumer culture, especially fashion. The culprit, according to Şenler, is not the United States or the Western Bloc but the Jews who desire to corrupt Turks morally and exploit them economically as part of their evil plans for world domination.⁵⁴ In her anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, Şenler associated Jews with Freemasons and Communists. She also accused secularist intellectuals—such as the liberal journalist Ahmet Emin Yalman, a founder and later fierce critic of the Democrat Party—of being crypto-Jews.⁵⁵ As she published and quoted from Islamic and European anti-Semitic texts, including her modified version of the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Şenler mobilized the power of conspiracy theories to produce a sense of threat in her readers and audiences and to cultivate their support for the Nur movement and their political agenda.

Şenler's relationship with Christianity was more complicated. While dismissing Christianity as a superstitious belief system, she referred to the piety of (Christian) Americans to legitimize her support for the United States⁵⁶—which was in tension with her nationalism and Islamism. Nevertheless, she frequently deployed Christianophobic discourses as well, especially to undermine her opponents in Turkey. These difficult negotiations and complex discursive strategies would ultimately fail to prevent Şenler's incarceration.

⁵⁴ Şenler, *Duyuşlar*, 227-293.

⁵⁵ Şenler, *Duyuşlar*, 256-267.

⁵⁶ Şenler, *Huzur Sokağı*, 180.

“‘Cry, O My Muslim Brethren, Cry!’ Şule Yüksel Has Been Incarcerated”

The first of the many trials where Şule Yüksel Şenler found herself as a defendant was in 1967, following a complaint by the feminist organization Türk Kadınlar Birliği (Turkish Women’s Union) on the grounds that in her column in the weekly Islamist *Yeni İstiklal* (*New Independence*), Şenler accused women who do not cover their hair of having no honor or chastity.⁵⁷ In her auto/biography, Şenler narrates that at the court, being among “the enemies of honor: crooks, swindlers, thieves, murderers, thugs, and traitor Communists” bothered her greatly.⁵⁸ With this reference to Communists, Şenler distinguishes between political convicts whom she classifies as deserving of punishment and herself. The trial created much publicity and several newspapers across the political spectrum featured the story. Şenler interpreted her eventual acquittal as the court’s approval of her efforts and found further motivation.⁵⁹

While she was on trial, Şenler received a transfer offer from another Islamist newspaper, *Babîâli’de Sabah* (Morning in Babîâli), to create a women’s page where she would publish advice on home economics and childcare. As much as it was a strategy to address women readers, this transfer was probably also an attempt to curtail Şenler’s political interventions that may have seemed aggressive and reckless at a time when secularism was still strong in Turkey. Being confined to a gendered career where she was expected to produce apolitical texts bothered Şenler greatly.⁶⁰ She then started writing a column for the daily *Bugün* (Today), published by the owner of *Yeni İstiklal*, Mehmet Şevket Eygi. *Bugün* greatly contributed to Şenler’s emergence as an iconic Islamist woman and an alternative role model

⁵⁷ Beşinci, “Şule Yüksel Şenler,” 97.

⁵⁸ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 58.

⁵⁹ Beşinci, “Şule Yüksel Şenler,” 97.

⁶⁰ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 60.

for women in Turkey, especially by publishing her photographs at the court.⁶¹ Şenler's iconic visibility intensified as she toured Turkey with a series of lectures on women's place and responsibilities in Islam, organized by groups affiliated with the Nur movement, such as Komünizmle Mücadele Derneği (the Association for Fighting Communism).⁶²

Despite the warnings of the *Bugün* editorial team against being involved in politics, Şule Yüksel Şenler continued to write on issues that were dear to her and created much public controversy.⁶³ Of particular notoriety from this period was the essay "Cry, O My Muslim Brethren, Cry" ("Ağlayın Ey Müslüman Kardeşlerim Ağlayın"), published in *Bugün* on July 28, 1967. The essay criticized the Pope Paul VI's visit to Istanbul for a meeting with Athenagoras I, the 268th Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Şenler condemned the public excitement about the visit and the official ceremonies held in the Pope's honor, with the participation of the Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel from the Justice Party and the President Cevdet Sunay. Proposing one of her signature conspiracy theories, Şenler claimed that the visit was part of an evil plan to take Istanbul from Turks. Defining the day of the visit as a "'dark day' when the religious and national sentiments of Turks, their honor and pride were trampled on," Şenler made a call for jihad, a holy war to defend Islam and the Muslim community.⁶⁴ President Sunay responded by suing Şenler for insulting him.

While Şenler was on trial for insulting the President, she was also dealing with a second high-profile court case for attacking secularism at a public lecture in Bandırma.⁶⁵ When this second case resulted in an arrest warrant in absentia, members of the Nur movement helped Şenler escape and hid her in their homes in different cities. During these trying times, the Islamist press supported Şenler with diverse texts arguing for her innocence

⁶¹ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 63-64.

⁶² Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 64.

⁶³ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 61-62.

⁶⁴ Şenler, "Ağlayın Ey Müslüman Kardeşlerim Ağlayın."

⁶⁵ "Laikliğe Aykırı Konuşmalar Yapan Ş. Yüksel Şenler Hakkında Gıyabi Tevkif Kararı Verildi."

and condemning the trial while also using her story to attack the government. In these media texts, Şenler embodied the image the Nur movement and other proponents of political Islam desired to create for themselves: wronged yet honorable victims fighting for the nation as well as the global community of Muslims.

As may be expected, *Bugün* announced the arrest verdict against their popular columnist in the headline. The subheading, “With only few days left before the elections, this verdict puts the Justice Party in a difficult position,”⁶⁶ was not simply a statement of fact but also an implicit threat to the governing center-right party, reminding them of the organized power of the Nur movement as well as the broader Islamist community. *Bugün*’s editor Mehmet Şevket Eygi also referred to Şenler’s experiences in his column not only to express solidarity but also to encourage his readers to join the Islamist religiopolitical struggle. After mentioning the many letters from the readers expressing their sorrow about the arrest verdict, Eygi writes: “I don’t think that is what should be sorry about. What we should be sorry about is that while there are so many men, the first person to be arrested for an Islamic issue is a woman.”⁶⁷ With this misogynistic comment, while lending visibility to the public support for Şenler, Eygi also defined the Islamic struggle as fundamentally men’s business and almost trivialized Şenler’s work and her troubles with the law because of her gender.

While Eygi underplayed Şenler’s contribution to Islamist politics as he sought to motivate his male readers to do more, the few Islamist woman journalists produced complicated texts to express solidarity with the young columnist. Perhaps the most significant among them was an allegorical story by the novelist and journalist Münevver Ayaşlı (1906-1999). Coming from an elite Ottoman family, Ayaşlı’s life and works were characterized by nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire and the supposed tolerance of Ottoman Islam. She was also

⁶⁶ “Şule Yüksel Şenler İçin Tevkif Kararı Çıktı.”

⁶⁷ Eygi, “Şundan Bundan.”

a harsh critic of the secular nation-state and the early Republican elite. Ayaşlı was not a member of the Nur movement but of the Bayrami sufi order.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, at a time when there were few right-wing periodicals, she wrote for the Nurist *Babîâli'de Sabah*. Ayaşlı knew Şenler in person and she was deeply upset by the arrest verdict.⁶⁹

The story Münevver Ayaşlı wrote in support of Şenler, entitled “Bir Gelin Gitti” (“A Bride Went”), featured the author’s characteristic references to sufism. At the core of the sufi thought and practice is the struggle to abandon the ego, attain spiritual maturity, and become closer to Allah.⁷⁰ The story describes such a journey, the journey of a beautiful and virtuous bride on the path of Allah. In sufism, wedding refers to union with Allah, as best seen in the night of Rumi’s death being celebrated as the Wedding Night (Şeb-i Arus). By portraying Şenler as a bride who has pleased Allah and the Prophet Mohammad with her selfless actions—her attacks on secularism—Ayaşlı celebrated what seemed to be her approaching incarceration as the indicator of Şenler’s spiritual growth and her proximity to Allah.

An important aspect of “A Bride Went” is the instructions Ayaşlı provides to her readers for interpreting Şenler’s experiences. To this end, the story features an ordinary human who hears conflicting accounts of the bride and her journey. The devils in the guise of monkeys, jackals, and vultures—representing the legal authorities and the mainstream press—refer to the bride as an ugly girl going to the dungeon.⁷¹ The angels who pave her way with roses, on the other hand, praise the bride’s journey as one towards a higher level of spiritual achievement. To resolve the ordinary human’s confusion, a spiritually mature person (insân-ı kâmil) appears as a guide and affirms the angels’ account: “Her earthly path may be difficult

⁶⁸ The Bayrami sufi order or Bayramiyye is a Turkish sufi order founded in Ankara by Hacı Bayram-ı Veli in the fifteenth century. The order, aiming “to harmonize sufi practices with the authoritative sources of Islam,” went through state persecution in the sixteenth century, but found a new following in Istanbul beginning in the seventeenth century. See Yavuz, “Bayramiyye,” 46-47.

⁶⁹ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 186.

⁷⁰ Durak, “İslam Düşüncesinde Etik Bir İdeal Olarak ‘İnsan-ı Kâmil’ Anlayışı,” 119.

⁷¹ Ayaşlı, “Bir Gelin Gitti,” 187.

and rocky, but she is on the path of Allah. That path is beautiful, open, and straightforward.”⁷² Ayaşlı ends the story by confirming the spiritual guide’s vision: “In the name of Allah, we saw that as well. We saw that in person and we witness that she went on a path decorated with pink roses to pleasant, beautiful, bright days. A bride went with the dignity of Islam.”⁷³

Ayaşlı’s story encouraged and supported Şenler by framing her troubles with the law as the result of her selfless actions in the name of Allah. At a time when Şenler was emerging as an iconic visibly Muslim woman, Ayaşlı presented her as a spiritual role model. By confirming the account of the spiritual guide who has reached maturity in her story, Ayaşlı also used Şenler’s story as an opportunity to make a claim for her own spiritual maturity, which would further enhance the significance of her support for Şenler as well.

While Ayaşlı used sufi symbolism to support Şenler, members of the Nur movement took more concrete action. A group of armed men affiliated with the movement raided the Bandırma public prosecutor’s home and forced him to request the case to be transferred to İzmir in propria persona.⁷⁴ The prosecutor succumbed to their threats, and Şenler was acquitted at the court in İzmir. This story, narrated by Üzeyir Şenler in his sister’s auto/biography in 2007, demonstrates the already powerful networks the Nur movement had established by the late 1960s.

While Şule Yüksel Şenler was acquitted from the Bandırma case, her trial for insulting the president continued until 1971, further enhancing Şenler’s public visibility as an icon of dissent. Her images from the court, also reproduced in the press stories about her trial, demonstrate the role of fashion in Şenler’s complex negotiations with the legal authorities.⁷⁵ As in all her public performances, Şenler was impeccably dressed. She wore a light-colored

⁷² Ayaşlı, “Bir Gelin Gitti,” 189.

⁷³ Ayaşlı, “Bir Gelin Gitti,” 189.

⁷⁴ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 204.

⁷⁵ “Şule Yüksel Tutuklandı.”

trapeze dress, fitted in the shoulders and flaring out into an A shape, and a matching headscarf. The length of the dress, which ended under her knees and revealed her calves, differentiated Şenler from the stereotype of the Islamist woman in black veil. This sartorial strategy was an attempt to present a non-threatening image to the judges as well as the broader public to whom Şenler desired to demonstrate the possibility of a modern, urban, and visibly Muslim Turkish femininity.



Figure 1. “Şule Yüksel Arrested,” *Seher Vakti*, photographer unknown, 1971.

When Şule Yüksel Şenler was sentenced to thirteen months in prison for insulting the president, the Islamist youth magazine *Seher Vakti* published by her brother featured a quote from the Item 20 of the Constitution in the title of its cover story: “...And Your Constitution Says: ‘Every person has the freedom of opinion and belief. They CAN EXPRESS and PROMOTE their beliefs or opinions individually or collectively via speech, text, image or other ways.’”⁷⁶ By referring to the Constitution as “your Constitution,” the Şenlers⁷⁷ kept a distance from the (secular) law, implying that they only recognized the Islamic law, and refused to become the willing subjects of the Constitution or reproduce its force through uncritical reiteration. In the story, as they rightfully pointed to the hypocrisy in the selective interpretations of the Constitution, the Şenlers were also hypocritical in that they did not acknowledge the legitimacy Şule Yüksel Şenler and *Seher Vakti* provided to the incarceration of leftists or her many calls for the destruction of Communists as well as her explicit and implicit threats against her many enemies.⁷⁸

Seher Vakti’s last issue, published on July 1, 1971, was dedicated to Şule Yüksel Şenler’s recent incarceration. The issue’s solemn black-and-white cover, which contradicted the magazine’s usual 1970s Islamic kitsch aesthetics, featured a portrait photograph of Şenler looking calm and innocent, with the caption “A Clean Conscience Behind the Dark Bars.” Unlike in most of her photographs published in the journal, her head was not covered in her signature Şulebaş style. Şenler wore a white headscarf with needlework, which would be associated with elderly or provincial women. While Şulebaş enabled the performance of a religiopolitical identity as a member of a modern, urban Islamist movement, the white

⁷⁶ “...Ve Senin Anayasan Der Ki,” 1, capitalization in original.

⁷⁷ The cover story was published anonymously, hence I refer to both Üzeyir Şenler (as the publisher) and Şule Yüksel Şenler (as the editor), but she was probably also the author of the text.

⁷⁸ Şenler, *Duyuşlar*, 297.

headscarf with needlework connoted innocence and it could provide Şenler with the protection of the discourse of tradition.⁷⁹

The left side of the photograph was illustrated as if it were torn, almost touching Şule Yüksel Şenler's shoulder, implying that the attacks on Şenler and her eventual incarceration had been severe, yet they had failed to harm the journalist permanently. The image thus suggested Şenler's resilience and power as well as her integrity. The void left by the torn part of the photograph featured the headline: "Şule Yüksel, Convicted to Twelve Months in Prison for Her Column Titled 'Cry, O My Muslim Brethren, Cry!..' Was Incarcerated on June 28, 1971." The strategic deployment of capitalization and font sizes made the headline read as "Cry, O My Muslim Brethren, Cry! Şule Yüksel Has Been Incarcerated." The sentence Şenler had used to describe the Pope's visit, which she perceived to be insulting Muslim Turks, now referred to her imprisonment, suggesting a continuum of humiliation and pain as it sought to mobilize affect.

⁷⁹ Tezcan, *Bir Çığır Öyküsü*, 156.



Figure 2. “A Clean Conscience Behind the Dark Bars,” the cover of the special issue of *Seher Vakti* devoted to Şenel’s incarceration, photographer unknown, 1971.



Figure 3. Şule Yüksel and her husband, *Seher Vakti*, 1971, Stüdyo Bella.

The special issue was largely devoted to celebrating Şule Yüksel Şenler's life and achievements, with multiple pages on her books and popular public lectures. In its account of

Şenler's trial, the magazine argued that her ideas were misunderstood or misrepresented.⁸⁰ According to *Seher Vakti*, Şenler's "behavior and defense at the court proved that only traitors would be afraid of justice and run away from it, those who are right and are on the path of Allah would not run away from Allah or justice."⁸¹ Given how Şenler hid for months and how the Nur movement interfered with her trial, this account misrepresented the facts to enhance Şenler's status as an Islamic icon of dissent.

The special issue also presents a glimpse into Şule Yüksel Şenler's everyday life, with a focus on her four principles: simplicity, cleanliness, humbleness, and serenity. As it claims to expose the human behind the icon, the text still contributes to Şenler's iconification by enhancing her relatability to the readers. Featuring a studio photograph of the newlywed Şenler with her husband Abdullah Kars, and mentioning her happy and peaceful home, the text seeks to produce compassion and empathy in the readers as well.

On the special issue's back cover is a photograph of Şenler sitting in a meadow by a tree, smiling. The black-and-white photograph is cut in the shape of a cloud and pasted on a background of clouds. In cultural productions about prison, the sky, with its depth and unboundedness, often stands in contrast with confinement and signifies a longing for freedom. By placing Şenler among the clouds, the image alludes to the concept of freedom associated with the sky. Rather than reproducing the stereotypical image of the prisoner looking at or reaching out to the sky, however, the image depicts Şenler in the clouds to present her as the very embodiment of freedom. In prison iconography, the sky also emerges as a view that the incarcerated and the free may share. In this image, Şenler takes over the sky as an ideal figure that everyone should literally and figuratively look up to. The sky's association with angels, combined with her happy and peaceful demeanor, implies Şenler's innocence as well.

⁸⁰ "Şule Yüksel Mahkemedi," 11.

⁸¹ "Şule Yüksel Mahkemedi," 11.

Başyazarımız Şâle Yüksel'e, en yakın
zamanda Hürriyet'e kavuşması dileğiyle...

HÜRRİYET

Okul defterime
Sırma ağaçlara
Kumlar karlar üstüne
Yazarım adımı

Okunmuş vapraklara
Bembeyaz sayfalara
Taş kırık kâğıt yığına
Yazarım adımı

Yıldızlı tasvirlerle
Toplara tüfeklere
Kralların tacına
Yazarım adımı

En güzel gecelere
Günün ak ekmegine
Nişanlı mevsimlere
Yazarım adımı

Gök kırpıntılarına
Güneş küfü haruza
Ay dirisi göllere
Yazarım adımı

Tarlalara ve ufka
Kuşların kanadına
Gölge değirmenine
Yazarım adımı

Fecrin her soluğuna
Denize vapurlara
Azgın dağın üstüne
Yazarım adımı

Bulutun yosununa
Kasırganın terine
Tatsız kaba yağmura
Yazarım adımı

Parlayan şekillere
Renklerin çanlarına
Fizik gerçek üstüne
Yazarım adımı

Uyanmış patıkaya
Serilip giden yola
Hıncahın meydanlara
Yazarım adımı

Yanan lamba üstüne
Sönen lamba üstüne
Birleşmiş evlerime
Yazarım adımı

ki parça meyvaya
Odama ve aynaya
Boş kabuk yatağıma
Yazarım adımı

Obur köpekçigime
Dimdik kulaklarına
Acemi pençesine
Yazarım adımı

Kapımın eşigine
Kabıma kacağıma
İçimdeki aleve
Yazarım adımı

Camların oymasına
Uyanık dudaklara
Sükutun ötesine
Yazarım adımı

Yıkılmış evlerime
Sönmüş fenerlerime
Derdimin duvarına
Yazarım adımı

Arzu duymaz vokuğa
Çırcıplak salınlığa
Ölüm basamağına
Yazarım adımı

Geri gelen sağlığa
Kaybolan tehlikeye
Hatırasız ümide
Yazarım adımı

Bir tek sözün sekiyle
Daimiyetli hayata
Senin için doğmuşum
Seni haykırmaya

Hürriyet...
P. Eluard

ŞAİRE "HÜRRİYET" DEMİŞ, BİZ
"HAK" DİYORUZ.



Figure 4. "Liberté," the back cover of the special issue of *Seher Vakti*, artist unknown, 1971.

Around Şenler's image, the collage features Paul Éluard's 1942 poem "Liberté" ("Liberty"), translated as "Hürriyet," with a dedication note to Şenler, wishing for her to become free soon. Expressing the Communist poet's desire for liberty at a time when France was under the German occupation, the poem lists the various places, both real and imaginary, where Éluard writes the word *liberté*—including "the foam of clouds,"⁸² where Şenler is located in the collage. *Seher Vakti* thus appropriates a poem by a European Communist to further its anti-Communist agenda. The poem ends with a note, however: "The poet says 'liberty,' we say 'Al-Haqq.'" Al-Haqq, meaning the truth, is one of Allah's names. The brief note thus emphasizes that even though Şenler and fellow members of the Nur movement value freedom, their ultimate dedication is to Allah and the divine absolute truth. As such, Şenler's being located in the clouds signifies not only her ultimate freedom but also her proximity to Allah, which Münevver Ayaşlı had also suggested in her allegorical story.

Two months after Şenler's incarceration, President Cevdet Sunay issued a pardon for her. Nevertheless, she rejected the pardon and remained in prison until her release nine months later.⁸³ Following Said Nursî's teachings, Şenler also used incarceration as an opportunity for proselytization.⁸⁴ During her incarceration, while *Seher Vakti* and some of her other allies struggled to consolidate Şule Yüksel Şenler's image as an iconic prisoner, the support they could receive from the broader Islamist press remained relatively limited. On the one hand, with the coup by memorandum on March 12, 1971, shortly before Şenler's incarceration, several Islamist periodicals, including *Bugün*, had been closed. On the other hand, the growth of the Nur movement had led to conflicts within the group. Şenler's criticism of the movement's involvement in politics and business made her the target of

⁸² Éluard, *Selected Poems*, 75.

⁸³ Beşinci, "Şule Yüksel Şenler," 100.

⁸⁴ Şenler, *Her Şey İslam İçin*, 195.

attacks.⁸⁵ Moreover, her popularity and success sparked jealousy among members of the movement.⁸⁶ In the almost exclusively male world of Islamic intelligentsia at the time, the attacks on Şenler and the limited support she received possibly had a misogynistic aspect as well.

While consolidating her iconicity, incarceration also provided Şenler with a lasting shield against her Islamist critics. When the magazine *İslami Hareket* (Islamic Movement) criticized Şenler for her use of terminology associated with Marxism in 1978, for instance, they had to acknowledge her incarceration. Again, their praises for Şenler had misogynistic undertones as well: “For us, the name of Şule Yüksel Şenler will always be respectable and admirable as she wore a headscarf and proselytized Islam at a time when the bigotry of revolutionism was extreme, she performed a quite big service for fellow women, and she was awarded (!) with the system’s cold prison walls for the services she performed despite being a woman.”⁸⁷ While ostensibly praising Şenler’s service to Islamic movements, the text still marginalized her as a woman. Even more importantly, the only concrete reference to Şenler’s work in the text is her headscarf activism despite the much broader scope of her efforts.

Although Şenler returned to her career upon her release, she could not find a place in the periodicals affiliated with the Nur movement, such as the newspaper *İttihad* (Union).⁸⁸ In the 1980s, following her marriage with a member of the İsmailağa Community of the Naqshbandi Order, Şenler joined this more conservative community. She limited her contact with her old circles and largely ended her career as a public speaker and columnist. While Şenler was away from the public eye, political Islam began to gain unprecedented power in Turkey. Following the coup d’état in 1980, the junta government adopted “the Turkish-

⁸⁵ Çiftçigüzeli, “Şule Yüksel Şenler; Yüreğini Tam Yansıtamamış Bir İstanbul Hanımefendisi.”

⁸⁶ Çiftçigüzeli, “Şule Yüksel Şenler; Yüreğini Tam Yansıtamamış Bir İstanbul Hanımefendisi.”

⁸⁷ İslami Hareket, “Şule Yüksel Hanımefendi İçin: ‘Bu Vesileyle Usul Üzerine Birkaç Söz,’” 2.

⁸⁸ Çiftçigüzeli, “Şule Yüksel Şenler; Yüreğini Tam Yansıtamamış Bir İstanbul Hanımefendisi.”

Islamic synthesis” as its official ideology.⁸⁹ The ideology retained its power during the successive center-right Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi) governments (1983-1991). At the same time, the Islamist right-wing Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) expanded its voter base, especially thanks to the efforts of its female members.⁹⁰ In 1996, the party formed a coalition government with the center-right True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi), and the Welfare Party leader Necmettin Erbakan became the prime minister.

On February 28, 1997, in what was later termed a “postmodern coup,” the military-dominated National Security Council issued a list of measures for the government to follow in order to prevent the Islamization of the public sphere and to foster the secular system.⁹¹ The February 28 Process (28 Şubat Süreci) severely affected the public sphere and restricted “religious activities with fundamentalist overtones”.⁹² A particularly important political development that also had high symbolic significance was the headscarf ban at universities, which prevented students wearing the headscarf from attaining higher education. The policy was not new; it had been implemented by the Board of Higher Education under the military regime in 1982, but it was not strictly enforced before the February 28 Process.⁹³ Also in 1982, a general regulation on the dress code of public employees had been issued. Banning the headscarf alongside many other things, this regulation was already enforced quite rigidly. In this oppressive context of state secularism, women wearing the headscarf emerged as the embodiment of the discourse of victimization deployed by political Islam, which played a fundamental role in the economically neoliberal, socially conservative, Sunni Islamist, and increasingly Turkish nationalist Justice and Development Party’s coming to power in 2003.

⁸⁹ Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey*, 10.

⁹⁰ Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy*.

⁹¹ Cizre and Çınar, “Turkey 2002,” 309.

⁹² Kaya, *Europeanization and Tolerance in Turkey*, 165.

⁹³ Kaya, *Europeanization and Tolerance in Turkey*, 162.

This context enabled Şule Yüksel Şenler to make a powerful comeback as an iconic figure with the rise of political Islam in the 2000s.

Conclusion

“Icons of dissent,” Jeremy Prestholdt argues, “are dynamic products of the communal imagination whose meanings are constantly changing.”⁹⁴ Şule Yüksel Şenler’s meaning and power as an icon of dissent has fundamentally transformed in the last two decades. Since 2002, Turkey has been governed by the Justice and Development Party. The strategies behind the party’s success have included their use of self-victimizing discourses and their construction of a new formulation of official history. In this paradigm, the history of the twentieth century is defined “as the struggle of democratic Muslim masses struggling against the authoritarian encroachments of the Kemalist civilian-military elite upon democracy and human rights” while the involvement of conservative nationalist politicians and masses in the atrocities committed during the single-party era (1923-1945) and its aftermath are whitewashed.⁹⁵ Women who cover their hair have emerged as the symbols of both the historical victimization of practicing Muslims and the social justice supposedly created by the Justice and Development Party.

Under the competitive authoritarian regime of Justice and Development Party, Şule Yüksel Şenler, an old family friend of the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reemerged as an Islamic icon of dissent. For political prisoners, iconification can involve a complicated bargain that amplifies their voices at the expense of oversimplifying or distorting their

⁹⁴ Prestholdt, *Icons of Dissent*, 4.

⁹⁵ Bakiner, “Is Turkey Coming to Terms with Its Past?,” 706.

ideological investments and actions. The case of Şenler demonstrates how the ostensible reduction and even erasure of the iconic prisoner's political investments may become a useful resource. As an Islamist intellectual from Turkey, Şenler was a product of the local ramifications of the Cold War global tensions. Her ideological stance, comprising of a strategically deployed constellation of Islamism, Turkish nationalism, anti-Communism, anti-Semitism, Christianophobia, pro-Americanism, and discourses of social and economic justice, was marked by critical tensions and contradictions. Even more importantly, by the time her former allies came to power in the 2000s, the hegemonic articulation of political Islam had fundamentally transformed. In contrast with her unpopular views against the Nur movement's involvement in business and politics, many religious movements had evolved into quasi-corporations with close ties to the government. Gentrification, which was a main theme in Şenler's novel *Huzur Sokağı*, and the broader construction boom were key factors behind the Justice and Development Party's supposed economic miracle as well as its catastrophic failure. The performance of urban Islamic femininity came to be associated largely with neoliberal consumerism and desire.⁹⁶ Within that context, iconification's blurring of Şenler's political views and experiences, further enhanced by the ongoing misogyny of Islamist circles who reduced her work to headscarf activism, enabled Şenler to integrate into a new regime—arguably the most oppressive (authoritarian) democratic regime in the history of Turkey.

Many major newspapers featured interviews with Şenler. Islamic youth magazines presented her as a role model. Youtubers who cover their hair interviewed her. Dormitories run by the government and non-governmental organizations in Turkey's different cities and even in Skopje, Macedonia, were named after Şenler. Her novel *Huzur Sokağı*, still retaining its popularity, has been adapted into Turkey's first mainstream Islamic television series. The novel's theatrical adaptation reached audiences across Turkey, often with the support of the

⁹⁶ Sehlikoğlu, *Working Out Desire*.

Justice and Development Party municipalities. In 2019, the Şule Yüksel Şenler Foundation was established, with the First Lady Emine Erdoğan on its Board of Trustees. The foundation is working to establish a museum, which will provide an Islamist alternative to the existing institutions in the field of women's history, such as the Women's Library and Information Center in Istanbul. Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party, Şenler's reinvigorated iconic image and the story of her incarceration have thus been utilized to celebrate the victory of political Islam and to legitimize the authoritarian atmosphere in Turkey, where many intellectuals from across the political spectrum are in prison or exile, and 160,169 people were put on trial for insulting the President between 2014 and 2020.⁹⁷

What is striking about the contemporary circulation of Şule Yüksel Şenler's story is the persistent references to the School of Joseph in the competing claims for victimhood. At Şenler's funeral in 2019, the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan delivered a eulogy, where he praised Şenler as "an epitome of perseverance, struggle, and faith."⁹⁸ Using the opportunity to define Turkey's past as a time when the country suffered in the hands of coup organizers and military tutelage, Erdoğan stated that "she went through the School of Joseph as well."⁹⁹ It is worth noting that in the propaganda documentary *Usta'nın Hikayesi (The Story of the Master)* made in the aftermath of the Gezi Protests in 2013, Erdoğan had also narrated his own experience of political imprisonment with reference to School of Joseph.

Just as Erdoğan referred to Şenler's as well as his own incarceration to present her and himself as followers of the legitimate fraction of political Islam who have been victimized by secularism, dissident Islamic groups facing persecution and incarceration refer to the School

⁹⁷ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'a Yönelik 'Hakaret' Soruşturması 160 Bini Geçti," <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2022/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogana-yonelik-hakaret-sorusturmasi-160-bini-gecti-6904900/> (accessed June 18, 2020).

⁹⁸ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Şenler'in Cenaze Törenine Katıldı," <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-senlerin-cenaze-torenine-katildi> (accessed June 18, 2020).

⁹⁹ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Şenler'in Cenaze Törenine Katıldı."

of Joseph to criticize the government. These groups range from the Kurdish Sunni Islamist political party Free Cause Party (Hür Dava Partisi or HÜDA-PAR) to the staunch anti-secularist Criterion Foundation (Furkan Vakfı) to the apocalyptic movement the End Times Mujahideen (Ahir Zaman Mücahitleri ve Mücahideleri) founded by the Islamic creationist Adnan Oktar, also known as Harun Yahya, to the government's former ally Fethullah Gülen's transnational Service (Hizmet) movement.

Just like Şenler and the Nur movement, these groups also produce texts and images about incarceration as they struggle to constitute their leaders or members as iconic figures, create sympathy for their cause, and express demands for their release. Digital media technologies enable these cultural productions to reach a much broader audience than Şenler's allies could at the time of her arrest. By defining their experiences of incarceration with references to Said Nursî, contemporary Islamic groups try to situate themselves within a mainstream and—within the hegemonic Islamic social imaginary—legitimate genealogy. This strategy also helps Islamic groups differentiate themselves from other prisoners of Turkey's neoliberal Islamist regime, whom they may perceive as deserving incarceration, such as secular Turkish nationalists, socialists, liberals, and Kurds. The afterlives of Şenler's story and the experiences of contemporary Islamists demonstrate how the powerful discourse of victimization has associated incarceration with legitimacy and political power among diverse groups in a fragmented Islamic public sphere, and how the discourses and practices of incarceration retain a critical role in Turkish politics.

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