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Which Citizens Solicit Street-Level Bureaucrats and Why? Insights from Turkey's Muhtars

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SLB from the clients' perspective

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Which citizens solicit street-level workers and why? Insights from Turkey's muhtars

Muhtars (headmen) in Turkey are elected frontline workers operating at a very local level—that of a neighborhood or village. Their specificity is strong social and local embeddedness. The people they administrate are at the same time their neighbors and constituents. Besides, their work is organized in a much less bureaucratic manner than that of other frontline workers. Muhtars are not specialized but operate in several domains - mostly administrative work, social assistance, and service delivery. While most administrative procedures can be implemented both at muhtars' offices and in other administrations - and sometimes online -, many people still turn to muhtars.

Therefore, turning to these street-level workers is a choice by the users. Not all citizens make use of the muhtars to the same extent or in the same way. The paper therefore analyses which citizens tend to solicit the muhtar, and in which instances. Disadvantaged groups—be it economically, socially, or culturally—solicit muhtars more frequently. Interestingly, they turn to them with all kinds of requests - including for issues for which muhtars have no official responsibility.

The paper then questions why these residents make such broad use of muhtars. First, muhtars come across as being more accessible than other officials. This is certainly linked to their closeness to, and dependency on residents for reelection. Second, citizens expect muhtars to stray from the official precepts supposedly guiding them – much more than what Lipsky described for street-level work requiring 'responsiveness to the individual case' (Lipsky 1980/2010: XII). It is commonly believed that in Turkish administration, nothing works according to the rules, and that intercession proves crucial (Secor, 2007; Yoltar, 2007). Most citizens turn to muhtars expecting them to intercede with institutions on their behalf. Soliciting street-level workers often appears as attempts to bypass official rules (Massicard, 2022).

This work is based on in-depth qualitative fieldwork conducted in Istanbul over more than two years in the 2010s, constituting mainly of observation and interviews.

Introduction

Turkey has a specific figure in terms of street-level work, the *muhtars* – they are elected headmen/headwomen operating at the outer edge of institutions. *Muhtars* are clearly "street-level", since they operate at a very local level—that of a neighborhood or a village, i.e at a scale of a few hundred or thousand people. However, they are not really "bureaucrats". On the contrary, they are characterized by strong social and local embeddedness, and their work is organized along principles clearly different from those in other state institutions—to put it bluntly, in a much less bureaucratic manner. That's the reason why I prefer calling them "street-level workers" or "frontline workers" rather than bureaucrats. Muhtars operate in several domains - mostly administrative work, social assistance, and service delivery. They act as intermediaries or gate-keepers between residents and other institutions (municipalities, sub-governorships) that provide resources (public services, benefits, etc.). In a nutshell, the muhtarlık—a word referring to the institution or office itself— can be considered as a non-bureaucratic, embedded, multipurpose frontline mitigating between the state and the public.

Since the late 2000s, many public services have become computerized and databases set up. As a consequence, most administrative procedures that can be implemented at muhtars' offices can also be carried out in other administrations - and sometimes online. Many citizens still turn to muhtars, while others tend not to. This gives rise to an interesting situation where turning to these street-level workers is a choice by the citizens.

This situation provides for interesting research questions. Which citizens tend to solicit the muhtar - and which do not? For those who do, in which instances? Finally, why some people attend the muhtarlik where other people tend to get the same service among other, more bureaucratic institutions?

This paper is based on in-depth research on muhtars (Massicard, 2022). Most of the empirical material was collected through qualitative fieldwork conducted in Istanbul over more than two years in the early 2010s while I was living there. I conducted interviews, archival work, and observations of interactions between citizen and muhtars. I conducted my investigations in contrasting neighborhoods in Istanbul with varying levels of wealth and marginality, so as to get an idea of the ways in which the muhtarlık is being "used".

The first part presents the specificities of the muhtarlık in Turkey's broader administrative framework. Second, it shows that the recourse to the muhtars is socially situated, and that it is much more widespread among disadvantaged people. Finally, it analyses the reasons of this recourses, showing which advantages citizens expect from the recourse to these street-level intermediaries.

1. A localized and embedded street-level enclave in a broadly bureaucratized landscape

A multipurpose frontline

Muhtarlık is a very old Ottoman institution that appeared in the 1830s. It has been tasked with several official duties over time - maintaining the civil register, issuing certificates, enforcing laws and instructions, informing the security forces of suspicious or wanted people,

identifying future conscripts, and drawing up electoral lists, among others.[1] Many subsequent laws and regulations not directly relating to the muhtarlık have entrusted it with new tasks, for instance in welfare distribution. It would therefore be hard to draw up a precise list of muhtars' official responsibilities, but they can be said to operate mainly in administrative work (in particular, certification and citizen identification) and to assist the public authorities in service delivery—and in some instances, policy implementation—with a certain variation over time and space.

The muhtarlık, then, comes across as a local multifaceted institution with which citizens may come into contact for many different reasons. As a multipurpose, everyday point of contact between state and society at a very local scale—there are slightly more than 50,000 of them nowadays—, the muhtarlık is one of the main institutions through which Turkish citizens experience the state. However, muhtarlik is not the only frontline through which citizens get in touch with official institutions. They operate in a broadly more bureaucratic administrative framework.

Embeddedness and electedness

Muhtarliks are very specific in the broader administrative context – to some extent, they constitute an enclave (Massicard 2024). Their most important specificity is that they are socially and locally embedded ; muhtars are part of the local community where they operate. Before being elected, a muhtar must have lived for at least six months in the neighborhood, though most have resided there for far longer. This local anchoring clearly distinguishes muhtars from other street-level public agents who, including in Turkey, tend to be external to the society in which they operate. This sets muhtars apart from bureaucrats as defined by Max Weber, i.e. through their distance from the people they administer. In general, the use of outsider officials, who are more likely to be autonomous, is thought to be a defining characteristic of bureaucracies.

On the contrary, local ties are constitutive of muhtars' role. Muhtars' official attributes presuppose their being anchored in local society. One of their main tasks is to vouch for the situation of the residents to public institutions—for instance, identifying suspicious individuals or reticent conscripts, or issuing residency certificates. This testifying role requires firsthand experience of living in the neighborhood on a daily basis. In other words, muhtars' social anchoring in a web of acquaintanceships underpins their official functions.

Besides, an important aspect of muhtars' relationship to their residents is that the latter form their electorate. This, again, implies specific types of embeddedness. Since 1980, muhtars are not elected on party tickets any more, which means that elections for muhtar are based mainly on personal resources, but more importantly, on strong localized social anchoring.

We may argue, then, that muhtarliks are the exact opposite of Herzfeld's bureaucratic indifference (1993).

[1] In addition, the 1944 village law tasked village muhtars with intervening in other issues, such as health, education, and security.

Duplicating

Since the 2000s, many public services have become computerized and databases set up. This is particularly true of the civil register, since the introduction of an address-based registration system. Therefore, many tasks previously carried out by muhtars alone can also be carried out in other administrations, resulting in a kind of duplication. Previously only muhtars issued residency certificates. Now, citizens can also obtain them from the district population bureau – which is a "classical" administration -, and even electronically, online. However, it also remains within the purview if muhtars, and many people still turn to muhtars to get their certificate.

The coexistence of several procedures to perform the same functions increases leeway for citizens, who may select their interlocutors, choose their procedures, and decide to a certain extent how they interact with the state, opting to address the muhtar or a more "classical" administration. What parameters govern these choices? In this complex set-up, why do some people in some situations view muhtars as more appealing than other gateways to the state?

2. An institution for the disadvantaged?

A way to approach this question, is to investigate which citizens recourse to muhtars. Indeed, not all citizens use the muhtarlık to the same extent or in the same way. There is no quantitative data on how many or how often people solicit their muhtar. However, observation shows that the uses inhabitants make of the muhtarlık vary in the light of certain social parameters. All the muhtars I spoke to declared that disadvantaged groups came more frequently to their office. On the contrary, educated groups with fairly stable or established positions rarely solicit the muhtar.

It is in poor neighborhoods–particularly in shantytowns and recently settled areas - that inhabitants use the muhtarlık most extensively. In the 1990s, muhtars of the recent and deprived district of Ümraniye (Istanbul) reported spending ten to twelve hours per day carrying out tasks which were not officially theirs, and that their offices were never empty. The numerous shortcomings of public facilities and institutions in recently settled areas, together with their distance from administrative centers may go some way toward explaining this (Erder 1996: 75). One of my interviewees, the muhtar of a deprived but gentrifying neighborhood, mentioned another factor that affects which people come to the muhtarlık as "having problems": "those in need come a lot, otherwise those with problems come". On the contrary, I could observe that, in established neighborhoods with facilities and comparatively wealthy and educated inhabitants, less people recourse to the muhtarlık. Another interviewee, a young female muhtar in a very wealthy neighborhood, said that: "it is rare for citizens to come in person, they tend to send their caretaker". In comparatively wealthy neighborhoods with blocks of flats and gated communities, caretakers are the main interlocutors for the muhtar, who has little direct contact with wealthy citizens. Within a given neighborhood there may also be differences in the use inhabitants make of the muhtarlık depending on their socio-economic status, which can differ markedly (Arıkboğa 1998: 128).

The lack of literacy or administrative skills – that broadly overlaps with poorness -

seems to be a factor of recourse to the muhtars. Indeed, educated groups who know how to access institutions rarely bother with visiting the muhtar. Nearly all the educated people I spoke with reckoned that muhtars do not have any power or importance. They rarely go to the muhtarlık. A thirty-three-year-old graduate who spoke several languages and lived in a middle-class neighborhood of Istanbul stated that "muhtars are of no use except if you have something to sort out with military service". He said he never went there and did not even know who he had voted for a year before (despite having studied political science). However, this distanced relation is also a way of asserting one's distance from a figure perceived as archaic, and from political practices commonly associated with working-class groups. One of my interviewees, a male muhtar of a very deprived and tense neighborhood, established a link between the level of education or administrative skills and the means used to contact the administration. He stated that "someone with a certain level of culture knows that the muhtar won't be able to do anything. They know it is not their job and won't go and knock on their door. They'll go directly to the [relevant] institution, open that door without any problems and get what they want. They know how public procedures work. In any case, they don't know the muhtar very well, and they don't come". About people with poor administrative skills, on the contrary, he contended that: "if they go directly to the [relevant] institution […], it's busy and they have no chance of having the procedure explained to them, or pleading their case or trying to convince someone [...]. Ultimately, here, it's the people who don't know how to go about things". In other contexts too, for illiterate or uneducated people, taking up their pen to write to an administration or fill out a form is far from being self-evident (Dubois 2010). [2]

It would be simplistic, but not completely untrue, to assert that the main users of the muhtarlık are the "disadvanteged", given their multiple and not always overlapping characteristics: those seeking social assistance, the illiterate, people with a distant relation to the administration, those in a legally awkward position, the elderly, people with problems. On the contrary, groups that have few or no links to the muhtar include in particular upper and educated middle classes, and people with caretakers or else living in gated communities, who draw on other intermediaries. People thus access the state in socially differentiated ways.

How is this situation to be explained? One possible explanation is linked to the duties of the muhtars, since some of their duties target specifically disadvantaged people. In particular, muhtarlik is an important institution to obtain social assistance. To a certain extent, this could explain that disadvantaged people tend to recourse more to muhtars. However, this explanation is not completely convincing. A revealing indication of this is where people choose to get a residency certificate. As already stated, this document can be issued either by the muhtar or from the population bureau, or directly over the internet. However, there is a difference: while it is free of charge to get it issues at the population bureau or from the internet, it is charged for at muhtarliks, which does make a difference, even if the fee is not that expensive. We would expect poor people to get theirs from the population bureau, since it is free of charge.

[2] Besides, there is a strong gendered dimension here. Women's (particularly elderly women's) written skills are notably is lower than men's. Women are often those in the family who go to the administration, or at least to the muhtar–as fewer of them work, they have more time to go during opening hours. They are also less literate. Moreover, it is often women who request social assistance, since unemployed able-bodied men are often ashamed to ask (Buğra, Keyder 2005: 27).

Interestingly, that's not what's happening: wealthy and educated groups tend to get theirs from the population bureau (free of charge), while disadvantaged groups tend to get theirs from the muhtar, even if they have to pay there. For instance, neighborhood B, a quite poor neighborhood, is only a few hundred meters away from the population bureau, and is easy to get to for all residents even by foot. The muhtar explained that wealthy people go to the population bureau to draw up their certificates. Interestingly, she reckoned that poor people, on the contrary, still come to her, but that she exempts them from payment, like many muhtars - something poor people may expect, but that is never guaranteed, however. This is a hint that something more than material interests are involved in the choice of how to interact with the state.

2. The advantages of street-level intermediaries

It makes sense to look not only at social characteristics of residents addressing muhtars, but also at their rationales to do so. What do people expect from muhtars? It seems that calling upon a personalized intermediary seems to be far more important for certain sectors of the population than for others. In order to explain this, it is important to question this against the general background of ordinary links to the state in Turkey.

Ordinary representations of the state in Turkey

The Turkish state is widely viewed as a state in which nothing works according to the rules, and where the average user is sent endlessly traipsing from one counter to the next (Secor, 2007). Secor has shown that in Istanbul in the 2000s, the predominant opinion was that bending the rules, in the form of bribery or through knowing people, was important or even necessary to receive public services. The state was thus experienced as unequal, unfair, and unreliable. In Turkey, people with access to the state, however slight, were viewed as privileged (Secor 2007, 41, 47). Similarly, Fliche has shown that in the early 2000s, Alevi villagers from central Anatolia developed a perception of the administration in which rigidly sticking to the rules alternated with bending them. The incessant switching from an official to an unscripted register, from the incorruptible to the bribable, generated anxiety among users, who were forever uncertain of the outcome of their dealings with the administration. They sought other types of interface than those laid down by the legal framework, drawing on "other" connections, mostly informal, which were more effective than impersonal administrative relationships (Fliche, 2005).

The advantages of closeness and accessibility

This background is key to understand why some people recourse to muhtars. In Turkey, officials have traditionally based their claims to governmental legitimacy on standing above the people—what Babül calls "bureaucratic distinction" (2017, 42–43) - which, as she argues, is particularly strong in Turkey. On the contrary, muhtars are close to the residents. Conversely, people often consider the muhtar to be one of their own (Arıkboğa 1998, 162). This is very noteworthy in working-class neighborhoods: while muhtars might figure among those who have done fairly well for themselves, their immediate relatives and entourage tend

to still include people with modest living standards and little education. It is rare for muhtars to treat these disadvantaged populations scornfully or condescendingly—a common occurrence in many other state institutions. As a result, muhtars come across as being more accessible than other officials.

Babül further notes that "[bureaucratic] distinction requires government workers to disengage themselves from the community as much as possible, and prohibits them from undertaking the sorts of mundane activity that might put them in contact or on an equal footing with the people whom they govern" (2017: 47). This, again, distinguishes muhtars from other officials. The muhtarlık is very much embedded within local social relations. The muhtarlık relies on familiarity (Siblot, 2006)— to a greater extent than any other official institution in Turkey (Yildirim, Ucaray-Mangitli, and Tas, 2017, 669).

This has important effects on the relationships in the muhtarlıks. As local leaders anchored in local society, muhtars are aligned with local communities' interests and dynamics. As muhtars receive no administrative training, they remain firmly anchored in their own groups of origin. The norms and moral values underpinning their action therefore resemble those of their constituents. They care about what happens to the local population (Bhavnani and Lee, 2018).

Looking for backing and intercession

We can go a step further and state that muhtars, because they are elected, are dependent on those they administer, for it is they who elect them. This leads them to try to satisfy their voting public. This implies a relation of mutual yet unequal dependency. This specific relation between muhtars and inhabitants means that the average resident can legitimately ask for something to the muhtar, much more than to any other official. The muhtarlık is thus the only administration in which citizens exert a certain power over the person sitting behind the desk.

In a way, people indeed often turn to *muhtars* less for purely administrative procedures than to get advice, guidance or to plead their cause. Inhabitants view the muhtar as a multipurpose resource person who should be capable of providing solutions to their problems. As a middle-class youngster interviewed in Istanbul by Secor declared: "When you go to the muhtar, he is supposed to do something, because he is your muhtar" (Secor 2007, 38). The public expects the muhtar to look after matters referred to them, and to ensure that residents' requests and complaints are addressed. People expect the muhtar to relay their requests and also, often, to give them their backing or else intercede with institutions on their behalf. In other contexts, frontline workers may operate as crucial gateways to institutions while also generating specific forms of trust (Peeters, Dussauge, 2021).

One further dimension of this is the relative leeway muhtars enjoy with regard to procedures. Akarsu has noted that in Turkey, people want everyday officials to bypass tedious procedures while performing official work (2020, 35). Observation of the interactions between residents and muhtars shows that residents consider muhtars as granting access to the state in a way less hampered by rules and formalities. Having no budget, muhtars are more or less shielded from hierarchical authority. There is far less hierarchical control over muhtars than over any other kind of official. They therefore have considerable "administrative autonomy"—or, put differently, limited obligation to comply with prescribed institutional practices (Dubois 2010,

5). Muhtars may thus stray significantly from the official precepts supposedly guiding them. They make decisions in the absence of clear formal guidelines and follow weakly formalized working procedures (except for identity documents). This leads to weak professional norms and operating procedures, and may be thought to foster discretion.

Do they use that leaway? The answer is yes. As a matter of fact, muhtars do adapt how they function to better serve their residents. They spare their inhabitants administrative "hassle" or facilitate procedures, by drawing up paperwork over the phone, for example, or handing a document to a third party or even delivering it to someone's home. They help with their applications, help navigate administrative procedures—and at times even carry them out in their stead or support requests by residents in front of institutional actors.

In fact, the imperative to serve their inhabitants incites muhtars to routinely tinker with the rules. Muhtars sometimes bend the official order to fit residents' demands, sometimes managing to stretch the rules for their benefit. Muhtars often deem it legitimate to defend their constituents' interests against an official order widely perceived as unfair—even by them. They sometimes take this accommodating attitude to the point of turning a blind eye when a requisite is missing, or giving their inhabitants "tips" on how to dodge rules and especially sanctions. These arrangements can extend to infringements of the institutional order, as when a muhtar registers someone under a false address for the purpose of school enrollment, or divulges supposedly confidential information. Muhtars thus do much more than just help residents cope with administrative red tape. The fact that they can—and are sometimes prone to—adapt or even infringe rules may be considered their true "added value" in comparison to an impersonal administration.

Similarly, in her study of the green card scheme in the 2000s, guaranteeing free access to health services for the poor under legally specified criteria, Yoltar shows that the uncertainty characterizing the complex landscape of social assistance fueled citizens' impression of arbitrariness, generating suspicion and the feeling that things were unforeseeable. This, in turn, fueled demands for support and intercession (Yoltar, 2007). Applicants endeavored to maximize their chances by employing various tactics to ensure they obtained the card, even if it meant circumventing the official rules. Again, this type of tactic entailed drawing on privileged ties to reduce administrative burdens and uncertainty. All these studies show that muhtars are among the figures people turn to for this type of undertaking. Muhtars are thus solicited by applicants to support their attempts to influence a procedure.

Most muhtars do produce and perform precisely this image of serving residents: they proudly distance themselves from any purely administrative rationale. In general, they make it a point of honor to provide individualized responses—even when it far exceeds their official tasks. This goes much further than what Lipsky described for street-level work requiring 'improvisation and responsiveness to the individual case' (Lipsky 1980/2010: XII). Not only do muhtars accept solicitations, they also publicly express and display their devotion to their residents and present themselves as acting as their advocates. The muhtars' performance of championing their constituents is intended to reinforce their legitimacy and popularity. In overseeing multifarious requests, muhtars enhance their own image as problem solvers—which is, in a way, their "added value" for residents. They thereby reinforce their image as interlocutors who may be called on for specific goals, while fueling the image of deficient or

otherwise inaccessible institutions, together with the belief that intercession can be effective in dealing with institutions.

Conclusion

Turkey presents an interesting schoolbook case where citizens can choose for some procedures to recourse to street-level workers or to more distant (even electronic) administrations. These two ways to access public services and papers strongly differ from each other, since muhtars' street-level work operates along specific lines (especially embeddedness) as a kind of non-bureaucratic enclave. In this respect, muhtars provide specific interstices for accessing the state that work along specific, non-bureaucratic lines.

Interestingly, not all citizens prefer the bureaucratic or electronic channels. Which citizens chose each way of performing procedures is socially bound. Disadvantaged people tend to recourse more than the average to muhtars - which, to some extent, is linked to their closeness and to their competences – but not only. Muhtars also constitute a more flexible way to access officialdom ; they are often expected to act as means of redress and help to circumvent official procedures. Muhtars constitute a kind of accessible and negotiable face of the state within a broader, more bureaucratized and less flexible context.

The way inhabitants and muhtars perceive and engage with the muhtarlık cultivates the representation of a state with which one may negotiate, encouraging requests for intercession. Street-level work seems to be a way to access the state for people deprived from literacy and administrative skills, and/or an alternative to inflexible bureaucracy.

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