Allah, Bread, Freedom: Turkey's Muslim others and transnational mosques in Europe

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Abstract

Scholarship on political Islam has often addressed settings where Islamist movements and political parties operate as anti-colonial and oppositional entities. On the other hand, this article focuses on a less explored aspect of Islamist governmentalities in a case when Islamism becomes a part of the governing canon and rules over its Muslim others. I investigate situations where Islamist politics incorporates neo-imperial, nationalist, and colonial practices in creating a desired Muslim ummah at home and abroad. I explore marginalized critical discourses and praxes within this imagined Muslim ummah in Turkey and examine its transnational reverberations among the Kurdish and Turkish communities and mosques in Europe. In other words, I examine the dialectical relation between the formation of the Turkish Islamist canon and its non-Western critiques that comes from within and the margins through protests and critiques of Anti-capitalist Muslims in Turkey; examples of Civil Friday prayers (Sivil Cuma namazları) of the Kurdish imams; and the reconfiguration of Kurdish mosques of liberation in Europe. In doing so, I present how religious practices and discourses are instrumentalized for Islamist colonial governmentalities on the one hand but also serve as a decolonial critique to deconstruct contemporary Muslimness and open room for a plurality of Muslim perspectives excluded from the overly militarized and nationalist rhetoric espoused in Turkish Islamist discourses and practices.

Keywords Turkish Islam · Diyanet · Islamist civil society · Anti-capitalist Muslims · Kurdish diaspora · Transnational mosques

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Introduction

Each canon starts as a critique. Each critique can also generate a new canon as far as it resonates with the discontent of a wider community and accumulates the necessary means and power to implement its critiques. The reconfiguration of Islamist politics globally is a good example. Islamism as a political ideology arguably started as a critique of Western colonial practices and has become a part of anti-colonial and postcolonial struggles in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. As a result, Islamism has taken many shapes, often as a response to the exploitation of the land and resources of Muslim-majority countries at the hands of colonial and postcolonial administrations. This aspect of Islamist political thought and mobilization has been widely explored. Most studies have focused on examples of how Islamism operates as an anti-colonial or postcolonial movement, force, or ideology (Maussen et al., 2011; Motadel, 2014). Conversely, this article focuses on a less explored aspect of Islamist governmentalities in a case when Islamism becomes a part of the governing canon and rules over its Muslim others.

Components of the Turkish Islamist canon self-identify as a *mahalle* (neighborhood) to indicate the common interests and similarities they maintain against their political rivals (Özet, 2019), who are often understood within a religious (hence righteous) and secular (therefore immoral) binary. *Mahalle* connotes a community of believers sharing the same morals and politics, although its class component has significantly transformed during the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rule. It correlates to a power bloc comprising a conglomerate of Islamic networks, *cemaats* (communities), and institutions overseen and mobilized by the governing Islamist party. They often predate the AKP and come from various Islamist backgrounds, yet they accumulated power and reached exponential growth under the Islamist government of Turkey. The AKP relies on this power bloc for electoral success and implementation of its conservative policies. Members of this canon, or *mahalle*, retain certain autonomy in their pursuit of Islamist ideals and personal/collective gains. Nevertheless, they operate under an authoritarian Islamist governmentality that incorporates religious politics to consolidate power and mobilize the masses. Through ethnographic research evidence, I argue that Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottomanism, and a quest for global Muslim leadership are integral to this Islamist canon. It aims to monopolize Islam and form an imagined Muslim ummah at the service of the Turkish state's political interests. I examine the accumulation of power and canonization of Islamist governmentality under the AKP's rule in Turkey since 2002. Nevertheless, I present examples of non-Western critiques that come from within and from the margins of this canon and investigate how religious texts, spaces, practices, and prayers are transformed into an alternative religiosity that resists the utilization of faith and imposition of nationalist agendas.

By relying on multi-sited ethnographic research in Turkey, France, and the UK—and interviews with Kurdish imams working in Germany—I propose that the dialectical relationship between the Turkish Islamist canon and its critique

from within provides us with an opportunity to rethink how contemporary Islam is constructed and deconstructed. In other words, I present how religious practices and discourses are instrumentalized for colonial governmentalities on the one hand and serve as a decolonial critique to deconstruct the canonization of Islamist politics and contemporary Muslimness on the other. I argue that the omnipresence of religious references in Turkish political discourses and practices in the past 20 years, both nationally and transnationally, has created a religious field in which multiple actors constantly construct and deconstruct what it means to be Muslim and how Islam is understood in this dialectical relation (Türkmen, 2021). Although the Islamist government of Turkey constantly seeks to monopolize the *mahalle*, growing discontent and critique from Muslim actors and a new proliferation of Kurdish mosques across Europe are indicative of a radical transformation that undoes the binary of prayer and protest. In the empirical sections, I present examples of counter-hegemonic discourses emerging from anti-capitalist Muslims and Kurdish imams who expand the interpretation of religious texts in defense of freedoms and Kurdish civil rights. In this, I argue that Kurdish imams and anti-capitalist Muslims are making room for a plurality of Muslim perspectives excluded from the overly militarized and nationalist rhetoric espoused in Turkish Islamist discourses and practices.

Following this introduction, the article is divided into three sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I focus on the transformation of the Turkish Islamist canon in the national and transnational fields and examine how Islam is instrumentalized by the ruling Islamist government and its *mahalle.* I focus on the instrumentalization of civil society organizations and transnational Turkish mosques for power consolidation, electoral mobilization, and promotion of an Islamic fraternity to overshadow ethnic differences and civil rights of non-Turkish and non-complicit Muslim citizens. In the remaining sections, I investigate the critiques from within and from the margins of the Turkish Islamist canon by focusing on how religious practices and texts are transformed into critiques and protests by anti-Capitalist Muslims and Kurdish Muslim others. The article concludes with a comparative analysis of the dialectical relationship between the canon and critique in the context of Islamist politics in Turkey and the transnational mosques in Europe.

From *Mahalle* to transnational mosques: reconfiguration of the Turkish Islamist canon

The modern secular Turkish nation-state was born from the ashes of the collapsing multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire. The nationalist and secularist project of the founding Kemalist elites, *Laïcité Alla Turca*, was not a complete separation of religion and state affairs but rather the nationalization of Islam at the service of the new nation-state. The Turkification of the call to prayer *(ezan)* (Azak, 2010); the transformation of mosques into cultural centers (Ulutas, 2010: 393); the abolishment of the caliphate; the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) (Gözaydın, 2009); closures of religious orders and Sufi lodges; Latinization of the Turkish alphabet; and laws regulating religious attire were just a few

examples of the new Turkish state's policies to transform a traditionally religious society into modern and secular one—most often by force. Although many of these early strict secularist policies were reversed in the following decades, the secularist state's intervention into Muslim spaces, politics, and practices continued to evolve and periodically manifested via military coups and memorandums. As a result, these discriminatory and oppressive policies left a lasting effect on how practicing Muslims in Turkey envision state, power, and politics and how they self-identify as a community (*mahalle*) sharing common interests against their secularist rivals. The Kemalist centralizing approach to religion might have marginalized the rural religious masses and suppressed religious orders, communities, and organizations for a period. But most of them survived less visibly and found more exhaustive correspondence among a growing population in the following decades.

Islamist politics in Turkey started as a critique of these strict secularist policies which had alienated many Muslim constituents. The first Islamist political party, the National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi), emerged in the 1970s at a time when mass migration from the countryside to the urban periphery gained momentum, and the contentious politics between the left- and right-wing organizations polarized the youth and the working class. As a result, a conglomerate of Islamic networks, communities, and organizations—sharing similar goals but differing interests and methods—continued to mobilize the conservative rural populations and rural migrants on the outskirts of industrializing cities in the 1970s and 1980s. The political parties of the National Vision Movement (Milli Görüş)[1] and the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis[2] received support from the conservative and rural Sunni masses and became part of coalition governments throughout the 1990s.

There emerged Islamist nationalist political parties bolstered by popular support from the newly urban masses, *the neglected Turks*. This was the early formation stage of the Turkish Islamist canon. The post-1980 military junta favored them against the alleged threat of Communism, and the 1982 Constitution—which remains intact in spirit to this day—introduced compulsory religion classes in secondary schools and religious policies to form a nationalist religious constituency. The military junta's plan was not to transfer power to the emerging Islamic movement but to reinforce society along with a Turkish nationalist

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[1] Milli Görüş Hareketi (National Vision Movement) is an Islamist political movement established by Necmettin Erbakan in 1969. The movement founded a number of political parties one succeeding another as they were banned on grounds of violating Turkey's secularist legislation. Following the closure of Refah Partisi (the Welfare Party), the movement divided into two political parties (Felicity Party and Justice and Development Party), the latter received popular support and have been in power since late 2002. In a way, the Milli Görüş Movement has served as an incubation ground for Islamist politics and movements across Turkey and still holds a strong ground among the Turkish diaspora and transnational mosques in Europe. For further information, see Yang and Guo 2015.

[2] Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (Türk İslam Sentezi) is a form of Muslim religious nationalism that perceives Islam as the defining characteristic of the Turkish nation. It emerged in the 1960s as a counter ideology against secularist Turkish nationalism and gained more support and power following the 1980 military coup, whose leading generals have identified themselves with this ideology on occasion. For further analysis, see Turkmen who traces the historical roots of this ideology back to the late Ottoman period (2021: 125–130).

Sunni identity. The Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) of the National Vision Movement entered the Turkish Assembly in this environment in 1991 and became the first party in the 1996 elections to form a coalition government with the center-right political party of Dogru Yol (The True Path). The growing public support for an Islamist political party was perhaps not what the military envisioned when they increased the instrumentalization of religion at the service of the nation-state. However, they did not shy away from intervening once again via a military memorandum on February 28, 1997, that resulted in the resignation of the coalition government and the implementation of discriminatory policies toward Muslim citizens. Among these discriminatory policies, the headscarf bans and the prevention of İmam Hatip students from attending their chosen higher educational institutions created a lasting sense of victimhood and societal belonging to the same *mahalle*. At this stage, shared victimhood and perceived injustice were major social capitals consolidating the growing *mahalle*. Nevertheless, The National Vision Movement split into two blocks of traditionalists and reformists, represented by the Felicity Party and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) once the Welfare Party was banned by the supreme court in 1998. The AKP gained the majority seats in the assembly when they came to power in 2002, relying on public discontent amidst a national financial crisis following the 1999 Marmara Earthquake. The AKP's ascent to power marked the beginning of a reconfiguration among the Islamist *mahalle*, transforming it from a critique to a powerful canon in the process. They have expanded from moderate-size organizations of believers to consolidating Islamist AKP's rule over the country in the last two decades. The shared victimhood has provided a discursive tool to consolidate the *mahalle* under the AKP hegemony against the threat of *28 February, never again*!

In post-2002, the cooperation between the Islamist civil society and the governing Islamist party consolidated a "neighborhood alliance" and created a power bloc facilitating conservative social policies to transform society into a pious and loyal entity. Sociologist Serif Mardin coined the term *mahalle baskısı* (neighborhood pressure) in 2007 to describe a kind of collective persuasion exercised by the religious to make people act, think, and behave as themselves (Çakır, 2008). This pressure has been evident from the AKP's policies and practices over the last two decades. The transformation of the Islamic *mahalle* from a conglomerate of small networks to a powerful ruling bloc under the AKP indicates the canonization of Turkish Islamism and the transformation of power from former elites to the emerging green bourgeoisie.[3] However, this canonization did not happen overnight. Many components of this canon also reconfigured their positions in response to changing power configurations within the 20 years of the AKP government.

What enabled the AKP to come to power was the liberal turn in the discourse of its founders that convinced the masses of a promise to change. In the first few years of its administration, the AKP benefitted from this support and made attempts at reconciliation with the Kurds, Alevis, and non-Muslim minorities who have been

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[3] Green refers to the preferred color of Islamist politics.

systemically excluded from power and discriminated against since the foundation of the Republic, if not long before. In the meantime, the AKP also faced threats from judicial and military memorandums and changed alliances and discourse to fend them off. By 2013, the AKP and its significant ally, the Gülen Movement,[4] broke the alliance over corruption investigations and became eternal enemies. This transition enabled the smaller Islamist groups of the *mahalle* to thrive by cutting new deals with the government via civil society organizations. The crisis with the Gülen movement ended the liberal turn for the AKP and marked the beginning of an authoritarian turn guided by Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottomanism, and an increasing claim for global Muslim leadership.

To this end, the Islamist AKP has been implementing conservative and religious policies, increasing the numbers of religious Imam Hatip schools, allocating national and international funds to Islamist CSOs, promoting members and leaders of religious organizations and Islamic sects (tariqat) to higher administrative and influential positions, increasing the number of mosques and religious infrastructures in the country and abroad, and consigning public procurement to loyal Islamist individuals and organizations. Under the AKP administration, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet),[5] for example, reached its optimum level of influence, expanding religious services to mosques in far corners of the world. Beginning in 2010, the Diyanet increased its activities by establishing transnational Muslim networks, constructing new mosques across the globe, and appointing imams and religious personnel. As of 2017, Diyanet had mosques and representatives in 102 countries across North and South America, Europe, Africa, TransAsia, and the Balkans.[6] In addition, the new Diyanet TV and radio stations provided a venue for Diyanet outreach; family and guidance centers were built (Adak, 2020; Kocamaner, 2019), and female preachers (Maritato, 2015) and Quranic courses for girls (Kız Kuran Kursları) became key institutions to implement gender-tailored outreach to create "a pious generation" (Lüküslü, 2016). The Diyanet, in this era, became a representative of the new *Yerli* and *Milli* (homegrown and national) identity imposed by the

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[4] The Gülen Movement (Hizmet Movement) is an Islamist fraternal organization led by the Turkish Sunni preacher, Fethullah Gülen, who has lived in the USA since 1999. The movement has been an important ally and supporter of the AKP between 2002 and 2013. During this period, they also gained significant footing in numerous state institutions, especially in the education industry, the police force, military, and the judiciary. Once the AKP and the Gülenists eliminated the military threat and weakened the influence of the Kemalist secularist elites in the military and judiciary, problems started to arise between the two allies. The 2013 corruption investigation by the pro-Gülen officials in judiciary, police, and media was the first major breaking point between the groups, after which they remained antagonistic with the ruling party. In 2016, a failed military coup attempt perpetrated by the Gulenists in the military and police force served as a ground to further prosecute the organization, who have been declared a terrorist organization (FETO) and suffered massive purges, persecutions, and discrimination of all sorts. Since then, the organization has kept a low profile and continues its activities outside Turkey.

[5] Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) is the official state institution overseeing and administering over 85,000 mosques in the country and around 2000 mosques abroad. It was established in 1924, following the abrogation of the khalifate by the new republic. The Diyanet has been utilized by the governments in order to create complicit religiosity with a Turkish nationalist and statist undertone. For further information, see Gözaydın 2009.

[6] https://www.diyanet.tv/-diyanet-102-ulkede, accessed on 21.10.2020.

AKP (Mutluer, 2018:15). By implementing these policies, the Islamist government was able to consolidate its voting base, intervene in regional politics, mobilize the masses, and address the century-long Kurdish question via the promotion of an Islamic identity surpassing the ethnonational dissidence of Kurdish citizens.

The AKP's most considerable success has been instrumentalizing religious institutions and civil society organizations to generate political-economical situations that mobilize its base. For example, colossal projects and protocols have allowed the pro-government Islamist CSOs to operate within schools, recruit volunteers, collect donations, and provide training. In recent years, the National Ministry of Education (MEB) has signed protocols with Islamist organizations such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH),[7] the Ensar Foundation,[8] TUGVA/TURGEV[9] (run by Erdoğan's children), and the Hizmet Foundation.[10] Both the government and Islamist organizations benefit from this alliance in different forms. The government consolidates its voting base by creating a green bourgeoisie with shared values and mobilizes them when necessary. The Islamist organizations can maintain their recruitment activities via state-originated funds: they build new houses and dormitories; organize workshops, training, trips, and events for students; and hold regular religious classes and conferences within schools and public institutions. To this end, Islamist civil society and the Diyanet have become the operating front of the Turkish Islamist canon under the AKP. The Islamic dormitories, charities, and humanitarian activities provide services to the poor and needy, yet also recruit youth and volunteers. Furthermore, engaging with this volunteering work comes with certain privileges afforded to the members of the CSOs, and as a result, they are populated by so many who have so little.

Allah, Bread, Freedom: the Leftist children of the Islamist *Mahalle*

Nevertheless, the formation of an Islamist canon by the AKP is met with critiques and resistance by several groups, organizations, and individuals from the margins of the AKP's imagined Muslim neighborhood. Within and beyond Turkish borders, critical Muslim voices have been challenging prevailing Islamist narratives and practices, transforming prayers and religious spaces into platforms of resistance. Despite the hegemonic power of the *mahalle*, there are significant counter-narratives, critical individuals, and organizations among my research participants in the Islamic circles,

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[7] https://www.ihh.org.tr/her-sinifin-bir-yetim-kardesi-var (Each Classroom has an Orphan Sibling), accessed on 30.09.2019.

[8] http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/egitim/mebden-ensar-protokolu-40534320 (a 5-year protocol that allows the Ensar Foundation to conduct workshops, projects, and training in secondary level and high schools. Values Education is one of the many examples. This protocol was partly canceled by the supreme court due to its illicit nature in the process), accessed on 30.09.2019.

[9] https://www.evrensel.net/haber/299359/meble-tugva-protokol-imzaladi, accessed on 30.09.2019.

[10] https://t24.com.tr/haber/meb-turgev-ve-hizmet-vakfiyla-imzaladigi-protokolleri-uzatti,837564, accessed on 30.09.2019.

such as the madrasa-educated Kurdish imams, Anti-Capitalist Muslims (Uestebay, 2019), Zehra Foundation (Atacan, 2001), Labour and Justice Platform, pro-Kurdish Democratic Islam Congress, and Azadi Movement. In the following pages, I will focus on a few critical trajectories stemming from the margins of the Islamist *mahalle* and investigate how structural inequalities, class, and ethnic identity have been the main ground of the discontent and resistance against the Turkish Islamist canon.

It should be noted that these counter-narratives and alternative approaches often encounter hostility from the *mahalle*, and the participants experience social and political pressure (neighborhood pressure) and prevention of their public events and activities. Although the material power and social base of the critical Muslim organizations cannot be equated to the power that the Islamist *mahalle* has accumulated in the past 20 years, they are still feared for the critiques they pose in the face of growing discontent among the young generations, who have only experienced Islamist politics as a form of powerful, authoritarian, but corrupt governmentality. For example, the Anti-Capitalist Muslims' participation in the International Workers' Day under the banner of "Allah, Bread, Freedom" (Allah, Ekmek, Özgürlük) in the central Taksim Square of Istanbul and their funeral prayers protest in the Fatih Mosque, for those workers whom the right-wing Turkish nationalists have killed, prompted moral anxieties and furious responses from the governing party and the Islamist *mahalle*.[11] According to the mainstream *mahalle* discourse, Anti-Capitalist Muslims' participation in the Workers' Day march was a radical divergence from Turkey's Islamic morals and Muslim politics. The *mahalle* presented Anti-Capitalist Muslims as a small radical group without ground among pious Muslims and continuously dismissed many challenges they posed to Muslim politics in contemporary Turkey. Despite the *mahalle* pressure, the Anti-Capitalist Muslims actively organized alternative events, such as collective fast-breaking iftars (yeryüzü sofraları) on the crowded Istiklal Street of Istanbul during the holy month of Ramadan to protest luxurious iftar dinners and the VIP pilgrimage of the governing party. Through these practices, they contested mainstream Islamism on many fronts through boundary-blurring between Islamist and Leftist repertoires (Yavaş, 2019).

In 2018, Istanbul, I asked Ebuzer[12] (28) what the cost is of receiving governmental support. Before initiating his network of solidarity with African immigrants, Syrian refugees, and internally displaced Kurds, he was an active member of Anti-Capitalist Muslims for many years. Ebuzer explained that "it requires a complete submission to the government and support to their policies." He explained how the Islamist *mahalle* targets critical Islamists by defaming them with infidelity and accusing them of supporting terrorism when they disobey the government's policies. He says that "if you ever want to receive any support for your humanitarian projects, 'you must join the National Will Platform *(Milli İrade Platformu, NWP)*.[13]

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[11] https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/iste-eliacikin-devrimcileri-3544.html, accessed on August 16, 2022.

[12] All names and identifying information have been anonymized for the safety and security of participants in accordance with ethics protocol.

[13] National Will Platform was founded after the political clash between the Gulenists and the AKP government in late 2013. Since then, the platform has served as a loyalty test for relatively small Islamist organizations to declare their support to the government, firstly, against the Gulenists. In return, the members of the umbrella platform are granted state funds via projects and grants.

Otherwise, you are labeled an opponent (muhalif) and cut off from any state-generated support." Similarly, another critical Islamist, Selman (43), a member of the pro-Kurdish Zehra Foundation, told me that they could not receive the approval to build a private school on their land because of their disagreement with becoming an NWP member. Although "several cabinet members and the MPs used to be active in our organization back in the 1990s, and wrote articles for our monthly magazine," he said that in one of their visits with a former member of the organization and current MP, he mockingly asked them whether they had become a member of the NWP. Hearing that his former organization did not wish to become a member, he rejected their request, and the problem remained unresolved for years. Another participant, Mirza (30), a Labour and Justice Platform member, told me that the government allocates buildings and properties to the loyal Islamist CSOs for their activities across Turkey. He said that he witnessed many cases in which the government appropriated several historical buildings in the UNESCO World Heritage site of Sur district of Amed (Diyarbakır), which had been significantly damaged during the urban conflict in 2016. The government allocated these historical buildings and the newly built structures to the pro-government Islamist CSOs. According to Mirza, this was a clear sign of support for the government during the urban conflict. By this allocation, "the government assured the demographic change by displacing the Kurdish residents of the neighborhood and assigned the historical buildings to the Islamist organizations" to ensure the creation of complicit Kurdish citizens. Mirza also mentions how these networks operate.

> For instance, they [the state] may allocate a house in Suriçi with a historical value to Islamist organizations for 30-40 years. Or, if they would like an Islamist organization, such as [pro-government] TURGEV, to grow, they require a contractor or a businessperson – to whom they have been allocating most of the government contracts – to help TURGEV financially so that they can expand in Diyarbakir. Thus, the network overgrows. Not just the big ones, though. Even a small neighbourhood association, which can propagate the government's agenda in their alleys, is given some funds by the government. A neighbourhood association would not expect to get a contract for a dam construction project anyway. Instead, their expectations will be proportional to their size and [scope of] influence. So, the proximity of the people involved in a complicit Islamist CSO and their material size determine how much they can expand and how much the state can fatten them. I think the network operates in a way where the small [size CSO] receives small benefits, and the big [size CSO] receives enormous [benefits]. Then the small CSO makes a small contribution [to the government's agenda], and the big CSO is expected to do more.

Turkey's Islamist governmentality employs these strategies to tackle social issues and transform society into a complicit religiosity, in which the state's hegemony is presented as sacred and unchallenged. Mirza points out that within 15 years, the government managed to create a green bourgeoisie via selective support to CSOs to consolidate its political base. He also mentions that it is complicated to trace these networks. In some cases, businessmen receiving public contracts are not directly connected to an Islamist organization, but they donate a considerable amount of

money to a CSO that the government has indicated as beneficial. Ebuzer also states that Islamist organizations experienced a massive transformation during the AKP period. He points out that most of these organizations were anti-state and very critical of legal activities for ideological reasons before the AKP government. He says these organizations observed the proliferation of civil society organizations in the early 2000s and "soon after, took part in to get their share." He believes that the Islamist CSOs were hypocritical in ignoring the country's underlying political issues and structural inequalities, instead focusing on charities and alms to tackle these problems. By doing that, he believes, "no one questions their goodwill, but a lot is happening behind closed doors."

> There has been a burgeoning expansion in the number of Islamist CSOs since 2008. I find it heart-breaking that some members of these CSOs avoided any involvement with legal activities and political actions as they considered these sinful acts, but now, they hurry up to open a legal CSO to get their share from the government. They ignore human rights abuses; they turn a blind eye to the crimes committed by the government. Because I think, with the AKP government, Muslims got the taste of capital and power. They were craftsmen and artisans before, but they have become middle-class bourgeoisie. They believe that they deserve all this earthly pleasure and wealth. These CSOs became the means to redistribute wealth among Muslims. Especially if you are a member of the NWP and helping a few poor people and students, then no one will question where the rest of the money goes. I am surprised to see that all these former Islamists, who have chased big ideals and dreams for ages and achieved nothing, are now swarming to Islamist CSOs like crazy.

Many other responses like these underline strong ties between the government and Islamist CSOs in several fields: charities, youth, and education-related projects, and public contracts in return for large donations to pro-state Islamist CSOs. The civil society front has evidently become a medium for the Islamist government to distribute wealth and create loyal entities to mobilize the masses for electoral success and power accumulation.

However, only a small number of Islamic organizations and individuals refrain from such funds and highlight that this requires loyalty to the agenda of the Islamist government. Their main critique relates to the structural inequalities and how the Islamist government utilizes them to form complicit entities. Here, the critical Muslims employ vocabulary borrowed from the universal values and socialist perspectives to craft an alternative religiosity that stands with exploited and opressed citizens, via blurring boundaries between Islam and left-wing practices (Yavaş, 2019). They manage to reach beyond their *mahalle* and present critiques that question the ontological aspects of contemporary Islamist politics in Turkey. In the next section, I will examine how Islamist *mahalle* utilizes Islam to suppress the Kurdish ethnic identity and demands for equal rights and citizenship. Finally, I will investigate how the Kurdish Muslims deconstruct this utilization through several civil disobedience practices in the country and the establishment of Kurdish mosques in Europe. I will specifically look at a historical figure, the rebellious Sufi Sheikh Said of Pîran, and how he is transformed

into a symbol of resistance and alternative religiosity in the transnational religious fields.

A liberation theology in the making: The Kurdish Muslim others

I have already discussed elsewhere that the Islamist governmentality of the AKP regime toward the Kurdish population is not a break from the assimilationist policies of the previous secularist governments but constitutes a new governmentality in which the internal colonial status of the Kurds is sustained through religious policies and discourse of religious fraternity (Kurt, 2019). The instrumentalization of Islamic symbols and fraternity by the Islamist *mahalle* is especially common in the Kurdish region and encompasses figures such as Sheikh Said, a prominent Kurdish Sufi figure who led a popular uprising against the newly founded Republic of Turkey in 1925. After the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, the caliphate was abolished on March 3, 1924, and replaced by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Gözaydın, 2009: 22–23). This decision and subsequent developments caused strong reactions in the Kurdish region, manifesting itself in several uprisings, beginning with the Kurdish National Rebellion under the leadership of Sheikh Said (Olson, 1991).[14]

Sheikh Said was the head of a powerful Sufi Naqshbandi order (tariqat) in the area and was well connected to the community leaders, imams, and seydas,[15] who studied in the family's madrasa and adhered to the Sufi order. Moreover, Sheikh Said was an influential tribal leader whose authority was acknowledged in the region. However, the new Republic's modernist and nationalist agenda threatened this inherited power and prestige. Robert Olson highlights that the main reason for the uprising was the new state's Turkification policies and centralization project: the tribal chiefs and sheikhs feared that these reforms would eradicate their traditional privileges and authority. Increasing taxation and negating the Kurdish cultural and political autonomy also fueled the uprising, which spread over several Kurdish cities within weeks (Olson, 2000). Soleimani concludes that for the Sheikh and his generation, Islam and Kurdishness were not two separate entities yet intertwined identities that complemented one another (Soleimani, 2016).

Within a month, the rebels controlled much of Eastern Turkey and marched to the Southeast. Many Kurdish political and religious elites supported the uprising and mobilized their armed force. However, some other Kurdish tribes allied with the Ankara government, which brought the failure of the uprising. Sheikh Said and his friends were finally captured at the end of May and brought to Amed/Diyarbakır. On the night of 29 June 1925, he and forty-six of his companions were hanged by the Independence Tribunal in the Diyarbakır Dagkapi square (Olson, 1991: 200–205)

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[14] Although Sheikh Said was the leader of the uprising and his followers composed the rebellion, a secular nationalist organization called Azadi whose aim was to establish an independent Kurdistan was also a major component. Yet, this group did not have enough power to mobilize masses for their nationalist goals.

[15] Seyda is an honorific for madrasa-educated imams.

Fig. 1 A banner hung by the AKP administration to welcome Erdoğan

and were buried in a ditch not far from the area. The exact location of this mass grave has remained a mystery and has become a collective symbol in the Kurdish public memory (Özsoy, 2013).

Although the state's discourse around the rebellion was extremely negative for much of the twentieth century—claiming that the Sheikh was a British agent—the AKP government did not hesitate to utilize Sheikh Said's name for political gains during the 2017 constitutional change referendum (see Fig. 1). The referendum was vitally important in implementing Erdoğan's presidential system. The instrumentalization of a rebellious Kurdish Sheikh at the service of the Turkish Islamists might sound contradictory. Yet, the AKP's utilitarian politics exploited the ethnic-religious divide in the Kurdish society to gain the support of the Kurdish Islamist groups (Kurt, 2019). Banners were hung across Amed (Diyarbakır) before the visit of Erdogan and prime minister Binalı Yıldırım to mobilize the Kurdish population after the political violence in 2015–2016. The banner read: "Every single 'yes' vote [to the constitutional change] is a prayer to the soul of Sheikh Said." The slogan targeted the pro-Hüda-Par[16] neighborhoods in Diyarbakır and sought to attract their supporters.[17]

Nevertheless, the Sheikh also became a symbol of resistance to Kurdish liberation in the process. The rebellion became one of the events that have shaped Kurdish political imaginations to this day. Although the PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan's perception of the Sheikh was highly negative, and he described Sheikh Said as a counter-model to his ideology, the image of Sheikh Said in the Kurdish

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[16] A small Kurdish Islamist political party that succeded its underground armed organization, Kurdish Hizbullah (Kurt 2017).

[17] The alliance is not surprising given the political climate in Turkey in the past two decades. Any reference to Islam and Islamic figures since the AKP came into power in 2002 became more acceptable and rewarding. The new elites of the state considered the Kurdish Islamists as a natural ally and supported them in their attempt to influence the political sphere in Kurdistan and divert the Kurdish youth from their national aspirations.

national movement was reshaped in the 1990s, and again in the 2000s, a transformation described by Özsoy as the three faces of Sheikh Said. In the 1990s, when the PKK became a mass movement, it claimed the legacy of Sheikh Said as an anti-colonial struggle and imagined Sheikh Said as a national hero (Özsoy, 2013: 210–215). Furthermore, the PKK's transformation from a Marxist-Leninist organization to a radical democratic federalist movement in the 2000s affected the ways in which the Kurdish political actors imagined Sheikh Said. The legal Kurdish party started embracing Sheikh Said and attended his commemorations during these years. Furthermore, Diyarbakır municipality changed the name of Dagkapi Square to Sheikh Said in 2014, and the demands for the lost graves of Sheikh Said and his friends became another symbol of the claim for justice and Kurdish civil rights.

Between 2011 and 2013, the biggest challenge to the AKP's religious policies came from the Kurdish imams who initiated the Civil Friday Prayers *(Sivil Cuma Namazları)* as a part of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party's (BDP) Civil Disobedience Protests. On April 15, 2011, thousands of people gathered in Diyarbakır (Amed)'s Sheikh Said Square to participate in a civil Friday congregation to listen to the sermons in Kurdish. The purpose was to protest the ban on the Kurdish language in state mosques and demand that religious services be provided in Kurdish. The protest was so effective that it spread across Kurdish cities and towns the following Friday and continued for 2 years until the government made a deal with the protest leaders to allow the usage of Kurdish in mosques where the majority of attendants are Kurdish.[18] This was one of the first examples of prayer turning into a collective protest against the canonization of Turkish Islam. As a result, the Prime Minister of the time, Erdoğan, accused the Kurdish imams of separatism and criminalized the participants of the Civil Friday Prayers.[19] The Islamist *mahalle* framed the event as another example of Kurdish nationalism (kavmiyetçilik) targeting the imagined unity of the Islamic fraternity and that the events were organized by "the head terrorist, Abdullah Öcalan."[20]

On the 90th year of Sheikh Said's execution in 2015, the pro-Kurdish HDP's MP Nimetullah Erdoğmuş, the retired Mufti of Diyarbakır, stated "the Kurds are becoming actors of the new history following the trace of these great characters. It is a shame that their burial place is still unknown and that the Kemalist mentality still prevails in the state administration. The Kurdish movement is on the stage to correct the mistaken direction of history."[21] His figurative speech indicated a new direction in Kurdish politics. Indeed, the retired mufti was initially appointed by Erdoğan himself to resolve the dispute over the civil Friday prayers, and his change of alliance (by becoming an MP from the pro-Kurdish HDP) was a shock for the government. From that point, Erdoğan started to call him the so-called Mufti (sözde Müftü).[22]

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[18] This has been reversed once the urban conflict started in 2015.

[19] https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/129155-sivil-cuma-namazi-kilindi, accessed on 09 June 2022.

[20] https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/secim-gecti-alternatif-cuma-namazi-bitti-325115, accessed on August 16, 2022.

[21] https://www.mynet.com/hdpli-erdogmus-rayindan-cikmis-tarihi-rayina-oturtmak-uzere-bugun-kurt-hareketi-sahnede-180101872041, accessed December 5, 2020.

[22] https://www.birgun.net/haber/diyarbakir-da-sozde-muftu-ege-de-escinsel-aday-gostermiyoruz-81786, accessed August 16, 2022.

Beginning on June 7, 2015, in the general elections, Erdoğmuş and several other Islamic scholars and activists became MPs of the pro-Kurdish HDP in the new parliament. During their addresses in the Turkish assembly and press releases, their critiques toward the governing Islamist bodies were deeply rooted in religious references and discourses aimed at advancing Kurdish civil rights and advocating for broader social and political inclusions of and equity for ethnic, religious, and secular others. The pro-Kurdish civil society, the Sheikh Said Association, and organizations such as the Azadi movement and the Democratic Islam Congress also contributed to the commemoration of the Sheikh, who had become a new symbol for the Kurdish national movement, reflecting the integration of Islam into the party's political discourse. This proved to be an effective strategy at the time, as was evident in the increasing support of religious Kurds to the HDP. However, this period was short-lived as the PKK's armed youth organization and the security forces confronted each other in urban centers from the summer of 2015 to the spring of 2016, which resulted in the death of around 2000 people, destruction of towns and districts, and displacement of nearly half a million people.[23] On July 15, 2016, the country faced a military putsch led by the Gülenist members in the army and police forces. The attempt failed, yet the government seized the opportunity to rule the country via martial law and emergency decrees. As a result, it eliminated many advances the Kurdish civil society had made in the 2000s. However, the image and symbol of Sheikh Said had already become a transnational symbol as many Kurdish mosques in Europe had started naming their places of worship after historical Kurdish Muslim figures such as Melayê Cizîrî, Mele Ehmedê Xanî, Feqîyê Teyran, Sheikh Said and Sheikh Mashuq Khaznewî.

Sheikh Said and the Kurdish mosques of liberation in Europe

Unlike the centrality of the mosques and religious organizations for the Turkish diaspora led by Diyanet (Kurt, 2022), the Kurdish diaspora mainly organizes around secular associations. Kurdish imams explain the abandonment of Turkish religious institutions by referencing the utilization of religion against Kurds in their homeland and, more recently, the suffering of Kurds at the hand of radical Islamist groups and terrorist organizations such as ISIS and the Turkish state's jihadist proxies in Syria. Beginning in the early 1990s, practicing Muslim Kurds disassociated themselves from Turkish mosques and started establishing their own places of worship due to the discriminatory attitudes they faced in the Diyanet mosques. The Unity of Religious People of Kurdistan (Yekîtîya Oldarên Kurdistanê) was established in 1991 and changed its name to the Kurdistan Islamic Society (Civaka Îslamî ya Kurdistanê, CIK) in 1993. The CIK serves as an umbrella organization for around eighty Kurdish mosques across Europe, primarily in Germany, France, Austria, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The Turkish state's propaganda often targets these mosques as

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[23] https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf, accessed April 11, 2023.

being centers of terrorism and separatism,[24] exploiting the religiosity of the Kurdish people and collecting donations for terrorist organizations (Bayraklı et al., 2019).

This was evident during my field research in the Turkish Diyanet mosques in France. Whenever I asked my research participants about the Kurdish mosques, they would agitatedly correct me that they are not Kurdish mosques but the PKK's centers and that they support terrorism. One afternoon, after finishing the Friday congregation, I asked Devlet Jr. (56), one of the managers of the mosque association in one of Paris's *banlieues*, what he thinks of the Kurdish Mosque nearby. He was very friendly until then, yet my question prompted a cold response. He refused to acknowledge that there is a Kurdish Mosque and said, "You mean the PKK's place? It is not a place of worship. It is a terrorist organization." I was not surprised that he had proudly mentioned that their mosque is a Turkish mosque inspired by Ottoman architecture, and he believed that the Turkish way of Islam is the most correct. However, he did not think that Kurdish mosques had any legitimacy and believed that "the PKK traps innocent Kurdish brothers" by establishing these mosques. I have discussed elsewhere the omnipresence of militarism and nationalism in the diasporic Turkish mosques, arguing that mosques for diasporic Turkish communities prevent, rather than engender, shared understandings of faith or common grounds for mutual dialogue between Kurds and Turks living in the diaspora (Kurt, 2022: 32).

The following week after my conversation with Devlet Jr., I decided to attend the Friday congregation in the Kurdish Mosque. I arrived at the door of the Sheikh Said Mosque in the same *banlieue*, where I found hundreds of Kurds populating the mosque that had been converted from a warehouse. Although I grew up speaking Kurdish as a son of a Kurdish Seyda, it was unusual to see so many Kurds gathering in a Kurdish mosque in Paris and praying in their native language. The imam preached in Kurdish, and his Quran recitation (maqam), was not what I was used to hearing in Turkish mosques. Although Mele Azadi was a Kurd from Turkey, he was trained at Al-Azhar University in Egypt following his education in a Kurdish madrasa in Siirt, Tillo. Following the congregation, Mele Azadi announced that there would be a funeral ceremony in the Kurdish community center nearby. The deceased (*merhum*) was an active member of several diaspora Kurdish organizations, including establishing the first Kurdish mosques in France. His son had fallen in the ranks of the PKK, and he was referred to as *şehîd* (martyr), although he did not die on the battlefield. Mele Azadi explained to me that the comrade spent years in a Turkish prison and, after arriving in Europe, continued suffering from many health issues because of years of torture. After the funeral, he would be transferred to his Kurdish village in Eastern Turkey to be buried in the family graveyard. This would be his first visit after 26 years of exile and in a coffin wrapped with a Kurdistan flag. I asked Mele Azadi if it would be possible to keep the flag while he is in Turkey, and he said, "No, this is impossible. We experienced many troubles with the Turkish embassy in order to bury our dead bodies in our land. See, we even need to found a Kurdistan to die at peace."

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[24] https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/pkk-icin-fitre-ve-zekat-topluyorlar-185657.html, accessed December 5, 2020.

After the funeral prayer and condolences, the Kurdistan flag was removed from the coffin, and the *merhum* was transferred to the airport, *dead and bare, without his flag*. On our way to a Kurdish restaurant, Mele Azadi told me about his madrasa years in Tillo/Siirt in Turkey, crossing to Syria and Egypt to further his religious training. He eventually ended up in Europe working as an imam in one of the first Kurdish mosques established in the 1990s. When we arrived at the restaurant, I met another Kurdish imam, Mele Şoreşger, who had come to attend the funeral from Germany. Mele Şoreşger escaped persecution in Turkey in the 1990s after the Turkish army threw his father from a helicopter. He was also detained and advised by someone in the courtroom to escape as soon as he was released, as he would be kidnapped outside the courthouse. During lunch, I asked Mele Şoreşger what the purpose was of establishing the Kurdistan Islamic Society (CIK) and opening Kurdish mosques, as he was also one of the first people involved in this process after arriving in Germany in the early 1990s.

> We aim to raise awareness against those who monopolize Islam and use it as a tool for their colonizing interests. The Turkish state wants to monopolize Islam for its political interests. The religion of Islam is not under the control of a particular person, nation, or ideology. Islam is a religion of peace, and every person and nation has a place within it. We aim to teach people about real Islam. For example, if we look at the life of Prophet Muhammed, we can see that Jews, Christians, and polytheist people were welcomed in his mosque. When these people had problems, they asked the Prophet for help. Therefore, we do not discriminate against someone's faith. We accept everyone into our mosque who respects humanity's values and is not racist.

Compared to Turkish mosques, Kurdish mosques in Europe are more appreciative of religious and ethnic diversity. In their sermons and preaching, they use verses from the Quran that highlight the diversity of humanity rather than triumph and conquest, as was the case in the Turkish mosques during the Turkish invasion of Syrian Kurdish territories in 2018 and 2019 (Kurt, 2022). For example, Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13, is frequently referenced in their sermons and preaching, which translates as "O humanity! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another." Mele Azadi explains why it is crucial for them to establish Kurdish mosques and criticizes Turkey's Diyanet for not allowing the Kurds to use their language in prayers:

> The Turkish state instrumentalizes many sheikhs of religious orders, imams, and mosques of the Diyanet for its benefit and ruling power. They have transformed religion into a business. They use religion as an instrument to advance their power and position. In Turkey, there are twenty million Kurds. However, Kurdish imams cannot use a single Kurdish word in their preaching, but we are free here and do not face restrictions because of our language. In our mosques in Europe, we are happy that we can pray and share the religion of the Prophet Mohammed in our language. There are also Arab, Pakistani, and Black people who visit our mosques to pray. However, a Turkish individual

has never come to our mosques to pray. In their view, these mosques are the mosques of terrorists.

This welcoming attitude and openness to other faiths and ethnicities propel Kurdish mosques to engage with the wider Kurdish community and to collaborate with members of different secular and religious organizations, such as Alevi, Yazidi, Assyrian, and Jewish communities, as well as their religious and official counterparts. In addition, Kurdish mosques in Europe are critical of using religion for political purposes. Nevertheless, they believe in the importance of Kurdish religious organizations in providing religious services to the Kurds and supporting Kurdish civil rights. From what I observed during my consequent visits to the Kurdish mosques around Paris and from my interviews with Kurdish imams working in France and Germany, the Kurdish mosques in Europe play a vital role for practicing Kurdish Muslims and serve as an important hub of solidarity for the Kurds in the diaspora. My research participants mentioned funeral services, marriage officiations and blessings, daily and weekly prayers, Ramadan iftars and events, and congregations as examples of their mosques' functions. They also stated that many diasporic Kurds abandoned the Turkish mosques, especially during the intensified political conflict in the 1990s and more recently during the Syrian War in the 2010s, and started establishing their own places of worship, the Kurdish mosques of liberation, as one of my research participants described while sipping our hot teas (kaçak çay/çaya qaçax) after a Friday congregation in one of Paris's *banlieues*. I asked them why they felt the need to do so, and many of them explained that the Turkish mosques in Europe propagate the Turkish state's discourse and invite the Kurds to submit to Turkishness rather than to a fraternity in which all Muslims would be treated equally and have equal rights. Many mentioned bad experiences with overt and covert racism toward their identities, politics, life choices, morals, and general physical traits. It was obvious that the Kurds were racialized in Turkish Muslim spaces and had been systemically discriminated against (Kurt, 2021).

Conclusion

Since the early 2000s, the notion of shared religion and Islamic fraternity has been utilized by the Islamist government of Turkey to govern its Muslim subjects and incorporate them into an ethnically blind supranational identity of an imagined Muslim ummah. As a result, religious politics has become an integral part of Islamist governmentality within and beyond the Turkish borders and created an Islamic canon in which Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottomanism, and Turkey's quest for global Muslim leadership are the main pillars. On the national level, the AKP consolidated its power over pious Muslim subjects and created complicit entities via Islamic CSOs and other state apparatuses that gradually fell under the control of the government. Internationally, the AKP increased the number of Turkish mosques and religious activities to widen its influence among global Muslim communities and mobilize its citizens beyond Turkish borders via Diyanet mosques.

However, this canonization is met with resistance within and beyond the Turkish borders, as is evident from the critiques of the anti-Capitalist Muslims, the Kurdish imams and mosques flourishing across Europe. Objections by these actors to the Turkish Islamist canon and their efforts to create inclusive religious spaces and practices show us, in this case, that religion is not only a tool of oppressive governmentality perpetuated by the Turkish state, but it has also started to serve as a platform of resistance for the Muslim others. However, canonic and critical religious institutions, infrastructures, and mobilization capacities cannot be equated in terms of their support and power. The Turkish Islamist canon and its infrastructures are more powerful and widespread, with massive organizational, financial, and political support from the Turkish government. Kurdish mosques in the diaspora and smaller critical Muslim organizations in Turkey rely on limited resources—primarily obtained through membership fees, rental incomes, and donations—and they operate as a conglomeration of a comparatively small number of organizations. Nevertheless, the development of Kurdish mosques outside of Turkey, the counter-hegemonic discourses of the Kurdish imams, and the critiques of groups such as Anti-Capitalist Muslims shape the formation of a discourse of liberation in the making. It calls for liberation from exploitation, colonial domination, and the utilization of religion for political purposes (Gutierrez, 1973). The proliferation of alternative religious spaces that blur boundaries between sacred and profane and religious and secular indicates a decolonial critique coming from indigenous Muslim perspectives, formulating a new discourse of liberation theology in the making.

Declarations

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