

Use of Past Collective Traumas, Fear and Conspiracy Theories for Securitization of the Opposition and Authoritarianisation: The Turkish Case

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Abstract: Several studies have analysed different aspects of Turkey's authoritarianisation under the AKP rule. However, there is still a gap in this literature with regards to the role of instrumentalization of narratives and discursive strategies in this authoritarian turn which has been successfully engineered by the AKP. This article addresses this gap and shows how securitising narratives based on fear, trauma, nostalgia, ontological insecurity, grievances, and conspiracy theories have been used by President Erdogan and his AKP as psycho-political tools of authoritarianisation. It argues that these tools have shown to be useful in securitizing the opposition to consolidate power, change the governing structure, and take other extraordinary measures, while legitimizing these acts for the public. In an attempt to provide a holistic picture, this paper analyses how the AKP has securitized almost all of the significant opposition socio-political identities, groups and parties in Turkey. This study contributes to securitization theory by shedding light on the use of traumas, conspiracy theories, and fear in the securitization process, in legitimizing securitization and authoritarianisation.

Key words: Authoritarianism, Securitization, Fear, Trauma, Opposition, Conspiracy Theories, Turkey, AKP

Introduction

Troubles of democracies in the face of the challenges posed by populists, far-right parties and movement and new generation of autocrats in countries as diverse as Brazil, Poland, Hungary, Russia, India, Russia, Venezuela, UK, USA and Turkey have paved the way for a plethora of new studies on autocratization and authoritarianism (see for example Diamond 2008; Bermeo 2016; Haggard and Kaufmann 2016; Altman and Perez-Lian 2017; Coppedge 2017; Snyder 2017; Cassani and Tomini 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann et al. 2018; Runciman 2018; Tomini and Wagemann 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Wiatr 2019). In almost all these cases, autocrats ‘shy away from sudden, drastic moves to autocracy and instead mimic democratic institutions while gradually eroding their functions’ (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1096). The terms that have generally been used to describe this phenomenon are democratic backsliding, breakdown of democracy, autocratization and authoritarianisation (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1098). In this regard, harassment of the opposition, subversion of horizontal accountability and self-coups have been studied widely (Diamond 2008; Svoboda 2015; Bermeo 2016). Limiting the media freedom and the space of civil society while leaving the institutions of multiparty elections in place (Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017) and gradual concentration of power in the executive, i.e. executive aggrandizement (Bermeo 2016; Coppedge 2017) have also been studied. These studies have shown how the new generation of autocrats do not oppose democracy but give it a special meaning by restricting ‘it to the expression of the will of the people, leaving aside the rule of law and the protection of human rights’ (Wiatr 2019, 175). These works have analysed how the autocrats establish political control over the judiciary to prevent independent courts from questioning their power; control mass media, particularly those which give them access to the less educated sections of society; and buy support of the poor by adopting populist policies of redistribution (Wiatr 2019, 176). Reasons for such support such as the reaction of the population to the prolonged crisis of the state, the deteriorating economic situation and corruption in Russia, longing for Soviet-style stability in Belarus; conditions of the economic crisis and massive corruption in Hungary; and high level of economic inequality in Poland have been analysed in attempting to understand the success of the autocrats and populists (Wiatr 2019, 175). Even though all these cases are different, they generally have one common trait: the populists and autocrats appeal to the real or imagined worries of the less privileged sections of society (Wiatr 2019, 177).

The success of the AKP's authoritarianisation in Turkey was possible largely because of a series of events in recent Turkish political history. The 2010 constitutional referendum (Kalaycıoğlu, 2011) gave Erdoğan a golden opportunity to consolidate AKP's power. The 2010 referendum introduced sweeping changes to the constitution, reorganising the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors in order to bring them under the government's control. The changes also reduced the military's power by restricting its privileges to intervene in social affairs and severely curbing the authority of military courts. Furthermore, in a series of investigations between 2008 and 2011 called Ergenekon and Balyoz, the AKP, with the help of the Gülen Movement, purged as well as put to trial tens of high-ranking military generals who were accused of plotting to overthrow the government (Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018, 1816). All these have ended the military's tutelage over elected politicians.

After a series of shocks, particularly, the Gezi Protests of secular sections of society in mid-2013 and later that year the anti-corruption investigations of 17–25 December launched by prosecutors widely believed to be Gülenists, Erdoğan and the AKP decided to strengthen their grip on power at the expense of democratic norms, by adopting a nationalist, divisive, and hostile discourse (Sawae, 2020: 259) and weakening checks and balances to target any opposing group in the society and the politics (Önbaşı, 2016: 276).

Erdoğan's power grab was cemented with the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. Erdoğan utilized the effect of the coup attempt to win the 2017 presidential referendum. This referendum in 2017, and the presidential election in 2018, allowed for the regime change from a parliamentary system into a presidential system and made Erdoğan not only the de facto but also the de jure hegemon in Turkish politics. All these changes in 2017 and 2018 'paved the way for institutionalization of a plebiscitary presidential regime that depends on a particular combination of supreme power of the leader, an extremely weak parliament, and elections of a plebiscitary character' (Yılmaz 2020, 265).

Scholars have analysed different aspects of this authoritarianisation. Yılmaz and Bashirov (2018, 1813) argued that the political regime in Turkey has evolved into 'electoral authoritarianism' and showed that regime and ideology that they call "Erdoganism" has features of electoral authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism, Islamism and populism. Some others have analysed how religion, ethnicity and power struggles have been instrumentalised in Turkey's authoritarian turn (see for instance contributions in Baser and Ozturk 2017). The erosion of the state-party boundary, the breakdown of the already weak division of powers and independence

of the judiciary, co-optation of business elites, direct or indirect control of the media, and uneven playing field in multiparty politics in favour of the incumbents have also been analysed (Somer 2016, 488). Use of emergency law, constitutional amendments, governmental control over the media and the instrumentalization of the judiciary during the elections, selective criminalisation of the opposition (Sozen 2019, 291-292) and electoral irregularities to enable authoritarianisation have also been studied (Esen and Gumuscu 2019). Some others have shown how, on the one hand, Turkey's authoritarianisation carries features of the global rise of autocrats, on the other hand, it is a by-product of Turkey's long-existing semi-democratic Kemalist tutelage regime (Somer 2016, 481).

However, few studies (see for some exceptions, Tansel 2018; Yilmaz and Turner 2019) have analysed how the AKP has discursively instrumentalised some narratives to achieve this authoritarianisation that provided Erdogan an executive presidency without credible checks and balances. This study addresses this gap by examining how past collective fears, traumas, and conspiracy theories were exploited by Erdogan, his AKP (Justice and Development Party) and his ally the far-right MHP (Nationalist Action Party).

Since at least the Gezi protests of mid-2013, by employing the politics of fear, Erdogan has rallied his supporters around an imminent danger to the national security narrative. During the referendum campaign in 2017, Erdoğan and his new ally, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), portrayed all those opposed to the proposed political system change as traitors and collaborators of the coupists (Yilmaz et al 2021, 12). According to this view, Turkey was divided into two: the patriotic natives and the traitors. While Erdogan has successfully claimed that his critics and opposition groups are existential threats to the country and the nation, he is the only credible leader who can challenge these threats. Since Turkey had suffered in the past from acute economic problems stemming from political instability and also suffered from terrorism, significant sections of society continued voting for Erdogan who presented himself as the anchor of stability and security. On the other hand, opposition groups and parties have been constructed as security threats. This paper shows how Erdogan has utilized the above-mentioned psycho-political tools and successfully securitized almost all significant opposition groups and parties. We are of the view that securitization is the most appropriate theory to analyse this specific but significant manifestation of authoritarianisation that enabled the incumbents to discursively marginalise and disempower the opposition in Turkey.

This study contributes to securitization theory by shedding light on the effect of these instruments, namely traumas, conspiracy theories, and fear, in the securitization process, in legitimizing securitization, and the role of the functional actors. This paper also contributes to the extant literature on Turkey's authoritarianisation under the AKP in two important ways. First, it looks at this phenomenon through the lens of securitization through exploitation of past traumas, fear and conspiracy theories. Second, it attempts to provide a holistic picture by the AKP's securitization of almost all significant opposition socio-political identities, groups and parties in Turkey.

This article proceeds as follows. It, first of all, looks at the use of securitization, fear and trauma to consolidate power and repress the opposition. The article, then, focuses on Turkey's collective historical traumas and its main factor of ontological insecurity that resulted in its ambivalence towards the West. Next, the paper particularly looks at opposition groups in Turkey and how traumas, fears, and conspiracy theories have been used to securitize them. We look at the opposition groups in four main categories: disloyal secular elites, Alevis, the disloyal practicing Muslims and Islamists, and the disloyal Kurds. Then the paper concludes.

Use of Securitization, Fear and Trauma to Repress the Opposition

Authoritarian regimes and leaders have used securitization extensively to extend their power, and to legitimize both their regime and their repression of the opposition. It is a profound element that helps maintain authoritarian regimes' resilience. The core claim of traditional securitization theory is that security must be understood as a speech-act, not only a sociological and explanatory tenet. By uttering security keywords, a ruler claims a special right to use whatever means necessary to prevent the threat (Buzan, Waever and DeWilde 1998, 26).

There are three main ways of dealing with political issues: non-politicization constructs an issue as unimportant and not for discussion; politicization accepts the importance of an issue but leaves it to the public to debate before policymakers make a decision; and finally, securitization fills an issue with an existential importance to be dealt with by higher levels of government (Buzan, Waever and DeWilde 1998; Buzan and Hansen, 2009).

Among the most important building blocks of securitization is the referent object, which is given existential importance. The actors or objects that are threatened 'can be extended to include actors and objects well beyond military security of the territorial state' (Williams 2003,

513). The survival of the referent object is linked to the survival of the wider community, usually the nation and the state, but not always limited to them. The political elite use securitization as a tool to convince the public when they want to use extraordinary measures, by arguing that there is an existential threat to the referent objects such as the community, nation or the state and only coercive or repressive measures will suffice to deal with the threat(s) (Buzan, Waever and DeWilde 1998).

Securitized issues are not open to public debate, but rather policymakers are granted the sovereign right to take any measures they deem necessary to deal with the issue. To get this 'right', the securitizing actors present their case to the audience, which usually means to the people, who then give them the right to use extraordinary means that would not normally be used against the threat. However, the audience does not need to give written or verbal consent, silent consent means that securitizing actors (in this case the government) feel entitled to use any means against the perceived threat. After an issue is set in the agenda and the audience has accepted the reference objects' existential importance, the security actors build coalitions among different audiences (Leonard and Kaunert 2011, 67), including different publics, political audiences and political supporters (Roe 2004).

Fear, trauma, and conspiracy theories are particularly used in securitization. In an atmosphere where there is fear, it is easier to argue the need to use extraordinary means. Fear prevents rationality, and people are more likely to give the right to use extraordinary means to the government to guarantee their security (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008, 94). In some cases, association with certain groups, discrimination, marginalization, and context can securitize an issue more effectively than the traditional securitization means of associating the referent object and threat with security keywords. Two of the most essential features in securitizing certain policy areas are the vilification of opponents, and the conspiracy that foreign 'others', together with their domestic collaborators, are plotting against 'us'.

Historically rooted trauma, nostalgia, ontological insecurity and grievances of the nation are in some cases used for securitization (Shipoli 2018, 81). Historical trauma, in particular, is used in multiple securitizations and it can be used at different levels, in different contexts, in different events, and in different regions (Shipoli 2018, 81). A simple example is the securitization of Islam in the United States' and references to apocalyptic war, call from God, crusade, biblical wars, and significant wars in American history, such as Pearl Harbor and Pig Bay, constantly used by the Bush administration in the wake of September 11 (Shipoli 2018, 177).

This paper contributes to the theory of securitization by using Turkey as a case study. It studies how fear, trauma, nostalgia, ontological insecurity, grievances, and conspiracy theories are used in securitization, and how this helps authoritarianisation.

Turkey's Collective Traumas and Ambivalence towards the West

The fear of loss of territory is an important one, as it was a major concern for the late Ottoman Empire and continues to be a major concern in the current Turkish national psyche as well (Göçek 2011, 41; Alaranta 2020, 269). The Empire's main decline came with the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji in 1774, and resulted in the Ottomans accepting the supremacy of European powers by 1921 (Yilmaz 2021, 8). In the 1800s, millions of Muslims escaping ethnic cleansing in the lost territories in Crimea, the Balkans, and the Caucasus fled to the Ottoman heartlands, creating additional trauma for the local population (Yilmaz 2021, 8). In addition to deep traumas stemming from the gradual dissolution, disintegration and eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire and centuries long humiliation of losing wars at the hands of the big Western powers and the former Ottoman subjects such as the Balkan nations (Ozturk 2021), ethnic cleansing of Muslims and Turks in the lost territories in the Balkans and Caucasus, Turkey's ruling elite suffered also from ontological insecurity (Zarakol 2010).

This ontological insecurity had spatial and temporal dimensions. Turkey was always seen as a bridge between the East and the West but not actual part of the West. It could not align temporally with the West and has been behind in the process of modernisation, always seeming 'backward' in comparison, and seen as uncivilised, savage and brutal by the powerful, dominant and hegemonic West (Capan and Zarakol 2019, 269). Thus, the Turkish state did not have the same legitimacy of existence as the civilised states, which were seen as having a right to colonise as part of their civilising mission (Zarakol 2010, 8).

Since the nineteenth century, Turkey has been trying to overcome this insecurity by espousing, emulating and transplanting Western educational, political and legal constructs and institutions. On the other hand, the deep suspicions about the West's true intentions in relation to the Empire, and later Turkey, have been embedded and still remain in the mind of the Turkish people. However fierce the debates are, Turkish political leaders saw Western civilisation as the only civilisation to be emulated, although this determination has not detracted from anxieties, insecurities and fears about the true intentions of the powerful Western states. In this context, Turkey's ambivalent relationship with the West and the international system has been

repeatedly debated (Ahıska 2003; Rumelili 2003; 2011; Bilgin 2009; Yanık 2009; Zarakol 2010; 2011; Bagdonas 2012).

The shrinking of the Empire left its traumatic mark on the national memory and motivated the subsequent Kemalist Turkish nation-building project. Fearing that, similar to the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, Turkey would also be divided by the Great Powers along ethnic lines, the Turkish establishment elite tried to homogenize the nation and undertook a ‘Turkification’ project as part of its ‘modernization’ (Jongerden 2007: 213). As a result, non-Turkish Muslim identities were securitized and constructed as existential threat to Turkey after the establishment of the Turkish nation-state that aimed at homogenization of the population to prevent foreign interference (Birdisli 2014; Geri 2017; Weiss 2016; Ozpek 2019).

The Kemalists sought refuge in a narrative about external forces, internal citizen enemies and constant anti-Turkish conspiracies, traps, plots, and games. The fear and victimhood discourse have been well consolidated in the Turkish national psyche and many believe in this collective victimhood of Turkish people as a nation, especially at the hands of Western imperialist forces (Jung 2001, 149; Şirin 2020, 77). This deeply internalized mentality is based on the deep suspicion of the true motives of Western countries over the possible annihilation, abandonment or betrayal of the Turkish state (Kalaycıoğlu 2005, 37; Göçek 2011, 99; Nefes 2015, 575; Şirin, 2020, 75). Kemalists viewed ethnic and religious diversity as being inherently dangerous because of its potential to fracture the Republic (Kehl-Bodrogi 2003, 64; Göçek 2011, 131; Adar 2018, 741; Çapan and Zarakol 2019, 272).

All of these traumas, anxieties and fears were perpetuated in education (especially history), media, and popular culture to create desired citizens, warn them against external and internal existential threats, and mobilize them for the nation state (Göçek 2011, 41; Alaranta 2020, 269; Yılmaz 2021, 8).

Despite Turkey’s participation in NATO and the EU accession process, Turkish nationalism has been accompanied by intense isolationism and suspicion of outsiders. Even at the peak of Turkey’s EU accession period, opinion polls still showed fear and distrust of foreigners imbedded in cultural memories of European interventions during the last years of the Ottoman Empire (Haynes 2011). Not only the Kemalists, but other sections of society and especially the Islamists have also been under the influence of the deep mistrust towards the West. Thus, the Islamists under Erdoğan have successfully used these sentiments to construct the opposition as

extensions and tools of mischievous foreign powers, thus security threats to the nation. This discursive tool is one of factors that enabled and facilitated the AKP's authoritarianisation.

In the following sections, we will analyse how Erdoğan and his AKP have securitized disloyal secular elites, Alevis, disloyal practicing Muslims and Islamists, and disloyal Kurds.

Disloyal Secular Elites

In the Erdoğanist imagination, the 'outsider' groups that have been co-conspirators of the West include secular Turks such as Kemalists, leftists, liberals, democrats and most of the urban educated people. These are often cast as elites (*Beyaz Türkler*, White Turks) that Erdoğanists accuse of being out of touch with the 'real', authentic values of 'the people' (Çapan and Zarakol 2019, 276).

The resentment and vindictiveness of Islamists towards the West extends to these secular elites who are 'viewed as a product of Western cultural imperialism and an oppressor of Turkey's Muslims' (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016, 510). Kemalism's aggressive secularization rhetoric, policies and embrace of Western lifestyles drove the Islamist perception of the Kemalists as enemies of true Turkish culture, values and traditions that are embedded in the Ottoman past and Islam. The pejorative figure of the White Turk is constructed as someone who sees practicing Muslims as provincial, lower class, and ignorant in order to define its own (secular, civilized, and Westernized) identity and to justify its authority. In the Erdoğanist narrative, the White Turks are portrayed as responsible for anything that goes wrong in the country (Yılmaz Z. 2017, 499). The arrogant, elitist, and anti-Islamist White Turk is a particularly popular theme among Turkish-Islamist media intellectuals. The spectre of the past Kemalist regimes plays an important narrative role, illustrating what would happen to 'the people' if Erdoğan loses power (Çapan and Zarakol 2019, 276).

The anti-Kemalist and anti-CHP (Republican People's Party) sentiments of Islamists, Erdoğan and AKP are well known. Thus, it is important to give some examples in relation to non-Kemalist secular sections of society to portray this narrative against the secular Turks, better. On 11 January 2016, 1128 academics in Turkey and abroad, under the banner of Academics of Peace, signed a petition calling on Turkish authorities to cease state violence in the mainly Kurdish-populated areas of the country that had been under curfew and an extended state of emergency. Erdoğan accused the signatories of treason and terrorist propaganda and demanded

that prosecutors launch an investigation. Hundreds of trials have taken place for these academics, and 32 have been sentenced to up to three years' imprisonment (Başer, Öztürk and Akgönül 2017, 274).

The *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, which employs both leftist and pro-Kemalist journalists, has been targeted as well. A Turkish court has sentenced 13 *Cumhuriyet* journalists to prison on terrorism charges, in a case that sparked global outrage over press freedom. The AKP accused *Cumhuriyet* staff of supporting groups it had labelled terror organizations, including the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the ultra-left Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front, and the Gülen Movement (BBC 2018).

The government also launched a major crackdown on liberal and leftist journalists, such as Ahmet Altan, Mehmet Altan, Şahin Alpay, Mümtazer Türköne and Nazlı Ilıcak, as well as dissident Islamist journalists like Ali Bulaç who was Erdoğan's advisor when he was the mayor of Istanbul (Amnesty 2019). There are many examples of the purge of leftist/liberal journalists and opinion leaders, from Ahmet Şık to Can Dündar, Kadri Gürsel, and Osman Kavala to name a few. The Gezi Park trial represents yet another attack on the liberal and leftist sections of society (HRW 2019).

By linking her to 'terrorists,' Erdoğan also securitised Meral Aksener, an opposition leader who formed the Good (IYI) Party after she left the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which is now in alliance with Erdoğan. He called Aksener to 'Look at the ones serving time in prison, the FETÖ (Fethullahist Terror Organisation) members serving time, you can find yourself in the same position' (Ahval 2019).

On 27 February 2019, one month before the municipal elections in Turkey, Erdoğan tweeted a picture and an explanation that these elections were about two opposing alliances in Turkey: the Republican Alliance, of his AKP and MHP, and the Mortification Alliance, referring to the National Alliance, in which the Republic Party (CHP), the Good Party (IYI), and Felicity Party (SP) aligned alliance to oppose Erdoğan and the MHP. Erdoğan chose to substitute the word that the opposition alliance used, Millet (National), with Zillet (Mortification) to give another meaning to the opposing alliance, while in front of the Republican Alliance he put the star and crescent of the Turkish flag (Erdogan 2019a). This picture that Erdoğan tweeted claimed that his Republican Alliance was established in the street on 15 July 2016 (referring to the people rising against the coup attempt); that the party is at the disposal of the nation; that it is the

advocate for the right and truth; that it stands with the oppressed against the oppressors; that it will last to the grave and not only to when financial interests end; and that all it wants is to serve the people.

Internally, Erdoğan used the rise of Islamophobia to target anyone who criticized him or Turkey. For example, when the terrorist attack in a New Zealand mosque coincided with the local election campaign of Erdoğan. The whole world came together, refusing to show footage of the attack. However, Erdoğan used the footage at two local election rallies to construct a Crusader-Christians-attacking-Muslims narrative and claiming, ‘Together with all Muslims, our country, our nation and myself are targeted,’ (Erdoğan 2019b). He played the New Zealand footage of blurred images but with the sound of automatic gunfire, followed by a cut to the main opposition leader, Kilicdaroglu, talking of ‘terrorism rooted in the Islamic world’ (BBC 2019). Erdoğan then thundered ‘Mr Kemal is hand-in-hand with terrorists!’ (BBC 2019). Kilicdaroglu would also be repeatedly attacked by Erdoğan for being an Alevi. Erdoğan’s securitization of Alevis is briefly discussed in the next section.

Alevis

Alevis in Turkey are a non-Sunni Muslim community. They constitute about 7–10 per cent of the Turkish population and are the second largest religious group in Turkey after Sunnis. However, Alevi identity was consigned to invisibility by the Kemalists who were suspicious of the Alevis as they were stigmatised as descendants of the Ottoman Alevis and Bektashis who revolted against the Sultan and cooperated with Safavid Iran. Thus, they continued to be regarded as suspect, a potential fifth column, and thus were continuously under surveillance (Dressler 2015, 2). They were also seen open to Communist infiltration (Lord 2019, 58).

Initially, the AKP government adopted a friendly approach, in contrast to the Kemalists. They tried to achieve this through the Alevi Opening (Uyanık 2009, 305; Borovalı and Boyraz 2015a, 356). When the AKP realised that this would not be possible, it turned again to re-securitisation (Yılmaz and Barry 2020a). After the outbreak of civil war in Syria, the AKP took a pro-Sunni adventurist foreign policy direction (Ozturk 2021) which paved the way for the AKP’s accusations of Kılıçdaroğlu, along with other AKP opponents, of an alleged Alevi sectarian affinity with the Assad regime (Lord 2019, 62).

The first anti-Alevi AKP sectarian discourse is ‘traced to the campaign speeches of the 2010 referendum, in which Erdoğan repeatedly complained of an alleged ‘domination of high judicial posts by a clique of Alevis’ (Karakaya-Stump 2018, 56). During the referendum campaign ‘lower-ranking AKP members were traveling through the country to spread the word among their conservative Sunni constituency that their goal was to ‘rid the judiciary of the Alevis’ (Karakaya-Stump 2018, 56).

Throughout the 2011 general elections campaign, Erdogan told crowds repeatedly that Kilicdaroglu is Alevi (Buyuksahin 2012), framing the Alevis as an ‘other,’ in opposition to wellbeing, security, national identity and prosperity for the majority Sunni Turks.

Gezi was the first major occasion after the 2010 constitutional referendum and 2011 general elections ‘where the AKP openly resorted to sectarianism to solidify and mobilize its conservative Sunni Muslim support base against its opponents and rivals’ (Karakaya-Stump 2018, 56). All seven victims of fatal police violence during the Gezi protests were Alevi and this was exploited by the AKP. Also, the release of a police report that claimed 78% of those detained during the protests were Alevi (Hurriyet Daily News 2013), ‘was no doubt part of the same deliberate strategy to vilify the protests in the eyes of conservative Sunnis.’ (Karakaya-Stump 2018, 62). Based on this police report, Nagehan Alçı (2013), one of the pro-AKP pundits in the media, claimed on a television program that the Gezi Protests were essentially an Alevi revolt against the state (Karakaya-Stump 2014). During the protests, Berkin Elvan, a 15-year-old boy who was hit on the head by a tear-gas canister fired by a police officer, was declared a terrorist by Erdogan who deliberately underlined his family’s Alevi identity (Karakaya-Stump 2018, 64).

After the Gezi, Erdogan kept underlining that the main opposition leader Kilicdaroglu is an Alevi and framed this negatively:

Kılıçdaroğlu, you may be an Alevi. I respect that. Do not hesitate, do not be afraid. Say this comfortably. I am a Sunni and I say this comfortably. There is no reason to be afraid of. Thus, there is no need to cheat the nation (Erdogan 2014a).

After the July 2016 coup attempt Alevis were targeted again by the AKP’s media and anti-coup crowds who marched into Alevi neighbourhoods (Lord 2018, 158). After the coup attempt, pro-

AKP media repeatedly claimed that Alevis were being used by the Gülen movement and foreign powers to provoke chaos and civil war (Yeni Safak 2016a; 2016b).

Erdoğanism's antagonism towards the Kemalists, secular elites, and Alevis is not surprising given the history between these identities, but even practicing Muslims and Islamists can be seen as traitors and citizen enemies by Erdoğanism. This will be discussed next.

Disloyal Practicing Muslims and Islamists

The AKP has been attacking all opposition and non-abiding Islamic groups as disloyal, but the main among them is the group of Fethullah Gülen's followers, the Gülenists. The Gülen Movement has received the harshest treatment at the hands of the AKP, despite being an ally for most of Erdoğan's governance from 2004 to 2013.

Once allies, Erdoğan now portrays Gülen as an agent of the US and the mastermind of all conspiracies against Turkey. More than half a million Turkish citizens are being investigated for belonging to what Erdoğan called the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO). They have been imprisoned, purged, and even killed under the pretext that they were part of a conspiracy to overturn Erdoğan since the Gezi protests, and especially in the military coup of 2016. This type of securitization has worked to solidify support. Erdoğan has used past traumas and victimization to securitize a former ally.

Erdoğan's perception of disobedience and disloyalty created intense hostility toward the movement members who were condemned to social and economic death (White and Herzog, 2016). For instance, in 2014, when speaking at an academic year opening at Marmara University, Erdoğan talked about Lawrence of Arabia at length, and explained how some Arabs betrayed the Ottomans by taking gold from Lawrence. Erdoğan then likened the Gülen's followers to Lawrence:

We see that new Lawrences are making efforts. They look like man of Service [a reference to Hizmet Movement as the Gülen Movement calls itself], a journalist, a writer, or a terrorist. By saying service [*hizmet*], freedom of press or *jihad*, they are trying to implement what was required by the secret Sykes-Picot agreement (Erdogan 2014b).

By doing this he framed the movement members as traitors, secretly working for foreign governments to dismember, divide and destroy Turkey, as the Ottoman Empire was dismembered as a result of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which led to the division of Ottoman-held Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine into the French and British colonies. Well before the 2016 coup attempt, on different occasions he called the movement members:

Impostor, hypocrite, grave robber, body snatcher, lowly, treacherous, virus, cancer, malignant tumour, terrorist, scoundrel, traitors, bloodsucker leech, bloodthirsty murderer, vampire, characterless robot, pawn of a shady conspiracy, Mossad collaborator (SCF 2017: 26-33).

After former prime minister and staunch Islamist, Ahmet Davutoglu, announced the establishment of a new political party in December 2019, Erdoğan's ally and coalition partner, Devlet Bahçeli of the MHP, claimed that the goal of the newly established political parties in the country was not to meet political and social need, but 'to conspire against the country'. In a written statement, he stated that the complicated and dirty actions of those who want to sabotage politics have accelerated. He concluded that seeking new political parties was 'a cheap order of inventors of conspiracy and fiction [plotting] on Turkey' (Bahçeli 2019).

Being a practicing Muslim or even an Islamist, like Davutoglu, is not sufficient to be considered a desired citizen by Erdoğanists – absolute loyalty to Erdoğan is necessary.

Disloyal Kurds

Even though the AKP has been de-emphasizing secular Turkish nationalism and promoting Islam that would cement Turkish and Kurdish brotherhood (Gurses 2018; Sarigil 2018; Al 2019; Turkmen 2021), it has not shown any substantive departure from the Turkish nationalist past and thus the Kurdish minority's overall relationship with the Turkish state has not changed (Gurses and Ozturk 2020, 327).

During the AKP's second and third tenures, from 2009 to 2012, negotiations were carried out between the outlawed PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) and the Turkish state. The AKP started the 'Kurdish Opening', which aimed to disarm the PKK and resolve the Kurdish question (Pusane, 2014: 81). During this period, the political atmosphere was friendlier to the pro-Kurdish opposition and some issues that had once been taboo were discussed in a relatively

non-securitized context. The AKP government took a number of historic steps, initiating reforms to address the problems faced by the Kurdish people in Turkey. Before the June 2015 general elections, in order to change the constitution to create an executive presidential system, the AKP was looking for further political support and votes from the Kurds to secure an absolute majority, even lobbying HDP candidates to run as independent candidates rather than a political party (Geri 2016, 196; Özpek 2019, 38). This would enable the AKP to gain extra seats in the parliament that would normally go to the HDP if it ran as a political party at the elections. Previously, the pro-Kurdish parties did not do it and instead supported independent candidates because of the %10 threshold. When ran as a political party, even %9.9 vote meant zero seats at the parliament. On the other hand, running as independent meant losing many seats to bigger parties. After some electoral calculations, the HDP took the risk and ran as a political party, denying the AKP's request. This denied the AKP basic majority in the parliament, let alone getting the absolute majority to change the constitution. The AKP's response was harsh. It swiftly ended the 'Kurdish Opening' and resecuritized Kurdish demands and political activities (Geri 2016: 198).

On 17 July 2015, Erdoğan renounced the peace process that started with a declaration by the AKP and HDP leaders at the Dolmabahçe Palace (Erdogan 2015a). After this declaration, the PKK announced that the self-imposed ceasefire had ended and this was followed by PKK attacks, which killed civilians and soldiers in the southeast of Turkey in July 2015. HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş issued a call for the disarmament of the PKK and dismissed claims that his party had organic ties with the PKK. But Erdoğan responded that 'we know based on the intelligence we gathered that there is *an inorganic tie*' (Erdogan 2015b).

On another occasion, in an attempt to label Demirtaş as an American project, Erdoğan claimed that 'Demirtaş hired Obama's campaign staff for the election.' (Deccan Chronicle 2015). He also criticized Demirtaş' visit to Brussels and stated that 'The party that is controlled by a terrorist organization is looking for a solution in Brussels' (Naharnet 2015).

In 2015, hundreds of HDP members were arrested for allegedly pro-Kurdish leanings. On 11 September 2016, 28 mayors of Kurdish municipalities were 'suspended and replaced with AKP appointees' (Akkoyunlu and Öktem, 2016: 4; Gürses 2018). The Diyarbakır deputy for HDP was detained due to his opposition to the government, as was the leader of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş, who was accused by the government of being a member of a terrorist organization.

By constructing the HDP as an ‘extension of the terrorist PKK’, collaborator with ‘inorganic ties’ to the PKK, and pawn of America and Europe, Erdoğan has played into the fears of the Turkish people, utilizing the long conflict between the state and the outlawed PKK. He has also played into the collective trauma and conspiracy theory that the West supports terrorist factions, and their alleged political arms, to destabilize, even collapse, Turkey, as they did with the Ottoman Empire. Through these associations, the HDP has been constructed as an existential threat to the ‘unity’ of the state, and exceptional measures were made acceptable with the resecuritization efforts that started in early 2015.

Concluding Remarks

Erdoğan came to power with the promise of desecuritizing relations with Turkey’s neighbours and its ethnic, religious and political minorities. However, a decade later, Erdoğan used speech acts to establish a ‘security state’ where everything is weighted on security. These opposing policies, of promising desecuritization while promoting securitization, were promoted by security speeches in the name of making Turkey secure and prosperous. In this study, we see that pattern with a religiously conservative government that has targeted non-Sunni, non-Muslim, and non-abiding Islamic communities in Turkey at every election, framing them as collaborators of sinister foreign powers who want to destroy their country and the Turkish nation by preventing the government in power to win elections. Any former ally that does not abide is labelled as an agent of those mischievous powers.

Making their survival a ‘national security’ issue, and then using the securitization narrative to ‘other’ all existing opposition and possible new opposition parties, has prolonged the political life of the AKP and Erdoğan. This strategy has helped their election success, despite economic failures. The AKP and Erdoğan have successfully used Turkey’s ontological insecurities and past traumas to convince their supporters that anti-Western conspiracy theories are real, and that Western powers are using opposition political parties and social groups to destroy the Turkish national identity, Turkish nation and its leadership of the Muslim world. The AKP’s new ally, the ultranationalist MHP, has welcomed this narrative and pushed for it among its supporters as well. Being securitized as agents of external enemy powers, the opposition is thus delegitimized in the eyes of AKP supporters. In other words, even though the AKP has failed to fulfil its economic promises, its supporters do not have any legitimate, reliable, or trustworthy

alternatives in the opposition that would defend the Turkish nation, its identity, honour, dignity, and integrity against the conspiring Western powers.

This paper contributes to securitization theory by showing in the case of Turkey, the use of ontological (in)securities, fear, trauma, and conspiracy theories for securitization of the opposition and thus authoritarianisation. This finding needs to be tested in other countries and contexts. The securitization of opposition politics and elections in Turkey is at the domestic level, but we can observe this pattern in other societies as well. This pattern shows that independent of the government, when people suffer from ontological insecurity, historical traumas, and are prone to conspiracy theories and fear, political decision makers use these insecurities to build on the existential importance of their political elite in countries such as Venezuela and Russia (Kneuer, 2017). Similar to Chavez, Erdoğan has resorted to the narrative of national independence against interest lobbies and foreign plotters who are antagonistic to the Turkish national identity, presenting the AKP as the hero of the people, delivering economic outputs during this hard time. His narrative that the people will overcome any attack on Turkey has also been successful. Nationalist, religious, and ethnic narratives have worked for Erdoğan as they have worked elsewhere. This is done through the construction of imagined existential enemies to the nation and its identity, threats, and ‘alternative truths.’ Today we see that even developed democracies are not immune to this. In the US, (former) President Trump made up stories of caravans of Latin Americans marching towards the US by the thousands, wanting to enter the US and commit crimes. As if that was not enough, Trump added a couple of ‘unknown Middle Easterners’ to the crowd (Trump 2018).

The paper contributes also to the securitisation theory by showing how images, previous knowledge, and ‘alternative facts’ have expanded what we have traditionally understood about speech act.

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