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Authoritarian Use of Religion to Delegitimize and Securitize the Opposition

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Abstract: This article examines the use of religion by an authoritarian ruling party to delegitimize political opposition through securitization. The case study presented is the ruling AKP in Turkey, which initially promised to desecuritize the Kurdish issue to co-opt the Kurdish opposition but eventually resorted to the demonization narratives and repressive policies of the secular Turkish state; however, in addition to labeling the Kurdish opposition as terrorists, the AKP deployed religion to legitimize its repressive policies on religious grounds. The Turkish case shows that not in legitimizing (via desecuritization), but in delegitimizing opposition (via securitization) religion has been the main tool deployed by the ruling party. This finding needs to be tested in other contexts and cases. Additionally, since this paper only focuses on the narrative of the AKP's religious delegitimization, further research is needed to measure its efficacy and impact.

Keywords: religion; Islam; authoritarianism; opposition; legitimation; delegitimation; securitization; repression; Turkey; Kurds

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1. Introduction

This paper delves into the intriguing question of how Sunni Islam has been leveraged by the AKP to undermine the legitimacy of the Kurdish opposition party (the HDP, and its predecessor, the BDP, until 2014). By doing so, it significantly contributes to the broader discourse on the role of religion in politics, both in general terms and within the specific context of Turkish politics (Driskell et al. 2008; Haynes 2009; Collins et al. 2011; Grzymala-Busse 2012; Brubaker 2015; Omelicheva and Ahmed 2018; Türkmen 2018).

Within the context of Turkey, existing scholarship predominantly explores the role of religion in electoral voting behavior (Gundem 2020) or its association with populism (Yabanci and Taleski 2018). In relation to the Kurdish issue, religion is frequently emphasized as either a conflict resolution tool or a unifying political force (Gurses and Ozturk 2020; Türkmen 2021). Religion has become a key component of the AKP regime, particularly after 2010. Studies on Turkey reveal that, since 2010, the Diyanet, or Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey, has become "hyper-politicized" (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Ongur 2020). Although initially established for political purposes (Gözaydın 2008), the Diyanet has been further instrumentalized and activated during the AKP regime to engage with its audience of religious citizens. The AKP regime has heavily invested in the Diyanet, utilizing it for political aims, to justify policies and practices, and garner support from Sunni Muslims (Gürpınar and Kenar 2016; Yilmaz 2021; Yilmaz et al. 2021b, 2022). This investment demonstrates the importance of religious rhetoric for the AKP regime and highlights its target audience: Sunni Muslims.

The framing of Kurdish politics as a threat to the nation's "spiritual security" (Payne 2010) by using religion seems to be a novel development emerging under the Islamist AKP regime.

This article, therefore, aims to illuminate the strategic use of religion in this context, thereby enriching our understanding of the interplay between religion, politics and securitization in contemporary Turkey.

The issue of Kurds in Turkey has long been seen as a security problem by the state, even when the discourse of recognition and democratic opening was introduced in 2009–2013. When there was a reformist shift from the denial to the recognition of ethnic identities, the democratization reform processes and securitization of Kurds in Turkey during this period were not mutually exclusive, and the two aspects of this discourse were almost always carried out simultaneously; however, after the consolidation of power in his hands, Erdogan has changed the course to increase his authority and the democratic reform process has come to an end (Demir 2019; Yilmaz et al. 2023a).

In this new era, the AKP government has employed strategies with which to increase its power and establish its reign, via either the co-optation or elimination of political rivals. In relation to the Kurdish opposition, the regime has attempted to delegitimize a legal as well as legitimate parliamentary party and its members by using religion, in addition to the use of other discursive tools, such as securitization and equating the HDP (and its predecessor parties) with the outlawed PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which has been studied by other scholars (Geri 2017; Martin 2018; Ozpek 2019; Yilmaz et al. 2022).

After summarizing our methodology, we proceed to provide a very brief summary of three pillars of authoritarianism: legitimation, co-optation, and repression. This paper will then look briefly at the background of the Kurdish opposition's delegitimization and repression by the secular Turkish state. This paper then investigates how the AKP tried to co-opt the pro-Kurdish HDP (and before that the BDP) by promising to legitimize it so that the AKP could establish a presidential system without checks and balances. It then turns its scope to the recent delegitimization efforts of the AKP regime via religion, Sunni Islam in particular. It explores how the resecuritization of the pro-Kurdish opposition, with the help of religion and accompanying repression, took place. Since the terrorism allegations aspect of this latest phase has been extensively studied, we will focus on the use of Sunni Islam by the AKP.

2. Methodology

Soon after the AKP disposed of the Kemalist tutelage led by the army, with a constitutional change referendum in 2010 and its third general election victory in 2011, the party took an authoritarian turn. Thus, this paper mainly focuses on the post-2010 developments. Additionally, since the securitization and repression of the Kurdish opposition on the basis of terrorism allegations have been extensively studied, the paper confines itself to the use of religion in the ruling party's dealings with the Kurdish party.

The strategic employment of religion in delegitimizing discourse concerning Kurdish politics is seen as critical, as it serves two primary objectives. First, it aims to dissuade religious Kurds from aligning with the HDP, and second, it legitimizes any exceptional measures taken against the HDP in the eyes of its religious support base. In this article, we critically analyze the declarations as well as statements made by AKP leaders and opinion formers regarding their use of religion in handling the Kurdish party, as well as relevant media reports. The issues, discussions, debates, polemics, talks, messages, statements, and even prayers have been meticulously scrutinized within the collected materials. Although the paper does not enumerate every instance, it presents a sufficient number of examples with which to substantiate its argument.

The study exclusively investigates the supply side of the AKP's legitimization and delegitimization of the Kurdish opposition party, focusing on content, narrative, and propaganda. It does not aim to assess the actual impact of these elements on society, as that is a subject warranting further research.

3. Three Pillars of Authoritarianism: Legitimation, Co-Optation, and Repression

Authoritarian regimes use multiple, non-exclusive survival strategies (Maerz 2020). Why and how autocracies remain stable have been two of the main questions in the research on authoritarianism. In addressing these questions, the literature, based on empirical studies, identifies legitimacy, repression, and co-optation as three tools that authoritarian regimes use to secure their continuing rule (see, for a review of the literature, Gerschewski 2013). These three pillars of survival are not inherited but developed, improved, and adjusted over time to ensure as well as safeguard authoritarian rule. Autocrats do not always employ repression as it is costly; thus, they often prefer to use legitimation and co-optation to contain the opposition, eliminate potential rivals, and maintain intra-elite cohesion. Building and maintaining these pillars occupy the main, if not the only, agenda shaping both the internal and external policies of autocrats.

In his systematic analysis of the classic and recent literature on why some autocracies remain stable while others collapse, Gerschewski (2013) presents a theoretical framework that explains the longevity of autocracies due to what he describes as the three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation. He argues that the wider literature on the resilience of authoritarian regimes, irrespective of their subtypes, can be explained with reference to these three pillars. To secure longevity, as Rousseau famously highlighted, even the strongest needs to transform strength into right, "as he would be never strong enough to always be the master" (Gerschewski 2013, p. 63). Powerholders must convert their strength into right, the right to rule; that is, they must create "legitimacy". Electoral authoritarian regimes, for example, use their electoral successes to legitimize their right and entitlement to rule as they see fit (Gandhi 2015; Saikkonen 2017); however, such regimes do not necessarily respect elections as a means of democracy, rather they (ab)use them as a source of legitimacy only. They may do anything to win, including rig elections, bribe constituencies, buy votes, and threaten the opposition as well as its supporters (Cheeseman and Klass 2018). When extra-legal mobilization and voter intimidation are used, oppositions are less likely to protest (Harvey and Mukherjee 2018). When a regime fails to win an election, it indicates its weakening strength, so they try to prevent this at any cost.

Co-optation is a strategy invoked by authoritarian regimes "to tie strategically relevant actors (or groups of actors) to the regime elite" (Gerschewski 2013, p. 22). This is when a regime convinces relevant actors to be in their service. When the opposition is not united, smaller, less cohesive opposition voices are more easily contained by financial or political means. Intra-party division and intra-elite splits within the ruling party are threats that receive immediate attention from authoritarian regimes. Every rumor is taken seriously, and co-optation strategies are immediately deployed to eliminate any suggestion of division. To maintain intra-party cohesion and intra-elite unity among politicians, bureaucrats, and businesspeople, co-option by any means is employed.

4. Background of the Pro-Kurdish Opposition's Delegitimization and Repression

Geri (2017, p. 191) links the delegitimization, securitization, and repression of the Kurdish issue to the "ontological insecurity" of the state and argues that the securitization of Kurdish identity dates back to the early years of the republic. Creating a homogenous nation was the priority of the founding Kemalist elite in Turkey, to the detriment of the diverse cultural context of the Ottoman Empire in which the republic was established. The new Turkish national identity, emerging from the birth of the republic, was built on ontological insecurity (Rumelili and Celik 2017; Çapan and Zarakol 2019; Yilmaz 2021) rather than shared values. Turkey's foreign policy outlook suffered from severe insecurity and anxiety. Turkey has a love–hate relationship with the West, based on fear and a lack of trust. At home, Turkey suffered from other insecurities and anxieties, perceiving different ethnic, religious, and political groups as threats to national unity and possible collaborators of Western powers that aimed to harm Turkey. Fearing that, similar to the multiethnic Ottoman Empire, Turkey would also be divided by the Great Powers along ethnic lines,

the Turkish political elite tried to homogenize the nation and undertook a "Turkification" project as part of its "modernization" (Jongerden 2007, p. 2013).

As Birdisli (2014) underlines, the *raison d'être* of Kurdish securitization manifests itself as the state being designated as the referent object with Kurdish identity posed as an existential threat to the "national integrity of the state" (Birdisli 2014, pp. 4–5). The securitization of the "pro-Kurdish opposition" has been easy because of Kurdish uprisings in the past and the terrorist tactics of PKK-affiliated organizations—including suicide attacks in major urban centers—that harm civilians. Such tactics helped the state to legitimize the discourse of securitization for the wider public (Karakaya-Polat 2009, p. 132). In technical terms, the activities of the PKK have facilitated the securitization of the pro-Kurdish opposition.

Not only has the Kurdish claim for autonomy but also their claim for cultural rights been conceived as an existential threat. In relation to securitizing actors, Geri refers to Turkish governments and political elite that have constructed the existential threats of Kurds and their demands in the realm of politics via speech acts. Having taken from the realm of politics to security and repression, the only option with which to deal with this "existential threat" is now military power (Geri 2017, p. 192).

5. Securitization to Legitimize and Delegitimize

Although securitization has only been recently theorized in international relations (Shipoli 2018) and political science, it is among the most used tools by the political elite to convince the public of the necessity of their use of extraordinary (often undesirable) measures by arguing that there is an existential threat to the community; thus, extraordinary measures are required (i.e., there is a state of exception).

The concept of securitization was developed from the "speech act theory" and the "doing things with words" debates of the 1990s; that is, political and security issues are conceptualized as conducting "politics and security" with words. Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (Waever 1995; Buzan and Waever 2003) pioneered the theory, which has been applied to migration, the economy, health, and the environment in the West.

Securitization, as a process, aims to transport issues from the boundaries of the political sphere to the security sphere, within which exceptional measures can be justified. In other words, politics is removed from the issue and it is dealt with as a matter of security, even though it might not necessarily be a traditional security issue. Securitization allows politicians to gloss over issues they do not want the public to talk about, use extraordinary means they normally could not use, and legitimize past actions of control, deterrence, and, most commonly, agenda-setting (Fierke 2007, p. 108).

In authoritarian regimes, securitization helps leaders establish grounds for further, harsher measures, such as the disseizing, displacement, and even mass killings of securitized groups or elements of society. By analyzing how authoritarian leaders, especially elected autocrats, legitimize their autocracies, we can see that they resort to securitization more than previously thought. They securitize non-security issues, construct threats, and legitimize the use of extraordinary means to contain as well as steer polarizing rhetoric and maintain their authoritarian regimes; however, more importantly, securitization constructs a state of exception, where previously unthought of policies are enacted by untraditional methods, and in this state of exception "all hands are on deck"—securitizing actors expand their reach beyond the issues they have securitized, because "exceptional times call for exceptional measures" (Yilmaz et al. 2021a, 2023b).

The idea behind securitization theory is that security issues do not stand by themselves; they have to be constructed as such (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 21). An issue is generally first constructed as security-related through speech; it is then transferred, as a security problem, into policy, such that the audience is convinced that it is a real security issue requiring immediate attention (Waever 1995, p. 55; Leonard and Kaunert 2011, p. 66). After these issues are set in the agenda and the audience has accepted them as issues of existential importance, the security actors build coalitions that will help broaden concern about the

issue among different audiences (Leonard and Kaunert 2011, p. 67), including different publics, political audiences, and political supporters (Balzacq 2005).

When people are convinced that without the survival and well-being of the referent object other things are irrelevant and life as they know it is at stake, they are likely to agree that the issue could and should be dealt with through any extraordinary means to ensure the well-being of the referent object, which is usually "the state", "the nation", and "national security". Thus, any threat to that referent object is regarded as "existential" and all measures are taken to ensure its survival, a Waltzian neorealist understanding of "survival in the face of existential threat" (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 33).

Drawing on these insights, this article investigates the role of and the way that religion has been employed by the Erdoganist regime in Turkey to resecuritize the pro-Kurdish HDP.

6. Legitimization of the HDP via the Desecuritization of the Kurdish Identity on Political and Cultural Grounds: An Attempt of Co-Optation

During the 2000s, Turkey had a period of the desecuritization of the Kurdish issue and pro-Kurdish opposition (Karakaya-Polat 2009, p. 133). The capture of the PKK's leader in 1999 and the decision at the EU's Helsinki Summit in 1999 to affirm Turkey's candidature for the EU created a political climate that triggered a democratization reform process. As a result, "academics, think-tanks and columnists asked for a normalisation of issues such as the use of headscarf and the use of the Kurdish language" (Karakaya-Polat 2009, p. 133).

During the AKP's second and third tenures, negotiations were carried out between the PKK and the Turkish state from 2009 to 2012. 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 government took a number of historic steps, initiating reforms to address the problems faced by Kurdish people in Turkey. To justify these steps, Erdoğan and leading figures took any opportunities to highlight commonalities between Kurds and Turks, with particular references to religious commonalities. For example, in August 2009 then Prime Minister Erdoğan, in his speech at the Parliament, delivered a speech with the following words, whilst also pointing out commonalities between Turks and Kurds. He stated:

> When Neşet Ertaş says "Gönül Dağı" (Heart Mountain), each of us shudders … Likewise, we plunge into the depth of our souls when Shevan Perwer says "Halepçe" or "Hazal" … As Yunus Emre, Mevlana Rumi, Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, Karacaoğlan, and Pir Sultan laid the foundations of Turkish culture, Dengbejs, who lived outside Munzur, were sowing the seeds of fellowship in the same lands.

Analyzing the motives behind the AKP's Kurdish initiative and negotiations, Geri points out that the government sought further political support and votes from the Kurds to secure an absolute majority (Geri 2017, p. 196). To support this argument, he draws attention to the changing strategy of the AKP after the June 2015 general election. He argues that the election results demonstrated that appealing to and gaining Kurdish votes in order to secure an absolute majority for constitutional amendments (to introduce a strong executive presidential system) was not possible. As Ozpek (2019, p. 38) underlines, the AKP wanted the HDP candidates to run in the June 2015 general election as independent candidates instead of as part of a political party.

Before the June 2015 general elections, Erdoğan vowed to change the entire political system of the country. He sought a strong presidential system without effective checks and balances and was seeking a supermajority government, demanding 400 seats (out of 550) to make this substantial constitutional change. He made use of every opportunity to talk about the benefits of and need for a presidential system in Turkey (HDN 2015a). More interestingly, Ozpek highlights that he was establishing a connection between a presidential system, the number of needed seats in the parliament, and the Kurdish peace process (Ozpek 2019, p. 39). In February 2015, at a public gathering in Bursa, Erdoğan said the following:

> "If we want the presidential system, then we have to give 400 lawmakers. If we want the resolution process [referring to the peace talks between the government and the PKK leader Ocalan] to continue, we have to give 400 lawmakers so that a strong party can come to power to realize it". (HDN 2015b)

Nevertheless, the HDP strongly objected to his plans. In March 2015, Demirtas, at the HDP's weekly parliamentary party meeting, strongly declared "Mr Erdoğan, as long as HDP exists, as long as HDP members will breathe, you will not be the president" (Bianet 2015). Demirtas' speech went viral with the hashtag #SeniBaşkanYaptırmayacağız ("We will not let you be elected as the President") and became Twitter's worldwide second-top-trending hashtag that day. Demirtas did not stop, and repeated this vow at any and every opportunity.

That incident was a turning point for the Erdoğan loyalists—a campaign to delegitimize the HDP in the eye of its Kurdish voters began. In addition to this, seeing that recent opinion polls and survey results showed religious Kurds' votes shifting from the AKP to the HDP (allowing the HDP to potentially pass the threshold to enter the parliament), the AKP regime started a demonization campaign towards the HDP on religious grounds.

7. Failure of Co-Optation, Delegitimization, and Repression on Religious Grounds

The empirical data collected for this paper are interpreted and categorized under three distinct categories: Firstly, the discourse surrounding religion in Erdogan's rhetoric, which we have labeled first-hand securitization. Secondly, we have identified second-hand securitization in the discourse of stakeholders, with the media playing a significant role as an amplifier. Lastly, we have examined the securitization of religion through the words of religious leaders and figures. These three categories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationship between religion and security in contemporary discourse.

7.1. Religion in Erdogan's Discourse: First-Hand Securitization

Even before the collapse of the peace process, Erdogan and the AKP were delivering conflicting messages about the HDP (BDP), especially before the elections. They were appealing to Kurdish voters via religious references and were also aiming at disinclining them from supporting the BDP, the Kurdish political party predecessor of the HDP. For example, in June 2011, speaking at a political rally in Diyarbakir, Erdogan stated the following:

> This BDP wants to divide us by taking its power from the PKK. They love my Kurdish brother, but why is *an imam killed* in the morning prayer? Why are they setting fire to the home where my Kurdish offspring live? Their problem is different. Those who say that the religion of the Kurds is Zoroastrianism, those who say that Islam was imposed by force . . . No such thing. Here I told you about Salahaddin Ayyubi. Are we ready to break this game on 12 June [the election date]? We are brothers from eternity. We come from Adam and Eve. Here we are for him. Let's give our answer to those who want to divide [us] on 12 June.

Erdogan, in his above quoted speech to discredit the Kurdish opposition BDP in the eyes of *religious* Kurds, underlines that the BDP is taking "its power from the PKK", which is targeting and killing "imams". He also makes reference to Salahaddin Ayyubi, the Kurdish commander as well as Sultan of Egypt and Syria who defeated the Crusaders and took Jerusalem back under his control in 12th century, which is quite remarkable here. Ayyubi is highly respected among the Kurds, particularly religious Kurds. These points show that Erdogan is deploying religious rhetoric and references to appeal to religious Kurds and portraying the BDP/HDP as a threat to the religion. In doing so, it is also made clear that he aims to divide/polarize Kurds as religious and non-religious, capitalizing on this division. Then, in the very same speech, he continued as follows:

> Oh my brothers, know that the congregation turns to the same qibla in Suleymaniye, Istanbul, as the congregation is facing in the Great Mosque. Our qibla is one, is there a difference? No . . . But recently a new movement came out. What happened? It's Friday at the Ulu[central] Mosque, you see if this is a member of the BDP or whatever, they say that the imam of the state, prayers cannot be performed behind him. Oh my brothers, this has nothing to do with Islam. For one thing, Friday is the gathering of Muslims. That is why we do not perform Friday in the [small] mosque in villages. My dear brothers and sisters, they are forming a congregation just behind them. Once on Friday, the imam must have a license, he must have merit. It is not possible to pray behind such a random person. (Hurriyet 2011)

In this statement, Erdogan emphasizes that groups who do not recognize the authority of state-appointed imams, and imams not appointed by the state, have "nothing to do with Islam". This delegitimization of non-state-appointed imams particularly pertains to Friday prayers, as they play a significant role in the Erdogan regime's communication with religious Sunni Muslims in addition to the legitimization of their policies and practices on religious grounds.

The role of Friday khutbas (weekly addresses to the congregation during Friday prayers) in the AKP's communication with its potential voters, Sunni Muslims, has been previously studied (Yilmaz et al. 2021b; Yilmaz and Albayrak 2022). In Turkey, khutbas are centrally prepared by the regime-controlled Diyanet and read across the country every Friday at state-controlled mosques. This also highlights the role of the Diyanet and its imams in the securitization of the HDP. Through the centralization and control of religious messaging, the Erdogan regime effectively utilizes the Friday khutbas as a means by which to maintain influence over its religious support base and further its political agenda. This strategy also serves to delegitimize non-state-affiliated religious leaders, reinforcing the AKP's grip on religious discourse and authority within the country.

The decreasing popularity of the AKP, and especially that of its nationalist partner, made Kurdish votes remain necessary for the future of the AKP regime. Thus, the regime has been seeking religious Kurds' support by suggesting that winning their votes is only possible by securitizing the HDP on religious grounds. As an example of this, in June 2018, speaking at a political rally in Diyarbakir, Erdoğan addressed the majority Kurdish audience in the following manner:

> We build, they destroy. They are in this country to destroy. Didn't they open tunnels under the houses? They burnt and destroyed our mosques and schools. Are we ready to teach them [HDP] their lesson on 24 June [date for general elections]? . . . Do they have any connection to our values? Do they have any connection whatsoever to İslam? They are atheists, they are irreligious . . . We have 20 days left [to elections day]. We expect the support of the region's opinion leaders like you during these 20 days. We expect your help, we will get results only if all of us support our cause [keeping the AKP in power]. Otherwise, no offence but, we will pay its price all together. (Ahval 2018)

This attempt of the Erdoğanist regime to disincline religious Kurds from the "irreligious" HDP was very clear when President Erdoğan, on a live broadcast program on a pro-government TV channel in March 2019, spoke about the HDP and claimed the following:

> They [HDP] shot [bombed] the Kurşunlu Mosque. Who? The irreligious, unbelieving, atheist team called HDP. They have such a structure. They ignored if it is a mosque and so on. Aren't they the ones who burned down all the schools? The only thing [they know] is to burn them instantly, to destroy them . . . My citizen[s] my Kurdish brother[s] should [wake up] be careful about this [party], should not say [think] this [HDP] is Kurdish'. (Arti Gercek 2019)

In November 2021, speaking at the pre-dominantly Kurdish city of Batman, President Erdoğan targeted the HDP with the following accusations:

> What am I saying, is there a Turkish, Kurdish, Laz or Circassian distinction in my religion? But this PKK, this HDP has no religious faith! We need to know these well . . . We saved our country and people of the region from the armed attack of the PKK, I hope we will also save it from the political attack of HDP, which is the puppet of this organization. (BirGun 2021)

7.2. Religion in Stakeholders' Discourse: Second-Hand Securitization and the Role of Media as an Amplifier

The AKP has swiftly returned back to this strategy of delegitimizing the HDP on the basis of religion. This was an additional strategy on top of equating the HDP with the outlawed PKK, which is seen as a terrorist organization by almost all ethnic Turks.

The new campaign aimed to tarnish the reputation of HDP candidates by using rhetoric such as "irreligious, communist, Armenian, uncircumcised" in an effort to reduce the HDP's votes below the threshold (AdaletBiz 2015). Kurdish AKP members and MPs have been the primary communicators of this campaign to Kurdish voters, with the pro-regime media playing an amplifying role. For instance, in April 2015, the HDP issued a statement criticizing mandatory religious classes. In response, several AKP MPs and pro-government figures spoke to the pro-government daily Yeni Akit (2015), which reported this statement under the sensational headline "HDP too is Kemalist and atheist".

The daily quoted the Diyarbakır Deputy from the AKP, Galip Ensarioğlu, as saying the following:

> PKK is a Marxist-Leninist organization. The first identity of the Kurds is their religion, Islam. Sometimes they put up conservative candidates in order to get votes from the conservative section, but there is never conservatism in their beliefs and philosophies. This is their belief; this is their main axis. They do not allow the ideas of the conservatives to be represented in their own parties. (Yeni Akit 2015)

Ensarioglu intentionally uses the PKK instead of the HDP. The PKK is not a legal political party and does not have the capacity to put up candidates in elections, but the HDP can. Ensarioğlu, Kurdish himself, with these words targets the religious Kurds, equates the HDP with the PKK, and underlines that it is a religious requirement for the Muslim Kurds, with "religion as their first identity", to disdain from the HDP and support the AKP.

In the very same news report, the daily also quoted the AKP Şırnak Deputy, Mehmet Emin Dindar, as saying the following:

> There is no difference between CHP and HDP. The HDP of the East is what the CHP is to the West. Kurdish people are religious. The HDP says 'Let the religion lesson be abolished', how is it different from the CHP! (Yeni Akit 2015)

In making these points, Dindar and Bayraktar reference the early years of the Republic when the state oppressed the Kurds and their religious practices, using Kemalist secularization and nation-building objectives as justification. By doing so, he aims to evoke a negative reaction from religious Kurds against the HDP. This historical context highlights the ongoing challenges faced by the Kurdish population and underscores the importance of understanding the implications of religious arguments in contemporary politics.

Additionally, the daily quoted Mehmet Bayraktutar, Chairman of the Diyanet-Sen, Union of Employees of Diyanet (imams) and charities, on the same page, saying the following:

> There is no difference between CHP and HDP in terms of Islam. Those who are uncomfortable with the religion and faith of Muslims living in Anatolia, even if they make politics under different roofs, they serve atheism. They serve Communism on the one hand, and imperialism, which they are supposedly

> against, on the other. This cherished nation will deal with this mentality, which is disturbed by the Religious Lesson, as it always has been. (Yeni Akit 2015)

All of these statements attempt to establish a link between the CHP, its staunchly secular and oppressive early Kemalist era, and the HDP. The intention is to delegitimize the HDP and dissuade the religious Kurdish majority from voting for it. In doing so, the religious Kurdish majority is being urged not to vote for the HDP if they do not want to experience the same victimhood that they experienced nearly a century ago. This news piece is also shared via the Diyanet-Sen's webpage (Diyanet-Sen 2015). The Diyanet, with its mosques and imams, is one of the key institutions by which the government communicates with religious masses to justify its policies.

In early June 2015, just three days before the general elections, Huseyin Besli, one of Erdoğan's chief advisers and a former AKP deputy, penned a commentary for the *Aksam* daily (2015). In the column he urged "Muslims" to vote for the AKP with the following words:

> Whoever defines himself as a Muslim should vote for the AK Party on 7 June.
>
> Whoever sees himself as a member of the Islamic nation and a part of Islamic civilization should vote for the AK Party.
>
> Whoever has adopted the principle of respect for human dignity should vote for the AK Party.
>
> Whoever calls himself a democrat should vote for the AK Party on 7 June. (Aksam 2015)

Subsequently, he redirected his focus towards Kurdish voters and advised them against voting for the HDP, claiming that the party was being manipulated by enemies of Islam. In his writing, he stated the following:

> Due to the electoral system, if the AK Party falls below 45% (if HDP passes the threshold), it can block its power alone with a qualified majority.
>
> It can be said that whatever the national will reveals, we are in awe.
>
> But the matter is different.
>
> Unfortunately, when the aforementioned result is realized, the national will not determine the power.
>
> Unfortunately, I don't know if the number of the new government is 1% or 10%.
>
> Anti-Islamic forces and individuals will be determined.
>
> There is no other reason or explanation for almost all the enemies of religion to play on the HDP. (Aksam 2015)

In April 2019, in a column published by an Islamist pro-AKP website, the words of the HDP's Co-Chair, Sezai Temelli, were twisted, reported, and analyzed as follows:

> HDP Co-Chair Sezai Temelli made statements revealing his true intentions at the party's rally in Mardin Kızıltepe. Temelli said, "Today, this is Turkey's most fertile land. This is the promised land. Moses spent his whole life searching for these lands. Is the phrase they came and dried up these lands" a reflection of HDP's idea that "we couldn't establish a Kurdish state, let's at least be included in the Greater Israel project?" Actually, this is not such a new question. We asked the experts of the subject in the context of Temelli's words about this issue, which has been talked about since the 1990s and about which books have been written. There is a common view: The Kurds have been captured, the Huntress Zionists are preying on the Kurds for their political ambitions. In other words, Kurds are being used as an appetizer to the Great Israel project by a non-Kurdish terrorist organization and its political extension party. (Kirazli 2019)

In September 2019, a group of Kurdish women started/staged sit-in protests before the HDP's Diyarbakir headquarters, claiming that their children were taken to the mountains (this means that they joined the PKK) with the help of the HDP. The protests continued

for months and were indirectly supported by the security forces and government. Pro-government media used this opportunity to target the HDP and highlight its alleged ties with the PKK.

In a video shared by Abdurrahman Uzun, an AKP supporter and an author/public figure with more than 900,000 followers, one of these mothers, in Kurdish, read the following:

> HDP is not Muslim, they don't have a religion and nor faith [in Allah]. They are not Kurds as well; they are not working for the Kurds but for the '*gavurs*' [infidels/non-Muslims]. (Uzun 2019)

Uzun shared this video with Turkish subtitles on social media with the following words:

> By Allah's permission, we will destroy these treacherous people who try to divide us, with the support of our blessed mothers like you. Bless your mouth and heart, my blessed mother . . . (Uzun 2019)

The main message presented/sent out by pro-government media and public figures has been that the PKK is a Marxist–Leninist and anti-Islam organization, with the HDP facilitating their operations. Therefore, the HDP cannot represent the majority Muslim Kurdish population. To support this argument, protests in front of the HDP building have been used as evidence. For example, Ilayda Atlas (2019), analyzing these protests in *Kriter's* October issue, one of the pro-AKP journals, writes as follows:

> More recently, we witnessed the heart-wrenching story of 82-year-old Hurinaz Omay, a mother who has never ceased to hope. Her son was abducted by the PKK in Bitlis province 24 years ago, and she has never seen him since. Omay even went to Qandil and Mahmur, the headquarters of the PKK, twice in the hope of finding him. She sheds tears full of grief and sorrow during the later years of her life, and still dreams of finding her son no matter whether he is dead or alive. Omay says in all honestly that the HDP does not represent the [Muslim] Kurdish people but deceives Kurdish children into joining the PKK, clearly expressing her revolt. (Atlas 2019)

Whether these protests were genuine or staged cannot be known; however, what is clear is that government forces capitalized on them to present the HDP as an anti-Islam and direct extension of the PKK.

In April 2021, another pro-government media outlet, *Dirilis*, published an interview with Cemal Toptanci, a known name among religious Kurds and the former mayor of Diyarbakir's Sur province from Erbakan's Islamist Felicity Party, on his book *Secular Politics in Turkey*. The interview had the following headline: "HDP cannot be the representative of Muslim Kurds"; Toptanci, coming from an Islamist background, is a staunch supporter of Erdoğan. In another interview with the very same outlet, referring to a reproachment between the HDP and CHP, draws the "commonalities" between these two opposition parties as follows:

> 'DP's efforts to make the people of the region irreligious coincide with the genetics of the CHP . . . the alliance established between the two parties threatens the future of the Kurds. Pointing out that 'DP's codes are no different from the atrocities of the single-party period [referring to staunchly secular anti-religious policies of Kemalist regime]. (Toptanci 2021a)

The same person, highlighting a social media message posted by the HDP about the Armenian genocide, addressed Muslim Kurds with the following tweet:

> You, o Muslim Kurdish brother! 'don't forget this posting that you should never vote for HDP showing that it is not a party of your belief, culture, and ethics. Because HDP is a party which is surveyed by the murderer Dashnak and Hinchak Armenians, who martyred your fathers. (Toptanci 2021b)

In April 2021, the former AKP MP and columnist for the pro-government *Yeni Safak* daily, Mehmet Metiner, coming from a respected Kurdish family himself and referring to the very

same post by the HDP, which read "face to shame of Armenian genocide", regarded the party as "a dagger stuck in the heart of the Muslim Kurdish people . . . PKK/HDP is the name of the project to de-Islamize the Kurds" (Metiner 2021).

In February 2022, the pro-AKP *Yeni Safak* daily reported on HDP Deputy Oya Ersoy's speech at the parliament:

> HDP's Oya Ersoy crossed the line on the night of the Kandil [a holy night in Islam]: Insulting Islam and Muslims from the rostrum of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. (Yeni Safak 2022)
>
> Then the following part was quoted from her speech:
>
> The destruction we face today is the dream of re-establishing the Ottoman administration 500 years ago, the social relations of the religion of 1500 years ago, and the Central Asian tales of 2500. It is the monstrosity of creating the vindictive and religious generation. (Yeni Safak 2022)

The Islamist and pro-government daily *Yeni Akit* also took Oya Ersoy's words out of context, and reported this speech with the following words:

> Istanbul Deputy of the terror-loving HDP, Oya Ersoy, insulted religion [Islam] and the Ottoman state in her speech at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. (Yeni Akit 2022)

The leader of the nationalist BBP, a member party of the ruling AKP's electoral alliance, Mustafa Destici, sought to delegitimize the opposition's presidential candidate with the following statement:

> "A presidential candidate or an alliance that the HDP is in or supports cannot be supported. This will be a heavy burden. They have to pay a heavy price both in this world and the next". (Serbestiyet.Destici 2023)

Destici threatens anyone supporting a coalition that includes or is supported by the HDP, suggesting they will "pay a heavy price in this world and the next". By referencing "the next", he alludes to the religious consequences in the hereafter. This religious rhetoric aims to discourage religious individuals from supporting the HDP and the opposition's presidential candidate.

7.3. Securitizing via the Words of Religious Leaders and Figures

Not only the Diyanet and politicians, but also some pro-AKP religious leaders/groups have employed religious rhetoric against the HDP to securitize it in the eyes of religious people. For instance, Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü, known as Cübbeli Ahmet, cursed the HDP and its voters in a video he published in May 2022. More recently, Ünlü prayed for the elections on the night of Berâet, a religious day of forgiveness and one of the five holy days known as "Kandil nights" during which people pray for forgiveness. Muslims, particularly in Turkey, dedicate this night to prayer and seeking forgiveness. In his YouTube channel, he delivered a "Special Talk on the Night of Berâet", which was viewed by 1.4 million people. In this talk, he expressed his support for Erdogan in the upcoming presidential election in May, while targeting the opposition front and HDP with the following words:

> . . . let's have a nice prayer. O Lord, grant that those who are the best to you, whom I have sacrificed for this country, for our religion, for our mosques, for our madrasas, for our chastity, for our honor, will be chosen.
>
> Make those who have contact with foreign powers, those who are with the PKK, those who are in business, devastated, devastated. O Lord, do not give an opportunity to those who are with the HDP and say that we will give a ministry to the HDP. Do not divide our country, O Lord. Make our unity, our unity, O Lord.
>
> You are chasing a table and a chair in pursuit of deception, do not give rank in this country to people who will harm the material and moral values of this nation

so that I can grab a corner and give him and this a fatty bone. (Rudaw.Unlu 2023; Youtube.Unlu 2023)

These examples, dating back to May 2015, illustrate the populist and divisive nature of the AKP's politics in contemporary Turkey. The strategy aims to divide the Kurds into Muslim and non-Muslim factions, positioning the AKP as the representative and protector of Muslim Kurds. The message being conveyed is that the HDP is anti-Islam and exclusively represents non-Muslim Kurds, while the AKP is the sole party safeguarding the interests of Muslim Kurds. This message has been communicated not only by Erdogan himself but also by political and economic stakeholders, primarily media and political figures, within his reign, as well as by religious figures who benefit from his regime.

8. Conclusions

Following its establishment in 2001, the AKP initially aimed to desecuritize the Kurdish issue and attempted to co-opt the Kurdish opposition by legitimizing it on cultural and political grounds. However, these efforts did not yield the desired political outcomes for the AKP. Consequently, the party reverted to the traditional repressive narrative and policies of the Turkish state. In contrast to the Kemalist era narrative, religion has been specifically employed by the ruling party in its delegitimization attempts targeting the Kurdish opposition party.

The empirical data collected for the paper were interpreted and categorized under three distinct categories: Firstly, the discourse surrounding religion in Erdogan's rhetoric, which we have labeled as first-hand securitization. Secondly, we identified second-hand securitization in the discourse of stakeholders, with the media playing a significant role as an amplifier. Lastly, we examined the securitization of religion through the words of religious leaders and figures. These three categories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationship between religion and security in contemporary discourse.

This paper highlights that the declining popularity of the AKP and, in particular, its nationalist partner has made Kurdish votes crucial for the future of the AKP regime. As a result, the regime has been pursuing the support of religious Kurds by arguing that winning their votes is only possible through securitizing the HDP on religious grounds. Accordingly, the AKP has sought to divide the Kurds into Muslim and non-Muslim factions, projecting itself as the representative and protector of Muslim Kurds in order to discourage the majority of Muslim Kurds from supporting the HDP. The paper also demonstrates that religion has been utilized as a political instrument with which to delegitimize and subsequently repress the opposition HDP, with the Diyanet and its state-sponsored imams playing a role in the securitization of the HDP.

The Turkish case reveals that religion has been a primary tool employed by the ruling party, not in legitimizing (via desecuritization) but in delegitimizing the opposition (via securitization). This paper also contributes to the securitization literature by showing how religion is used for securitizing the opposition. These findings warrant further investigation in other contexts and cases. Moreover, as this paper focuses solely on the narrative of the AKP's religious delegitimization, additional research is needed to assess its efficacy and impact.

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