



# Populism, Authoritarianism and Necropolitics

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Instrumentalization of  
Martyrdom Narratives  
in AKP's Turkey

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Ihsan Yilmaz · Omer Erturk

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# The AKP's Civilizational Populist Authoritarianism and Necropolitics

## INTRODUCTION

The literature on populists in power is evolving and expanding (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Pappas 2014; Kyle and Gultchin 2018; Munoz and Pfeiffer 2022; Yilmaz et al. 2022). This literature has shown the authoritarian tendencies of the populists in power (Grzymala-Busse et al. 2020). A confrontational cosmos, enmity, politics of victimhood, and siege mentality have been studied as some of the usual aspects of populism (Yilmaz and Morieson 2021). However, there is particularly a lack of engagement in the literature on the relationship between the populist movement narratives and violence. Even rarer are the analyses of the populists' use of necropolitics for authoritarian purposes (see for an exception Yilmaz and Erturk 2021). This book addresses this gap by investigating the empirically rich case of Turkey.

Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has governed Turkey since 2002, has over the course of its rule evolved politically from a pro-European Muslim democratic party to an authoritarian Islamist civilizational populist party that represses opposition, dissidents, undesired minorities, journalists and human rights advocates. As the AKP evolved in this direction, it began to produce and employ civilizational populist necropolitical narratives to stabilize and perpetuate its control over Turkey. While necropolitics was originally a term used by Achille Mbembe to describe the right of the sovereign to determine who shall live



and who shall die, the term has since been expanded upon and complexified to encompass a discursive and representational necropolitics that fetishizes death for the nation, and is fascinated with and champions death on behalf of the nation (Mbembe 2003, 2019; Carney 2018, 94, 101; Yilmaz and Erturk 2021). It is this expanded understanding of necropolitics that we employ in this book, and through which we try to analyse the actions of the AKP government in Turkey. This book therefore argues that as the party transitioned from socially conservative ‘Muslim democratic’ (Yilmaz 2009) values to authoritarian Islamism (Erturk 2022), coupled with civilizational populism, it embraced a necropolitical narrative based on the promotion of martyrdom, and of killing and dying for the Turkish nation and Islam, as part of their authoritarian legitimization, co-optation, repression, political mobilization and blame avoidance. This narrative, the book shows, is used by the party to legitimize its actions and deflect its failures through the framing of the deaths of Turkish soldiers and civilians, which have occurred due to the AKP’s political errors, as martyrdom events in which loyal servants of the Turkish Republic and God gave their lives to protect the nation, Islam and the Muslim World in a time of great crisis. This book also describes how, throughout its second decade in power, the AKP has asserted control over Turkey’s education system and its Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) (Yilmaz 2005), media, and produced television series and used them to perpetuate its civilizational populist necropolitical martyrdom narrative.

Turkey is no stranger to necropolitics. Glorification of death for the religion and the homeland was modified and transferred from the Ottoman Empire into the Republican period by the founding fathers. Thus, the modern Turkey has been established through necropolitics. Throughout the history of the Turkish Republic, governments have encouraged citizens to perceive deaths in the service of the nation as normal, and praiseworthy, and when called upon to be willing to die for the homeland or to sacrifice their limbs (Yilmaz and Erturk 2022). This necropolitical martyrdom narrative is therefore not the invention of the AKP. Rather, it was part of the secular nationalist Kemalist regime’s authoritarian toolkit from its earliest stages (Yilmaz and Erturk 2021). This narrative has been constantly propagated to the masses through the state ideology, public education, and everyday power structures. Besides, partly due to Turkish political culture and partly due to civil war in the 70s and the necropolitical practices of military junta in the 80s, almost all ideologies and worldviews in the Turkish context are imbued with a

distinctive martyr narrative. This narrative has especially been an integral part of the Turkish nationalist (*Ülkücü*), Kurdish nationalist and far-left political ideologies (the last two were the main victims of necropolitics of the 1980 military junta). This social support has provided an opportunity for the Islamist civilizational populist Erdoğan regime to exploit necropolitics to their own advantage in advancing authoritarianism and repressing dissidents, minorities, journalists and human rights defenders.

When the AKP won government for the first time in 2002, the party first turned away from the authoritarianism and martyrdom narrative of its secular predecessors. Moreover, the AKP successfully faced the pressure of the fear mongering coalition of the left and the right nationalist (*Ulusalçıs* and *Ülkücüs*) opposition (Yilmaz et al. 2020). However, a series of political events in Turkey dramatically altered the AKP's political agenda and drew the party towards Islamism and authoritarianism. As a result of a process starting with the Gezi Park Protests and Egyptian coup and accelerating with the major setback in the 2015 June elections, and the failed mysterious 2016 coup, the AKP—fearful of losing power—further steered away from liberalism and democracy and became progressively more authoritarian with each major event. Firstly, PKK-Turkey peace process (known as solution process) ended. Then, the whole pro-EU narrative did a U-turn and AKP was headed towards radical nationalism and anti-Western populist Islamist authoritarianism to maintain the rule over Turkey. Eventually, circumstances pushed the AKP to form informal alliances with far right and far left nationalist parties (MHP and Vatan), which it was once an enemy of.

As part of this political transition to radical nationalism and Islamist populist authoritarianism, the AKP began to employ a civilizational populist (see Yilmaz and Morieson 2022) necropolitical narrative. The AKP's necropolitics are in certain respects similar to those employed by the Kemalist regime. Both took advantage of Turkish fears that Western powers were seeking to dismantle their Republic by using Turkey's internal enemies as pawns, just as the West dismember the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War by supporting its minorities, and portrayed Turkey as a nation threatened by outside and internal forces (Yilmaz 2021), and which therefore required brave souls willing to sacrifice themselves in its defence (Yilmaz and Erturk 2022). Yet while the Kemalist's necropolitical narratives were secular nationalist in nature and encouraged citizens to die on behalf of the nation, homeland and people of Turkey, the AKP's necropolitical discourse draws on Islamic

ideas such as *jihad* and encourages Turkish citizens to become martyrs in defence of not only the nation, homeland and the Republic of Turkey but also for Allah, Islam, Ummah (the Muslim World) and Erdoğan. The otherization of dissident groups and minorities such as Kurds, Alevis, Gülenists, leftists, liberals, and non-Muslims is another common ground both Kemalist and Islamist authoritarianism share (see in detail in Yılmaz 2021). Their necropolitics targets these groups but is also strengthened by enmity towards these groups and extended much more intensely to journalists and human rights advocates.

This book therefore analyses the Islamized civilizational populist necropolitics of the AKP, how the party's necropolitical narrative is based on the Kemalist and Islamist necropolitical mindsets and is propagated throughout Turkish society—including in the education system, through the Directorate of Religious Affairs, television series—and its reception by AKP supporters. The necropolitical narrative of the AKP posits, we show, that Turkey and the broader Sunni Muslim world are threatened by non-Muslim external (primarily 'the Crusader West and Zionists') and internal forces (enemy citizens, i.e. dissidents and many of the minority groups), and that as the leading member of the Islamic world Turkey and its (Sunni Muslim pro-AKP) people have a duty to defend their homeland and Islam from their external and internal enemies. In the Turkish case, the political use of martyrdom is partly rooted in this Islamist messianic narrative that is based on Huntingtonian civilizational clash. Most importantly, the AKP's civilizational populist necropolitical narrative emphasizes that the Turkish people ought to be willing to die in the service of the regime, the Turkish homeland, and Islam. The AKP's necropolitical martyrdom narrative therefore portrays martyrdom as an act which will be rewarded by God in the next world, and as a sweet drink (*şerbet*) which all Turkish citizens should wish to enjoy.

The book argues that this narrative instrumentalizes Islam and nationalism, as well as the fears Turkish people have of further dismemberment of their 'homeland', to mobilize support for the ideology and agenda of the AKP government. Furthermore, the book argues that the AKP also uses this necropolitical martyrdom narrative to frame the deaths of Turkish civilians and soldiers—who may have died due to government failure or accidentally—as martyrdom events to avoid blame and accountability. We argue that by framing these deaths as martyrdom events the AKP turns potentially disastrous events, and which might therefore hurt the party electorally, into positive events which aim to legitimize the

AKP's rule and political decisions. Of course, the AKP would not have hoped to achieve this result if the AKP had not been the hegemonic party in right-wing politics, if the examples of Syria and Iraq had not triggered the desire for a strong state and a strong leader in the right-wing political base, and if the state of emergency conditions had not allowed the AKP to stigmatize all narratives contrary to its narrative as support for terrorism.

To state succinctly, the book:

1. Contributes to the study of necropolitics and makes an inquiry of dynamics between authoritarianism, civilizational populism and necropolitics.
2. Systematically examines the Erdoğan regime's use of necropolitics in order to legitimize the authoritarian order of Erdoğan's 'New Turkey'.
3. Applies the idea of civilizational populist necropolitics to understand why the AKP regime in Turkey emphasizes the need for Turkish citizens to martyr themselves to defend their 'homeland' and religion against internal and external enemies of Turks, Turkey, Turkish State, Islam, Muslim World and Allah.
4. Describes how and with which instruments the AKP regime propagates its populist necropolitical martyrdom narrative throughout Turkish society.
5. Explains how the AKP uses a populist necropolitical martyrdom narrative to legitimize, stabilize and perpetuate its populist authoritarian rule and to co-opt and/or repress the dissidents.
6. Examines the manner in which the AKP's grassroots supporters have received and responded to the AKP's civilizational populist necropolitical narrative.

### THREE PILLARS OF AUTHORITARIAN STABILITY

Authoritarian regimes use multiple, non-exclusive survival strategies (Maerz 2020). The research on the new authoritarianism that emerged since the 1990s has identified repression, legitimacy and co-optation as the three major tools (or pillars) that authoritarian regimes use to secure their continuing rule (Gerschewski 2013; Schneider and Maerz 2017).

It is clear that there is a direct relation between authoritarian regimes and political repression (Sluka 1997, 2). Repression is 'commonly used

by authoritarian and totalitarian governments against their own people, to spread fear and make political opposition impossible' (Walzer 2004, 130). However, relying on repression alone can be too costly as a means of sustaining authoritarian rule and cannot provide the necessary stability to autocracies since it can have destabilizing effects in the long run (Davenport 2007; Escribà-Folch 2013). Thus, as a second pillar of authoritarian stability, a regime's claim to legitimacy is important for explaining its means of rule and, in turn, ensuring its stability and resilience. Legitimation means 'the process of gaining support' and seeking 'to guarantee active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population' (Gerschewski 2013, 18). Regimes and citizens exchange political support for decreased repression. This exchange makes the regime less vulnerable to conspiracies, military coups, and violent rebellions and reduces the extent of repression of citizens (Gerschewski 2013, 21; von Soest and Grauvogel 2017, 288).

The third pillar of authoritarian stability is co-optation, which refers to the capacity to 'tie strategically-relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite' (Gerschewski 2013, 22). Co-optation usually involves neo-patrimonial arrangements between the ruling elite and the co-opted groups, such as those belonging to military, business, and political spheres, and aims to prevent the emergence of strong opposition actors. Co-optation thus becomes a more viable and cost-effective way to consolidate power, legitimate actions, and advance authoritarian reach (Holdo 2019; Maerz 2020). Patronage, clientelism, and corruption are the most commonly used instruments in co-optation (Maerz 2020, 67).

The AKP has used civilizational populist narrative for each of these three pillars (Yilmaz and Erturk 2021). Let's now discuss very briefly what we mean by civilizational populism.

## CIVILIZATIONAL POPULISM

Populism has alternately been defined as set of ideas, a thin-centred populist ideology, a type of political strategy, a discourse, or a style (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). The most accepted definition describes populism as a group of ideas that together argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people and considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'

(Mudde 2004, 543). Since populism as a thin-centred ideology lacks the sophistication of other ideologies like socialism or liberalism, populism is usually combined with other beliefs and ideas of politics (la Torre 2019). Especially, right-wing populism usually focuses on internal and external dangerous others who are clear and present threats to the people but are favoured by the corrupt elite. In contrast, populists present themselves as the only true representatives and the saviours of the people against these corrupt elite and the dangerous others.

In right-wing populisms, the corrupt elite usually are framed to be collaborating with the dangerous others. This form of populism is essentially a cultural populism, which designates ‘the people’ as the authentic people of the nation, and therefore others ethnic and religious minorities and—above all—‘cultural elites’ (Kyle and Gultchin 2018). These populists emphasize religious traditionalism, law and order, sovereignty and portray immigrants as an enemy other. This populist rhetoric is a powerful tool of division and polarization, punching both up and towards political, cultural, and economic elites, but also across and down towards minority groups and immigrants (Kyle and Gultchin 2018, 33–34).

Right-wing populists—as cultural populists—construct ‘the people’ and their enemies along civilizational lines (Brubaker 2017), arguing that there is a crisis in which the people are faced with an existential threat to their culture, identity, way of life, religion, and civilization. In the West, right-wing populists have incorporated civilizationalism to define ‘the people’ of their respective nations as Christian or Judeo-Christian, and to exclude Muslims by claiming Islam represents a threat to Judeo-Christian values and culture (Brubaker 2017). It must be noted, however, that while the boundaries of belonging and the semantics of self and other are reconceptualized in civilizational terms, civilizational populism largely remains a hybrid form of nationalism rather than an anti-nationalist ideology (Brubaker 2017). Yilmaz and Morieson (2022, 19) ‘define civilizational populism as a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people.’ In this book, we mean this definition when talking about civilizational populism.

Civilizational populism can be observed inside populist discourses across the democratic world. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP is beholden to the Hindutva ideology that asserts 'Hindu religious or cultural identity is the national and primary identity of Indians' (Saleem 2021). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP are attempting to build a 'New Turkey' (Yilmaz et al. 2020) for their supporters based on Islamist populism and Turkish neo-Ottomanism (Yilmaz 2018, 54–55). This civilizational populism is a conspicuous manifestation of a civilizational of populism within Muslim societies, and its survival and maintenance are highly dependent on continued antagonism between Islam and religious others that are usually framed as the Judeo-Christian West, Crusaders, Zionists, infidels, secularists, and their internal pawns. In other words, in this Islamist civilizational populism, the struggle between 'the people' and their enemies ('elites' and 'others') is constructed as part of a broader religious and civilizational struggle between righteous Muslims and those outside of/hostile towards Islam (Barton et al. 2021, 397).

Most of the literature available on the growing authoritarianism and populism deals with the supply and demand factors and how the socio-economic and socio-political crises play into the emergence of populist narrative. Yilmaz and Erturk (2021) raise a point by establishing a linkage between populism and violence. The violent imagery associated with populist slogans make it a populist strand of necro politics. This mixing of two streams is then used to consolidate the political grip of the ruling party over the corridors of power. What basically happens is that survival instinct of the people is turned on by presenting modern times as definitive and dark period that would determine the future course of nation's life. Once this image is constructed, real or imagined threats are then highlighted. Only two alternative futures are presented before the nation, either that of magnificent historical restoration or that of utter and complete destruction. It can be argued that primary conflict between tradition and modernity that gives rise to these issues is a primary feature of almost all the third world or non-European societies. Turkey, in this regard, is in a unique position when it comes to the dynamics of this conflict evident in Turkic society. Thus, when the AKP took an authoritarian turn after its general electoral victory, it has not only started employing civilizational populism to mobilize its supporters and to repress its critics, but it has also employed a necropolitical narrative.

## NECROPOLITICS

In its original meaning, and as conceptualized by Achille Mbembe, necropolitics is the right of the sovereign to determine who shall live and who shall die (Mbembe 2003, 2019). In a similar vein, necropower either decimates populations through massacres, or else commits populations to unliveable conditions in which they are continually exposed to violence and deprived of a proper human life, and in which they are destined to a death-in-life (Mbembe 2003, 21). To date, Mbembe's concept has been applied to several other contexts (for works on the Turkish context see, Ahmetbeyzade 2008; Bargu 2016, 2019; Zengin 2016; Akıncı 2018; Islekel 2017; Carney 2018). Necropolitics has now been expanded and complexified to include how the realm of the dead can be a site of violence, a surrogate for the government of the living, a means of delineating the boundaries of political community and a conduit for the production of collective memory (Bargu 2016, 2019, 17). In this usage, necropolitics is not the reduction of the living to 'the status of living dead', but 'the dishonouring, disciplining and punishment of the living through the utilization of the dead as post-mortem objects and sites of violence' (Bargu 2019, 9; Verdery 2000).

Further studies have complicated the concept and offered new dimensions of necropolitics, examining how it is operative in courts, prisons and political cemeteries, martyrdom, gender politics, collective memory, and reparation claims (Bargu 2019, 5–6). The meaning of necropolitics has also been expanded to include positive means of constituting community through the practice of caring for the dead, and positive interventions into dead bodies, burials, and grief (Akıncı 2018, 47).

Carney has also elaborated the concept and talked about a discursive and representational necropolitics that fetishizes death for the nation, and is fascinated with and champions death on behalf of the nation (Carney 2018, 94, 101). The term has also been applied to show how the authoritarian governments employ different politicizations of death: they control the narrative around the news of death to maintain discursive hegemony regulating death; depoliticize death to eliminate the risk of dissident mobilization after deadly incidents; normalize death as an inherent feature of some citizens' occupational, socio-economic, and—in some cases—gender position (Bakiner 2019, 26; Yılmaz and Erturk 2021).



For many centuries nationalistic and religious rhetoric from many countries and cultures have expressed encouragement of self-sacrifice for a greater cause. Before the emergence of nationalism, martyrdom appeared in the earliest human history. The religions of Egypt, Mesopotamia and ancient Greece included the notions of heroism and sacrifice in defence of good against evil (Szyska 2004). Until the age of democracy, from Pharaohs to Caesars, from kings to sultans, the sovereign had been possessing the right to kill and the power to declare the killed as martyrs. In ancient Greece, ritual ceremonies were dedicated to fallen heroes in patriotic wars, and in these ceremonies and orations, heroic death was skillfully presented as desirable. In the most famous of these, Pericles praises the sacrifices of the dead so that others will imitate them as Athens was so glorious that it was worth dying for (Bosworth 2000; Bowersock 1995). In repressed societies, such as the Jews during the Hellenistic period or the early Christians in the Roman era (York 2007), martyrdom played several roles at once: forging authority, escalating the struggle, reinforcing the ranks, legitimizing the alternative culture, and creating a sense of differentiation and animosity vis-à-vis the enemy (Hatina 2014, 233).

From the ‘cult of the martyrs of liberty’ during the French Revolution (Soboul 1989) to the ‘cult of the fallen soldier’ after WWI (Mosse 1990), there are uncountable examples of the use of martyrs for the sake of nationalist political goals. Nationalism’s ability to mobilize people through the power of the dead has been described as ‘the necromantic power’ (Açıksöz 2012, 115). Among world religions, Islam, for a variety of reasons, is now the most well-known for its emphasis on the virtues of martyrdom (See Hatina 2014 and its bibliography for many works on Islam and martyrdom). Apart from jihadist interpretation of Sunni Islam, martyrdom is also a central part of the narrative of contemporary Shia and Alevi Islam (Soileau 2017; Rolston 2020).

Martyrdom is a significant paradigm in creating political myths and collective memory (Castelli 2004). The martyrdom narrative, be it secular or religious, is one of the most ‘powerful tools of political action and potent weapons employed in political struggles’ for ‘creating and maintaining popular support’ for nationalist as well as religious struggles (Sluka 1997, 49). The powerful receive benefit from the glorification of martyrdom, death, and blood narratives, which become a tool for building authoritarian tools that would extend the political life of the autocrats. Martyrdom narratives have ‘functioned to forge a sense of solidarity, enhance mass mobilization, and preserve the sacred values of

the community' (Dorraj 1997, 489). Here, martyrs play a dual role by delegitimizing the enemy outside while consolidating the status of the martyr's group in the community (Klausner 1987, 231–232; Rosoux 2004).

Governments have imposed cemeteries of martyrs or martyr monuments upon the daily lives of citizens whose daily routines and commutes traverse these spaces. These monuments and spaces have been called 'necropolitical spaces' (Yanık and Hisarlıoğlu 2019) as they condition the masses to die for the sovereign, in a process in which the sovereign's overt 'right to kill' is transformed into a covert 'encouragement to die' (Yanık and Hisarlıoğlu 2019, 48).

Glorification of martyrdom, death and blood narratives have been especially used by non-democratic regimes as a tool for building collective memory, rituals, symbols, myth-making, and mass mobilization (Anderson 1983; Dorraj 1997; Gruber 2013); It has been used for mobilization, myth-making, and building a collective memory of culture; the recent examples in the history for this 'successfully' blending, religious-cum-authoritarianism, can be seen in Sudanese and significantly in the Iranian revolution (Gruber 2013; Swenson 1985). On martyrdom and building collective memory of culture and myth-making, see Castelli (2004). Thus, in our study, we classify and name this use of necropolitics as 'authoritarian necropolitics', and we test this concept in our case study of the authoritarian civilizational populist AKP government in Turkey and argue that our case shows the concept's salience.

The AKP's necropolitics has been studied earlier (e.g. Değirmencioğlu 2014; Bargu 2016; Carney 2018; Yılmaz and Ertürk 2021). For instance, Bakiner has shown 'the *expansion of martyrdom*, a concept hitherto used as a religious justification for military casualties, into the civilian sphere' (Bakiner 2019, 26) by Turkey's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government. Yanık and Hisarlıoğlu also analysed the same issue by looking at the creation of necropolitical spaces (martyr cemeteries and monuments) in post-2016 coup attempt Turkey (Yanık and Hisarlıoğlu 2019). However, the literature on necropolitics has not so far analysed in detail in terms of authoritarian necropolitics dimension and necropolitical icon-heroes, ideal model citizens who sacrificed their life for their nation, homeland, state, regime, and rulers. What is more, this book not only looks at how the AKP has been propagating its civilizational populist authoritarian necropolitics but

also how this narrative has been received and disseminated further by its grassroots supporters.

## THE CIVILIZATIONAL POPULIST NECROPOLITICS IN THE AKP AUTHORITARIANISM

Although the legitimation arguments of the AKP's authoritarianism, such as its ideational narratives, have been studied (Yilmaz et al. 2020; Yilmaz 2021; Bayulgen et al. 2018), its necropolitical use of martyrdom for authoritarian legitimation has not been examined. There are few scholarly studies of Turkey that investigate the relationship between democracy, biopolitics and sovereign violence in light of the theoretical arsenal of the necropolitical problematic (For recent examples, see Ahmetbeyzade 2008; Akıncı 2018; Bargu 2019; Islekel 2017; Zengin 2016; Yilmaz and Erturk 2021).

Similar to many other historical and contemporary contexts, blood and death and martyrdom narratives have been used for political purposes in Turkey for myth-making, building a collective memory, inculcating the masses with the nationalistic emotions and fervour, militarism (Altınay 2006) and collective mobilization (Azak 2007). As we will demonstrate throughout the coming chapters, this outlook has been propagated and perpetuated through national curriculum, media, popular culture, law, and state-controlled religious institutions (Yilmaz 2021; Yanık and Hisarlıoğlu 2019, 55; Özkan 2012, 9–11).

Partly because of Turkey's militaristic culture and partly because of its political worldview, embedded in the rhetoric of 'fatherland first' (*önce vatan*) or 'so there can be fatherland' (*vatan sağolsun*), the 'Turkish fatherland' has been constructed as a place that supplants everything of political importance, including human life. The fatherland, therefore, is a concept used to perpetuate the notion that inhabitants of Turkey should sacrifice themselves without question. This rhetoric is coupled with 'Sevres Syndrome' (Jung 2003) and the siege mentality, which is the fear that Turkey is surrounded by external enemies that are collaborating with internal foes with the aim of destroying the Turkish state and sending the Turks back to Central Asia (Yilmaz 2021). This is one of the few commonalities in Turkish politics shared by both secularists and Islamists. In the Islamic sense, this notion is strengthened by a fabricated hadith *hubb al-watan min al-iman* (love for one's fatherland is part of faith)

and the Islamist maxim that 'unbelief is one nation' (*küfür tek millettir*), which dictates a continuous sense of alertness against the outer world.

According to this mentality shared by both Kemalists and Islamists, Turkey's territory is a source of envy for other peoples (especially the West) who wish to take it from them and if not, divide and rule Turkey (Yılmaz 2021). As a result, this necessitates that Turkish subjects should be willing to die for the fatherland, the nation, and the state without question (Yanık and Hisarlıoğlu 2019, 57; See also Bircan 2014). As remarked in the Turkish national anthem, the Turkish fatherland is a 'paradise' (*cennet vatan*) that every citizen is required to sacrifice his or her life for it. This has been called the 'necrogeopoliticization of Turkey'. In combination with the Sèvres Syndrome, the concepts of the fatherland, martyrdom, and blood further intensify the necrogeopoliticization of Turkey (Değirmencioglu 2014).

Since the 1980s, and even much more so during the AKP period, these themes of fatherland, martyrdom, and blood have not only become more frequently invoked by the ruling elite but have also become everyday themes for other strata of society as well (See for example Bircan 2014). Recently the AKP has actively started capitalizing on this aspect of Turkish political culture. Erdoğan and the AKP have consistently used this militarist, Islamo-nationalist, civilizational populist, and necrogeopolitical culture of Turkey to rally the people around the flag. For example, President Recep T. Erdoğan frequently refers in his speeches to two lines of a poem written by a nationalist poet Mithat Cemal Kuntay that say, 'what makes a flag a flag is the blood on it; the earth can only become a fatherland (*vatan*) when there are those willing to die for it'. In one astonishing necropolitical case, from a stage where Erdoğan was leading a rally, he spotted a 6-year-old girl in the crowd, dressed in military-style camouflage and wearing a maroon beret worn by the Turkish special military forces and he asked the girl to be lifted towards the stage to meet with him. However, she was shy and began crying. After kissing her on both cheeks, Erdoğan turned to the flag-waving crowd and said:

Look what you see here! Girl, what are you doing here? We have our maroon beret here, but maroon berets never cry. God bless her. Her Turkish flag is in her pocket. If she becomes a martyr, God willing, she will be wrapped with it. She's ready for everything. Isn't she? (The New York Times 2018)

This is the ‘new normal’ in the ‘New Turkey’, a concept Erdoğan and his colleagues started talking about (Yılmaz et al. 2020) after the AKP established its domination of Turkish politics, especially after the Gezi Park protests in 2013. One commentator, however, suggested that even though ‘they had a name for the era, they did not have a perfect day that marked it’ and they have ‘been searching for new commemorations to mark their rule’. They were also not happy with the fact that all Turkish national day celebrations ‘were established by the single party regime of Atatürk and commemorate the establishment of the Turkish Republic’ (Özyürek 2016). The coup attempt in July 2016 which was mysterious in many respects and was called a ‘gift of God’ by Erdoğan provided the AKP with the opportunity to rectify this.

In his live TV speech on the coup night of 15 July 2016, Erdoğan called civilians to occupy city squares and airports to protest the plotters. In response to Erdoğan’s invitation, some members of the public tried to capture the Bosphorus Bridge back from the soldiers, while others tried to occupy military bases in various cities. During these clashes, 251 anti-coup people died and about 30 soldiers were either lynched to death or shot by unknown civilians. The incident has been fixed by the AKP as one of the most important official memorial days of Turkey. In Erdoğan’s words:

July 15 has become one of the symbols of our national history just like the Victory of Manzikert, Conquest of Istanbul and August 30 Victory as well as the foundation of Seljuk and Ottoman states and our Republic. (Erdoğan 2017)

Thus, 15 July was declared the Day of Democracy and Martyrs (Özyürek 2016; Solomonovich 2021, 1), and this incident has become the new milestone, founding identity, and symbol of the Turkish Islamists after the battle of Manzikert in 1071, which is deemed as the conquest of Anatolia, and the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 .

Erdoğanists have used this new holiday to shape the Turkish collective national memory by introducing a national celebration that does not revolve around secularist and pro-Western Atatürk, ‘but rather around the Justice and Development Party government and its more traditional and religious ideology’ (Solomonovich 2021, 1). The July 15 coup attempt, combined with the AKP’s allegation that it was a USA-led Western conspiracy against the leader of the Muslim World and Erdoğan’s