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The Politics of Gravelessness and Necropolitical Violence in Turkey: "The souls of deceased searching for a grave"

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Abstract

After the collapse of the peace process between the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government in July 2015, Turkey rapidly returned to armed violence with the intensified deployment of military troops and heavy artillery in the urban centers. The curfews then declared by the Turkish authorities entrenched various forms of necropolitical violence. As a result, the right to mourn became a dominant demand in civil society's justice agenda, alongside legal accountability, truth-seeking, and exhumation. This paper argues that to better understand the struggle of families and civil society actors and their demands for justice, it is essential to discuss the recent "politics of gravelessness" and necropolitical violence in Turkey. It examines the systematic erasure and dehumanization of Kurds through the destruction of bodies, graves, and cemeteries and restrictions to the public mourning process. The article

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highlights the Turkish state's role in perpetuating a hierarchy of grief and discusses the erasure of selected stories from public mourning.

Introduction

The idea of "the souls of the deceased searching for a grave," as one Kurdish activist put it, represents a necropolitical violence that does not even allow Kurds to have a proper burial for their loved ones. This form of violence was a part of the Turkish state's war strategy against the Kurds in the 1990s and is thus not unique to the government of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). However, what we have witnessed since 2015 is not only the return of the brutal necropolitics of the 1990s but also the development of a new form—necropolitics by curfew.

"They did not even let me hug my son's coffin," said the Kurdish mother when she saw her husband holding a white bag with her son's bones (Independent Türkçe, 2022). Their 28-year-old son Ali Rıza Arslan had been killed during the curfew declared by the Turkish Authorities in Diyarbakır's Sur district during 2015–16. After waiting five years, his body was identified, and the Kurdish authorities handed the son's bones to his father in a bag. As a result of the AKP government's destructive politics in the post-2015 period, the right to mourn has emerged as a dominant demand in civil society alongside struggles for legal accountability, truth-seeking, and exhumation and the demands for justice made by victims' movements, such as Saturday Mothers, for years. In this paper, I argue that to better understand the struggle for justice of Kurds and civil society actors, it is essential to discuss the recent politics of gravelessness and necropolitical violence in Turkey.

Turkey has a history of conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) and the Turkish army going back to 1984. The armed conflict intensified in the 1990s when the Turkish state implemented a state of emergency in Kurdish cities and heavy military operations aimed at defeating the PKK and suppressing Kurdish political activity. This period, which ended with

the lifting of the state of emergency in 2002, had devastating consequences. An official total of 35,576 people were killed (Grand National Assembly of Turkey, 2013), over two million were forcibly displaced (Kurban & Yeğen, 2012) and 1,388 forcibly disappeared, and 348 mass graves were located (IHD Diyarbakır Şubesi, 2022). The last and publicly declared peace attempt was initiated in İmralı Ireland in January 2013 between the AKP government and the leader of the PKK imprisoned on the island, Abdullah Öcalan. As Güneş (2013) explained, the AKP government did not genuinely attempt to resolve the Kurdish conflict by addressing the recognition of Kurdish identity and their political rights in the form of self-government. The AKP neither discussed the Kurdish political movement's project of democracy autonomy nor went beyond amending Kurds' cultural rights to propose a political project to resolve the Kurdish issue (Jongerden, 2018). Eventually, in July 2015, the peace talks collapsed with the suspicious assassination of two police officers in Şanlıurfa, and the ceasefire ended.

The violence the followed failure of the peace talks was even worse than during the 1990s. The AKP government declared curfews in the Kurdish cities in August 2015 until 2017 that affected more than 30 towns and displaced 355,000 people (UNHR Office of the High Commissioner, 2017). Government-led actions resulted in the deaths of 1,200 people (Erdem et al., 2019). The destruction was heavier than the statistics show, as can be appreciated through the necropolitical violence with its multilayered impact on victimized people—interrupting their mourning memory process, lingering their suffering, hampering legal accountability, and preventing the proper burial of loved ones according to religious and cultural ritual practice. These consequences once again enter the justice agenda of extended families and human rights actors. In the following sections, I discuss the cases of destruction in the wake of the curfews based on archival analysis of documentation from NGOs, media, and civil society initiatives as well as interviews conducted with grassroots actors in nontraditional transitional justice efforts in Turkey.

Necropolitics and the Politics of Gravelessness in the Post-2015 Period

During the curfews imposed between August 2015 and 2017, just after the peace talks collapsed, the issue of torturing dead bodies and destroying graves and cemeteries came even more to the fore. Two activists who visited the districts destroyed during the curfews conducted field research with the victims after the curfews were lifted. They were able to enter the districts in 2018:

> There are many (destroyed) places, but there were more in Cizre because of the known "Cizre basements" incident. They removed the human remains with the rubble, and it's said that they moved the rubble that contained human remains to another place where the municipality built a children's park on top of it, so people in Cizre refuse to go to that park because, they say, "Here are actually our children's bones; there, their dead bodies." (Activist, Interview 7, online, 20.08.2021)

"Cizre basements" refers to a brutal massacre committed in February 2016 during the curfews. Security forces surrounded a residential building and trapped the people inside. After the local authorities lifted the curfew, the burned bodies were found inside the building. According to the human rights committees that visited the district, almost 200 people perished and were later burned with the building (Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2017). The remains were removed and mixed with the rubble. Due to the destruction of bodies, only a few families could identify their loved ones (Aydın, 2016).

In contemporary political history, dictatorships or antidemocratic regimes apply necropolitics against their citizens under the pretext of their being communists or rebels. According to Mbembe (2016), nation-states monopolize political violence through modern military organizations, which enables governments to operate necropolitical strategies to uphold oppression. Necropolitical violence, therefore, is more than having the right to kill; it is a set of performative strategies

of sovereignty (Bargu, 2016). The perversion of people's sanctuary can be one of these strategies, and this tactic serves antidemocratic regimes in amassing their power through fear and force (Daşlı, 2017). For Mbembe (2016), these political actors are not less human or more barbaric than other people; rather, they construct their political power through hegemony in death. This power was intensively exercised by the Turkish security forces in the curfews, which caused other forms of necropolitical violence, as in the "Cizre Basements" massacre.

During the curfews, another form of violence enacted was the destruction of cemeteries in Kurdistan. Turkey's security forces perpetrated acts of destruction and attacked the cemeteries there, which left "the souls without graves":

> They say… that the deceased could not realize that they were dead. First, everyone, the whole congregation, gathers there [in the funeral] and prays for the dead person. Then, when the crowd leaves, the dead person raises his head, "I'm coming too, where are you going?"… Because they don't understand whose funeral it is... The dead person hits their head on the tombstone. The deceased person doesn't realize they're dead unless they shot them in the head. *So even our dead people don't realize they're dead. There are souls searching for a grave* (Activist, Interview 7, online, 20.08.2021; emphasis added).

The metaphor of "souls searching for a grave" underlines the perpetual violence. I term this the "politics of gravelessness" to indicate its systematic characteristics. The need to conceptualize this destruction emerges because of its unique features that differ from other forms of violence. During the less violent period, the peace process finally opened a space for the souls to find their graves: activists and victims exhumed the bodies of PKK guerrillas from mass graves and temporary graves dug in the mountains and reburied them in the rebuilt cemeteries (Bostan, 2022). Families who lost their children or relatives to armed violence were able to rebuild more than

ten cemeteries through local initiatives (İnsan Hakları Derneği, 2018). However, as the peace process failed, violence rapidly rose again during the curfews. The Turkish army began bombing the rebuilt cemeteries, attacking the dead bodies. A documentary director working on mass graves described what happened after 2015:

> Xerzan Cemetery, the cemetery where 282 people lay... They went in one night and put them all in bags without informing anyone and brought them here… to Kilyos [near Istanbul]. They did it without anyone's consent, saying that they were taking them to forensic medicine. This is something unique in the world! They dug out 282 with spades, piled the boxes on top of each other, and left them under that mud in the cemetery of the nameless in Kilyos (Director, Interview 11, in person, 04.09.2021).

Xarzan Cemetery was in Tatvan, a village in Bitlis in the southeast. The residents reorganized the cemetery in 2014 during a less violent period, but it was later damaged by the Turkish army bombardment (Bostan, 2022). As a part of the destruction, the dead bodies were removed and transferred to Istanbul and then reburied in the Kilyos cemetery for nameless persons. Officials did not rebury the bodies according to religious rituals or scientific methods.

The state dehumanizes Kurds through its politics of gravelessness by violating the dignity of victims and their families. This form of state violence is not specific to Turkey. In Jerusalem, the Israeli government destroyed entire tombs in the historic Palestinian cemetery and built the Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem, which humiliated the Palestinians more than fostering tolerance (Khalidi, 2009). Similarly, the attacks on cemeteries in the Kurdish region disgraced the Kurds more than ever. In 2021, a group of families, human rights defenders, academics, journalists, and activists founded a new organization called "Respect for the Dead and Justice Initiative" (*Ölüye Saygı ve Adalet Inisiyatifi*) to address this specific form of victimhood—the destruction of cemeteries and dead bodies. I had

an opportunity to speak with a lawyer from the initiative; he considered gravesites as memory places where people preserve the memory of their loved ones, their past, and their culture. For him, the state destroyed memory places, graves, and cemeteries to render people rootless (Fieldnote, 12 August 2021). He also added that the state eliminated the evidence by destroying the graves and bodies.

Mutilating corpses goes beyond torture. During the curfews, military personnel shared photos depicting the tortured bodies of the guerrillas. One of them was the naked *body* of Kevser Eltürk, known as Ekin Wan, a Kurdish woman guerrilla killed by soldiers in Varto district on 10 August 2015. The photograph displayed a disturbing image of Ekin Wan's tortured naked body surrounded by men. The Kurdish women's movement worldwide and women's rights groups organized protests against this sexual necropolitical violence (Isik, 2022).

The disturbing images disseminated by military officials can be read as a way of terrorizing society by sending a message that this could happen to anyone. Yet this still does not entirely explain why the state is not satisfied with killing "terrorists" and "enemies" and goes as far as to torture their bodies and demolish gravestones and cemeteries. The politics of gravelessness explains the different forms of destruction employed to dehumanize Kurds, violate families and disregard broader communities' traditions and rituals. This leads to an inquiry into understanding the right to mourn.

"Whose lives count as lives?" Tracing Two Femicide Cases in Media

In order to understand the emerging demand for the right to mourn, I ask Judith Butler's (2004) provocative questions "Whose lives count as lives?" and "What makes for a grievable life?" in the context of necropolitics. Butler states that our bodies have a public dimension and are vulnerable to external impact and violence. Mourning is not private but a political and communal process. By tracing mourning cases in the US, Butler argues that mourning in a

public sphere is constructed by a Foucauldian power, which creates a hierarchy of grief. She demonstrates this order in mourning through various examples. For instance, according to Butler (2004), while the media does not cover the Palestinians killed by Israeli soldiers backed by the US, American soldiers' names or hobbies are publicly narrated. In obituaries, people learn the names of dead soldiers and see the stories of their marriages and families on television In contrast, Palestinians are mentioned as only in statistics or as collateral damage; their live stories are erased from public discourse, implying that they are less than human.

Applying this analogy to Turkey, it may be stated that when Turkish soldiers died in the Kurdish conflict, the mainstream media shared its best photographs depicting happy lives and good fathers and sons, but it is rare for a story of a Kurd's death to be shared in order to honor their family. The mainstream media presents them as numbers and uses the dehumanizing language of people having been "neutralized." By attacking graves, cemeteries, and sometimes funerals, particularly those organized and attended by large crowds, the AKP government intensified this necropolitics. The politics of gravelessness interrupts the Kurds' public mourning and dehumanizes them by suggesting that they are less than human. More importantly, as Butler states, public authority reproduces a hierarchy of grief by deciding whose life deserves grief and whose does not.

I have chosen two femicide cases to apply Butler's interpretation to the context of Turkey and used English Wikipedia sources to reflect how these cases were represented in the media.[2] The first case is that of a young Turkish woman, Özgecan Aslan, who was raped and killed by a man in 2015 (Anıt Sayaç, 2024a). Her killing caused nationwide outrage, and the Turkish public media extensively covered Özgecan's story. People shared details of her personal life on social media, and society displayed a great willingness to provide public space to accompany the family in the mourning process. In

[2] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_%C3%96zgecan_Aslan and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_%C4%B0pek_Er

comparison, İpek Er, who died in a suspicious suicide after being raped by a soldier in 2020 (Anıt Sayaç, 2024b), did not receive similar attention; her story did not attract public figures or the media.

Following Butler, what was the difference between these two losses that led to public grief for one victim of violence against women but not for the other? Both women were young university students. In fact, Özgecan's life was familiar to the Turkish people; she was Turkish, she was a modern-looking young female, and she had what may be considered a very decent middle-class life. The English Wikipedia page opened for Özgecan provides every detail of her life, education, legal process, widespread demonstrations, and famous artists' support. It is long and includes her photograph. In contrast, İpek's page includes her story in brief, without her photograph. İpek was a Kurdish woman from a rural city in eastern Turkey, and her headscarf suggests that she likely came from a conservative and poor family. Also, her perpetrator was not an ordinary male but a Turkish soldier. İpek's story was not broadcast on conventional media, and only a few women activists followed her case.

This is an example of how the state and mainstream media erase the stories of Kurdish women victims of femicide (Bakan & Saluk, 2020). While Kurdish women's bodies are subjected to both state violence and patriarchy (Isik, 2022), their mourning is hierarchically restricted from public space. In fact, there are many layers in the hierarchy of grief created by the Turkish state toward communities on the margins, including Kurds and Armenians. The organization Respect for the Dead and Justice Initiative challenges the hierarchy of grief by publicizing victims' stories via videos and organizing conferences to discuss the violence against dead bodies and the restrictions the funerals of Kurds, trans people, and Alevis, who are omitted from public mourning (Ölüye Saygı ve Adalet İnisiyatifi, 2021).

Conclusion

The necropolitical practices of the AKP government in the post-2015 period deepened the suffering of the victimized Kurds. The

struggle of families and civil society actors for the rights to mourn, deliver proper treatment to the bodies of their loved ones, and have a gravesite has continued since the curfews were lifted in 2017. They need peaceful closure where they can feel relief by practicing traditional rites to transform their grief and humanize their loved ones again. When someone loses a loved one, their life is forever changed. The transformation of grief helps ease this process, but it requires those left behind to be able to mourn publicly. The recent struggles of families for bodies, cemeteries, and gravesites can be regarded as a counter-mourning resistance, similar to that exercised for a long time by other victims' movements, such as Saturday Mothers. These movements seek to provide a gravesite for those without one and whose soul is seen as being trapped without a place to rest. This counter-mourning struggle is a vital part of Kurds' justice agenda in the current situation.

In the broader context of necropolitics in Turkey, this article has discussed the systemic pattern of dehumanization and erasure of the mourning rights of marginalized communities, which include Armenians and Alevis as well as Kurds. It has focused on the period from the curfews until the present and highlighted deliberate attacks on graves and cemeteries and the restriction or absence of public mourning, reflecting an entrenched pattern of violence and disregard for the lives of Kurds. This analysis underscores the urgent need to dismantle the hierarchy of grief created by the state. The voices and stories of victims like Ali Riza Arslan, Ekin Wan, and İpek Er, among others, compel us to confront the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and power within the public sphere. This article thus calls for a re-examination of those whose lives are not deemed rei and deserving of public mourning, seeking justice not only for the living but also for the dignity and memory of the deceased.

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