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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postcolonial Analysis of AKP's Counter-Terrorism Discourse After the June 2015 Elections

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the escalation of violence in Kurdistan by the government after the 2015 General Elections, framed as counterterrorism, and its essentialist portrayal of 'terrorists' divorced from the historical context. It utilizes a postcolonial approach to deconstruct the 'terrorist' subjectivity, viewing them as products of subjectification processes in peripheral spaces, serving the center's hegemonic ambitions. The postcolonial approach exposes discourses masking internal colonialism as counterterrorism practices, seen as a dispositif for controlling these territories. The research starts from theoretical explorations of subjectification, violence, and dominance, and continues toward situating AKP's discourse within the Kurdish Question's historical context and its 'solution'. Focusing on June 2015 to July 2016, it illustrates the AKP's counterterrorism discourse's alignment with political dominance and colonial strategies. The study illuminates internal colonial relations, and counterterrorism discourse through parliamentary records, news articles, and governmental and non-governmental reports, untying the complex interplay between political violence, identity, and control.

KEYWORDS: AKP; Counterterrorism Discourse; Kurdish People; Political Violence; Postcolonialism
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1. Introduction

The postcolonial analysis of counterterrorism strategies emphasizes their colonial roots, focusing on the use of colonial state violence against indigenous peoples, as observed in French-occupied Algeria (Erlenbusch-Anderson 2018), British-occupied India (McQuade 2021), and the Vietnam War (Bonditti 2017). This legacy of (external) colonial impacts persists through the infiltration of Orientalist notions of colonialism into

terrorism discourse, which (re)constitute the hierarchical ordering of peoples in terms of suppression and violent interventions, such as the Global War on Terror (Jackson 2005a; Martini 2021). However, these studies exhibit a Western-centric perspective. Terrorism, as a discourse for controlling populations, is prevalent in postcolonial societies, including Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Egypt, and even non-colonized societies like Turkey. From this perspective, the article aims to analyze counterterrorism practices in Turkey through a postcolonial lens to comprehend the Justice and Development Party (AKP—*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) government's colonial strategies in Kurdistan, under the pretext of counterterrorism following the June 2015 General Elections.

The AKP elites' extensive use of the 'terrorist' label, targeting various social groups—from the Gezi Park protesters and former Kemalist-secular state elites to radical-Islamist/jihadist international networks and the Gülenists—underscores the political advantages gained through its deployment. However, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK—*Partiya Karkarên Kurdistanê*) has consistently been portrayed as the primary embodiment of this label since the insurgency in Kurdistan commenced in the mid-1980s. This conflict had a profound impact on Turkish public opinion, as the former state elites leveraged it to enhance their use of violence and repression (Martin 2018). This situation makes it important to analyze how AKP governments employed counterterrorism to control and govern the population. By focusing on the period between June 2015, when the General Elections are held and the AKP government lost its majority necessary to form a government in parliament for the first time, and July 2016, when the Gülenist generals in the military attempted to overthrow the government via a coup d'état, followed by a state of emergency declared by the AKP government, this article aims to understand how the AKP government deployed colonial discourse to justify the suppression of Kurdistan under the pretext of counterterrorism. Parliamentary discussions, news articles, and governmental and non-governmental reports are analyzed.

This article consists of three parts. The first part initiates a general theoretical discussion aimed at understanding postcolonial analyses of counterterrorism. It argues that internal colonialism can serve as a crucial conceptual tool for comprehending how governments deploy specific counterterrorism practices to marginalize segments of society. The second part delves into a historical evaluation of the Kurdish Question to illuminate the (internal) colonial legacy of counterterrorism practices in Turkey. Furthermore, it explores how AKP governments perceive the Kurdish Question and how their approach resembles the continuation of internal colonialism. In the final part, the article examines how the AKP's colonial understanding of the Kurdish Question has evolved into a primary tool for suppressing Kurdistan, particularly after the June 2015 General Elections. Specifically, it analyzes two aspects: AKP's subjectification of the Kurdish population and the techniques deployed to marginalize them.

2. Postcolonial Perspectives on Counterterrorism

Contemporary power hierarchies are often rooted in Western colonial practices. (Post)colonial identities are influenced by Western perceptions of Eastern populations, as discussed by Said in his seminal work, *Orientalism*. The East has typically been portrayed as fundamentally different and sometimes hostile to Western norms (Said 1979). This essentialist perception justified the violent subjugation of Oriental societies by colonial administrations. While pre-colonial interactions between the West and the 'Rest' set the stage, colonialism marked a significant turning point, producing knowledge that depicted non-Western societies as 'primitive', 'backward', and ultimately 'subordinate', driving colonial interventions to regulate presumed 'ungoverned' spaces (Scott 1998). Colonialism intertwined racial segregation with violent interventions under the guise of 'modernization' (Abu-Bakare 2020).

As genealogical studies reveal, counterterrorism, rooted in colonial administrations deeply tied to racial segregation and economic exploitation, serves as a technique to discipline populations ostensibly for the greater good of society (Ditrych 2014; Erlenbusch-Anderson 2018; McQuade 2021). Colonial administrations subjugated indigenous peoples and altered demographics through violent means, together with occupying, regulating, and subjugating territories (Dwyer and Nettelbeck 2018). According to Mbembe (2003, 26), "space was therefore the raw material of sovereignty and the violence it carried with it. Sovereignty meant occupation, and occupation meant relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood". This led to indigenous peoples' resistance, resulting in emerging forms of 'savage' violence.

In the 'postcolonial era', the enduring hierarchical structure continues to influence current power relations. Bhabha (1994, 9) underscores that "postcoloniality, for its part, is a salutary reminder of the persistent 'neo-colonial' relations within the 'new' world order and the multinational division of labour". In this line, the postcolonial critique of terrorism discourse aims to understand how counterterrorism has become a technique for Western societies to continue their hegemonies in the postcolonial spaces (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Feichtinger, Malinowski and Richards 2012; Khan 2021; Martini 2021; Sen 2022). In this way, it "[enables] a more comprehensive understanding of the complex histories, relationships and interconnections embedded in, and reinforced through, counter-terrorism discourses and practices" (Chukwuma 2022, 403). The techniques of colonial control are repurposed, with the classification of certain groups as 'terrorists', echoing colonial essentialism, and reinforcing the notion of an 'other' to be controlled for societal benefit (Abu-Bakare 2020; Kumar 2020). Although these studies focus on contemporary hierarchies rooted in colonialism, they primarily examine 'external' territories and Western constructions of 'others', like migrants and Muslims.

However, what about subjugations within territories? How can we examine colonial legacies in subjugating specific social groups that are not considered external 'others'? This article argues that analyzing counterterrorism practices necessitates employing the theoretical framework of internal colonialism—domination and control of specific social groups within a (nation-)state's borders, often based on factors like ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status (Blauner 1969; Hurstfield 1978; Hind 1984). It operates differently from colonial subjugation of external territories but shares similarities in power relations and disciplinary techniques.

The discussions of internal colonialism can be traced back to Gramsci's account of the North-South relations in Italy and how the Northern bourgeoisie "colonized" the South. In "The Southern Question", Gramsci (2021, 21) argues that "the bourgeoisie of the North has subjected southern Italy and the Islands and reduced them to the status of exploited colonies". The Northern expansion integrated Southern Italy as a poor agrarian collectivity that provided agricultural products for the Northern capitalists' needs. In this way, the North established a hegemony over the South, even with some racial connotations (Srivastava, 2018). This hegemonical relationship between the North and the South was 'parasitical' in the sense that "[the North] enriched itself at the expense of the South, that industrial development was dependent on the impoverishment of Southern agriculture" (Gramsci 1992, 143). Gramsci's analysis laid the groundwork for understanding 'internal colonialism' from the postcolonial perspective by noticing the colonial struggles within a nation-state (Young 2012; Salem 2021).

The concept of internal colonialism, extensively utilized by Latin American Marxist scholars, gained widespread use during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the United States. According to Gutiérrez (2004, 282), "internal colonialism offered minorities an explanation for their territorial concentration, spatial segregation, external administration, the disparity between their legal citizenship and de facto second-class standing, their brutalization by the police, and the toxic effects of racism in their lives". Internal colonialism manifests in unequal economic development among regions, leading to hierarchical classifications often based on ethnic, religious, or racial differences (Hind 1984). Like colonial relations, where the metropole dominates

the colony, core regions dominate politically, socially, culturally, and economically over peripheral regions (Pinderhughes 2011). This domination results in the extraction of resources and labor from subjugated groups, creating economic disparities. Additionally, the dominant group controls political institutions, limiting the representation and influence of oppressed groups. Moreover, cultural assimilation or marginalization further exacerbates disparities, as the dominant group imposes its culture, language, and values on subordinated regions (Salih 2021). As a result, established power structures marginalize specific groups by perpetuating societal inequalities.

Like 'classical' colonialism, internal colonialism requires coercive control of peripheral regions, attributed to two security mechanisms. One aspect involves the substantial deployment of military, paramilitary, and police forces to regulate the movement of individuals residing there. The other facet pertains to political interventions by the central authority aimed at overseeing the administration of these regions for the collective welfare (Hechter 1975). Subjectification, a process of fashioning individuals or groups into subjects with specific identities, is intertwined with these security mechanisms. In colonial rationality, subjectification establishes racial hierarchies, positioning peripheral populations as inherently inferior, thus justifying their political and social marginalization and exclusion (Ehlers 2012). By creating spatially bound racial hierarchies, policing strategies can be employed to dominate peripheral populations similar to ghettos, which "are the consequence of the imposition of external power and the institutionalization of powerlessness. In this respect, they are in fact social, political, educational, and above all—economic colonies" (Blauner 1969, 396).

Counterterrorism, by embodying both subjugation and subjectification of peripheral spaces, serves as a modern aspect of internal colonialism. Within counterterrorism, subjectification encompasses the creation of 'terrorists' as a distinct category (Appleby 2010; Ryan 2013). Since counterterrorism pathologizes specific territories as breeding grounds for terrorism, it carries a colonial legacy of the racialization of "certain bodies and communities as 'monstrous dangers'" (Turner 2017, 781). This construction is far from neutral; power relations and the interests of the ruling elites strongly influence it (Pettinger 2020). Terrorism is defined as 'savage' violence against the dominance of the central authority by ruling elites in a colonial political rationality, leading to the disqualification of indigenous populations from governing themselves (Jackson 2005b; Ditrych 2014). Thus, counterterrorism perpetuates colonial rationality by marginalizing peripheral populations through control mechanisms and constructing endless suspicion based on race, ethnicity, religion, and other factors.

Even though there is a limited understanding of how to analyze Turkish counterterrorism practices in terms of internal colonial relations, there are extensive discussions on the colonization of Kurdistan. Beşikçi (1969) was one of the earliest thinkers who noted that Kurdistan was a colony since it had become a source of raw materials and cheap labor essential for the Turkish bourgeoisie to increase their benefits. Since then, the internal colonial dynamics have been analyzed by referring to the central attempts to integrate Kurdistan during the late Ottoman and early Republican periods (Yılmaz 2023), the emergence of the Kurdish movement resembling an anticolonial struggle (Tuğrul 2022), the social and cultural responses to the Kurdish Question (Kurt 2019; Salih 2021) and the transformation of Kurdistan to discipline and control the rebellious populations (Gambetti 2005; Genç 2021; Dölek 2022). This article aims to analyze the counterterrorism practices of the AKP government immediately after the 2015 General Elections. For this reason, the next chapter will explore the colonial relations between the center and periphery from a historical perspective.

3. Historical Context of the Colonial Dynamics

Although the Ottoman Empire faced losses of territory, external pressures, and encroachments, it did not undergo formal colonization akin to the societies in Africa, the Americas, Australia, or Asia. Mustafa Kemal

Atatürk spearheaded a national liberation movement, securing Turkey's independence in 1923 and preventing colonial administrations within its borders. On the other hand, both the Ottoman Empire and, subsequently, Turkey reproduced colonial modernity, especially regarding the political and cultural dominance of central authority in Kurdistan.

Turkish counterterrorism practices represent a continuation of this colonial rationality by framing the Kurdish movement as a 'terrorist' threat to national unity and employing the same repressive colonial methods of control and suppression. State-building involves the sociopolitical reorganization of territories and establishing security mechanisms that create center-periphery relations (Bonacker 2018). Security functions as a means for the center to discipline peripheral regions perceived as disloyal and dangerous. Consequently, certain social groups were marginalized and segregated as a part of the nation-building process. From this perspective, some studies suggest that during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, 'distant' territories labeled as disloyal and hazardous experienced a form of 'colonization', with security measures implemented to regulate and govern these regions (Yılmaz 2023). Thus, the Turkish case is crucial for understanding the postcolonial approach to counterterrorism practices.

3.1. Origins and Evolution of the Kurdish 'Question'

The Kurdish Question's politicization and the Turkish state's subsequent response highlight the persistent colonial governmentality in the 20th century. Kurdistan was subject to centralized administration, notably seen through the *Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu* (Law on the Maintenance of Order) during early Republican-era rebellions and multiple state of exception declarations in the 1970s, including the enduring instances after the Maraş Massacre, a pogrom committed by the Turkish ultranationalists against the Alevi Kurdish population in December 1978, until 2002. The Emergency Rule Regional Governorship, established in 1987, extended central government control, exemplifying efforts to suppress Kurdistan. Administrative measures, such as trusteeship institutionalized to depose elected Kurdish mayors in response to alleged links to the PKK in 2016, further illustrate the denial of Kurdish self-governance.

The central government perceived Kurdish demands as stemming from underdevelopment, necessitating intervention. However, the politicization of the Kurdish Question in the late 19th century and the early 20th century is closely related to the Turkish identity construction, especially after the founding of the Turkish Republic. As the Ottoman Empire declined, especially during the Hamidian era, territorial relations with the Eastern parts of the Empire were redefined. In response to increasing Armenian uprisings, the Empire enlisted Kurdish militants from Kurdish tribes, both to suppress revolts and secure these tribes' loyalty (Yılmaz 2023). Consequently, the Eastern peripheral territories became a security threat, resulting in significant political repression and even massacres.

Administrative reforms aimed at governing the region more effectively by reducing autonomy and increasing central authority led to Kurdish uprisings (Saatçi 2002; Yadirgi 2017). However, the Empire's collapse after World War I spurred a national liberation movement that established the Turkish Republic as a nation-state centered on Turkish identity. Kurds were categorized as part of the 'Turkish' nation due to their Muslim status, and they faced assimilationist policies under the Republic's secular principles (Saatçi 2002). Additionally, the "corporatist experiments" aimed at transforming individuals from "primordial" communities into "citizens as workers and peasants" heightened ethnic tensions (Cammett *et al.* 2015, 404), which led to numerous Kurdish revolts, posing a security challenge for the new regime (Yadirgi 2017; Salih 2021). Despite investments based on statism that spurred industrial growth and expanded the railroad network during the one-party rule, the socioeconomic landscape of Kurdistan remained largely unchanged. As White (1998, 143)

discussed, "[Kurdish feudal landowners] acted as mediators for the Turkish bourgeoisie, in marketing some of the latter's good". Kurdistan became integrated into the Turkish political-economic system as a raw material supplier for the Western parts of the country (Beşikçi 1969).

The Turkish socioeconomic landscape started to change after World War II, as the Turkish government, ruled by the Democrat Party (DP—*Demokrat Parti*), received substantial development aid as a part of the Marshall Plan. The increasing mechanization of the agricultural sector in the 1950s prompted a mass migration of former Kurdish sharecroppers to urban centers, where they established new squatter settlements and became a surplus labor force (White 1998; Yadirgi 2017; Tuğrul 2022).[1] Therefore, it resembles one of the clearest examples of internal colonialism: the transfer of low-cost labor from the periphery to the core (Hechter 1975). They began working as seasonal workers in the labor-intensive sectors, such as construction, tourism, and agriculture. This "proletarianization process" created a dual status for the migrated Kurds: they became an important labor force in the urban centers but were prohibited from expressing their Kurdish identity (Saatçi 2002, 559). They are "disproportionately confined to various categories of low-status labor", and, concurrently, their cultures are distorted, downgraded, if not destroyed (Hurstfield 1978, 60).

As a result of the rights and liberties established by the 1961 Constitution, Kurdish activists felt empowered to express their identity within the broader socialist movement. Initially, the multi-party system created space for the Turkish socialist movement to flourish. However, in the second half of the 1960s, the Kurdish movement emerged as part of the broader socialist rise in Turkey. During this period, "the Kurdish identity question was expressed in terms of regional economic inequalities and suggested a socialist solution" (Yavuz 2001, 9). The Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP—*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*) played a pivotal role in forming the Revolutionary Cultural Eastern Hearths (DDKO—*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları*) in 1969, following Eastern Meetings held in 1967. The active participation of Kurdish scholars in the TİP increased the visibility of the Kurdish issue, while its underlying causes, such as colonization and underdevelopment, became the main focus of analysis, thereby augmenting ethno-nationalist sentiments among Kurdish intellectuals (Gunes 2016). These developments established the Kurdish movement as a distinct political force. However, the aftermath of the March 12 Memorandum in 1971, which ushered in martial law and the dissolution of TİP and DDKO, led to the emergence of new Kurdish groups. The most influential group has become once Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

3.2. The Rise of the PKK

A significant turning point came with the PKK's founding in 1978, aiming to unite Kurds for an independent socialist state. The 1980 military takeover exacerbated the persecution of Kurdish political groups, resulting in widespread repression, including killings, torture, and arrests. Paradoxically, this heightened the radicalization of the Kurdish movement and bolstered Kurdish nationalism (Bozarslan 2001; Yavuz 2001). The PKK positioned itself as the main force resisting Turkish military efforts to 'Turkify' Kurdistan, framing it as a defense of Kurdish honor (Tezcür 2015). Consequently, the PKK emerged as the dominant force within the Kurdish movement, as democratic channels seemed insufficient to secure Kurdish rights in Turkey (Beyribey 2023).

[1] White's (1998, 141) figures state that "by 1973, landless families constituted 30.1% of total rural households. This figure is almost double the ratio of landless families to landed families for Turkey as a whole". Moreover, only 11.6% of all households in 1980 held all 59.9% of the land. Only 8.7% of the total amount of land was possessed by the 56% of households that owned land. This data demonstrates how mechanization affected the landlessness of Kurdish villages persisted even in the 1970s.

Immediately after the 1980 Coup, neoliberal reform packages were introduced. While the military regime cleaned the path for these changes by pacifying the population, the civil administration under the leadership of US-trained economist Turgut Özal initiated the wholesome transformation of Turkey's political-economic landscape. Privatizations, cuts on social spending, and trade liberalization increased social inequality, with the Kurds being heavily impacted. Reduced subsidies for agriculture decreased real prices, pushing Kurdish villagers deeper into debt, and intensifying their sense of exclusion (White 1998; Mousseau 2012). Thus, peasants were the primary recruitment targets, believing that the Turkish government and local collaborators were responsible for their exploitation (Tuğrul 2022). Initially perceived as a dangerous foreign organization, the PKK eventually garnered the support and cooperation of numerous Kurdish villagers, partly due to state coercion and a sense of having no other alternatives.

In the 1990s, the intensification of the conflict between state forces and the PKK caused forced migration from remote villages, driven largely by state forces.[2] These villagers settled in makeshift communities within Kurdish-majority cities like Diyarbakır (Gambetti 2005). This further radicalized urban Kurdish youth, leading to increased PKK recruitment, while the governments of the 1990s attempted to combat the PKK through military means, together with introducing new economic development plans for the region. Nevertheless, the region's underdevelopment intensified dissent among the Kurdish population, who were already facing repression by the Turkish state. As noted by White (1998, 148), "the singular paucity of infrastructure, and low level industrial development in Turkey's Kurdish region, makes it difficult in the best of economic climates to attract development capital". Nonetheless, the primary cause of this underdevelopment was the extraction of surplus value generated in the region, consistently channeled toward the western parts of the country (Tuğrul 2022). Unemployment soared among Kurdish youth, and their settlements turned into war zones. "Brutal torture continued to be a routine and systematic interrogation technique (fifteen people died in suspicious circumstances while in police custody)… and members of the Kurdish minority in southeast Turkey were killed, tortured, detained and forced to abandon their villages and fields" (*Refworld* 1994). Therefore, while Turkish governments relied on security measures to maintain their subjugation over the Kurdish population, underdevelopment in the region persisted, with many serving as the labor force for the core regions.

Throughout the 1990s, the state of exception was the modus operandi in the region. On one hand, a super-authorized administrative unit, the Emergency Rule Regional Governorship, was established to coordinate local governors and military personnel. On the other hand, violent conflicts intensified, claimed thousands of deaths, and displaced millions. Despite this, the Kurdish movement was able to mobilize its sympathizers. For instance, in the 1995 General Elections, the People's Democratic Party (HADEP—*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*), a pro-Kurdish party established in 1994, received only around 4% of the votes nationally but secured significant support locally: 46% in Diyarbakır, 37% in Batman, 54% in Hakkari, and more than 20% in Van, Mardin, Siirt, and Şırnak (Bozarslan, 1996), indicating its increasing regional influence in the 1990s.

3.3. The Rise of the AKP and the 'Transformation' of the Kurdish Question

Amidst the prolonged conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, Turkey faced political instability. With U.S. support, Turkey apprehended the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya, bolstering Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's popularity and fueling nationalist sentiments, which significantly increased votes for the

[2] Turkish Chief of Staff Doğan Güreş defended these security measures, stating that they aimed to achieve "area domination" through the strategy of "let[ting] them stay without logistic support—go hungry and surrender strategy" (Human Rights Watch 1994, 3).

ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP—*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) in the 1999 General Elections (Aydın and Taşkın 2014). This led to a new coalition government comprising the Democratic Left Party (DSP—*Demokratik Sol Parti*), MHP, and the Motherland Party (ANAP—*Anavatan Partisi*), which collapsed in 2002 amid economic and political crises. Meanwhile, a reformist faction within the Virtue Party (FP—*Fazilet Partisi*) established the AKP under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership in 2001. In the 2002 General Elections, the AKP secured almost 35% of the votes, leveraging the electoral system to establish a majority government.

Initially, the PKK declared its intention to retaliate for the capture of their leader, initiating several attacks, particularly in Europe, which was assumed to be part of this 'conspiracy'. However, Abdullah Öcalan called on his supporters to cease violence after his capture.[3] He asserted that he could contribute to ending the violent conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK if the Turkish state and society underwent democratization, prompting the PKK to declare a unilateral ceasefire in 1999 (Gunter 2000).

In its first term, the AKP government initiated several 'democratization' reform packages, which included effectively terminating the state of emergency in Kurdistan, decriminalizing the use of the Kurdish language in public, and releasing several former Kurdish representatives such as Leyla Zana. This relatively 'peaceful' period was disrupted when the PKK resumed attacks in 2004, following the termination of its unilateral ceasefire. During this period, the PKK evolved into a more complex organization with civil and armed entities in Turkey and abroad (Kayhan Pusane 2015). The PKK diversified its zones of activity and retained the support and loyalty of some segments of the Kurdish population. This intricate network of connections enabled the PKK to launch a new wave of attacks in Turkey.

Despite some contacts with the PKK in mid-2008, such as the Oslo meetings, new negotiations became public only in 2009, when the AKP government launched the 'Democratic Opening' initiative to end violent conflicts for good. Even though there were disruptions between 2009 and 2013, resulting in waves of clashes, this process evolved into a new stage when the AKP government and the Turkish state started direct negotiations with the PKK through Abdullah Öcalan in 2013. The PKK once again declared a ceasefire, withdrew its militants, and the government promised new democratization reform packages, enhancing the cultural and political rights of the Kurdish population.

4. Post-2015 Election Unrest and Colonial Strategies

When Kobani, a Kurdish town right across from Suruç in Turkey, was besieged by ISIS militants in October 2014, the peace process began to falter. The PKK and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP—*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*) accused the government of indifference, prompting many young Kurds to join the ranks of the Democratic Union Party (PYD—*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) (Yeğen 2015; Martin 2018). Subsequently, a violent crisis known as the 2014 Kobani protests, or the October 6-7 clashes, erupted between the Kurdish Hizbullah supporters, police forces, and the pro-HDP protesters, as a spill-over of the Kobani siege. During the clashes, more than 40 people died, and over 600 people were injured. This was the initial sign that the so-called 'peace process' was fragile.

Following the June 2015 General Elections, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority for the first time, despite receiving 40.87% of the votes. Furthermore, the HDP secured more than 13% of the votes, earning 80 seats, marking an extraordinary advancement for the Kurdish movement. To consolidate his power, Recep Tayyip

[3] However, it is important to note that Abdullah Öcalan had never called on the PKK to disarm. Throughout this period, the PKK remained armed and primarily stationed in Northern Iraq (Kayhan Pusane 2015).

Erdoğan pursued two policies, as outlined by Jongerden (2019): preventing the formation of any coalition government and remilitarizing the Kurdish issue by inciting violence under the pretext of counterterrorism. In this manner, he aimed to regain control of the parliament by delegitimizing the Kurdish movement, fueling nationalist sentiments through the propagation of fear and hatred. This marked the effective conclusion of the 'peace process' and a return to the military 'solution', causing the rapid escalation of violence in Kurdistan.

Hence, a question arises: How should we interpret the rapid escalation of violence, despite efforts to resolve the violent aspects of the Kurdish conflict? This paper argues that, while the AKP governments initially framed the Kurdish 'issue' as an identity problem, it was proposed to be addressed within the Islamist governmentality (Kurt 2019). However, this proposed solution did not intend to alter Kurdistan's socio-economic structure, which remained a peripheral space within the Turkish Republic. The ontological crisis experienced by the AKP government following the June 2015 General Elections led to the formation of a new coalition bloc with ultra-nationalists, which demanded the remilitarization of Kurdistan, ostensibly to combat 'terrorism' (Weiss 2016; Geri 2017; Özpek 2019). In this chapter, the article will explore two perspectives on internal colonialism concerning the tensions that arose after the 2015 elections: subjectification and subjugation.

4.1. New Subjectification of the Population

The transformation of the Kurdish 'issue' under AKP governments is closely linked to the construction of a new version of Turkish-Muslim subjectivity and its power struggle with secular elites. As noted by Kurt (2019, 351), "the notion of ummah and brotherhood in the state's discourse has been used as a discursive tool to subordinate the Kurds in its colonial territories". This process has witnessed the Islamification of Kurdistan, wherein the colonial relationship between the center (the state) and the periphery (Kurdistan) has been framed around the idea that Kurds are the 'Muslim' siblings of Turks, with loyalty expected through a uniform (Sunni) Muslim identity. In essence, Kurdishness is contingent upon conformity to Islamic solidarity under AKP rule and/or Islamist governmental rationality (Bayır 2014). Consequently, the PKK has been branded as an 'infidel' group seeking to undermine this bond through Marxist-Leninist methods (TGNA Proceedings Journal 2016, 86).

As the Kurdish conflict took on an Islamic dimension, the AKP government enlisted various Islamic groups to exert control and discipline over the region. One of the most significant groups was the Gülenist-affiliated organizations. The Gülen movement[4] was viewed as "a utilitarian force in seeking brotherhood and fostering stability through business and education" (Toktamis 2018, 705). The purges of secular-Kemalist high-level state officials, aided by high-profile trials such as the Ergenekon or Balyoz trials initiated by Gülenist militants, allying with the AKP, helped them infiltrate and control the police and judiciary. These developments at the national level also allowed Gülenists to dominate discussions on the solution to the Kurdish conflict, 'Islamizing' the approach to disciplining and controlling the Kurdish population. For instance, providing social services such as education or healthcare, particularly for the urban poor in Kurdistan, with an emphasis on 'Islamic brotherhood', aimed to diminish 'Kurdishness' and foster a bond based on 'Islamic' identity (International Crisis Group 2012; Gunes 2014). Consequently, societal relations were reshaped to bolster

[4] The Gülen movement is an Islamic religious network led by Fethullah Gülen, a self-exiled cleric in the USA, focused on establishing hegemony over civil society through investments in education, healthcare, and business associations. Once allied with the AKP, the movement was always controversial due to its influence within state institutions and political agendas. As tensions between the AKP cadres and the Gülen movement grew, the July 2016 coup attempt, allegedly orchestrated by Gülenist-affiliated officers, became a turning point, leading to their designation as a 'terrorist' organization by the AKP government.

Islamic governmentality to infiltrate Kurdish communities through the Gülenist *dispositif*. In essence, Islamic identity references became the organizing principle for Kurdistan, restructuring colonial arrangements by creating room for pro-Islamic initiatives in education and business.

The control exerted over the Kurdish population through the Islamic discourse experienced setbacks. The most notable setback occurred when the Democratic Society Party (DTP—*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*), a pro-Kurdish party established in 2005, secured victories in the Kurdish municipalities during the 2009 Local Elections, serving as an alarming signal for the AKP. Some municipalities that had been won in the 2004 Local Elections, such as Van and Siirt, were lost. Immediately after the elections, police operations were initiated against the DTP, which was subsequently banned in 2009, as a means to curtail the power of the Kurdish political movement (Casier, Jongerden and Walker 2013). A similar trend was observed in the 2014 Local Elections. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP—*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*) achieved success in nearly all provinces within Kurdistan, once again highlighting the resilience of the Kurdish movement despite security and judicial pressures. Therefore, the 'counterterrorism' operations reflect the AKP's pursuit of hegemonic control through a nationalist-religious discourse and Islamic governmentality.

In this discourse, the PKK has been considered as the enemy of the Muslim communities and cast as an 'infidel' terrorist group with no respect for the sacred values of Islam (Erdoğan 2015).[5] This religious discourse was also prominent during and after the 2015 General elections. One of the most memorable moments was when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan held a Kurdish-translated Quran during a rally in Batman. In his speech, he vehemently criticized the HDP and Demirtaş, accusing them of attempting to shut down the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). He further alleged that the PKK and its 'affiliate', the HDP, aimed to promote Zoroastrianism among the Kurdish population, while the AKP and the state were dedicated to preserving and safeguarding Islam in Kurdistan (*Sözcü* 2015), effectively framing it as the foreign 'other'. Another example is when an AKP lawmaker claimed that an individual affiliated with the AKP was kidnapped by the PKK and "received eight hours of Bible lessons in the mountains" (TGNA Proceedings Journal 2016, 354). As such, "this formula presupposes that Kurdism[6] is not only in contradiction with Islam but also against the interests of Kurds, who are Muslim" (Bayır 2014, 23). Consequently, the Islamic 'brotherhood' was considered the primary bond connecting Turks and Kurds, while 'terrorists' were labeled as 'infidels' positioned outside the Kurdish community.

This emerging political subjectivity transformed the 'war on terror' into a form of colonial warfare, openly emphasizing the mission to bring (Islamic) civilization, which was regarded as the highest of all. To achieve this, the security forces were imbued with a 'sacred cause'. As this warfare intensified, the PKK was portrayed as the "enemy of the homeland, nation, and religion" (TGNA Proceedings Journal 2015, 747). For instance, a delegation comprising judges, prosecutors, academics, civil servants, and businesspeople visited Diyarbakır to provide 'moral support' to the police and military personnel. One of them stated,

[5] This religious-Islamist discourse can be observed even before the collapse of the peace process when the relations between the PKK and the Turkish state strained. One prominent example of this discourse can be found when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan went to Elazığ to participate in the opening ceremony of the new terminals of the Elazığ Airport in 2012: "Oh my Kurdish brother. My dear brother. Take a stand against this terrorist and say, 'Let those places prosper'. Because they do not regard you as a human being, but we love you with the understanding that 'we love the created for the sake of the Creator'. These people have no connection with the Creator. The place for these terrorists is clear, they are Zoroastrians. Now they are revealing it themselves, they are talking about Yezidism. Look at what is coming out. We are learning from them; they perform such rituals" (T24 2012).

[6] Bayir (2014, 23) defines 'Kurdism' as "claims to protect and nourish the language and culture of the Kurds and their political interests"

> We will depart, entrusting our Quran and flag to our brothers and sisters who stand guard within the borders of the Sur district, dedicating themselves to the people's protection even at the risk of their lives. Nevertheless, our hearts will forever remain here... Our people, recognizing the truth, have chosen their rightful side, while those who disregard the Quran, faith, and flag have been left behind (*TGRT Haber* 2016).

In this manner, the war on terror assumed a new dimension, now framed as a struggle against the 'infidels'. The security forces had been sanctified, portrayed as "fighting hand in hand against turmoil, affliction, and madness, united under the flag and the call to prayer" (TGNA Proceedings Journal 2016, 86). The PKK was portrayed as opposing the 'Quran, faith, and flag', and the urban conflict aimed to safeguard these 'values' within Kurdistan. For example, claims were made that the PKK was attacking various religious buildings, such as the Med Zehra Social Complex, described as a building "to cherish the memory of Bediüzzaman Saidi Kürdi, the greatest Kurdish scholar", or Quranic schools administered by various Islamist *waqfs* (foundations) (TGNA Proceedings Journal 2015, 634). This 'mission' of securing the territory from the terrorists was accompanied by a high level of symbols of Turkish-Muslim identity, such as armored vehicles decorated with flags, and playing nationalistic songs (Dölek, 2022).

Diyarbakır's Suriçi district became the epicenter of trench operations, and during the violent conflicts, it suffered extensive damage. After the operations concluded, the AKP government promised to revitalize the district. However, the crucial aspect here is that their approach to reconstruction was rooted in neoliberal principles. It is crucial to note that the economic driving force during the AKP governments has been the construction industry. On one hand, the construction sector has channeled income through development contracts to business associates enriched under the AKP governments. On the other hand, the political dimension of this construction-centric economy has involved glorifying the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan governments (Buğra and Savaşkan 2014; Öniş 2019). This is because massive construction projects have become symbols of Islamist political rationality, creating a political identity that reflects the 'service' that had previously not been achieved.

The operations and their subsequent aftermath, including destruction, have provided an opportunity to reinvigorate the construction sector once again. Nearly all the district was expropriated, even without any legitimate pretext (Kamer 2017). As discussed by Genç (2021, 1683), "the AKP political elite and state bureaucracy envisaged the rehabilitation of Suriçi's landscape as a way of recasting the state in its benevolent image". Nevertheless, while Suriçi was once inhabited by lower-class residents of Diyarbakır, the 'reconstruction' of the district aimed to displace them in favor of middle- and high-class residents. More than 80% of the district has been expropriated and transformed into a commercial district, erasing Kurdish historical and cultural memory. Consequently, the district transformed to cater to its new inhabitants and ensure their security by incorporating new police stations and checkpoints (DİTAM 2024).

Moreover, this transformation was narrated as the '(re)conquest' of the cities governed by 'infidels'. During his visit, the then-prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was greeted with banners stating that 'we are standing like Sur (the Wall)' or 'the world is bigger than five, so as Sur is bigger than the trenches' (*Hürriyet* 2016). He extended this promise, stating that the district would be reconstructed as soon as the operations ceased, even transforming it into Toledo (*Sözcü* 2016). According to this narrative, the primary cause of terrorist activities within the region is unplanned urbanization. It is argued that reshaping the urban structure within its historical (Islamic) fabric is necessary to make the city more attractive as a "touristified site" (Genç 2021, 1683). Consequently, the narrative suggests that the counterterrorism practices implemented in Diyarbakır's Suriçi

district will also involve its 'rejuvenation'. This analysis transitions into the second part: how has the subjectification of the Kurdish people led to their subjugation by security strategies?

4.2. Colonial Subjugation Strategies

In the postcolonial analysis of terrorism, counterterrorism practices are a part of subjugation strategies aimed at disciplining and controlling indigenous people. Since they are subjectified as 'rebellious' groups harboring potential 'terrorist' elements, counterterrorism seeks to pathologize and reorganize the spaces where they live. On one hand, disciplining the indigenous population subjectifies them to 'normalized' hegemonic subjectivity, creating a hierarchy among various life conditions (Abu-Bakare 2020; Khan 2021); on the other hand, the spaces where they live are also pathologized and deemed in need of intervention to be corrected. The second aspect of counterterrorism strategies resembles the colonial policies of space regulations and transformations that both separate the colonial forces from native populations by creating 'safe zones' where colonial forces reside and intervene in native populations' territories to change the space to make it regulated (Chukwuma 2022). From this perspective, the Turkish counterterrorism operations carry a colonial subjugation strategy, aiming both to create 'safe zones' for military and police forces by transforming the city landscapes and to regulate the space by declaring curfews or dismissing elected mayors to keep the 'rebellious' population under control.

The escalation of violence in Kurdistan immediately after the 2015 elections bears a resemblance to a colonial war. The primary objective behind the forceful intervention of state forces was to (re)establish dominance in Kurdistan, particularly in the city centers. However, amid this violent escalation within the urban landscapes, the cities underwent significant transformations, destroying many cultural heritage sites. One of the most notorious instances was the military operations in the Sur[7] district of Diyarbakır, where the urban space was turned into a warzone, and all basic human rights were suspended. According to a report prepared by the Migration Watch Association, like military operations in other parts of Kurdistan, essential needs such as access to water, electricity, and sanitation became unavailable, and indefinite curfews were imposed. This resulted in the displacement of many people from their homes, and various human rights abuses became distressingly commonplace (Göç İzleme Derneği 2021).

Similar to the colonial reconfiguration of urban planning, Kurdish cities are divided between areas where indigenous people reside and areas inhabited by colonial 'outsiders'. It is common to observe highly secured staff accommodations allocated to various public officials, including police officers, teachers, and judiciary personnel. Moreover, city centers are dotted with security structures such as police stations and military barracks. Following the escalation of violence between the state and the PKK, the AKP government intensified this spatial segregation. On the one hand, the AKP government initiated the construction of more security buildings. In Sur districts, for instance, despite the threat of homelessness faced by over five thousand people, the AKP government decided to build six new police stations (Özdemir 2017). On the other hand, public service buildings, such as schools, were turned into police stations, thus increasing the number of police stations within Kurdistan (*Evrensel* 2017).

[7] Sur, in English, means 'The City Wall'. As the name implies, this district in Diyarbakır constitutes the historical core of the city, enclosed by ancient city walls. These city walls were designated as a UNESCO Heritage site, but they suffered extensive damage during trench operations.

One of the first security mechanisms the government initiated was the proclamation of 'special security zones'. The law, known as the Law of Prohibited Military Zones and Security Zones,[8] which permits the proclamation of these zones, was legislated in 1981, immediately after the 1980 coup d'état. According to the law (Article 1b), special security zones are defined as:

> In the event of significant contributions to national defense or the national economy, or in cases where partial or complete damages or temporary or permanent disruptions to activities may adversely affect national security or societal life, security zones will be established around all kinds of locations and facilities belonging to other military installations and areas, as well as public or private institutions.

These special security zones aim to segregate specific areas for military personnel, thereby restricting access for residents. Consequently, special military zones have become a prevalent aspect of daily life for Kurdish people. During the period between July and August 2015, a total of 130 special security zones were declared across 15 provinces (*Bianet* 2015).

The decision to establish a special military zone could only have been approved by the Chief of the Military Staff (Article 3). Following the escalating violence during the 'trench operations', the AKP government amended this article of the law through an Emergency Decree Law in 2017,[9] aiming to militarize public spaces. The revised version of the article states that...

> As of the date this paragraph enters into force, the service buildings, outposts, and similar locations where the units of the Gendarmerie General Command and the Coast Guard Command are stationed shall be considered as spontaneously forming special security zones… The boundaries of the special security zones established within the framework of this paragraph are determined by the Ministry of Interior.

As urban militarization intensified, so did the control and domination over the local populace.

As control over the cities continued, some extraordinary measures became normalized. For instance, according to the Migration Watch Association (*Göç İzleme Derneği*), from January 1, 2017, to June 12, 2017, curfews persisted for approximately one hundred days in seven districts in Diyarbakır. Furthermore, the curfew declared on November 28, 2016, lasted for over 18 months (Göç İzleme Derneği, 2021). During this period, security forces maintained control over entrances, and ID checks and body searches became routine procedures. This practice was justified under the guise of "rooting out the terrorism threat, curtailing the local population, and protecting their achievements, similar to other parts of the country where citizens enjoy". (TGNA Proceedings Journal 2015, 565). Consequently, these cities were transformed into zones of insecurity, where every individual was regarded as a suspect, and the protection provided by existing civilian laws was ignored. In essence, citizenship in these spaces was suspended. As Kurt (2019, 356) argues, "it is a permanent state of exception where Kurds live under a constant threat of punishment".

[8] The law can be accessed via this link: https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/17552.pdf

[9] This Emergency Decree Law can be accessed by this link: https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2017/04/20170429-M1-2.htm

As daily life became increasingly securitized during the trench operations,[10] the AKP government found a new tool to subjugate the Kurdish population further. Following the Gülenists' unsuccessful coup attempt in July 2016, a state of exception was declared. During this period, the AKP, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership, enacted several laws and amendments. As the AKP elites began equating the HDP with the PKK, the mayors elected in the 2014 Local Elections became labeled as 'terrorists' or 'terrorist-affiliated mayors' who allegedly assisted the PKK in procuring resources, both material and human (Geri 2017). One of the most significant changes was introducing the trusteeship institution for municipalities, made possible by Emergency Decree Law No. 674, passed on September 1, 2016.[11] The Minister of Interior Affairs was authorized to appoint trustees "in cases where the mayor, deputy mayor, or council member is suspended from office, arrested, or banned from public service due to charges related to terrorism or aiding and abetting terrorist organizations" (Article 38). Furthermore, it was stipulated that if there were suspicions that municipal resources were being used to support 'terrorists', representatives of the central government could take control of them. Consequently, the political representation of the Kurdish movement was immediately impeded. Between September 2016 and December 2017, trustees were appointed to 94 out of 102 HDP municipalities.

To address criticisms, the Ministry of Interior Affairs prepared a report whose objective is to emphasize that the removal of 94 mayors, "who had affiliations with or connections to the separatist terrorist organization PKK", and the appointment of deputy mayors in their place "were not mere preferences of [the] Ministry". Instead, it underscores that these actions were "constitutional obligations and legal duties of the State". These duties aimed to "safeguard the unity of the country and its people, ensure the safety of life and property for citizens residing in the region, and fulfill the local common needs of citizens" (İçişleri Bakanlığı 2019, 5). While the removal of HDP-affiliated mayors by the Ministry of Internal Affairs was justified on security grounds, the central government also utilized the narrative of 'improved service quality'. It was argued that the appointed mayors were more effective in delivering public services such as healthcare, education, and employment opportunities to the residents, which were portrayed as "genuine municipal endeavors" (İçişleri Bakanlığı 2019, 22). Consequently, any political dimensions of the Kurdish movements were reduced to the 'service quality' provided by the appointed mayors, thereby obscuring the political dynamics of center-periphery relations.

5. Conclusion

This article explored how the counterterrorism strategies implemented by the AKP governments immediately following the 2015 General Elections represent an extension of their colonial strategies in Kurdistan. On the one hand, the AKP sought to transform the Kurdish conflict from a political framework to a religious-Islamist one. This involved falsely promising a solution to the conflict via (re)establishing bonds between Turks and Kurds through (Sunni) Islam. Essentially, the Islamic narrative surrounding the conflict

[10] According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), approximately 2,000 people died during the operations. Of these, nearly 800 were security personnel, while around 1,200 were residents between July 2015 and December 2016. During this period, between 355,000 to half a million people were displaced without receiving any humanitarian aid. Widespread serious human rights violations, including torture, disappearances, prevention of access to emergency medical care, food, water, and livelihoods, occurred. For the full report, please see: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf

[11] This Emergency Decree Law can be accessed by this link: https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/09/20160901M2-2.htm

depicted Kurds as 'siblings' within the same religious framework, thereby accepting the majority of Kurds, who are Muslim, as an integral part of society. However, the (secular) Kurdish movement was marginalized as an 'outsider' to Kurdish identity and labeled as 'separatist' and 'terrorist', seeking to disrupt this religious unity. Consequently, the AKP's proposed 'solution' to the conflict rekindled internal colonial dynamics, this time utilizing religious discourse.

On the other hand, as the Kurdish movement gained momentum following the 2014 Local Elections and 2015 General Elections, counterterrorism measures were implemented to uphold this internal colonial framework. Following the June 2015 General Elections, where the AKP lost its parliamentary majority primarily due to the HDP's decision to contest as a party rather than through independent candidates, the AKP initiated a new wave of counterterrorism practices in Kurdistan targeting both PKK militants and HDP municipalities. This was intended to assert central authority at the expense of local autonomy. Thus, under the guise of counterterrorism, a colonial warfare was launched to assert dominance over the region and suppress local demands once again.

As this dynamic demonstrates, postcolonial analysis of counterterrorism practices should be extended to formerly colonized or non-colonized societies to understand how their central governments deploy such practices to suppress and control distinct social groups. This aspect is crucial because the general emphasis within (critical) terrorism studies is to analyze 'Western' discourses of terrorism. However, as the Turkish example illustrates, counterterrorism becomes a tool for central governments to control specific social groups for the 'non-Western' governments as well. In this sense, internal colonialism is a useful concept for discussing this dynamic. Internal colonialism mirrors external colonialism in terms of subjectification and subjugation, albeit occurring within a nation-state. Through this conceptual framework, counterterrorism can be analyzed as a mechanism by which central governments suppress and control specific social groups, thereby perpetuating internal colonial dynamics. Consequently, it can create new academic avenues for analyzing domestic counterterrorism practices from a postcolonial perspective.

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