

‘My Muslim Kurdish Brother’: Colonial Rule and Islamist Governmentality in the Kurdish Region of Turkey¹

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Abstract

This article critically examines the role of Islamist state discourse and policies in the Kurdish region of Turkey. Academic works on Islamism often address settings where Islamist movements and political parties operate as anti-colonial and oppositional entities. However, this article discusses how Islamist ideology has become an instrument of governmentality to maintain and legitimise colonial rule in the Kurdish region of Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). After contextualising the Kurdish issue as an internal colonisation process since the beginning of the Turkish Republic, the paper focuses on the AKP period to analyse the use of an Islamic discourse of unity and brotherhood and attempts to foster the rise of a loyal conservative civil society among the Kurds. Thus, it argues that the internal colonial paradigm remains fully relevant to analysis of the Kurdish issue during the last decade and that neoliberal Islamist governmentality should be understood as a strategy complementary to repression, to increase popular support for the government and marginalise opposition.

Introduction

The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and the colonial legacy left the Kurdish lands divided among four Muslim majority nation states (Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran). For decades, the so-called 'Kurdish question' has involved repressive state policy and the struggle of Kurdish people for their basic individual and collective rights by different means, from armed resistance to legal politics.

In recent years, post-colonial theories have been increasingly used in Kurdish studies to discuss various aspects of the Kurdish question, such as state violence and forced displacement,² discourse,³ and identity.⁴ However, this paper proposes to use the colonial paradigm to analyse a neglected aspect of the Kurdish question in Turkey: the role of religion in state policy and practices.

The Kurdish question in Turkey has become a litmus test for the Islamist political imagination since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power in 2003. After a century of suffering for the Kurds under secular nationalist regimes in the Turkish Republic, during the AKP rule state-society relations in the Kurdish public and political sphere have been reshaped by intensive implementation of a religious discourse and practice to maintain the colonial rule in place for a century. Promotion of the idea of Islamic unity (*ummah*) and brotherhood via the media and mosques, increased financial support to Islamic civil society organisations in the Kurdish cities and the networks of corruption around them and new alliances between the state and Hûda-Par, the political wing of Kurdish Islamist Hizbullah, are reflections of the change in Turkish state policy concerning the Kurds.

Furthermore, I claim that 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. Although this has been the case throughout the 20th century, recent political developments in the Kurdish lands accelerated and intensified the implementation of a religious discourse under conservative and radical regimes in the last fifteen years. The example of Turkish Kurdistan and AKP governmentality is a relevant case when evaluating the internal colonisation of the Kurds in light of the recent conflict. Religious politics has been the main component of the AKP strategy to cope with the Kurdish question in its territories as well as in neighbouring countries.

On theoretical grounds, this paper questions to what extent the Turkish state's use of power in the Kurdish region can be considered as an internal colonial practice and what the role of Islamist governance has been in transforming and shaping the political space in the AKP period. Has the AKP regime created an alternative solution to the Kurdish question by adopting an Islamist discourse and practice? How has the AKP's coming to power affected the continuous state of repression towards the Kurds? What role has Islamism played in enforcing and legitimizing the internal colonial rule in the Kurdish political space? This article argues that the use of religion by the AKP in the Kurdish region does not constitute a break with the colonialist stance of the previous decades, but rather seeks new ways to enforce and legitimise the ongoing colonial rule.

The paper will consist of three sections. The first section will be based on a theoretical discussion on internal colonialism, post-colonial theory, state, violence and power. The second section will contextualise the Kurdish issue and state colonial practices within the history of modern Turkey, with specific focus on the role of religion and state repression. The last section of the paper will focus on the religious discourse and practices developed by the governmental and pro-governmental institutions in the Kurdish regions. While I acknowledge that the reception of this policy by the local actors is crucial to evaluate its political meaning and impact, the responses of the Kurdish civil society organisations (CSOs), political and civil actors to the Turkish state's religious policies deserve a thorough analysis that is beyond the scope of this article. I will discuss them in a forthcoming article, complementary to this piece.

The first two parts of this paper critically address theoretical literature on internal colonialism, as well as historical and sociological works on the Kurdish issue. The last part is based on research data obtained via ethnographic fieldwork in the Kurdish region of Turkey, in the cities of Diyarbakır, Mardin and Bingöl in 2015 and 2016. The selection of these cities was made based on an evaluation in order to capture a wide representation of ethnic and religious components of the research field: Diyarbakır as the biggest Kurdish city and the symbolic capital of Kurdish culture and politics; Bingöl as a conservative city with a majority Zazaki-speaking⁵ population; and Mardin as a diverse city of Kurdish, Arabic and Assyrian residents. In addition to participant observation, interviews were conducted with Islamist CSO leaders, members, civil actors and political party representatives.

Islamism and Internal Colonialism: An Unexplored Relation

Islamism and colonialism are generally conceptualised as interrelated but antagonistic phenomena. The colonial structures and legacies in the colonial and post-colonial periods contributed to the shaping of Islamist ideology. Islamist thinkers, such as Hasan Al Banna and Sayyid Qutb, argued that *ummah* was a response to the colonial rule and corrupt secular regimes.⁶ Islamist movements remained as a form of opposition against colonial and post-colonial states for most of the twentieth century and suffered from state repression across the Middle East under secularist regimes.

In the political field, discussions around Islamism usually take place in the shadow of essentialist anti-colonial oppositions and feed on the vision of an imaginary golden age community. In this sense, it is not independent from relations of power and hegemony, and shields itself from today's structural inequalities. Like all golden age imaginaries, this attitude relies more on fantasy than facts but is a way to convey these ideals to the masses.

Although many aspects of the western colonial expansion over Muslim majority countries and territories and the response from Islamic ideologies (modernist, Islamist or fundamentalist) have been studied, most of these works focus on cases where Muslim societies and their ideologies are the victims of colonisation.⁷ On the other hand, the role of Islamism as a tool of power when Islamist movements take control of the state has been mostly analysed through dialectic between religion and secularism,⁸ or elite vs. popular classes (or new elite).⁹ This paper, however, aims to explore the interplay of Islamism and colonialism in Turkish Kurdistan, a region where Islam is the common denominator between the ruler and the population. It will attempt to conceptualise this case through the paradigm of internal colonisation.

The concept of internal colonialism came to use in 1954, when the oppression of non-white South Africans was described as 'colonialism of a special type' by the South African Communist Party (SACP).¹⁰ In 1964, Malcom X delivered his well-known speech describing the USA as a colonial power, colonizing 22 million black Americans by depriving them of their civilian human rights.¹¹ In 1967, discussion around black Americans and civil rights increased as Martin Luther King described black ghettos as American colonies: 'The slum is little more than a domestic colony which leaves its inhabitants dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated at every turn'.¹²

The concept of 'internal colony' first appeared in academic discussions in the late 1960s. Although a few writers like Harold Cruse¹³ and Kenneth Clark¹⁴ highlighted the significance of this phenomenon by employing the term 'domestic colony' in the early 1960s, the first conceptualisation of the term as 'internal colony' came from Robert Blauner in 1969. In his seminal article, *Internal Colonialism and the Ghetto Revolt*, Blauner distinguished between colonialism as a social, economic and political system and colonisation as a process that is not only particular to classic colonies but also widely recognizable within state boundaries.¹⁵ This approach has shifted the focus of race studies in the USA and created a basis on which to analyse various aspects of the structural inequalities between white and black Americans within colonial theory. Blauner formulated four basic components of what he called 'colonisation' and distinguished the process from what we have previously thought of as a colony. The first component was to examine how racial groups enter into the dominant society (whether it is a colonial power or not). He observed that colonisation begins with a forced, involuntary entry. Second, there is an impact on the culture and social organisation of the colonised people, which is more than just a result of such 'natural' processes as contact and acculturation. The colonizing power carries out policy that constrains, transforms or destroys indigenous values, orientations and ways of life. Third, the colonised are governed by representatives of the dominant power. He observes an experience of being managed and manipulated by outsiders. The fourth is racism, as it accompanies colonisation practices in many cases.¹⁶

Although the concept was initially applied to black Americans and non-white South Africans, today there is a vast literature on ethnic, class, labour and religious aspects of internal colonisation. Gonzalez-Casanova was the first to apply the concept to Mexico in the context of uneven development.¹⁷ Hechter's work on Wales, Scotland and Ireland,¹⁸ Epstein's work on internal colonisation and its impact on education in Peru,¹⁹ Zureik's study of Palestinians in Israel,²⁰ Mitra Das's work on Bangladesh and Pakistan,²¹ Goodman's work on ethnic minorities in China²² and Etkind's work on Imperial Russia and its internal colonies²³ are some of many examples of the concept's application.

As Robert Hind explains, internal colonialism derives from analogies: the coloniser and the colonised, contrary to the classic colonialism where there is a geographical separation, live in the same country. However, an internal colony comprises the common features of conventional colonisation existing within the state boundaries: political subjection, economic exploitation, cultural domination and racial/ethnic conflict occur widely within internal

colonies.²⁴ ‘The rule of difference’, as Partha Chatterjee describes it, is the main rule of governance in colonies.²⁵ Hence colonies are places where structural inequalities have become the norm in economy, politics, culture and belief. In this sense, it is the norm that a colony be subjected to economic exploitation, but also to what Gramsci describes as ‘cultural hegemony’.²⁶ As a result of cultural hegemony, the inhabitants of colonies perceive themselves as weak subjects and have a tendency to consent to the cultural and economic exploitation they experience as a result of colonisation.

Thinking about the Kurdish issue through this formulation, one can easily assume that Kurdistan features many characteristics of internal colonisation. First of all, Kurdish people and land have been under a permanent ‘state of exception’ in the twentieth century²⁷ through decade-long martial law rules, special administration, state violence in all forms, forced displacement and disappearances, impunity, impoverishment, uneven development, racism and discrimination and/or exclusion from high ranking posts within state institutions. Though it is beyond the scope of this article, a closer look at how Kurdish cities have been ruled by martial law governors (OHAL Valisi) or the new administration concept of trustees seen after the suspension of elected Kurdish mayors since 2015 would show the extent of internal colonisation practices.

Despite the early example of the sociologist, İsmail Beşikçi, the Kurdish case has been under-theorised in the academic literature produced by scholars from Turkey. İsmail Beşikçi, who described Kurdistan as an international colony in the 1960s,²⁸ constitutes an exception with his activist scholarship on the Kurdish issue. In the 1960s, Beşikçi first worked on the nomadic Alikan Tribe at a time when the state’s assimilationist policies were being implemented in Kurdistan and the very existence of a distinct Kurdish identity was denied. According to the state narrative, Kurdish was as a dialect of Turkish and Kurds were a nomadic Turkish tribe migrated from central Asia together with their Turkish fellows.²⁹ Beşikçi described Kurdistan as an international colony, referring to the separation of Kurdistan between four countries. Although Beşikçi has never used internal colonialism as a concept,³⁰ what he describes in his work is very close to the above-mentioned characteristics of internal colonisation. Because of his scholarship, Beşikçi spent years in prison, his work was trivialised in academia and his example became an opportunity for the state to give a clear message to the scholars who would dare to discuss the Kurdish issue and/or describe Kurdistan as a colony. Hence, the discussion around colonialism in the academic sphere was

non-existent in the 1970s and 1980s in Turkey, although this concept did constitute the main argument of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) during this time.

When the civil war intensified in the 1990s, Kurdish studies focused on evaluation of the result of state violence and its social and political consequences³¹ such as nationalism, identity transformation,³² forced displacement and disappearances.³³ In the late 1990s and 2000s, Kurdish studies started to receive more attention from international academia and the relevance of the colonial paradigm to the Kurdish case began to be discussed. Özgür Sevgi Göral's PhD thesis is a good example of how the experiences of forced displacement and disappearances in the 1990s and broader public and political discussion around these issues are conceptualised around colonialism and post-colonial studies.³⁴ Gambetti's spatial analysis of urban colonial practices in the de facto Kurdish capital of Diyarbakır,³⁵ and Yüksel's study of spatial transformations and neo-liberal practices in the Sur district of Diyarbakır,³⁶ discuss how urban space is re-designed through several post-colonial and neo-liberal practices. Orientalism and post-colonial theory have also been used to analyse the AKP's political discourse³⁷ and the representation of the Kurds in public and political discourse.³⁸ Moreover, the Kurdish political movement's new shift towards democratic autonomy and its implementation in Rojava (Northern Syria) have been studied as a decolonisation experience³⁹ or an alternative to the nation-states⁴⁰ in the recent years. While all these works have contributed to reframing the Kurdish issue from a colonial perspective, little attention has been paid to the role of religious discourses and practices in the colonial project articulated by the Turkish state. While assessing the religious dynamics of internal colonialism throughout the Republican era is obviously beyond the scope of this article, a preliminary insight into the history of state-religion relations in Turkey is necessary to understand the specificity of the AKP period.

Religious policy as a colonial tool: an overview of the Republican Period

Although the creation of the Republic of Turkey is most often described as a modernist and secularist project, religion has played a major role in attempts to create a Turkish national identity. The secularist project of the Kemalists was not a separation project: it aimed to nationalise Islam and integrate it into the state apparatus. The caliphate was abolished on March 3, 1924 and from 1925 onwards, laws such as Law on the Closure of Religious Orders (1925), Law on Headgear and Dress (1925) and the Turkish Civil Code (1926) were implemented as pillars of the secularist state.⁴¹ These reforms especially targeted traditional

religious practices and authorities that were stigmatised as backwards and challenging to the new state authority. However, the secularist republic did not give up using religion for its purpose and the Directorate of Religious Affairs was established on the same day as the suppression of the caliphate. The Turkification of the *Ezan*⁴² in 1930 was symbolic of the state's attempt to use Islam as a central element of the Turkish national culture in the making.⁴³

The Kemalist centralising approach to religion marginalised traditional religious practices and institutions but most of them survived in a less visible, often clandestine way. Resistances were especially strong in the Kurdish region. The first major revolt against the new regime started in 1925 around a Kurdish Naqshbandi, Sheikh Said, and the respective share of religious and ethnic motivations has been much debated in historiography. The revolt was harshly suppressed and followed by the forced displacement of tens of thousands of Kurds.⁴⁴ Yet dissent and uprisings in the Kurdish region continued in the following decade, culminating in Ağrı (1927-1930) and the Dersim Rebellions (1936-1938). Religious solidarities and leaders played an important role in all these revolts, which resulted in further repression and deportation.

From 1920s to 1980s, the state discourse and practice in Kurdistan was based on an assimilationist policy; the existence of the Kurds was denied, tens of thousands of Kurds were killed, displaced, exiled and relocated in the Anatolian countryside. In this period, the state framed the Kurdish issue as a result of regional backwardness, tribal resistance and reactionary politics, pointing to the lack of education, the resistance of landlords and religious elites (sheikhs) and regional underdevelopment.⁴⁵ Yet, despite the state's attempt to suppress the traditional religious and political structures in the Kurdish region, South-eastern and Eastern Anatolia remained at the margins of the Republic.

With a transition into the multi-party system in 1950, religion returned to the political sphere as a platform for political parties opposing the excess of secularism. The first Islamist political party was created in the early 1970s and ideologies such as the National Vision Movement (*Milli Görüş*) under the leadership of Erbakan and the Turkish-Islamic synthesis started to get an increasing audience. Although Islamist parties were able to enter governmental coalitions in these years, they had a limited influence on policy, as their term was relatively short and interrupted by military coups. However, with the 1980 military coup, Islam returned to the public space through the military junta, whose declared aim was to re-establish public order and fight against communism. Although Islamist activists also suffered

from military repression in the first years of the military regime, Islam played an important role in the official ideology of the new power⁴⁶. According to Jenkins, in these years Turkish society rapidly moved towards a more nationalist Islamist line after the coup, illustrated by an increase in votes for the nationalist and Islamist parties from 10.1% in 1987 to 16.9% in 1991, 29.9% in 1995, 34.9% in 1999, 54% in 2002 and 66.2% in 2007.⁴⁷ National Vision Movement political parties (Welfare Party, Virtue Party, Felicity Party), the central right parties (Motherland Party, the True Path Party), and the Nationalist Movement Party formed the backbone of this increase in support in the Turkish political sphere.

However, the rise of the Islamists in the 1990s started to be considered as dangerous by political and military elites, which led to the 28 February 1997 post-modern coup.⁴⁸ The successor of the National Vision Movement, the AKP, rose up as the central right and the National Vision Movement parties lost their public support after a series of political and financial crises, and power has accumulated at the hand of the AKP since 2003. With the AKP period, the conservative periphery completed its journey into the centre, assuming power in the form of a one-party government and remaining as such for the last 15 years. Islamism gradually became one of the main components of the state's discourse over this period.⁴⁹

The AKP acted more sensitively with respect to the secular regime due to expectations of the European Union and pressure from the Turkish military in the first years of their rule in early 2000s. However, as its room for manoeuvre expanded in the later years, the AKP started to implement more openly Islamist policies.⁵⁰ While the AKP power retains much of the nationalist ideology developed during the previous decades, its main originality lays in the use of religious discourse, practices and organisations as a resource to develop its political and economic influence. The Kurdish region has been one of the main targets of this policy aimed at legitimizing state authority in a politically contested space of ethno-religious tensions. While this state policy has sometimes been interpreted as a change of paradigm, especially during the liberal phase of the AKP rule,⁵¹ I argue that the colonial paradigm continued to prevail throughout the period and that the Islamist discourse of unity and brotherhood developed by the AKP is a manifestation of a colonial practice at the hand of an Islamist governmentality. In sum, what the AKP introduced to the Kurdish question is not a fundamental change in state paradigm, but a strategic move to employ a religious discourse of unity and brotherhood to surpass the ethno-political nature of the Kurdish issue.

‘My Muslim Kurdish Brother’: Islam as a tool of governance and legitimisation of the state’s violent practices

The colonial rule of the Turkish state in the Kurdish region can be observed in many aspects of administration and everyday life. What Bedirxan observes in Diyarbakır is very much true for all Turkish Kurdistan: it is divided in two in a colonial manner, compartmentalised both in terms of space and its inhabitants. Almost half of the Kurdish cities are allocated to military quarters, barracks for the families of soldiers, teachers and bureaucrats and the office of the governor, which are usually built next to each other and very well-protected. The second part of this division is a *death zone* where no one has security of life protected by law and citizenship.⁵² It is a permanent state of exception where Kurds live under a constant threat of punishment, something never seen in the rest of Turkey.

It is true that in the first years of the AKP there were a few improvements in the Kurdish issue in parallel with other advancements in society in general. Many scholars saw this as a paradigm change and proposed the Turkish model as an example for Muslim democracies.⁵³ However, the recent change in the Middle East politics⁵⁴ and the role of Kurdish insurgency both in Syria and Iraq revealed that the Turkish model is not an example but a continuum of nation-state practices under both secular and conservative regimes. In the Kurdish case, Islamist politics do not constitute a divergence from colonial state practices but rather seek new ways to enforce and legitimise the on-going colonial rule.

Through a few examples of internal colonial discourses and practices during the AKP rule, this part will analyse to what extent the notions of Islamic unity (*ummah*) and brotherhood serve the interests of the Turkish state. I argue that the use of religious discourses and practices constitute a tool of legitimisation for the state, which lays emphasis on the shared religious belief in Islam uniting the Turks and the Kurds.

The Islamic discourse also provides an opportunity for local actors who are willing to benefit from state-originated wealth and political recognition. As well as repressing political opponents, the state offers an alternative pattern of adhesion to the Kurdish citizens, characterised by the rejection of Kurdishness as an exclusive form of political and social belonging. Yet the affirmation of an ethnically blind religious identity by this new state discourse is not exempt from nationalist prejudices, as emphasised by a Hûda-Par leader in one of our interviews:

Another issue is that if you dig deep enough, you’ll find that the most radical of

Turkish Islamists is indeed nationalist. I'm not talking about nationalists. This is what the Islamists are like. Tie a Turkish Islamist to a lie detector and list places like Arabia, Turkmenistan, Turkistan, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan. As soon as you say Kurdistan their heart will beat in anger and the detector will react. Turks are prejudiced on this issue.⁵⁵

Here, I argue that the state's assimilationist policies transformed into a new form where Kurdishness can exist in conjunction with a strong religious presence and articulate its political arguments through religious discourse and practices. Although this is not a progression in terms of Kurdish political and collective rights, there are several motivations that make this discourse and practice function in the Kurdish region. First, the Kurds have been impoverished over many decades of violence and discrimination in Turkey and their survival strategies are scarce. Hence, rejecting Kurdishness as a political identity or at least being ethnically blind provides some opportunities for those that do not have any other alternatives. It is not a whole new political being, but a 'line of flight', in the words of Deleuze and Guattari,⁵⁶ where the Kurds find a new strategy to survive from the state violence at the expense of their Kurdish political being and national aspirations. Second, the Kurdish society living in the countryside still features a strong religiosity, in the form of social conservatism, popular traditions or loyalty to local religious elites like the sheikhs. The religious stance adopted by the state authorities enables them to benefit, at least partly, from this loyalty, especially on the part of the older generations. This policy has led to increasing conflicts and tensions between the religious and secular, young and old, rural and urban, educated and illiterate categories during the last decade. Finally, the Islamist organisations have played an important role in the phenomena of religious radicalisation observed in the region. Not only the Kurdish Hizbullah, but also many other organisations like Pro-Al Nusra and Islamic State (IS), whose civil society organisations (CSOs) have been very active among the youth since the Syrian War. The role of the state in the process of radicalisation is essential at many levels. Moreover, urban poverty, which is pervasive among the displaced Kurds, is also one of the main drivers behind radicalisation not only in Turkey but also in many other Muslim majority countries.⁵⁷ Yet urban poverty does not lead to secular or religious radicalisation alone, but operates in conjunction with a series of other factors such as structural inequalities, state violence and politics of denial.⁵⁸

The AKP campaign for the general election in June 2015 constitutes a striking example of the use of religious discourse as a tool of legitimisation in the Kurdish region. The 7 June

2015 elections were a turning point in the history of democracy in Turkey, but also the beginning of a quick shift and escalation of violence after Erdoğan repealed the results of the Dolmabahçe Agreement in February 2015.⁵⁹ During the campaign, the use of a religious discourse reached the highest level. One of the symbolic aspects of the AKP campaign was the use of a Kurdish translation of the Quran to counter-balance the negative impact of the rupture of the peace process. Erdoğan delivered public speeches with the Kurdish translation of the Quran in hand, praising the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) for translating the Quran into Kurdish and criticizing the People's Democratic Party (HDP)'s attacks against the Diyanet. Although the translation had not been completed yet and still needed editing at that time, ten thousand copies were published for the election and distributed to mainly state-appointed imams in the Kurdish region. Disputes over the issue continued as the HDP MP and professor of Kurdish studies Kadri Yıldırım announced that the Diyanet had contacted him for editing the translation but that the book had finally been printed without editing with the intention of political benefit in the approaching elections.⁶⁰ The strategy of the AKP failed in these elections, as the HDP obtained the majority of votes in the Kurdish cities, including among the religious Kurds.⁶¹

This was not the only occasion when Erdoğan, the AKP and their supporters in the media employed a religious discourse towards the Kurds. The use of the notion of *ummah* is another example of the attempts to legitimise the state authority and stigmatise the Kurdish opposition through religious references. During the above-mentioned electoral campaign, Erdoğan expressed his belief that his Kurdish brothers were loyal to their religion and they would give the necessary answer to Zoroastrian politicians⁶² (meaning the HDP) in the election.⁶³ One year later, as he was visiting Diyarbakır right after a four-month-long curfew and the destruction of Sur district in May 2016, in a meeting with Islamic civil society organisations the Turkish president declared that there was proof that the HDP members were Zoroastrians and atheists and urged his 'Muslim brothers' to choose their sides and make a choice.⁶⁴ This injunction to make a choice is embedded in the everyday life of the Kurds who are constantly urged by politicians, bureaucrats, security forces and pro-governmental civil society organisations to distance themselves from their Kurdish political identity and adhere to the state narrative, according to which the PKK and HDP do not represent the Kurds, there are also 'good Kurds' who do not support 'terrorism' and that Turks and Kurds are all brothers of the same *ummah*. I have come across this narrative quite often during my fieldwork with Islamic CSOs and I have concluded that most Kurdish people are aware of this distinction and constraint. The

sentence “I am a Muslim Kurd and I do not support the PKK”, underlining the Muslim identity and the opposition to the Kurdish movement, becomes a line of flight for the Kurds who attempt to escape from the stigma of Kurdishness and reproduce a narrative based on Islamic brotherhood and unity.

The division between a good and bad Kurd manifests itself through an Islamic discourse, in which Turkishness is explicitly or implicitly superior and leading,⁶⁵ while Kurdishness is absent or stigmatised. As a result, even if the official denial of the Kurdish existence has ended, being no longer sustainable, the denial of the Kurdish issue as an ethno-political question has found a new ground in the AKP period, through the use of an Islamic narrative that relies on a discourse of unity and brotherhood. This brotherhood nonetheless requires an ethnically blind approach towards its own being and has to prove its loyalty on every single occasion. This loyalty manifests itself the best in the examples of Islamist civil society organisations and their state-supported activities in the Kurdish region.

I will here provide some examples from local Islamist civil society organisations (CSOs) and their alliance with the AKP in the last 15 years. The data comes from two years of fieldwork in the Kurdish cities, including participant observation and interviews with members, leaders and recipients of Islamist CSOs services and activities.

Since the early 2000s, the Kurdish region has witnessed a rapid growth in the number of Islamist CSOs⁶⁶ in the field of humanitarian aid, education, student housing, human rights and development. Most of these CSOs operating in the Kurdish region are affiliated with a certain Islamic circle that precedes the AKP administration. While some of them are the local branches of the nation-wide Turkish Islamist groups, such as the Ensar Foundation, İlim Yayma Cemiyeti and Gülen movement, many others are affiliated with the Kurdish Hizbullah and other Kurdish Islamist groups ranging from moderate to radical Islamist lines such as Öze Dönüş Platformu, Ay-Der and Mustazaflar Association. Although the Gülenist CSOs were the most supported by the AKP government until the first clash occurred between them in 2013, most of these CSOs have benefited from various forms of support from the state during AKP rule. The example of the Social Support Programme (SODES) illustrates well this policy. SODES is a programme designed for development purposes, focusing on impoverished areas and underrepresented populations to provide them with support. At the same time, it also encourages individuals, CSOs and small businesses to adjust in neoliberal polity and create a conservative type of entrepreneurship. Gülen-affiliated CSOs received most of the SODES money for many years, and spread across the Kurdish region, recruiting Kurdish youth and

imposing a soft Islamist ideology and nationalism in the process. After the first AKP-Gülen clash in late 2013, the SODES projects were redirected to other CSOs, including the Kurdish Islamists who complied with state practices and joined the National Will Platform⁶⁷ or the local Islamic Civil Society Platforms.

These platforms, initiated or encouraged by the AKP administration, served as a litmus test for the CSOs, whose members benefitted from various ways of financial and political support. The state used their alliance to spread the Islamic unity and brotherhood discourse and divert people from pro-Kurdish political entities. It should be emphasised that social support programmes like SODES only developed dependant financial and political entities, rather than empowering civil actors and supporting entrepreneurs who would have independent agendas of grassroots movements and mobilisations. As has been the case in previous decades, political economy is used as a colonial tool by the hegemonic power.

The Blessed Birth (*Kutlu Doğum*) event⁶⁸ organised by the pro-Hizbullah platform Lovers of the Prophet (*Peygamber Sevdalıları Platformu*) or the celebration of the Conquest of Diyarbakır⁶⁹ in the symbolic capital of Kurdish politics, are two examples of the spread of political Islam in the Kurdish public space. The first has become a major public event for the Kurdish Islamist groups who participated in the civil war of the 1990s, supporting the state by murdering more than a thousand Kurdish civilians. Kurdish Hizbullah remained underground for two decades but appeared in public space via CSOs and a political party, Hûda-Par in the 2000s.⁷⁰ They proved themselves to be loyal to the state in times of conflict, although they have their separate political and social interests. The alliance between the state and Hûda-Par reflects the state strategy in this contested political space, consisting of supporting whoever serves their agenda, regardless of whether they are true allies or strategic partners. The main motivation is to balance powers and divide the Kurdish society, affected by century-long suppression and colonial practices.

The first celebration of the Conquest of Diyarbakır was also organised by the Hizbullah affiliate CSOs⁷¹ in May 2016, when the four-month-long curfew in the historical district of Sur had just ended and the massive destruction of neighbourhoods and historical sites had not yet been well documented.⁷² The destruction of Kurdish towns went hand in hand with this creation of a discursive hegemony, which produces symbols and narratives to maintain the state's colonial rule and practices. The Blessed Birth (of Muhammad) or the celebration of the Conquest of Diyarbakır can be interpreted as examples of a counter-narrative created and backed by the state and its apparatus.⁷³ The Prime Minister of the time, Ahmet Davutoğlu,

visited the city during the same period, delivering a talk in front of the Grand Mosque (*Ulu Cami*), describing the conflict as a conquest by referring to the common Islamic history and the notion of Islamic unity and brotherhood. His speech was well attended by the Islamist CSOs and broadcasted on all national and local TV channels. This analogy does not come from a coincidence but a strategic plan to distribute a similar narrative to all levels of society. Hence, the invention of the conquest is not a random choice but a well-designed strategy that has been transformed into a public event in which the masses can participate, bear witness and reproduce the state narrative of a war on terror, which becomes another indicator of colonial rule.

The Blessed Birth and the conquest of Diyarbakır are indeed conceived as responses to the well-attended Kurdish New Year celebration, Newroz, and other Kurdish public gatherings and events. It shows us that the state hegemony takes place at multiple levels and transforms the Kurdish public and political space into one that complies with the state's political interests, which I describe as a colonial practice due to its clear purpose to divert the grassroots political reality towards a more state-centric approach to the Kurdish issue. It is not surprising that the invention of the Conquest coincided with the massive destruction of Sur district. As I have also witnessed how security forces described the destruction as a conquest and a battle won after a heavy war in 2016, there is a strong parallel between the discourse and practice that state and its local apparatus produce and disseminate.

SODES or public events like the Blessed Birth and the Conquest of Diyarbakır are not the only ways through which the Turkish state and its local apparatus seek to enhance their control and legitimacy. There are other instances of this reciprocal relationship between the state and their local allies: state-originated wealth such as mass housing construction (TOKI) and infrastructural projects (highways, bridges and urban renewal) in the possession of loyal Kurdish subcontractors; institutional ranks and positions granted to members of Islamist CSOs; public and media visibility for loyal individuals and organisations; and political recognition and support of the pro-Hizbullah Hûda-Par and alike political entities. It should be noted that the state needs this form of alliance to maintain their rule and legitimise their acts in the region. These institutions, individuals and CSOs provide both physical and symbolic spaces for the state to interpret, reproduce and maintain a colonial rule in the Kurdish region and challenge the insurgent sentiments among the Kurds. This alliance has a high cost as the state asks them to demonstrate their loyalty in media and public space, reproduce and disseminate the discourse of unity and brotherhood, and support the state through several

channels whenever needed. This policy results in more disputes and conflicts in the Kurdish public and political space and creates a wide range of reaction from local actors and political parties.

Concluding Remarks

Relying on the paradigm of internal colonisation, this article has argued that this paradigm is relevant to analyse the policy of the Turkish state in the Kurdish regions since the beginning of the Republican period. Based on the destruction of traditional structures, violent repression and discriminatory practices, this policy has turned Turkish Kurdistan into an internal colony, despite an assimilationist discourse denying the very existence of a distinct Kurdish identity. While this colonial paradigm has started to be discussed by recent works on the Kurdish issue, the role of religious policy in the state's attempts to establish and maintain its colonial rule has been little discussed. This article sought to bring an original contribution to the field by focusing on the AKP period and questioning the use of Islamic references by the government and its supporters in the Kurdish region.

Religious brotherhood and shared belief in Islam have been used as a tool of political mobilisation and legitimisation by the AKP power in order to gain support from the conservative and/or Islamist components of the Kurdish society. Emphasizing the shared Muslim identity of the Turkish and Kurdish people and stigmatising the supposed lack of religious belief of the Kurdish political movement, the governmental actors and the affiliated organisations attempted to influence and reshape the public sphere by supporting Islamic civil society initiatives and developing new rituals and celebrations, such as the Blessed Birth of the Prophet or the Conquest of Diyarbakır. Although at first sight these initiatives seem to promote a more participative form of governmentality, their counterpart has been an increasing repression of political opponents and the economic marginalisation of the actors excluded from these partisan networks. In short, the Islamic stance of the AKP power has served the consolidation of the colonial rule in Kurdistan.

The reception of this policy deserves a thorough analysis. As mentioned in this article, its political impact in terms of vote has been limited. However, it has created responses and resilience among the Kurds such as Civil Friday Prayers⁷⁴ and formation of the Democratic Islam Congress⁷⁵ (DIK) and pro-Kurdish Islamic CSOs, a few examples that need further investigation in terms of their effectiveness and agencies. Beyond this, to what extent could

the AKP policy towards the Kurdish region develop loyalty to the government and the Turkish state among the local population? Did they influence religious practices and result in an increase of religious conservatism in the local society? And how have the Kurdish political movements responded to this use of religious references as a tool of mobilisation? In a forthcoming article, I will focus on these questions to argue that the colonial paradigm is not only useful to analyse state domination but also provides a relevant theoretical framework to understand the multiple layers of agency and resistance among Kurdish society.

¹ This research was supported by the British Academy Newton Advanced Fellowship held at Queen Mary, University of London between March 2015 and March 2018. Article at hand is a part of an article series produced as a part of the fellowship programme.

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reject the Dolmabahçe Agreement around the Kurdish New Year (Newroz) in March 2015. For a related news look at, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 20 July 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogans-denial-of-dolmabahce-agreement-sparks-row.aspx?pageID=238&nID=85656&NewsCatID=338>, (accessed 17 October 2017).

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⁶² This is not the only example where Erdoğan employed a language of hatred towards ethnic and religious minorities as Armenians, Jews, Alevîs, Yazidis and the Kurds have been exposed to the same language in many occasions. By employing such a discourse, Erdoğan aims to benefit from the embedded hatred in society that has already been constructed by the state in previous decades.

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⁶⁶ This fact is very much true for the rest of Turkey under the AKP rule as well. However, the motivations and drivers of the CSOs in the Kurdish region differ from their Turkish counterparts, which will be comparatively analysed in detail in a separate publication.

⁶⁷ National Will Platform (Millî İrade Platformu) was founded in late 2013 during the political clashes between the AKP and the Gulen Movement. The platform was established solely to back the AKP discourse against the Gulenists and it has stayed so since then. *National Will Platform*, 2013, <https://milliiradeplatformu.com>, (accessed 18.10.2017).

⁶⁸ Although there have been small scale celebrations of Muhammad's birthday in the past few decades, the Blessed Birth (Kutlu Doğum) celebration organised by the pro-Hizbullah organisations has become an indicative symbol of the Islamist power and their presence in the Kurdish region. Every April, ten thousands of Islamists gather in the city of Diyarbakır to celebrate the event and show the extent of their power and influence in the Kurdish region. Hence, the celebration is not solely religious but political in nature. For more information; M. Kurt, *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey: Islamism, Violence and the State*, Pluto Press, London, 2017.

⁶⁹ The event originally took place in 639 A.D., during the rule of Khalif Umar. In the last 40 years, it has remained at the centre of debates between the secular and religious Kurds, as the former would define the incident as a massacre, while the latter see it as a victory and conquest. However, the celebration is newly invented event introduced to the Kurdish public space.

⁷⁰ M. Kurt, *Ibid*.

⁷¹ The second Conquest programme was organised by another pro-government CSO, Anatolia Youth Association (Anadolu Gençlik Derneği).

⁷² A recent UN report shows the extent of the destruction that has taken place since July 2015, when the peace process terminated and the conflict between the PKK and the state forces reignited. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21342>, (accessed 18 October 2017).

⁷³ M. Kurt, 'The "success" of political Islam in the Kurdish context', *Open Democracy*, 2 June 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/mehmet-kurt/success-of-political-islam-in-kurdish-context>, (accessed 18 October 2017).

⁷⁴ Public gathering of practicing Muslim Kurds to protest restrictions on the usage of Kurdish in mosques. For further information, please look at Türkmen-Derivoğlu, *Ibid*.

⁷⁵ Democratic Islam Congress (DİK) was founded after the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan emphasised the importance of a new perspective for a democratic Islam in early 2010s. After two national meetings in 2014 and 2015, the DİK's meeting was interrupted under the authoritarian AKP regime.

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