Sacralisation: Defying the Politicisation of Security in Turkey

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Abstract: In early 2016, a small town called Kilis on Turkey’s southeast border became the target of unguided short-range rockets originating from an ISIS-controlled zone in Syria. Continuing over a five-month period, the attacks claimed 20+ lives, rendered hundreds of people homeless, and traumatised many more. Yet, the public in the rest of Turkey remained mostly unaware of the havoc caused by these attacks. This is not to say that appropriate steps to address the rocket attacks were not taken. Yet uttering ‘security’ was conspicuously absent from Ankara’s response repertoire. The puzzle being: how was it possible for Ankara to limit politics in the face of local civil societal actors’ and opposition MPs’ attempts to politicise security? Through sacralisation, I suggest. What follows shows that in the first half of 2016, invoking ‘sacred’ cultural codes in framing the events helped Ankara to limit politics around security.

Keywords: Securitisation; politicisation; sacred; politics; security; Turkey

Introduction

In early 2016, a small town called Kilis on Turkey’s southeast border became the target of unguided short-range rockets originating from an ISIS-controlled zone in Syria. Continuing over a five-month period, the attacks claimed 20+ lives, rendered hundreds of people homeless, and traumatised many more. Yet, the public in the rest of Turkey remained mostly unaware of the havoc caused by these attacks. This is not to say that appropriate steps to address the rocket attacks were not taken. Yet this was done without any political drama. Uttering ‘security’ was conspicuously absent from Ankara’s response repertoire.

A first look at the Kilis incident seems to suggest a textbook-worthy example of the social constructedness of security: rockets sent from outside a country’s
boundaries and resulting in fatalities may not be securitised if the state elite chooses to portray them as ‘falling’.  

A second look shows that Ankara did securitise the issue but without recourse to security-speak. The local and central representatives of the state adopted a series of measures to prevent further destruction and alleviate human suffering while putting in place a gag order on the use of graphic images in media reporting.

A third look reveals that Ankara’s efforts did not concern a decision to securitise or not (because the issue was already securitised), but were in defiance of local civil societal actors’ and opposition MPs’ attempts to politicise security via generating controversy: the former issued an announcement in national newspapers declaring that ‘the homeland is under attack’ and invited attention; the latter set up an investigative commission and submitted written questions at the Parliament, probing into the appropriateness of Ankara’s handling of the incident.

My aim here is not to inquire into the possible reasons why Ankara responded to ISIS rockets in the way it did. Others have considered the relative weight of domestic and international political concerns in shaping Ankara’s policies toward the war in Syria in general and ISIS in particular. Here, I am interested in understanding how it was possible for Ankara to defy local non-state actors’ and opposition MPs’ attempts to politicise security. What follows shows that in the first half of 2016, representatives of the state establishment invoked ‘sacred’ cultural codes when framing the dangers involved in and the suffering caused by the rocket attacks. In the face of local civil societal actors and opposition MPs seeking to generate controversy around Ankara’s handling of the incident, I suggest, invoking ‘sacred’ cultural codes in framing the events helped to limit politics around security.

The paper begins by tracing the trajectory of critical security thinking about politicisation of security (section 1) and offers a discussion on the notion of sacralisation (section 2). Next, I set the context in Turkey by showing how the late 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s were characterised by politicisation of security by civil societal actors who sought to make room for the democratising reforms

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5 In 2014, Turkey’s Mosul (Iraq) consulate was seized by ISIS, keeping 49 people hostages (including the consul-general) for three months until a negotiated deal was reached. A report issued by the Ministry of Interior listed 14 major terrorist attacks conducted by ISIS in Turkey during 2014-16. Turkey has been a member of the coalition fighting ISIS since the beginning. The Incirlik airbase in Turkey has been used by the coalition in the fight against ISIS since 2015. See https://www.academia.edu/33832608/T%C3%BCrkiye%E2%80%99nin_DAE%C5%9E_Hareketi_ile_M%2F%C3%BCCADESI,-_Turkey%27s_Fight_Against_DEASH (Accessed 6 July 2018).

required by EU conditionality. Such reforms were previously obstructed by those in the state establishment who invoked ‘national security’ concerns toward limiting politics (section 3). The final section turns to the Kilis incident in early 2016 and shows how Ankara, when faced with non-state actors’ and the opposition’s efforts to generate a controversy around its handling of the Kilis incident, responded by portraying as ‘sacred’ the dangers involved in and the suffering generated by the attacks (section 4).

**Politicising security**

On one level, to speak of politicising security is a misnomer. Security is always already political. To quote R.B.J. Walker: ‘questions about security cannot be separated from the most basic questions of political theory’.7 Michael Dillon concurred:

*Security turns-out to have a much wider register – has always and necessarily had a much wider register, something which modern international security studies have begun to register – than that merely of preserving our so-called basic values, or even our mortal bodies. That it has, in fact, always been concerned with securing the very grounds of what the political itself is; specifying what the essence of politics is thought to be.*

On another level, post-Cold War debates on security were set in motion by exposing the politics of Security Studies that had, for long, remained oblivious to its own politics. What students of critical approaches to security have done, then, is to expose the politics of (the study of) security.8 As Ken Booth underlined, ‘the problem of security is not in the meaning of the concept, but in the politics of the meaning’.9 Dillon’s counsel that Security Studies scholars begin to register the ways in which security has a ‘much wider register’ was considered to be an appropriate opening move by students of critical approaches to security.10

In the early post-Cold War period, exposing the politics of security went hand in hand with highlighting the constructedness of security.12 Notwithstanding the differences among students of critical approaches to security, they all begin from the understanding that insecurities are socially constructed.13 This is not about materiality/immateriality of issues. What is socially constructed is their securityness/not. The decisive factor is neither the material costs incurred nor the breach of sovereignty. What renders an issue a ‘threat’ is not its intrinsic qualities but the meanings ascribed

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9 ‘Politicizing security’ and ‘exposing the politics of security’ are difficult to distinguish in the way ‘gendering security’ refers to ‘exposing the ways security is gendered’. I use them interchangeably.
12 Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Raymond Duvall & Hugh Gusterson, eds., Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities and the Production of Danger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).