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He Is a Lynched Soldier Now

Coup, Militarism, and Masculinity in Turkey



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The violence that unfolded during the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, has shaken Turkey's political culture on many levels, including the relationship among gender, militarism, and nationalism. Both the brutality of the military against civilians and the collective violence targeting soldier bodies have created deep if transitory fractures in this relationship. One of the daunting tasks that awaits the ruling bloc in Turkey in the postcoup era will be the restoration of the military's privileged place in the hegemonic constructions of masculinity and national identity.

On the coup night, low flying military jets terrorized urban centers and the air force targeted the parliament and progovernment security forces, while unarmed civilians confronted and were killed by military troops and tanks. Such acts of violence were appalling and unfathomable for the nation, except for the Kurdish region, where state violence had long gained an ordinary character. Yet, for large sectors of Turkish society, some of the most disturbing spectacles of the coup night were the grotesque scenes of lynching in which surrendered conscripts were whipped and beaten to death by progovernment crowds. Video footage (likely fabricated) of a beheaded soldier — resonating with both ISIS beheadings and the beheading of Kubilay, the iconic martyr of Turkish secularism — added to the shock that people felt in the face of the violent defacement of a crucial gendered national symbol, the soldier body.

Compulsory military service serves as a key rite of passage into hegemonic masculinity in Turkey (Açıksöz 2012; Altınay 2004). The dominant social expectation is that young men become marriageable and employable sovereign (hetero) masculine subjects on the completion of military service. This is why the lionized and masculinized male conscript is also seen as a childishly innocent figure and is

affectionately called little *mehmet* (the generic term for a common soldier), suckling, and hennaed lamb. Because of his status both in military hierarchy and in the heteropatriarchal nexus of gender and age, the conscript is not deemed to possess the gendered power to make sovereign decisions. In the aftermath of the coup, the moral outrage caused by the victimization of young and helpless conscripts, who were constructed not only as subservient inferiors but also as “innocent kids,” was precisely charged by the violation of this gendered logic.

Such otherwise hegemonic gendered constructions of soldiers’ “innocence” did get contested in progovernment circles, which highlighted the coup’s civilian victims and soldiers’ criminal offenses. Nevertheless, even the pro-AKP far-right Islamist newspaper *Yeni Akit*, infamous for its sexist and violence-prone vulgarity, which covered the alleged beheading with a headline, “The People Chopped Off the Head of the Traitor Coupist,” had to pull back following the uproar. The government itself walked a tight rope with regard to its supporters’ paramilitary violence against soldiers. After all, just one month before the coup, the government had passed a law to grant soldiers immunity from prosecution for their actions in the reignited counterinsurgency operations in the Kurdish region. Now, soldiers were being killed live on TV by civilians who were hailed as heroes of democracy. The rift within the hegemonic relationship between masculinity, the military, the state, and the nation was deepening. A defamed soldier, who called on his wife and children to drop his family name, dramatically relinquishing his heteropatriarchal privilege, became an iconic example of this deepening rift.

The government resolved its apparent dilemma by resignifying coupist soldiers as “terrorists.” The constant iteration of the phrase “terrorists in soldier uniforms” evoked a political fantasy in which the soldier body was displaced by the terrorist body. While these terrorist-soldiers were said to belong to the Gülenist “parallel state,” the mobilization of the terrorism discourse whose primary reference point was the Kurdish conflict made it possible to subject soldiers to the forms of gendered and sexualized violence that have been long inscribed on Kurdish guerrillas. Detained soldiers were stripped half-naked and pictured in humiliating poses. Amnesty International reported that postcoup detainees were subjected to sexual abuse and rape (Amnesty International 2016). Video footage showed a policeman threatening to rape a detained soldier’s baby daughter. Even dead soldiers were subjected to the kinds of symbolic violence that imprinted the afterlives of dead guerrillas (Özsoy 2010). The Presidency of Religious Affairs declared that no funeral services would be provided to coupists and a “traitors’ cemetery” was created.

While justifying violence against soldiers, the political fantasy of the terrorist-soldier also shielded the generic soldier body from defacement in the eyes of AKP supporters. One of the most ironic scenes I spotted during the “democracy feast” celebrations on the streets was a deliriously dancing young man waving a scarf that read “he is a soldier now.” A familiar nationalist accessory of soldier’s farewell



ceremonies where sending young men off to compulsory military service gets celebrated, the scarf provides a powerful lesson about the rekindling of hegemony in the exact moment of its crisis.

Attending to the irony of celebrating the failure of a military coup through a militarized object glorifying conscription is crucial to understanding the fact that the postcoup political climate is not anti- or postmilitarist but rather a remilitarizing one. Despite the fractures and defacement that the coup created in the gendered economy of militarism, the religiously inflected masculinist fetishization of the military will only intensify in the forthcoming days. The thoroughly militarized language of the Democracy and Martyrs meeting, the foundational event of the postcoup national consensus endorsed by all major political parties except the leftist/Kurdish HDP and attended by millions, and its explicit and excessive emphasis on *ghazi* (wounded) warriors and martyrdom serve as a reminder of that.

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