

ARTICLE

Turkish Islamism Racist Discourse

Kamal Soleimani 

Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies | El Colegio de México | Centro de Estudios de Asia y África

Abstract

This article examines Turkish Islamist discourse as a form of genocidal political theology through a critical analysis of a pro-state Yeni Şafak article addressing the Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo. It argues that Islamist rhetoric does not merely justify violence but actively produces the ontological conditions under which Kurdish civilian life becomes destroyable. By criminalizing Kurdish presence, recoding civilians as “occupiers,” and sacralizing state violence through Qur’anic references such as *Ayyām al-Furqān*—which symbolically recast Kurdish neighborhoods as the pagan aggressors of Mecca against the Prophet Muhammad and the Medinan community—Islamism collapses the distinction between revelation and political command. The article conceptualizes this process as a theology of annihilation, in which destruction is rendered meaningful, necessary, and sacred.

Keywords: Political Theology, Islamism, Genocidal Discourse, State Violence, Kurds, Aleppo

I. Islamist Discourse as the Production of Genocidal Legitimacy

This paper analyzes the recent events in the Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo—Sheikh Maqsoud, Bani Zaid, and Ashrafiyah—through a critical reading of an article published in Yeni Şafak, a Turkish pro-state Islamist newspaper. The analysis proceeds from the premise that Islamist discourse does not merely comment on violence but actively produces the conditions under which violence, displacement, and genocidal practices become legitimate, intelligible, and even virtuous (cf. Feierstein 2014; Hinton 2002). Drawing on my previous work—including Islam and Competing Nationalisms in the Middle East and Modern Islamism—as well as a broad comparative literature, I have consistently argued that Islamism is best understood as a modern form of conservative religious racism, or at minimum as an exclusionary violent ethnocentric project. Far from being separable from ethnocentrism, Islamism has repeatedly proven more absolutist, more homogenizing, and often more violent than säkular nationalist

formations (Brubaker 2017; Mann 2005). This pattern is visible in Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, and now Syria.

My focus here is primarily on analyzing a Turkish pro-state Islamist news article published in *Yeni Şafak*, written by an Islamist commentator named Taha Kılıç. What makes the *Yeni Şafak* article particularly revealing is not merely its political position but its theological labor. Kılıç does not argue in the language of policy or law; he argues in the language of sacralized distinction (*Furkan günleri*, a Qur’anic reference to the “Days of Distinction,” associated with the Battle of Badr). His argument begins with a categorical designation: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are labeled “Marxist.” This label is not descriptive but performative, and it warrants annihilation through the act of labeling itself. Once imposed, it suspends the entire normative—and modern legal, international—framework governing armed conflict and civic life. Through this act of naming, the SDF police forces and their administrative and bureaucratic personnel—and, more crucially, the civilian populations in the Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo—are symbolically expelled from the moral and legal community (cf. Butler 2004; Mamdani 2001).

From this initial act follows a predictable escalation. The SDF—mainly Kurdish in composition and explicitly advocating varying degrees of Kurdish self-rule and rights—are first branded “terrorists,” then declared “Marxist-Leninist,” a designation that functions in Islamist discourse as a marker of heresy and apostasy historically punishable by death, and are finally recast as “occupiers.” This final label implies not merely political illegitimacy but foreign invasion, a language long used by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) against Kurds. Kılıç adopts both Turkish state discourse and Islamist Arab nationalist language that insists on the inherently Arab character of the Syrian population, echoing and reiterating the Assad regime’s labeling of Kurds as *ajanib* (“foreigners”). At the same time, the armed force now referred to—at Turkey’s insistence—as the “Syrian Arab Army” is in fact composed of multiple non-Syrian and non-Arab elements, including Uyghur, Turkish, Chechen, and Chinese fighters, remnants of designated terrorist organizations such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* and ISIS.

This rhetorical progression is neither accidental nor novel. International criminal jurisprudence—from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)—has repeatedly emphasized that genocide does not begin with killing but with discursive practices that dehumanize, criminalize, and collectivize guilt, thereby Preprint a population for destruction (ICTR, *Prosecutor v. Nahimana et*

al. [the “Media Case”]; Straus 2007). The construction of Kurdish neighborhoods as criminal spaces—depicted as inherently subversive, disorderly, and illegitimate—performs precisely this preparatory function by relocating an entire civilian population outside the sphere of moral and legal protection.

This framing is advanced despite the existence of a prior, formal agreement between Ahmad al-Sharaa (formerly Muhammad al-Jolani) and the residents of Sheikh Maqsoud, Bani Zaid, and Ashrafiyah. Rather than acknowledging this agreement or addressing its violation, Kılıç redirects attention toward Kurdish religious figures and intellectuals who publicly opposed the Turkish-backed armed groups installed in Syria. The breach of agreement thus disappears from view. In its place emerges a familiar Islamist maneuver: the moral disciplining of dissent. Kurdish objection is no longer treated as political disagreement but is recoded as ethical failure and religious deviation.

Within this framework, Kılıç’s Turkish-language article portrays the Kurdish neighborhoods as “occupied zones” allegedly responsible for disorder, criminality, kidnapping, extortion, and smuggling. This language exemplifies a classic genocidal logic identified in genocide studies: once a civilian population is represented as inherently criminal and socially corrosive, ethical restraints collapse and violence is no longer experienced as violence but as the restoration of order (Arendt 1951; Feierstein 2014). Under international humanitarian law, such reasoning directly violates the principle of distinction and the absolute prohibition of collective punishment (Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 33). Yet within Islamist discourse, this same reasoning is rendered not only plausible but necessary.

At the core of the accusation of “occupation” lies a single political premise: that these Kurdish communities refused unconditional submission to the authority of the so-called central government. The charge of “occupation” is therefore not a neutral territorial description but a historically sedimented rhetorical weapon. Its genealogy can be traced directly to the Assad regime’s long-standing depiction of Kurds as *ajanib* (foreigners) and internal outsiders, a discourse that denied Kurdish presence any legitimate historical or political standing in Syria. This same language was later radicalized by ISIS, which routinely framed Kurdish-administered areas as illegitimate “occupied zones” requiring purification through violence. What is striking—and politically revealing—is how seamlessly Turkish Islamist discourse adopts this language when it comes to Kurds, without hesitation or theological restraint.

The ease with which Islamist commentators such as Taha Kılıç, together with Erdoğan’s broader regime discourse, appropriate the Assad–ISIS vocabulary of “occupation” and “foreignness” demonstrates that Islamism here functions less as a religious worldview than as an ethnocentric and violent political strategy. The designation of Kurds as “occupiers” does not merely signal political illegitimacy; it actively reclassifies Kurdish presence itself as a foreign intrusion. Through this move, Kurdish civilians are stripped of any claim to protection, rights, or political belonging. Such rhetoric is not incidental but constitutive: it is a necessary step in transforming an entire population into a legitimate target of collective violence.

Seen from a longer historical and ideological angle, this Islamist logic reflects a deeply entrenched strand within Islamist political thought in which any power that successfully occupies the “center” is owed absolute obedience, irrespective of its origins, composition, or record of violence. Authority is sanctified by its control of the center itself. Dissent, especially demands for decentralization, autonomy, or plural sovereignty, is therefore criminalized by definition. Within Islamist literature and certain strands of classical jurisprudence, such dissent is framed as *muḥārabah* (waging war against authority) and, in some interpretations, as apostasy. In this framework, the political demand for self-rule is transmuted into a theological crime, and resistance to domination is recoded as rebellion against God.

The adoption of this language by Turkish Islamists exposes the extent to which Islamism’s primary concern is not religious ethics or spirituality, but the consolidation of centralized power through ethnically targeted violence. Far from expressing a transcendent moral order, Islamist discourse here operates as a flexible instrument of state-aligned domination; one that borrows without hesitation from Ba’thist, jihadist, and colonial vocabularies alike whenever Kurdish existence obstructs political control. Accordingly, the fact that a former militant—who once carried a U.S. bounty of ten million dollars and moved through ISIS, al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, and later Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham—now occupies the center of power is treated as sufficient to legitimize his authority. Past atrocities, ideological extremism, and transnational jihadist affiliations become irrelevant once central authority is secured. Obedience becomes mandatory; deviation is recoded as rebellion deserving violent suppression. This reveals a fundamental feature of Islamist political reasoning: it is structurally hostile to divided sovereignty, devolution of power, and any conception of popular self-rule in which people themselves constitute a source of political legitimacy.

What follows, therefore, is not an aberration or excess, but the logical outcome of this epistemology.

II. Tactical Deception, State Supremacy, and the Normalization of War Crimes

This logic is further reinforced through tactical deception. In another passage, Kılıç claims that Ahmad al-Sharaa was “very patient” with these neighborhoods despite their demands for decentralization—an aspiration Turkey categorically rejects in any form. This claim collapses in light of al-Sharaa’s own admission, in a recent interview with Shams TV in Hewlêr, that his agreement with the SDF was never principled but purely tactical. According to reports, the interview was not aired after producers concluded that it amounted to terrorist propaganda. In it, al-Sharaa openly states that the agreement existed only because he had no viable alternative at the time. Once the SDF withdrew its military forces—leaving behind only local police and Asayish units—continued control over these neighborhoods was reframed as economically indispensable.

Kılıç then elevates this asserted economic significance into a justification for what followed: mass displacement and organized violence against Kurdish civilians. Economic utility is thus transformed into a warrant for destruction. Under international law, such reasoning constitutes a direct violation of the prohibitions against collective punishment and forcible transfer (Fourth Geneva Convention, Arts. 33, 49). Within Islamist logic, however, it appears self-evident. Despite grounding his claims in the language of Islamic ethics, Kılıç ultimately relocates moral authority onto the Turkish state itself. Because Turkey allegedly possessed knowledge of, or involvement in, the operation, Kurdish police forces—present under a formal agreement—are retroactively reclassified as “terrorists.” State awareness becomes moral absolution. Kurdish death becomes administratively irrelevant.

At this point, the argument becomes explicitly supremacist. Turkey is presumed to be the state for Kurds as well, and its participation is treated as binding upon Kurdish Muslims. Faith is equated with obedience to an ethnocratic state. Kurdish suffering becomes irrelevant once Turkish approval is asserted. When Kurdish religious figures speak of massacres—“Kürtlerin katliamı yapılıyor”—Kılıç dismisses this as fabricated hysteria, accusing them of lies and provocation (“türlü yalan haberler ve tezvirat”), and of removing events from their “context.”

Yet this very invocation of “context” is precisely what neutralizes atrocity. It is through such contextualization that Islamism reveals itself as a statist political theology; one that sacralizes sovereign power and renders mass violence not only permissible but morally necessary.

It is here that the invocation of *Ayyām al-Furqān*—the “Days of Distinction”—assumes its full meaning. This Qur’anic reference to the Battle of Badr is not metaphorical. It functions as a theological transposition. Through it, a contemporary political war—Turkey’s and al-Sharaa’s campaign against Kurdish civilian neighborhoods—is reframed as a divinely sanctioned confrontation between belief and unbelief, transforming state violence into sacred duty and annihilation into obedience (Schmitt 1922; Benjamin 1921; Derrida 1994).

This move accomplishes several things simultaneously. Ahmad al-Sharaa is elevated to a position functionally analogous to the Prophet Muhammad. His political decisions are sacralized; his authority becomes unquestionable. Kurdish civilians in Sheikh Maqsoud, Bani Zaid, and Ashrafiyah—neighborhoods from which armed forces had already withdrawn—are recoded as the pagan aggressors of Mecca. A modern campaign of displacement and bombardment is thus transformed into the moral equivalent of Badr.

Once this transposition is made, genocide becomes righteous. Killing becomes obedience. Displacement becomes purification. Protest becomes a heightened manifestation of apostasy—particularly when those targeted are designated “Marxist-Leninists,” a label that, within post-Umayyad and Abbasid-era **statist–sectarian juridical frameworks**, has historically been associated with unbelief and rebellion against constituted authority. In certain strands of premodern Islamic jurisprudence, especially in the work of jurists such as al-Māwardī (d. 1058), rebellion (*baghy*) and armed opposition to authority (*muḥārabah*) could warrant the most severe corporal punishments, including execution and, in some interpretations, mutilation. Within this discursive configuration, political dissent is transmuted into a theological crime, and civilian resistance is rendered punishable as heresy.

This is not merely the familiar language of modern Islamism understood as a political program; it is an attempt to revive a juridical philosophy forged in the crucible of sectarian struggle—one that replaces revelation (*naṣṣ*) with juridical interpretation, and substitutes God and the Prophet of Islam with the state and the demand for absolute, unconditional obedience to the ruler. This logic is classically articulated in thinkers such as al-Ghazālī, for whom rulers and prophets alike are ultimately chosen by God, a formulation that sacralizes political authority

and forecloses the possibility of legitimate dissent. It is therefore unsurprising that Ahmad al-Sharaa has either directly or indirectly appropriated this entire theological-political repertoire, even though the legitimacy of such authority ought, in principle, to be fundamentally questioned.

Yet despite its inherent sectarianism and brutality, the classical Islamic juridical tradition—however hierarchical and exclusionary—nonetheless preserved a crucial form of epistemic humility. Jurists consistently distinguished between revelation (*naṣṣ*) and interpretation (*ijtihād*). This distinction was rooted in the practice of the Prophet Muhammad himself, who differentiated between divine command and personal judgment, explicitly allowing his companions to question and contest him in matters not grounded in revelation. Islamism annihilates this distinction entirely. It replaces God with the state, revelation with ideology, and ethics with command. Once this substitution is complete, political authority assumes a sacred character, and obedience is transformed into an absolute moral duty.

In this sense, the discourse analyzed here constitutes not merely propaganda but public incitement. Under the UN Genocide Convention, direct and public incitement to genocide is itself a punishable act (Art. III). The sacralization of violence, the systematic dehumanization of Kurds as a protected ethno-national group, and the framing of their annihilation as a moral and religious necessity together establish genocidal intent (*dolus specialis*)—an intent that international jurisprudence recognizes as inferable from patterns of rhetoric, preparation, and conduct (ICJ, *Bosnia v. Serbia*; ICTR jurisprudence).

Moreover, the blanket targeting of Kurdish civilian neighborhoods—declaring entire residential areas as military objectives, ordering the population to evacuate with the evident intent of displacement and ethnocidal removal, as documented on the ground—together with the indiscriminate bombardment of residential zones, attacks on evacuation routes, and the deliberate terrorization of the civilian population, constitute war crimes under the Rome Statute (Art. 8) and grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions. The appearance of this language in a pro-AKP, pro-state newspaper renders it especially alarming. This is not marginal jihadist rhetoric operating at the fringes of society; it is state-adjacent advocacy that normalizes, legitimizes, and morally sanitizes the annihilation of Kurdish civilian life. This should alarm not only Kurds and Muslims, but the Turkish secular public as well. If the mere allegation of “Marxist-Leninist tendencies” is sufficient to place an entire population outside the protection of law, then no oppositional group—leftist, Alevi, Kurdish, or otherwise—can claim security. The mechanism

is easily transferable, and its logic admits no internal limits. What ultimately emerges is Islamism as a racialized totality: dissent is redefined as apostasy, victims are transformed into enemies, and violence is elevated into virtue. Turkish Islamism thus reveals itself not as an alternative to racism, but as its religious embodiment; a political theology in which the destruction of Kurdish civilian life can be narrated not only as permissible, but as sacred.

Genocide as Political Theology

The analysis developed here demonstrates that the violence inflicted upon Kurdish civilian neighborhoods in Aleppo cannot be adequately grasped through legal categories alone. While international criminal law remains indispensable for naming crimes and assigning responsibility, it is insufficient for understanding how such violence becomes thinkable, narratable, and morally authorized. What is at stake here is not merely a violation of law, but the operation of a genocidal political theology—a mode of reasoning in which destruction is rendered meaningful, necessary, and even sacred.

From a genocidal perspective, the central question is not only what happened, but how a population came to be conceived as destroyable. Genocide does not begin with killing; it begins with a transformation in the moral grammar of politics—one in which a group is stripped of protection, historicity, and legitimacy, and reclassified as an obstacle to order, purity, or destiny. The discourse examined here—labeling Kurds as “Marxist,” criminalizing entire neighborhoods, recoding civilian presence as “occupation,” and sacralizing violence through the invocation of *Ayyām al-Furqān*—constitutes precisely such a transformation. It prepares a population for destruction by expelling it from the sphere of the human before any physical annihilation occurs.

Seen from this perspective, the significance of Islamist discourse lies not primarily in its illegality, but in its ontological work. It reorganizes reality by collapsing the distinction between divine authority and state power, between interpretation and revelation, between political command and moral truth. Violence ceases to appear as violence; it appears instead as obedience, purification, and historical necessity. This is the philosophical core of genocide: the moment at which killing no longer requires justification because the victims have already been rendered metaphysically illegitimate.

The invocation of Ayyām al-Furqān crystallizes this logic. Through this theological transposition, a contemporary campaign of displacement, bombardment, and terror against Kurdish civilian neighborhoods is reframed as a sacred struggle between belief and unbelief. Kurdish civilians are recoded as metaphysical enemies; obedience to state power becomes obedience to God; resistance becomes apostasy. In such a framework, genocide is no longer an aberration or excess; it is an intelligible outcome of a worldview that recognizes no limit beyond itself.

This is why the question raised by this paper is ultimately philosophical rather than juridical. Islamist political theology, as it operates here, does not merely accompany genocide; it produces the conditions of its possibility. By abolishing transcendence beyond power—by replacing God with the state, ethics with command, and interpretation with certainty—it constructs a world in which destruction can appear as truth itself. In Derridean terms, this is a fully immanent regime of authority, one that admits no exterior judgment and therefore no internal restraint.

International law can—and must—name the resulting crimes. But it is political theology that explains how an entire society can come to tolerate, normalize, and sanctify the annihilation of civilian life. What the Aleppo case reveals, therefore, is Islamism not as an alternative to racism or state violence, but as its religious intensification: a genocidal rationality in which the elimination of Kurdish existence is rendered not only permissible, but meaningful.

To confront such violence requires more than legal accountability. It requires dismantling the theological and philosophical structures that make genocide imaginable in the first place. This is the task of critical scholarship, and the ethical imperative of our time.

Notes on contributor

Kamal Soleimani is a professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. He received his PhD from Columbia University in New York in 2014. During the 2014–2015 academic year, he taught at Mardin Artuklu University and was among the first academics dismissed during the Turkish government’s crackdown on higher education. Soleimani is the author of several books, including *Islam and Competing Nationalisms in the Middle East* (translated into multiple languages), *Islam, State, and the Kurds* (in Faersi and Kurmanji), *The PKK and the Kurdistan Question* (in Sorani), and *The Kurdish Paradox of Statelessness: Öcalan’s Strategies of Turkeyification* (co-authored with Behrooz Shojai). He has also published nearly two dozen articles in leading academic journals such as *Current Anthropology*, *The British Journal of Sociology*, *Security Dialogue*, and *Third World Quarterly*.

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