

Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies

A Conversion to Civil Society? The Incomplete Reconfiguration of the Hizbullah Movement in Turkey --Manuscript Draft--

Full Title:	A Conversion to Civil Society? The Incomplete Reconfiguration of the Hizbullah Movement in Turkey
Manuscript Number:	CJSB-2019-0075
Article Type:	Research Article
Keywords:	Islamist Civil Society; Kurdish Hizbullah; Kurdish Question; Political Conflict; Ethnography
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A Conversion to Civil Society?

The Incomplete Reconfiguration of the Hizbullah Movement in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the incomplete transformation of the Kurdish Hizbullah from an illegal underground organisation to a social and political movement influent in the Kurdish Turkey. The article contextualizes Hizbullah's transformation within the broader social and political developments after 2000s. After a critical evaluation of the reconfiguration of the Kurdish political sphere in Turkey, the article critically addresses the Hizbullah's conversion to civil society. It analyses the Hizbullah's strategies of reorganisation and mobilisation through associations, political activism and public celebrations under the AKP rule. While acknowledging the political and social impact of this reconfiguration, this article also underlines the limits of this process, with a special focus on the Kurdish question and the ambivalent approach to Kurdish identity and martyrdom promoted by the political leaders and supporters of the movement. Relying on boundary making theory, the article argues that the Hizbullah's attempt to rearticulate religion and ethnicity to broaden its political and social base remains circumscribed by the hegemonic aspirations of the Turkish state on the one hand, and the ongoing antagonism with the Kurdish national movement on the other.

Introduction

On a chilly morning in early April in 2016, I left the city of Mardin in southeastern Turkey and headed off to *Diyarbakır Newroz Parkı* to follow the annual celebration for the Prophet's birthday (*Kutlu Doğum* or *Mewlida Nebî*), the biggest Islamist festival organised by Hizbullah-affiliated organisations. The spring was booming in the Mesopotamian plateau, or *Deşta Amedê* in Kurdish. Numerous cars, mini vans and buses from nearby cities of Batman and Mardin, all covered with Islamic banners and flags, were passing by to join the Blessed Birth festival. In the Newroz Park, more than a hundred thousand men, women and children were cheerfully celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday, proud of their strength and identity, in the square where the Kurdish new year celebration, Newroz, takes place each year on 21 March.¹ The pictures of the recently killed Yasin Börü² and Aytaç Baran³ were omnipresent in the area as the new symbols of martyrdom and victimhood of the struggle between the PKK and Hizbullah. A few pictures of Sheikh Said, the Naqshbandi leader of 1925 Kurdish rebellion, were shaded by the black flags and banners of *Kalima Tawhid*⁴. The crowd shouted Islamic slogans: Takbirs, followed by joyful Allahu akbars; and the Hizballahi songs, both in Kurdish and Turkish, were accompanied by messages delivered by imams, writers and leaders of Hizbullah affiliated legal community organisations.

The Blessed Birth festival is one of the most visible aspects of the transformation of the Kurdish political sphere in the last decade. This article seeks to analyse and contextualise the Kurdish Hizbullah's⁵ transformation from an illegal secretive group to a political party and its legal 'civil society' associations, operating in every aspect of public life in Turkey's Kurdistan region. Since the mid-2000s the region has witnessed the multiplication of Islamist organisations opening branches, increasing their activities and reaching out to millions of people via charities, social events, student housing and education. The use of the concept of 'civil society' by the Islamists in Turkey is misleading as these organisations are neither non-governmental nor civil society in a liberal sense. In Zubaida's words, Islamist civil society is:

...outside the state, but not necessarily against the state: It fulfils an important function of social control. It could, under certain conditions, be mobilized against the state. But if the quest for the civil society is one which seeks a framework for the

1 exercise of the human rights and social autonomies, the model presented by the
2 Islamic sector falls short. It reproduces under modern conditions the authoritarian
3 and patriarchal framework of the association of kinship, village and religious
4 community at a time when such communities have been effectively loosened and
5 dispersed by the socioeconomic processes of modernity.⁶
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9 In this article, inspired by Zubaida's approach to Islamic associations (*the jama'at*
10 *Islamiyya*) in Egypt, I will focus on the Hizbullah's transformation and Kurdish Islamist
11 associations to explore the reconfiguration of Turkey's Kurdish political sphere in the last
12 decade with a special focus on the articulation of religion and ethnicity by the main actors
13 of this sphere. I will then concentrate on two complementary aspects of Hizbullah's
14 endeavours to increase its political and social outreach: proposing an alternative solution
15 to the Kurdish conflict, combining an Islamic discourse of brotherhood and a strategic
16 alliance with the state; multiplying its interventions in the social sphere through civil
17 society organisations and celebrations. The article seeks to analyse the modalities and
18 aims of Hizbullah's conversion to civil society in the context of the repeated
19 reconfigurations of the Kurdish political field and the increasing hegemony of the AKP
20 government. Avoiding a linear or teleological perspective, I maintain that the process
21 reflects both the legacy of the cycle of violence and conflict in the 1990s and a new
22 awareness of the importance of civil society organisations and legal politics to conquer
23 space and minds.
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27 The data gathered for this research was obtained during an eighteen-month ethnographic
28 fieldwork in the Kurdish cities of Diyarbakır, Mardin and Bingöl in 2015 and 2016. During
29 this fieldwork, I frequently travelled between these three cities to observe social and
30 political events, attend gatherings and participate in conferences organised by several
31 political and civil organisations. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with the
32 members and leaders of Islamist and secular civil society organisations and analysed
33 related publications and social media accounts to better understand the reaction to this
34 transformation in the Kurdish public sphere.
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37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 **1. The reconfiguration of the Kurdish political sphere in Turkey** 56

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58 Scholarly attempts to analyse the division of the political sphere in Turkey's Kurdistan
59 have mostly relied on the articulation of religion and ethnicity in the different political
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discourses and opinions of Turkey's Islamist variation.⁷ Christopher Houston identified
three main Islamist approaches to the Kurdish question in the 1990s Turkey, namely
Statist-Islamist, Islamist and Kurdish Islamist, and argued that the Kurdish question could
be framed around these respective discursive groups.⁸ His typology remained relatively
valid in the following decade but required a reformulation during the AKP period after
the shifting power alliances. Gülay Turkmen-Derrişođlu proposed relational categories of
ethnic and religious identities (religious-ethnic, ethno-religious and religious) to describe
the Kurdish political field in the 2010s and highlighted that these forms of identities were
constructed and reconstructed according to the changing conditions. Türkmen argued
that these divisions prevented Sunni Islam from acting as a conflict resolution tool in the
Kurdish conflict in Turkey.⁹ Questioning the very relevance of such typologies, Cuma
Çiçek argued that the boundaries between the Kurdish national, Sunni-Muslim and Alevi
religious identities were not fixed, but rather fluid, dynamic and relational. Çiçek
maintains that it is not possible to make a clear distinction between various Kurdish
national and religious identities, given that, for instance, Zaza ethnic/cultural identity is a
remarkable source for both Sunni and Alevi Kurdish positionalities.¹⁰

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While the above-mentioned approaches attempt to define the Kurdish political sphere
along discursive and ideological lines, Mustafa Gürbüz proposes an approach which
focuses on practices and strategies developed by the main actors to increase their
influence. He describes the Kurdish national movement, the Hizbullah and the Gulenist
organisations¹¹ as rival actors who transformed their culture of violent enmity into a
culture of polite competition after a series of national and international changes, such as
the AKP's rise to power and the start of the Turkey-EU membership negotiations.
Gürbüz's approach to rival movements and their similar strategies through charity
organisations after 2004 is useful. The notion of niche building, proposed by Gürbüz, in
which he "refers to the rival activists' efforts to specialize in certain fields that are not
easily available to their competitors" well explains how the Hizbullah specializes in
religious public events, whereas the Gulenists focus on educational institutions and the
Kurdish movement in women organisations.¹² However, Gürbüz fails in explaining what
he exactly means by grassroots activism and what the role of the state is in this inter-
communal conflict and competition. Furthermore, the reignited conflict between the state
and the PKK, as well as the enmity between the Gulenists and the state in the last few
years have put an end to the period of polite competition.

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The multiple reconfigurations of the Kurdish political field can only be understood in an intersectional context,¹³ where the relations with the Turkish state on the one hand, and changing transregional dynamics on the other hand play a major role.¹⁴ The early 2000s observed an Islam-friendly opening in the legal political sphere, where the Kurdish political parties increasingly welcomed Islamic figures and incorporated an Islamic discourse to claim Kurdish political and cultural rights. Sarıgil demonstrates how a series of global, national and local events transformed the Kurdish national movement and led to a relative opening to Islamic references. He highlights the emergence of multiple political actors and their competition in the political field. According to him, electoral politics required that the Kurdish national movement expanded its support base among the Kurdish society, in which religious Sunni Muslims are the majority. The struggle for political legitimacy, both at the regional and national levels, has been much influential in this transformation in the Kurdish national movement.¹⁵

By focusing on the less documented transformation of the Hizbullah and its affiliate legal organisations, this article expands and builds on the analysis presented in the above-mentioned studies. It demonstrates how the symbolic ethno-religious boundaries of the Hizbullah have changed since 2004 and analyse the expanding ethnic-boundaries of Hizbullah towards the Kurdish political identity in its regional and national contexts. I rely on Wimmer's classification of boundary making, in which he distinguishes between five typologies relevant to contextualize the Hizbullah's transformation. I argue that Hizbullah maintained a blurred boundary with the political Kurdish identity during its illegal years but expanded its boundaries to a rudimentary form of religious-nationalism with the legalisation of their activities. Wimmer proposes that 'the institutional order, distribution of power and political networks determine which actors will adopt which strategy of ethnic boundary making.'¹⁶ Accordingly, I argue that Hizbullah's relational approach to the Kurdish identity should be analysed in the changing power dynamics of the period and contextualized within the intersectional local, regional, national and international dynamics that shape the trans-regional political field in the Kurdish regions.

The inclusion of Islamic references in rival Kurdish political discourses is strongly connected to the broader transformation of the Turkish state's polity from Kemalist nationalist to Islamist nationalist under the AKP rule.¹⁷ On one hand, the Kurdish Islamist movements, supported by the governmental authorities, have been implementing pan-

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Islamist political agendas in the Kurdish region during the AKP period, creating a form of religious-nationalism, while on the other hand, the Kurdish national movement has contested these policies and came up with its own proposal to create a democratic nation that welcomes religious freedoms and representations as a part of its democratic autonomy and diversity project.¹⁸ These concurrent agendas determine both groups' connection to the Kurdish political identity: while the Kurdish Islamist movements embrace a form of Kurdishness that mainly consists of Islamic references, the Kurdish national movement incorporates Islam into its pluralist notion of 'the peoples of Turkey' (*Türkiye Halkları*) and adopts religious references to fight for the Kurdish language and cultural rights in the political sphere. As a result, Islam has become increasingly present the Turkish and Kurdish public and political spheres in the last two decades.

2. Living for the cause: how the Hizbullah turned to civil society

The Martyrdom Greengrocer (*Şehadet Manavı*) was a little shop on a roadside on my way to Bingöl. I stopped by the shop in a late afternoon, in May 2016, and greeted the shopkeeper in a religious way. The shopkeeper, Mucahid,¹⁹ was a middle-aged Kurdish Zaza from a nearby town. He was wearing a baggy pant and had a long beard and shortly trimmed moustache. After a short introduction, I asked him whether he would be interested in an interview. I was surprised to find him very keen to talk as a few years before most of the Hizbullah members and sympathizers I tried to interview were reluctant to talk due to security concerns. I thought that the political climate might have an impact on encouraging pro-Hizbullah members to speak openly. I started asking why he named his shop The Martyrdom Greengrocer and he replied:

Mucahid: We learnt martyrdom from the Resulullah (peace upon him), from prophet Zakariya and his son. This is the biggest gift that Allah, the almighty, can give to a person in the world, a rank that even prophets always insistently requested from Allah. We see it as mainly to live like a martyr, to witness Islam, and after witnessing Islam, to demand that exalted rank from Allah *the Rabbul Alamin*. Besides, to incorporate that into every corner of our lives will show Islam's principality to us. I think that those who have never demanded martyrdom in any way in their lives cannot establish an equilibrium in terms of faith. Therefore, there should be no inconsistency in our naming out the shop in this way.

Mehmet: Are you saying that martyrdom is not just a name, but also a way of life?

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Mucahid: We can refer to it as a way of life on one level. Because, as I said, to live like a martyr and requesting that rank from God after living like a martyr may constitute a way of life. But when we say martyrdom, we don't mean that literal understanding that many circles keep repeating in such expressions as the martyr of democracy, martyr of socialism, martyr of communism, martyr of Marxism, martyr of such-and-such-ism, etc. But Allah includes it in certain parentheses in the Quran. Only those who are *fisabilillah* [in the cause of Allah], those who are killed for Allah's blessing on Allah's path become martyrs.

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Mucahid was a member of the Hizbullah. His emphasis on martyrdom as a way of living and dying gives an insight into the Islamist stance of the movement and is helpful to understand the continuities and changes that it witnessed in the last decades. While the early 1990s in Turkey was characterized by the armed conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish Armed Forces, another important but less documented development was the emergence of Islam referenced violence perpetrated by the Hizbullah, whose main agenda was to overthrow the secular regime and establish a sharia-based government. However, it formed a strategic alliance with the Turkish state in a mutual endeavour against the PKK and managed to eliminate the PKK from many Kurdish towns. They established networks of power across the Kurdish region via religious classes in the mosques, recruitment activities in high schools and *madrassahs*, and received support from local families and tribes. The Hizbullah neighbourhoods and districts in Amed (Diyarbakir), Batman, Nusaybin, Silvan and many other places created a territory of control and hegemony in the 1990s. The PKK's secularist leftist stance and its hostility towards religious elites in the 1980s offended many conservative Kurds and created a fertile ground for an organisation that pursued an 'anti-state'²⁰ discourse and respected Islamic and traditional values. Many tribes and families, as well as conservative individuals supported the Hizbullah's eclectic construct of dissidence, embracing Islamic symbols and ideals over the nationalist constructs of the PKK.

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The tension between the PKK and Hizbullah started in the 1980s but it turned into a murderous period in the first half of the 1990s. A decade-long conflict between the PKK and the Hizbullah resulted in the death of 700 civilians²¹ and created a lasting enmity between the two groups. In 2000, the Hizbullah leader, Hüseyin Velioglu was killed during a police raid on his new headquarter in the residential Beykoz district of Istanbul. The seized archive and documents from this house-compound led to a series of security

1 operations across Turkey, where bodies of murdered people were found and further
2 documents confiscated. As a result, thousands of Hizbullah members were arrested and
3 many other had to go underground.²² In 2004, however, the movement reappeared in the
4 public arena through charitable and educational CSOs, in particular the Association for
5 the Solidarity with the Oppressed (Mustazaflar Der), and later in the form of a political
6 party, Huda-Par, in 2012.

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11 The AKP's accession to power in 2003 was considered by the Hizbullah as an opportunity
12 to restructure the organisation and legalize the recruitment process, due to the shared
13 ideological ground. Limited efforts to activate Hizbullah's activities among the former
14 members in the early 2000s were first met with hostility due to the ongoing political
15 pressure.²³ For many, the Hizbullah had been eliminated through security operations in
16 early 2000s and its return under a legal form was not fitting the image of the secret
17 underground and violent Hizbullah. What this public image missed was the Hizbullah's
18 strategic move and its ability to adopt into new conditions. The security operations had
19 dismantled the Hizbullah administrative structure, but the public base of the group was
20 untouched. Furthermore, the collective punishment of the state towards Hizbullah
21 members, regardless whether they were involved in violence or taught Quran in the
22 mosques, victimized the family and relatives of the convicted Hizbullah members, which
23 contributed to strengthen the solidarity of the group.²⁴

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36 The new AKP administration and their encouragement to organize around Islamic civil
37 society organisations, together with the beginning of the EU-Turkey membership process
38 in 2004 facilitated the civil society-zation of Hizbullah activities. The legalization of
39 Hizbullah activities in the public space began with the opening of the Mustazaflar
40 Association in 2004. In the following years, relying on its social base, the Hizbullah
41 established hundred civil society organisations across the Kurdish region. Smaller
42 Islamist groups followed this trend, initiating their own organisations, while the
43 nationwide Islamist organisations also established branches across the region. I argue
44 that the Hizbullah's legal operations provided an opportunity and a shield for the other
45 groups, which could initiate their own organisations without fearing to be targeted by the
46 PKK. This was confirmed in conversations I had with the members of other Turkish and
47 Kurdish Islamist associations.²⁵

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The gradual process of legalizing Hizbullah activities brought both challenges and opportunities for the legal Hizbullah. The biggest opportunity was the expansion and diversification of their activities, reaching out more and more people under the protection of a legal association. The Respect for the Prophet rally in 2006 to protest the cartoon controversy that broke out in Denmark²⁶ was followed by the Blessed Birth events (Kutlu Doğum), where hundred thousand of people gathered in central squares of the Kurdish cities each April. The most crowded Blessed Birth events took place in Diyarbakır and were attended by approximately half a million people coming from all around the Kurdish cities and towns. In the recent years, Hizbullah turned the Blessed Birth event into a week of celebrations across the Kurdish region, as well as in western Turkey and Europe.²⁷ A week-long celebration period in April features several events and contests for young Hizbullah members to recite the life of Muhammad and his friends (*Siyer Yarışmaları*), in which the winners are sent to Mecca to visit the holy places (*umra*). Moreover, the graduation ceremony of Hizbullah *madrasahs*, attended by women members of Hizbullah, is held during the week. Almost all the Hizbullah members and the attendees of the Blessed Birth celebration I have spoken with indicated that the event is now a big source of excitement and opportunity to show their strength and recruit new members.²⁸ The attendees of Hizbullah events are not necessarily Hizbullah members but are Kurdish conservatives. Relying on this base, the Hizbullah set up a political party in 2012, the Huda-Par, after the Mustazaf-Der, was shut down by the supreme court due to its links to Hizbullah.²⁹ In the meantime, the movement diversified and expanded their activities and established radio and TV stations (*Rehber TV*), publishing houses (*Dua Yayıncılık*), newspapers (*Doğru Haber*), news agencies (*İlke Haber Ajansı/İlk-Ha*), magazines in Kurdish and Turkish language (*Kelha Amed, İnzar*), Quranic schools, madrasahs, private schools, dormitories for high school and university students, revenue generating businesses and much more.

Hizbullah's journey from an underground secretive group to legal 'civil society organisations' induced a gradual transformation in the practices and discourses of the Hizbullah-affiliated organisations. The level of this transformation can be traced back in the public events, the publications, music albums and media productions of the Hizbullah. This process was far from being linear and was shaped by the changing political and social circumstances. In this respect, I maintain that the Hizbullah's worldview has not been radically altered; rather, the movement adopted new strategies and discourses that

1 facilitated its transition into the legal public and political space. This shift gave the
2 Hizbullah an opportunity to expand their public base and reach conservative people who
3 would have been reluctant to engage in underground illegal activities, but were happy to
4 participate in legal public events and charity work. In the course of my fieldwork, many
5 Hizbullah members and sympathizers were enthusiastic about their participation in the
6 mass Hizbullah events and appreciated the efficiency of this strategy in terms of visibility,
7 power and recruitment activities.³⁰

12 Hizbullah's visibility increased when the Kurdish peace negotiation ended, and the
13 conflict reignited between the PKK and the state in 2015. Dozens of casualties on both
14 sides, some of which remained unsolved, were reminiscent of the 1990s cycle of violence,
15 where the state or state-related actors aimed to create a domestic conflict between the
16 groups. Maybe because both sides had learned from their experience in the 1990s, the
17 violence did not escalate to an uncontrollable level, but the fragility of an unspoken
18 ceasefire became obvious during the Kobani protests (2014) and during the urban
19 warfare across the Kurdish cities of Turkey between June 2015 and July 2016. One can
20 say that the state of exception and the nation-wide martial law were in practice in the
21 Kurdish towns long before the attempted coup, and the tension between the PKK and
22 Hizbullah helped the state to strengthen its authority, favouring the latter while
23 suppressing the former.

36 The failed military coup in July 2016 is the most recent turning point in the transformation
37 of Hizbullah. While the coup was followed by waves of purge and arrest targeting
38 oppositional parties, organisations and individuals, the pro-Hizbullah organisations
39 benefitted from the tolerance and even support from the state authorities. The weekly
40 newspaper of Doğru Haber, for example, became a daily newspaper shortly after the failed
41 military coup in July 2016. During a month-long street protests (democracy meetings),³¹
42 Huda-Par members and pro-Hizbullah organisations were at the forefront of the
43 demonstrations across the Kurdish region, where the Hizballahi songs were broadcasted
44 from the loud speakers in the squares of Mardin, Diyarbakır, Bingöl, Batman and many
45 other Kurdish cities. Following the failed military coup, the pro-Hizbullah organisations
46 and individuals appeared on national TVs, welcomed by the president Erdogan and high
47 rank state institutions.³² The Huda-Par leader Zekeriya Yapıcıoğlu even gave a public talk
48 in Istanbul's Taksim Square a week after the failed coup,³³ which have marked a new era
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for the Hizbullah, who, for the first time, expanded its activities to the central square of Turkey. Following the July 2016, the Huda-Par representatives met the president Erdogan and the party leaders many times to discuss various issues and the pro-Hizbullah Rehber TV alluded to an officious agreement between the AKP and Huda-Par representatives.³⁴

In the late 1990s, few would have predicted that the underground and illegal organisation operating in small rooms and cells of the Kurdish suburbs and towns would turn in a major actor of the Kurdish civil society and politics. The Hizbullah case is emblematic of the dramatic reconfiguration of the Kurdish political and social spheres since the beginning of the AKP rule. Contrary to the Kurdish national movement, the Hizbullah's penetration of civil society was impeded neither by the collapse of the peace process nor by the failed coup in 2016 and rather benefitted from both. However, the Kurdish question remained at the core of the Hizbullah discourse and strategy of legitimization. The last part of this article will analyse the impact of the Hizbullah's turn towards civil society on its standpoint on the Kurdish question, with a specific focus on the articulation between religion and ethnicity.

3. An Islamic Solution to the Kurdish Question? New Discourses and Old Demons

Several speakers were invited to address the public in the above-mentioned Blessed Birth festival in April 2016. In his speech, Mehmet Göktaş, a former Mufti and editor in chief of pro-Hizbullah *Daily Doğru Haber*, vehemently criticised the failed peace negotiations between the state and the Kurdish movement:

You have no rights to destroy this nation by collaborating with those who do not represent the Kurdish people. They are communists and immoral atheists who have brought about the destruction of cities and suffering of people. Enough of you! Here are the true representatives of the Kurdish people. Here are the will and support that you need to solve this problem. You can only solve the Kurdish question with an Islamic ideal and in collaboration with the right people.³⁵

According to Mehmet Göktaş and many other speakers in that afternoon, Islam was the only solution to the Kurdish question. They advocated Islamic fraternity, the *Ummah* uniting the Kurds, Turks and other Muslim nations, as the only salvation that the Kurdish people could and should seek. The state was blamed for initiating a peace negotiation with the PKK, which has harmed innocent people. Mele Beşir Şimşek, the spokesperson of The

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Lovers of the Prophet Platform, the organiser of the Blessed Birth events, suggested a spiritual remedy to cure the “illness” (*nexweşî*) affecting Kurdish society: ‘the remedy is not in Washington, neither in Europe. The remedy for this problem [the Kurdish question] is in the Quran, read the Quran. The remedy is in the word of Muhammad, [hadith], read the hadith’.³⁶

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Theses discourses must be contextualised in the collapse of the so-called Kurdish peace process, abruptly terminated by the AKP government in March 2015. The rupture of negotiations between the state and the Kurdish national movement gave the Hizbullah-affiliated organisations the opportunity to present themselves as the legitimate interlocutors to solve Kurdish question. The process had actually started even before the interruption of the negotiations. In January 2015, 724 Islamist ‘civil society’ organisations, including pro-Hizbullah organisations, attended the conference organised by the pro-AKP Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) in Diyarbakır.³⁷ In March 2015, 600 delegates, representing 3500 civil society organisations³⁸ from the Kurdish region,³⁹ participated in a pro-Hizbullah two-day conference. Both events were entitled ‘Islamic Solution to the Kurdish Question’, and the declarations following the events proposed Islamic fraternity as the only solution to the Kurdish question. The inclusion of Islamist organisations as the new interlocutors of a possible peace process was implicit in the declarations, where the PKK and the Kurdish movement were explicitly criticized and delegitimized in terms of the representation of the Kurds. The real goal of these conferences was to produce consent among the Kurds, relying on mechanisms that bear some similarities with the process described by Chomsky and Herman in their seminal work, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*.⁴⁰ The network of alliances established by the AKP regime in media and civil society was instrumental in manufacturing the consent of the Islamist subjects around a promise of peace and the reaffirmation of their Sunni-Muslim identity.

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The biggest challenge faced by the Hizbullah to expand its influence in the Kurdish legal public and political space came from the legacy of the 1980s and 1990s. The involvement of the Hizbullah in the violent suppression of the Kurdish national movement remains much present in the collective memories of the Kurdish people. Building a new discourse on the Kurdish question was thus essential to broaden the audience of the movement and legitimise its political aspirations. The establishment of the Hûda-Par in 2012 was a

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decisive landmark in this process. As a political party based in Kurdistan, the Hûda-par had to formulate a clear position on Kurdish question. In the above-quoted speeches and the party documentation, delegitimization of the PKK and the Kurdish national movement on the ground of their alleged hostility towards Islam is at the core of the argumentation. According to the Hûda-Par, the Kurdish people are pious Muslims who cannot be represented by those who aim to eradicate Islam among the Kurds. This line of argumentation is not new in the discourse of Hizbullah. However, in the context of legal politics, it becomes a central element in the Hûda-Par's claim to be the true representative of the Kurdish people.

Beyond this emphasis on religious identity, Hûda-Par reformulated its Islamist Kurdish solution in the party programme initially published in 2012, where a separate section was devoted to the resolution of the Kurdish question through an 'Islamic solution'.⁴¹ In the programme, the Kurdish question is presented as a result of the violent modernization process instigated by Kemalist state, symbolised by such events as the abolishment of the caliphate, the alphabet revolution, and the suppression of the dissident Kurdish religious leaders like Sheikh Said. It is noteworthy that this perspective is shared by many other Islamist groups and political parties, including the AKP, although their references to the Kurdish religious leaders are limited to the election periods.⁴² In this respect, the Hûda-Par's emphasis on Islamic fraternity and its perception of secularist state practices demonstrate its integration in the broader tradition of political Islam in Turkey.

However, the Hûda-Par's programme strongly diverges from this tradition when it comes to the collective rights of the Kurds. The programme states that a constitutional recognition of the Kurds and equal citizenship rights are essential to establish peace between the Kurdish and Turkish people. The party also emphasises the importance of introducing Kurdish language in state institutions and demands official state apologies for the killing of major figures of the dissident Kurdish tradition, such as Sheikh Said and Seyid Riza. Even more surprisingly, given the role played by the Hizbullah in the 1990s, the party claims compensation for the war crimes and advocates the formation the truth committees to reveal the state crimes of the 1990s.⁴³ In this respect, the Hûda-Par programme does not differ much from what the HDP would advocate in terms of citizenship rights and constitutional recognition. However, the legacy of the 1990s continues to oppose two movements. The Kurdish movement accuses the Hizbullah to be

1 a governmental tool and a state apparatus, 'the party of Satan' (*Hizbuşşeytan*), fighting
2 against their struggle for the Kurdish liberation. The Hizbullah, on the other hand, blames
3 the PKK for corrupting the moral values of Kurdish society.⁴⁴
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6 The figure of Sheikh Said, the sufi Naqshibandi leader of Kurdish Zaza tribes who led the
7 first major revolt against the Turkish state in 1925 is emblematic of the struggle for
8 legitimacy between the Kurdish National movement and the Hizbullah. In the last decade,
9 both groups have reconstructed an image of the Sheikh, in line with their political aim and
10 transformation. At a time when the PKK revised its orthodox leftist position towards
11 religion, Sheikh Said became a leader of national liberation for the Kurdish national
12 movement.⁴⁵ This appropriation of Sheikh Said reached a peak in 2014, when Diyarbakır
13 municipality renamed Dağkapı square as the Sheikh Said square. This coincided with the
14 launching of an annual commemoration of Sheikh Said by the pro-Hizbullah organisations
15 in the Grand Mosque of Diyarbakır. In a parallel way, after many years of silence and
16 understatement, Hizbullah reconfigured its political genealogy to include rebellious
17 Sheikhs and dissident Kurdish Islamic voices. However, this appropriation does not
18 explicitly state the Kurdish aspect of the Sheikh Said rebellion, arguing that the 'true color
19 of the rebellion was Islamic'.⁴⁶
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23 The same ambiguity is attached to the concept of martyrdom, omnipresent in the
24 discourses of Hizbullah-affiliated actors. As in the above-quoted interview, Mucahid and
25 many other informants I interviewed in the course of my fieldwork consistently expressed
26 their desires to be a martyr, to sacrifice themselves for the cause (*bedel and dawa*). The
27 passion and desire for *Shahadat* (the martyrdom)⁴⁷ is rooted in broad references to the
28 Quran and the life of Muhammad. Yet, among my interviewees, these references were
29 little grounded in their theological background. Rather, martyrdom was used to draw a
30 line between the rightness and holiness of one's cause (*dawa*) and the falseness and
31 corruption of the 'enemy', the PKK and its secular leftist ideology.⁴⁸ In this political
32 context, the theme of martyrdom thus raises the question of the legitimacy of violence for
33 the supporters of the new Hizbullah. While my informants underlined their attachment
34 to legal politics and pacific struggle, their discourses were not without ambiguity, as
35 illustrated by the following quote:
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Mehmet: Do you think after the 2000s, in the more recent years, there's been an evolution [in Hizbullah] from armed action towards legal Huda-Par and Mustazaf-Der?

Mucahid: Yes, there has been. Actually what the cemaat of Hizbullah wanted to pursue was the legal line [of politics] since its establishment in 1979. Mind you, the Resulullah, peace upon him, did not conquer pieces of land with the use of a sword. He conquered people's hearts. Therefore, today the cemaat of Hizbullah is pursuing a completely legal way. They have brought a new political mentality into the [political] scene both by the NGOs and by the Huda-Par. They take their references from the Quran only, and this cannot be said for everyone as it is very difficult to achieve. Every step that is taken is scrutinised under a magnifying glass, in fact, under the lens of microscope, they have joined the political scene taking their references from the Quran and declaring their Quranic way. This is a guarantee that Hizbullah is pursuing the legal line and will continue to pursue a legal line.

There are several points that needs to be tackled in Mucahid's articulation of the past and the present affairs and in its emphasis on legality. While defending here the 'legal line", in other parts of the interview Mucahid implicitly legitimized violence through a discourse of self-defence against the attacks coming both from the secularist state and the Marxist PKK. Mucahid's allegation that Hizbullah intended to pursue legal activities from the beginning contradicts the main narrative of Hizbullah throughout 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, during those two decades Hizbullah advocated that the secularist state was tyrannical and illegitimate and rejected to act in the legal framework. Beyond discourses, the widespread use of torture and extra-judicial killings by the Hizbullah in the 1990s was at the core of the organisation's strategy aiming to terrorize and suppress the supporters of the Kurdish national movement.

This ambivalent attitude to violence became clear after the collapse of the peace process. The killing of Yasin Börü and his friends during the Kobane protests in October 2014 and the suspicious murder of Aytaç Baran right after the June elections in 2015 inflamed the conflict between the Hizbullah and PKK supporters and resulted in several other casualties. After Sheikh Said, Yasin Börü and Aytaç Baran too joined the "Caravan of Martyrs" (şehitler kervanı) exalted by the Hizbullah supporters in their public meetings and publications.⁴⁹ The incidents also showed that the Hizbullah had not totally given up arms: an armed unit of Hizbullah, the Sheikh Said Bridages,⁵⁰ appeared on the streets of Diyarbakır shooting slogans and firing arms. The clashes spread over the region, resulting

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in several more casualties until the Brigades went underground. No investigation seems to have been started against the group, which might point to a connection with the state institutions, following the pattern of state's indirect rule inherited from the 1990s.⁵¹ Hence, the Hizbullah's transformation from a violent underground activities to legal politics and 'civil society' activities should not be interpreted as a rupture: it is rather a strategic adaptation, in which the armed conflict is not a priority but remains a valid option when tensions rise in the Kurdish region. The reproduction of the discourse of martyrdom among young Hizbullah generations who grew up with the narrative of their fathers' sacrifice for the cause (*dawa*) is emblematic of these blurred boundaries between social activism and involvement in violent actions, which also characterises the Kurdish national movement.

23 **Conclusion**

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This article sought to contextualise and analyse the conversion of the Hizbullah to civil society. It emphasised the importance of the regional and national context, characterised by the increasingly hegemonic rule of the AKP on the hand, and the evolution of the Kurdish national movement on the other hand. Thus, the multiplication of Hizbullah-affiliated associations can only be understood in the framework of the alliance between the state and the Islamist/conservative civil society, based on the distribution of financial resources and political support.

While the increasing influence and visibility of Hizbullah-affiliated associations and public celebrations clearly indicate the relative success of the strategy of legalisation, the article also attempted to develop a critical perspective on the process, emphasising the ambiguities and limits of the conversion to legal politics and social activities. The ambivalent attitude of the Huda-Par and its supporters towards Kurdish identity and the Kurdish question is emblematic of the persistent legacy of the 1990s and antagonism with the Kurdish National movement. In this respect, the discourse of Islamic brotherhood and emphasis on Kurdish Muslim identity rather reflects hegemonic aspirations than the search for a political and social consensus among the diverse Kurdish population. Relying on the Sunni conservative Kurdish population for its political mobilisation and leaving out the majority of Kurdish Alevi and secular population, the legal Hizbullah has a limited chance to expand its activities beyond its ideological boundaries. Beyond the scope of this

1 article, the transnational dynamics affecting the Kurdish regions beyond Turkey and the
2 confrontation between radical Islamist movements and the Kurdish national movement
3 in Syria constitute additional factors of division of the Kurdish political sphere and further
4 threats to the fragile and incomplete turn of local actors to civil politics.
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¹ Newroz is not particular to the Kurds and is widely celebrated by other Middle Eastern and Central Asian nations. However, Turkey's violent repression of the Kurdish dissidents during the celebrations of Newroz in the 1990s has transformed it into a political platform where the Kurds are mobilised around and counter the state hegemony through this symbolic and mythical event. For more information: D. Aydin, 'Mobilizing the Kurds in Turkey: Newroz as a Myth', in C. Gunes and W. Zeydanlioglu (Eds.), *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation and Reconciliation*, Routledge, London, 2014, pp. 68-88.

² Yasin Börü was killed by the Kurdish demonstrators during what is known as Kobane protests in 6-8 October 2014. During the protests, more than 40 demonstrators were killed by the police, but the murder of Yasin Börü and three of his friends, Riyat Güneş, Ahmet Dadak, Hasan Göküz, marked a new era in the PKK-Hizbullah conflict. Yasin Börü case was also heavily utilized by the government representatives and pro-government media organizations against the HDP. Many songs and religious anthems were composed and public events dedicated to Yasin Börü and Aytaç Baran.

³ Aytaç Baran was killed two days after the 7 June 2015 elections, where the HDP gained 13 per cent of votes and received 80 MPs in the parliament. Baran's murder case has not been resolved yet. Within hours, the pro-Hizbullah city militia, Sheikh Said Brigades, killed three HDP activists in their houses and fired guns in the streets of Diyarbakır.

⁴ Kalima Tawhid or Kalima Tayyibah (*lā ilāha illāllāh, muḥammadur rasūlullāh*, لا إله إلا الله مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ الله) is one of the six kalimas/pillars of Islam. It is used to convert to Islam and declare one's faith to Allah and his Messenger. It means "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah".

⁵ I prefer to use the term Kurdish Hizbullah to describe the legal and illegal networks of Hizbullah movement in Turkey and to distinguish them from the Shi'i Lebanese Hizbullah. Hizbullah in Turkey is a Sunni Shafii group and the majority of the group is consisted of Kurdish citizens. The legalisation of Hizbullah activities led to a reconfiguration of Hizbullah's political views, which increasingly welcomes a religious form of Kurdish nationalism in the making. In this article, I will, however, use the term Hizbullah alone to refer to the group as there is no possible ambiguity.

⁶ S. Zabaida, 'Islam, the State and Democracy: Contrasting Conceptions of Society in Egypt', *Middle East Report*, Vol. 179, 1992, p. 9.

⁷ O. Taspinar (2005), *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey: Kemalist Identity in Transition*, Routledge, New York, pp. 116-208.

⁸ C. Houston (2001), *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation State*, Berg, New York, pp. 147-191.

⁹ G. Türkmen-Derivoğlu, 'Negotiating Symbolic Boundaries in Conflict Resolution: Religion and Ethnicity in Turkey's Kurdish Conflict', *Qualitative Sociology*, 41 (4), 2018, pp. 569-591.

¹⁰ C. Çiçek, 'Kurdish identity and political Islam under AKP rule', *Research and Policy on Turkey*, 1 (2), 2016, p. 147.

¹¹ The reason why Gürbüz included the Gulenists as a rival Kurdish movement is not clear. Gulenists were an important actor in the Kurdish region during the AKP period until the early 2010s, but the political clash between the two groups brought an end to the domination of the Gulenists.

¹² M. Gürbüz, *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey: Transforming Ethnic Conflict*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2016, pp. 24-28.

¹³ H. Lutz, 'Intersectionality as Method', *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 2 (1-2), 2015, pp. 39-44; K. Davis, 'Intersectionality as a Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful', *Feminist Theory*, 9(1), 2008, pp. 67-85.

¹⁴ In a previous article, I have discussed the role of the state in this intersectional dynamic and argued that the internal colonization theory is not only useful to analyse state domination in the Kurdish case but also provides a relevant theoretical framework to understand the reconfiguration and multiple layers of agency and dissidence among the Kurdish society. See M. Kurt, 'My Muslim Kurdish brother': colonial rule and Islamist governmentality in the Kurdish region of Turkey', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 21 (2), 2019,

¹⁵ Z. Sarıgil, *Ethnic Boundaries in Turkish Politics: the Secular Kurdish Movement and Islam*, NYU Press, New York, 2018.

¹⁶ A. Wimmer, 'The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory' *American Journal of Sociology*, 113, (4), 2008, pp. 970-1022.

¹⁷ E. Axiarlis, *Political Islam and the Secular State in Turkey*, I.B.Tauris, London, 2014 pp. 10-115; C. Grissi, *The Kurdish Question in Turkey in the Third Millennium*, VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, Riga, 2010.

¹⁸ C. Gunes, 'Kurdish Politics in Turkey: Ideology, Identity and Transformations', *Ethnopolitics*, 8 (2), 2009, pp. 255-262; R. Burç, 'One State, One Nation, One Flag—One Gender? HDP as a Challenger of the Turkish Nation State and its Gendered Perspectives', *Journal of Balkan and Near*

1 *Eastern Studies*, 21 (2), 2019.

2 ¹⁹ All names and identifying information are changed for the safety and anonymity of the interviewees.

3 ²⁰ As I will explain further in the following pages, Hizbullah's anti-state discourse was limited to the critique
4 of the secularist and modernizing republican project. However, the movement had no issue with
5 collaborating with the state and security forces during the violent years of the 1990s.

6 ²¹ Some accounts highlight that the actual number is much bigger and many of the unsolved killings during
7 the 1990s committed by the Hizbullah members. See M. Kurt, *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey: Islamism, Violence*
8 *and the State*, Pluto Press, London, 2017, p. 31.

9 ²² The amount of the documents confiscated by the police is told to be around a million pages and contains
10 notes from Hizbullah members, CVs, investigation documents, intelligence-like reports and much more. The
11 archive was never made public, but it served as the main evidence for Hizbullah-related court cases. My
12 interviewee Azad told me that he had to hide for a year during this time and that many others hid for two-
13 three years. Personal interview with Azad, 28.10.2013.

14 ²³ Personal conversation with Suleyman, 24.01.2016

15 ²⁴ For more details and discussion, see M. Kurt, *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey*, op. cit., pp. 93-111.

16 ²⁵ The conversations took place in the spring of 2016 at the height of security operations in the region.

17 ²⁶ <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons_controversy)>, (accessed
18 12.12.2018)

19 ²⁷ For a list of the Blessed Birth events taking place across Europe in 2017,
20 <<https://hursedanet.net/Kultur/181768-2017-Avrupa-Kutlu-Dogum-etkinlik-takvimi.html>>, (accessed
21 28.11.2018)

22 ²⁸ Personal conversation with Mucahid (11.05.2016), Abdulaziz (01.10.2015), Gurbet (27.06.2016) and
23 Şeyma (14.05.2016)

24 ²⁹ Several managers of association were convicted due to their affiliation to Hizbullah in previous years.
25 This was taken as an evidence of the links between Hizbullah and Mustazaflar Association.

26 ³⁰ Personal Interview with Gurbet (27.06.2016) in Bingöl and Şeyma in Diyarbakır (14.05.2016)

27 ³¹ The Democracy Meetings took place after the failed military coup in 2016 and lasted 27 days. People went
28 on the streets across Turkey, whereas the great majority of the participants in the Kurdish region were pro-
29 Hizbullah citizens.

30 ³² <<http://hudapar.org/web/394/genel-baskanimiz-yapicioglu-cumhurbaskani-erdoganla-gorustu.jsp>>,
31 (accessed 10.12.2018)

32 ³³ <[http://www.hudapar.org/webtv/164/genel-baskanimiz-sayin-zekeriya-yapicioglu-taksim-
33 meydanda-konustu.jsp](http://www.hudapar.org/webtv/164/genel-baskanimiz-sayin-zekeriya-yapicioglu-taksim-meydaninda-konustu.jsp)>, (accessed 10.12.2018)

34 ³⁴ [M. Kurt, 'The 'success' of political Islam in the Kurdish context', Open Democracy],
35 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/mehmet-kurt/success-of-political-islam-in-kurdish-context>>,
36 (accessed 04.12.2018)

37 ³⁵ Mehmet Göktaş's public talk during the Blessed Birth event on 17 April 2016, Diyarbakır.

38 ³⁶ Mele Beşir Şimşek, Public talk during the Blessed Birth event on 17 April 2016. The proposed remedy to
39 the Kurdish question by Molla Beşir, and others during the event, reminded me of Christopher Houston's
40 observation that "medical metaphors are often employed by Islamists in their attempts to grasp the
41 parameters of the Kurdish problem. So writers frequently opine that unless a proper *diagnosis* of the
42 *condition* is carried out, the correct *remedy* will not be *prescribed*. Nationalism is asserted as *festering* in
43 Western imperialism's drive to expose and thus subjugate the Muslim ümmet [...] If the Turkish Republic
44 itself is sometimes *classified* as the West's greatest tactical triumph, Kurdish nationalism too is *treated* as
45 Western-inspired, sometimes through the claim of the West's direct *injection* of funds, but more often as
46 *symptomatic* of an ideological *infection*. Thus the *body politic* (the Islamic ümmet) is labelled as *sick*, being
47 *under attack from foreign-bodies* that *contaminate* its holistic entity. The *cure* then is to *purge* it, by ridding
48 the body politic of that which penetrates it, and restore it to *health and strength*". See C. Houston, op. cit., p.
49 161.

50 ³⁷ <<http://www.haksozhaber.net/diyarbakirda-kurt-meselesi-ve-cozum-sureci-toplantisi-56109h.htm>>,
51 (accessed 26.11.2018)

52 ³⁸ The number of organisations is surprisingly high in both cases. This is a result of the rise of Islamist civil
53 society. 600 delegates can represent 3500 organisations only if one person is involved in the membership
54 or administration of several organisations. It indeed became a common practice among many Islamist
55 groups to receive funding for several projects, as a strategy to avoid monitoring and suspicion, and to sign
56 political statements and declarations with as many organisations as possible.

57 ³⁹ <<http://www.haksozhaber.net/kurt-meselesine-islami-cozum-calistayi-sonuc-bildirgesi-58162h.htm>>,
58 (accessed 26.11.2018)

1 40 N. Chomsky & E. S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Vintage,
2 London, 1994.

3 41 My interviewee Abdulaziz refused the term of the Kurdish question and told me that the question is the
4 lack of Islam (sorun İslamsızlıktır), (01.10.2015).

5 42 The AKP used Sheikh Said during the campaign for the 2016 constitutional change referendum. Banners
6 were hanged across Diyarbakır before the visit of Erdogan and the prime minister Binali Yıldırım, to try to
7 mobilise the Kurdish population after the violent destructions in 2015-2016. Targeting the pro-Hizbullah
8 neighbourhoods in Diyarbakır, banners read: "Every single 'yes' vote [to the constitutional change] is a
9 prayer to the soul of Sheikh Said". Hizbullah did support the constitutional change in the referendum.

10 43 Mehmet Kurt, '*Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey*', op. cit., pp. 45-48.

11 44 Several interviewees highlighted that the moral values of Kurdish society were in decay due to the
12 Kurdish movement's secular policies. They were especially infuriated by the changing relations between
13 men and women in public. Interestingly, women members of Hizbullah were even more virulent this regard.
14 Personal Interview with Mucahid (11.05.2016), and Gurbet (27.06.2016).

15 45 H. Ozsoy, 'The Missing Grave of Sheikh Said: Kurdish Formations of Memory, Place, and Sovereignty in
16 Turkey', In K. Visweswaran (Ed.) *Everyday Occupations: Experiencing Militarism in South Asia and the Middle
17 East*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 2013, p. 212.

18 46 Huseyin Yilmaz, the vice president of Huda-Par, <<http://hudapar.org/web/772/seyh-said-efendinin-kiyaminin-rengi-islamdi.jsp>>, (accessed 29.08.2018)

19 47 M. Cormack, (ed.), *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion*, Oxford University Press,
20 Oxford, 2002.

21 48 The discourse of martyrdom is constructed upon rivalry with the PKK both in the official narrative of
22 Hizbullah and in the semi-fictional novels and stories written by Hizbullah members. For a detailed analyses
23 and themes, see M. Kurt, '*Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey*', op. cit., pp. 125-127.

24 49 Caravan of Martyrs (*Şehitler Kervanı*) was an album series produced during the conflict between the PKK
25 and Hizbullah in the 1990s, with eulogy and anthems for the Hizbullah martyrs.

26 50 Sheikh Said Brigades (*Şeyh Said Seriyyeleri*) and the Bodyguards of Huseyn (*Huseynin Fedaileri*) are two
27 Hizbullah underground units operating respectively in Diyarbakır and Batman. They have so far appeared
28 in public once after the killing of Aytaç Baran in June 2015, but several youtube videos include images and
29 songs made for the units. They also have a twitter account (@Saidseriyyeleri and @H_Fedaileri) with more
30 than ten thousand followers. See for instance <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2h1skMbuRkw>>,
31 (accessed 28.11.2018); for an only media analysis on the group:
32 <<http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/umit-kivanc/seyh-said-seriyyeleri-1381090/>>,(accessed
33 28.11.2018)

34 51 The concept of the indirect rule is developed by Mahmood Mamdani to explain the post-colonial policies
35 of conservatizing the society and provoking domestic conflict in favour of the ruler. See M. Mamdani, *Citizen
36 and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton,
37 1996, pp. 3-35 and 62-108.