

## 8 Enemies of the “Deep State”

### Narrative Contests and Symbolic Localization

The real rulers of a nation are undiscoverable.

– Felix Frankfurter

The state is an abstraction, only the people is a concrete fact.

– Karl Marx

It was a blazing summer afternoon in Diyarbakır and a few days before the crucial nationwide elections in 2011. As violence escalated in the city, so did questions. I ran into DIAYDER’s main office to get a sense of new developments. My passion to understand the strategic logic of the alleged PKK attacks on a few imam-preacher schools led to my asking tough questions to Zahit Bey, the executive director of DIAYDER. The imam’s cold response was not only a denial of PKK involvement, but also a challenge to my curious tone: “One would hardly know what is actually happening behind the scenes. Here, things are not the way it appears to one’s eye.”

The imam’s reference to dark forces in everyday Kurdish politics has lately become an arena for cultural contestation. What has happened? Who were the perpetrators? Why? In the late 1980s, the implementation of martial law in the Kurdish-populated cities neither hindered the PKK insurgency nor protected local Kurds; instead, it reinforced a non-democratic environment in which violence became a part of everyday reality. The prolonged war between the Turkish military and the PKK provided a context for both illegal state operations as well as for false-flag operations of the PKK.<sup>1</sup>

As early as 1985, the Turkish State started to make alliances with local tribes against the PKK and established armed Kurdish militias in villages, known as the village guard system (*köy koruculuğu*). Accordingly, tens of thousands of village guards were drafted from among local villagers. The State paid considerable wages to the village guards and supplied them

<sup>1</sup> Spain’s war against the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (Basque Homeland and Freedom), ETA, had similar outcomes. Between 1983 and 1987, the Spanish government illegally sponsored death squads, known as *Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación* (Antiterrorist Liberation Groups), GAL, to fight the ETA. See Woodworth 2001.

with weaponry.<sup>2</sup> The village guardianship system, however, was open to abuses and did not mitigate increasing insecurity in the region.<sup>3</sup> Hizbullah's armed struggle with the PKK (1991-1996) further worsened the anarchic atmosphere.

In the early 1990s, thousands of Kurds simply disappeared because they were alleged PKK sympathizers. Stories and rumors circulated among local Kurds as dead bodies and tortured corpses were found on the outskirts of the cities.<sup>4</sup> Assassinations of pro-Kurdish politicians skyrocketed.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of different and often conflicting narratives, a consensus has emerged about the existence of illegal, dark, and secret state operations and counterterrorism units that targeted Kurds, popularly known as the "deep state" in Turkey.

This chapter analyzes how the notion of the "deep state" has become a cultural construct that has acquired a life of its own. Each rival movement has contributed to the public vilification of the "deep state" in order to resonate more with local Kurds. In other words, the rivals have pursued a strategy of legitimacy building in public as they narrate the deep state's operations to exterminate Kurds. The activists ardently engaged in theorizing about the Turkish state as they condemned their rivals for being co-opted by "evil" elements of the state. In these competing narratives of the history, the rivals contested what actually happened in the past, who was co-opted by the state, the Turkish state's security policies, and even the nature of the state itself.

Analyzing narrative contests, I suggest that meaning-making processes of Kurdish activists are not separable from the dynamics of social movement competition in the region.<sup>6</sup>

2 For the village guard system, see McDowall 1997: 422; Romano 2006: 82.

3 The tribal structure of Kurdish society also contributed to abuses in the village guard system. Some tribes that entered the system misused their new authority and arms to drive other smaller tribes from their lands. See McDowall 1997: 422.

4 According to *İnsan Hakları Derneği*, a secular leftist human rights association, there were more than 200 places that were used by counterterrorism squads of the Turkish military to torture and execute Kurds. In these mass graveyards, the death toll is about 3,000 people. See, the interactive map: <http://www.ihddiyarbakir.org/Map.aspx>, Accessed March 4, 2012. The total number of lost and murdered Kurds, however, is more than 6,000. See, İHD 2009. The death toll is only comparable with notorious examples of state-led violence in Argentina and Chile in the late 1970s, known as the "dirty wars." In Argentina, 10,000-15,000 died or disappeared; in Chile, the estimated toll was 4,000. See Loveman 1998: 486.

5 In just two years, between October 1991 and October 1993, fifty-four Kurdish politicians and activists were murdered and hundreds were threatened with blackmail. See Oran 2010: 47-48. Most cases still remain unsolved.

6 Social movement studies are increasingly paying special attention to the storytelling practices of activists. Among leading works are Polletta 1998a, 1998b, 2006; Davis 2002. Scholars

## The "Deep State" and Kurds

People began to hear the term "deep state" after a traffic accident in the small town of Susurluk in northwestern Turkey in 1996. Three of the four passengers in the luxury car died at the scene. Revelation of the occupants' identities became a milestone event as it publicly revealed a peculiar network for the first time. Those who died were (1) an ultranationalist hit man on Interpol's Red list, (2) his mistress who carried a fake identity certificate, and (3) the former deputy head of the Istanbul Police Department. And finally, the survivor was a deputy in the Grand Turkish National Assembly and the leader of a Kurdish village guard clan. The Susurluk accident triggered a massive public reaction and introduced a new political term *derin devlet*, the deep state.<sup>7</sup>

Fast forward to November 2005 when a defector from the PKK employed as an informant by the security forces and two officers of the local gendarmerie bombed a local bookstore in Şemdinli, revealing that some army officers illegally target PKK sympathizers.<sup>8</sup> The state prosecutor linked high-ranking military officers to the incident, including General Yaşar Büyükanıt (later the chief of the general staff) who had served in the region in the late 1990s. The prosecutor's indictment pointed out that the bombing "was part of a series of similar attacks intended to provoke the security forces into a clampdown on the restive Kurdish region that would then unleash European criticism and jeopardize Turkey's hopes of joining the EU."<sup>9</sup>

This particular incident, popularly referred to as the *Şemdinli affair*, was followed by other revealing events, and consequently, five different illegal clandestine organizations were detected that have ties with some army

note three distinct features of narratives: (1) some are a form of selective appropriation of past events and characters, (2) others provide a temporal order of events, and (3) some weave events and characters into what is called the "relationality of parts" or "emplotment" (Ewick and Silbey 2003: 1341). Narrative accounts select certain events in the past as building past, present, and future in a consequential way in order to clarify "the point of the story" (White 1987).

7 In the early 2000s, characterizations of state-mafia relations in popular Turkish soap operas and television series such as *Deli Yürek* (the Reckless Heart), *Kurtlar Vadisi* (Valley of the Wolves), *Yılan Hikayesi* (Snake Story), and *Alacakaranlık* (Twilight) further contributed to popular discourse about shadowy figures within the state.

8 Aytar 2006: 6-7.

9 Turgut 2006; quoted in Kaya 2009: 104. The prosecutor Ferhat Sarıkaya also accused General Büyükanıt of attempting to influence the judicial process as the general had commented that he knew the alleged bomber officer personally and that the officer was a "good boy." The prosecutor was disbarred by the Supreme Board of Prosecutors and Judges (*Hakim ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu*) on the grounds that his indictment was faulty.

officers and ex-army members.<sup>10</sup> The events hinted at the existence of shadowy formations within the security forces and raised questions about the legality of the measures used in fighting terrorism with respect to citizens' rights. In the words of Christopher De Bellaigue in *The New York Review of Books*,

Some members of the armed forces, afraid of losing the prestige, political autonomy, and big budgets that they have enjoyed since the PKK rebellion gained momentum in the late 1980s, do not want peace at all ... The relative freedom with which Öcalan's (the captured leader of the PKK) lawyers have been able to pass on his messages has led some to suspect that he is cooperating with his captors – that he has defected, in effect, to the 'deep state.'<sup>11</sup>

De Bellaigue's comments found echo in everyday Turkey, especially after one particular illegal clandestine group became publicly known: Ergenekon.

Named after a mythical valley in Central Asia,<sup>12</sup> Ergenekon was allegedly supported by counterterrorism units within the Turkish military such as JITEM (Gendarmerie Intelligence and Anti-Terror Struggle). As a response to the PKK attacks in the late 1980s, Turkey declared eleven provinces in east and southeast Anatolia to be in *OHAL*, "Emergency Rule Law," governing the region by martial law.<sup>13</sup> Enjoying the independence from checks and balances by the civil authorities, some of the army members became involved in a "dirty war," including forming some illegal death squads that killed several thousand community leaders and human rights activists for allegedly being PKK sympathizers, waging false-flag terrorist attacks, and forcing hundreds of thousands to evacuate their villages.<sup>14</sup>

JITEM units were heavily recruited from former members of the PKK, who provided information in return for immunity from prosecution or reduced jail sentences. As Gareth Jenkins notes,

In addition to gathering intelligence, JITEM units would detain, interrogate, and frequently torture and execute suspected PKK members.

<sup>10</sup> *Radikal* 2006.

<sup>11</sup> De Bellaigue 2007: 37.

<sup>12</sup> In the legend of Ergenekon, a she-wolf rescued the Turkish nation in a most desperate situation in Central Asia. The Turkish republican elite reproduced the Ergenekon myth in its early years, trying to establish a secular nationhood disconnected from the Ottoman past. See, Türköne 2009.

<sup>13</sup> From 2000 onwards, after the EU negotiation talks began, the number of provinces in the *OHAL* was gradually reduced till its final abolition in November 2002. For details, see Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Van Bruinessen 2004: 12; Kaya 2009: 100.

JITEM units also targeted those who were believed to be merely Kurdish nationalists, assassinating journalists and intellectuals and bombing the offices of publishers and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).<sup>15</sup>

In June 2007, a legal investigation into the Ergenekon organization was filed. The state prosecutors defined Ergenekon as a collusive terrorist organization within the Turkish state, rooted mainly in the Turkish armed forces.<sup>16</sup> The type of network was reminiscent of the notorious Italian counterterrorism unit, *Gladio*, and therefore, the state prosecutors' indictment linked Ergenekon with NATO's secret stay-behind armies in member countries against a potential Communist invasion.

Despite disputes between pro-Islamic and pro-secular constituencies about the Ergenekon case, major political players in the Southeast, namely the pro-Kurdish DTP and the AKP, have concurred that the Ergenekon has used brutal violence against the Kurdish population. As the Ergenekon's covert operations against the Kurds became public, criticism of the deep state increased in the region.

### The Rival Movements and Competing Narratives on Ergenekon

The question "What is Ergenekon?" posed in a nationwide poll saw the majority of AKP and DTP voters defining Ergenekon as an organization that is "responsible for all mysterious violent acts."<sup>17</sup> The DTP leader, Ahmet Türk, maintained that the Ergenekon conspiracy was directly tied to the Kurdish question in Turkey:

Wherever this organization [Ergenekon] grew, it was within the geography of Kurdistan. Where did the arrested generals do their duty? Within Kurdish geography. Against whom did they direct their operations? The Kurds. According to official statistics, there are 17,000 unsolved committed murders. Ninety percent of them were committed in the Kurdish regions. People were murdered savagely and thrown into acid pits. They were taken from their homes in the middle of the night and killed. They were forced to eat feces and underwent unimaginable torture.<sup>18</sup>

15 Jenkins 2008.

16 Kaya 2009: 105.

17 Ünver 2009: 25.

18 Quoted in Olson 2009: 131-32.

Türk further criticized the AKP for its failure to adequately investigate Ergenekon operations in Kurdish-populated regions. The AKP officials, on the other hand, charged the DTP for its lack of support in their fight with the status quo regime that is responsible for the Ergenekon-like organizations.

Involved in a never-ending process of meaning-making, rival Kurdish activists of the PKK, Gülen, and Hizbullah have vilified the “deep state” through telling stories. Their narrations, however, have not been free-floating performances. Competition among the rival activists has led them (1) to engage with the notion of deep state to the extent that they could exploit the discursive opportunity in the best way possible, and (2) to build their legitimacy in the public eye as they emphasize the deep state’s collaboration with rivals.

I call rival movement activists’ story-telling efforts to re-construct their identities through the negation of their competitors a process of “social movement distinction.” As a form of strategic subversion, the social movement distinction is a never-ending discursive performance of self-construction (*Re-construction*) that can be realized to de-authenticate the rivals (*De-legitimization*). In the Kurdish case, the rival activist narratives claim their bona fide Kurdish-ness (*Re-construction*) through condemning their rivals’ collaboration with the deep state (*De-legitimization*).

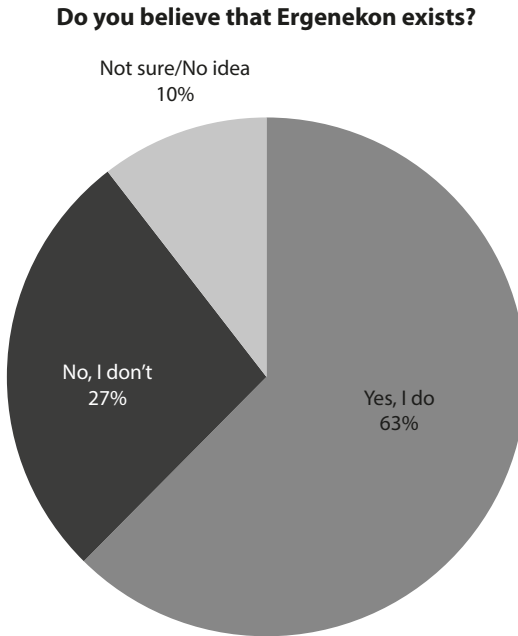
Thus, narrative contest is a form of social performance, entailing a “feeling for the game” that the social movement actors play. It is a highly developed cultural game that has two components: (a) story-telling as a form of *mimicry* and (b) competition or *agon*, i.e. warfare. As Marie Maclean puts it,

In the normal narration, while there is always a narrator, we are frequently left to deduce the possible reactions of the narratee from the strategies of the text. In the narrative contests, however, the double nature of the narrative contract is actualized because each performer is seen in a double role. Apart from explicitly judgmental statements, each competitor also gives an implicit opinion of the previous narration by the tale he or she chooses to tell and the manner of telling it. So each is not only actor but audience, and simultaneously both counsel and judge.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows, I analyze the rival movements’ reputation work through narratives.

19 Maclean 1988: 126.

**Figure 8.1 Public responses to question about the existence of the deep state  
(Conducted by Metro Poll in January 2009)**



### The Gülen/Hizmet as Enemy of the Deep State

The Turkish military's intervention in politics on February 28, 1997, popularly called the *post-modern coup*, initiated a process "of monitoring, controlling, and criminalizing all Islamic activism" including the Gülen movement.<sup>20</sup> The February 28 process came as a great shock to Hizmet activists. For the first time in the movement's history, activists were publicly ostracized, charged, and discriminated against for allegedly being enemies of the state.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Yavuz 2003: 277. In the February 28 process, two political parties were banned because of their allegedly Islamist roots; about a thousand military officers were removed from their posts for similar reasons; some corporations were labeled 'green capital' and discriminated against; hundreds of Qur'an teaching centers were closed; and thousands of students were expelled from public and private universities because of their adoption of the headscarf. See, Gürbüz 2009; Taş 2011.

<sup>21</sup> The state security court prosecutor opened a court case against Fethullah Gülen by demanding the death penalty. For the details of the case, see Harrington 2011.

Fethullah Gülen had to go into exile in the United States because of extreme pressure.

In 2004, the movement's *Samanyolu* channel launched a TV series, *Şubat Soğuğu* (The Cold February), narrating the February 28 process through a fictional account. *The Cold February* (2004-2006) depicts shadowy forces gathered around a clandestine group of the power elite known as *Cemiyet* (the Committee) and how they effectively operated to shape state policies in the 1990s. The Committee, which includes both outside/foreign elements and domestic members, appoints a key bureaucrat (*Mehmet Aziz Tarman*) as the chief executive to control the State's national security policies through manipulations, provocations, and the construction of mass hysteria. As the ultimate power behind the extra-judicial activities in the country including the major atrocities in the Kurdish-populated Southeast, the Committee has strong relations with outside "hostile" forces abroad. In this sense, *The Cold February* resonated with local discourses among Kurds as well as Turks because it reproduced multiple and conflicting local meanings that are primarily shaped by people's own lay theories.

The Gülen movement's narrative of the Kurdish issue was a public challenge to the official state discourse. As the civil society competition escalated after the 2007 elections, the *Samanyolu* channel launched another TV series, *Tek Türkiye* (*One Turkey*), this time exclusively for narrating the Kurdish issue.

*One Turkey* tells the story of a young, idealistic doctor called Tarık who travels to the Southeast from Istanbul. Planning a short trip, Tarık aims to help local people who suffer from the war between the Turkish state and the PKK rebels. Tarık's trip turns into a long journey when he learns that he was born in the village that he visited in the Southeast, so he is a Kurd, not a Turk. Although *One Turkey* does not mention the Gülen movement, Tarık's persona clearly represents a Hizmet activist in the region. Tarık is an observant Muslim Kurd who has a high level of education. His original Kurdish identity functions as a representation of the bona fide Kurdishness of Hizmet activists (*Re-construction*). Through Tarık's emphasis on his Islamic identity, a recognition of his Kurdishness, his unyielding defense of the land of Turkey against PKK guerillas, and his community service as a doctor (and then local governor in later episodes), viewers get a concrete message: Separatism is not a solution for the problems in the region; instead, investing in the education of the youth and Turkish-Kurdish unity around an Islamic identity could prepare a better future.



The most striking feature of *One Turkey* is its constant reminder of the deep state. The series depicts some powerful, ill-intentioned figures who employ covert operatives who are involved in provocative secret operations to incite hatred among local Kurds against the state. Reminiscent of the Committee in the *Cold February* series, these figures are not visually recognizable but could be heard by the viewers. Their forum, called *Karanlık Kurul* (the Dark Committee), often collaborated with some of the Kurdish guerilla leaders (representing the PKK), some radical Islamic groups (representing Hizbullah) as well as some high-level Turkish army officers who specialize in counterterrorism (representing the JITEM, Gendarmerie Intelligence and Anti-Terror Struggle). The show, thus, narrates how the leaders of the PKK and Hizbullah collaborate with the deep state for their selfish interests and sell out the cause of Kurdish people's well-being (*De-legitimization*).

*One Turkey* suggests two pictures of the Turkish state for its audience: (1) ugly elements of the state ("the deep state") that are not part of the genuine Turkish state, and (2) the real Turkish state that embraces its Kurdish population as equal citizens. Consider the following occasion in the eighty-sixth episode of the show: After a legal interrogation, two former members of the PKK (who were not involved in criminal acts and who later turn themselves in) were set free by the Gendarmerie station. As they are about to leave, an officer from a specialized unit (JITEM) wants to re-interrogate them. The colonel who administers the Gendarmerie station insists that their interrogation was held and they should be allowed to leave. The dispute continued as following:

The JITEM officer: Your benign interrogation techniques would not work for them! Let me have a chat with them. You'll be surprised to see how eager they are to talk.

The Colonel: That's enough for them to be tortured by the terrorists. Don't torture them!

The JITEM officer: Don't be kindhearted, commander. You'll cry a lot then!

The Colonel: Do not touch them! I know what you guys wanna do. Your sole job is to make the people of this land into sworn enemies of their fellow citizens and their state. But don't get too excited: Your dynasty will fall apart soon.

The JITEM officer: Who do you think you are! Beware of your rank. You could never reach us. Know your limits or we will put you in your place.

The dialogue presents two conflicting approaches to the Kurdish rebels. The Colonel represents the *authentic* Turkish state's position: conducting business within the legal boundaries, sympathetic towards its Kurdish citizens, and cognizant of abusers who work within the state apparatus. On the other hand, the JITEM officer represents the dreadful face of the Ergenekon, the Turkish deep state: torturing its Kurdish citizens, recruiting from former members of the PKK, who provided information in return for immunity from prosecution or reduced jail sentences, and deliberately escalating the hatred between Turkish and Kurdish communities in order to strengthen their militaristic authority.

Another occasion in the same episode includes a Kurdish girl's regretful account before a gentle school teacher who was also previously a rebel in the mountains:

I made a lot of mistakes. I was rebellious against my people and my state. But now I realize that the state is not only those who do bad things to us. I supposed that they were the state. In fact, it turned out that they were bandits who had infiltrated the state. The real state, indeed, has been you and us.

The girl's account highlights the main idea in the *One Turkey* series: many Kurds who were ignorant about the deep state and its activities condemned the Turkish state; now it is time to realize that there was a bunch of criminals acting in the name of the state.

In the Gülen activists' narrative, the very definition of the state remains a symbol of unity among its Turkish and Kurdish constituents, whereas the definition of the deep state refers to a dark relationship between some elements within the state and radical elements in society. Many episodes of *One Turkey* narrate how the Kurdish guerilla leaders (representing the PKK) are in close connection with the deep state in order to facilitate further recruitment to their party (*De-legitimization*). References are made to the Turkish state negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan, the captured leader of the PKK, in a way that implies the Kurdish ethno-nationalists' compromise with the deep state in return for the PKK's organizational survival. The message is clear: the defenders of Kurdish ethno-nationalism are indeed prioritizing their organizational survival over the Kurdish people's well-being; therefore, they have sold out. In a similar vein, some episodes depict Hizbullah as the spawn of the deep state conspiracy in order to boost the militaristic hegemony in the region (*De-legitimization*).

### The PKK: "The State wants to sweep its filth under the carpet!"

Soon after his election with the pro-Kurdish party ticket as the mayor of Diyarbakır, Osman Baydemir removed the Turkish Republic's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's statue from one of the city's main squares. Then he erected a statue of Musa Anter, a prominent Kurdish writer and activist, who was killed as part of a wave of 'unknown-assailant murders' in 1992. It was a powerful attempt to shape 'geography of memory' by drawing public attention to the Ergenekon atrocities.<sup>22</sup> As the pro-Kurdish party DTP leader Ahmet Türk put it,

We feel that the Ergenekon issue is very important for the future of Turkey and for transparency in politics. I believe that if all dimensions of the Ergenekon issue are made clear, the Kurdish and Turkish people will better understand one another. It is important to make clear the efforts of Ergenekon to put the Turkish and Kurdish people at loggerheads ... The source of the Ergenekon conspiracy was the Kurdish question. The origin, nurturing, and growth of the Ergenekon organization were in the Kurdish region. The operation they perpetrated in the Kurdish region consolidated their power and made them a stronger organization.<sup>23</sup>

The ethno-nationalist narratives on the Turkish deep state, however, were *bound up* with the inter-movement competition structure. Pro-Kurdish politicians expressed their deep concern about the investigation held by the pro-Islamic AKP. Emine Ayna, a leading pro-Kurdish party deputy, stated their strategic approach as she commented on the pro-Islamic actors' claims about the Ergenekon case:

Our position is clear. Whatever the claims of the Ergenekon case that are exposed, Kurdish intellectuals and Kurdish politicians will realize that the issues are not as they appear and, indeed, the Kurdish intellectuals and politicians will analyze the Ergenekon case and will take action.<sup>24</sup>

Ayna's frank statement illustrates the difficulty and elasticity of this contested issue as a consequence. The competing activists could speculate on constantly developing the Ergenekon case as they learn about their rivals' discourses.

<sup>22</sup> For the term, see Alderman 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Olson 2009: 23-24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 2009: 25.

Kurdish ethno-nationalists depict the deep state as the Turkish state itself. For example, Ahmet Türk argued that Ergenekon was not comprised of individuals who had worked for the state but by individuals within the state. Ergenekon's atrocities, exclaimed Türk, were perpetrated "by the state itself." "If you cut off the tail of a snake without crushing its head, it becomes more dangerous ... The 'covered' face of the state wants to sweep its filth under the carpet."<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Songül Abdil, the mayor of Tunceli from the DTP, narrated the atrocities of the Turkish state and its armed forces as she maintained that Kurds were hardly surprised by the horrific tactics of the Ergenekon:

In 1938, during the massacre in Dersim [Tunceli is usually called Dersim by Kurds], thousands were killed ... They stabbed our women's stomachs with bayonets, extracted their babies, and threw them into the Munzur River.<sup>26</sup>

Abdil's equation of Ergenekon with the Turkish state and its military does not reflect her opinions solely. In my field interviews, I heard similar narrations. Ararat, an activist who works for the Kurdish daily *Azadiya Welat*, claims that Ergenekon was the last attempt of the Turkish state to eliminate Kurdish resistance:

In fact, we should ask the question why the state had needed the Ergenekon in the first place, and later, could not get along with this organization. The Ergenekon was needed since the Kurds have come to a certain point in their democratic struggle, have become powerful; and then, it became apparent that they cannot be resisted through legal means. In this sense, the state has chosen to establish illegal squads within its apparatus. I mean, the Ergenekon is not something separable from the state or governments; therefore, we do not see it as a component or section [of the state].<sup>27</sup>

Ararat's account portrays the deep state as the illegal "dirty" face of the state, and PKK activism is viewed as a successful challenger that drives Turkish state policy (*Re-construction*). Moreover, Ararat criticizes the party in power, the AKP, and holds it to be complicit in the crimes despite the pro-Islamic AKP's claims to fight against Ergenekon (*De-legitimization*).

<sup>25</sup> *Radikal* 2009b.

<sup>26</sup> *Radikal* 2009a.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview. Diyarbakır, July 12, 2009.

Another activist, who works to unionize pro-Kurdish teachers in Urfa, describes how he sees pro-Islamic actors as complicit in the crimes of the state:

According to my own perception and our communal perception in general, the Ergenekon case is an operation of the state to purify itself ... In fact, the Ergenekon case is a result of negotiation between the AKP and the deep forces in Turkey ... Those arrested [in the Ergenekon case] were the main figures who had implemented violent policies to solve the Kurdish question for years. First, they were eliminated due to their failure to solve the Kurdish question despite their employment of all sorts of violence ... Second, the operation [to eliminate them] was an outcome of cooperation between the AKP and the Turkish Armed Forces. What kind of cooperation? The AKP is told to attack those hawks by political means ... In return, the AKP demanded their support; assuring them it could diminish Kurdish people's interest in the PKK and the DTP by playing the religion card.<sup>28</sup>

The union activist's portrayal of the cooperation between the pro-Islamic actors and the state is remarkable in two ways: First, he interchangeably uses "the deep forces" and "the Turkish Armed Forces" through negative connotations as he narrates their violent stance on the Kurdish issue. Thus, similar to Ararat, he does not distinguish them as separate political formations. In this regard, he also reiterates the pro-Kurdish activists' opposing position vis-à-vis the state (*Re-construction*). Second, he accuses the AKP of being co-opted by the state in terms of solving the Kurdish question. Therefore, rival Islamic-Kurdish identities are now in play to crush the PKK mobilization (*De-legitimization*).

For many Kurds, the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan is a powerful storyteller. Öcalan warned Kurds that the criminalization of Ergenekon is a strategic choice that is linked to current transformations in the Middle East. The real threat, he concluded, is American-led "soft Islam," the AKP and the Gülen:

The United States had a major influence on the elimination of Ergenekon. Having a new plan for the Kurds, the US wanted to realize its aims. Yet, through active resistance, these people [the Ergenekon convicts] did not let the US realize its Kurdish project. The US does not want the PKK

<sup>28</sup> Author's interview. Urfa, July 5, 2009.

to remain as it is, and therefore they develop conspiracies (against us). Those who were detained in the Ergenekon case are professional soldiers who have been trained by the US since the 1960s as intelligence and counter-guerilla officers. The US told them, “You screwed up!” and later put them out with the garbage. Now, the US wants to realize its (Kurdish) project through “soft Islam.”<sup>29</sup>

Öcalan also adds “radical Islam” as an element of this project, claiming that Hizbullah has been nurtured into “a ready to use force against Kurds” in the hands of the Turkish state.<sup>30</sup> Öcalan’s accounts often refer to Hizbullah as the *Hizb-i Kontra* (Party of the Counter). Given the fact that *kontra* is employed to refer to counterterrorism/counter-guerilla groups, *Hizb-i Kontra* (Party of the Counter) labels Hizbullah as collaborators of the counter-guerilla forces that attack the PKK.<sup>31</sup>

### Hizbullah: “We’re the Victims of the Deep State!”

One of the first publications of Hizbullah was *Eşreften Esfele* (From the Most Honorable to the Most Shameful). Written as fiction in the form of a novel,<sup>32</sup> *Eşreften Esfele* depicts Hizbullah as a group of young Muslim Kurds who are organized for the well-being of their local community. The novel describes “illegal” and “shameful” operations conducted by some undercover agents in order to damage Hizbullah activism and its rising reputation among the Kurds. The story ends with Hizbullah’s kidnapping of a key undercover

29 For the full talk, see Öcalan 2009b. Öcalan’s talks from his cell are regularly recorded by his lawyers and widely distributed in the Kurdish community as *Görüşme Notları*, i.e. the Meeting Notes. The PKK- affiliated online platforms such as <http://www.rojaciwan.com/> and <http://www.firatnews.com/> provide the Meeting Notes in full.

30 Öcalan 2008a, 2009d, 2011a.

31 Öcalan depicts complex relations between “soft-Islam” and Hizbullah, even calling the AKP the official form of Hizbullah (Öcalan 2008b). His narratives put the AKP, the Gülen movement, and Hizbullah on one straight line that has been compromised by the deep state, which he sometimes calls the “Gladio.” “Among the Turkish army, there were those who accepted the AKP’s power in Turkey and those who did not. Cooperating with those who accept- and in fact they have been those who represent the NATO Gladio-, the AKP went to eliminate the other segment of the Gladio who started to operate independently. I mean, the Gladio was not eliminated totally; instead, an agreement and a negotiation were held with one part of the Gladio.” See, Öcalan 2011b.

32 Among Hizbullah’s fictional novels are *Konuş! Yoksa ...* (Speak Up! Otherwise ...), İstanbul: İhlas Yay. 2004 and *Can Laleler Solmasın* (Don’t Let Lovely Tulips Wilted), İstanbul: Dua Yay. 2009.

state agent, Zülküf Dogan, and subsequently the capturing of many others. After his abduction, Zülküf's muttering to himself, in fact, summarizes the major themes in the novel:

You're finished now. You who had many innocent people tortured for no reason! You who had people jailed and who made their families miserable! You who were spreading seeds of doubt and disunity that caused people to cease to care for the Brothers [Hizbullah]; who was inculcating Devil-inspired thoughts that led them to renounce Islam! You who sexually abused little children; and you, who besides being a spy, has turned others into spies! What a pity for you!

The confessions of Zülküf aim to give the main message to the reader: Hizbullah did not kidnap and murder random civilians; instead, those killed were undercover agents of the Turkish state.

The public discussions of the Ergenekon case have provided Hizbullah activists with a discursive opportunity. An online Hizbullah publication claimed that its earlier description of "the dark and dirty plans of the Kemalist regime"<sup>33</sup> referred in fact to the Ergenekon operations in the region.<sup>34</sup> Depicting the Turkish secularist regime as the foundation for the deep state, Hizbullah activists do not really distinguish the Turkish state from its deep entities. As one of the activists told me, the deep state is "a component of the state itself."<sup>35</sup>

Hizbullah activists narrated how they were both victims of the deep state as well as the bona fide Kurdish challenger against the deep state (*Reconstruction*). Often portrayed in the 1990s as an armed machine of the Turkish deep state aimed at eliminating the PKK, they are quite disturbed. "For

33 Hizbullah activists use "the Kemalist regime" and "the secularist regime" interchangeably to refer to the Turkish state regime.

34 The anonymous document further claims: "From its very establishment, the Kemalist regime has been a system that strives to exist at the expense of its own people, a system that never considers the nation's values and wishes ... We should emphasize that the roots of the Ergenekon-like organizations go back to societies such as the Union of Committee and Progress [*İttihad ve Terakki*], which has been active since the foundation of the Kemalist regime ... The Community [*Cemaat*] of Hizbullah has become the target of the Ergenekon-like groups since its earlier days of widespread and effective public activism. We could easily claim that there is no community in the world that struggled with the Ergenekon-like organizations and got results as much as the Hizbullah did. This fact has incited enmity against the Hizbullah at its peak." See Anonymous 2008.

35 Author's interview. Istanbul, June 5, 2009.

us, to collaborate with the Ergenekon is disbelief” said Hasan, who was sent to prison for being a Hizbullah member, complaining about the allegations.<sup>36</sup>

Hizbullah’s military flank leader Cemal Tutar narrates how the PKK and the Gülen defame Hizbullah. Tutar’s claims represent the movement’s overall stance: the overwhelming majority of the Hizbullah’s public statements portray the PKK and the Gülen as corrupt because of their dark relations with deep forces of the system (*De-legitimization*).

A passage from Tutar’s statement illuminates how the PKK is depicted by Hizbullah activists:

Everywhere in the world, the enemies of Islam who do not want to acknowledge successful Islamic movements attempt to slander them and thus devalue their victories. Nowadays, Al-Fatah’s efforts to cast a shadow on the achievements of HAMAS in Palestine – and its alienation from its own people so that it could even cooperate with Israel – are not different from the wrongdoings of the PKK. It’s because [similar to the PKK], in order to diminish the people’s support, Al-Fatah claims that HAMAS was established by Israel. For this reason – as well as for many other reasons – one could strikingly see how the PKK and Al-Fatah are identical.<sup>37</sup>

The narration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is purposeful because mainstream Kurdish public opinion perceives HAMAS as a legitimate defender of the Palestinian people. In this way, Hizbullah is depicted as a popular resistance movement as unyielding as HAMAS, whereas the Kurdish ethno-nationalists are portrayed as having dark relations with the system similar to Al-Fatah (*Re-construction* and *De-legitimization*).<sup>38</sup>

36 Similar statements are made by other activists who use pseudo-names to publish on Hizbullah’s website:

“To mention Hizbullah’s name together with the Kemalist regime’s intelligence office is the greatest insult to our community. The Kemalist state uses many organizations including nationalist, leftist, and fascist since they are ideologically and politically open to be utilized ... Yet, Hizbullah is quite different in terms of its belief system and organization structure ... It can never be used by any power. First of all, the political thought, ideology, and belief of the Hizbullah perceive the Kemalist regime as a system of infidels. Hizbullah not only believes that the regime should be destroyed but also takes action to smash it.” (Nuhoglu 2011).

37 Tutar 2009: 82.

38 In our interview, one of the prominent Hizbullah singers told me that they especially seek to raise consciousness about the plight of the Palestinians through their songs. The most popular albums of the Group *Özlem* (the movement’s music agency) such as *Bu Ne Sessizlik* (Defeating Silence) and *Vuslata Özlem* (Yearning for the Reunion) have several songs in support of the cause of HAMAS and Palestine. Author’s interview. Istanbul, June 7, 2009.



In a similar vein, an article published in Hizbullah's weekly *Doğru Haber* describes Gülen as a part of "a MOSSAD-linked deep project" against Hizbullah:

In recent years, Gülen-swayed missionaries have been rushing into the region in order to subdue Kurds, or even make them monkeys. Backed by Pennsylvania [where Fethullah Gülen is living], they are certainly part of a Zionist international plan that targets Kurds. Everybody and his brother knows about the notorious plans to launch a Kurdish establishment as Israel's servant in order to shape the future of Kurds in accordance with Israeli interests.<sup>39</sup>

### **Narratives in Conflict Transformation: Reputation Work and Symbolic Localization**

How do narrative contests contribute to the shift in the violent ethnic conflict toward non-violent political persuasion in the region? In their study of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Daniel Bar-Tal and Gavriel Salomon argue that narratives are motivational tools to solidify group identity and dehumanize the enemy. Thus, narratives help to prolong injustice and ethnic conflict. Transformation of the conflict, they suggest, depends on changes in collective narratives. The first step in this direction is for people to learn about the other side of the story, giving legitimacy to competing narratives. Willingness to listen to the other, however, should come from the stronger party first.<sup>40</sup>

The Ergenekon investigation provided an unprecedented opportunity for Turkey to face its dirty war in the Southeast. As victims of the secularist military regime, the pro-Islamic AKP and Hizmet supported the investigation. Public criticisms of the military opened Pandora's Box: the Turkish constituency began to hear competing stories about "terrorists" for the first time in such a degree. Having roots in both Turkish and Kurdish constituencies, these pro-Islamic actors helped to deminish the ruthless Turkish nationalist stance that long imposed "narrative violence."<sup>41</sup>

In my fieldwork, I observed that Turkish Hizmet activists spoke highly of the drama series *One Turkey* whereas Kurdish Hizmet activists were more

39 Atak 2011. *Doğru Haber* has long called Gülen-affiliated media "Fesat Medya Grubu," (Corrupt Media Group) pejoratively. For allegations on TV show *One Turkey*, for example, see its issue no: 54, April 10-16, 2009.

40 Bar-Tal and Salomon 2006: 39; Pappé 2006: 198.

41 Cobb 2013: 29.

critical of the show. Feeling enlightened about the Kurdish issue, a Turkish activist asked a leading Hizmet spokesperson who is ethnically Kurdish, “Do they [Kurds] not watch *One Turkey*, to realize what is going on behind the scenes? It should be nominated for the Oscars.”

Although a Kurdish audience would find such a question orientalist and disturbing, his questioning tone was more an expression of his sympathy for Kurds. Through *One Turkey*, he recognized that some Kurds were “forced” to join the PKK because of outrageous attacks by the “deep state” during the martial law era. Thus, the “attribution of subjectivity,” that is seeing the other as a victim of structural forces, enabled the Turkish constituency to be willing to hear more about alternative narratives about the conflict.

The pro-Islamic activists’ meaning-making processes, however, are not constructed in a vacuum. Public criticisms of the deep state have provided a “discursive context” to interpret their positions vis-à-vis the Turkish State.<sup>42</sup> Narratives have helped to situate all social actors in the new game – non-violent competition in the civil society. What should be remembered? How? From Hizbullah’s novels to ethno-nationalist municipality projects, narratives play a huge role in symbolic localization of competitor Kurdish activists. Narrative contests are, in fact, an essential part of reputation work: rival activists re-constructed their self-image through “distinction”<sup>43</sup> among other Kurds. They call Kurds to build trust on their bona fide Kurdish movement by harming the reputation of their competitors. Thus, there is the process of social movement distinction, a constant discursive performance of articulation, re-appropriation, and negation.

Transforming the ethnic conflict, rival Kurdish activists are now “reputational entrepreneurs”<sup>44</sup> thanks to the interpretive and representational character of their narratives. Competitors in a narrative contest are not supposed to carve out the details of their message since their narrations are constructed through images that summarize “the point of the story.”<sup>45</sup> The tarnished image of the Turkish State and its collaborators is more publicly memorable than what actually happened in the region. Gary Alan Fine put it plainly: “We remember our history not through the details of events but through the labels that characterize and summarize these events.” “These labels,” adds Fine, “have a life of their own.”<sup>46</sup>

42 See, McCammon et al. 2007; Woehrle, Coy, and Maney 2008.

43 Here, I follow Bourdieu’s definition in his classical work. See, Bourdieu 1984.

44 Fine 2006.

45 White 1987.

46 Fine 2001: 71.