

Article

Blame Avoidance through Necropolitics and Religious Populism: Autocratic Responses to Nationwide Crises in an Authoritarian Islamist Polity

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Abstract

Blame avoidance, a strategic distancing from culpability following events resulting in the deaths of citizens of a country, has often been studied in democratic contexts, yet its manifestation in authoritarian scenarios remains understudied. This study addresses this gap by scrutinizing empirical data derived from Turkey's party in power, the AKP, and their political narratives and policies concerning these fatalities. Synthesizing the concepts of blame avoidance and necropolitics, it investigates how Turkey's ruling competitive authoritarian party uses blame-shifting strategies to account for deaths resulting from negligence. Employing a conceptualization of martyrdom intertwined with religious populism, the party appeals to both religious and nationalistic sentiments and succeeds in sidestepping responsibility and accountability for these tragic incidents.

Keywords: religious populism, death, martyrdom, accountability, blame avoidance, competitive authoritarianism, elections, AKP, Turkey

Introduction

Accidents or violent conflicts resulting in fatalities have a profound impact on individuals, communities, and societies, especially when these tragedies are linked to government failure or negligence. Such events often provoke significant criticism and challenge the government's legitimacy. To manage the fallout and sustain their position, incumbents typically employ several strategies: controlling the media, calling for national unity, appealing to patriotism, using nationalistic rhetoric, promoting solidarity, implementing censorship, or putting the blame on others and so on. These methods are used to deflect criticism, manage public perception, and maintain authority in the face of government shortcomings, a practice commonly known as blame avoidance.

Blame avoidance generally refers to any actions taken by leaders and officials to distance themselves from situations that could result in blame or jeopardize their objectives (Hinterleitner, 2017: 243). This behavior can be observed across various levels, ranging from national governance to community leadership (Baekkeskov & Rubin, 2017; Li et al., 2021). Numerous studies have analyzed blame avoidance behaviors and strategies in both democratic and authoritarian or competitive authoritarian contexts, particularly during administrative, financial, security, or electoral crises (Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2002, 2011; Hood et al., 2015; Ellis, 1994; Mortensen, 2012). This strategy is important because it helps leaders—whether autocrats or democrats—deflect public criticism, ease social tensions, and legitimize their prolonged rule, ultimately turning such crises to their advantage. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how autocrats use necropolitics, martyrdom, and religious populism narratives as a strategy of blame avoidance in response to nationwide accidents, catastrophes, and conflicts resulting in fatalities.

Specifically, while blame avoidance has emerged as a strategic tool frequently employed by Turkey's competitive authoritarian ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), limited attention has been given to this phenomenon within the Turkish context. Only a handful of studies, such as those by Aytac (2021) and Soylemez & Angin (2023), have examined blame avoidance, focusing on economic and financial crises. Zahariadis, on the other hand, analyzed its role during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how leaders deflected government responsibilities (Zahariadis et al., 2020; Aytac, 2021; Soylemez-Karakoc & Angin, 2023). While necropolitics has been studied independently within the Turkish political landscape (Bargu, 2016; Akinci, 2018; Ahmetbeyzade, 2008; Islekel, 2017), its intersection with blame avoidance remains underexplored.

In this research, we will focus on how autocrats use necropolitics and religious martyrdom narratives alongside blame avoidance to navigate nationwide calamities, such as accidents or violent conflicts resulting in fatalities, to shape public perceptions and deflect government accountability. This article aims to bridge this gap by examining empirical data derived from the political populist narratives and policies of Turkey's current leadership. By integrating the concepts of blame avoidance and necropolitics and applying this combined framework to the data, the paper reveals the strategies used by Turkey's ruling competitive authoritarian party, the AKP. It assesses the extent to which these strategies are effective in a competitive authoritarian context and explores how the

party seeks to avoid blame, evade responsibility, and deflect accountability for fatalities resulting directly from its negligence.

Turkey's political trajectory under the ruling AKP has witnessed a notable shift from undemocratic responses to the Gezi Park protests in 2013 towards what many scholars now characterize as an Islamist populist competitive authoritarian regime (Yilmaz, 2018; 2021a). Scholars have given an understanding of the role of religion in shaping the party's populist appeal, evident in analyses of Friday sermons and the strategic mobilization of diverse populist movements. These academic works insightfully map out Turkey's socio-political landscape, particularly scrutinizing the dynamics within Erdogan's tenure. By fusing elements of personal identity, political leadership, and national and religious affiliation, Erdogan orchestrates a narrative wherein allegiance to his policies is associated with religious devotion. This elevates Erdogan beyond the realms of conventional political figures, positioning him as a symbolic embodiment of Turkish identity itself. The mix of political leadership and religious identity engenders a transformative shift, fundamentally altering the contours of Turkish identity and governance. This recalibration fosters a symbiotic relationship between political allegiance and religious identity (Yilmaz, 2021a; Yilmaz, 2021b; Yilmaz et al, 2021; Yilmaz & Erturk, 2021a; Yilmaz & Erturk, 2021b; Yilmaz et al, 2021a).

In this article, we argue that the incumbent party adopts a strategic approach by framing deaths from accidents, clearly under its own responsibility, as acts of martyrdom, thereby deflecting accountability while appealing to both the religious and nationalistic sentiments of the Turkish populace. This tactic serves to deflect blame by recontextualizing fatalities as acts of martyrdom, intertwining them with religious and patriotic ideologies. In doing so, the party attempts to distance itself from culpability and obfuscate its accountability for these incidents. Through this lens of blame avoidance and the incorporation of necropolitics, the article sheds light on the strategies employed by the incumbent party to navigate and manipulate public perceptions surrounding these sensitive and politically charged events.

A structured approach is used in this paper to illustrate this argument. Initially, we look at the realms of the blame avoidance theory, establishing the theoretical and conceptual framework guiding our exploration. This foundation serves as a crucial backdrop for the subsequent analysis. Moving forward, the focus shifts to a comprehensive explanation of necropolitics and martyrdom, focusing on the definitions, characteristics and scholarly discourse surrounding these concepts. We add depth to this analysis by offering a brief yet impactful examination of martyrdom's significance within Islam and its historical utilization by political figures in the Turkish context.

In the empirical analysis section, we focus our attention on evaluating how the AKP strategically integrates necropolitics with two pivotal blame avoidance strategies in incidents that result in fatalities. First, we delve into the AKP's utilization of the presentational strategy, elucidating how they manipulate narrative presentation to deflect culpability and evade accountability. We then shed light on the AKP's engagement in bargaining via rewards as another tactic employed to circumvent blame, showcasing how the party navigates and manages public perception amidst tragic events leading to

fatalities. Through this empirical examination, we aim to provide concrete examples and critical insights into the AKP's strategic maneuvering to avoid blame, supporting our argument regarding the convergence of necropolitics and blame avoidance strategies used in the Turkish political landscape.

Blame Avoidance Theory and Necropolitics

Politicians opportunistically highlight their successful policies to gain or maintain favor. However, they also often attempt to deflect blame when their failures come under scrutiny, especially in regimes with competitive but flawed electoral processes. This strategy is crucial for politicians, as voters are more likely to remember experiences of loss and suffering than instances of progress or success (Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2002; 2011). This is described in psychological studies which indicate a human inclination towards remembering adverse, harmful, or traumatic events over positive ones, a phenomenon commonly termed as negativity bias (Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Kanouse & Hanson, 1987). For those in office, shouldering blame can lead to significant political setbacks and, especially in contexts with multiple competing political parties, could even result in a loss of power (Hansson, 2015).

In his seminal work, *The Politics of Blame Avoidance* (1986), Weaver identifies eight strategic approaches that politicians utilize to evade responsibility in the face of potential blame. These strategies encompass *agenda limitation*, *issue redefinition*, *resource investment after failure*, *delegation of blame-inducing decisions*, *scapegoating*, *aligning with popular alternatives*, *diffusing blame among multiple actors*, and *persisting in harmful actions despite recognition of their detrimental consequences*.

First, *agenda limitation* serves as an attempt by policymakers to suppress blame-generating *issues* from gaining prominence in public discourse. However, when such issues cannot be entirely suppressed, *issue redefinition* becomes a secondary strategy, where policymakers introduce new policy narratives that obscure potential political damage. In scenarios where attempts to avoid loss have already failed, the strategy of "throwing good money after bad" is employed, whereby policymakers inject further resources into problematic situations in an effort to offset negative outcomes.

Moreover, when facing blame for undesirable outcomes, political leaders often seek to *delegate decision-making authority* for controversial matters to other actors, thereby distancing themselves from accountability. In cases where delegation is not feasible, they may resort to *scapegoating*—shifting the blame onto individuals or groups perceived as responsible. Another tactic commonly observed is *blame diffusion*, which involves dispersing accountability across multiple actors, thereby diluting personal culpability.

Finally, despite recognizing the wrongful nature of certain actions, policymakers may choose to persist in their course of action to avoid publicly acknowledging their mistakes. These interrelated strategies illustrate the multifaceted nature of blame avoidance and underscore the lengths to which political leaders will go to maintain their standing by deflecting or mitigating accountability in politically sensitive situations (Weaver, 1986).

Christopher Hood's concept of the *presentational* strategy adds another dimension to the array of techniques political actors employ to navigate blame avoidance. This strategy revolves around the deliberate manipulation of information, spin, and persuasive rhetoric to deflect responsibility for blameworthy outcomes (Hood, 2011). As studied by some other scholars, these presentational strategies serve as crafty tools wielded by policymakers to manipulate the public narrative in several ways. Firstly, they succeed in redefining, reshaping, and spinning issues, working to divert public attention away from the heart of the matter. These strategies delve deeper into the realms of information control and manipulation, where policymakers impose restrictive measures on dissenting voices within the media landscape, effectively diminishing oppositional views and reinforcing the government's narrative. Often, they craft narratives that border on fabrication, using these persuasive stories to evade responsibility (Baekkeskov & Rubin, 2017: 428). Alternatively, storytelling can be employed to portray governmental actions or responses as commendable or necessary, with the acceptance of blame serving as a strategic move to maintain political legitimacy or rationalize policy decisions (Hood, 2011: 47–49; Weaver, 1986: 385–86).

In authoritarian regimes, presentational strategies often hinge on secrecy, involving the restriction of information flow and stringent control over media outlets to influence how incidents are accessed and perceived. In contrast, in democratic settings, these strategies may manifest through media priming, where incumbents manipulate public perception by leveraging media platforms to frame issues favorably (Baekkeskov & Rubin, 2017: 428).

The presentational strategy aims to reframe what might be perceived as a blameworthy issue into a strategic advantage—for instance, by portraying short-term crises as catalysts for long-term benefits (Hood, 2011: 17). Particularly in authoritarian regimes, incumbents often suppress oppositional voices and control the narrative surrounding incidents, transforming situations that might otherwise attract blame into justifications for their continued political rule (Hood, 2011: 18). Through these efforts, political actors shape public perceptions and influence how blame is assigned, ultimately using these strategies to safeguard their legitimacy and maintain control in the face of political adversity.

Building on this literature, our exploration reveals the AKP's concerted efforts to intertwine necropolitics with two primary strategies in evading blame amid incidents that have resulted in fatalities: First, the presentational strategy and second, the technique of turning blame into credit and bargaining via rewards (an extension of Weaver's 'throwing good money' after a bad situation). Before establishing these strategies empirically, it's crucial to first establish a foundational understanding of necropolitics and martyrdom. Necropolitics, a concept that intertwines governance and death, demands comprehensive exploration. This theoretical framework demonstrates how power structures manifest in controlling not just lives of the citizenry, but also the circumstances of death, and how this can be wielded as a tool for political agendas.

Moreover, within the context of Islam, martyrdom holds profound significance, deeply embedded in religious narratives and revered as a noble sacrifice. Historically,

martyrdom has resonated within Islamic cultures, serving as a powerful symbol to unite and galvanize communities. In modern times, however, martyrdom has been popularized primarily by violent Islamic groups in their armed struggles at both local and global levels, often within a jihadist framework. This contemporary use emphasizes the sacrifice of the self, devaluing life while highlighting the rewards of the afterlife. Understanding its significance within Islamic faith, alongside its current pro-Sharia and jihadi associations (Yilmaz, 2019a; 2019b; 2021b; Yilmaz et al., 2023), is crucial to grasping its utilization by AKP politicians in Turkey, given their historically close ideological and organic ties with these movements (See Erturk, 2002; 2023). Politicians in Turkey, aware of the emotional and ideological power of martyrdom, have strategically harnessed its symbolism to reinforce their narratives, influence public opinion and attack the opposition (Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2022). This practice intertwines religious sentiments with political aims, leveraging the reverence for martyrs within society to consolidate power and garner support.

Necropolitical Use of Martyrdom by the AKP and Popularization of Death

Necropolitics, as defined by Mbembe (2003; 2019), refers to the sovereign's authority to control both the lives and deaths of individuals, encompassing the power to decide who lives and who dies. This concept has found application in various contexts, notably within the Turkish landscape, as described in works by Ahmetbeyzade (2008), Bargu (2016; 2019), Zengin (2016), and Islekel (2017). These contributions have broadened the understanding of necropolitics, introducing novel dimensions that demonstrate its complexity and influence in contemporary political landscapes (Bargu, 2019: 5-6). Within the realm of Turkish politics, the AKP has strategically harnessed martyrdom narratives, employing them as powerful tools that normalize and celebrate death when the deaths are perceived or explained as being on behalf of the masses (Carney, 2018; Bakiner, 2019; Yilmaz & Erturk, 2021a; 2021b; 2023). In the AKP's discursive and representational necropolitics, the notion of death for the nation - epitomized through martyrdom - is elevated to a fetishized status (Carney, 2018: 94, 101). This fusion of necropolitical discourse with martyrdom narratives by the AKP indicates a calculated effort to both celebrate and sanctify the notion of death, evoking profound emotional responses within the populace, and intertwining cases of death with nationalist and religious fervor.

The Evolution of Martyrdom and Its Contemporary Application by the AKP

The concept of martyrdom has a rich etymological and cultural history, with roots that trace back to the Greek word "martus" or "martyr," meaning "witness." While the term initially held a broader significance, it gradually acquired a religious connotation, coming to represent the act of sacrificing one's life for God, especially within Christianity and Judaism (Freamon, 2003: 319). In the Islamic tradition, this concept is mirrored by the Arabic term "shahadah," which also translates to "to witness." The individual who carries out this act is known as a "shahid," a title bestowed not just in Arabic but in many non-Arab Muslim societies as well (Hatina, 2014: 19). This evolution of the term across linguistic and religious boundaries highlights the profound and universal significance of martyrdom as a symbol of ultimate commitment to faith and principles.

Historically, martyrdom is deeply rooted in ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece, evolving across religious and cultural landscapes throughout time. This archetype of the warrior-hero finds expression in diverse ideologies and conflicts, from kamikaze pilots in World War II to self-immolating Buddhist monks protesting the American occupation of Vietnam, and from Irish Republican Army (IRA) hunger strikers to freedom fighters in Middle Eastern liberation movements (Hatina, 2014: 2). Christianity and Islam significantly shaped the archetype of the martyr, offering promises of immortality, absolution, exemption from Judgment Day, and even direct communication with prophets as rewards for their sacrifice (Hatina, 2014: 2). These religious incentives imbue martyrdom with powerful emotional and spiritual weight, further solidifying its role in political and military narratives.

Scholars across disciplines have examined martyrdom's global manifestations, emphasizing how this concept transcends cultural and religious boundaries. Martyrdom serves as a powerful mythological figure, often invoking revolutionary goals and legitimizing struggles, both secular and religious (Hatina, 2014: 7; Szyska, 2004). The adaptability of martyrdom across diverse contexts is particularly significant—it functions not only as a religious ideal but also as an emotional and motivational resource in secular struggles, helping individuals endure sacrifice for nationalistic or political causes (Sluka, 2000: 49; Anderson, 1983: 15). Whether in national liberation movements, ideological conflicts, or religious wars, martyrdom emerges as a central narrative that justifies extreme sacrifice.

In the Turkish context, martyrdom assumes a multifaceted role. It serves as a tool for mythmaking, helping to shape collective memory, ignite religious populism and nationalistic fervor, promote militarism, and facilitate collective mobilization (Altınay, 2006; Azak, 2007; Degirmencioglu, 2014a; 2014b). In particular, as our research explores, the ruling AKP has employed the concept of martyrdom as a form of blame avoidance. By assigning martyrdom to deaths that occur under contentious circumstances—such as accidents or conflicts—the AKP not only deflects blame but also reframes these tragedies as noble sacrifices for the nation or religion.

This paper establishes that assigning martyrdom also provides the AKP with an opportunity to manipulate public narratives and shift accountability, thus enhancing its political legitimacy. By intertwining religious symbolism with political agendas, the AKP leverages the revered status of martyrs in Turkish society to maintain public support and consolidate power in times of crisis. This rhetorical maneuver serves to bolster the regime's legitimacy, blending religious sentiment with political strategy to maintain public support in the face of adversity.

The Co-optation of Religion by the Secular State

Despite its officially secular stance, the leadership of Turkey has long intertwined Islam with state operations at multiple levels since its foundation (Cagaptay, 2006; Yegen, 2007; Sakallioglu, 1996; Kaplan, 2002: 665; Yilmaz, 2021a). A key example of this is the state's efforts to cultivate a devout and patriotic military force, which might seem contradictory to the secular image of the state (Kemerli, 2015: 282; Kaplan, 2002;

Gurbey, 2009).

Rather than discarding the historical religious associations tied to soldiering, the Turkish state has effectively co-opted Islamic notions such as jihad and martyrdom to foster a sense of duty and militarism within society (Yilmaz, 2021a). These religious concepts have been reinterpreted to serve the goals of secular nationalism (Kemerli, 2015: 282), and more recently, have been redirected towards advancing an Islamist populist agenda. During times of national crisis, even secular leadership has sporadically invoked religious discourse to bolster public support. For instance, during the Cypriot intervention of 1974, the use of Islamic terminology such as "jihad," "mujahids," and "martyrs" revealed how religion could be tactically deployed to legitimize military actions. This paradoxical use of religious language by a state that claims to uphold secularism has conferred substantial religious legitimacy on the Turkish military, traditionally regarded as the staunch protector of secularism. Furthermore, since the 1980s, this religious rhetoric has also bolstered public support for conscription, even amid the protracted Turkish-Kurdish conflict, where significant loss of life continues to be a reality (Kemerli, 2015: 282). The integration of religion into state affairs—especially in the military sphere—demonstrates how the Turkish state has consistently navigated the tension between secularism and religious symbolism to achieve political and military objectives.

Beyond the historical military context, the AKP under Recep Tayyip Erdogan has strategically re-focused its discourse on martyrdom, particularly in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in July 2016. During this period, martyrdom became not only a symbol of national and religious sacrifice but also a powerful political tool to legitimize authoritarian populist and repressive measures and consolidate the ruling party's authority (Yanik & Hisarlioglu, 2019: 57; Baykan et al., 2021). Erdogan and the AKP capitalized on the emotionally charged symbolism of martyrdom, aligning it with their broader political objectives, which allowed them to reframe public perceptions around death in a manner that reinforced their narrative of religious populism, resilience and divine purpose.

Building upon this shift, the AKP expanded the traditional understanding of martyrdom beyond the military realm, reimagining it to encompass civilian spheres. The party's redefinition of martyrdom demonstrates a broader and more calculated approach to managing social and political realities. As Bakiner (2019) outlines, the AKP has employed four distinct strategies in controlling the narrative surrounding death. First, the party broadened the scope of martyrdom, extending its definition to include civilian deaths, with material benefits being provided to survivors through both formal laws and informal state mechanisms. Second, they normalized untimely deaths by framing them as natural consequences of citizens' occupational, socioeconomic, or gender positions, thereby reducing the likelihood of public dissent. Third, the AKP actively depoliticized death to suppress any mobilization of opposition, particularly in the wake of state-linked fatal incidents. Finally, the party tightly controlled public discourse, ensuring that the narrative surrounding martyrdom remained aligned with the AKP's ideological objectives and reinforced its discursive dominance (Bakiner, 2019).

Category One: Religious Narratives and Strategic Blame Avoidance—Redefining, Reshaping, Spinning, and Manipulating Death-Related Incidents

The AKP's initial reaction to tragic incidents resulting in loss of life typically involves absorbing the immediate shock within society, followed by a narrative that attempts to normalize such events. The Soma mining disaster in Manisa on May 13, 2014, stands as a poignant example, marking the deadliest labor catastrophe in Turkish history, which claimed the lives of 301 miners. Revelations surrounding the incident indicated the role of governmental corruption within the AKP, with media reports highlighting close ties between the mining company's owners and the AKP, along with documented safety concerns that had been circumvented by the company (Yetkin, 2014). Instead of assuming responsibility, Erdogan attempted to downplay the incident's severity by characterizing the catastrophe as a typical 'work accident,' and 'the nature of the work' by asserting that mine explosions are common throughout the world (Cumhuriyet, 2014; Daloglu, 2014). This strategy aimed to evade liability and minimize the government's role in the disaster in the eyes of the public.

The AKP adopted a similar presentational blame avoidance strategy following the tragic Aladag boarding girls' Qur'anic school fire in 2016, which resulted in the deaths of eleven students and a teacher. Revelations indicated that the dormitory had not been subjected to the required comprehensive inspections, primarily due to its management by a pro-AKP religious community. The AKP again sought to diminish its responsibility, by labelling the catastrophe as an 'act of fate' (Shafak, 2016). This narrative tactic attempted to deflect accountability by framing the incident as an unforeseeable and uncontrollable occurrence, to sidestep the deeper scrutiny of the regulatory oversights or negligence that might have contributed to the tragedy.

The AKP once again employed a blame avoidance strategy in the aftermath of two Turkish soldiers losing their lives in 2018. The soldiers died due to freezing conditions in the eastern province of Tunceli (Dersim), a situation that occurred outside of wartime and sparked extensive debate and media coverage within Turkish politics. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of main opposition Republican People Party (CHP), demanded the responsibility of ruling party officials and bureaucrats for this failure, prompting criminal complaints alleging negligence against top government figures including President Erdogan and other key ministers (Hurriyet Daily News, 2018).

In response, Erdogan employed the presentational strategy to deflect accountability for the government's shortcomings in safeguarding these soldiers' lives. He sought to normalize the soldiers' deaths caused by hypothermia by equating it with the risks faced in martyrdom, remarking that "in martyrdom, there are bullets to be taken, as well as freezing" (Erdogan, 2018). To justify this narrative, Erdogan referenced his grandfather's freezing to death during World War I, attempting to craft a narrative that would diminish the significance of soldiers succumbing to freezing temperatures (Hurriyet Daily News, 2018). These comments demonstrate a discursive effort to reshape the narrative about these tragic deaths. They dilute the government's accountability by placing the deaths within the context of martyrdom and divert attention from any potential governmental oversights or failures in safeguarding soldiers' safety.

Erdogan also invoked the concept of martyrdom to undermine the credibility of the main opposition leader, Kilicdaroglu, and to discredit his criticism. Erdogan accused Kilicdaroglu of not believing in martyrdom and publicly chastised him, stating, "You have no right to devalue this nation and this country. You already lack any belief in martyrdom. But the families [of the fallen soldiers] believed in martyrdom. You, however, have no such sense" (BBC, 2018).

The case of the captured, tortured, and then murdered soldiers by ISIS terrorists in 2016 provides another example of how the AKP's blame avoidance strategy. In this case, instead of taking any responsibility for its failure to save the two soldiers or providing details of any efforts to save them, the AKP manipulated ('spun') how the event was communicated to the public on social media and conventional media, which is under its control. After ISIS streamed the video of killing the soldiers, the AKP immediately restricted access to social media and related news. After, the AKP proclaimed that the footage was fabricated (Sputnik, 2016; Hurtas, 2017). An AKP lawmaker, Samil Tayyar, also declared that the murdered soldiers were members of ISIS, and they had voluntarily joined the group (Sputnik, 2016). Almost a year later, the AKP informed the murdered soldiers' fathers they would be rewarded with martyrdom privileges and their murdered sons would be bestowed with official martyrdom status.

As part of its presentational strategy, the AKP government promptly enforces media bans and restricts news that could potentially incite dissent, opposition, or mass protests. In the incidents described above, journalistic reporting was prohibited with the government reasoning that coverage might incite disruptive acts and protests, posing threats to the peace, safety, and public order throughout the country (BBC Turkce, 2016).

The restriction of opposing voices was highlighted again following the tragic deaths of high-ranking Turkish Air Force (TAF) officers, including two intelligence officers, in Libya. Traditionally, in situations where blame is attributed to groups like the PKK, the AKP government orchestrates official funeral ceremonies. These ceremonies often draw the upper echelons of military and political power, who strategically deliver speeches that transform the funeral into a moment of national credit and sympathy, and then broadcast live on television for public viewing. However, in this instance, the bodies of the officers were clandestinely interred without any public funeral rites.

Adding to the clandestine nature of this burial, journalists who reported on this event faced immediate repercussions. They were swiftly arrested the day after the incident, and their homes were raided in early morning police operations, severely restricting the ability to disseminate news regarding the incident (BBC Turkce, 2020). Media outlets critical of the government were branded disloyal and treasonous by pro-AKP media (Sabah, 2020). When details of the deaths eventually surfaced in the media, widespread complaints and criticisms targeting the AKP government ensued. The public discourse questioned the fundamental reason for Turkish soldiers' involvement in Libya, labelling it 'unnecessary' and 'adventurous' (Euronews, 2020).

In response to the mounting criticisms, President Erdogan again instrumentalized martyrdom, acknowledging the fatalities by stating, "We have a few martyrs [in Libya]"

(Euronews, 2020). He also attempted to normalize the deaths in his comment, “My brothers and sisters, we should never forget that the martyrs' hill (cemetery) will not be empty” (Euronews, 2020). Contextualizing the fatalities through the language of martyrdom represents an attempt to shift public perception away from scrutiny and critique of the government's decisions and actions by elevating the status of the deaths and assigning them with religious significance.

The night of July 15, 2016, marked a pivotal political moment as the AKP was targeted during the attempted coup, ostensibly becoming its victim. However, opposition parties raised pertinent questions about the neglectful stance and actions of the AKP government both preceding and following the event. The suspicion surrounding the coup led the leader of the main opposition to characterize it as a 'controlled coup,' insinuating that Erdogan and a select few, including the Head of National Intelligence Service (MIT) and the Chief of General Staff, were aware of the attempt and instead of thwarting it, orchestrated it in a manner to derive maximum advantage. The AKP hindered a comprehensive investigation into the coup attempt, barring the Head of MIT and the Chief of General Staff from testifying before the parliamentary committee, and withheld the committee's report from publication, despite AKP lawmakers forming the majority and chairing the committee. The opposition contends that Erdogan and his close circle knowingly permitted the coup attempt, resulting in civilian casualties that night (Tas, 2018).

Moreover, rather than engaging with critical inquiries or allowing an open, thorough investigation, the AKP consistently employs these narratives to steer attention away from potential negligence or failures. This tactic serves to not only evade responsibility but also to maintain a strong grip on the public discourse, framing the narrative in a manner that aligns with the party's interests and political survival.

In the subsequent section, we will examine how religious narratives and strategic blame avoidance are leveraged not only to deflect blame but also to transform it into a form of political credit. Building on Weaver's and Hood's theories, we will explore how these strategies are integrated into the broader context of necropolitics and martyrdom. This analysis will reveal how the AKP employs religious and political narratives to shift public perception, turning criticisms into affirmations of political legitimacy. Additionally, we will delve into how these narratives are coupled with mechanisms of bargaining and rewards, further extending traditional theories of blame avoidance. This exploration will provide insight into the complex interplay between religious symbolism and political strategy in the AKP's approach to maintaining power amidst crises.

Category Two: Religious Narratives and Strategic Blame Avoidance—Transforming Blame into Credit and Bargaining via Rewards

The second category of strategies explored in this article delves into how the AKP transforms blame into credit and leverages bargaining rewards through religious narratives. A key tactic involves the use of martyrdom to reshape public perceptions of fatal incidents for which the government is solely responsible. By elevating certain deaths to the status of martyrdom—a revered religious honor—the AKP reframes these

tragedies as symbols of triumph and honor, effectively turning blame into a form of credit.

This approach not only alters the narrative surrounding the victims but also influences how society and the victims' families perceive these events. The popularization and necropolitical use of martyrdom make the results of these incidents more palatable to the public, allowing them to digest and accept the government's role in these events. Instead of addressing criticisms or facilitating impartial investigations, the AKP employs a strategic discourse to deflect blame, suppress opposition, and galvanize support. By embedding martyrdom narratives into the political and social fabric, the AKP consolidates its legitimacy and mitigates dissent.

The transformation of blame into credit was evident in the case of the death of Eren Bulbul. In August 2017, the local 15-year-old boy lost his life at the hands of the outlawed PKK while in the presence of Turkish military officers, who had reportedly employed him as an informant. The boy's grieving mother publicly declared the responsibility to belong to the government, prime minister, ministers, and other authorities for the tragic loss of life (Gazete Duvar, 2017). In response to the outcry, President Erdogan publicly praised Bulbul's mother during a mass gathering and praised her for mothering thirteen children: *"You have fulfilled the order of Allah and His messenger [by giving birth to many Muslims]. What a beautiful mother you are!"* (Beyazgazete, 2017). This praise, steeped in religious and moral overtones, demonstrated a clear attempt to pacify the mother and to create a public perception of unity between the leader and the grieving mother.

Erdogan also drew on martyrdom, communicating to Bulbul's mother that she possessed greatness due to her son's status as a 'martyr': *"Thanks to the 'martyr' Eren, you are guaranteed to enter Heaven together with your thirteen children"* (Beyazgazete, 2017). This rhetoric served to divert attention from the failure to protect the boy, reframing the tragedy as a sacrifice for a higher cause and transforming the mourning mother into a figure of honor within a religious context.

In another instance, Erdogan conveyed to the mother of a soldier, captured and killed during a rescue operation, that she had attained an exceptional honor: *"Not every mother can have such an honor; but you have this honor now as a neighbor of the Prophet and the martyrs in the hereafter"* (Sozcu, 2021). This religious rhetoric attempts to transform the loss into a revered status, offering solace through the lens of martyrdom.

The AKP's prolonged dissemination of martyr stories serves as a deliberate effort to embed a specific narrative within the public consciousness. This has allowed the party to solidify its political stance while strategically mitigating any potential scrutiny or dissenting views. It also serves to leverage emotional connections to nationalistic sentiments and a reverence for sacrifice.

By emphasizing the martyrs' sacrifices and portraying their deaths in a manner that exalts their devotion to the nation, the AKP manipulates the collective memory and perception of these events. This deliberate and ongoing narrative construction aims to create a shield

against any potential scrutiny or doubts about the party's actions or policies.

Co-optation and Cooperation in Blame Avoidance: Bargaining via Rewards
In this segment, we delve into the AKP's necropolitical strategy of deflecting blame through a technique we term "bargaining via rewards," an extension of Weaver's "throw good money after a bad situation" approach. This strategy involves the strategic use of various incentives—referred to as carrots—to co-opt the families of victims and bolster the party's narrative. The AKP strategically employs these incentives, which include financial aid, assurances, privileges, and promises of elevated social standing, to align with its broader necropolitical agenda.

A notable element of this strategy is the official designation of martyrdom. This status is often conferred upon civilians whose deaths occur in incidents where the government is implicated in preventing such tragedies. By granting martyrdom status, the AKP not only elevates the victims' families with unique material rewards but also integrates these incidents into a revered national narrative. This designation serves to mollify and placate the affected families, while simultaneously deflecting criticism and managing public perception, thereby reinforcing the government's position and mitigating the fallout from its actions.

In the Turkish legal framework, the designation of 'martyrdom' (şehitlik) lacks an explicit definition or criteria for who qualifies as a 'martyr' (şehit). The Turkish Anti-Terror Law No. 3713 outlines specific guidelines that primarily pertain to support for the families of individuals (both military and civilian servants) who have been wounded or lost their lives due to terrorist acts. The authority to declare someone officially a martyr typically resides with the Turkish Armed Forces or the Turkish Judiciary (Yilmaz & Erturk, 2023).

During the AKP's tenure, this authority appears to have been utilized more liberally. Notably, in 2012, the AKP government revised the regulations related to martyrdom, allowing civilians who lost their lives due to terrorist attacks to be classified as martyrs. This definition was subsequently expanded by the AKP to encompass victims of natural disasters, large-scale incidents resulting in fatalities, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Yilmaz & Erturk, 2023).

An illustrative instance was observed following the Soma mining accident, where an immediate announcement declared the deceased as 'civil martyrs' or 'martyrs of the mine.' Their direct relatives were then granted the benefits outlined in Terror Law No. 3713, entailing financial support, employment opportunities, and educational scholarships. In another instance, President Erdogan announced that the annual proceeds from the newly inaugurated Eurasia Tunnel would be directed to the families of the martyrs, exemplifying the government's priority towards supplying financial benefits to these families.

It is crucial to recognize the selective application of this law in the Turkish context. Law 3713 was not invoked uniformly for families of mining incident victims. Instead, the AKP selectively used the legal framework in those incidents which garnered widespread public attention. This emphasizes the AKP's propensity to utilize the notion of martyrdom

for specific populist purposes, rather than as a consistent response to the death of Turkish employees.

The mechanisms overseeing financial aid, and its allocation predominantly fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services. Under the AKP's tenure, there has been a noticeable elevation in the stature of the Presidency of Relatives of Martyrs and Veterans, which was upgraded to the status of a General Directorate. Minister Zehra Zumrut Selcuk highlighted a significant surge in employment, revealing that as of December 2020, the ministry had provided jobs for 44,781 relatives in the civil service, a substantial increase from the 6,315 recorded before the AKP assumed office in 2002 (Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı, 2020).

In addition to the customary rewards associated with legal martyrdom, policymakers have gone so far as to pledge homes to these families. Shockingly, reports emerged revealing instances where veterans and martyr families signed documents and petitions relinquishing the pursuit of compensation cases against the government in exchange for these promised residences. This unsettling revelation underscores how the assurance of housing was leveraged to dissuade families from seeking rightful recourse through legal avenues.

Bargaining via rewards thus emerges as a deliberate strategy employed by the government to publicly reward the families of 'martyrs'. The term 'martyrdom' itself holds significant weight, not merely as a religious attribution but as a symbol bolstered by official and tangible assurances. Without material guarantees, martyrdom alone may not suffice for these families. Therefore, policymakers reinforce the revered status of martyrdom with a rewarding strategy, offering substantial monetary or material resources. This serves multiple aims including appeasing the affected families, fostering or solidifying their allegiance to the ruling authority, and pre-empting any potential dissent they may express online, via the media, or by aligning with oppositional political parties.

These endeavors underscore how necropolitical blame avoidance is reinforced by financial provisions, rewards, and the bestowment of privileged status, effectively elevating the status of victims' families within societal ranks. This strategic utilization of martyrdom and its accompanying rewards serves as a mechanism through which families absorb blame in a way that diminishes blame toward the government. This bargaining process is often conducted in a public setting, frequently covered by the media, and broadcast on television. By presenting these 'bargaining' exchanges as transparent, equitable, and mutually agreed upon between the government and the affected families, it is possible for public blame to be neutralized, and criticism deflected.

Combined, the strategy of turning blame into credit and bargaining via rewards sees the AKP not only absolving itself of direct responsibility but also maneuvering the narrative by portraying these losses as emblematic of sacrifice for the nation's greater good. By offering these rewards and privileges, particularly the esteemed status of martyrdom, the government aims to forge an emotional connection with the affected families while simultaneously solidifying its narrative in the eyes of the public. This strategy effectively

co-opts the victims' families, aligning their sentiments with the AKP's narrative, thereby furthering the party's blame avoidance tactics.

Conclusion

This study explores the underexamined dynamics of blame avoidance in political contexts marked by fatal incidents, using the Turkish incumbent government as a case study. It addresses the gap in scholarly attention regarding governmental responses to deaths, focusing on how the ruling competitive authoritarian party employs strategic blame avoidance tactics within an authoritarian setting.

Our findings reveal that in a Muslim-majority country, a populist electoral authoritarian Islamist party can effectively use religious elements—such as martyrdom, belief in the hereafter, and the devaluation of worldly life—to craft compelling narratives that bolster its blame avoidance strategies. The Turkish ruling party strategically combines these religious concepts with Weaver's and Hood's presentational strategies, including redefinition, reshaping, spinning, manipulation, and rewarding victims' families. By bestowing martyrdom status and offering material rewards such as financial aid, social privileges, and promises of elevated standing, the AKP transforms blame into credit, deflecting responsibility for fatal incidents.

This approach not only mitigates the emotional and political implications of blame but also strengthens the party's political legitimacy amidst crises. The AKP's tactic of "bargaining via rewards" aligns with necropolitical principles, offering incentives to victims' families to suppress dissent and deflect calls for accountability. This strategic use of religious and material rewards serves to shift public perception, making government-induced fatalities more palatable to the public.

This research bridges existing literature by applying blame avoidance theories to authoritarian regimes and integrating them with necropolitical and martyrdom discourses. It uncovers deliberate strategies employed by the Turkish ruling party to evade accountability for deaths caused by government negligence, highlighting how authoritarian and populist strategies can exploit religious elements and rewards to maintain power and legitimacy in the face of fatal crises.

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