

Mediating Muslim Victimhood: An Analysis of Religion and Populism in International Communication

BILGE YESIL*

College of Staten Island and The Graduate Center, CUNY, USA

This article examines the mediation of Muslim victimhood and its articulation with religiously inflected populist tropes through the lens of Turkey's first international news channel, TRT World (Turkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu—Turkish Radio and Television Corporation). Through a discourse-historical analysis, this article sheds light on the thematic frameworks embodied in TRT World documentaries that tackle Muslim suffering and Islamophobia while contextualizing them within the AKP's ideational framework. In doing so, it contributes to the scholarly literature on the nexus of populism and religion, which has been dominated by analyses of right-wing populist parties and movements in contemporary Europe and the United States.

Keywords: populism, Islam, Islamophobia, victimhood, international communication, international news channel, TRT World, AKP

In 2018, a three-minute music video, titled "Erdogan, a Tall Man" dropped on social media and news sites based in Turkey (T24, 2019). Produced by the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) government's Human Rights Commission and shared by party officials and supporters on social media sites, the video pays tribute to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his guardianship of oppressed peoples around the world. The video is a series of still images set against a song with English lyrics that lauds Erdogan for showing compassion toward the downtrodden while he himself has to overcome various challenges: "Born into an age which has lost its conscience/raised in a world which has kept its silence/he wouldn't turn a blind eye to injustice and poverty/he wouldn't turn a blind eye to the oppressed and lonely" (AK Parti, 2018, 0:18–0:52), and "Lived in a country which had lost its confidence/saw the mighty despising the poor with arrogance/he wouldn't stop believing in his people and history/he wouldn't stop believing in compassion and mercy" (AK Parti, 2018, 1:40–2:20).

The video interposes lyrics about injustice and poverty with images of refugees walking in mud and rain, displaced individuals waiting at train stations, and civilians rescuing children from underneath the rubble in war-torn cities. When the melody takes a more upbeat turn, we see images of Erdogan hugging a Syrian refugee girl, flashing the Rabaa sign, and speaking at huge rallies.¹ Then, we hear the song's hook: "Erdogan,

Bilge Yesil: bilge.yesil@csi.cuny.edu

Date submitted: 2020-06-23

¹ The Rabaa sign (the raising of four fingers) originated in Egypt in 2014 when the Egyptian police violently dispersed sit-ins in the Rabaa al-Adawiya Square, killing more than 500 protestors. Because those killed in

a tall man/walks by his nation/Erdogan, a tall man/fights with oppression" (AK Parti, 2018, 0:55–1:25). Although the video does not indicate who "the oppressed and the lonely" are, it is clear that they are from Muslim communities and/or the global South (AK Parti, 2018, 0:53). Images of mud-covered refugee camps, destroyed cities, and mothers crossing rivers with children on their backs are references to the plight of Muslims in Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and Myanmar. Meanwhile, images of Erdogan storming off of a Davos forum in protest of Israel, and Turkish convoys delivering aid in Somalia constitute a shorthand for Turkey's guardianship of and compassion toward Muslims around the world.² I begin with an analysis of this video since it opens up a space for questions about the discourse on Muslim victimhood, use of populist dichotomies (e.g., the mighty vs. the poor, injustice vs. compassion), and promotion of Turkey as the benevolent leader of Muslims as generally found in the AKP's global communication initiatives. Given the plethora of English-language content produced by state-run media outlets and pro-AKP entities, this video is not an idiosyncrasy in terms of its populist logic and promotional agenda. As I discuss below, the AKP government has amplified its global communication apparatus since the 2010s, which promotes Turkey as the "voice of the voiceless"—a term that Erdogan and AKP officials use in reference to oppressed peoples, specifically Muslims.

In this article, I examine the mediation of Muslim victimhood and its articulation with religiously inflected populist tropes through an analysis of content produced by TRT World. My point of departure is the scholarship on the nexus of populism and religion, which has mostly focused on right-wing politicians and their Islamophobic discourse in contemporary Europe and the United States. To contribute to this literature, I examine the populist mobilization of Muslim identity by a non-Western actor, the AKP, and account for the sociocultural and historical dynamics of the ideational framework that animates its Islamic populist communication. I focus on TRT World since it is the flagship outlet in the AKP's media outreach program developed to influence international public opinion and garner support for Erdogan's foreign policy initiatives. I want to clarify at the beginning that my objective is not to measure the effectiveness of the AKP's media outreach or evaluate TRT World's success in shaping international public opinion. Instead, I investigate thematic frameworks and discursive strategies embodied in TRT World content and their articulation with the AKP's populism. Another point of clarification is also in order: I do not deny that Muslims around the world are faced with rampant discrimination and marginalization—problems that are enmeshed with oppressive and racial politics. What I critique in this article is the AKP's instrumentalization of Muslim suffering for political gain in a selective manner and reducing Muslim victimhood to a binary opposition between good and evil. With this in mind, the article proceeds in the following manner: I begin with an overview of existing research on populist mobilization of religion and describe the AKP's global

the square were Muslim Brotherhood supporters, this gesture since then has been used to show solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood by Islamist actors in Egypt and around the world. Erdogan, AKP officials, and supporters quickly adopted the Rabaa sign as a means of criticizing the Egyptian military's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and more broadly as a symbol of Muslims' plight at the hands of repressive regimes.

² In 2009, Erdogan infamously walked off a Davos panel because he was upset with the moderator for not allowing him to speak longer and rebut Shimon Peres about Israel's latest Gaza offensive. Erdogan said to Peres, "When it comes to killing, you know very well how to kill. I know well how you hit and kill children on beaches" and left the podium vowing to never come back to Davos (Benhold, 2009). Erdogan's remarks were celebrated by his supporters at home and in parts of the Arab world as a symbol of his championship of the Palestinian cause.

communication initiatives that seek to manage Turkey's international image. I then present background information on TRT World and its editorial line and proceed to discuss findings from my analysis of the documentaries that tackle Muslim victimhood.

Populist Mobilization of Religion

Populism is premised on an anti-establishment logic and the primacy of popular sovereignty. Populists separate society into two "homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" and proclaim to have rapport with the former (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Rooted in this opposition to elites, populists seek to restore sovereignty to the people and describe politics as the expression of the people's "general will" (Canovan, 2005, p. 67; Mudde, 2004, p. 543). They imagine the "sovereign people as one, as an ideal unity," and valorize them for their "natural social unity and inherent virtuousness" (Jansen, 2011, p. 84). In contrast, they describe the elite as immoral and corrupt (Arato, 2015; Jansen, 2011, pp. 82–83). As part of this "friend/enemy identity politics," populist actors often invoke religious identity to mobilize "the people" against "others" that seemingly pose a threat to their unity (Arato & Cohen, 2017, p. 287). Especially at times of crisis, populists turn to religion to justify their anti-democratic practices, marginalize dissent, and label their critics as being against the majority religious community (Yabancı & Taleski, 2018). Although not a new phenomenon, populist mobilization of religion has penetrated various political systems in the post-September 11 era and more recently in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis. Accordingly, it has generated a growing number of analyses that focus on right-wing populists in Europe and the United States. As these studies show, right-wing populist politicians describe Islam as a "civilizational threat" and call for "the return to and protection of Christian or Judeo-Christian humanist spiritual foundations of the religious heritage of the West" (Arato & Cohen, 2017, pp. 289–290; DeHanas & Shterin, 2018, p. 178). This civilizational matrix also animates the privileging of Christianity as a "culture" based on associations with "human rights, tolerance, gender equality and support for gay rights" (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1193). It facilitates the framing of Islam not as a religion, but as an "anti-democratic, anti-liberal, subversive (terrorist) politics" (Roy, 2016, p. 186).

Populist Mobilization of Islam

There are a handful of analyses on the instrumentalization of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa by populist parties and politicians. In these studies, Islamic populism (the term used to refer to populist mobilization of Islam) is generally conceptualized as a response to political economic transformations spurred by the rise of global capitalism. For example, Hadiz (2016) attributes the success of Islamic populist movements and parties in Egypt (Muslim Brotherhood), Indonesia (the PKS), and Turkey (the AKP) to their success in tapping into voters' anxieties in the post-Cold War, neoliberal era; their promotion of "Islamic ideology as an alternative to corrupt and abusive governments;" and redistribution of political economic resources from dominant to marginalized classes (p. 34).

In a similar vein, Colas (2004) associates the rise of Islamic populism in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia with the "uneven reproduction of global capitalism" in the region in the 1980s and 1990s and argues that Islamic populists successfully exploited the "generalized rejection of the 'new world order'" that was being constructed at the time (pp. 241–256). Colas (2004) also notes that Islamic populist parties

"positioned themselves as alternatives to traditional nationalist, socialist and liberal organizations" and "mobilized voters through a direct, unmediated identification with a single, charismatic leader representing a given 'communal heartland'" (p. 246).

While these analyses are primarily grounded in political economy, the above-mentioned authors (and a few others) nonetheless make references to religio-cultural dimensions of Islamic populism. Hadiz (2016) briefly notes that populist politicians in Egypt, Indonesia, and Turkey make appeals to Islamic faith and morals, invoke the ummah, and moralize the "virtuous 'ordinary people'" while demonizing the "rapacious and immoral elites" (p. 128). Colas (2004) writes that a key ideological pillar of Islamic populist parties in the Maghreb is their opposition to the West, Western culture, and/or modernization (p. 241). In the context of Iran, Dorraj and Dodson (2009) explain how former president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad attributed the country's problems to the ascendancy of "alien and imposed Western modern culture" (p. 151). Last but not least, Tugal (2002) notes that "Islamist populism" in Turkey is more than "election time pragmatism or clientelism" (p. 95). While Islamic populists in Turkey are committed to the "consistent redistribution of resources from dominant to subordinate groups," they also emphasize religious beliefs and values, and construct "the people" as "both marginalized *and* faithful" (Tugal, 2002, p. 95; emphasis in original).

The above-mentioned studies provide useful insights into different manifestations of Islamic populism, yet they remain exclusively concerned with political economic dynamics in the domestic context of the country under examination. To remedy this gap, I examine the AKP's populism as one that instrumentalizes Muslim suffering on an international scale and as part of its efforts to further its geopolitical economic agenda. I trace contemporary materializations of the AKP's Islamic populism through TRT World content and discuss the mediation of Muslim victimhood in light of the party's nationalist-Islamist politics.

AKP's Global Communication Outreach

AKP's global outreach consists of various public diplomacy, media and communication, humanitarian relief, and development programs. The building blocks of this outreach were put in place in the 1990s when Turkey launched several initiatives to draw Central Asian Turkic republics into its orbit after the fall of the Soviet Union. This program expanded in the 2000s when the AKP government began to pursue a more-assertive foreign policy in the Middle East and the Balkans with the hopes of restoring the erstwhile Ottoman glory and influence in these regions (Davutoglu, 2013; Murinson, 2006).

To expand the country's sphere of influence, the AKP founded and/or improved several public diplomacy entities and focused on strengthening Turkey's ties with various Turkic and Muslim communities around the world. It bolstered cultural, diplomatic, educational, and trade relations with countries in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. It also increased its spending in global humanitarian assistance, making Turkey the largest donor in 2017 and 2018 (Baser, 2015; Ergocun, 2019; Ozkan, 2010; Saracoglu & Demirkol, 2015).

A key tenet of these initiatives is the incorporation of Muslim identity into the AKP's foreign policy vision. Under the leadership of Ahmet Davutoglu, first as the minister of foreign affairs and later

as the prime minister, the AKP invested in positioning Turkey as the self-proclaimed “political center” in the Middle East and beyond (Ozkan, 2014, p. 127). Davutoglu argued that to become a global power, Turkey should take stock of its Muslim identity and Ottoman legacy and create a hinterland in the Balkans, Caucuses, and the Middle East. A particular concern for Davutoglu was the “geopolitical disintegration of the Muslim community caused by the foundation of the Middle East’s modern nation-states,” which could be settled if Turkey supported Islamic movements in the region and unified the Muslims (Ozkan, 2014, pp. 128, 136).

Although Davutoglu was forced to resign from the premiership in 2016, his foreign policy vision continues to shape various aid and development, cultural-educational exchange, and humanitarian assistance programs. For example, the Diyanet Foundation, a state-funded entity, builds mosques, offers religious services, and scholarships and trains preachers around the world. Another state-funded organization, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB in its Turkish acronym), provides cultural, educational, and religious programs for Turks and non-Turkish Muslims in the diaspora. Humanitarian NGOs that are directly or indirectly affiliated with the AKP work with “oppressed Muslims” in “oppressed geographies,” which happen to overlap with former Ottoman territories in the Middle East and Africa (Celik & Iseri, 2016, p. 436; Yabanci, 2019). That Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Iraq, and Somalia are the major recipients of Turkish humanitarian assistance is an illustration of the Islamic orientation of the AKP’s global outreach initiatives (Ergocun, 2019).³

To promote Turkey as a great power, the AKP deploys several international media and communication outlets. Among the most prominent state-run outlets are international television channels (TRT World, TRT Kurdi, TRT Arabi) and digital news sites (TRT Deutsch, TRT French, TRT Russia), an international radio network (Voice of Turkey), and a news agency (Anadolu Agency). According to the director of communications of the presidency, these outlets promote Turkey’s “breakthroughs, values and esteemed civilization in every field” (Directorate of Communications, 2019, para. 3).⁴ In this regard, TRT World and its sister channels are tasked with “doing their part” to promote Turkey at a time as it “gains its rightful place as a force for good in a troubled world” (TRT World, 2020, para. 5).

³ For humanitarian dimensions of the AKP’s public diplomacy efforts, see Davutoglu (2013), Hasimi (2014), and Sancar (2015).

⁴ In addition to these state-run outlets, the AKP also benefits from the efforts of partisan outlets that run English-language dailies (Daily Sabah, Yeni Safak English), and civic entities and grassroots actors that engage in social media campaigns to garner support for Erdogan in international circles. For more detailed information on the latter, see Yesil (2020).

TRT World

TRT World is Turkey's first 24-hour news channel that targets English-speaking audiences. Launched in 2015, it is headquartered in Istanbul with studios in London and Washington, DC, and has a large network of correspondents in 90 countries. According to its website, TRT World reaches 260 million people in 190 countries. It is available on various European and U.S. cable operators, pay-TV providers, and is carried by eleven satellite operators (TRT World, n.d., TRT World, 2017).

Similar to its counterparts in the international news landscape, TRT World covers politics, business, sports, arts, and culture through a mixture of news bulletins, debate programs, and documentaries. Its live and recorded news bulletins incorporate in-studio and on-the-ground reporting from around the world with Western and non-Western presenters and reporters—a strategy generally deployed to “appeal to the greatest number of viewers around the world and also make [the channel] culturally proximate” (Jirik, 2016, p. 3544).

TRT World describes itself as an “independent public service broadcaster” and a “credible and objective” news organization that adheres to professional journalistic norms (Srivastava & Mance, 2016, para 13). However, it is important to note that TRT World is owned and operated by the state broadcaster TRT (Turkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu—Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) which heavily relies on funds collected from tax fees imposed on electronic devices, and is therefore dependent on the state purse and placed under the financial control of the government.⁵

The key rationale for TRT World's founding is indeed associated with the AKP's communicative needs, that is to deflect Western criticism of the AKP and to promote Turkey as an advocate of oppressed peoples. A quick look at statements from various high-level party officials confirms this point. For example, in the words of the former minister of justice, TRT World stands apart from other international news organizations because it is “free from the pressures and threats of sovereign powers” (a reference to the West) and gives “everyone in the world” the opportunity to “tell their stories” (Anadolu Agency, 2017, para 7). According to Erdogan, unlike Western news outlets that turn a blind eye to the plight of “the downtrodden and the oppressed,” TRT World enables them to “tell their own stories” (Turkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaskanligi, 2016, para. 17).⁶

The empowerment of non-Western voices and the presentation of an alternative perspective to hegemonic news organizations comprise the backbone of TRT World's editorial line. TRT World positions itself as a competitor against CNN International, BBC World, and Al Jazeera English, yet it emphasizes that it brings a humanitarian perspective to international news by foregrounding the voices and stories of

⁵ According to the latest report in 2016, 45% of TRT's revenues came from tax fees, 37% from utility bills, and 6% from advertising. The remaining 12% is listed as “other income” such as DVD sales (TRT, 2016, pp. 223–224). Since 2016, TRT has not shared any budget or activity reports. Likewise, there is no public information about TRT World's annual budget. For a historical analysis of TRT's autonomy, see Sahin (1981).

⁶ References to “the downtrodden” and “the oppressed” inevitably bring to mind Al Jazeera Arabic, which launched as the “voice of the voiceless” and promised to report on “marginalized groups, disenfranchised entities, nonstate actors, and unconventional players” (Zayani, 2016, p. 3358).

"underreported and underprivileged others"—a reference to Muslims and global South communities (TRT Haber, 2015, para. 11). A crucial aspect of TRT World's editorial line is to report on the global South consistently, rather than only at times of crisis and conflict. According to its general manager, Ibrahim Eren, the channel prioritizes "places, situations, stories and people" that have been "othered and rendered insignificant, but have nonetheless noteworthy stories that wait to be told" (TRT Haber, 2015, para. 20). In official statements that laud TRT World's mission, one can see how the AKP's ideological and political perspectives bear on the definition of "the downtrodden": "Children that are bombed in Gaza, people that are massacred in Syria, elected politicians that were toppled by the army in Egypt, human beings that are ignored by the global [media] order" (TRT Haber, 2015, para. 11).

Methods

In this article, I present an in-depth analysis of TRT World documentaries that deal with Muslim victimhood.⁷ I focus on documentaries as opposed to news bulletins, because they implicate a higher level of editorializing and advance a specific argument through the use of "images and scenes that carry a strong emotional impact" (Nichols, 2008, p. 1402). While TRT World does not function as a propaganda mouthpiece in the classical sense of the term with 24/7 coverage dedicated to Erdogan and his government, it is through programs such as documentaries that one can trace how the channel reflects the AKP's foreign policy agenda and preferred narratives.

For this article, I conducted a discourse-historical analysis of 10 documentaries that specifically focus on Muslim victimhood and were produced from the time TRT World started its regular programming in 2016 until the time of writing in May 2021. I located these documentaries by conducting a search on TRT World's website, YouTube channel, and iPhone app using the terms "Muslim, Islam, Islamophobia, anti-Muslim, hate crime," and "hate speech." I watched the documentaries focusing on how they frame Muslim victimhood and/or Islamophobia, what problems they identify, whose voices they foreground, and if they include opposing perspectives. In addition to analyzing what these documentaries communicate, I also examined how they advance certain meanings and sensibilities about Muslim victimhood, how they establish binary oppositions between Muslim victims and non-Muslim perpetrators, and if/how they contextualize Islamophobia within historical, political economic, and sociocultural dynamics.⁸

I used the discourse-historical approach (DHA) since it helps to integrate critical discourse analysis of texts with the inquiry of social variables and historical knowledge of texts, actors, and institutions (Wodak, 2012, p. 529). Given that the representations of social, political problems (in this case, Muslim victimhood) and the legitimation of dominant interests (those of the Erdogan government) are embedded in history, DHA is an especially useful method. It enables the researcher to "triangulate analyses of the immediate texts under investigation; intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses; social/sociological variables and the broader socio-political and historical contexts" (Wodak, 2001, p. 69; Wodak, 2012, p. 529).

⁷ All of the documentaries are available on <http://www.trtworld.com> under the Documentaries tab.

⁸ I thank the anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to this important point.

Findings and Analysis

The 10 documentaries (approximately 25 minutes long) I analyzed for this article offer a highly personalized and emotional account of Muslim victimhood and/or Islamophobia. Somber in tone, they include factual information and/or the voices of politicians or experts, but do not necessarily foreground them. Instead, they allow Muslims to talk about their personal experiences. In what follows, I discuss the three main themes that TRT World documentaries foreground and proceed to analyze the discursive construction of Muslim victimhood and/or Islamophobia.

Anti-Muslim Sentiments in Everyday Life

Among the documentaries that discuss Muslim suffering in everyday life are two productions that are specifically concerned with Western contexts. *Muslims in Britain: Unheard Voices* (Salam & Baig, 2019) reveals the extent to which British Muslims are faced with anti-Muslim sentiments on a daily basis. The documentary is based on interviews with Muslims from different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds (including a White, female convert) and recounts their experiences of being seen as outcasts and terrorists, and the everyday pressures they feel to prove their humanity. Meanwhile, *Another America: The First Muslims in America* (Ahmed, 2019) is concerned with the intersection of religious and social injustices in the United States. Based on interviews with activists, community organizers, and young Muslim men, *Another America* gives insights into the marginalization, stereotyping, and police discrimination Black Muslims face in their everyday lives.

Military or Police Violence Against Muslims

TRT World documentaries also shed light on Muslim suffering as it relates to broader political conflicts. In all three documentaries that tackle military and/or police violence, there is a particular emphasis on emotional, physical suffering, and Muslim's yearning for justice. For example, *The Face of Hate: Anti-Muslim Violence in Sri Lanka* (Pauliat & Saxena, 2018) examines Buddhist hardliner monks' attacks against Muslims. Set against the background images of maimed Muslims and burnt houses, it points out how Sri Lankan authorities failed to protect Muslims and bring the perpetrators to justice. Likewise, *Unwanted: The Rohingya Exodus* (Pauliat, 2017) foregrounds the voices of Rohingya refugees that fled the Myanmar military and Buddhist nationalists. With images of razed villages and untenable living conditions in refugee camps, *Unwanted* (Pauliat, 2017) emphasizes the suffering of the survivors and their pleas for justice. *Kashmir: Fault Lines in the Valley* (Ennaimi & Shah, 2019) offers a look at the physical and emotional cost of the conflict between Hindu nationalists and Muslims. Through interviews with victims who lost family members, suffered injuries, or were displaced from their homes, the documentary centers on the concept of injustice toward Muslims.

In addition to informing audiences about these contemporary acts of violence and injustice against Muslims, TRT World documentaries also keep fresh the memory of past atrocities. *Black Orchards: Azerbaijan and Armenia's Wars* (Kerkuklu, 2019) revisits the 1988–1994 war between the two countries, focusing on the 1992 Khojaly massacre that left thousands of civilians killed and/or displaced. The documentary shows footage of dead bodies on the streets to visualize the "Armenian atrocities" while

highlighting personal stories of loss and pointing out how the Western media turned a blind eye to the Khojaly massacre. Last but not least, *Justice and Genocide* (Zaimovic, 2017) examines the work of the International Criminal Tribunal on the prosecution of the perpetrators of Bosnian genocide. Based on interviews with victims who survived the Srebrenica massacre as well as prosecutors and journalists that advocated the rights of Bosnian Muslims, the documentary brings home the point that many of the perpetrators were not tried, and some who were convicted were released early (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Screenshot from the opening of *Justice and Genocide* (Zaimovic, 2017).

Europe's Anti-Refugee Policies

Finally, TRT World documentaries bring attention to Muslim suffering via a critique of anti-refugee, anti-migrant policies in Europe. One of the common frames that runs across these documentaries is concerned with Europe's alleged lack of humanity. For example, *Beaten by the Border* (Pauliat, 2019), which investigates Croatian border guards' attacks against refugees from the Middle East, subtly ties humanity and compassion (or its lack thereof) to religious and sociocultural identities. It emphasizes the "inhumanity" of Croatian guards who beat the refugees and take away their personal belongings, contrasts it with the compassion of Bosnian villagers who provide food and shelter to refugees, and ultimately delivers a moral message about "Europe's border of shame" (Pauliat, 2019, 23:11).

Similar dichotomies are also found in *Transit* (El Marakeshy, 2018) and *Hopes Denied: An Aegean Tragedy* (Yuksel & Saylan, 2021), both of which compare Turkey and Europe in terms of moral values. *Transit* starts with interviews with smugglers and refugees in the port city of Izmir, Turkey, and follows them to the Moira refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece. As we see images of unsanitary and inhumane living conditions at the camp, we hear firsthand accounts from several refugees: "This camp is not for people. This camp is for the animals"; "Where is the humanity? Where is the peace that Europe talks about? Europe

has to be ashamed of that"; and "We fought to death and came here to at least [experience] some humanity. Is this the value of humans?" (El Marakeshy, 2018, 12:23, 14:34, 18:45). Meanwhile, *Hopes Denied* (Yuksel & Saylan, 2021) informs viewers about how Greek coast guards push back refugees into the sea in violation of international laws. Interview excerpts with refugees who recount their harrowing experiences are laced with images of Turkish Coast Guard rescuing refugees from the sea and giving them food and medical check-ups. Later, we see children coloring in a playroom at a migration center in a coastal city in Turkey, which, we learn, is staffed by "doctors, nurses, translators, psychologists and lawyers" (Yuksel & Saylan, 2021, 18:12). When the documentary proceeds to show piles of trash and ramshackle tents in the Moira refugee camp in Lesbos, the contrast between the two countries is clear.

Discursive Construction of Victimhood

The facts of the marginalization of and discrimination against Muslims cannot be disputed, but the discursive strategies that are used to mediate them can be varied. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze TRT World documentaries not only in terms of *what* they communicate, but also *how* they communicate it.⁹

All the documentaries analyzed here follow the typical three-stage narrative structure. In the opening scenes, we see aerial or street-level views of a village, a city, or a region that seemingly looks ordinary and peaceful. With somber music in the background, the narrator tells us that behind this façade lie tragic stories of fear, distress, or mourning. The documentary begins with an interview wherein a victim recounts their story of marginalization, persecution, and/or displacement because of their Muslim identity (Figure 2). The emotional content of the interview is amplified by close-up shots of the victim's face, eyes, and hands.

⁹ I want to thank the anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to this important methodological point.



Figure 2. Screenshot from *Unwanted* (Pauliat, 2017).

The documentary then proceeds to provide some background information concerning the problem at hand. The narrator interweaves factual information drawn from reports and surveys with interview excerpts from analysts, policy makers, activists, or NGO workers. Sketchy at best, this background places the focus on what Islamophobia does to victims (e.g., number of verbal/physical attacks against Muslims in the United Kingdom, nature of physical wounds sustained by Iraqi migrants at the Croatian border, number of Bosnians killed in Srebrenica) and represents Islamophobia as a problem that can be fixed if the perpetrators are brought to justice or if they simply end their inhumane treatment of Muslims.

In the final section, the documentary once again turns to stories of suffering. We hear from other victims and listen to stories of death and displacement as somber music plays in the background. The documentary usually comes to a close with the same victim who was interviewed in the beginning. While the camera focuses on their hands and eyes, the narrator reminds us that the suffering is ongoing and/or the victims are still waiting for justice.

While one can hardly critique TRT World documentaries for drawing attention to Muslim victimhood, it is their ahistorical, reductionist, and moralistic approach that should beckon our attention. Through the narrative process described above, TRT World documentaries establish binary oppositions, such as the oppressed versus the oppressor, peace versus violence, compassion versus inhumanity, justice versus injustice, and frame Islamophobia as a battle between good and evil (Table 1). They offer a cursory description of the problem at hand while ignoring the historical and structural conditions that have produced it. For example, *Kashmir* (Ennaimi & Shah, 2019), *Unwanted* (Pauliat, 2017), and *The Face of Hate* (Pauliat & Saxena, 2018) tell us how many Muslims the Buddhists killed, injured, or displaced, but fail to acknowledge the postcolonial histories and socioeconomic dynamics that fuel Islamophobia. *Muslims in Britain* and

Another America bring up the racialization of Muslims, and *Beaten by the Border* critiques the downfall of “European values of freedom, human rights and dignity” (Pauliat, 2019, 25:32), yet they do not mention how right-wing, nationalist politicians and sensationalist mass media exploit nativist and anti-immigration views in Europe or how the sociocultural production of fear after September 11 has created moral panics about Islam in Europe and the United States.

Table 1. Documentary Topics and Binary Oppositions.

Documentary	Cause of Victimhood	Oppressor	Oppressed
<i>Muslims in Britain</i>	Misrepresentation, dehumanization, criminalization	British society at large	British Muslims
<i>Another America</i>	Marginalization, discrimination, profiling	Non-Muslim Blacks, Non-American Muslims, White Americans, police	Black Muslims
<i>Black Orchards</i>	Ethnic cleansing, displacement	Armenians	Azerbaijanis
<i>Justice and Genocide</i>	Genocide, failure of International Criminal Tribunal	Serbs, International Criminal Tribunal, international community	Bosnian Muslims
<i>Kashmir</i>	Physical attacks, displacement	Indian hardline nationalists	Kashmiri Muslims
<i>Unwanted</i>	Physical attacks, displacement, rape	Myanmar army and government	Rohingya Muslims
<i>The Face of Hate</i>	Physical attacks, displacement	Buddhist monks	Sri Lankan Muslims
<i>Beaten by the Border</i>	Police violence, unlawful expulsion	Croatian police, European Union	Migrants from Middle East
<i>Transit</i>	Inhumane treatment	Europe	Refugees from global South
<i>Hopes Denied</i>	Inhumane treatment, illegal pushbacks	Greek authorities	Refugees from global South

Discussion

Contemporary forms of victimhood in political life are closely associated with what Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1967) described as *ressentiment*. According to Nietzsche, Judaism and Christianity promoted “a resentful affect” that made suffering “a constitutive element of self-understanding” (Horwitz, 2018, p. 555). This *ressentiment* also produced a “moral code” that “validated the hatred of evil enemies who caused the suffering (Horwitz, 2018, p. 555).

In the political domain, the notion of victimhood has been central to nationalist projects and discourses (Al Ghazzi, 2021). Self-victimization and trauma are commonly used in Israel and Serbia, for example, as a means to justify military aggression toward the nation’s others. In postcolonial contexts, such as India, politicians often turn to colonial-era victimhood to legitimate their rule. Chinese authorities conjure up narratives of victimhood and humiliation vis-à-vis the West and Japan to shore up popular support for

the regime (Al Ghazzi, 2021, pp. 50–52). Ethnic, religious minorities also mobilize experiences of suffering and collective trauma to bolster group identity, maintain self-understanding, and build solidarity networks. Yet in other contexts, victimhood can be deployed by politicians to rationalize their exclusionary politics (Feinstein & Bonikowski, 2021; Risor, 2018).

In Turkey, Muslim victimhood has been used by various right-wing nationalist and/or Islamist actors since at least the early 20th century (Acikel, 1996; Bora, 2017; Tokdogan, 2020). As Savas (2013) explains, the narrative of “undeserved suffering” in nationalist-Islamist politics can be traced back to the “the religious mythology of Islam,” which is laced with parables of oppression and injustice (p. 117). The Quran, for example, refers to the suffering that the three Abrahamic prophets experienced in the context of orphanhood, repression, and misery (Savas, 2013, p. 117). The “suffering of Mohammed and the first Muslims” have later been fused with the hardships that emanated from the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the end of the Caliphate, and the marginalization of pious Muslims during the modern Turkish Republic’s Westernization program (Savas, 2013, p. 120). This “Islamist victimology” owes its existence to Islamist thinkers of the late 19th and 20th centuries, especially to Necip Fazil Kisakurek, a revered figure among nationalist-conservatives. In his poems and polemical writings, Kisakurek “told and retold the personal hardships some religious figures experienced in the early years of the Republic” and significantly contributed to the formation of a narrative that views pious Muslims as victims relegated to the peripheries of political, economic, social, and cultural life (Baskan & Taspinar, 2021, p. 195; Tokdogan, 2020, p. 104).

The narrative of Muslim victimhood, interwoven with concepts of loss, injustice, and persecution, is among the sources of the AKP cadres’ antagonism toward the West and its religiously framed populism (Tokdogan, 2020, pp. 395–396). The worldview of Erdogan and leading AKP members has been shaped to a great extent by midcentury Turkish Islamist thinkers, such as Kisakurek and Nurettin Topcu, who espoused a civilizational duality between the West and Islamic world. In the 1960s and 1970s, Erdogan and founding members of the AKP who later served as president, deputy prime minister, and speaker of the parliament, were all members of a Turkish Islamist youth organization, the MTTB (Milli Turk Talebe Birligi—Turkish National Students Union).

The Milli Gorus (National Outlook) movement also played an influential role in shaping the AKP cadres’ ideological stance. The founder of the movement was Necmettin Erbakan, who launched several political parties and served as the de facto leader of political Islam in Turkey between the 1970s and late 1990s (Ozkan, 2017; Vomel, 2019, p. 2). Erbakan was inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and demonstrated a particular disdain for the materialism of the West. He advocated anti-Semitic conspiracy theories claiming that Zionists controlled the world economy and were collaborating with Western powers to destroy Turkey as “a country, nation, and community” (Cornell, 2018, p. 13). In 1975, Erdogan became a youth member in Erbakan’s Milli Selamet Partisi (National Salvation Party) and climbed up the political ladder in the succeeding Refah Partisi (Welfare Party). He came into national prominence when he was elected the Istanbul mayor in 1994.

In 2001, Erdogan and his close associates broke with Milli Gorus and founded the AKP, and came to power a year later. During their first two terms in office, they adopted a pragmatic pro-European Union and neoliberal stance, but began to pursue a more open and assertive nationalist-Islamist agenda after

cementing their electoral hegemony in their third term (Duran, 2013; Kaya, 2015; Lukuslu, 2016; Yilmaz, 2018). This period also coincided with more anti-Western, anti-Semitic, and conspiratorial ideas expressed by Erdogan and AKP officials and constructions of party and its supporters as victims in a never-ending conflict with both the West and pro-Western elites in Turkey. Especially in response to various domestic and foreign policy crises that transpired since the mid-2010s, Erdogan and his associates included in their definition of the elite international institutions and financial entities, foreign leaders, and West-based news media as sources of threat against Turkish sovereignty. Since then, it has become customary for the AKP to hold Turkey's so-called external and internal enemies responsible for various economic and foreign policy crises, accuse them of conspiring against Erdogan and label all critics and opponents "Islamophobic and non-national" (Cinar, 2018, pp. 188–190).

The AKP extended this Islamic populist discourse to the international plane as it began to highlight the political economic, sociocultural marginalization of Muslims around the globe and promoted itself as their advocate. In official statements delivered at international gatherings, Erdogan consistently brings attention to the plight of Muslims by referencing rampant Islamophobia in the West and the rise of far-right extremism in Europe—topics that have been covered in detail by the AKP-backed international outlets.

With all this in mind, one can then argue that TRT World content on Muslim suffering is not accidental, but, in fact, is symptomatic of the AKP's worldview and foreign policy agenda. The assertion of victimhood constitutes one of the core elements of the Muslim identity that the AKP embraces and promotes. At the domestic level, the AKP deploys victimhood to mobilize its base against foreign threats, such as "Western forces, Jews, Masonic networks and their internal collaborators" (Yilmaz, 2017, p. 487), and at the international level, it uses victimhood-related binaries (oppressed vs. oppressor, compassion vs. violence, good vs. evil) to assemble Muslim communities and promote Turkey as the morally superior actor vis-à-vis the West.

TRT World documentaries constitute only one of the sites where the AKP's populist mobilization of Muslim identity can be traced. TRT World Citizen, the channel's "social responsibility arm," aims to raise awareness about the suffering of Muslims either in their own countries or in others where they seek refuge (TRT World Citizen, n.d.a). TRT World Citizen launched its first annual campaign, "Am I not a Child?" in 2017, in which it examined the sexual exploitation and trafficking of unaccompanied refugee children in Europe (TRT World Research Center, 2017). The following year, its "Women of War" campaign highlighted the suffering of women in Syria, Myanmar, Bosnia, Kashmir, and South Sudan (TRT World Research Center, 2018). The 2019 campaign, titled "Hello Brother," after the last words of a Muslim man killed in the mosque attack in New Zealand, invited audiences to share short videos of "stories of hope, unity and love" (TRT World Citizen, n.d.b, para. 1). TRT World Citizen's most recent campaign in 2020 was "Dignity Without Borders," which focused on the human rights abuses faced by Muslim refugees in Europe and elsewhere (TRT World Research Center, 2020).

Aside from TRT World, there are other state-run and commercial outlets that seek to inform international audiences about Muslim suffering and shape public opinion in favor of Turkey. For example, Bosphorus Global, a loyalist entity that runs social media accounts and websites on behalf of Erdogan, seeks to call out the West for its racism and Islamophobia (Yesil, 2020). The pro-AKP English-language newspaper *Daily Sabah* covers Islamophobic attacks extensively and publishes op-eds critical of anti-Muslim hatred,

racism, and xenophobia in the West. Other examples of the emphasis on Islamophobia can be found in conferences, policy briefings, and research publications undertaken by AKP-funded entities, such as SETA (Foundation for Political, Economic, Social Research), which organizes panels on Islamophobia and related topics in major European capitals and Washington, DC, and publishes an annual "Europe Islamophobia Report." Although there is nothing particularly wrong about raising awareness about Islamophobia, it is the AKP and its proxies' instrumentalization of the issue that deserves critical attention.

Conclusion

The AKP has deployed political economic, sociocultural, and religious binaries in domestic politics for the past 20 years and has begun to retool them on the international plane as seen in TRT World content. Based on dichotomies such as victim versus perpetrator, good versus evil, and justice versus injustice that comprise the core of the AKP's political messaging and ideological framework, TRT World documentaries communicate Muslims' plight to international audiences. They aim to ignite awareness of Muslim suffering in its various manifestations, and criticize foreign countries, especially those in the West. In doing so, TRT World content implicitly seeks to leverage Turkey as the advocate of Muslims, one of Erdogan's core narratives. However, these documentaries construct moralized messages that reduce anti-Muslim discrimination to a battle between good and evil, and indirectly prioritize restoring justice at an individual or communal level over solving deep-rooted political economic and sociocultural problems.

It also bears noting that the AKP's international communication work discussed in this article is not merely about informing West-based audiences of Muslim suffering and presenting them with critical commentary on their governments' policies. It also seeks to assemble Muslim publics around the world based on shared grievances toward the West, and to position Turkey as a morally superior actor. There is one other important point to keep in mind, and that is the selective and transactional nature of the AKP's messaging about Muslim victimhood. Take, for example, Turkey's silence on China's persecution of Uighur Muslims, a group that is ethnically related to Turks. In 2009, Erdogan called it a genocide, but in recent years he has muted his criticism most likely because of the deepening bilateral relations between the two countries in the fields of energy, infrastructure, military, and security (Alemdaroglu & Tepe, 2020). Erdogan has also ignored the plight of Muslims who were prevented from entering the United States as a result of Trump's 2017 executive order, known as the "Muslim ban." The AKP government chose not to openly criticize the Trump administration in the hope that Turkey could extract political concessions from the United States at a time when bilateral relations were dire. These are only a few examples that attest to the AKP's instrumentalization of Muslims' plight and beckon us to ask why, for example, TRT World has not produced a documentary about China's persecution of Uighur Muslims.

The contribution of this article lies in analyzing the populist mobilization of Islam, more specifically the construction of a moral framework around Muslim suffering in international communication work produced under the auspices of an Islamist government. The study of Turkey's first English-language news channel, TRT World, and its Muslim victimhood-related documentaries shows the AKP's deployment of populist dichotomies and contributes to the growing literature on the intersection of populism, religion, and communication. This article can serve as a baseline to consider what other issues TRT World covers in regard to Muslims and/or the global South and how its coverage compares to that of other international channels.

On a broader level, it would also be worthwhile to examine how Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, three regional powers that make claims to leadership of Muslims, use television, film, and social media to promote bonds with Muslims in the region and around the world.

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