

STARVE

The Politics of

AND

Human Weapons

IMMOLATE

Banu Bargu

Columbia University Press
New York

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Publishers Since 1893

New York Chichester, West Sussex

cup.columbia.edu

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Bargu, Banu.

Starve and immolate : the politics of human weapons / Banu Bargu.

pages cm. — (New directions in critical theory)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-231-16340-8 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-231-53811-4 (e-book)

1. Hunger strikes—Turkey—History—21st century. 2. Protest movements—Turkey—History—21st century. 3. Prisoners—Civil rights—Turkey. 4. Political prisoners—Turkey. 5. Human body—Political aspects—Turkey. 6. Government, Resistance to—Turkey. 7. Turkey—Politics and government—1980- I. Title.

HN6565.Z9H844 2014

303.48'409561—dc23

2014001323



Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

This book is printed on paper with recycled content.

Printed in the United States of America

C 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

COVER & INTERIOR DESIGN BY MARTIN N. HINZE

COVER PHOTO BY GENÇER YURTTAŞ

References to Web sites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor Columbia University Press is responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

*For my parents,
Gülçin and Simav Bargu*

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Introduction

The Death Fast Struggle and the Weaponization of Life

Prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked state, in its most excessive form, and where it is justified as moral force.

—Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power"

In October 2000, hundreds of political prisoners in Turkey went on hunger strike. They announced that their main goal was to halt the introduction of high security prisons and to prevent cellular imprisonment. A month later, and in the absence of any response from the government, they declared the transformation of their hunger strike into a fast unto death and began to launch teams of death fasters, selected from those already on hunger strike, and concatenated according to expected dates of death, on the path to self-destruction. Individual death fasters, donned with a red headband to mark their advancement toward martyrdom, saw their struggle as advancing the cause of revolution. Their experience in hitherto existing prisons, architecturally set up in the form of large wards where prisoners lived a collective life and established self-governing "communes," formed the basis of

their solidarity and political will; these wards also became the foundations of their claim to an alternative sovereignty. In defense of the communist revolution, which these prisoners saw as emanating from prison wards as the new front of struggle, they launched a movement by forging their lives into weapons. They starved and burned themselves to death. They meticulously managed their self-starvation, with precise intakes of sugar, salt, and water, and at times, vitamin supplements, in order to prolong or hasten their labor of dying. They coordinated this labor with others, across ideological differences, organizational affiliations, prison wards, and prison walls. This book tells their story.

As the silent army of death fasters scattered all over the country's prisons marched toward death, negotiations with the government came to an impasse. The popular mobilizations, petitions, sit-ins, demonstrations outside the prisons did little to alter this stalemate. In December 19–22, 2000, most of these prisoners were forcibly transferred to the high security prisons they were struggling against by an unprecedented "security operation" in which, not unlike the Attica recapture but on a much greater scope and scale, the Turkish state dispatched thousands of heavily armed personnel against the political prisoners on hunger strike, simultaneously attacking and invading some twenty prisons under its own control. This security operation, named "Operation Return to Life," declared the intention of rescuing the prisoners from their path to self-destruction; ironically, however, it alone resulted in the death of thirty prisoners and two security personnel (some of them burning to death, others shot or poisoned by gas), the severe wounding of hundreds of prisoners, and many instances of maltreatment, torture, and rape, complaints regarding which were filed with human rights organizations.

At the time of the operation, the construction of F-type prisons (as high security prisons have come to be known in Turkey) was incomplete; some buildings were barely finished, others had no running water or proper heating. But the government's hasty decision to open these prisons was, according to members of parliament across the political spectrum, symbolically and strategically long overdue. Not only were the overcrowded, unhygienic, and disease-infested communal wards of existing prisons extremely obsolete, but they were also the source of radical politics incommensurable with the sovereignty of the state. The high security prisons, originally stipulated as part of the 1991 Law for the Struggle Against Terrorism (but not yet put into practice by 2000), were not only the architectural underpinnings of a new penal regime that became the basis of a vigilant security apparatus, but they would

also constitute the building blocks of a transfigured and strengthened sovereignty, a sovereignty that was now wounded by those who threatened to die rather than submit themselves to the state.

While the repeated broadcasts of the violent security operation were largely successful in intimidating the public into silence, they were less effective in putting an end to the movement. Defying the state's expectations, the violence that the security operation unleashed upon prisoners increased the number of participants in the hunger strike and led more prisoners to escalate their protest, by either transforming their hunger strike into a fast unto death or resorting to acts of self-immolation. While prisoners affiliated with three outlawed leftist organizations initially spearheaded the struggle, the number of organizations that participated in the death fast movement increased to a dozen after the state's security operation. At its peak, the number of prisoners who participated in the movement reached some fifteen hundred individuals—encompassing nearly the entire population of prisoners affiliated with the extraparliamentary and outlawed left. This participation was complemented by solidarity hunger strikes, self-immolations, urban guerrilla attacks, and suicide attacks outside the prisons in an escalating spiral of violence that only alienated the movement further from mass support and had no positive political effect on the government's unyielding stance in support of high security prisons. If anything, it lent further support for official arguments that these prisons were absolutely crucial in the vigorous "struggle against terrorism."

For several months after the security operation, the militancy of the movement crested both in terms of the radicalism of its discourse, asserting a "right to die," and in terms of its casualties due to self-inflicted violence. In response to the increasing death toll and the prospect of even higher casualties, given the number of prisoners on the brink of death by self-starvation in prison cells, the state resorted first to artificial feeding and, when that did not create the intended deterrence on prisoners, to discharging prisoners on the death fast almost en masse, by the provisional suspension of their sentences or by presidential pardon, on grounds of their deteriorating health. Beginning in May 2001 the discharge of prisoners constituted the turning point in the trajectory of the movement.

Once these prisoners were released from prison by state authorization to the care of their families, many of them quit the death fast. They dispersed to their hometowns across the country or went to Europe, seeking political asylum or looking for refuge in self-imposed exile. Some remained in Tur-

key's largest urban centers like Istanbul and Ankara and continued to organize around the associations for prisoners' families; others quit politics altogether; and still others faced a new struggle against Wernicke-Korsakoff, a debilitating disorder of the central nervous system common to hunger strikers due to prolonged durations of starvation and vitamin deprivation. Meanwhile, a handful of ex-prisoners continued to fast in their private beds, carrying out the labor of dying now in the "resistance houses" that welcomed them in the urban shantytowns that have traditionally been enclaves for the radical left. In these neighborhoods, now transformed into small pockets of insurgent activity, relatives, neighbors, and comrades surrounded those still on the death fast and continued to pressure the government for concessions to relax solitary confinement in the F-type prisons, which had already become functional fixtures on the Turkish penal landscape.

When ongoing attempts of civil society organizations to reach a compromise, led by several bar associations and supported by trade unions, occupational chambers, and human rights organizations, were officially rejected by the government after the first anniversary of Operation Return to Life, the already precarious public support waned even further. In 2002 most of the leftist organizations called off their participation in the movement, without, however, conceding that the movement had come to an end. In spite of the steadfast adherence to the death fast by only two of the dozen leftist organizations that had once been part of the movement, the general mood on the left was one of retreat.

In the following years the movement continued to have an even more marginal presence, making not the headlines but small corners of newspapers whenever another death transpired as the result of the fast unto death, self-immolation, or occasional suicide attack. When mainstream media found the casualties of the death fast struggle worth reporting, rather than human tragedies that should scandalize the public they became numbers indicating the already meaningless death toll in the protracted, low-intensity "war against terrorism." In the meantime, the trauma of witnessing the self-induced deaths of a generation of dedicated leftist militants deepened the political paralysis for many of the interested and committed public intellectuals, artists, and human rights defenders in Turkey. While they had mobilized in favor of the prisoners in the early days of the hunger strike, pulling together their resources and connections, signing petitions, organizing press conferences, sit-ins, and events, translating books on prison struggles from around the world, writing

letters, articles, and columns, their efforts vanished into thin air. The government proved highly adept at diffusing whatever pressure these intellectuals generated, and the publicity never turned into a significant mass support.

Soon the sympathetic parties in civil society were reduced to passive spectators, having to watch, on one side, prisoners march to their self-inflicted deaths and, on the other, the state's high security prison project put into practice, without being able to put a stop to either process. Their difficulty was also encumbered by their position vis-à-vis violence: defending the right to resist the violence of the state, on the one hand, and taking distance from the violence of the outlawed leftist organizations carrying out the struggle, on the other hand. Their sense of ethical responsibility and humanitarian commitment to the "right to life," to making sure that militants did not die, stood in tension with their political support for the struggle against high security prisons, whose predominant technique was self-destruction and most prominent claim the "right to die." These positions squeezed the most outspoken members of the intelligentsia, human rights defenders, and trade unionists into a difficult middle ground, as a result of which their efforts were not appreciated either by the state or by the militants. Their efforts did not translate into building nonviolent popular resistance against the high security prisons, nor could they help arriving at an amicable agreement between the state and the militants. In the face of the personal tragedies they witnessed as well as the general public's growing acceptance of and indifference to these tragedies, their involvement soon decelerated and came to a standstill.

According to the participants of the death fast struggle, civil society had, once again, failed the left. It was not until 2006, over five years into the struggle, when a prominent lawyer and human rights defender launched a fast unto death, in connection with the floundering movement, that shook off some of the inertia in the public sphere. In question, however, was no longer the very existence of high security prisons but only the regime of cellular isolation that came to define the conditions of imprisonment in these new penal institutions. With the new moral, humanitarian call, which framed cellular isolation as a form of torture, the mostly subsided struggle found renewed public support and gained the necessary momentum that culminated in a gesture from the government, which relaxed conditions of solitary confinement in high security prisons.

When it was formally called off on January 22, 2007, the death fast had lasted a little over six years—a total of 2, 286 consecutive days of sustained,

relayed self-starvation that had involved several thousands of people. The movement claimed 122 martyrs, most of whom had died self-inflicted deaths. The end of the death fast struggle was announced in radical newspapers to the shrinking audience of the extraparlimentary left of Turkey as a great victory. However, the concession of the government, which allowed up to ten prisoners to come together for social activities (for no longer than ten hours per week) in the F-type prisons, now without the controversial requirement of "successful" participation in prison "treatment and rehabilitation programs," was so minimal, particularly in comparison with the initial demands and militancy of the movement, that this was hardly an occasion for celebration. The anticlimactic ending, rather, came as a relief from the vicious cycle of self-destructive practices that dominated the politics of the radical left in the last decade and shackled resistance to a stalemate between a small group of defiant insurgents and a recalcitrant, increasingly securitized government.

WHY THE DEATH FAST STRUGGLE?

While this book tells the story of the death fast struggle, this is not its only purpose. The second aim of the book is to interrogate the death fast struggle around the question of its dominant form of political action: self-destruction. It asks: Why did modalities of self-destruction such as hunger striking, death fasting, self-immolation, and suicide attack become the prevailing tactics in this movement of political prisoners? The technique of self-destruction as the basis of political action is radical and enigmatic in general: it is self-inflicted, painful, potentially irreversible, and final, therefore existential and embroiled within a logic of sacrifice that is opposed to our conventional notions of instrumental action because it renders difficult, if not altogether impossible, the achievement of political ends through means lesser than death. But given the nature of the declared aims of the political prisoners who participated in the struggle and the reactions of the state, that such an irreversible and final technique should be the predominant form of political action appeared only to augment this enigma.

The ostensible aim of political prisoners was to halt the introduction of high security prisons, the F-types. Surely, this was a goal that had a significant self-interested component that followed, rather transparently, from an intimate knowledge of Turkish penal practices and an accurate prediction regard-

ing how conditions of imprisonment would change as a result of the move away from prisons based on communal wards to prisons with cells. In addition to struggling for better conditions, the prisoners' movement also served a symbolic purpose, drawing attention to how the Turkish state governed its prisons, its human rights record, and the numerous problems associated with different elements of the criminal justice system, including the conditions of detainees in relation to convicts, the precarious status of prisoner rights, ongoing human rights violations, the unavailability of mechanisms for addressing grievances, and the lack of public scrutiny over the management of prisons. The struggle cast light on the state of Turkish democracy; it brought into the spotlight the high numbers of political prisoners in Turkey's prisons, especially vis-à-vis the country's European counterparts, and their problematic legal status, which is stipulated as a function of laws that regulate the "struggle against terrorism." Moreover, the struggle was important for its capacity to problematize cellular imprisonment at a time when high security prisons have become widely accepted and have proliferated around the world.

However, despite the hard facts of prison conditions and the very real problems emanating from every aspect of the penal system in Turkey, which the struggle threw into sharp relief, there was something elusive and puzzling about the radical nature of the struggle that emerged from Turkey's prisons. The opposition to F-type prisons, venerable as it was as the movement's expressed goal, was never a fully satisfactory explanation, given the high levels of participation, the zeal and dedication of its participants, and, most importantly, the technique of struggle that became the central feature of the movement. How was it that this relatively limited political goal of protesting conditions of imprisonment could warrant such an existential, total response? The ends simply did not seem to measure up to the means: either the arduous labor of dying, enduring months of prolonged self-starvation and suffering the slow decomposition of the body, or the brutal agony of consuming one's flesh in flames. The finality and pain that such violent political practice entailed appeared to far exceed the potential, plausible gains that might have been achieved through a collective struggle that resorted to other, perhaps more ordinary, practical, and customary tactics. Since all the participants of this struggle happened to be openly declared Marxists of different ideological stripes, whose "repertoire" of political action did not include or lend justification to such corporeal tactics (especially until the late 1970s), the choice of these self-destructive practices appeared all the more counterintuitive.¹ Even

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the common argument that these practices were rendered necessary due to the specific conditions of the prison where there was a dearth of possible forms of political action did not seem to ring completely true, since similar tactics were utilized outside the prisons where other methods of struggle were surely available.

If understanding the choice of the corporeal and destructive technique of political action in its various modalities, deployed by the movement as its central tactic, thus appeared as the key to unlock the enigma of the struggle from the point of view of its participants, it also seemed quite central to understanding the Turkish state's otherwise inexplicably heated reaction to this struggle. The coordinated security operation targeting the already frail political prisoners on a fast unto death appeared so out of measure, even given the state's own roots in an authoritarian tradition of statecraft and its history of repressive practices toward political dissent, that it could be read as the symptom of a deeper problem.

From the beginning of the struggle, the state's perspective was shaped by the perception of a grave threat posed by political prisoners, a perception that was nurtured, of course, by the Kemalist state tradition whose primary reflex toward the political left, and especially its radical variants, has always been one of criminalization and punishment. This reflex had long transformed prisons into sites of confrontation, a tendency that intensified with the 1980 coup d'état. Therefore, this was not the first time there was unrest in prisons, nor were the numbers of prisoners participating in the struggle a great fraction of the total prison population (even though they corresponded to a significant fraction of the political prisoner population). Furthermore, to a state whose policy had been oriented toward the fervent elimination of the currents it considered to be on the "extreme" left in connection with its "struggle against terrorism," should the political prisoners' self-destructive practices not have seemed as an apposite occurrence?

Nevertheless, the official perspective on the death fast struggle as a "crisis" and the ensuing measures set into motion to deal with this crisis gave away an evaluation of the resistance of political prisoners not simply as a struggle against prison conditions but, rather, as a formidable challenge directed at the state itself. The prisoners' tactics were simply intolerable to the state, and the state went to extremes in order to put an end to this movement. From the disproportionality of force deployed in Operation Return to Life to the controversial "amnesty" legislation passed in order to dampen down the over-

crowding in prisons, from the endorsement of artificial feeding, in order to resuscitate those on the brink of death, if only to continue to imprison these individuals in high security prison cells, to the collective pardons issued to discharge dying prisoners on the death fast, the state's response was comprehensive and total. As was the case for the political prisoners, but from the opposing viewpoint, the necessity of implementing F-type prisons was never a fully satisfactory explanation, given the vocalized and fast-forming unity across the political spectrum at the level of official politics, the zeal of government officials and bureaucrats in trying to suppress the movement, the belligerent discourses that were marshaled for justification, and the complex array of tactics that were deployed in response to the prisoners. Once again, there was something peculiar about the form of the prisoners' struggle and its implications that proved fertile for the attribution of such significance by the state to an otherwise marginal movement.

This book therefore explores the death fast struggle by placing self-destructive techniques of political action at the center of its inquiry in order to theorize this highly particular form of struggle in which life is forged into a weapon. Since the sustained duration of the movement and the high numbers of its participants, its elevation of the fast unto death to centrality, its complementing of the death fast with self-immolations and suicide attacks have rendered it uniquely resourceful to explore this counterintuitive form of political action, this book utilizes the in-depth study of the death fast struggle in order to contribute to the understanding of human weapons. What are the reasons for choosing such tactics? What are the justifications provided for this choice? What are their ethical and political implications? Through this inquiry, the book attempts to interpret the growing centrality of a novel set of practices of resistance that have entered the political scene in Turkey and to scrutinize their meaning, function, and effects, without whose analysis both the opposition of political prisoners and the reaction of the Turkish state are bound to remain opaque.

THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

The book's focus on the self-destructive techniques of this movement illuminates the specificities of the political context in Turkey, but it also has political and theoretical repercussions that exceed the boundaries of Turkish politics.

While the death fast struggle, with its goals and demands, practice and discourse, was specific to the Turkish scene in many ways, it also had an important kinship with other instances of political struggle around the globe.

The death fast struggle in Turkey spanned the same decade as a large number of mass hunger strikes of varying durations that sprang up in different places. Scores of hunger strikes have been performed by immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (sometimes involving hundreds of individuals) in detention centers across Australia, Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, France, Spain, Finland, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, Bahrain, among others.¹ These hunger strikes were often complemented by other acts of self-harm (such as self-infection, self-mutilation, sewing of lips and eyelids) and, at times, different forms of self-killing. Our knowledge of these hunger strikes and other self-destructive practices is still very limited, not only contingent upon what gets officially reported by local authorities, what portion of these instances makes the global news, and how much coverage they are given, undocumented and unnamed as their performers already are, but also because of the relative paucity of studies focusing on such actions as forms of resistance. Nonetheless, the increasing number of organizations that monitor the status of immigration detention centers, the growing body of news reports, documentation, and scholarship on immigration and population movements all point us to the fact that self-destructive forms of resistance are fast becoming a common feature of detention centers around the globe.²

Among prisoners, widespread instances of hunger striking have also been noted around the globe, including locations as diverse as South Africa, Australia, Israel/Palestine, and China, among others.³ Of these protests, those carried out by the prisoners under "indefinite detention" in Guantánamo Bay Prison, and their subsequent nonconsensual artificial feeding by the prison authorities, have received the most public attention, happening as they have been in the wartime detention center, already controversial due to its offshore location, unclear status vis-à-vis international rules of war, and denial of fundamental rights, such as habeas corpus, to the detainees under its supervision. The occurrence of hunger strikes in Guantánamo under the auspices of a country that deems itself the beacon of democracy has been particularly scandalous as it has exposed the human rights practices of the United States to widespread criticism.⁴ Since the actions of Guantánamo prisoners deeply resonate with those of the political prisoners in Turkey, it is worthwhile to examine them in further detail.

The several waves of hunger strikes that have taken place in Guantánamo since 2002 were carried out in protest of the prisoners' detention without trial and their ongoing experience of different forms of inhumane treatment, including physical, psychological, and religious abuses, degrading conditions of shelter, as well as not having access to proper food and clean drinking water.⁵ While the mass hunger strikes in 2002 were relatively short in duration and conducted in the form of relays, without serious harm to the individuals involved, the protests of several individuals who did continue to fast for over sixty days and approached death were terminated by nonconsensual artificial feeding.⁶

A second wave of hunger strikes in mid-2005, which started out as the refusal of one meal per day, was soon converted into a fast unto death, in a form of escalation highly resonant with the trajectory of the death fast struggle in Turkey. The death fast in Guantánamo involved around two hundred prisoners (corresponding, approximately, to one-third of the total prisoner population) who, in addition to fasting, also refused showers, clothes, and recreation time, not unlike the dirty protest of the Provisional IRA prisoners in Maze Prison three decades ago.⁷ The Guantánamo prisoners demanded fair trials, the amelioration of their conditions (such as access to clean water, edible food, sunlight, medical treatment, letters from their families), equal treatment of prisoners across the different divisions of the prison, and respect for their religious beliefs and practices.⁸ Even though the prisoners called off the strike upon the establishment of a prisoners' grievance committee and promises that conditions at Guantánamo would be made to comply with the Geneva Conventions, they recommenced the hunger strike in August 2005 in the absence of any concrete measures by the prison administration and carried on, with decreasing participation, until 2006.⁹ The procedure of nonconsensual artificial feeding by military medical staff also continued, despite widespread criticism from the broader medical community.¹⁰

Acknowledging the administration of "involuntary" feedings upon prisoners on hunger strike, Department of Defense officials emphasized the humane and professional conduct of the medical staff and the necessity to carry out these interventions to secure the health of the prisoners. According to the words of Joint Task Force Guantánamo Deputy Commander Brig. Gen. John Gong, "We have an ultimate responsibility that every detainee on our watch is taken care of."¹¹ Officials also argued that most instances of artificial feeding were consensual, despite counterallegations. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld argued that it was the decision of the commanders and medical ex-

perts to intervene when they saw fit.¹³ In 2006 the instructions for the treatment of detainees issued by the Department of Defense gave further official affirmation to the procedure of "involuntary" feeding on hunger strikers in critical condition as a necessary measure to "prevent death or serious harm."¹⁴

Despite the difficulties of accessing accurate information regarding what happens at Guantánamo, we know that the Guantánamo prisoners have repeatedly resorted to individual and coordinated acts of self-killing in addition to multiple hunger strikes. In August 2003, 23 prisoners attempted (unsuccessfully) to hang themselves in their cells. Of these, 10 attempts were reported to be simultaneous.¹⁵ These incidents were only a fraction of the 120 "hanging gestures," as the U.S. government called them, that came out of a pool of 350 instances of reported "self-harm," for 2003 alone. According to government officials, who subsequently referred to these acts of self-harm as "manipulative self-injurious behavior,"¹⁶ the purpose of these actions was "a coordinated effort to disrupt camp operations."¹⁷

In 2006 three prisoners (who had been participants of previous hunger strikes) were found dead on the same morning, having hanged themselves in their cells using bedsheets. While officials, including Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, had explained away the earlier hunger strikes as the prisoners' way of attracting press attention,¹⁸ the official evaluation of these new self-killings was different. In a press conference Navy Rear Adm. Harry B. Harris, commander of Joint Task Force Guantánamo, argued: "I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetric warfare aimed at us here at Guantánamo."¹⁹ Emphasizing that this was not a simple suicide but a political act, Harris continued: "We have men here who are committed jihadists. They are dangerous men and they will do anything they can to advance their cause."²⁰

The recognition by officials of the *political* nature of the Guantánamo prisoners' practices of self-destruction, whether the ultimate goal attributed to them is one of attracting publicity, disrupting the operations of the prison, or advancing their cause as part of asymmetric warfare, is important as a public acknowledgment of these acts as different from personal acts of suicide. Perhaps this merely registers what is all too well known to the prisoners themselves, but it is still significant, especially in light of how frequently these acts tend to be conflated, at times purposefully, with suicides in order to conceal the occurrences of resistance or to neutralize their reverberations, not only in Guantánamo but across detention centers and prisons around the globe. The recognition granted to these acts by United States officials has served to

underscore the fact that these acts do not often arise from personal despair or psychological pathologies but are conscious, voluntary, politically motivated, and orchestrated, thereby directly contributing to their political and subversive qualities as acts of protest. As the officials well understood, these acts were calculated responses, arising out of the problems of their immediate material conditions, but they were not necessarily limited in their political purpose to those conditions. Rather, they were acts of corporeal, existential, and total resistance and refusals to participate in one's own dehumanization.²¹ In short, they were occasions in which actors forged their lives into weapons of political struggle and which became performances that incited further state violence through repeated medical interventions in the form of artificial feeding.

Like their more mediatized counterparts in Guantánamo, detainees in tens of detention facilities around the world and the prisoners in Turkey have also been resorting to self-destructive acts as a form of political resistance. In fact, the very synchronicity of these multiple struggles and their wide-ranging geographical distribution suggest that we are faced with a global political phenomenon. This does not mean that these struggles are organically connected, nor that the individuals who resort to these tactics fight for the same cause. Regardless of whether those prisoners at Guantánamo were "committed jihadists," as Commander Harris called them, it is certain that the prisoners in Turkey, or detainees and asylum seekers around the globe, subscribe to a wide array of beliefs and political views that cannot be reduced to or subsumed under jihadism. The differences across them, in terms of their ideological viewpoints, sociological characteristics, the internal organization of their respective movements (if they are connected with one) and the relation of these movements to the contexts out of which they emerge, are not negligible, nor should we ignore these differences.

Each struggle has its own specificity, complex set of determinations, particular trajectory, distinct discourses, and, of course, divergent effects and reverberations. It is nonetheless noteworthy that, precisely despite their very important differences, political actors around the globe in comparable situations increasingly resort to a repertoire of self-destructive techniques that they share in common. Scholars suggest that military and civilian prisons, especially supermaximum security facilities, detention centers, and refugee camps, are fast converging in terms of their structural features, as well as the practices that govern them, troubling an easy separation of Guantánamo as the "exception" from the otherwise legally, politically, socially acceptable norms

reigning everywhere else.²³ The globally homogenizing spaces of confinement, with cellular isolation and panoptic surveillance, are increasingly germane to similar modalities of protest. It is in this light that one may agree with Harris's characterization of Guantánamo prisoners, "dangerous men [who] will do anything they can to advance their cause," as an illuminating remark for all those individuals, men, women, and even children who, treated as a "danger" to society, go to extreme lengths to assert their political voice and forge their lives into weapons around the world.

A NOTE ON CONCEPTUALIZATION

The convergence of disparate, unrelated struggles around the globe toward a common repertoire of self-destructive techniques is of central interest to this book. In fact, if one can speak of a global conjuncture in which radical movements operate and resistances, individual or collective, are staged, our conjuncture is marked by the increasing prevalence of the *weaponization of life*. In this conjuncture the Turkish case constitutes an important, though by no means singular, example. This characterization does not imply that the technique of self-destruction is completely unprecedented or novel. In fact, hunger striking, for example, has entered the modern political scene with the actions of British suffragettes in the early twentieth century and became well-known through Gandhi's repeated hunger strikes, which were formative for the constitution of modern India.²³ What I want to underscore, rather, is an intensification: both an ever more frequent resort to this form of political action as well as a growing tendency to orchestrate this technique with the coordination of a multiplicity of individuals, ranging from several to hundreds at a time. This intensification renders the weaponization of life an emergent repertoire rather than an isolated, random tactic, an individual act.

By the *weaponization of life*, I refer to the tactic of resorting to corporeal and existential practices of struggle, based on the technique of self-destruction, in order to make a political statement or advance political goals. I coin the term *human weapons* to designate the actors who forge their lives into weapons of political struggle by a resort to self-destructive techniques. As a tactic, the weaponization of life encompasses a series of practices that range from varieties of nonlethal self-mutilation (which include forms of amputation, maiming, infection with disease, sewing of eyes and mouth, temporary

starvation, all inflicted by and upon oneself) to the more fatal actions of self-immolation (understood as setting oneself on fire), temporally indefinite hunger strikes, fasts unto death, self-killing (through a variety of methods including hanging, drinking pesticide, slitting wrists, overdosing on medication, and swallowing cyanide capsules), and forms of suicide attack (involving, again, different forms of actions such as the detonation of bombs strapped upon the body, driving a loaded vehicle into a target to induce explosion, participation in military assaults with no chance of survival, and so on).²⁴

Overall, the various modalities of the weaponization of life have different temporalities and degrees of certainty in their fatality. Some extend the period of fatality over a long period of suffering whereas others are more instantaneous. Those modalities, such as indefinite and nonrelayed hunger strikes or fasts unto death, which prolong the labor of dying, are also more prone to interruption and termination, though generally not without reversible health effects. In contrast, self-immolations and suicide attacks bring about much more immediate deaths. Self-destructive acts also span a continuum with respect to the reach of violence they perform. Echoing Oliver Grojean, it is important to stress that "the common perception of the hunger strike as a type of non-violent action here seems misleading."²⁵ While all of the modalities involve violence to the actor performing these acts, they fall into a spectrum with respect to violence on others: on one end are acts that are entirely self-directed (such as death fasts and self-immolations), which I will refer to as *defensive* forms of weaponization of life, and on the other are acts that are simultaneously other-directed (such as suicide attacks), which I will refer to as *offensive* forms of weaponization of life.²⁶ Most of the organizations that resort to the weaponization of life (such as PKK, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Tamil Tigers, and al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade) have utilized both defensive and offensive forms, sometimes within the same campaign, along with other, more common violent tactics, such as guerrilla warfare.²⁷ As a result, a categorical separation between these forms, in which defensive forms are construed as nonviolent as opposed to offensive forms that are recognized as violent, does not seem to be accurate, especially from the perspective of those who resort to them.²⁸

I therefore suggest viewing these different modalities of the weaponization of life as a continuum.²⁹ Situating these acts on a continuum does not intend to obliterate the political and ethical differences between the defensive and offensive forms of self-destruction, only to underscore the affinities in their technique. Overall, I use the weaponization of life as an overarching

umbrella concept that involves these different modalities of action whose core commonality is that the performance of self-destruction is integral to the actor's political intervention.

The weaponization of life is a tactic in which the body is utilized as the conduit of a political intervention. However, it is important to emphasize that even though this intervention is made through the body, it is irreducible to the corporeality of the body. There are two main reasons for this. First, the corporeality of these performances presents a paradoxical combination of instrumentality and the abolition of instrumentality. On the one hand, the body is an intermediary, a means of staging a protest that advances certain specific demands as the political ends of that protest. On the other hand, the body is not an empty, mediate vessel to achieve political ends precisely because its deployment only by way of its destruction defies the distinction between means and ends and obliterates instrumental rationality. Second, the intervention often has a metaphysical element attached to it, an element regarding the meaning of existence.³⁰ The self-destructive act makes a commentary on the meaning of life by conveying the prioritization of the life of a political cause over the biological existence of its proponents. These acts say, in a sense, it is not worth living life if you cannot live it according to your own political convictions; it is not worth living life if you are forced to live a mere existence that is predicated on renouncing or not living up to your political cause. Without this metaphysical component, it would be difficult to understand the specificity of self-destructive practices vis-à-vis other practices of resistance, their extremity, existential and total nature, and, further, to separate these acts from suicides.

For these reasons, I find it more apt to refer to this tactic as the weaponization of *life* and not the weaponization of the body. I use this characterization also in order to highlight the violence that inheres in the weaponization of life less as a political instrument than as a form of political *expression*. Among the theories of violence, Frantz Fanon's argument that, under circumstances of colonial rule, violence is entwined with the political expression of the oppressed has an important place, emphasizing the transformative function of violence beyond an instrumental relation to the political end of fighting colonial domination. According to Fanon, violence is not viewed simply as a means to an end, justified by the legitimacy or desirability of the end, but becomes formative and redemptive of the colonized subject, if not even therapeutic: violence is the process of the constitution of the colonized into a human being.³¹ His

view that violence becomes a sign and means of the political subjectification of the colonized, particularly in the absence of other opportunities to individuation, has suggestively been applied to human weapons.³²

While I am skeptical of this romanticization and justification of violence as a means of subject formation, a view that is authorized or at least rendered plausible by Fanon himself, I think he is nevertheless correct to problematize the reduction of violence to a simple means.³³ In the transformation of human life into a weapon, there is both the desire to pursue particular political goals and an assertion of subjectivity (that may or may not have been denied previously) in which one's humanity is constitutively entwined with a *politicized* interpretation of life itself. In other words, what is asserted is less an abstract political subjectivity or a universal notion of humanity than a situated and radicalized understanding of what it means to be human as synonymous with a political existence in conformity with the specific cause that subjectivity is marshaled to express. The body becomes the "organ" of representation that articulates this coterminous assertion of the frustrated existence of an individual, class, or community and the political desire for nondomination and emancipation.

But the weaponization of life, understood as a form of expression, also invites us to complicate our understanding of violence by restoring an independent role to *form* as having distinctive qualities, certain political and ethical effects of its own. I find Walter Benjamin's interpretation of violence illuminating in order to conceive of the weaponization of life as a particular form of violence whose technique of self-destruction renders it not only expressive of a content but also with specific implications of its own. Benjamin draws attention to instrumental modalities of violence that instantiate the sovereign power to make or preserve the law, but he also distinguishes a different kind that is not a means to an end (nonmediate violence). Benjamin gives the example of a sudden angry outburst as the example of the kind of violence that is "not a means but a manifestation."³⁴ He then identifies a certain variety of expressive violence, which he qualifies as "pure" and "divine," aporetically intimating its relation to transcendent, messianic justice. Following his thought, we may think of the weaponization of life not only as the political expression of passions (such as rage) but also as articulating, in its very form, a similar aporia: the desire and call for justice and, at the same time, the recognition of the impossibility of its realization under the political conditions in which these violent performances take place. Thus self-destruction as *form* is inti-

mately, if aporetically, connected with a transcendent justice, which in its turn gives meaning to life and death and animates this violence.³⁵ This complex determination of form, consequently, creates highly specific effects, such as the cultivation of a theologized discourse of martyrdom that permeates the content being expressed in these violent political practices.

By conceptualizing self-destructive practices as the weaponization of life, with particular emphasis on their expressiveness, therefore, this book takes critical distance from approaches that conflate these actions with *suicides*, on the one hand, and that subsume them into *terrorism*, on the other. The first move, in part a result of Émile Durkheim's influential categorization of voluntary deaths under the rubric of suicide, works in the present to neutralize the political and often collective quality of these actions. Durkheim's original classification is problematic not only because its criteria for distinguishing between different categories of suicide is primarily based on individual moral dispositions of egoism versus altruism but also because it groups together self-induced deaths pursued in fulfillment of social obligations, religious ideals, and political motivations in the same subcategory of "altruistic suicide," losing the specificity of self-destructive acts carried out as a political intervention.³⁶

At the same time, in politics, calling these acts *suicides* has the rhetorical function of assigning responsibility solely to the actor who performs the act of self-killing, thereby individualizing the action, obfuscating its political message, and even working against the very purpose of action. In most contexts these rhetorical effects are compounded by the evocation of the religious prohibition on suicide. As an exemplary instance of this move, one may recall that, in the context of prison struggles in 1981, the British government insisted on calling Bobby Sands's death on the hunger strike a suicide, presenting him "as having the initiative and thus deciding his fate."³⁷ In contrast, his supporters viewed his death as martyrdom, emphasizing the self-sacrificial nature of his course of action and attributing the responsibility of his death to the government's policies in response to which he starved himself to death. Either way, the choice of vocabulary defining the act clearly shows that the nominal operation is cryptonormative, incorporating a judgment of the cause for which the self-destructive act is performed.

On the other hand, the second move of folding self-destructive practices within a discourse of terrorism is also problematic for two reasons. First, the definition of *terrorism* is not free of ambiguity and contestation. In the context of its evolution, the term has experienced a semantic reversal: having origi-

nated from the practices of Jacobin government, it has come to denote the oppositional practices directed at established political rule that threaten to challenge the status quo through the deployment or threat of violence. More important, however, is that the proliferation of the semantic possibilities of the term has rendered it difficult to distinguish terrorism from other forms of violence. At times the distinction rests on the status of the perpetrators of violence as nonstate actors, at other times it is based on the noncombatant status of the targets of violence. Moreover, each definition is quickly complicated by counterinstances: the arbitrary, illegitimate use of violence by state agents against the civilian population has been labeled state terrorism,³⁸ acts directed at combatants (such as those in military bases or on patrol), particularly within the context of invasion and warfare, are frequently called terrorist attacks, even violence directed at property and cybernetic information systems have been included within the definition of terrorism (for example, ecoterrorism and cyberterrorism). As a result of its malleability and multivalence, the term has become a loose cannon that has lost whatever analytical precision and effectiveness it may have originally commanded.

Second, as a result of the definitional ambiguities and the political stakes of these ambiguities, the public and scholarly discourse on terrorism has become an ideological battlefield in which even the deployment or avoidance of the term itself has been transformed into a signifier of a normative and political position. It is not only that states confer illegitimacy upon their political contestants when they label their acts "terrorist" but also scholars who reproduce the same charges of illegitimacy at the discursive level while also revealing their own political sympathies in relation to these acts. Once again, as in the application of the category "suicide," the labeling of these acts as "terrorist" does the cryptonormative work that incorporates a judgment of the cause for which the self-destructive act is performed.

While some instances of political, self-destructive violence may have their roots in personal motivations akin to those that lead to suicide, and while more assertive and offensive modalities of self-destruction, such as suicide attacks by nonstate parties directed against civilians, may fit a rigorous definition of terrorism, I think it is analytically and politically worthwhile to dissociate the weaponization of life from these conceptual apparatuses. This move enables us to analyze the meaning and functions as well as the reasons and justifications for self-destructive tactics in connection with political struggle and to situate these forms of action within a theoretical discussion of power

and resistance rather than immediately be implicated in their condemnation or espousal. This approach does not imply that we should not ultimately judge these acts, only that political and normative judgment should come ultimately.

Following this path, this study is interested in inquiring what material, political, and social conditions produce self-inflicted death as a form of resistance and the predominant alternative to existing hierarchies of power, what mechanisms make the self-infliction of death appear as the only agency possible, rather than ask, for example, whether self-immolation is suicide, whether it is morally acceptable or justifiable, whether it is terroristic, and so on. Instead of imposing moral judgment through the characterization of these acts as suicidal or terrorist, this study is concerned with understanding their relation to the conditions out of which they emerge as well as also how they come to be shaped by the perception and experience of those conditions and how they in turn express those perceptions and experiences. Finally, suspending preemptive judgment also allows us to be attentive to the multifarious ideological, political, and cultural effects the deployment of the weaponization of life may have upon the world of those who plan, coordinate, perform, and support these acts, highlighting the specific consequences that flow from the very form of struggle.

AIMS OF THE BOOK AND ITS FRAMING

There are thus two interrelated aims of this book. The first is to tell the story of the death fast struggle in Turkey. The second is to interrogate this story from the angle of self-destructive practices in order to deploy its findings toward the theorization of this emergent repertoire of action that increasingly stamps the radical struggles of our present.

There is a burgeoning literature that addresses the rise of self-destructive forms of political struggle, particularly in the last three decades, marshaling various explanations and interpretations in order to illuminate this complex and elusive phenomenon. One of the most common explanations is to place these actions within a framework of fanaticism, mostly driven by religious beliefs.³⁹ The weaponization of life, particularly in its more aggressive, offensive modalities, it is argued, is motivated by Islamism in its fundamentalist version that condones violence against its infidel enemies and seeks political supremacy through the waging of holy war in which individual self-sacrifice

in the name of God is sought in order to achieve the status of martyrdom and a rewarded afterlife.⁴⁰ Following this line, the more defensive modalities of self-destructive practices, such as self-immolation, have been associated with Buddhism and Christianity.⁴¹ A corollary of the religious fundamentalism argument points to the existence of “cultures of violence”⁴² or “cultures of death” in which martyrdom is exalted, even if this exaltation may not be solely due to religious convictions.⁴³ Scholars have argued that self-destructive practices can arise from a nonreligious construction of victimhood and the view that the political body is an “afflicted body” that needs to be reversed by radical action.⁴⁴ It is a logical consequence, the argument goes, that struggles will be directed toward the attainment of martyrdom in geographies where the constant presence of violence, exacerbated by religiosity, has shaped popular culture and mechanisms of subjectivation to foster a widespread acceptance of self-destructive acts and even grant them legitimacy.⁴⁵

The emphasis on religion has led to the construction of lineages for these contemporary practices through historical narratives of religious martyrdom. Of central interest to the Islamism thesis is the genealogy that emphasizes the Karbala event of 680 CE (where the prophet’s grandson Husayn was killed with his seventy-two men in the fight over the succession of the caliphate after Mohammed’s death), which has generated the Shia interpretation of Husayn’s death as a willful act of martyrdom that was intended to inspire others to fight against injustice. The anniversary of Husayn’s death is commemorated through a series of rituals that enact the suffering of Husayn on the battlefield: self-flagellation, self-mutilation, and other forms of self-harm are regular components of the Ashura, pointing to a continuing tradition in which martyrdom commands great value. On the more aggressive end, the seditious sect of Ishma’ili “assassins,” also known as the Hashishiyun, led by Hassan Sabbah in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, has been recognized as a medieval precursor of today’s suicide attackers, based on their practice of carrying out suicidal missions in order to kill those in power, particularly prominent members of the Sunni ruling elite.⁴⁶ On the other hand, others have pointed to the early Christian martyrs as generative of a discourse of martyrdom in the face of persecution.⁴⁷ The traditions of apocalyptic prophecy and eschatology connected with Judeo-Christian thought that have given rise to the heretical millenarian movements in early modern Europe have also been considered as potential sources of the proliferation of martyrdom today.⁴⁸ Historical precedents of self-immolation have also been traced back to early Buddhist

practices dating from circa fifth century.⁴⁹ Overall, while such lineages tend to associate martyrdom with particular religions, they rather suggest that a common heritage of martyrdom lies at the source of all modern religions.

Despite the powerful evocation of traditions of martyrdom as antecedents of contemporary political practices of human weapons, recent scholarship has shown that religion, while an important source of motivation for some of these actions, is by no means the sole or even the main determinant.⁵⁰ While religious beliefs may have some role in inspiring the actions of these agents, these constitute *one* among many motivations that instigate self-destructive practices.⁵¹ Religion sometimes simply serves as a justification, “rationalizing narrative” or consolation rather than a direct motivation.⁵² In fact, studies have suggested the relevance of highly this-worldly rationales, such as the desire to combat imperialist domination and foreign occupation and the quest for national independence, as more prominent motives in the name of which self-destructive techniques are widely used.⁵³ As Diego Gambetta notes, counter to their common public perception, “more than half of total world missions, even if one excludes the anarchists and the Kamikaze and counts only from 1981 to September 2003, were carried out by *secular* groups.”⁵⁴

Another common strand of explanation resorts to individual psychology, attempting to pin the reasons for performing such acts to trauma and post-traumatic disorders, depression, and, at times, personal pathologies.⁵⁵ In these approaches the self-destructive act becomes a function of the personal life story of the actor and the experiences (such as the loss of a loved one, poverty, unemployment, humiliation, and so on) that result in social exclusion, grief, desperation, and hopelessness about the future, which then propel individuals to self-destructive actions. For many strands of liberal thought, whose political analyses are based on the model of the rational, self-interested individual, for whom self-preservation should be a priority, the explanation of individual trauma or psychopathology is expedient in order to account for the reasons why individuals would choose to give up their lives, consciously and willingly.

The problem with this group of explanations is that, in addition to the tendency to construe these individuals as irrational, disturbed, brainwashed, or suicidal, it tends to lose sight of the political context in which these actions take place, the conditions that give rise to them, and the ideological dispositions, motivations, and demands of the political groups and organizations that coordinate them.⁵⁶ While individual reasons for participation in such actions are doubtless important, scholars have suggested a wide array motivations that

may or may not be political: protecting family and country; expressing solidarity with members of a group; avoiding the guilt of nonparticipation; taking revenge; acquiring prestige and glory; and acting on beliefs and emotions, such as devotion, disappointment, desire for the afterlife, fury, and hatred against the enemy, among others.⁵⁷ However, particularly when these actions are not spontaneous but rather part of organized movements or campaigns, the directly political, organizational motivations stand in tension with narratives that privilege personal motivations that are often deemed nonpolitical. Organizational motivations include weakening and demoralizing the enemy, escalating the conflict, drawing publicity for the cause, retaliating, improving political reputation before the opposed forces or vis-à-vis rival organizations, and increasing the morale of one's political constituency.⁵⁸ Given this diversity and the complex interaction between the individual and organizational motivations, interpretations that focus mainly on personal experiences of trauma appear reductionist, lopsided, and incomplete at best.

A different thread of explanations focuses on the balance of power between conflicting parties in which self-destructive techniques are commonly used, often by the weaker party against the strong.⁵⁹ Situating these practices within the context of the changing nature of warfare and increasing asymmetries, scholars argue that the resort to “suicide missions” becomes a strategic choice that violent organizations make.⁶⁰ This choice is contingent upon the objective constraints of these organizations, constraints such as the degree of asymmetry vis-à-vis the enemy, technological resources, the availability of volunteers, and level of popular support, as well as their ideological orientation.⁶¹ Particularly where weapons and resources are scarce, the argument goes, groups or organizations resort to “human capital” to make up for what they lack in terms of technology or money.⁶² By deploying militants in sensational acts of violence, they achieve a greater impact than what they can otherwise achieve. As these methods command a much amplified media presence, they become effective and efficient ways of furthering the struggle and drawing attention to their cause. Moreover, the success of these operations motivates other organizations to emulate and adopt similar tactics, creating a “social learning” or contagion effect.⁶³ At the same time, competition among various organizations for the loyalty and support of their constituencies tends to create “outbidding” and increase the propensity of suicide operations, particularly if the popular reception of these acts is positive.⁶⁴ In light of this strategic, calculative framework, political actors embedded in asymmetric conflict

situations become the favored precursors of contemporary self-destructive actions rather than prior instances of religious martyrdom. Here we can find references to the Russian anarchists in the nineteenth century who resorted to suicidal missions to assassinate political figures, as well as to the Japanese kamikaze fighters. Such an approach also fosters the possibility of sustained comparisons with radical organizations in asymmetric situations that do not carry out self-destructive missions, such as Baader-Meinhoff, Red Brigades, ETA, and the IRA.⁶⁵

The greatest merit of this approach is to counter the demonization of self-destructive acts and to present an analysis of these actions as conscious, calculated choices given the structural constraints of conflict situations, such as the absence of effective access to conventional means of political struggle or equivalent technological and financial resources among conflicting parties. However, one of the drawbacks of this approach is that it focuses exclusively on the analysis of the given situation without problematizing the broader structures and relations of power that go into the making of the given situation. Another problem is that while the perspective of asymmetric warfare gives a strong account of the causes of the resort to self-destructive violence, it fails to conceptualize the specificity of this form of violence vis-à-vis other forms of resistance, except as a cheap, short-circuiting alternative to the methods of struggle that require greater resources and broader popular support.

While generally utilizing the insights of this body of scholarship regarding how power differentials in situations of asymmetric conflict tend to shape choices of political action, I take a different theoretical track—one that problematizes the power relations that produce asymmetric conditions and operate through them, shaping not only the strategic choices of political actors but also the political subjectivities of those who make those choices of political action. In order to explore the specifically self-destructive form of the weaponization of life, I think we need a more comprehensive account of the nature of power relations that agents resorting to oppositional practices are situated in and conditioned by, concurrent with an analysis of asymmetry and its implications. If we are to restore a rigorous specificity and independent role to *form*, it is necessary to analyze the kind of power relations that are being confronted, relations which inform the expressive capacity of the oppositional action and condition the flow of the content of resistance into the specific variant of struggle, involving a complex negotiation of the meaning of life and

death in relation to power and justice. This is why contemporary strands of biopolitical theorization that tackle the intimate and intricate relationship between life and power in modern societies are of immense relevance for human weapons. Since self-destructive practices work by forging life into a weapon of struggle, they necessitate a deeper understanding of the nature of power relations in which life becomes an object, a target, an objective in response to which death, and especially self-inflicted death, becomes constituted into a distinct site and form of resistance.

My reading builds upon a Foucauldian perspective on power relations and takes as its point of departure Michel Foucault's dual thesis on how life becomes an object of regulation and how death falls from the purview of the political in light of the emergence of biopolitics as a new modality of power with modernity. As the seminal theorist of the biopolitical problematic, Foucault makes a strong case for transformation in the nature of power regimes toward the regulation of the well-being of individuals and populations and away from rule based on corporeal loyalty and the extraction of death. He thereby draws up a stark contrast between sovereignty based on the power *of* life (and death) and governmentality based on the power *over* life.⁶⁶ This account has the great merit of depicting the entry of life into the political sphere, both at the level of the individual body through disciplinary power and at the social level in the form of population management through biopower. Foucault's reflections on the prison have become a natural starting point for analyzing modern practices of punishment, with great relevance to the high security prison whose architectural design furthers panoptic surveillance, individualized and docile subjectification, and normalization in a power regime based on disciplinary domination rather than corporeal punishment.⁶⁷ Foucault's analysis of the prison also draws attention to a politics of space, through its enclosure, organization, and utilization, which provides the necessary foundation upon which to build a micropolitical analysis of asymmetric conflict situations within institutional structures. At the same time, his work on the development of governmental techniques that manage the life processes and well-being of populations through the regulation of flows and contingencies has become an indispensable reference point to understand the political tactics deployed under the expansive category of "security."⁶⁸ Overall, Foucault has taught us to pay attention to the conjoined workings of disciplinary and biopolitical discourses and practices in order to advance the analysis of power in the present.⁶⁹

However, the two theses of the Foucauldian account, if taken to their logical conclusions, tend to produce two consequences that present theoretical difficulties in light of contemporary politics, constituting important shortcomings to the otherwise potent insights of this account. First is that the general tenor of the argument regarding the transformation from sovereignty to biopolitics gives the impression that sovereignty is in the process of disappearance, dissolution, and replacement by the techniques of government that focus on the administration of life processes and well-being. Second, the narrative of the progressive totalization of biopolitical government tends to foreclose possibilities of resistance or at best tether resistance to forms that mimic the biopolitical logic of affirming life and making claims for greater rights and well-being.

Through a close engagement with theorists of biopolitics, especially Foucault and Agamben, this book argues against both of these tendencies.⁷⁰ On the one hand, the book makes a case, theoretically and empirically, for *bio-sovereignty*, which indicates the contradictory amalgamation of sovereignty and biopolitics as the distinguishing feature of contemporary power regimes. In response to the argument that sovereignty, in the traditional sense of the power to command life and death, is fast becoming an artifact of the past, this book maintains, on the contrary, not only that sovereignty continues to be prominent, but also that it refounds and installs itself in new, albeit contingent, configurations based on the fertilization and mutual interpenetration of sovereign tactics with biopolitical tools of government. Rather than disappearing or enfeebling, the sovereignty with which we are faced is recalcitrant, seasoned, and self-invigorating; it grows and augments itself by increased control and governance over life. Sovereignty and biopolitics come together in the form of a *biosovereign assemblage*, which the book traces in the specific example of the Turkish state.

On the other hand, by critically reconstructing and extrapolating from the otherwise limited and pessimistic account of resistance provided by theorists of biopolitics, according to whom power penetrates every facet of life and shapes subjectivities in ways that preclude or greatly limit the potentials of resistance, the book argues that biosovereignty continues to produce new forms of resistance. Since biopolitics functions by extending control over life itself, the argument goes, then resistance to it must accordingly occur as a response to this control and at this level. When theorists of biopolitics do in fact carve a role for resistance, however, this resistance is based on turning the logic of biopolitics against itself through struggles that demand better conditions of

life and greater well-being. However, this book contends that there is also a negative form of biopolitical struggles, based not on the affirmation of life but on its willful destruction.

I theorize the self-destructive practices that forge life into a weapon as a specific modality of resistance, which I will call *necroresistance*. I argue that the reasons for the growing prevalence of human weapons should be sought in the new and contextually specific constellations of the increased biopoliticization of sovereign power; indeed, precisely as a response to this development. The contours of this kind of resistance are shaped not only by the biopolitical valorization of life but also by the ongoing, modulated, and fortified presence of the sovereign power of life and death. I interpret necroresistance as a form of *refusal* against simultaneously individualizing and totalizing domination that acts by wrenching the power of life and death away from the apparatuses of the modern state in which this power is conventionally vested. In this effort I argue not only with and against Foucault but also through Agamben and other scholars who have developed Agamben's provocative thesis on "bare life" in new directions.

The overarching theoretical goal of this book, then, is to show the link between specifically self-destructive violence and the power of the state, or how fatal corporeal acts of insurgence reveal, communicate with, and perform a response to the continuing presence of sovereign power, but in specific forms whose corporeality and relation to death are conditioned by biopolitics. The book relies on the in-depth study of the death fast struggle as a suggestive example to unpack the characteristics of this novel form of insurgent politics in relation to transformations in the nature of power relations. Through this situated analysis, the book seeks to offer new ways of thinking about human agency and the possibilities and limitations of radical political resistance in the present.

METHODOLOGY

This book casts the death fast struggle as an instance that crystallizes a conjuncture in which the process of the *biopoliticization of sovereignty* meets the *necropoliticization of resistance*. In order to reveal the internal dynamics, lived experience, and ideological understanding of the actors that are situated amidst these interrelated tendencies, I study the death fast struggle as

an exemplary but not exceptional instantiation of the conscious, voluntary, protracted, and strategic deployment of self-destructive practices as part of a political struggle in a context that is characterized by overt efforts at transforming and revamping the sovereign power of the Turkish state.

In this study I proceed by weaving together political theory and political ethnography. I draw upon detailed fieldwork, combining contextual immersion, personal observation, and in-depth interviews. I bring this research together with an array of resources: parliamentary proceedings, prisoner letters, press releases by various civil society organizations and minimally circulated reports prepared by human rights agencies, excerpts from leftist journals, pamphlets, and daily newspapers. These primary sources nourish us with a thorough and vivid sense of the movement and the context, allowing us to trace the trajectory of the death fast in a way that appreciates and conveys the rich details and paradoxical complexities of the situation.

The ethnographic component of this work is particularly important in order to access the world of the death fast struggle as a movement that emerged from and occupied margins otherwise difficult to penetrate, a movement that, in fact, stood at the intersection of multiple margins, objective and subjective. The death fast struggle was at the margins geographically: it occurred in a country that borders Europe and the Middle East, being part of both and neither fully. It was at the margins spatially: the movement was initiated in prison wards, continued in prison cells, and disseminated into the shantytowns in big cities, whose inhabitants were increasingly constructed as "others" of mainstream urban life.⁷¹ It was at the margins legally: the participants of the struggle were not only prisoners affiliated with extraparliamentary leftist organizations and parties, outlawed by the Turkish state, but they were also carrying out and supporting acts of self-destruction whose legal status was ambiguous. The movement was at the margins ideologically: the organizations orchestrating the struggle constituted the "radical" end of the political left, arguing for the overthrow of the constitutional order with violence, if necessary. The movement was also at the margins epistemically: the participants of the struggle lacked the privilege that would qualify their experiences as a source of knowledge, their utterances as political voice, their desires as legitimate interests.⁷² Finally, the movement was at the margins politically: it was composed of individuals and organizations that, far from participating in mainstream politics, were rather included in it only as a threat to be overcome or eliminated. If these distinct margins came to intersect, under the increasingly unsparing and intensifying domination of

the Turkish state over its insurgents, in the position inhabited by leftist political prisoners in Turkey, it was not long before the same intersection was appropriated and transformed into a "space of death."⁷³ As a result, the literal margins of the political overlapped with its metaphorical margins: death relegated to the borders of biopolitics was concretized in these overlapping sites of marginality and transformed into the venue of radical politics.

Without an ethnographic account, it would be difficult to capture the fleeting spaces and temporalities of these intersecting margins that were briefly opened up to visibility as actors located in those sites staged fatal political interventions and which were subsequently closed to public scrutiny as the state attempted to push them further into the margins, if not erase them altogether. In that brief aperture created by the movement's coming into existence and subsequent passing, therefore, the ethnographic work attempts to grasp *in situ* what happened in these margins, how they were shaped, perceived, and dealt with by the center, as well as the relationality of the center to its margins, and to catapult the way in which this relationality was experienced by a multiplicity of actors into the field of theory. As such, the empirical research is not a mere complement, but an indispensable part of the effort of political theorization pursued in this book.

The narrative's focus on the weaponization of life as it becomes the interface of confrontation between the insurgency and the state allows us entry into two spheres at once: the sphere of resistance and the sphere of power. On the one hand, it provides important clues regarding the objects, objectives, desires, strengths, weaknesses, and contradictions of resistance; in short, it opens a path to its theorization and critique. At the same time, it enables us to gauge the approach of power—its fear and hostility, decisiveness and commitment, reactions, calculations, discourses, justifications, and stratagems—toward the weaponization of life, allowing us access to its objectives, desires, strengths, weaknesses, and contradictions; in short, the internal configuration of the power regime, the differential modalities of power that operate in tandem and their interrelations. In other words, the ethnographic account of the margins gives an account both of the margins and the center, or more accurately, of their dynamic relationality.

The work as a whole learns from the "anthropology of the margins" as an integral part of the work of political theorization.⁷⁴ According to Veena Das and Deborah Poole, "anthropology of the margins offers a unique perspective to the understanding of the state, not because it captures exotic practices,

but because it suggests that such margins are a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of rule.⁷⁵ In keeping with the emphasis on the margins, a crucial antecedent of this work is Allen Feldman's account of the dirty protest and the hunger strike of Irish political prisoners in the cells of Maze Prison.⁷⁶ Feldman's narrative combines great ethnographic acumen with profound theoretical sophistication while relaying the violent struggles in Northern Ireland, both outside and inside prison. This study takes inspiration from his work, which highlights the body as both an extension of the state apparatus and a counterinstrument of protest. Like Feldman's masterful work, this book attempts to bring the lived experience of corporeal violence to bear on its theorization, albeit with different theoretical preoccupations that center on biosovereignty and necroresistance.

As a work in political theory, this book insists on the centrality of ethnographic research as an indispensable resource, which allows us to hear the marginal voices that make up the death fast struggle, but it also cautions us against taking them at their word. The reading I give the death fast struggle builds on narratives by the participants of the movement, but ultimately diverges not only from the ways in which they individually perceive and present themselves as participants but also from the collective statements and evaluations issued by the radical organizations with which they affiliate their politics. The book attempts to analyze the resistance beyond how that resistance understands and presents itself to itself, to its supporters and opponents, and to the public at large. At the same time, my reading builds on the accounts of state officials, public authorities, and prison administrators, but takes distance from the way in which they portray the struggle as well as the practices of the state addressing that struggle. The book therefore attempts to analyze power beyond its self-representation, by making the case that the transformation in the central categories of our political world must be studied and understood from the perspective of their most subversive opponents that find themselves in the margins, their demands, views, reactions, and ultimately, transformations. Without attention to the stories that become subjugated by the dominant narratives of power, we are left to take power at its word. It is not possible to have a truthful grasp of the political relations and arrangements that define our world, let alone begin to think beyond them, without attending to the resistances they provoke and coming to terms with how these resistances interpret them.

Consequently, my practice is to read the varied interpretations of multiple actors gathered through ethnographic research in relation to one another. At the same time, I treat these narratives as living texts of political theory that facilitate our entry into the margins and the center alike. As raw and unmediated convictions, statements and interpretations, these narratives, especially the voices of those who inhabit the margins of the political, constitute subjugated knowledges, according to Foucault, "knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition and scientificity."⁷⁷ Bringing these knowledges to bear on questions of political theory, such as power, resistance, sovereignty, and agency, entails a practice of political theory that aggressively questions any strict separation between the histories of political thought and the diverse ways in which ideas are put into practice. It interrogates the moments in which political theory becomes lived experience and traces the theoretical contradictions and practical dilemmas of political agents that become accentuated and acute as they are violently acted out. It puts these live texts in conversation with the great thinkers of politics.

Overall, this method signifies my understanding of the enterprise of critical theory today: as thinking in the conjuncture, through the case at hand, from the event, in its concreteness, immediacy, and often daunting complexity about a political problem that is of universal significance.⁷⁸ At the same time, treating subjugated, disqualified knowledges at the same level with prominent theorists of politics is my way of writing a more egalitarian "history of the present" in order to assess the ambiguous, dangerous, multifaceted, obscure, and intriguing legacy of human weapons.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The main thesis of the book, namely, the stark contrast between the *biopoliticization of sovereignty* and the *necropoliticization of resistance* as the dual political logic of the present, is mirrored in its organization. The architecture of the book replicates this contrast by developing the narrative of the death fast struggle around the central antagonism between the state and the insurgents. It begins from a description of the death fast struggle as an event. It then un-

packs this event, first by venturing in the realm of the state and second by moving to the realm of the insurgents. Meanwhile, it portrays the opposition between the state's goal of introducing a penal regime that controls life and the prisoners' goal of protesting this control by a resort to death. It juxtaposes the discursive and practical techniques deployed in the service of these goals by the state and the insurgents respectively. In other words, it tells the same story twice, from opposing perspectives, the contrast between and the combination of which tells another story that is irreducible to each story alone. The main intention of the book's architecture, therefore, is to cast power and resistance not only in a binary opposition but also as two faces of the same coin. At the same time, the architecture aspires to enact a displacement from the conventional sites of political action to enclaves of insurgency by shifting our political gaze from the center of the political stage to its margins. We therefore move from the domain of power to the domain of resistance, from the center to the margin, from life to death.

The analysis opens by the depiction of the death-event of a hunger striker in the death fast struggle. Focusing on the relationship between the state and the insurgent's body as key to the significance of that scene, chapter 1 takes up this relation as a symptom of the nature of the dominant power regime. It develops the conceptual apparatus of the book by charting the changing nature of sovereignty and resistance within a biopolitical problematic. Through a close engagement with Foucault's work, and a discussion of Agamben and others who have utilized the biopolitical paradigm, I introduce and develop the concepts of *biosovereignty* and *necroresistance*. Having presented the theoretical problematic of the book, its conceptual tools, and main arguments, I turn to the specific study of the death fast struggle in Turkey in order to illustrate, complicate, further explore, and elaborate this apparatus.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore biosovereignty in the context of its development. Chapter 2 provides the historical background on Turkey, its traditions of statecraft and treatment of radical currents on the left as its "internal enemies," which frame the way in which the state perceived the challenge of the death fast struggle as a "crisis" of sovereignty. The prison becomes an emblematic site for securitization and the stage for a highly politicized confrontation between the state and the insurgents. In this light, I interpret the introduction of a new, selectively engineered, and isolationist penal regime as a crucial moment in the transformation of sovereign power in line with the state's security considerations. I analyze the state's rationales for

reforming its penal apparatus couched within a discourse of a "war against terrorism" and the reestablishment of the state's sovereign authority over insurgents. I discuss how the spatial rearrangement of the penal landscape through the introduction of high security prisons modeled after the super-max becomes symptomatic of the development of the biopoliticization of sovereign power.

Chapter 3 continues the investigation of biosovereignty by looking at the tactics of its implementation. It challenges the conventional understanding of governmentality in which traditional techniques of power based on the extraction of the corporeal loyalty of citizens are left behind in favor of new ones based on the administration of their lives and well-being. In contrast, I show how this "transition" to the governmental technologies of life builds upon a substrate of old techniques and instruments of sovereign power that, far from disappearing, are thereby reformed and refurbished. I argue that the Turkish state introduced a new penal regime by making law, implemented that regime by making war, and, finally, secured that regime by making peace, including the issuing of amnesties and artificial feeding of hunger strikers at the brink of death. These stratagems were used to implement a new rationality of political rule. In fact, the transition toward a more efficient, effective, customized, and calculated penal government of "internal enemies" was continuously buttressed, pushed forth, and implemented by traditional instruments of sovereignty. The chapter thereby depicts the amalgamation of sovereign power with disciplinary and biopolitical logics of political rule in an emergent biosovereign assemblage.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 turn to necroresistance. Chapter 4 shifts the gaze from the center to the margins. Moving away from the mainstream of the political sphere dominated by the state, the political parties in the parliament, and public institutions, it turns to document the emergence of islands of alternative power at the margins—the prison wards that were transformed into semiautonomous spaces where prisoners lived a communism-in-practice. It depicts these spaces as sites in which actors brought their insurgent political ideals into life. I argue that these spaces became pivotal for the formation of a strong collective will and a shared political identity that facilitated these actors' entry into a struggle with the state, contesting its sovereignty and defending a rival form of power based on their claim upon the right of life and death, and that decided on necropolitical resistance as the method of expressing political voice from the margins. The chapter then chronicles the emergence of the

death fast struggle, its demands, the main incidents that shaped the prisoners' course of action, and the debates that surrounded their choices, especially how the weaponization of life became the favored tactic of the movement. It analyzes the paradoxical "right to die" that was asserted by these prisoners against the state, especially its policy of nonconsensual artificial feeding. The chapter concludes by providing an account of how the protracted struggle was brought to an end by the movement's tactical instrumentalization of a human rights discourse in a final attempt to gain mass support in place of the radical, albeit failed, politics of human weapons. Overall, I put forth a reading of the trajectory of the movement through the contradictory development of voice and will, undergirded by a politics of space.

Chapter 5 continues the exploration of necroresistance by delving further into the discourses and practices of human weapons, their cultural world, rituals, values, and myths. It presents the political cosmology that envelops the experience of self-destructive practices and the rites that develop around it as specific effects that follow from this particular *form* of political action. Drawing upon the diverse meanings, interpretations, and formulations with which the participants of the death fast struggle understood and constructed their actions, goals, and desires, I present the peculiar qualities of their militancy and their relation to death, their ideas about martyrdom, and, finally, the contradictory interpretations of their agency as different cultural and metaphysical coordinates of the weaponization of life. I draw attention to how self-destruction works to generate a new constellation of practices, meanings, and values that sustain the radical political community that endorses this form of political action. The chapter proceeds by tracing a dialectic between the living and the dead in which human weapons are embedded and through which their subjectivity is shaped. Based on an analysis of the preparatory, funeral, and commemorative rituals that surround the weaponization of life, I call attention to three moments of this dialectic: namely, the transition of the militant to martyrdom even before the performance of the self-destructive act, the fusion of the militant and the martyr in the dead body, and, finally, the movement of the martyr into a new stage of militancy through its appropriation by the living and incorporation into practices of everyday life. Through this analysis, I show how the theologization of leftist politics at the margins occurs through the movement of the category of martyrdom to prominence.

Chapter 6 highlights the multiple meanings of the weaponization of life as a political tactic. Through an analysis of the self-interpretations of partici-

pants of the death fast, especially with respect to the role of the body, violence, death, and the meaning of sacrifice, I identify three distinct readings that present themselves as different ways of conceptualizing the weaponization of life. As an act of *resistance*, I argue, the movement sought to defend human dignity against the cell as a form of torture and to articulate itself with the broader societal struggle for the deepening of democracy. As an act of *class war*, the movement saw itself as part of the struggle against capitalism, demonizing the state as the representative of the class enemy. As an act of *refusal*, the movement launched an ideological offensive against the state's sovereign power whose legitimation is based on the sanctity of human life, asserting a "right to die" in the name of an alternative order. As a result of these multiple threads, I show how the death fast struggle also constituted a contradictory assemblage (like the power regime it was opposing), which advanced biopolitical claims regarding prison conditions, on the one hand, while it constituted a necropolitical refusal of the existing order, on the other hand. Finally, the book closes by discussing the implications of human weapons for a theory of biosovereignty and necroresistance.