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The debate on helalleşme was sparked by a speech by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition CHP (Republican People's Party, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) in November 2021. Kılıçdaroğlu said that the unhealed wounds of various communities in Turkey built a barrier to our future, adding that it was time we left the tormented past behind and turned to the future, that it was time for *helalleşme*.

'At any rate, we should know how to take responsibility for past mistakes and ask to reconcile with each other in order to strengthen our social relations and heal our wounds. The party of which I am the leader has also inflicted deep wounds in the past. I have strived for so long to change the system that has inflicted these wounds; it is now time to turn outward. I am setting out on a journey of reconciliation to heal these wounds.'

Kılıçdaroğlu mentions several stops on his journey including groups that have been subjected to various forms of state violence since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and those that have been victimised by the state tradition represented by his party. Alevis, Armenians, Kurds and Greeks who have suffered grave violations and massacres, February 28 victims, victims of police violence, victims of work-related deaths, or those who suffer the consequences of corruption and misconduct in public office. This long list of the history of state violence in Turkey is among the historical causes of the current polarisation in the country. For a democratic and peaceful future, all of these violations should be addressed individually within their specific context. In that sense, the call for helalleşme by Kılıçdaroğlu is significant and should be supported as it brings the debate on dealing with the past back to the public agenda. In this article, I will discuss how helalleşme can tip the scale in terms of addressing the past, the opportunities it may offer, and its limitations.

Concept of Helalleşme in Islam

Helalleşme is an everyday practice for most people living in Turkey, regardless of whether they know its meaning and interpretation in Islam or not. "Hakkini helal et" is an expression most people use when they say farewell. At funerals, the congregation is asked if they would

“forgive and forget”. These examples of requests to forgive and make peace concern the future rather than the past. Nevertheless, considering its widely accepted meaning in Islam, *helalleşme* cannot be regarded as a trivial practice, nor can it be reduced to the ritual of peace-making.

Helalleşme refers to a process where a person who has wronged or oppressed the other is forgiven by that very person. ‘Rightful due’ that is the sins against other persons or the violation of other persons’ rights are among the sins that Allah does not forgive but that can be forgiven by the aggrieved person. Islam broadly defines the ‘rightful due’ ranging from atrocities and injustices committed against humans, animals, and nature to the abuse of public property. In other words, all of the violations cited by Kılıçdaroğlu, including torture and corruption, involve the rightful due of other people. The person who committed injustice or atrocity against another can only be forgiven by that person. Contrary to *helalleşme* rituals in everyday life, the *helalleşme* process puts a heavy responsibility on both sides, the one who asks for forgiveness and the one whose right has been violated. In his work titled *İhya’u Ulum’id-Din*, Imam Al-Ghazali, whose opinions have profoundly influenced the interpretations of the religion of Islam, states that in order for a person who has committed an offence or a sin to express penitence and seek forgiveness, they should first comprehend the meaning of such offence or sin as well its consequential damages, repent, redress the damages, take steps not to commit a similar sin in the future and undergo transformation. *Helalleşme*, in this sense, is a concept related to both the past, the present, and the future. *Helalleşme* requires that the person who has violated the rightful due of another person fulfill the necessary conditions and that the aggrieved person accepts to forgive the perpetrator. Although it is encouraged in religion and presented as a moral virtue, forgiveness is not mandatory.

Helalleşme is a performative act². In other words, the expression “I forgive you”, once uttered, turns the words into reality, resulting in transformative effects on both sides. In addition to the above-listed conditions, achieving *helalleşme* also depends on the concerned parties’ acceptance of historical social norms concerning the discourse and practice of forgiveness and reconciliation in Islam. You cannot ask for forgiveness from someone who does not know what *helalleşme* means, nor can you ask it of someone who sees it as a meaningful and difficult process as opposed to a trivial and insubstantial ritual of peace-making without satisfying any of the conditions beforehand. Contrary to Christianity where

forgiveness is encouraged as an unconditional virtue, forgiveness in Islam and Judaism can only be achieved after completing a more complicated process. Helalleşme is not quite possible unless sincere repentance and penitence ensue and compensation and justice are attained.

Achievement or failure of *helalleşme* attempts offers some insights about the dominant social norms, resistance to these norms and their possibility of change or transformation. For example, remember the funeral ceremonies of [Kenan Evren](#), the architect of the September 12 coup, or of [a factory owner from Kocaeli](#) where people chanted in protest “we do not forgive”. Or remember the protests chanting “*hakkımızı helal etmiyoruz* (we do not forgive)” on the streets, in the media and in the social media in response to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s remarks “we ask for forgiveness from any tradesmen and employees who may [have been hard up](#)”. These protests, which challenge trivialized *helalleşme* rituals calling for an easy reconciliation, a far cry from its original meaning, show how *helalleşme* could become a political field. Such ruptures put forward a demand for justice and social change that covers the past, the present and the future, rather than an easy forgetfulness based on the notion “let’s forget everything and turn to the future”.

Possibilities and Limitations of *Helalleşme*

Religious discourses or practices may play a meaningful role in the processes of confronting the past. There are countries which have had a positive experience of such a process, whereas there are also many examples where the religious institutions or leaders supported, legitimised or directly took part in such violence or remained silent in the face thereof³. Therefore, it is not possible to assume that religion alone would create a ground for reconciliation. However, we can assume that the public in Turkey would relate to the practice of *helalleşme* in its general sense, independent of religious institutions, religious orders, and leaders. In this context, what possibilities and limitations may the discourse of *helalleşme* have in the processes of confronting the past?

The practice of *helalleşme* reduces the process of confronting past violations to an individual, moral, and religious level, which can be seen as both a possibility and a limitation. The reason why I see it as a possibility is the following. Turkey has a century-long history rife with violence, which has created not only oppression, trauma, injustice, racism, and

discrimination, but also complex moral subjectivities. It created different processes of victimization, different perpetrator subjectivities and ambiguous spheres where the categories of victims and perpetrators intertwine. The reason for sustained state violence and the consistent failure to account for such grave violations in Turkey is not simply widespread ethnic and religion-based nationalism. Such sustained violence is only possible because of complex subjectivities that enable it by keeping silent or by approving and encouraging it. It is made possible because of those who economically, socially, and politically benefit from it. A less discussed topic in Turkey is those who are indirectly implicated in state violence. This is understandable to some extent considering that we have failed to bring even the perpetrators to account. Still, I think that we should as much question these subjectivities as we should settle accounts with perpetrators in this period of spiralling violence. Perpetrators who create the conditions for violence, who give or implement orders and have political and criminal liability gain power because of racist and discriminatory practices, discourses legitimising violence and people who, actively or passively perpetuate the atmosphere of violence. Given these different levels of perpetration and associated moral subjectivities, we see that dealing with the past and *helalleşme* are multi-layered. The individual aspect of *helalleşme* is important in that it asks the question of who should ask for forgiveness from whom.

Nevertheless, discussing dealing with the past through the religious and moral notion of *helalleşme* is also dangerous because it moves the systematic state crimes and mass violence from a political and legal ground to an individual, moral, and religious one. Following Kılıçdaroğlu's initiation of the debate on *helalleşme*, the most significant point emphasised by those who work in this field was the fact that there could not be any *helalleşme* without dealing with the past. They stressed that *helalleşme* could not be achieved unless the truths were revealed, the victims compensated, apologies made, discriminatory laws and practices repealed, and the right to remember and mourning recognized. There are as many perpetrators with various levels of responsibility in state crimes as there are victimisations caused by state crimes. In addition to directly affected victims, social trauma caused by the consistent failure to account for past state violence demonstrates the limits of the practice of *helalleşme* in this field.

Can *Helalleşme* Create a Fair Ground for Reconciliation?

Reducing the process of dealing with the past to *helalleşme* can also run the risk of pushing the victims of violence, who cannot even mourn for their loved ones, to forgive and reconcile. Forgiveness is not a prerequisite for confronting the past and social reconciliation. A person whose rights have been violated, who has suffered an atrocity, or whose loved ones have been tortured, forcibly disappeared or killed may not forgive the perpetrators regardless of whether they repent of their deeds or not. In terms of the individual transformation of the perpetrator and ensuring social reconciliation, it is undoubtedly crucial that a perpetrator sincerely repent, undergo an introspective reckoning and take responsibility for their actions. However, focusing on forgiveness and reconciliation in the case of systematic state crimes imposes an unequal burden on victims and their relatives. Dealing with the past, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace-making are processes that support and can run in parallel to each other; however, each has its varying temporalities. Recognising the victims, prosecuting the perpetrators regardless of whether they repent, and ensuring that justice is served involve processes that precede *helalleşme* and are not conditional on forgiveness. A perpetrator may choose to ask for forgiveness and take steps in this direction; however, forgiveness can only be a wish which may or may not be achieved in the processes of dealing with the past.

Ultimately, *helalleşme* works mainly in favour of the person who asks for forgiveness. After all, *helalleşme*, if achieved, means the perpetrator is forgiven. Yet, what holds significance for the aggrieved person is the apology, the steps taken to redress the grievances caused by the crime and compensate damages, and the pledge that similar crimes will not be committed again. Therefore, a trivialized understanding of *helalleşme* that fails to fulfil the conditions comes down to prioritising the perpetrator's demand for forgiveness over the victim's demand for rights, justice and the truth; and would not gain much ground other than serving the interests of the perpetrator. A peaceful future can be established based not on the forgiveness of the perpetrator by the victim but on the recognition of the perpetrator's crimes, prevention of similar crimes and promotion of social, economic and political reforms to end violence.

“The Priority is Not Forgiveness but Truth, Justice, and Equality...”

Reducing *helalleşme* to a ritual of forgiveness and reconciliation that fails to fulfil the required conditions will not heal the past wounds but can only cover them up. Nonetheless, a practice of *helalleşme* defined in consideration of the rightful due, the necessary conditions and the

heavy responsibility placed on the concerned parties can provide opportunities for dealing with the past. *Helalleşme*, in its widely recognised meaning in Islam¹, resembles the secular processes of confronting and settling accounts with the past in the sense that it involves similar phases, including identifying the crime, issuing an apology, providing compensation, and taking preventive steps for the future. This type of *helalleşme* can contribute to social reconciliation by encouraging moral subjectivities that would engage in confronting past crimes, taking responsibility for ones' actions, engaging in self-criticism or religious self-examination, apologising and doing one's best to redress the grievances one has caused. The moment of mutual recognition and the promise of not repeating the same crime during the ritual of *helalleşme* can reinforce social reconciliation and envisage a shared future. Nevertheless, this is only possible if we foster common social values that have been fading away because of impunity and practices of denial in the face of past crimes. Having said this, it is essential to remember that an authentic *helalleşme* process also has its limitations. It is doubtful how closely *helalleşme*, as a religious practice, can relate to the agony of the other or whether it can foster shared emotions, especially considering the diversity of religious interpretations and the sectarian discourses that commend violence. Interpretations of Islam note that the rightful due of a person, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, has to be restored, and *helalleşme* has to be achieved. However, in cases of state-led grave and systematic violations and atrocities that have not been accounted for, especially when these forms of violence target religious minorities, it is difficult to say to what extent the conditions of *helalleşme* can be fulfilled, including recognizing the crimes, providing compensation and giving a pledge not to commit the same crimes again. Most importantly, it should be emphasized that the priority in dealing with past violations and atrocities is not forgiveness but truth, justice, peace and equality. Much like in the [outcry](#) of İzettin Çevik, the father of Başak Sidar, who was killed in the October 10 Massacre at Ankara Train Station, against the defendants: "benimle helalleşmeniz lazım" (you have to reconcile with me). But by telling the truth, helping the justice system and disclosing those who are responsible.

¹In Islamic law, the concept of *helalleşme* is too comprehensive to give its proper meaning with this brief explanation. In addition to multiple factors that may influence forgiveness including the type and severity of the offense or whether the offence was intentional, there are also varying meanings and practices of forgiveness and peace making or reconciliation. My intention in this writing is to outline the relation of the rightful due and forgiveness with *helalleşme* as a religious and cultural notion.

²I use the concept of performativity with reference to the performativity theory of J.L. Austin, philosopher of language. For details, please see his work *How to Do Things with Words* or its translation *Söylemek ve Yapmak* published by Metis Publications.

³For instance, while the church supported the military junta in Argentina, it played an important role in establishing and running a truth committee in Guatemala.

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