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Authoritarian Surveillance Trends: Structural Racism and Transnationalism

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Article abstract

This paper extends the "authoritarian surveillance as a practice" (Topak, Mekouar, and Cavatorta 2022) perspective by focusing on the major trends that shape authoritarian surveillance in three different contexts. It draws on authoritarian surveillance practices implemented by Turkey, Israel (in Palestine), and the European Union (EU) (at Africa-Europe borderzones) and observes that, despite different contexts and regime types, authoritarian surveillance is driven by structural racism and transnational associations. In Turkey, racialized Kurdish populations and pro-Kurdish dissident groups have been the major recipients of authoritarian surveillance practices, even though mass authoritarian surveillance has impacted large segments of the society. The Gülen community, which is a Turkey-origin transnational movement, played a major role in the intensification of authoritarian surveillance, while the EU provided indirect support because of its reliance on Turkey for stopping migrants trying to reach Europe. The EU implements authoritarian surveillance not only through responsibilizing external actors (such as in Turkey and Libya) for border policing but also through the deployment of its own border surveillance technologies. The EU drones, provided by Israeli companies, surveil and facilitate the return of black African migrants to Libya where they are subjected to crimes against humanity. The long history of European colonialism in Africa shapes the current racist use of EU drones as an authoritarian surveillance practice, which is implemented through the EU's transnational associations involving Libyan militia groups and Israeli drone companies. In Palestine, the legacies of Israel's settler-colonial racism against Palestinians have culminated in the current genocidal surveillance by Israel. Israel has been committing genocide within a network of transnational associations and is also one of the major exporters of authoritarian surveillance technology, ranging from spyware to drones. Through examination of these contexts, the paper argues that authoritarian surveillance is practiced by both liberal and authoritarian regimes, is driven by structural racism and is implemented through the involvement of various transnational actors.

Surveillance & Society

Dialogue

Authoritarian Surveillance Trends: Structural Racism and Transnationalism

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Abstract

This paper extends the "authoritarian surveillance as a practice" (Topak, Mekouar, and Cavatorta 2022) perspective by focusing on the major trends that shape authoritarian surveillance in three different contexts. It draws on authoritarian surveillance practices implemented by Turkey, Israel (in Palestine), and the European Union (EU) (at Africa-Europe borderzones) and observes that, despite different contexts and regime types, authoritarian surveillance is driven by structural racism and transnational associations. In Turkey, racialized Kurdish populations and pro-Kurdish dissident groups have been the major recipients of authoritarian surveillance practices, even though mass authoritarian surveillance has impacted large segments of the society. The Gülen community, which is a Turkey-origin transnational movement, played a major role in the intensification of authoritarian surveillance, while the EU provided indirect support because of its reliance on Turkey for stopping migrants trying to reach Europe. The EU implements authoritarian surveillance not only through responsibilizing external actors (such as in Turkey and Libya) for border policing but also through the deployment of its own border surveillance technologies. The EU drones, provided by Israeli companies, surveil and facilitate the return of black African migrants to Libya where they are subjected to crimes against humanity. The long history of European colonialism in Africa shapes the current racist use of EU drones as an authoritarian surveillance practice, which is implemented through the EU's transnational associations involving Libyan militia groups and Israeli drone companies. In Palestine, the legacies of Israel's settler-colonial racism against Palestinians have culminated in the current genocidal surveillance by Israel. Israel has been committing genocide within a network of transnational associations and is also one of the major exporters of authoritarian surveillance technology, ranging from spyware to drones. Through examination of these contexts, the paper argues that authoritarian surveillance is practiced by both liberal and authoritarian regimes, is driven by structural racism and is implemented through the involvement of various transnational actors.

Authoritarian Surveillance by Turkey, Israel, and the European Union

Authoritarian surveillance, understood broadly as the use of surveillance for violating fundamental human rights, is a global trend, practiced by both authoritarian and liberal-democratic regimes of the Global North and South (Murakami Wood 2017; Topak, Mekouar, and Cavatorta 2022; Volinz, in this issue). This paper tries to "zoom out" from the complexities of authoritarian surveillance in particular contexts to identify global common trends of authoritarian surveillance. Focusing on the cases of Turkey, Israel, and the EU, it observes that structural racism and transnationalism are major trends shaping authoritarian surveillance practices regardless of the context and regime type. Due to structural racism, authoritarian surveillance incorporates "racializing surveillance," defined as "a technology of social control… that maintain a racial order of things" (Browne 2016: 16–17). Authoritarian surveillance is also practiced through complex relationships and associations among states and transnational actors. This reality urges us to move beyond "methodological nationalism" and be attentive to those transnational relations (c.f., Schmidt-Wellenburg and Bernhard 2020) that drive authoritarian surveillance across diverse contexts.

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To begin with a short history of authoritarian surveillance in Turkey (whose complexities I discussed at length elsewhere [see Topak 2017, 2019, 2022]), modern Turkey has a long authoritarian tradition inherited from the Ottoman Empire and later implemented by the secularist-nationalist (Kemalist) state elites and their military tutelage system. When the governing Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002, it also used authoritarian surveillance as a key technique of governance. In the first decade of its rule, the AKP made an alliance with the Islamist Gülen community, which took a leading role in targeting key Kemalist groups in state bureaucracy and civil society with authoritarian surveillance tactics (including wiretapping, listening bugs, cameras, and planting and fabricating digital data). These tactics resulted in the removal of Kemalist elites from power through politically motivated operations and trials. In the aftermath of the 2013 anti-government (Gezi) mass protests, the AKP gradually established a mass authoritarian surveillance regime that targets not only key dissident actors but also anyone critical of AKP's policies. Around the same time, a fight between the AKP and Gülen community broke out for the full control of state power which culminated in the 2016 coup attempt led by the Gülenist military officers. In the aftermath of the failed coup, the AKP deepened authoritarian surveillance practices and targeted a wide range of dissident groups who had nothing to do with the coup attempt.

While details of these complex fights among state elites (first between Kemalists and Islamist AKP/Gülenists, and later between the two Islamist groups, AKP and Gülenists) and their relationship to rising authoritarian surveillance cannot be provided here, if we were to "zoom out," we would observe that, despite not being part of the state elites, Kurds have suffered the most negative and violent outcomes of authoritarian surveillance regardless of the state elites implementing them. Within the context of its fight against the insurgent PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), the Turkish state engaged in "a total war on the armed and unarmed wings of the Kurdish movement," causing mass human rights violations in the 1980s and 1990s (Yeğen 2020: 320). More recently, and following the end of the peace process between the Turkish state and the PKK (2009–2015), the resurging conflict has again resulted in mass human rights violations against Kurdish populations in 2016. In addition, the state targeted elected Kurdish mayors and politicians of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) and removed many of them from power, included ninety-four of 102 mayors (Yeğen 2020: 322–329).[1] In the context of deepening authoritarianism in the post-coup environment, the state brought together various forms of traditional and digital surveillance apparatuses to construct an authoritarian surveillant assemblage (ASA). While the ASA targeted the mass segments of society critical of AKP's policies, Kurds and pro-Kurdish groups have been its major targets. In addition to the members of the Kurdish political movement, the Academics for Peace (with more than 2,000 signatories) were surveilled, criminalized, and forced to face state repression because of their criticism of human rights violations committed by the Turkish military in its 2016 military operations and their call to return to the peace process (Baser, Akgönül, and Öztürk 2017). The structural reason behind Kurds and pro-Kurdish groups being major targets of authoritarian surveillance is found in the legacies of anti-Kurdish racism in modern Turkey, which have involved elements of assimilationism, discrimination, and violence (e.g., Ergin 2014; Yarkın 2022; Yeğen 2009). In addition to Kurds, Alevis, a historically marginalized religious sectarian community, experienced racism, and they too were disproportionately impacted by authoritarian surveillance such as during the 2013 anti-government (Gezi) protests (e.g., Yonucu 2024).

If racialized surveillance is a major authoritarian surveillance trend in Turkey, another trend is the role of transnational actors and associations. While not all of these actors and associations can be discussed here, two key actors are worth highlighting: the Gülen community and the EU. The Gülen community can be described as a Turkey-origin Islamist "transnational parapolitical network" (Watmough and Öztürk 2018). The leader of the community, Fettullah Gülen lived in the United State from 1999 until his recent death in 2024. In the post-9/11 context, the community had established close ties with the "centres of global power

[1]In late 2024, after this paper was completed, the ruling coalition of AKP and MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) initiated a new round of peace talks with the PKK's jailed leader Öcalan. The outcomes of these talks remain to be seen, and they are outside of the scope of this paper.

such as Washington DC" due to their championing of a Western-friendly version of "moderate Islam" in harmony with "free market entrepreneurship" (Tee 2021: 87). The community gradually possessed "a global network of schools, medical facilities, dialogue platforms and business interests" (Tee 2021: 100). While representing itself as a promoter of "moderate Islam' globally, the Gülen community infiltrated the Turkish state's security and judicial sector and led the authoritarian surveillance tactics (against the AKP's rivals and dissenters) in the first decade of the AKP's rule (2002–2013), as well as the coup attempt in 2016 (against the AKP). While the "dark network" (Watmough and Öztürk 2018: 45) of the community might be hard to believe for external observers, the long history of Western support for illicit groups in the Global South for geopolitical reasons (see, for instance, the below section on EU's support to Libyan militia groups), tells us that the Gülen community may not be as unusual as it looks from the outset. Another transnational actor that—albeit indirectly—contributed to the authoritarian surveillance in Turkey is the EU. The EU and Turkey signed the 2016 Migration Pact in the aftermath of the large-scale migration movements from Turkey towards the EU in 2015. The Pact established Turkey's role as the gatekeeper to Europe for migrants and refugees, and in turn, provided Turkey political leverage over the EU. As Karadağ (2019: 7) observes, because of its dependency on Turkey's gatekeeper role, "the EU chose to remain silent about the de-democratization process under the leadership of Erdoğan."

The EU's border policies can be defined as "authoritarian" because they are characterized by "the disenfranchisement and dehumanisation of refugees at the EU's external borders" (Pichl 2024: 232). The EU's border policies not only include the externalization of the EU borders through responsibilizing authoritarian actors (such as in Turkey, Libya, Sudan, and Morocco) but also the deployment of specific border surveillance technologies to prevent migrants from reaching the EU. These technologies can be categorized as authoritarian surveillance technologies because they cause systemic and mass human rights violations against migrants and refugees. Alongside and in combination with other border surveillance technologies, the EU has more recently deployed drones at Mediterranean borderzones. The EU drones cause crimes against humanity, including "murder, enforced disappearance, torture, enslavement, sexual violence, rape and other inhumane acts" against migrants trapped in Libya (United Nations Human Rights Council 2023: s[41]). They do so through providing information about departing migrant boats to the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) so that the LCG can pull-them back to Libya (Sunderland and Pezzani 2022). The LCG was re-created through the direction of the EU and Italy after the fall of the Kaddafi regime in Libya (Amnesty International 2017) and has been colluding with various militia and trafficking groups that target migrants as resources to be exploited (United Nations Human Rights Council 2023; Topak 2024).

The EU drones implement a contemporary form of "slave-patrol" (Browne 2016: 52) for they surveil and return runaway subjects to captivity (Topak 2023). The targets of contemporary slave surveillance are similarly racialized black Africans—a reality that underscores how legacies of structural racism shape contemporary authoritarian surveillance practices. Mbembe (2019: 77) explains how European colonizers saw African people as subhuman categories possessing "savage life… just another form of animal life." Due to this racial dehumanization, a key expression of what Agamben (2005) terms the "state of exception" materialized during Western colonialism where the massacring of colonized black populations by Western colonizers did not constitute murder (Mbembe 2019: 77–78). The contemporary EU borders similarly operate by designating vast Mediterranean spaces as "spaces of exception" where violence can operate without any moral and legal limits against black Africans.

The EU uses Heron 1 and Hermes 900 drones produced by Israeli companies: the Israel Aerospace Industries and the Elbit Systems. The same drones were first deployed by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) against Palestinian populations, resulting in mass killings of civilians (Mazzeo 2021). The EU continues to provide funding and contracts to Israeli arms companies that test and deploy their weapons, including artificial intelligence empowered drone systems, in Israel's ongoing (2023–present) military actions in Gaza (Statewatch 2024). Alongside other reports from human rights organizations (including the report from the UN rapporteur on Palestine [United Nations Human

Rights Council 2024] and Amnesty International [2024]), the report from Forensics Architecture (2024) establishes that these actions constitute genocide because they "indicate a systematic and organised campaign to destroy life, conditions necessary for life, and life-sustaining infrastructure." In addition to large drones, Israel has deployed a vast surveillance and killing apparatus in the genocide, including smaller semi-autonomous quadcopter drones, spywares, social media and communications monitoring systems, facial recognition cameras, AI algorithm-based targeting systems, and cloud computing databases provided by Amazon and Google (7amleh 2024; Abraham 2024; Amnesty International 2023).

Israel's current genocidal surveillance apparatus is the consequence of the long history of settler-colonial racism implemented by Israel in Palestine, which is characterized by "the dispossession of [Palestinian] populations through violence, repressive state laws and practices, and racialised forms of monitoring" (Zureik 2016: 3). The effects of anti-Palestinian racism have been felt beyond Palestine, resulting in the criminalization of Palestinian solidarity movements in Western societies (Fekete 2024). This process heavily relied on the deployment of authoritarian surveillance tactics ranging from surveillance of social media posts critical of Israel to surveillance of Palestine solidarity initiatives in university campuses and public spaces (some of which have resulted in dismissals, suspensions, police violence, and arrests), if not outright bans (Charbonneau 2024; Fekete 2024). The surveillance and criminalization of Palestinian solidarity movements in Western societies shows how structural racism and transnationalism together drive authoritarian surveillance. Notably, Israel is not only supported by powerful actors—including the United States, European states and agencies, big tech companies, and even complicit regional actors—in its genocide campaign but it is also a major exporter of authoritarian surveillance technology to other contexts. Israel has long used the OPT as a laboratory to test authoritarian surveillance technology using Palestinians as guinea pigs (Loewenstein 2023). In addition to drones, Israel is a global leader in spyware technology. The Pegasus spyware of the Israeli NSO Group has been exported globally and used by various state actors (including those of India, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, United Arab Emirates, and Hungary) to surveil journalists, human rights defenders, state officials, and dissidents. Notably, the spyware is also linked to the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi by the Saudi state agents (Biermann 2024; Topak, Mekouar, and Cavatorta 2022).

Conclusion

Authoritarian surveillance is a global trend. In addition to the formally authoritarian regimes, it is also heavily implemented by Western liberal states. This short paper discussed two global trends shaping authoritarian surveillance regardless of the regime type and context: structural racism and transnational associations. The concepts of authoritarian surveillance include "networked authoritarianism" (MacKinnon 2011) and "authoritarian surveillant assemblage" (Topak 2019). Building on Akbari's (2022: 446) call to innovate further authoritarian surveillance concepts, this paper invites more emphasis on how structural racism and transnationalism interact with variants of networked authoritarianisms and authoritarian surveillant assemblages. This would entail greater engagement with related concepts such as "racializing surveillance" (Browne 2016) and "transnational fields" (Schmidt-Wellenburg and Bernhard 2020).

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