

# The Power of Concepts under Authoritarianism: The Life of Arendt's Banality of Evil in Turkey

Imge Oranli July 19, 2021





*The front book cover of the Turkish translation of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil*, with the courtesy of Metis Publication House in Istanbul.*

The racist killing of Georg Floyd in the Summer of 2020 created waves of protests not only in the U.S. but all over the globe. In Turkey, my home country, there were also street demonstrations that demanded justice for Floyd, but "Twitter activism" was more popular. Turkish-speaking-twitter became a hotbed for condemnations. Amidst an array of tweets condemning Floyd's racist killing, one stood out and made it to the headlines of alternative media outlets. A former official of the authoritarian Turkish government, Yusuf Yerkel, wrote the following tweet in Turkish on June 5, 2020, in response to Floyd's racist killing; here, I provide an English translation of his infamous tweet (the Turkish original of which is still available on Yerkel's account on Twitter): "The reason that protests grew to this extent in the U.S. seems to be based on a phenomenon, in H. Arendt's terms, 'banality

of evil,' which has become evident in the face of Floyd's murder. An ordinary White cop's atrocity as an "everyday job" was the tipping point." Yerkel herein uses [Arendt's notion of the banality of evil](#) (see esp. p. 287 of the book) to describe Derek Chauvin's atrocious act, where the evil of racist police violence has become ordinary, banal, and "every day."

Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, in [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#), and its effects on individual evildoers as portrayed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, provide a suitable framework even today, primarily to raise one's critical voice and to protest Authoritarian governments. Arendt argues, to put it simply, the creation of "banal" evildoers is the outcome of Totalitarian regimes. It is the regime's ideology, the political climate and everyday practices of silencing, criminalization and impunity supported by a strong bureaucratic operational mechanism (along with other factors) that manufacture individuals who become prone to *not thinking* about the ethical consequences of their actions. Faced with Eichmann's disposition during the trial, Arendt diagnosed a "quite authentic inability to think," proposing that the nature of Eichmann's evildoing was "banal" (see p.159 of [Responsibility and Judgment](#)). Even if Arendt does not stress the role of Nazi ideology in shaping Eichmann's actions (she claims that Eichmann's evildoing was *not* a result of his ideological convictions: again, see p.159 of the



[same book](#)), nevertheless, her analysis of Eichmann's evildoing is still very profound and accurate on many other points (for a discussion on Arendt's failure to stress the role of ideology, see Robert Bernasconi's essay [in this book](#)).

What was probing about Yusuf Yerkel's tweet condemning Georg Floyd's murder by police and referencing Arendt's banality of evil was the fact that he (Yerkel) was photographed a few years back (in 2014) violently kicking a protester at a public protest while he was working for the government (see: [The Guardian's report](#)). Dissident online media outlets and journalists responded to Yerkel's Georg Floyd tweet with this outrage: As an agent of violent authoritarianism, Yerkel had kicked a peaceful protester at a public demonstration in Turkey, how could he now be presenting himself as a "critical mind," "agreeing" with the protests against police violence in the U.S., and doing it by referring to Arendt's banality of evil!?!?

Notwithstanding, similar statements by other Turkish government officials followed condemning Georg Floyd's racist killing. Condemning state violence "elsewhere" has been useful for agents of Turkish authoritarianism. These "gestures" of condemnation have been identified mainly by leftist journalists (e.g., [Banu Güven](#)) as political tactics to divert attention from Turkey's own police violence and civil rights violations.

Only a few days after Yerkel's scandalous tweet (on June 9), Yerkel was identified as a "Turkish Eichmann" (after the Nazi official [Adolf Eichmann](#)) by [a columnist](#) in Turkey—because Yerkel too was an evildoer of violent authoritarianism (even if not of full-blown totalitarianism). The columnist, Mete Kaan Kaynar, compared Yusuf Yerkel with Derek Chauvin in terms of their "banality of evil," and by doing so, was suggesting to his readers to think about the theoretical and political implications of "Turkish Eichmanns." This essay highlighted once again a powerful and popular trend in Turkey: of using Arendt's concept of "banality of evil" to identify "evildoers" that sided with the Turkish government's authoritarian policies. Such identifications are common to "leftist/liberal" writers and journalists who position themselves as resisting current Turkish authoritarianism, and use Arendtian concepts, rather frequently, to target it. It was thanks to Kaynar's identification of Yerkel as a "Turkish Eichmann," I became even more interested in tracing the popularity of Arendt in Turkey and the power of her concepts.

In the post-9/11 Era, in the U.S. and Europe, the revival of interest in Arendt's philosophical reflections on evil was directly related to understanding "terrorism" as a new form of evil. Whereas in Turkey, the most popular appeal to Arendt was to address authoritarianism. As a Turkish scholar who specializes in contemporary philosophical studies of political evils, I have been observing with a curious interest the

popularity of Arendt's notion of Banality of Evil in Turkey. Since the [Turkish translation of Arendt's book \*Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil\*](#) by Metis Publication House in 2009, selling more than 10,000 copies, Arendt has become quite popular in Turkey. I can list more than 20 blog posts, online journal essays or newspaper opinion pieces that discuss *Banality of Evil* in the context of Turkey published in the past 10 years in Turkish (here are a few examples: [example 1](#), [example 2](#), [example 3](#)).

This context-specific popularity implies that Arendt's notion of banality of evil took a *life* of its own in Turkey as it has been used to address the state violence, militarism and non-lawful governance of the ongoing authoritarian regime, while at the same time being utilized by the Turkish government officials, like Yerkel, to point a finger to U.S. police violence, in an attempt to absolve, justify, and rationalize Turkish state violence. I have been interested in understanding the motivations behind this popular (mainly non-Academic) appeal to Arendt's theorization of evil, which has led me to ask the following questions: Is the reference to Arendt a way of gaining authorial credibility in analyzing the Turkish political climate and its effects on individuals? What makes this theoretical association with Arendt so favorable in Turkey?

My brief and somewhat simple response is that Arendt's

banality of evil has the curious capacity to be utilized by people and groups at the opposite ends of the Turkish political spectrum: conservative and authoritarian government officials and their allies versus leftists and liberals. On the one hand, dissident groups use the Arendtian concepts to critique state violence and alliances with Turkish authoritarianism. On the other hand, for the Turkish state apparatus, phrases like "banality of evil," "state racism," and "state terror" function as strategic catchwords to claim that even in relatively democratic countries (like the U.S.) "such things happen." In this context, the state's strategic use of "liberal-democratic vocabulary" is an attempt to deny, rationalize, and make invisible state violence and evildoing.

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