“Martyrs Never Die”: Martyrdom and Sacrifice in Building Kurdish Political Identity
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While martyrdom and sacrifice is discussed widely along the lines of religion in recent years, its secular and liberatory deployment as a ethico-political concept remains underrepresented in scholarly debate. My paper argues that martyrdom and sacrifice establishes an ethical position for the would-be-martyr that helps him/her escaping sovereign power. In spite of condemnations of “fetishizing death”, the prevalence and widespread use of the slogan “Martyrs never die” in the discourse of Kurdish political movement displays the contribution of martyrdom and sacrifice to the forging of the national identity of Kurdishness. As the martyrs’ mortality renders affirmation of life possible for the alive, it also creates an “economy of sacrifice” that is outside of sovereign’s monopoly on appropriating sacrifice. Life under the tutelage of sovereign becomes a “despicable act” in such an economy of sacrifice. On the other hand, martyrs of the cause is exalted to the level of “undead” since they signify the “immortality” of the cause and the nation. The dead becomes the generative and reproductive force of political action and identity-building through acts of sacrifice. By gaining significance after life, the dead body of the Kurdish martyr overcomes the limits of Agambenian “bare life” which would normally be exposed to violence and excluded from political life that would have turned the main goal of life into mere physical survival. The figure of martyr escapes sovereign’s threat to make life “bare” by positing itself “immortal” and reinvigorating the struggle. From this point of view, a discussion of secular, “revolutionary martyrdom” is much needed. Also the peculiar relationship between figure of Kurdish martyr and different interpretations of Islamic martyrdom should be investigated further for a better understanding of the political connotations of martyrdom and sacrifice for Kurdish political movement.