

# The Politics of Identity, Recognition and Multiculturalism: The Kurds in Turkey

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Pre-print deposited in [Curve](#) September 2015

**Original citation:**

Kuzu, D (2016) The Politics of Identity, Recognition and Multiculturalism: The Kurds in Turkey. Nations and Nationalism. In press

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## **The Politics of Identity, Recognition and Multiculturalism: The Kurds in Turkey**

The politics of identity and recognition regarding the Kurds in Turkey has gained momentum since 2002 but has never been implemented fully. The rightful critics emphasizing the continuity of the State's authoritarian character however have not so far analysed if their own normative suggestions are theoretically consistent and sociologically grounded. Based on the Author's fieldwork and contemporary social surveys this article shows that there are conflicting views within the Kurdish community about the forms that the politics of recognition could take. By exploring the conflicts of interest within the Kurdish community from a bottom-up approach, the article concludes that the recognition of an authentic Kurdish identity is problematic sociologically. It is also more likely to harm than help the Kurds in the country from a normative perspective. The article explains how the quest for an authentic Kurdish political identity and attempts to generate it actually limit the individual autonomy and exacerbate the disparity between the Turks and the Kurds in the country.

**Keywords:** Identity politics, multiculturalism, recognition, Kurds, Turkey.

### **The Politics of Recognition: Freedom or Straitjacket for the Kurds in Turkey?**

Since the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923, the Kurds who today make up almost 15-20 per cent of the population in Turkey have been expected to live under the authority of the state that has used only the Turkish language in its relation to all its citizens (Icduygu, Romano and Sirkeci 1999; Koc, Hanioglu and Cavlin 2008; Konda 2011). Use of the Kurdish language in public offices and education was banned and any political movement that was based on ethnicity was not tolerated. All ethnic differences in the country have been ignored by the 'state that constitutionally consists only of 'citizens of Turkey' (Barkey and Fuller 1998: 1). 'The Turkish constitutional scheme solves the question of minorities without ever addressing it. There is no reference in the constitution to the word minority, not even the Lausanne Minorities' (Minority Rights Group 2007). Yet for the last two decades the state policies have slowly begun to change. With amendments to the laws that for so long prohibited its use in education, media and public events, the Kurdish language in Turkey has now become more apparent and publicly used than ever (Kurban 2003; Ozbudun and Yazıcı 2004). Nevertheless, this raw inclination of the Turkish government to adopt the weak multiculturalist policies could not evolve into the

strong multiculturalism that requires the State to provide the Kurds with state-funded education in their own language (ECRI 2005). Most studies argue that that the country has not yet reached a democratic solution mainly because of the Islamist AKP government's incoherent and reluctant approach towards the language issue (Zeydanlioglu 2013) as well as the consistent opposition of the nationalist party MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) and the Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party) (Gunes 2013). None of the democratization studies with regard to the Kurdish question in Turkey has ever analysed the difficulty of multiculturalism itself as a political attempt to recognize the authentic rigid boundaries of ethnicity where they are far more fluid than has been suggested. As such, most studies about the Kurdish nationalism and democratization have so far failed to account for this heterodoxy.

The leading scholars of Kurdish studies including Zeydanlioglu and Gunes (2013) and Entessar (1992) have made an argument similar to that of multiculturalists such as Taylor (1992) and Kymlicka (2001, 2013) who suggested that 'national minorities have typically responded to majority-nation building by seeking greater autonomy which they use to engage in their own competing nation-building, so as to protect and diffuse their societal culture throughout their traditional territory' (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001: 23).

What this article rejects is this general presumption that ethnic and cultural identities will almost inevitably translate into politics. Ozkirimli (2013: 3) also warns us to use 'the term "Kurds" to refer to a heterogeneous and highly diverse population, not a unitary collective actor with common goals'. However in his defence of 'recognition based multiculturalism' Ozkirimli, too, unavoidably assumes overall support for ethno-politics within the Kurdish community for all practical and theoretical purposes. Ozkirimli (2013) falls prey to the trap of reification, which he

himself often warns us against. When suggesting that ‘the Democracy Autonomy Project is generally endorsed by the Kurdish population at large and that most of the Kurdish respondents express their support for policies which entail the constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity’ Ozkirimli (2013: 4) dismisses the more conflicting results of the very same survey he refers to. He does not mention or discuss, for example, the deep fragmentation amongst the Kurds who have expressed completely different views of what they mean by constitutional recognition and an autonomy solution in the first place. He suggests that ‘recognition based multiculturalism’ should be wary of essentializing and reifying cultures but he never elaborates on the theoretical debate about whether the two (the politics of recognition and reification) can possibly be divorced from each other at all. In what follows the article will first provide this theoretical debate and then contextualize it with the aid of more detailed empirical evidence from the Kurdish question in Turkey.

### **The Post-Multiculturalist critique of Recognition in Turkey**

The post-multiculturalist critique of identity politics in this article elaborates on an alternative theoretical perspective suggesting that ‘recognition is undoubtedly a matter of justice, but it cannot be reduced to that alone, since it operates within a more personal psychological domain, and requires the unique bonding of two subjects, which will necessarily be different every time ’(Wynne 2000: 10).

Politics of recognition as argued by Kymlicka is dominantly informed by a responsive conception of recognition by which it is asserted that there is an authentic self, awaiting to be recognized (Heyes 2003). Here, to recognize someone in a responsive sense is

to acknowledge them as they already really are...The demand for recognition in a response-model is produced and justified through pre-existing characteristics of a person.... in the generation-model it is the act of recognition itself which confers those characteristics onto a person through their being recognized as such. The former is a case of person 'knowing', whilst the latter is a case of person 'making' (McQueen 2011).

Kymlicka's multiculturalism that is supposedly constructed on the response-model has the risk of overlooking the dialogic nature of identity and the generation-model that it actually promotes. 'Our individual identity is not constructed from within and generated by each of us alone. Rather, it is through dialogue with others that we negotiate our identity' (McQueen 2011).

### **Inter-subjectivity, 'Significant Other' and Recognition in Turkey**

Given that we have more than one pre-existing characteristic as well as overlapping relationships with others, what matters in responsive recognition is about the question of what characteristics are to be recognized. Calhoun (1993: 229) asks: given that nationalism consists not only of claims to social and cultural identity, but an affirmation of the importance of certain likeness above all others, why has selected likeness been chosen as the 'single' definition of the political community in question? The answer lies in 'the significant other' (Gillespie and Cornish 2010). What is distinctive about a group can only be explained in relation to its 'significant other' (Taylor 1995; Brubaker 2000, 2002), and for this, our focus should be moved from the 'authenticity' of the group to the contexts within which individuals collectively develop a sense of distinctiveness around one specific difference. A careful analysis of Turkish context suggests the Kurds *per se* had never been the significant other *vis-à-vis* the Turkish identity until the 2000s. Turkishness had previously been defined as a citizenship category on an ideational level and any group formation on the basis of

ethnicity was strictly prohibited rather than crystallized and stigmatized (Ergin 2014). Cirakman (2011) showed that peculiar change in the Turkish self-image towards an ethno-nationalist discourse occurred only in the 2000s. Before then assimilation was the main method used in homogenization discourse within which differences have been moulded into Turkishness (Saracoglu 2009).

This process of assimilation has been given in the conventional literature as the primary cause of Kurdish nationalist radicalization and the politicization of ethnicity (Zeydanlioglu 2008; Yegen 2006, 2007). This has also been supported by Honneth (1995, 169) who offered a detailed theoretical account of how ‘the denial of recognition provides the motivational and justificatory basis for social struggles’ (McQueen 2011). Forced assimilation is a source of radicalization and this radicalization has typically translated into politics, if not violence (Horowitz 1985, Gurr 2000). The scholars who suggest this relationship between assimilation and social struggle, however, cannot account for why during the time between 1938 and 1984 there was not a mass Kurdish struggle (Heper 2007: 2). Neither can they explain remaining and increasing levels of social struggle and conflict on the part of the Kurds in times when their identity is recognized and accommodated by the state (Tezcur 2010).

The proponents of the ‘assimilation-resistance’ model have the presumption that the assimilation process poses a challenge to the very existence of the subject’s identity and therefore the subject who senses a danger of extinction develops a motivation for social struggle. The reason why they have this misconception of what happened in Turkey and why ‘they cannot explain the periods of relative peace and quiet’ in the past (Tezcur 2009: 3) is because their interpretation of assimilation is not informed by the distinction between absorptive and additive types of assimilation.

The former refers to a type of acculturation that does not expect one to lose previous cultural membership while obtaining a new one (Baubock 1996), and the absorptive category assumes that ‘the identity formation is a constant-sum game, whereby the acquisition of a new identity occurs at the expense of the original one’ (Zolberg 1997; Barry 2001: 81). While the first category is especially relevant to linguistic minorities who can develop bilingual identities, the latter is more about the mutually exclusive groups of religious minorities who cannot be both Muslim and Christian, or Protestant and Catholic at the same time. When the assimilation is additive, as is usually the case with linguistic minorities, it is hard for multiculturalism approach to locate individuals at one side of the line between resistance and assimilation. In such cases people may resist to preserve their native culture yet voluntarily assimilate into another at the same time. So portraying the reaction of most national minorities to assimilation as resistance does not represent the reality in such cases where boundaries are permeable and assimilation is additive. Those who want to reverse the policies of assimilation are informed by this erroneous reading of the problem in which it is asserted that Kurdishness and Turkishness are mutually exclusive categories and binary oppositions. The historical discourse of assimilation and heterogeneity that it constructed within and across ethnic groups in Turkey has not been analysed in terms of its implications for the contemporary politics of recognition that minority nationalists have championed.

Proponents of ‘reverse assimilation’ never examine what to recognize if there is not such a unanimous category of Kurds who have been excluded on the basis of their ethnicity per se and merged around it in return. Immaturity of the minority’s societal culture is rather interpreted by ‘liberals’ in Turkey to be the outcome of the unjust historical discourse of assimilation that they think should be reversed. They usually

do not approach the societal implications of the historical narrative as an independent variable. The reason for this is that many Turkish and Kurdish scholars associate 'liberalism' with just the opposite of everything done by the state in the past. I am not going to dwell on the normative problem and these past injustices; it is already a widely accepted fact that the state nationalism in Turkey has been illiberal. In this article I will rather focus on heterogeneity that it has created.

What follows is an account of the heterogeneity in Kurdish socio-political culture. The data about these differences and the societal order in which we operate is drawn from my field work in Eastern cities of Turkey including Diyarbakir, Mardin, Tunceli, Bitlis, Van and Hakkari that I visited twice between 2009 and 2011; another important source of information is the broader survey research conducted by KONDA research institute in 2010 with more than 10,393 people from 59 cities, 374 boroughs, and 902 villages in Turkey.

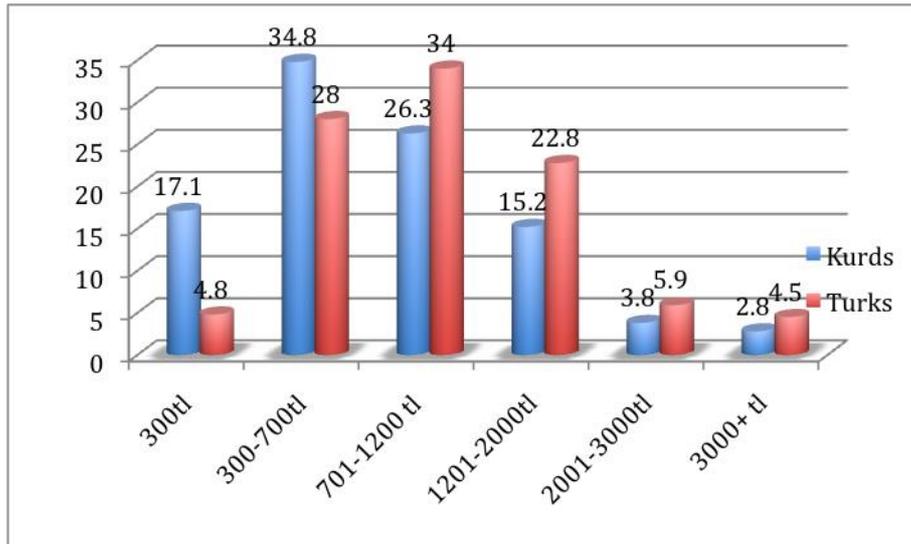
### **Additive Assimilation and Heterogeneity**

As explained earlier, Turkishness has been defined by the constitution as a category of citizenship and as such it has been internalized by a huge number of minority citizens in the country. Most of the people from different ethnic groups even refused to be identified as a minority in the sense that the concept of minority refers to a group of citizens who are deprived from fundamental rights on the basis of their differences from the majority. 38.2 per cent of Kurds in the Southeast and Central-East Anatolia claim that their ethnic Kurdishness is in no conflict with their Turkishness so long as the latter is defined to be a category of citizenship, 29.8 per cent of them implied that their sense of Kurdishness and Turkishness as being of a binary opposition and this has been inaugurated only recently and not in their

childhood. Only 32 per cent of Eastern Kurds refuse to accept Turkish identity in any form in opposition to the 68 per cent of Eastern Kurds who do not see their ethnicity and Turkishness by citizenship as mutually exclusive categories. (Konda 2011: 120)

The Kurds' varying perceptions of Turkishness are also reflected on the variety of demands that they have for the education in their mother tongue. 82.1 per cent of Kurds want education in their mother tongue (Konda 2011: 124) but what they understand from education in mother tongue differs to a great extent. 56 per cent of the Kurds who demand education in their mother tongue think of it as an optional language course beside Turkish as being the medium of instruction in all taught courses. Only 19 per cent of Kurds in the region claim all grades of education to be in Kurdish. Open ended conversations I had with Kurdish people in the cities of Mardin and Diyarbakir, revealed that although they believe that their demand for cultural recognition is represented by the BDP (Pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party), its leaders' insistence for education in Kurdish for all grades does not in fact represent the interest of the majority of Kurds who think that the future of their children lies in Turkish. 'Most Kurdish couples speak Kurdish between themselves but the communication process in Kurdish is cut off when they communicate with their children at home; they speak Turkish with their children in order to support their school life and future interests' (Gultekin 2012: 156). This has also been supported by my interviews with many Kurdish women in Tunceli.

**Figure 1. Distribution of ethnic groups by income**



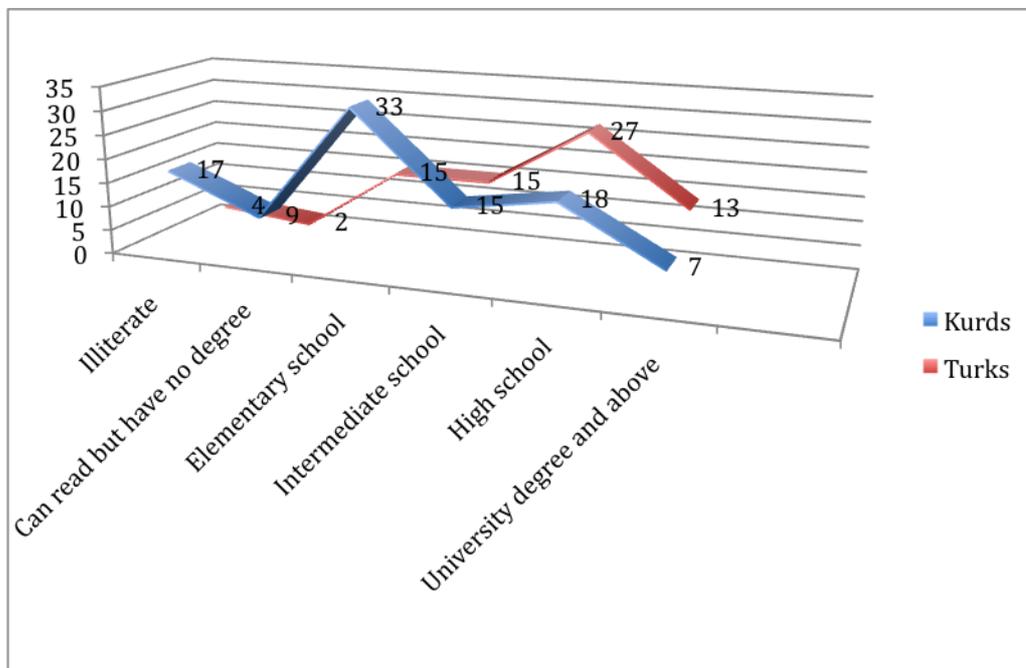
It is argued that ‘economic disparities can cause people to develop a heightened awareness of their class or regional identity. But because the Southeast of Turkey is both the poorest region and the only predominantly Kurdish part of the country, economic disparities lend themselves particularly well to heightened, politicized ethnic identity formation’ (Icduygu, Romano and Sirkeci 1999, 998). According to statistics 29 per cent of Kurds live under the poverty line whereas this figure for Turks is around 20 per cent (Konda 2011: 96). The reason why this sense of economic disadvantage is felt more and more deeply among Kurds than Turks is that the majority of those Kurds who live under the poverty line are concentrated in the Southeast region. That clearly gives an idea that the economic dimension of the problem is regional rather than ethnic, but the discourse of differentiation and the politics of grievance itself creates misguided analogies between ethnicity *per se* and economic deprivation.

The survey results as shown in the above graph reveal that there is an economic disparity between the Turks and the Kurds, but the disparity between different income groups within the same ethnicity proves to be far greater than the level of disparity that we observe between Turks and Kurds. The economic inequality that matters in

terms of justice can only be recognized by a comparison between the worse off and the better off. With this logic in mind, I argue that there is no point in explaining the disparity with ethnicity *per se*, because none of the better off categories in opposition to the least advantaged lowest income groups are exclusive to the members of the dominant ethnicity.

Duman's (2008) work on education and income inequality in Turkey suggests that the income disparity between Turks and Kurds can be explained better by their access to education: There is a wide gap between the educational levels of the poorest and richest socioeconomic groups in Turkey. For example in 1987, 53 per cent of the lowest income quintile had a primary school leaving certificate while this ratio was less than 40 per cent for the richest quintile (Duman 2008: 377).

**Figure 2. Education by ethnicity**



This argument is also indicated by the number of Kurds and Turks with different levels of education. The percentage of illiterate Kurds is almost identical to the

percentage of Kurds with the lowest income as shown above. Figures also suggest that educational opportunities like income and material sources have not been exclusive to one ethnic group or another. It is, however, true that those who couldn't have equal access to education also comprised the lowest income group and this in turn made them less likely to invest in the education of their own children. Those Kurds who are stuck in this vicious circle of injustice were also found to comprise the group with the deepest sense of discrimination in Turkey. As shown before in this article recognition of linguistic differences is a matter of justice in terms of its capacity to provide equal access to education. It is, however, misleading to depict the problem as being of ethnicity only and then formulate solutions on the basis of this criterion to promote the ethnic character of the body politic. The reason why it is problematic is because it overlooks the way in which equal access to education is violated by factors other than ethno-linguistic differences. As shown by the research (Duman 2008) access to education seems to be associated more with family income and class differences than ethnicity in the first place.

37.8 per cent of Kurds think that improvement of their economic conditions is the most important and necessary action to make things better for all Kurds in the region. 21.2 per cent think that recognition of their Kurdish identity will be enough and only a very small portion of them 16.8 per cent want the local administration to become autonomous and make its own decisions (Konda 2011: 130). What complicates the feasibility of multiculturalism in Turkey therefore is that only a very small proportion of the Kurdish population is asking for administrative autonomy with legislative powers. Nevertheless this is still quite problematic as only small proportion of Kurds –16.8 per cent – maintains the remaining conflict and as long as the conflict is an issue, an amnesty is far from being an option in the country where

the majority has a tendency to interpret it as a form of surrender to violence. This recognition is still an issue because Kurds in the region are not exactly sure what it means and their demand for recognition is most likely to be conflated by radicals with regional autonomy as well. The BDP claim rights to the autonomy and to the state funded education in the Kurdish language in 15 East and Southeast Anatolian cities with a significant Kurdish population. In the 2011 general election, however, the independent candidates supported by the BDP could only win the majority of the votes cast in 5 out of these 15 cities. (Hurriyet 2011–Turkey’s 2011 General Election Results). I also had extensive discussions with Kurds in the cities of Diyarbakir and Mardin. From this emerged a different emphasis than was indicated by the numerical data on the 2011 election results in these two cities. This was that even those who voted for the BDP do not have an agreed upon definition of what exactly is meant by the regional autonomy that its leaders voraciously claim. The striking theme of my observation in the region is that the demands of the conciliatory Kurds’ are not actually reflected by the hawkish MPs from the BDP despite having voted for them.

Multiculturalism still remains as an option and a desirable idea, but in what forms and how? Can ethno-centric multiculturalism equally promote freedom for all these segments of Kurds with their different interests?

### **Generative Recognition and Multiculturalism**

If the Kurds have not been directly envisaged as other by the state discourse; if the differences among Kurds as I illustrated above have been relevant to the extent, that they do not even share the same view about the causes and solutions of the problem; then what distinction will the ethno-centric multiculturalism recognize?

The article argues that the identity politics in Turkey is complicated by the complexities I explained above. The politics of recognition has to fabricate

distinctions to overcome the problem of complexities. In doing so it is also bound to violate the freedom of the Kurds because it segregates and puts them into one cultural block. What follows will also argue that the segregation diminished the dignity that the Kurds would have derived from liberalization in different forms. This argument is informed and suggested by post-multiculturalist scholars like Phillips (2007), Cowan (2001) and Benhabib (2002) who are indeed sympathetic to idea of multiculturalism. Nevertheless their account is nuanced enough to be able to track the difference between the 'recognition of identity' and 'the politics of identity'. In other words this is the difference between the recognition of culture as 'knowing it' and the recognition of culture as 'making it'. Their critique is based on the illiberal implications of the latter. Based on the post multiculturalist critique I will suggest that the violation of freedom by ethno-centric multiculturalism takes four different forms in Turkey: violation of the freedom of exit, essentialization of the culture, reification of the identity, and stigmatization of minority.

### **Freedom of Exit**

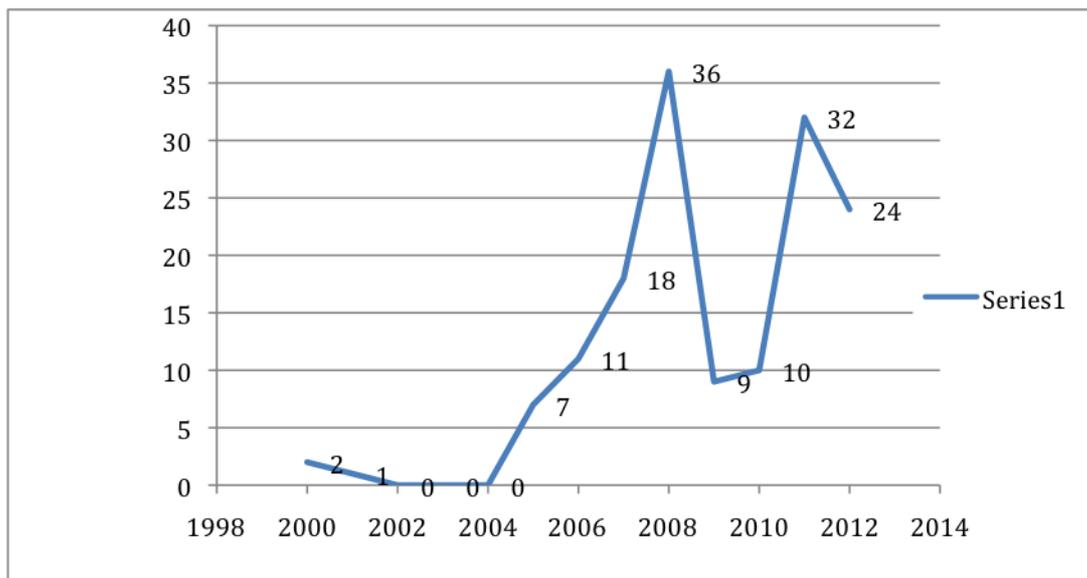
Benhabib argues that 'no authority should impose cultural membership on a person with reference to where he or she is born. It also means that a person must be totally free to leave his or her cultural group and to join any group of his or her own choice, i.e. the 'freedom of exit and association' (Benhabib 2002: 19). Similarly Kukathas, drawing on Brian Barry's view, explained that 'Given that many forms of association such as group membership, are unchosen, the critical issue is whether or not individuals can exit from an association' (Kukathas 2002: 186). Education in the mother language is the crucial point where the multiculturalism may come to be very problematic. Under its egalitarian critique, multiculturalism has been assessed in

terms of its capacity to provide children from different ethnicities with the equality of opportunity. At the very heart of the argument championed by scholars who defend the 'freedom of Exit' lies this concern. Drawing on Mill's concept of 'harm principle', it has been asserted by Barry that the decisions about the language of the education should not be left to the hands of the parents only. This is because freedom of exit is possible only if the people are well equipped to use that option. As education is the only means to attain the qualifications that open the exit door, the state should make sure that education is given in the language that then opens the door to the largest range of opportunities available in the body politic.

According to Barry (2001), the state may and should find it necessary when the autonomous parents' cultural interests limit the capacity of their children to enjoy their liberty. According to Kelly (2002), parents' decisions on educational issues do not bring about any limits to their children's freedom. Children can leave the community of their mother language when they become mature enough to do so. Nevertheless, Barry (2001) argues that parents' freedom for and interest in sending their children to schools where the medium of instruction is in the mother language would decrease their chances to leave. Given that the societal culture of the Kurdish community is not yet developed as much as and in the way that Kymlicka (1995) defined as necessary, the education of all grades in Kurdish would halt children from enjoying the opportunities available in broader society. As I suggested before this is only a contextual condition that might be developed in time and therefore might not be a problem in the future if the gradual implementation of multiculturalism (in the case of education the minority language as an elective course in the curriculum) starts to take place. This is indeed what is slowly happening in Turkey, yet it creates another problem in the sense that radical nationalists in the minority group see this weak

multiculturalism as only another manipulative way of the state discourse to integrate the Kurds into the mainstream community.

**Figure 3. PKK Conflict Graphic 2000-2012<sup>i</sup>**



As seen in the above graph, the PKK-inspired incidents of conflict steadily increased from 2004 to 2009, which is the period when the AKP Government continuously initiated reform policies. This evidence supports the view that identity politics rekindles and brings about further radicalization in Turkey. Akcam and Asal (2005) argue that in the Kurdish case radical factions deliberately create instability to

provoke government repression. ‘Government repression on ethnic groups increases disadvantages for ethnic group. The existence of collective disadvantages creates opportunities for ethnic leaders to mobilize ethnic group for their movement’ (Akcam and Asal 2005). Clearly, at times of reform it is more crucial for the ethnic insurgency to remind its constituency that the state is still their enemy (McCord 1979, 427).

### **Stigmatization and Self-Respect**

‘Social Identity theory posits that individuals choose to affiliate with social groups primarily because such affiliation serves to enhance self-esteem’ (Tajfel and Turner 1979). From the inter-subjective perspective as the article argued before self-esteem cannot be generated from within. ‘It is through dialogue we negotiate our identity’ (McQueen 2011). What dignity Kurds can make out of recognition will be dependent on what image of Kurdishness is generated by the politics of recognition in the eyes of the majority. If the recognition and prioritization of their ethnic particularity in political sphere is bound to create further conflict and injustices, as shown above, then it is suspicious what self-respect Kurds can derive from this image.

In this context the politics of recognition is more likely to create new stereotypes about the minority, rather than liberating its members. For example, the Turks have increasingly started to hold the Kurds responsible for escalating the conflict. As an outcome of this stigmatization, the military conflict between the PKK and Turkish armed forces has almost turned into a civil war. In October 2011 thousands of civilians attacked the pro-Kurdish BDP centers in Bursa, Eskisehir, Konya and Erzincan to protest against the PKK’s killing of 24 soldiers in Hakkari. Most of the Kurds I spoke to in the Western cities of Turkey complained to me that

they are increasingly stigmatized in daily life just because people tend to think that any Kurd who is proud of being Kurd would necessarily support the PKK. This was also observed by Ergin (2014) who explained that the racialization of the Kurdish identity in Turkey only started recently; and the same phenomenon has also been supported by Saracoglu (2009) who gave an account of ‘specific ethnicization process that takes place in the everyday life of cities in Turkey ’ during the 2000s. This might not be a problem in an ideal context where members of different groups live in their own societal culture under territorially concentrated self-governments, but given that almost 40 per cent of Kurds are scattered across the country, this seems to be quite a problem.

### **Essentialism**

According to Benhabib (2002: 4) drawing on Turner (1993: 412)

reductive sociology of culture [in multiculturalism] risks essentializing the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race, it risks reifying cultures as separate entities by overemphasizing the internal homogeneity of cultures in terms that potentially legitimize repressive demands for cultural conformity; and by treating cultures as badges of group identity, it tends to fetishize them in ways that put them beyond the reach of critical analysis

State nationalism in Turkey has been informed by its ideational sources like equal citizenship, patriotism and rights on one hand and resort to religion as a source of mobilization on the other. A secular, ethnicity-blind, civic and French formulation of nationhood in Turkey on the ideational level has been supplanted in practice by religious sources of mobilization. The Kurds who belong to the same religion as the rest of the population have always been incorporated in the system by this commonality. The outcome of this can be observed in the Konda survey done in 2010. It shows the most important source of identity that binds people and especially the Kurds to Turkey is now religion, and according to the same survey, almost half of all

Kurds tend to identify with Islam before their ethnicity. Almost half of the Kurds even in the Southeast region let alone the other Kurds who are scattered across the country vote for the AKP that is a pro-Islamic party. Its program strongly resonates with religious Kurds and the party has 75 Kurdish MPs in the cabinet. After the electoral victory of the AKP in 2007, Emine Ayna who was a Kurdish nationalist MP from DTP said that ‘Whoever becomes an AKP candidate is not a Kurd, even if she says I am a Kurd’ (Tezcur 2009: 5).

It is not only ‘who is not a Kurd’ that is decided by the activists, ‘who is a Kurd’ also becomes a matter to be decided by the dominant narrative and the activists. Zaza people, who assert that they are not Kurds, are treated as traitors by radical Kurdish nationalists. This is also supported by the factual evidence that I observed during my visit to the city of Tunceli where the Zaza people I spoke communicated their Zazaki (*Alevi Kirmanci*) identity as being distinct from Kurdish in the strongest terms possible. This was also evident when the city of Elazig, which has a large Zaza population, organized a very well attended protest against ‘PKK terrorism’ on October 24, 2007. The participants, many of who are Zaza Kurds, shouted, ‘we are all Turks, we are all Mehments’ [a generic name given to soldiers of the Turkish Army]’ (Tezcur 2009: 7).

Multiculturalism theory as such cannot be accused of encouraging essentialism and it is true that political actors are more responsible than the theory for its practice and implications (Kymlicka 2013). Yet the problem is deeper than suggested because it is not only about how the political actors arbitrarily interpret and use multiculturalism in practice. It is much more about the context in which agents sometimes have no other option but to define what constitutes a group, unless it has already been agreed by people themselves from an inter-subjective perspective. As I

have argued before, people's sense of 'us' is entrenched as much as, and so long as, they are defined as 'the other' by their significant collocutor. I argue that ethnocentric multiculturalism and identity politics is more likely to result in the essentialization of ethnicity when the 'group' at stake has not already been defined as 'the other' by the system.

### **Reification**

Anne Phillips argues 'Multiculturalism ... solidifies differences that are currently more fluid, and makes people from other cultures seem more exotic and distinct than they really are. Multiculturalism then appears not as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straitjacket' (Phillips 2007: 14; Kymlicka 2013: 2).

In applying this argument to the Kurdish case, I argue the way the meaning of Kurdishness is generated reduces the multiple identities of its members into one. This is in the sense that members of the Kurdish group are Kurdish before anything else; before their religion, sex, profession, ideology, motherhood, and so on. Of course this is not a barrier to the other things that they can be, but if the creation of their group identity is primarily dependent on their prioritization of this ethnic distinction, the discourse generates the ways in which people are primarily represented by their ethnicity. For example, a meeting of intellectuals may increasingly be described as a meeting of 'Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals' instead of just intellectuals' (Somer 2007: 105).

This can also be seen in the Konda (2011) survey where the opinions of the Kurdish and Turkish respondents on discrimination are attributed to their ethnicities. One problematic perspective in these kinds of analyses is that the discourse itself leads us to think that those who say that they cannot live their identity are saying so because they are Kurdish. A more accurate analysis requires us to develop an

awareness that the members of the Kurdish group are not only Kurds but they also hold other identities that might be subject to discrimination in society. Gay people and Alevis are some of the other marginalized groups in Turkey. The Kurds' sense of deprivation might be informed by one of these other identities that lead to them being excluded and marginalized. All in all components of identity are many, and definition of the 'self' changes, depending on the context where one particularity becomes more relevant than others in relation to the 'significant other that 'the self' communicates. What I stress here is that everything people do or say should not be attributed to their Kurdishness or Turkishness. This especially becomes a more important problem in Turkey where 'Turks', who have been indoctrinated since the foundation of the Republic that Turkishness is a category of citizenship, are now forced to define it in ethnic terms in relation to Kurds. Not only those Kurds who resist it but also Turks who refuse to acknowledge ethnic conception of their identity complicate the feasibility of multiculturalism. Emina Ayna who is a hardliner of the Ocalan (the PKK's founder and now its honorary leader) faction insists that the Constitution should use a language where the population of the country should be referred to as the 'citizens of Turkey' but not 'Turkish'. This claim yields itself to the suggestion that Turkishness is a category of ethnicity and not citizenship. By refusing this ethnic conceptualization of their identity, the majority of the people in Turkey blame the nationalist Kurds for creating false categories and psychological warfare.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, the article argued that identity politics seems to be more likely to limit individuals' autonomy when their multiple identities are very hard to confine into one. Introducing the inter-subjective paradigm of identity this article stressed that the only difference that is readily available between Kurds and others is the language and it is

the primary concern for the parts claiming autonomy to use their language freely. However the distinction does not itself create a binary opposition. Kurdishness and Turkishness are not mutually exclusive categories and individuals can be both Kurdish and Turkish so long as they speak both languages and especially because the latter is rather a broader and inclusive category of citizenship. Moreover the level of significance attributed to the use of the mother tongue in public life is only a matter of individual choice that may be informed by many independent variables other than the value of the language as a good in itself. What is complex about language question however, is that those who prioritize the use of their mother tongue in public life is dependent on the participation of others. This is because the language has a function only but only in a dialogical environment where one needs one another person to speak it. One's freedom to use it in public is, therefore, wholly dependent on the participation of others.

As was shown in the case of Turkey and suggested by the theoretical literature, the consent of people to ascribe meaning and value to the use of their first language in public should not be taken for granted. When it is an option, learning, using and living in another language may be even more liberating than imbibing what we are already given by birth and our parents subsequently. The evidence shows that notwithstanding the Kurds' shared claim for cultural recognition, political reflections of this recognition take very different forms in their opinions.

There are many studies criticizing the unequal treatment of minorities in Turkey that especially highlight the need to improve equality between the Kurds and the Turks. However, the means by which the improvement should be achieved in Turkey has not been argued on a normative and/or a sociological basis. None of the academic studies pay sufficient attention to the new problems emerging from the politics of

recognition in Turkey. To what extent this affects the ethnic conflict between the Kurds and the Turks has not as yet been studied fully either. Recognition of minority identities and the viability of accommodating diversity in a liberal democratic system have been at the centre of the argument in Turkey. But the most appropriate path to a solution in this context was not discussed with reference to the theories of multiculturalism and its critiques. In Turkey, as a country in transition to liberal democracy, 'liberalism' has been idealized by some Turkish and Kurdish scholars, some political actors and institutions, but it has not as yet been clarified which liberalism they are talking about or which principles of liberalism they seek to defend. Neither is it argued what the limitations and consequences of the liberal principles they defend are in relation to the equitable accommodation of the Kurds in Turkey. This article provides a detailed discussion on these matters and suggests that the solution of the Kurdish question should be based on the concepts of neutrality and non-domination and not the politics of recognition. No matter how utopian; the commitment to neutrality and non-domination is indeed the most appropriate way to accommodate the cultural diversity in Turkey. Otherwise the politics of identity as such will increasingly stigmatize, reify and essentialize the Kurds in the country.

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<sup>i</sup> The Chronological account of PKK attacks I used in generating the figure 3 is available at the PKK Terrorism blog (<http://www.pkkterrorism.org/>) and USAK (International Strategic Research Association) Research Report (2006)  
<http://www.usak.org.tr/dosyalar/dergi/z6UFq2LoFkdiuzBbZSt9qHMi7u4Ke2.pdf>