The "Kurdish question" in Turkey: between governance, human rights and denied culture

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Abstract:

This article investigates the complex dimensions of the Kurdish issue, with particular emphasis on its ramifications for national governance, regional stability, and the intricacies of global multilateralism (Natali, 2005; Yildiz, 2005; Romano, 2006). By employing critical theoretical frameworks established by esteemed scholars such as Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Mesut Yeğen, and others, this study delineates how multilateralism—conceptualized as inclusive and norms-based international cooperation—may effectively mediate the structural tensions that exist between state sovereignty and the legitimate aspirations for cultural and political autonomy. Drawing on concepts such as "bare life" and biopolitics, the article analyzes the historical and contemporary mechanisms of Kurdish repression within Turkey, linking domestic policies of cultural assimilation and securitization to broader regional and global dynamics. It critically assesses the role and effectiveness of international institutions in addressing minority rights violations in the context of a global order increasingly challenged by nationalist agendas and declining trust in multilateral governance. The Kurdish question is thus framed as a critical case study for evaluating the possibilities and limitations of international governance in responding to ethnic conflicts and human rights concerns. The article concludes by highlighting the implications for global governance and the potential for multilateralism to foster more inclusive and equitable frameworks for minority recognition and conflict resolution.

Keywords: Kurdish Identity, Multilateralism, Cultural Repression

Introduction

This article employs a systematic literature review to examine the intersection of sovereignty, minority rights, and international cooperation in the context of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. The approach proposed in this article integrates theoretical perspectives of scholars

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and political theorists such as Mesut Yeğen (2004, 2007), Giorgio Agamben (2005), Michel Foucault (1979), Julian Reid (2005), Baskın Oran (2010, 2020), Ahmad Mohammadpour and Kamal Soleimani (2019), Amid Bein (2017), Michael J. Shapiro (2013), Zeynep N. Kaya and Matthew Whiting (2019), Hannes Černy (2018), and Ramazan Aras (2014) to explore specific aspects where multilateralism, understood as a collaborative and inclusive approach to international conflict resolution, can intervene in dealing with the so-called Kurdish issue and its implications for sovereignty and human rights (Ruggie, 1992; Anghie, 2005; Mardin, 2006; Newman et al, 2006; Weiss, 2006; Falk & Farer 2013; Zan, 2015; Zorlu, 2023). Using Agamben's (2005) concept of "bare life", which highlights the reduction of individuals to disenfranchised biological existences under sovereign control, and Foucault's (1979) biopolitics, which reflects on state control of life and identities, we interpret the repression of the Kurds as an expression of biopolitical power manifested in cultural and linguistic repression (Černy, 2018).

This reading, detailed by Oran's (2010, 2020) analyses of the condition of minorities in Turkey and their relative historical developments and Shapiro's (2013) theoretical approach, posits the so-called Kurdish issue as an emblematic case of conflict between sovereign power and the demands for recognition and autonomy of an ethnic and cultural "minority". The repression of Kurdish identities, as Mohammadpour and Soleimani (2019) argue, reveals the ideological construction of the state that portrays Kurdish identity as premodern and, therefore, hostile to state modernity. Research by Bein (2017) and Kaya and Whiting (2019) show how Turkish policies have oscillated between strategies of repression and reform, keeping the principles of assimilation and control intact. In this context, multilateralism is a potential tool for harmonizing the principle of sovereignty with instances of autonomy, opening spaces for a more balanced representation of minorities. The approach proposed here, combining critical theory and historical analysis, thus contributes to a reading of multilateralism as an inclusive framework in which the international community can facilitate a balance between state control and cultural and social rights (Nicolescu, 2008; Shapiro, 2013; Axelsson et al., 2020). This article explores the intersections between global multilateralism and the Kurdish question by examining how local conflicts test the effectiveness of international governance. In this context, "international governance" refers to the set of norms, institutions, and practices, both formal and informal, through which international actors (states, international organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders) coordinate their actions to manage transnational issues. Multilateralism, as a foundational principle of international governance, emphasizes rule-based cooperation among

three or more states aimed at achieving common goals through dialogue, institutional legitimacy, and shared norms (Ruggie, 1992).

The current global order—often described as a liberal international order—has been historically underpinned by multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, and NATO. However, this order is increasingly under strain due to the resurgence of nationalist agendas, the erosion of institutional trust, and the growing instrumentalization of sovereignty to resist international oversight, especially in cases concerning minority rights and democratic accountability. Empirical indicators of this decline include the rise of populist governments openly challenging multilateral frameworks, withdrawal from international treaties, and the weakening of global human rights mechanisms. In this light, the Kurdish question becomes a case study through which to assess the capacity—and limitations—of multilateral governance to intervene meaningfully in situations where domestic sovereignty is used to suppress ethnic and cultural diversity. Through a meta-theoretical lens that integrates insights from International Relations theories, conflict resolution, and ethnic studies, this study critically examines the Kurdish issue in Turkey, situating it within a broader global order increasingly strained by competing national interests and declining faith in multilateral frameworks. The analysis is grounded in a systematic literature review of scholarly works spanning political theory, minority rights, state sovereignty, and international cooperation. This methodological approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns, theoretical debates, and empirical findings that inform a nuanced understanding of how the Kurdish question has evolved and been treated both domestically and internationally:

- How has global multilateralism influenced the handling of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, and what role do international institutions play in balancing the principle of national sovereignty with the Kurds' demands for cultural and political autonomy?
- How have domestic policies of cultural repression and forced assimilation toward the Kurdish population in Turkey interacted with regional geopolitical dynamics, and what implications emerge for regional stability and governance?

The article is organized into four distinct sections. Following this preliminary introduction, Section 1 delineates a theoretical framework, elucidating the foundational concepts of multilateralism, sovereignty, and biopolitical governance. Section 2 critically analyzes Turkey's domestic policies concerning the Kurds, illustrating how these policies manifest both discursive securitization and biopolitical control, and examining how these dynamics resonate at the regional geopolitical level. Section 3 explores the roles played by international institutions and multilateral actors, critically assessing their capacities and limitations in

engaging with the complexities of the Kurdish question. Finally, the conclusion contemplates the broader implications of this case study for global governance and delineates potential avenues for further scholarly inquiry. Through the integration of concepts from critical theory and a systematic review of extant scholarship, the article posits that the Kurdish question serves as a salient illustration of the structural tensions between a state-centric international order and the burgeoning demands for cultural autonomy and pluralistic governance within a context of contested multilateralism.

Nationalism and Homeland Security in Republican Turkey: Between Cohesion and Repression

In the early 20th century, Republican Turkey presented itself as a nation that embraced the motto "Yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh" (Peace at home, peace in the world), as expressed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Deringil, 2004; Ergene, 2006; Oran et al., 2010; Bein, 2017; Tusan, 2012). Although this principle reflected an official commitment to domestic stability and a foreign policy of non-expansionism, behind this image of appeasement lay a more complex reality, as noted by Bein (2017). Precisely, the dynamics related to the so-called Kurdish issue, among others, laid bare the contradictions between the stated ideal of national cohesion and the assimilation and repression policies implemented by the Turkish state to ensure such unity. Indeed, although the newly formed Republic of Turkey projected itself as a status quo power focused on domestic progress, regional and European actors often perceived Turkey as a nation with latent territorial ambitions. During this period, Turkey's domestic policy, particularly regarding its Kurdish population, was characterized by harsh repression and violent responses to dissent, as evidenced by the brutal suppression of Kurdish insurgencies in southeastern Turkey. This domestic approach reflected Ankara's determination to maintain control over the various minorities within the nation. Rosa Burç and Mahir Tokatlı (2020) argue how it is still debated today whether Turkey can be considered or may have taken on fascist characteristics during the interwar period. However, the authors highlight that the newly established nation led by Mustafa Kemal justified the rise of authoritarianism by presenting a new revolutionary order. This order aimed to reposition the newly established Republic of Turkey in the global arena after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and to safeguard it from the colonial ambitions of Western powers: "The rise of authoritarianism in Turkey during the interwar period, therefore, as well as elsewhere in Europe, was associated with a transition to modernity, hence with the creation of a 'new order' embodied in the violent making of the modern nation-state system" (Burç & Tokatlı, 2020, p. 159). Turkey's suspicion that European powers, mainly Britain,

France, Russia, and Italy, were supporting separatist movements within its borders, especially among the Kurds, Armenians, and Assyrians, further aggravated its internal policy of repression (Bein, 2017). This "Sèvres syndrome", a lingering fear derived from the unratified Treaty of Sèvres, was rooted in concerns that Western powers wanted to dismember Turkey and encourage internal rebellions (Guida, 2008, 2014). The Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, established Turkey's modern borders after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Still, some of its provisions were perceived by Turkey as compromises rather than final solutions. In particular, Turkey reluctantly agreed to give up territories historically part of the Ottoman Empire, such as northern Syria and Iraq, recognizing them under British and French control (Özoğlu, 1996; McDowall, 2004; Van Bruinessen, 2011; Zürcher, 2017). Although the treaty marked the formal end of the Turkish struggle for independence, the perception that these concessions were imposed temporarily reflected the hope that, in the future, some of these areas could be claimed or influenced again by Turkey. Despite its public commitment to peace, many foreign observers believed that Turkey might seek territorial revisions should the opportunity arise, underscoring the tension between its stated policies and regional aspirations. This was particularly relevant in the border regions near Syria, Iraq, and Iran, where Kurdish insurgencies were perceived to be supported by outside powers and posed a direct challenge to Turkey's territorial integrity. This historical context is essential for understanding the so-called ongoing Kurdish issue in Turkey, which reflects broader tensions between local conflicts and the effectiveness of international governance frameworks. As Francis O'Connor (2021) points out, the "Kurdish nation" spans four states: Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. The most significant portion of the Kurdish population resides in Turkey, between 12 and 15 million people, or about 18-23% of Turkey's total population (Gunter, 2010). Many Kurds refer to the Kurdistan region within Turkish borders as Northern Kurdistan, or Bakurê, as opposed to Turkish state-centered designations such as "the southeast" or "the east" (Jongerden, 2021; Gündoğan, 2011). Although the majority of Kurds in Turkey are Sunni Muslims, a significant minority identify as Alevi (Shankland, 2003), and the region is home to historical religious minorities such as the Yazidis and various Christian denominations (McDowall, 2004). Turkey's two main Kurdish languages, Kurmanji and Zaza, belong to the Indo-Iranic language family and are completely unintelligible to Turkish speakers (Galletti, 2003). Under Ottoman rule, Kurds were largely organized into tribes and enjoyed almost total political and cultural autonomy (Klein, 2011). However, it was during the 19th and 20th centuries, with the decline of the Ottoman Empire amid growing nationalist movements, that a more politicized Kurdish identity began to form. After the Ottoman defeat in World War I, the victorious European powers divided the Kurds

among the newly emerging states of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria (McDowall, 2004). The newborn Turkish state, built on a foundation of Turkish ethno-nationalism, sought to homogenize its ethnically and religiously diverse population (Özcan, 2006). The first two decades of the Turkish Republic saw 19 Kurdish insurgencies, all led by tribes and met with violent repression by the Turkish army (Olson, 1989; Kiliç, 1998). Indeed, Yeğen (2007) points out that: "While the collapse of the Ottoman Empire prompted a change in the course of Kurdish nationalism in the form of rendering Kurdish literates and notables striving for social and cultural demands some political nationalists looking for autonomy or independence, the foundation of the Turkish Republic as a nation-state granting no cultural and political rights to Kurds prompted a greater shift in the course of Kurdish nationalism" (Yeğen, 2007, p. 314). These uprisings caused significant loss of life (Jwaideh, 2006; Watts, 2000; McDowall, 2004) and were followed by an aggressive campaign aimed at eradicating Kurdish culture and language (Zeydanlioglu, 2013). After years of rebellion, the 1940s and 1950s were characterized by relative political calm in the Kurdish regions. The Kurdish issue resurfaced in the 1960s and 1970s, led by educated Kurdish youth rather than tribal elites. Inspired by successful anticolonial movements, the 1970s saw the emergence of numerous Kurdish groups dedicated to the armed struggle for Kurdistan's independence. Among these movements, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) became the most prominent and enduring (Gündoğan, 2011; Gunes, 2012; Bozarslan, 2012; Jongerden, 2021).

The repression of the Kurdish population in Turkey, when situated within a broader regional framework, cannot be viewed merely as a domestic matter—it has profound implications for regional geopolitics. Turkey's longstanding concerns over Kurdish autonomy have influenced its foreign policy toward Iraq, Syria, and Iran, each of which hosts significant Kurdish populations with varying degrees of political mobilization. In the Iraqi context, Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have oscillated between economic cooperation—particularly in energy trade—and military incursions against the PKK, illustrating Ankara's ambivalence toward Kurdish self-rule. In Iran, shared concerns over cross-border Kurdish insurgencies have historically produced security cooperation between the two states, even amidst geopolitical competition. The most significant transformation has transpired in Syria, marked by the establishment of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, commonly known as Rojava, in the aftermath of the Syrian civil conflict. This development has elicited a sequence of military interventions by Turkey, notably including Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018), and Operation Peace Spring (2019). Turkey regards the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military

counterpart, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as affiliates of the PKK, notwithstanding their vital contributions to the international coalition against ISIS (Saltsman and Gunter, 2023). The convergence of Kurdish political movements across national boundaries has exacerbated Turkey's security concerns and stimulated actions aimed at thwarting the institutional consolidation of Kurdish autonomy within Syria. Such responses have further complicated Ankara's relations with NATO allies and regional powers, including Russia and the United States, each of which has maintained variable alliances and strategic interests in northern Syria. Thus, the entanglement of the Kurdish issue within the framework of regional geopolitics extends beyond mere ethnic solidarity and transnational identity; it is equally shaped by the geopolitical realignments catalyzed by the Kurdish political agency. These dynamics reveal the inherent limitations of a solely state-centric, sovereignty-bound paradigm of regional order, thereby highlighting the imperative for the establishment of multilateral frameworks capable of engaging with non-state actors and accommodating aspirations that reside beneath the level of statehood. Consequently, Turkey's internal repression of Kurdish identities not only resonates within the confines of its foreign policy but also contributes significantly to the overarching destabilization of the region. This situation is exacerbated by the consistent failure of multilateral institutions to deliver effective and reliable mediation in these complex geopolitical interactions (Saltsman and Gunter, 2023). Ilia Xypolia (2016) points out how an often overlooked but crucial aspect of Turkish national identity in the last century has been its racial component. Historians and social scientists have largely neglected this aspect, focusing instead on the state's treatment of ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Armenians, Jews, and Greeks. Research on these issues rarely delves into the racial ideologies underlying Turkishness, particularly the concept of "pure race" (Üngör, 2012; Xypolia, 2016; Ergin, 2017; Özkut & Çolak, 2019). Official historical accounts and narratives of Turkish nationalism tend to omit or underestimate how race shaped the nation's identity (Ergin, 2017). The construction of race should be seen as part of a more extensive system of power and oppression, the meanings of which change the political context of the time. To fully understand the persistence of these racial ideas, it is necessary to examine them within the framework of a global racial hierarchy (Xypolia, 2016). "The Turkish nation was 'imagined', the nation's history could no longer be constituted as a derivation of religion or the history of the human species. In other words, the new historical narrative had to be based on a secular understanding of the material processes of the evolution of the human species" (Karaömerlioğlu & Yolun, 2020, p. 3).

The Kurdish issue, amid diminishing multilateral frameworks, challenges national governance and diplomacy. Historically, the situation of the Kurdish people in Turkey has been

shaped by marginalization and the evolving responses of the Turkish state. However, these dynamics are no longer confined to the borders of nation-states. In recent decades, the so-called Kurdish question has intertwined with broader geopolitical contexts, particularly the Syrian conflict and the emergence of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (Zan, 2015; Saltsman & Gunter, 2023; Alemdaroglu & Göçek, 2024). These developments have made addressing this issue within an increasingly pressured multilateral system even more complex. Global governance institutions, such as the United Nations and the European Union, have found it challenging to navigate the dense web of local conflicts and conflicting geopolitical interests that define the Kurdish issue (Buzan & Diez, 1999). This dilemma elucidates a structural tension inherent in the liberal international order, wherein the acknowledgment of minority claims frequently conflicts with the foundational principle of state sovereignty. Furthermore, the contemporary surge of populist and nationalist movements has increasingly constrained the normative and operational capacities of multilateral institutions, undermining their ability to function as impartial arbiters in conflicts involving marginalized ethnic or cultural groups.

This tension underscores a more profound crisis in multilateral governance: the lack of a cohesive framework capable of addressing minority rights as fundamentally transnational matters that necessitate more than merely symbolic commitments or ad hoc interventions. The stakes involve not only the efficacy of international institutions but also their normative legitimacy in addressing forms of structural repression that transcend national borders while remaining cloaked under the guise of national prerogative.

Multilateralism through the Kurdish Question

In the context of International Relations, multilateralism is an approach that favors cooperation among multiple states through global institutions or agreements to address common problems or achieve shared goals (Keohane, 1990; Acharya, 2014). Unlike a unilateral or bilateral approach, multilateralism implies the involvement of different international actors with shared management of decisions and responsibilities. However, the increasing prevalence of competing national interests has undermined the ability of multilateral institutions to deal with complex issues such as the Kurdish conflict. In a global framework in which multilateral relations are gradually weakening, a widespread distrust of international governance mechanisms is emerging, making it difficult to mediate effective solutions (Ruggie, 1992; Gunes, 2012; Tezcür, 2009).

Some scholars define multilateralism by the number of countries involved, such as Keohane (1990), who argues that multilateralism implies cooperation between three or more countries

through agreements or institutions, while bilateralism is between two countries and unilateralism implies one country acting alone. Ruggie (1992), however, argues that this definition does not capture the deeper aspect of multilateralism. According to Ruggie (1992), genuine multilateralism implies adherence to certain principles, such as international norms, and ensuring that all parties benefit equally over time. This makes it different from unilateralism or bilateralism, in which one or two countries control the process without regard to broader international rules. Multilateralism involves rules and institutions everyone respects (Karakoç, 2020). After World War II, multilateralism became the primary way countries worked together, and international organizations increased in number. Although bilateral agreements were still made during the Cold War, multilateral cooperation was dominant. However, as new global challenges emerged after the Cold War, the traditional state-centered model of multilateralism became less effective. Thus, a new, more flexible form of multilateralism, centered on temporary agreements rather than formal institutions, developed and has become increasingly important in the 21st century.

Several scholars have analyzed this new type of multilateralism (Fukuyama, 2005; Wright, 2009; Hampson & Heinbecker, 2011). Francis Fukuyama (2005) calls it "multi-multilateralism" (Wright, 2009; Karakoç, 2020), involving informal cooperation not always based on international law and including non-state actors. Morse (1992) and Keohane (1990) describe it as "contested multilateralism", where changing groups and less formal institutions define the new multilateralism. This form of cooperation is not always cooperative or rule-bound and is not only opposed to unilateralism or bilateralism. Other terms, such as "new multilateralism" or "multilateralism", are used to describe this shift, although informal cooperation has also existed in the past (Hampson & Heinbecker, 2011; Karakoç, 2020; Dee, 2024). A biopolitical framework can help understand how multilateralism and domestic politics interact with the Kurdish issue. The biopolitical approach highlights how the Turkish state, even with the tacit complicity of multilateral institutions, employs a discourse of "national security" to justify repressive measures toward the Kurdish population (Muller, 2011; Cagaptay, 2017; Dell, 2024). Esposito (2005) observes that the biopolitical device separates what is to be protected from what is excluded, finding a dynamic between inclusion and exclusion. Applying this observation by Esposito (2005) to the case under consideration, one can see how the Turkish government labels Kurdish identity as a threat, justifying repressive practices in this regard. This approach highlights how multilateral institutions can, albeit indirectly, legitimize sovereign control over domestic ethnic issues in the name of stability, effectively limiting the recognition of minority identities. The securitarian discourse prevalent within Turkish political

narratives conceptualizes Kurdish identity not merely as a cultural or political manifestation, but as a significant security threat to the integrity of the nation-state. This ideological transformation is consistent with the securitization theory articulated by the Copenhagen School, wherein an issue is discursively constructed as an existential threat to a referent object—most commonly, state identity or sovereignty—thereby legitimizing the implementation of extraordinary measures that transcend the parameters of conventional political practices (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Balzacq, 2011). In the specific context of Turkey, the aspirations of the Kurdish population for autonomy and cultural recognition are framed as destabilizing forces, thereby facilitating the state's justification for sustained repression and the abrogation of minority rights under the pretext of national security. This article employs a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Balzacq, 2011), biopolitics (Foucault, 1979; Agamben, 2005), and critical approaches to international governance (Weiss, 2006; Falk & Farer, 2013). It examines the extent to which Kurdish identity is influenced by both discursive securitization and biopolitical governance, placing these dynamics within the larger context of global multilateralism (Ihrig, 2014).

Notwithstanding their stated normative commitments to peace, human rights, and inclusivity, multilateral institutions frequently abstain from challenging state narratives under the pretext of upholding national sovereignty. Consequently, such reticence may inadvertently bolster exclusionary state practices and exacerbate the marginalization of sub-state actors, notably the Kurds. Methodologically, this article is based on a systematic literature review of both theoretical and empirical contributions across political theory, ethnic studies, and International Relations. The review enables a structured synthesis of the key scholarly debates on multilateralism, minority governance, and sovereignty, while grounding the analysis in a meta-theoretical lens that integrates conceptual and regional insights. This framework is employed to investigate two interrelated dimensions: first, the regional entanglements of the Kurdish issue—particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Iran—where securitization narratives transcend borders and shape regional alliances and interventions; and second, the role of international institutions and multilateral mechanisms in either challenging or enabling state-led repression. By linking securitization, biopolitics, and multilateral governance, this article aims to show how the Kurdish question exemplifies the structural tensions between a state-centric international order and the growing transnational demands for cultural autonomy and pluralism.

Research Methodology: Critical Analysis of the Kurdish Question in Turkey

In this research, I analyze the Kurdish question in Turkey by focusing on the denial of Kurdish culture and the mechanisms of Turkish governance. The study employs a systematic literature review that integrates traditional social science methodological principles with Michel Foucault's (1979) concept of discursive formations, as further developed by Shapiro (2013). This methodological framework enables a critical examination of how state governance has historically and systematically sought to suppress Kurdish identity and autonomy. It also allows for an exploration of the relationship between power and knowledge in shaping the socio-political construction of the "Kurdish issue", situating it within broader processes of state-making, securitization, and identity control. As pointed out by Shapiro (2013), the formulation of the research problem is often underestimated in the mainstream social sciences when, in fact, it represents a profoundly political process. The so-called Kurdish question in Turkey is not simply shaped as a cultural or ethnic issue but is rooted in historical, political, and discursive contexts where power relations influence the very definition of the "problem" (Shapiro, 2013). This study takes a critical approach to interrogate how the Turkish state's denial of Kurdish identity is not just a form of repression but part of a broader and more structured governance strategy. The research is based on a synthesis of critical discourse analysis and historical inquiry, both of which are central to the methodological approach suggested by Foucault (1979) for analyzing "discourses" as "political resources" (Shapiro, 2013). The inquiry explores the historical trajectories of Turkish state policies toward the Kurds, examining the evolution of these policies and the political discourses that justify their implementation. Moreover, the Foucauldian concept of "problematization" assesses how Kurdish identity has been systematically framed as a "threat" in Turkish political discourse. According to Foucault, problematization is not about representing an existing object or reflecting a subjective condition but refers to circumstances that allow knowledge to manifest itself and take shape (Foucault, 1969; Barnett, 2024).

In parallel, Roberto Esposito (2005) points out that: "The biopolitical device implies the distinction and separation between what is to be protected and what is to be excluded, founding a constant dynamic between the inside and the outside of the body politic" (Esposito, 2005, p. 128). These theoretical approaches provide insight into how the Turkish state uses the discourse of security to justify policies of exclusion and repression against the Kurdish population (Yeğen, 2007; Gürses, 2020; Ongur and Zengin, 2019; Oran, 2020; Jongerden, 2021).

The analysis will focus on the discursive strategies used by the Turkish state to justify the suppression of Kurdish culture, applying Foucault's conceptual framework of "regimes of truth" (Shapiro, 2013). Particular attention will be paid to securitization processes, which have

transformed Kurdish identity into a subject of national security, legitimizing the adoption of exceptional measures, such as emergency laws and military interventions. By positioning the Kurdish question within an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, this study aims to reveal the historical and political forces that continue to shape the denial of Kurdish culture and autonomy in Turkey. The methodology adopted recognizes that these processes are not static but dynamically interact with broader global and regional changes in governance and power (Alemdaroglu & Göçek, 2023).

The "Culture of Fear" and the Difficulties of Multilateralism in the Kurdish Question.

It is often challenging, if not impossible, to pinpoint when a group begins to demand statehood or when an ethnic group transforms into a nation (Černy, 2018). In many cases, this can only be determined in retrospect, and it is not always clear whether the person or group making these demands truly represents the entire community. Ethnic identity and nationhood should not be viewed as fixed or rigid concepts but as dynamic and constantly evolving. They are shaped by social and political forces and change depending on the situation (Černy, 2018). According to this perspective, ethnic and national identities are not static but are influenced by different discourses (or ways of thinking and talking about them) that vary over time. Depending on the context, these instances can shift from more extreme to moderate positions (Černy, 2018). Rather than seeing ethnic and national identity as part of a clear and linear progression, such as the transition from an ethnic group to a nation to a state, it is more correct to see them as flexible and continuous conversations. Accordingly, Černy (2018) employs the term 'ethnic/ethnic-nationalist conflict' to describe the complex and evolving interplay of identities and claims, emphasizing how these do not develop along unambiguous or linear trajectories but rather in a fluid discursive context adaptable to historical and political circumstances (Tezcür, 2009; Černy 2018; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2019).

Hannes Černy (2018) draws on Michel Foucault's (1969, 1979) idea of 'discursive formations', which are how certain ideas and discourses are organized around a specific logic or set of values. These ideas shape the way people act and think. In this sense, ethnicity and nationality are more than just identities or beliefs; they are part of a broader discourse, shaped by the historical and social context, and always open to change. Understanding the logic behind these discourses is crucial to understanding the conflicts themselves. One of the fundamental aspects of the complexity of the so-called Kurdish issue in Turkey is the 'emotion of fear', specifically the 'fear of the state', which, as Ramazan Aras (2014) points out, represents not

only a subjective experience but also a social and cultural practice. This emotion is constructed and manipulated by the state as a tool to legitimize violence and control over the population. This dynamic has been central to handling the Kurdish conflict in Turkey (Aras, 2014). The 'fear of the state' creates a culture of fear that becomes an integral part of the daily life of communities under siege and serves as a mechanism of control not only on an individual but also on a collective level. In the Kurdish case, state violence and constant repression have led to the creation of a 'culture of fear' (Sluka 1995; Aras, 2014), which has devastating effects not only on the Kurdish population but also on regional dynamics. In this context, Zeynep N. Kaya and Matthew Whiting (2019) point out that the handling of the Kurdish conflict has evolved and, especially since the 1980s, has become closely linked to the clash between the Turkish state and the PKK. The latter, originating from left-wing movements in the 1970s, aimed to liberate Kurdistan and establish an independent, united, socialist Kurdish state. The lack of progress in the political representation of the Kurds led many activists to join left-wing groups in the hope of advancing their cause. Still, frustration with the apathy of the left concerning Kurdish issues led to the emergence of Kurdish movements with radical leanings. It was against this backdrop that the PKK launched its guerrilla campaign in 1984, fueled not only by socio-economic inequalities but also by the systematic repression operated by the Turkish state (Kaya & Whiting, 2019).

In response to the PKK's advance, the Turkish state has taken increasingly repressive measures, including the destruction of villages, mass arrests, and torture. Such actions have only strengthened the legitimacy of the PKK in the eyes of many Kurdish communities, consolidating the cycle of violence and resistance. This process entrenched a 'culture of fear', perpetuating the conflict and reinforcing state control through securitization practices (Waever, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998; Taureck, 2006; McDonald, 2008). State policy has thus become increasingly oriented towards the 'securitization' of the Kurdish issue, i.e., its reduction to a national security problem to be managed by military and police measures. These dynamics, accentuated by the military coup of 1980, further radicalized the Kurdish movement, which found guerrilla warfare and armed conflict the only way to resist systematic violence. In parallel, during the 1990s, some attempts at a political resolution of the so-called Kurdish question emerged. However, although figures like Turgut Özal tried to adopt a less militarized approach, the predominance of the security forces in the state always limited any real progress. The electoral efforts of Kurdish parties also failed to achieve significant results, as the Turkish state responded with constant political repression and the banning of several Kurdish parties (Kaya & Whiting 2019).

In this context, the generalized fear of the state (Aras, 2014) fuels cycles of violence and resistance, and the reaction of opposition groups, such as the PKK, is often a direct response to the violence suffered (Aras, 2014). The Kurdish question is thus inscribed in a broader context in which sovereign state power not only represses but turns life itself into "bare life" (Agamben 2005), i.e., a condition in which violence and control are the order of the day and the law loses its protective value. In Turkey, securitization practices and the imposition of states of exception (OHALs) are long-established strategies (Balzacq, 2011; Yeğen, 2007; Agamben, 2005). Such mechanisms not only aim at the accumulation of power but also serve as powerful tools in the hands of a few elites who can profoundly influence both the political system and society (Lemke, 2005; Özkut & Aşçı, 2020). Regardless of the role that the Gülen Organization may or may not have played in the coup attempt of 15 July 2015, the AKP has adopted similar tactics to those used in the past by Gülen and the AKP itself against the military power network during the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials (Cagaptay, 2017). Although the objectives of securitarian discourse have evolved, there remain consistent strategies in play: identifying an internal enemy as a national threat, leveraging media and digital platforms to propagate this danger, implementing legal reforms to purge dissent, and enacting extraordinary measures to underline the urgency of the threat. As Cook (2017) notes, "the regime's goal is to preserve its authority by portraying dissent as a fundamental threat to national security." (Cook, 2017, p. 21). This aligns with Aydindag and Isiksal (2021), who emphasize the strategic role of the state in amplifying perceived threats through "heightened securitization policies aimed at suppressing political opposition" (Aydindag and Isiksal, 2021, p. 12). Using Maurizio Geri's (2016) analysis: "we can say that the securitization theory can be applied to the Kurdish case as there is evidence that supports it. This jeopardizes Turkey's democracy and is not helpful to the country's future. Today, Turkey is no longer considered, by scholars or by international indexes, as a real effective and substantive democracy because of the treatment of Kurdish minority, as well as the crackdown on freedom of expression and media" (Geri, 2016, p. 37).

According to Mesut Yeğen (2004), there is an intrinsic connection between the narrative of the Turkish state and the social dynamics in which Kurdish identity is constituted. Yeğen (2007), emphasizes that the identification of the so-called Kurdish question with reactionary politics, tribal resistance, and regional backwardness is not only a discursive strategy but a way to marginalize and exclude Kurdish identity. Recreating a historical genealogy through Janet Klein's (2011) studies shows how the Kurdish emirates, historically organized into autonomous units, had enjoyed a degree of independence until the 16th century, a time when pressure from the Ottoman and Iranian powers forced the Kurds to side with the Ottomans against the Iranians

(Klein, 2011). This change marked the beginning of a forced inclusion of the Kurdish region into the Ottoman Empire, further compromising Kurdish autonomy. Yeğen (2004, 2007) points out that Kurdish social structures, including their traditional life forms, constitute Kurdish ethnopolitical identity. The Turkish narrative that equates Kurdish culture with elements of backwardness and tribal resistance only reduces Kurdish identity to mere negative categories, thus pushing away the possibility of recognition and appreciation of cultural diversity. This leads to the need to explore the 'social space' in which Kurdish identity is formed and developed and how state violence and its rhetoric of exclusion influence this dynamic: "The constitution and exclusion of Kurdish identity were intrinsically related to the project of transforming an a-national, de-central and disintegrated political, administrative and economic space into a national, central and integrated one. Indeed, the exclusion of Kurdish identity was an outcome of that project" (Yeğen, 2004 p. 226). In parallel, the application of Agamben's (2005) theoretical approach in the Kurdish context provides us with a lens through which to read these dynamics, his concept of 'bare life' describing how people can be reduced to biological existences devoid of rights and dignity (Lemke, 2005; Morgensen, 2011). Thus, while Yeğen (2004, 2007) highlights how the state discourse excludes and annihilates Kurdish identity, Agamben (2005) suggests that this exclusion leads to a condition of life in which people no longer enjoy the protections guaranteed by law, becoming targets of relentless state violence. In sum, both thinkers offer a critique of how state power not only represses but also structures the conditions of everyday life, eroding the identity and autonomy of the Kurds. The relationship between Yeğen's (2004, 2007) thought. Agamben's (2005) theories manifest themselves in the understanding of how the Turkish state works to exclude Kurdish identity through a narrative that associates the Kurdish issue with elements of reactionary politics, tribal resistance, and regional backwardness concerning the debate on tribalism Ahmad Mohammadpour and Kamal Soleimani (2019) point out how Kurdish identity is often considered pre-modern, while the role of the state is seen as essential for the modernization of 'tribal entities'. This narrative justifies colonial practices, labeling ethnic resistance as a form of 'pre-modernity.' This dynamic generates a conflict between the state, a symbol of secular modernity, and Kurdish identity, seen as an expression of tribalism and banditry (Özoğglu, 1996; Amarilyo, 2014; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2019). As a result, this approach tends to validate an official discourse, which is not uncommon among some left-wing currents in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, where the intelligentsia of the dominant communities adopt an ethno-nationalist interpretation and view the nationalism of the dominated communities as reactionary and a threat to national unity (Houston, 2008).

However, it is essential to note that criticism of the use of ideological categories does not imply that community relations or kinship systems are not influenced by history. The aim is to question the asserted 'universality' of terms such as tribe and tribalism (Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2019). These concepts, with their contemporary definitions, were created in the colonial context to represent non-Western populations as homogeneous, in contrast to the uniqueness of the West. In recent years, a significant body of critical research has emerged that situates the production of such categories within European identity formation, interpreting the attempt to define tribalism as a reflection of European self-perception, seen as a model of unity in a plural reality (Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2019). This exclusion towards the Kurdish community in Turkey is not only a matter of cultural denial. Still, it represents a form of biopolitics, where the state not only exerts control over the lives of Kurds but also shapes the conditions of their existence (Yeğen, 2004; Rabinow & Rose, 2006; Ergin, 2008; Morgensen, 2011; Al, 2013). As Yeğen (2007) argues, the social structures that define Kurdish identity are attacked through the use of state violence, creating a space in which identity practices are suppressed. Baskın Oran (2020) elaborates on this dynamic, showing how the Turkish state uses the concept of 'national unity' to justify the denial of cultural and political rights to minorities. In this context, Kurdish identity is perceived not only as a threat to state sovereignty but also as a challenge to the ethnic and cultural uniformity that the state seeks to maintain. Oran (2020) also emphasizes that policies of forced assimilation and the denial of official recognition of minorities reinforce state control, allowing for systematic repression of identities deemed "divergent".

In parallel, Agamben (2005) suggests that in this condition of "bare life", people are reduced to mere biological existences, depriving them of the rights and protections that the law should guarantee. In this way, both Yeğen (2004, 2007) and Agamben (2005) highlight how state control not only represses identities but also transforms life itself into a battlefield, where the authenticity and autonomy of Kurdish identity are eroded by systematic and institutionalized violence: 'The state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the legal order itself, it defines the concept of the threshold or limit of law' (Agamben, 2005, p. 12). The complex interplay between sovereign power, biopolitics, and challenges to multilateralism is vividly illustrated in the context of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, mainly through the theoretical framework developed by Julian Reid (2005) in his research on the 'war on terror'. Reid (2005) argues that referring to the US conflict in Iraq, this conflict marks a significant regression in the international system, characterized by a reassertion of sovereign power, particularly by the US. This phenomenon challenges the frameworks of

multilateralism, which depend on cooperative international governance to address global issues. Within the Turkish state, a similar reassertion of sovereignty can be observed in its policies towards the Kurdish population. The Turkish government has framed its military and political actions against Kurdish groups, such as the PKK, as vital to national security, thus prioritizing state sovereignty over collective international frameworks or human rights norms (Saltsman & Gunter, 2023). The notion of biopolitics, highlighted by Reid (2005), offers further insights into the management of Kurdish identity in Turkey. The Turkish state employs both overt military actions and subtle biopolitical strategies to regulate the lives of its Kurdish citizens and to assimilate or marginalize their cultural and political aspirations. These policies serve as control mechanisms that exemplify how biopolitical forces function to sustain state authority. This control manifests itself not only in the suppression of Kurdish identity but also in the broader socio-political landscape in which the state actively shapes the life experiences of the Kurdish population. Reid's (2005) discussion of the 'return of imperialism' provides a historical context that resonates with the struggles of the Kurdish people. This perspective highlights how the Kurdish population has often been positioned between competing local, regional, and global interests, leading to a unique form of imperialistic governance that persists in the behavior of the contemporary Turkish state. This historical framework emphasizes the need to recognize the continuity of imperialist tendencies in managing Kurdish identity and autonomy, revealing how these dynamics are not mere remnants of the past but active forces shaping current realities. Imperialism is re-emerging in how governance operates today, not only through controlling territories but by influencing and shaping the conditions under which life is perceived and governed (Reid, 2005, p. 243). The limits of multilateralism are further underlined by the Turkish state's response to international criticism of its treatment of the Kurdish population. While various international bodies support human rights and the recognition of minority rights, Turkey often interprets these interventions as unwarranted interference in its internal affairs. This stance illustrates the tension between national sovereignty and global advocacy, revealing a landscape in which the assertive claims of state authority often limit the effectiveness of multilateralism in addressing the rights of minority populations.

The theoretical framework Reid (2005) developed leads us to a deeper understanding of the Kurdish question in Turkey, suggesting that contemporary power dynamics cannot be interpreted solely as a regression to traditional forms of imperialism. Instead, a complex interrelationship between sovereign state power and biopolitical control fundamentally shapes the realities of Kurdish identity and resistance. Ultimately, the intersection of Reid's (2005) insights with the Kurdish question reveals critical implications for the discourse on sovereignty

and identity in contemporary international relations. By acknowledging the intricate power dynamics, scholars can better understand the ongoing struggles for Kurdish rights and autonomy while exploring the broader implications of multilateralism in an increasingly complex global landscape.

In parallel, Mehmet Gürses' (2020) analysis highlights how, since the 2000s, Turkey has undergone significant change under AKP leadership. The party's initial reformist agenda, which included openings towards the Kurdish issue through the so-called 'Kurdish Openness Process' (later redefined as the 'National Unity and Brotherhood Project'), marked an attempt to reduce Kurdish cultural and linguistic expression restrictions. However, the failure of these opening-up policies and the subsequent return to repression demonstrated the limits of the government's commitment to conflict resolution. Starting in 2015, with the end of the ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish state, there was an escalation of violence, culminating in the failed coup in 2016. This event allowed President Erdoğan to consolidate his power further, replacing many critical military and civilian elite figures and accentuating the authoritarianism of the government (Falk & Farer, 2013; Bechev, 2022). Gürses (2020) observes that despite the massive disparity in military and economic resources between the PKK and the Turkish state, the Kurdish insurgency not only survived but continued to receive support from the Kurdish population, as evidenced by the electoral success of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the 2019 local elections.

This theoretical and historical framework, obtained by combining the reflections of Reid (2005) and Gürses (2020), provides essential insights into the extent of the Kurdish people's struggles for the recognition of their rights and autonomy. Indeed, Reid's (2005) reflection suggests that contemporary power dynamics cannot be reduced to a dichotomy between state sovereignty and international interference but must be analyzed in light of the complex interactions between state control, global governance, and the ongoing struggle for minority rights. Within the framework of multilateralism, the Kurdish issue serves not only illustrative of the pervasive global tension between the principle of state sovereignty and the recognition of minority rights, but it also serves as a particularly illuminating case where these tensions are exacerbated by the ongoing denial of recognition and legal status. The Kurdish situation exemplifies how sovereign authorities effectively reduce certain populations to what Agamben (2005) refers to as "bare life". Meanwhile, multilateral institutions, encumbered by the doctrine of non-interference, often fail to intervene in a significant manner. This interplay highlights the inherent limitations of the contemporary multilateral order in addressing claims for sub-state autonomy, especially when such claims confront foundational narratives of national identity.

Thus, the intersection of Reid's (2006) and Gürses (2020) analysis allows us to understand better the challenges faced by the Kurdish population in Turkey and raises fundamental questions about the ability of multilateralism to effectively respond to demands for justice and autonomy in an increasingly complex global context, demonstrating how, despite state control and repression, support for Kurdish self-determination remains strong.

As pointed out by Baskın Oran (2020), the management of minorities in Turkey has deep roots. It has evolved from Ottoman practices of imperial administration of ethnic and religious diversity to current state policies aimed at forced assimilation. "As the main distinguishing feature, language was a key vehicle of assimilation" (Üngör, 2012, p. 128). Both the bans on speaking and publishing in Kurdish, as well as the forceful and subtle promotion of Turkish in people's lives, play a crucial role in creating the target population' (Flader, 2014, p. 42); this passage highlights how state control was not limited to physical repression but deeply affected the Kurds' cultural and linguistic identity, thus linking issues of sovereignty, autonomy, and assimilation (Vali, 2003). As noted by Coşkun et al. (2011), "Language can be a tool used to transform a population with different ethnic and linguistic identities into the semblance of a coherent whole in the interest of the nation. The more efficiently and widely this tool is used, the more inevitable is the leveling out of divergent attitudes and the production (and reproduction) of a standard language and culture based on the principles of nationalism." (Coşkun et al., 2011, p. 14). This process of linguistic assimilation shows how state policies have sought to shape the Kurdish population to fit the principles of Turkish nationalism, reducing cultural and linguistic divergences.

In Turkey, the so-called Kurdish question has evolved from an issue of uncertain recognition to one characterized by denial and systematic repression, reflecting the broader struggle for identity and representation within a state increasingly defined by authoritarianism (Yeğen, 2004). The shift in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rhetoric from recognition to outright rejection illustrates the challenges Kurdish communities face in a political landscape that marginalizes their voices. As the HDP struggles to assert its presence in a context of increasing oppression, the international community faces a crucial test of multilateralism (Yeğen, 2007; Mofidi, 2024). This article explores the intricate dynamics of governance, human rights, and cultural denial surrounding the Kurdish question, examining the limits of multilateral responses to human rights violations in Turkey and the potential of collaborative frameworks to foster dialogue and promote Kurdish rights. The interplay between domestic repression and international advocacy reveals both the limitations and opportunities inherent in multilateralism

as a means to address the enduring grievances of the Kurdish people (Van Bruinessen, 1992; Karakoç, 2020; O'Connor, 2021; Dee, 2024; Ahmedi, 2024).

Conclusions

Analyzing the so-called Kurdish question through the theoretical apparatus proposed in this article highlights the inherent complexities of international governance in the 21st century. As Turkey continues to oscillate between strategies of repression and openings towards a more inclusive management of its minorities, multilateralism emerges as an area of potential exploration to understand how different actors might interact on this issue. The critical theories and analytical perspectives of scholars such as Agamben (2005), Foucault (1979), Yeğen (2004, 2007), Reid (2006), Černy (2018), Gürses (2020), and Oran (2020) allow for an in-depth exploration of the historical and political dynamics influencing the Kurdish reality, highlighting the tensions between aspirations for cultural autonomy and sovereign control. In particular, the biopolitical approach emphasizes how international institutions can act as instruments of large-scale control, legitimized by states of emergency (health, environmental, security) that temporarily suspend local rights and norms in the name of a higher order. In this perspective, multilateralism could, in some cases, appear as an extension of the 'governmentality' described by Foucault (1979), which operates not only through direct repression but also through practices of managing the lives and choices of populations, potentially reducing local self-determination (Jaeger, 2010). In light of a growing mistrust of international governance mechanisms and the emergence of nationalist movements, questions could be raised about the effectiveness of multilateralism in addressing transnational issues, such as the so-called Kurdish question. It is interesting to consider whether and how the multilateral approach can meet the demands of recognition and justice for minorities, considering local specificities and demands for autonomy, without these demands being interpreted as mere instances of biopolitical management (Ekici, 2021). Population management through biopolitical governance often extends beyond national borders, presenting itself as a universal intervention driven by humanitarian motives. This approach to global governance risks overshadowing local specificities and replacing independent self-governance with external regulatory structures (Kelly, 2010). This article is based on a systematic literature review and does not rely on primary empirical data. The deliberate choice to engage solely with secondary sources is rooted in the objective to furnish a meta-theoretical and conceptual analysis of the Kurdish question. By engaging with diverse interdisciplinary scholarly works, this methodology facilitates a critical interrogation of the construction, framing, and treatment of the Kurdish issue within national and international discourses. Although future inquiries may integrate empirical data to

augment this framework, the present study aspires to enrich the theoretical and normative discussions surrounding multilateralism, state sovereignty, and minority rights through the provision of a reflective synthesis of extant knowledge.

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