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Subjects in Contested Space: The Securitization of the Kurdish Language in Syria**

ذوات في فضاءات متنازع عليها: أمانة اللغة الكردية في سورية

Abstract: Kurdish identity has been perceived as a security issue by the state in Syria. Therefore, successive governments have taken measures against the use and perceptibility of the Kurdish language, as a manifestation of Kurdish identity, in public spaces. The securitization of the language has not only operated through legal measures but has also spread to ordinary Arab Syrians perceiving the Kurdish language as an undesirable presence in public spaces. In Kurdish-majority areas, the effect of these measures could be minimized, and those opposing its use could be challenged. Drawing upon ethnographic data collected from interviews with Syrian Kurds, and the Foucauldian concept of power, this study analyzes the deep-rooted subjugation in Syrian social relations. It aims to understand power relations beyond the dichotomy of domination, and to recognize the power that a minoritized community facing repressive measures can exercise by reproducing and validating the use of a language.

Keywords: Kurdish Language; Syria; Kurds; Securitization; Public Space; Power Relations.

الملخص: نظرت الدولة في سورية إلى الهوية الكردية على أنها قضية أمنية؛ واتخذت بناءً على ذلك إجراءات ضد استخدام اللغة الكردية (بوصفها تعبيراً عن هذه الهوية) وحضورها المُدرّك في المجال العام. ولم يدخل التمثل الأمني لهذه اللغة حيز الممارسة على مستوى الإجراءات القانونية فحسب، بل تعداه ليمسّ عامة الناس في استخدامهم إياها، معتبراً ذلك فعلاً شائناً ينبغي التصدي له في المجال العام. ومع ذلك فقد أمكن، في المناطق ذات الأغلبية الكردية وفي إطار العلاقات المتبادلة، الحد من أثر هذه الإجراءات وتحدي أولئك المعارضين لاستخدام اللغة الكردية. تستند هذه الدراسة إلى معطيات إثنوغرافية جُمعت خلال مقابلات مع مستجيبين من الأكراد السوريين، وإلى مفهوم السلطة الفوكوي، لتقدّم تحليلاً لمختلف علاقات الإخضاع المتجذرة بعمق في العلاقات الاجتماعية. وهي تهدف بذلك إلى الوصول إلى فهمٍ لعلاقات السلطة يتجاوز حدود علاقة السيطرة ثنائية البعد، وإلى التعرف إلى نوع السلطة التي يمكن أن تمارسها أقلية ما، بوصفها جماعة تواجه إجراءات قمعية، حينما تصرّ على استخدام لغتها الممنوعة وتعيد إنتاجها وتصدق هذه الممارسات.

كلمات مفتاحية: اللغة الكردية؛ سورية؛ الأكراد؛ الأمانة؛ المجال العام؛ علاقات السلطة.

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Introduction

Soon after the independence of Syria in 1946, the new Arab-dominated state accelerated assimilationist policies against its Kurdish population, by imposing restrictive measures targeting various aspects of life such as economics, education, demography, and cultural expressions such as the Kurdish language. The impact of these measures on the everyday life of people has been studied in great detail, and NGOs and foreign affairs offices in the region have widely reported on them.¹ As the expression of Kurdish identity has primarily been repressed in the public space, the difficulties Kurds endured in these spaces were the focal point of these studies and reports. However, by shifting the focus from macro to micro relations and decentring the state, the Kurds can be seen to have also exercised a great deal of power, both as a community to minimize the impact of measures taken against the expression of their language in public spaces, and as individuals by challenging the security discourse among other Syrians.

The ethnographic data discussed in this paper reveals that a dichotomic analysis of power relations casts a shadow over the power that the Kurds have exercised as a community and the agency that they had as subjects. Limiting the complexity of everyday life relations to a dichotomy of domination leaves much of the power relations unexamined. The Foucauldian concept of power² enables an examination of power relations in their regional forms, and this paper employs the concept to ensure a diffused power relations analysis. The concept is insufficient to fully address life under authoritarian regimes because for Foucauldian power relations to function, there is a need for some level of liberty. However, as the discourse securitizing Kurdish language goes beyond legal terms and also comes into effect in bodies who perceive the Kurdish language as an abject object, it enables an understanding of the subjugated bodies of the security discourse and the power relations rooted deep in reciprocal relations. In spaces where Kurds constitute the majority, measures against the use of the Kurdish language could be minimized, and interventions could be challenged; thus, a power relations analysis also helps us to recognize the agency that a minoritized group as a social body and as individuals could exercise under repressive domination.

The paper begins with a synopsis of restrictive measures taken against the use of the Kurdish language in public spaces, then continues with ethnographic data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 among Syrian Kurds in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In collecting the data, categories such as gender, age, belief, education, and place of origin (such as rural and urban, and Kurdish-majority and

1 Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*, Library of Modern Middle East Studies, no. 144 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Anita L. P. Burdett (ed.), *Records of the Kurds: Territory, Revolt and Nationalism, 1831-1979: British Documentary Sources*, vol. 12, Cambridge Archive Editions, 13 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Alessandra Galié & Kerim Yildiz, *Development in Syria: A Gender and Minority Perspective* (London: Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2015); Michael M. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014); *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime*, Human Rights Watch Books (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); "Syria: The Silenced Kurds," *Human Rights Watch/Middle East*, vol. 8, no. 4 (E) (October 1996); "Syria: End Persecution of Kurds," *Human Rights Watch*, 26/11/2009, accessed on 8/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3HOdDhC>; Robert Lowe, "The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria," in: D. Romano & M. Gurses (eds.), *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, revised and upd. ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies, no. 16 (London/ New York: Routledge, 2009); "U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2006 – Syria," *Report*, United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 6/3/2007, accessed on 8/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3M3HOnj>; Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People* (London/ Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press in association with Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2005); Kerim Yildiz & Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds in Syria: Denial of Rights and Identity* (London: Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2004).

2 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Robert Hurley (trans.), 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1982); Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984," J. D. Gauthier (trans.), *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 12, no. 2-3 (1987); Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon & Peter Miller (eds.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (trans.), 2nd Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Michel Foucault, *Power*, James D. Faubion (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Michel Foucault: vol. 3. (London: Penguin, 2002); Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana & François Ewald (eds.), David Macey (trans.), 1st ed. (New York: Picador, 2003).

minority areas) were considered. Interviews took place with over 80 people in the Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok governorates, where I met participants in their houses, public spaces such as cafés, their workplaces, and refugee camps. Participants' personal experiences and observations shared during these interviews demonstrated how a discourse of securitization was internalized by ordinary people, and how it could be challenged and minimized. It employs the Foucauldian concept of power to analyse the ethnographic data, shedding light on how social domination functions through ordinary individuals who counter the state's domination of public space and its securitization of the Kurdish language.

Public space as a concept encompasses all areas belonging to the public and which the state attempts to regulate through legal measures. Hereafter, the term will mainly be used to refer to public institutions. The control of many of these spaces had fallen into the hands of the public since the state as an administrative body and mediator had fallen short in its ambitions. For example, the state no longer regulated discussions about speaking Kurdish, while state agents went beyond legal boundaries. These boundaries had never been recognized by the Kurds anyway, as the ethnographic data demonstrates.

Public Domination Through Repressive Measures

As a fundamental characteristic of Kurdish identity, the Kurdish language has been a primary target of the Syrian state's assimilationist policies. Restricting the use of the Kurdish language, attempting to replace it with Arabic, and limiting the expression of other Kurdish cultural practices were key elements of the state's efforts to minimize the presence of Kurdish identity in the public sphere. Constraints on the use of the language included preventing its use in public services; forbidding the production of Kurdish cultural materials such as music, films, plays, and publications; prohibiting businesses without Arabic names in Kurdish-populated regions; refusing the use of Kurdish names for birth registrations; and forbidding Kurdish as the language of instruction in any means of education.³ In government directive No. 15801 issued by the Ministry of Local Administration on 18 May 1977, the Kurdish names of towns and villages were replaced with Arabic names.⁴ By decrees, the use of Kurdish in workplaces was prohibited in 1986, and singing non-Arabic songs at weddings and festivals was forbidden in 1988.⁵ Beginning in 1992, people living in al-Hasakah province reported to Human Rights Watch that they had been prevented from registering their babies with Kurdish names. When asked about decree No. 122 prohibiting Kurdish names, government officials attempted to justify it by pointing to the ban on the use of foreign languages (including Kurdish) in workplaces, and the absence in Arabic of some sounds or letters in the Kurdish language.⁶ Other reported legal measures included a resolution in May 2000 that prohibited trade in Kurdish music cassettes, videos, and discs and closed down Kurdish cultural centres and bookshops,⁷ and decrees No. 49 and No. 59 in 2008 prohibiting any real estate sales on the border with Turkey to non-Arabs and the demolition of residential buildings in Kurdish areas under the pretext of urban planning.⁸

Although these restrictions did not specifically mention the Kurdish language, with the imposition of Arabic as the only means of communication in public institutions and then specifically permitting instructions and materials in Armenian, Syriac, Hebrew, French, English, Turkish, and other languages

3 *Syria Unmasked*; "Syria: The Silenced Kurds," p. 6; "Syria: End Persecution of Kurds"; Lowe, p. 235; Carsten Wieland, *Syria at Bay: Secularism, Islamism and 'Pax Americana'* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006), p. 47; Yildiz & Montgomery, pp. 98-99.

4 "Syria: The Silenced Kurds," p. 28.

5 *Ibid.*; McDowall, p. 476.

6 "Syria: The Silenced Kurds," p. 28.

7 Gunter, p. 21.

8 Myriam Ababsa, "The End of a World: Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria (2007-2010)," in: Raymond Hinnebusch & Tina Zintl (eds.), *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, vol. 1: Political Economy and International Relations (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015); "Systematic Housing and Land Rights Violations against Syrian Kurds," *Report*, NGO Submission to the UN Human Rights Council, Universal Periodic Review of Syrian Arab Republic, Twelfth Session of the UPR Working Group, Habitat International Coalition, Housing and Land Rights Network in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC, 3-14 October 2011.

but not Kurdish, it was evident that the Kurdish language was the sole target of the legal measures. Ethnic minorities such as Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews could continue to use their languages as that of instruction in private schools and places of worship.⁹ However, despite being native to Syria and constituting about 20 per cent of the population, the Kurds were denied the collective rights that other ethnic groups could enjoy. Therefore, the policies of homogenization targeting ethnic minorities since 1949¹⁰ and suppression of non-Arab communities¹¹ mainly targeted the Kurdish population, as reflected in the reports of the Foreign Affairs offices in the region.¹²

An interesting example of this was also provided during the ethnographic research by Diyar, a man in his mid-30s from Qamişlo (Qamishli), the most populated Kurdish city in Syria, as follows:

Sometimes we would learn [writing] Kurdish ourselves at school. When I was 15 or 16, one takes it as a challenge, it was risky, but we did not know much about it (risk) When they would say it was forbidden, what would we do? For example, there was a class of gymnastics. They (students) would go out to play, but we would tell the Kurds to stay: 'do not go out to play; we have a Kurdish class'. There would be someone teaching us Kurdish. Once they caught me. There was an Arab girl that we liked very much. She was also a student.

When was this?

At school, when I was 16, in the tenth grade. She left her water bottle behind. We were on the third floor. When she came to fetch it, she saw us sitting, and me writing the letters on the board [he chuckles]. She passed by; we thought that she would not make any complaint about us, she would not tell. [But] just after she left, the principal (muhaccah) came in and asked: you are learning Kurdish, are not you? I knew a little bit of Turkish; in the last few years, I forgot much of it. The Kurdish letters are the same [similar] to the Turkish ones. There is not much difference. He came and asked us, 'you are learning Kurdish, are not you?' I said: 'no sir (ustad), I know Turkish, and they wanted to learn Turkish, so I am teaching them Turkish'. In this way, I saved the situation. I told him that he could take a photo and show anyone that knows Turkish, and they would say that they [the letters] are Turkish. He said: 'do not teach Turkish either, do not do it!'

As the children knew that teaching Kurdish was forbidden, they would do it in such secrecy that Diyar described "being caught" as if he had been engaged in highly illegal activity. Since the use of Turkish was allowed, unlike Kurdish, Diyar used the similarities between their alphabets to avoid facing some disciplinary measures. Although there were no legal grounds to prevent students from learning a language by themselves, Diyar, the principal, students learning Kurdish, and their female colleague knew that it was dangerous to learn and teach Kurdish at school.

Diyar and the students engaging in Kurdish teaching and learning in secrecy, the female classmate reporting it, and the principal seeking to prevent it, all acted in line with a discourse that securitized the Kurdish language. Although the female Arab student was a classmate the Kurdish students liked, she felt that she had encountered an illegal action which she took as her duty to report immediately. Upon being notified, the principal felt the need to take immediate action to prevent the Kurdish language from being

9 Thomas Colleto, *Syria: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: United States Govt Printing Office, 1988), pp. 68-70; "U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2006 – Syria."

10 Tejel, p. 41.

11 John McHugo, *Syria: A Recent History*, Paperback ed. (London: Saqi, 2015), p. 257.

12 Burdett.

taught at the school. It is apparent that both the female classmate and the principal did not ponder *why* they should report and act against learning a language at school. The reactions to teaching Kurdish went in parallel with the discourse of securitization that triggered some prescribed behaviours in their bodies, where discourses reside as effects and function through their ontological actions.¹³

On the other hand, unlike in public spaces, in the social domain of everyday life where Kurds and Arabs lived together, securitization could not hold the ground. When I asked Henife, a woman in her early 60s from Efrin, how she learned Arabic without going to school, she told me that in her community, they lived together with Arabs who also knew Kurdish very well:

Do you know Arabic?

Yes, I do.

How did you learn?

There were Arabs among us.

So, by interacting?

Yes, they visited us; we visited them. ... They know Kurdish and Arabic; we also know Kurdish and Arabic.

They also speak Kurdish?

Of course, if they spoke Kurdish, you would not know that they were Arabs [her son sitting with us confirms]. If people spoke Arabic, you would not know that they are Kurds.

I see, so Kurds knew Arabic, and Arabs knew Kurdish.

Yes, they grew up in the village, and we also grew up in the village; we were all in one village.

The Arabs living with Kurds and interacting with them on a daily basis embraced the Kurdish language, just as Kurds living with Arabs adopted the Arabic language. The cleavage between the state-regulated public spaces and the social environment of everyday life was a matter of the discourse of securitization being internalized by one party and not the other. Therefore, despite the legal actions being in place at the macro level, the use of the language at the micro- and meso-levels not only continued with the reproduction of the conditions that validate the language (as Arab residents were able to learn it), but also could balance some macro-level measures such as the securitization of the language in public spaces, as the following section details.

Domination and Power Relations in Contested Spaces

One fine summer's evening in August, I was exploring life in the Darashakran refugee camp, located about an hour's drive north of Erbil. The camp was mainly populated by Kurds from Qamişlo and Kobanê, a city turned into rubble after the attack on the town by ISIS in 2014. Life in the camp was lively, as then it was Eid, and people were visiting their relatives and friends to celebrate the festival. With its bungalows, shops and restaurants, and people sitting outside the buildings in the late afternoons and evenings during

¹³ Judith Butler, "How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler," Irene Costera Meijer & Baukje Prins (Interviewers), *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1998).

the summertime, the atmosphere was similar to that of a small Kurdish town. While walking, I met two friends, Ahmed and Mîran, and then Cemal who joined us later, sitting outside a house where Ahmed lived with his family. Ahmed and Mîran were enjoying the evening breeze in Erbil's hot summer when I approached to wish them a happy Eid and grab the opportunity for an interview. Fortunately, my request was kindly accepted, and I sat with them to begin. Ahmed (24) and Mîran (20) were from Qamişlo and had lived there until they left Syria, but Cemal (22) had lived in Damascus, in the district of al-Zabadani, for 15 years after moving there from Dêrik (al-Malikiyya).

When speaking of education, Ahmed told me how, although he initially experienced some difficulties in Arabic, his time at school was bearable; while speaking in Kurdish during class was not allowed, it was possible to speak the language with friends. Mîran confirmed Ahmed's statement, but not Cemal. He stated that the situation in Damascus was very different:

Speaking in Kurdish at school would cost you a three-day suspension, and for this reason, we had fights with some Arab students several times for spying on us and informing the school management.

Cemal continued by stating that if he and his friends were speaking in Kurdish and someone passed by, they would stop speaking until the person was safely out of earshot. Mîran continued the conversation by explaining that the situation in Qamişlo was different because of the large Kurdish population of the city. Ahmed remarked that as the number of Kurds was much higher in Qamişlo, the regime could not hope to dominate them in all aspects and would therefore turn a blind eye to issues such as language. As the number of Kurds in Damascus was far fewer, the regime could prevail there.

Cemal further mentioned that Kurdish students would sometimes fight some Arab students who called their Kurdish colleagues "Kirdi", a broken pronunciation of the word "Kurdi" (Kurdish) in Arabic. While Cemal would fight the students for their remarks, some of his teachers would also make such remarks when addressing their Kurdish students. This caused distress to Cemal, as he felt looked down upon and not recognized as an individual. Mîran clarified that there was no such thing in Qamişlo, again because of the size of the Kurdish community there. Cemal explained that Qamişlo was considered Kurdistan, and the regime could not mistreat Kurds there, but because Kurds were a minority in regions such as Damascus, the regime could do whatever they wanted. Due to the situation in Damascus, Cemal explained, he spoke Kurdish less over time, as he was mainly only able to talk to his family members and relatives in the language.

What made the circumstances better in Qamişlo compared to Damascus was being surrounded by Kurds, enabling the people to feel safe to speak among themselves, unlike Cemal who was spied upon. Rita (29), a woman from Qamişlo, told me that being surrounded by Kurds at school made a difference such that they could not only speak in Kurdish with each other in the schoolyard but also in the class when the teacher was also Kurdish:

It was not acceptable to speak Kurdish at school.

Not even with friends?

Well, with friends and in Qamişlo, it was not a big problem, because all of our teachers were also Kurds. But they would say: 'you cannot speak Kurdish in class, you need to speak Arabic'.

With friends?

We would speak in Kurdish with friends unless the teacher was an Arab; they would not allow it.

If the teacher was a Kurd?

They would allow it.

Were there Arab students in the class? Would they say anything?

They also would learn Kurdish. As I told you, when there were a few Arabs among Kurds, they would also learn Kurdish.

Zayn (60), also from Qamişlo, began his education in a village. He related to this that in his time, the school in the city was stricter in preventing children from speaking in Kurdish even in the schoolyard. However, as most of the students were Kurds to the point that Arab students would stand out, they could speak it among themselves unless there was someone around whom they could not speak Kurdish. Unlike Rita who had more freedom, because most of her teachers were Kurds, most of Zayn's teachers were Arabs. Rodi (62), a man from Dirbêsiyê (Darbasiyah), stated that his aunt, several years older than him, recalled teachers from Egypt being posted to the town, and at his time teachers came from the coastal area of Syria rather than being local to the region. Later, with greater numbers of Kurdish teachers, students could speak in Kurdish more freely, and teachers would lapse into Kurdish to provide further explanations in their classes. However, as both Rodi and his aunt studied primary school in villages, as did Zayn, they encountered no problems with speaking in Kurdish, because everyone in the community was Kurdish, and the teachers working there would adapt to the life of the village rather than imposing another. When asked whether there was much difference between his life at school and outside it, Rodi replied

Was there much difference between your life at school and outside it?

Not at all! The school was a house in the village, where else could we go. Contrarily, the teacher would come and be like the Kurds. Even the chickens were Kurdish [laughs]. All the village was Kurdish; the villages around it were Kurdish; there were no Arabs, there were no Arabs among us.

However, where the Kurds were a minority, speaking in Kurdish was more of a challenge. Diyar, who studied and lived in Damascus for eight years, encountered difficulties when studying at Damascus University:

There was this guy from a province in the south of Syria, the far south, a town called Dara'a. Once, we were speaking in Kurdish with a friend at the university; he asked, 'what language is this that you are speaking?' I said: 'it is Kurdish'. He did not know about it; he probably didn't even know who Kurds were. All he said was 'Mamnu' tahki Kurdi,' which means that it is forbidden to speak Kurdish. I said, 'why is it forbidden; what have we done to you? The French came and persecuted you; they did things to your dignity/honour [namûs] and your women, but French is taught at the universities of Damascus and Aleppo [...] Ibrahim Hanano was a Kurd and led the revolution against the French mandate to save you. Instead of thanking us, you come and say, 'Your language is forbidden'? He said nothing.

A similar incident was also experienced by Rita when she studied at Hama University, shortly before the civil war began. When talking with her friend in Kurdish, a lecturer warned her not to speak Kurdish on campus. She responded to him that she was not speaking with him, but with her Kurdish friend, and naturally she would speak to a Kurd in Kurdish. As the lecturer believed that she was being too stubborn to admit what she did was wrong and there was no legal ground to justify why she should not speak in

Kurdish on campus, he later asked a senior Kurdish student in the department to talk to Rita about what had happened. However, as the senior student did not believe that there was anything wrong with it, the lecturer could not insist further.

Social Body and the Power of Ordinary Relations

The difference between Kurdish-majority and minority areas, and public space and the social environment, is not only a clear demarcation of greater liberty to speak in Kurdish, but also to learn the language, which was limited to the anthropological margins of the Kurdish society. Kurds who spoke in Arabic in daily life in camps that I visited were an example of this. When asked why they did not know Kurdish, some participants reasoned that it was because they grew up in places where there were not many Kurds. As the use of Kurdish was pushed into private spheres, learning the language was also limited to what Yusuf, a man from Qamişlo in his early 60s, described as "Kurdish homes and Kurdish streets". Mainly, Kurdish could only be spoken with family members and relatives, as was the case of Cemal in Damascus. Faisal, a party representative and former schoolteacher in his late 50s from Qamişlo, told me how grateful he felt for growing up among Kurds when he met a Kurdish youth who did not know the Kurdish language:

When I was a child, I knew that I was a Kurd by my language [...] For instance, yesterday we had a guest, a young man originally from Kobanê who grew up in Damascus. He does not know his language [i.e. Kurdish]. I remarked how lucky I was for not growing up in places like Damascus that I could learn my language, my cause and my [Kurdish] national question. It was a major privilege that we grew up in Kurdish society, where naturally one grows up like a Kurd. Also, when we were growing up, there was not much interaction with other ethnic groups, such that people in our village were all Kurds.

However, the differences between the Kurdish majority and minority areas were not always a matter of concern, as people could adapt to each other's way of life without seeking to replace one another. There were also many Kurds who were happy with their lives in Damascus and Aleppo, such as Ciwan, a man in his early 50s who had lived in Dêrik and Qamişlo for over 20 years before moving to Aleppo to study and remained there until he left in 2012. However, when discussing the differences between Kurdish majority and minority areas to express how happy he had been with his life in Aleppo, Ciwan also revealed more about the orienting power of the social body, which he referred to as a "shell":

Apart from any success in education, in my belief, the time spent in education, especially university, are the best years of life. In that stage, both mind and heart are opened, and you see a new culture and a new society, a diverse one. When we were living in the village [of Dêrik, until he was 12] and then in Qamişlo, which was a multi-ethnic city and we can say that all the constituents of Syria were present we were still in the shell of either our Kurdish nation, Kurdish society or the family group. At university, you see people from all provinces and all cultures, and we can say that there is an exchange that takes place between cultures and beliefs, and your individuality blossoms and develops.

What from the macro level may seem to be an ineffective entity, when the interactions of everyday life to which one is subjected are taken as the standpoint, and state apparatuses and legal actions are decentred, the orienting power that social life exercises through ordinary people can be recognized. A detailed investigation into micro-level relations of everyday life reveals how individuals, who hold no other political power, are agents that have the force to impact the orientation of social life, similar to the state apparatuses that do so on a mass scale in public spaces. As these agents operate at the micro-level

of everyday life relations, in effect they act upon bodies in reciprocal relations. This is the case for both other bodies through which a security discourse could operate, and those who are the target of the security discourse – in the Syrian context, those who reproduce and validate the Kurdish language.

As interactions such as these exceed personal relations and are frequent and intensive in nature, taking place at every point in life, the "personal forces"¹⁴ have the impact of a "reciprocal shaping of individuals".¹⁵ Therefore, they are fundamental to the phenomenon of society and are constituent parts of any social life. Mead identified the phenomenon as "institutional functioning",¹⁶ operating through "institutionalized attitude[s]"¹⁷ practiced by "institutionalized individual[s]".¹⁸ Bourdieu incorporated this notion in his concept of "habitus", standing for the internalized know-how characteristic of sociocultural life, including language and its use.¹⁹ He contends that these relations are what both inscribe the know-how in bodies through bodies acting on each other, and validate the habitual nature through maintenance of the ordinary life in which institutionalized attitudes "[go] without saying [and come] without saying".²⁰ In such a "multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate, and which constitute their own organization",²¹ the power that they exercise becomes omnipresent, practiced by everyone momentarily "in every relation from one point to another" and grips every aspect of daily life as it "comes from everywhere".²²

In Ciwan's statement, these relations were identified as the "shell" of Kurdish ethnicity, Kurdish society and the family group, from which he moved away when he went to Aleppo and encountered new ways of life different from that in which he grew up. Although in Qamişlo he was already living alongside Arabs, Assyrians, and Armenians, he did not find life there much different than his life in one of the villages of Dêrik. In the predominantly Kurdish-populated towns of Qamişlo and Dêrik, even under the rule of the Baathist regime which pursued the Arabization and the Baathist indoctrination policies, Kurdish life was still a strong shell. The power that everyday relations exercised continued to reproduce sociocultural characteristics of Kurdish society such as the Kurdish language, and validate its use in everyday life. Thanks to the intersubjective relations of mundane life through which bodies act upon each other, not only the Kurds but also Arabs living in Kurdish-majority areas could learn the Kurdish language to communicate with their neighbours, colleagues, and friends, just as Henife could learn Arabic thanks to her Arab neighbours. This was also restated by Rita, who observed the phenomenon of Arab inhabitants speaking in Kurdish when living in Kurdish-majority spaces. Reşîr, a man in his early 40s from Efrin, shared a similar experience, of sending his children to learn Arabic with his Arab neighbour, so they would not encounter difficulties in later life:

For example, with my children, we had an Arab neighbour; when my children were young, we would send them to play with the neighbour's children, so they would learn Arabic. One week, two weeks later, their father told me 'Instead of yours learning Arabic, mine have learnt Kurdish' [chuckles].'

14 John Henry Wilbra Stuckenberg, *Introduction to the Study of Sociology* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1898), p. 127.

15 Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Kurt H. Wolff (eds.), A Free Press Paperback (New York: Free Pr., 1967), p. 14.

16 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, Charles W. Morris (ed.), Works of George Herbert Mead, George Herbert Mead: vol. 1 (Chicago/ London: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 155.

17 Ibid., p. 264.

18 Ibid., p. 211.

19 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Reprinted (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, no. 28, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

20 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 167.

21 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 92.

22 Ibid., p. 93.

Social environments, as the embodiment of sociocultural characteristics, are strong enough to undermine some anti-Kurdish policies. As Ahmed stated, the representatives of the regime would turn a blind eye on children speaking in Kurdish at school when the Kurdish population was relatively high; in Ciwan's words, the "shell" was tough to break. As this would prevent the state's discourse of security from holding ground, the state's plan for demographic changes aimed at geographically dispersing the Kurdish social network, through economic deprivation to encourage internal migration, and physically divide existing communities by building Arab settlements between them. However, as the participants observed, experienced, and described, the social body could resist these securitizing measures, although repressive measures persisted until the early 2000s, shortly before the civil war broke out in 2011.

Subjects, Discourses, and Power Relations

Migdal attributes a phenomenon such as that described above to the weakness of a state, its inability to penetrate into society to regulate social relations. The Weberian model of the state that he followed entails the capacity to create inclinations in people towards prescribed behaviours,²³ to bring order to social life.²⁴ Therefore, the inability to generate such force over the social life is considered a weakness in the state's capacity. Although the state is more perceivable in its administrative body, as Weber emphasized, its repressive and ideological operations constitute its foundation, ideally through the rule of institutions in line with codified universal laws, as opposed to arbitrary treatments.²⁵ In fact, the state, as a complex of apparatuses, functions to reproduce the conditions of its subsistence; therefore, one must read the attempt to bring order to social life as having the aim of reproducing its political and ideological ground. Therefore, although by Migdal's standards the state in Syria could be described as weak in its capacity to place itself in a strategic position where relations are regulated through its mechanisms, it is evident that it could exercise power through its repressive and ideological means to secure its political machinery and reproduce discourse of its ideological settings by prescribing behaviours in ordinary bodies. Although as an institution the state fell short in its infrastructural power,²⁶ the normalization of repressive measures against the use of the Kurdish language, and the reactions shown by ordinary people to its use in public spaces, confirm a firm reproduction of the desired ideological conditions. Therefore, the reactions to the Kurdish language and the normalization of such measures must be read not through the repressive measures limited to the administrative body and its relations with individuals, but through the conditions in which ordinary people intervene to deepen the measures in private relations between colleagues, and between teachers and students. The state passed no law against individuals speaking in Kurdish among themselves in public spaces, and thereby there was no legal grounds for preventing people from speaking Kurdish among themselves at schools and on campuses. However, many ordinary people, who were not required to intervene, nevertheless were inclined towards enforcing the security discourse dominating the public space in reciprocal relations, by functioning as vehicles of the security discourse which was manifested in their perceptions and utterances. At different times and in different locations, such interventions were similar in citing the same discourse in their performative remarks.²⁷ Although the discourse seemed to be targeting Kurds only, it was evident that those opposing the use of Kurdish were also targeted, as they carried the discourse to micro-level relations where the state apparatuses failed to operate. This made the interventions both arbitrary, such that Zayn and Cemal would stop speaking in Kurdish if someone they

23 Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 19-23.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 33-38.

25 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

26 Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1984).

27 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

did not know passed by to prevent any repercussions, and personal, as those who intervened did so by their will without being required to do so.

However, as these interventions were private in nature, there was some level of liberty to resist through moral and logical reasoning, as Diyar and Rita did. In these reciprocal relations operating at the micro-level of everyday life, people could exercise power to repel such interventions; at a communal level, they also could keep them at bay or minimize their effects in places where Kurds constituted the majority. This was mainly because most people in close proximity were Kurds, and the intersubjective relations could both prevent a discourse of securitization from holding ground in places where Kurds and Arabs lived more harmoniously together and could reproduce and validate the use of language. Beyond the relations of dichotomic domination, the interpersonal and intersubjective relations that people lived by had more impact on the micro-level relations of everyday life than the state apparatuses. Power should not be contemplated as "formulated in terms of law" that localizes power at a macro-level in the hands of the state or an actor of political significance.²⁸ Rather, it should be considered as diffused power relations at the interpersonal level that function at every point in daily life and disguise themselves by operating through people that have no political significance and exercise power to regulate social life through bodily actions on each other to inscribe and prescribe bodily behaviours such as language as an act.

Therefore, "subjects in their reciprocal relations; not sovereignty in its one edifice, but the multiple subjugations that take place and function within the social body" must be taken as the viewpoint "to understand the power in its most regional forms and institutions".²⁹ This entails going beyond state-centric and dichotomic group domination relations, to an analysis of diffused power relations³⁰ which, as a network of relations, even if it creates density while passing through institutions and apparatuses, does not localize.³¹ These power relations are "multiple forms of domination that can be exercised in society" and "multiple subjugations that take place and function within the social body".³² This is the result of an analysis of power "in its most regional forms and institutions", where "its exercise becomes less and less judicial"³³ and functions in private spheres of life where relations are personal. Domination in its dichotomic relations remains limited to state apparatuses where it can be sustained through repressive measures, but because power is not a possession that a group can hold on to, but is the effect of strategic positions that get diffused in social relations.³⁴ This is mainly because, in power relations, there must be a certain level of liberty for the power to function³⁵ and mask a considerable part of it to be tolerable.³⁶ Therefore, unlike the material objects of repressive domination, in power relations the objective is the soul, the psyche, rather than external control of the body.³⁷ However, as the ultimate aim is to discipline the body and employ it as a vehicle of its exercise, the body becomes both the vehicle and the ultimate target.³⁸ This suggests that individuals as vehicles are a fragment of complete exercise of power, through whom the power is diffused in social relations.³⁹ As they act upon the acts of another, away from the public gaze,⁴⁰ they carry the force deep into the social nexus to the extent that, without power relations, a society can only be an abstraction.⁴¹

28 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 87.

29 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 27.

30 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 92-93.

31 Ibid., p. 96.

32 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 27.

33 Ibid., pp. 27-28.

34 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 26.

35 Foucault, "The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," p. 123.

36 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 86.

37 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 30.

38 Ibid., p. 170.

39 Ibid., p. 171.

40 Foucault, *Power*, p. 340.

41 Ibid., p. 343.

Therefore, similar to the exercise of power in reciprocal relations between colleagues, there are multi-layered relations in everyday life, with a strength that Ciwan likened to a shell. As these relations are constitutive in their aim, they target bodies to discipline them through inscribing, prescribing, correcting, and preventing behaviours. Kurdish communities, constituting the majority across the northern parts of Syria, could continue to reproduce an institutionally functioning habitat that could subjugate bodies and inscribe dispositions to reproduce institutionalized individuals. The Kurdish language was a disposition of such relations that, despite restrictions on its use in public spaces and services, its inscription through bodily acts could maintain its reproduction in private spheres such as "Kurdish homes and Kurdish streets". The cleavage between Arab neighbours and friends learning Kurdish in Kurdish-majority spaces and Kurds who grow up in parts of the country such as Damascus not knowing the language, and, on the other hand, students who were able to speak in Kurdish at school in Kurdish-majority areas and those who faced difficulties in Kurdish-minority spaces, can be read as the impact of power relations which extend beyond the state's public domination. In such a social network, power is exercised and circulated as an effect in bodies, the basic atomistic components of society. Faisal ascribed being a Kurd and speaking in Kurdish as a natural outcome of growing up in a social network of this kind. Rodi humorously put it that "even the chickens were Kurdish" in his Kurdish-majority village, and Rita, in her argument against her lecturer at Hama University, that she would naturally speak to a Kurd in Kurdish. It was also natural that Kurds and Arabs living together learned each other's languages, such as Rita's observation of Arabs learning Kurdish when living among Kurds, Henfie and her Arab neighbours knowing each other's language, and Reşî's children exchanging their language with the children of his Arab neighbour. Although Ciwan resembled this network to a shell, which by its very nature constrains, it is also an enabling network that exemplifies the nature of subjection and also the ground for the agency through constraints.⁴² This interactive relation between a body and other bodies functions through collective actions acting upon bodily acts⁴³ in a fashion that Bourdieu framed as the "performative magic of the social".⁴⁴ As it takes place in a network, unlike the state mode of domination, it functions without a conductor being in charge.⁴⁵

The body politics of the state aims at accessing such a performative ability, to not only mask its repressive and ideological apparatuses but also normalize them by performing through ordinary individuals who would intervene to correct, prescribe, and prevent certain bodily acts, such as speaking in Kurdish. In this game, individuals become the vehicles of power by acting on the actions of another in private spheres, citing disciplinary discourses and acting along with some strategic rules of truth production, giving rise to a collective prejudice and its normalization.⁴⁶ This could be seen in the immediate reactions to the use of the Kurdish language, to a bodily act rather than a statement, and its normalization meaning that the reasons why it should not be spoken could go unquestioned. Here the integration of individuals into the state's ideological ground can be observed. A ground that imposes a structure of performative acts by placing a language in a strategic position for the sole domination at the expense of others by making it easier to access one language and difficult to access another language through restrictions and prohibitions.⁴⁷ Therefore, the normalization of the securitization of the language makes it not only less accessible but also less tolerable, in a way that can trigger impulsive interventions from ordinary people who are not required to intervene or spy.

42 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

43 Pierre Bourdieu, "Doxa and Common Life," *New Left Review*, vol. I, no. 191 (1992).

44 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Reprinted (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 57.

45 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

46 Foucault, "The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," p. 129.

47 Foucault, "The Subject and Power."

As these interventions in their nature aimed at subordinating bodies to correct them,⁴⁸ when the desire for subordination was challenged from a rational and moral ground, the symbolic domination which came without saying and was expected to go without saying could not go further. This occurred when Diyar responded to the student from Dara'a by asking why speaking in Kurdish was forbidden despite the Kurds being part of the Syrian social fabric, and the student could not make further arguments in favour of his intervention. This was also the case with the lecturer who warned Rita to not speak Kurdish on campus, as he could not reason why she should not speak in Kurdish, unlike Rita who was clear in her position that she was speaking to a Kurdish friend and would naturally speak to a Kurd in Kurdish. The same trend can be seen in the students who spied on Cemal, the female classmate who informed the headmaster, and the teachers who opposed students speaking in Kurdish at school, who could not reason for their acts, but relied on the use of disciplinary measures such as suspension from school.

Both the reactions shown to the use of the Kurdish language and the continuation of the use in everyday life, are examples of enabling grounds. In public spaces, subjects of the security discourse could intervene to subordinate and "correct" those speaking in Kurdish, while Kurds in Kurdish-majority areas could continue to reproduce and validate the language through its use in everyday life, and challenge interventions in reciprocal relations. Although the Kurdish language was not perceivable in public spaces due to the restrictions and prohibitions, it could continue to be used in ideological state apparatuses such as schools and campuses, challenging the discourse in reciprocal relations. The continuation of the use of the language and challenging of its securitization also played a decisive role in preventing the normalization of such discourse in private spheres among Kurds, which could pose the danger of internalizing subordination that would inevitably deepen assimilation. By reproducing cultural dispositions such as language, and challenging the attempts to securitize the language in private relations, the state discourse could be limited to the public space where its apparatuses could operate. As Scott argues, such a dichotomy between private and public spheres can undermine the dichotomic relation of domination, even if it seems to go deep into the everyday use of language in public spaces.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Although legal measures and their implementation through Syria's state apparatuses were more discernible, they were also fundamentally limited to their capacity to carry out and sustain the measures. The restrictions on the Kurdish language and other aspects of culture which have been cited in academic works, journalistic writings, and periodical official and non-official reports are mainly of this nature. However, the relations of domination did not end with the margins of the state apparatuses. In the vast spectrum of everyday life, the ideological affect went beyond the apparatuses by being actualized in ordinary bodies, who, as carriers of a security discourse, extended the securitization of the Kurdish language to the spontaneity of everyday life. The structural restrictions embedded in the *modus operandi* of the apparatuses could be limited and minimized in effect thanks to the social network and habitat validating and sustaining the use of the Kurdish language. However, reactions coming from self-ordained individuals, including public employees such as schoolteachers, spread it further. In spaces where Kurdish speakers were marginal in number and unequal relations held sway, such as in schools in Damascus, Kurds could fall victim to a collective prejudice and vulnerability before the other. But in reciprocal relations, interventions could be challenged through ethical and rational reasonings that revealed the impulsive nature of the interventions.

48 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

49 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 1990).

The Foucauldian concept of power relations offers a ground of analysis beyond a mere dichotomic understanding of domination. This is to understand the state apparatuses in their affect in bodies, recognize the power exercise of the communal network that could sustain the targeted institutional dispositions, and reveal the function of power relations in reciprocal interaction. The body's function as the target, affect and carrier in power relations discloses the exercise of power in its regional operations, such as in the body of a teacher or a student, as a gaze and an ear, monitoring to intervene, correct and prevent, and also its effect in the bodies that can no longer perform the language or can only perform it to a limited extent. This understanding of power also helps us realize the exercise of power within the social body, in which bodies act upon others by institutional behaviours such as language. The transmission of embodied dispositions through bodies and the attempt to prohibit some exemplifies how bodies are fundamentally both operators and objects in power relations.

Although awareness of this fundamental role of bodies in power relations is vital for understanding the impact, target, and *modus operandi* of a security discourse, the structural restrictions embedded in the political body remain critical in frustrating a security discourse. Recognition of a language and its use by state apparatuses is crucial to tackling this problem. However, as the phenomenon of collective prejudice worldwide illustrates, addressing a security discourse circulating through bodies cannot be limited to state apparatuses; it requires extensive attention to the circulation itself.

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