"Nothing But a Fighter":
An Exiled Kurdish Academic's Journey Towards Human Rights Activism

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Abstract[2]: This article presents an oral history of a Kurdish academic, examining how they narrate Kurdish identity under repression and how those meanings shaped their decision to escape Turkey to live in exile. The narrator was one of the participants of a dissertation on the erosion of academic freedom in Turkey and the experiences of academics in exile following the 2016 attempted coup. This article focuses on the oral history conducted as part of that project. This study can inform understandings of other stories, rather than claiming to represent all Kurds in Turkey. Therefore, I used an oral history approach to center the narrator's testimony and analyze how they construct meaning about Kurdish identity under conditions of surveillance and risk, understanding that identity is socially constructed, interactional, performative, and situated within webs of significance. The findings offer insight into the personal dimensions of post-2016 repression in Turkey, the narrator's account of seeking recognition of cultural and linguistic rights, and everyday mechanisms and policy dynamics that contributed to the academic purge and to academics' decisions to live in exile.
Keywords: Kurdish, academic freedom, academic purge, Turkish–Kurdish conflict, human rights, ethnic identity

Preface

Within hours of the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, a phone call from a friend overseas warned Baran[3] of their imminent capture. Being a Kurdish academic in Turkey in July 2016 meant facing the risk of losing their job and imprisonment. Weeks passed until Baran decided to escape the country, leaving everything behind, including their family, and facing a "deadly journey" to escape imprisonment and protect their life. Baran spent days hiding before smugglers helped them dodge the federal government's travel bans. Jumping from town to town, sleeping in cars on the side of the roads, enduring late-night freezing walks, facing the national guard and a police car chase, crossing a river, and nearly drowning in its icy water, Baran finally reached the shores of freedom in Greece. The thought of their children and beloved father prevented Baran from succumbing on the journey. In the weeks that followed, Baran found that other academics had been imprisoned, jailed, tortured, and even killed. Images and stories went through Baran's head as they asked: "What was my crime? Why is being a Kurd a crime?"

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[3] Baran is a pseudonym chosen by the narrator. The neutral pronoun they/their/them was used to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the narrator's identity and personal information.

My purpose in telling a Kurdish academic's story was to document how Baran narrated Kurdish identity under the pressures of the repression after the 2016 attempted coup and how that narration shaped their decision to leave Turkey and live in exile. By collecting the first-hand account from a Kurdish academic, I aimed to preserve Baran's memories while analyzing the tensions, revisions, and silences that developed around identity. The findings offer insights into the Turkish–Kurdish conflict from an intimate, case-based perspective and as it intersected with academic freedom after 2016, serving as an analytical model on a small scale that can be expanded to understand other stories and similar experiences on a larger scale (Elias & Scotson, 2000) rather than claiming to represent Kurds' experiences in Turkey. Through this interpretive oral history, I center and analyze the narrator's testimony to examine how they construct meanings about Kurdish identity under conditions of surveillance and risk, understanding it as socially constructed, interactional, performative, and embedded within webs of significance (Blumer, 1969; Geertz, 1973; Kohl, 2021).

Background of the Study

This study originates from my dissertation (Halpern, in press), which investigated the erosion of academic freedom in Turkey, particularly in the aftermath of the attempted coup on July 15, 2016. As part of this research, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Turkish academics who faced persecution, prosecution, arrest, imprisonment, and loss of employment, which resulted in their decision to leave Turkey to live in exile in Western countries. Among these participants was Baran, a Kurdish academic, who stood out due to the unique way they intertwined their experiences of persecution with their Kurdish identity and subsequent human rights activism. Baran's story sheds light on how their sense of being targeted after the coup was not solely tied to their role as an academic but also to a deeper history of being Kurdish in Turkey. In presenting this account, I adopt an interpretive oral-history stance, focusing on a single participant to achieve depth and thick description rather than representativeness. This personal narrative provides a window into the broader dynamics of identity and marginalization, illustrating how the state's suppression of dissent has intersected with long-standing ethnic tensions.

Baran's account offers a deeply personal perspective on the broader Turkish–Kurdish conflict. Unlike other participants who primarily framed their experiences within the context of academic freedom violations and their alleged connections to the Gülen Movement, Baran perceived the events of 2016 as a direct continuation of the systemic marginalization faced by Kurds in Turkey. Therefore, I center Baran's testimony to examine how identity is narrated under pressure without implying a general account of "Kurdish identity." Through this story, I explore the intersection of Baran's experiences with state repression and their evolving sense of Kurdish identity, culminating in their decision to leave Turkey and become a human rights defender in exile. Reflexively, my commitment to documenting academic freedom violations shaped the questions I asked; to balance advocacy and analysis, I attend not only to what is said but to how it is told (Mishler, 1986; Thomson, 2006) in a context marked by surveillance and institutional retaliation after July 15, 2016 (Scholars at Risk [SAR], 2024).

Historical Background

In this section, I present a concise historical background to situate Baran's story. This background is selective, locating Baran's account within the legal-political environment following the July 15, 2016, attempted coup and repression across Turkey's higher education institutions; thus, it is not a general account of Kurdish identity.

Since 1923, nationalism has been one of the guiding principles that underscored the rise of the independent Republic of Turkey as a modern state and society (Öztürk, 2018). Commonly

referred to as the process of Turkishness/Turkification, this ideology has shaped Turkey's official discourse (Mateescu, 2006), imposing national sovereignty, traditions, and historical-cultural narratives. Central to this process is the establishment of Turkish as the official language in Article 3 of Turkey's Constitution of 1982 (Constitute, n.d.), in which Turkishness was "not determined by one's race or religion but by the degree a person associate[d] himself with the ideals and goals of the Turkish Republic and through commitment to Turkey's independence and modernization" (Kili, 1980, p. 388). Thus, Turkishness became the standard against which a citizen's loyalty to the country was measured (Aral, 1997).

However, the ideal of Turkishness, which sought to establish a homogenized, unified nation, was curbed by the country's diverse demographic composition (Aral, 1997). Historically, Turkey was formed by a mosaic of 36 ethnic groups and non-Muslim minorities (e.g., Armenians, Assyrians, Circassians, Greeks, and Jews). Since the country's independence, ethnoreligious minorities have faced pressures to assimilate, and those who resisted saw their cultural, social, religious, and linguistic rights systematically suppressed through policies that legitimized forced resettlement and discrimination (McDowall, 2004; Oran, 2021). As a result, the rich multiethnic character of the Ottoman Empire was replaced by an ethnic hierarchy, positioning Turkish identity at the top while suppressing others through ethno-religious cleansing (O'Driscoll, 2014; Yeğen, 1999).

Scholars argued that Kurds have been among the groups most affected by Turkishness and the country's nationalist agenda, as the country's largest minority group (N. Kaya, 2009), in which "successive Turkish governments have failed to recognize the Kurds as a minority" despite comprising 20% of the country's population (Aral, 1997, p. 86). Kurds represent one of the largest transnational and stateless ethnic minority groups in the world, with 10 to 20 million Kurds living in Turkey (Ergin, 2014). Consequently, the recognition of Kurdish identity, culture, and language has been considered an existential threat to Turkey's unity (Jongerden, 2018) rather than "a symbol of the richness of the diversity of the Turkish state" (Aydin, 2020, para. 2). Turkey's multiculturalism was rejected from its inception, as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk considered the multicultural nature of the fallen Ottoman Empire a weakness in establishing the new nation-state (Zeydanlioğlu, 2012).

Thus, Kurds have faced enduring and systematic denial and degradation in the Republican era (Jongerden, 2018), and have been repeatedly cast in belittling, pre-modern images (Faltis, 2014): "Kurdish tribes, Kurdish bandits, Kurdish sheikhs—all the evils of Turkey's pre-modern past" (Yeğen, 1999, p. 555). Denigrating representations described Kurds as poor, uneducated, "savage and backward, and lost in the mountains," while Turks were considered modern, great, and civilized (O'Driscoll, 2014, p. 278). Perceptions of Kurdish culture and language as inferior to Turkish have been widely disseminated and have contributed to their social, political, and economic marginalization (Turtuk & Phillips, 2021). These discourses and policies fostered internalized devaluation and accelerated Kurdish assimilation into the dominant society, contributing to political and cultural erasure. In Republican-era views, the "cleansing" of Kurdish elements was framed as civilizing, rooted in the belief that "Kurds could become Turkish" (Yeğen, 2007, p. 138).

Numerous policies and court cases have sought to criminalize, prohibit, and ban Kurdish language and culture, deny Kurdish existence, and enforce assimilation (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008; Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012). The discourse promoting national unity has led to both symbolic and physical violence against Kurds and other minority groups who have sought to maintain or promote their cultural and linguistic practices (Faltis, 2014). For instance, Article 42 of the Turkish Constitution states, "No language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institution of education" (Constitute, n.d., p. 16), and Law No. 2510 (1934) enabled resettlement and other measures that weakened Kurdish linguistic and cultural continuity. In the newly founded Turkish Republic, resistance to those policies was met with

punishment, including arrest and, in earlier decades, execution (O'Driscoll, 2014; Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012). Recent United Nations (UN) documents report large-scale displacement and hundreds of civilian deaths between July 2015 and December 2016 (United Nations [UN] News, 2017, 2018). Following the July 15, 2016, attempted coup, emergency decrees (*Kanun Hükmünde Kararname* [KHK]) intensified restrictions, including mass academic purges, further entangling ethnic politics with academic governance. Research on Kurdish communities has itself been fraught with risk for both participants and researchers (Eccarius-Kelly, 2019).

As a result, Kurds live in conditions of both material (e.g., income, education, health, possessions, state services) and non-material (e.g., language, culture, identity, belonging) insecurity, which perpetuates their subordinate status in Turkish society (Içduygu et al., 1999; Yarkin, 2020). Kurds have been legally denied the right to educate their children in their mother tongue, often resulting in inadequate access to education for children from Kurdish communities (Aydin & Ozfidan, 2014; Ozfidan, 2014; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008). The lack of access to education, the inability to enjoy their own culture, and the denial of the right to be educated in their mother tongue constitute fundamental human rights violations (Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 1992; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994; UNESCO, 1960). It is important to note that despite legal constraints on Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights, İ. Kaya and Aydin's (2013) evidence-based report synthesized international bilingual education models and proposed a structured implementation plan. Specifically, it outlined short-term expansion of Kurdish as an elective, medium-term transitional models, and longer-term enrichment/two-way bilingual programs, contingent on reforms in teacher preparation, curriculum development, and school administration.

Despite the existence of such a structured, evidence-based plan, Kurdish identity has remained marginalized in school curricula and public discourse. In fact, Abbas and Zalta (2017) explained that Kurds have "no place in the textbook history of collective identity" (p. 630) and are often portrayed as enemies of and threats to Turkey's national existence (Çirakman, 2011). The monocentric notion of Turkishness "hinders any chances for the recognition of Kurds as a minority group" (Aral, 1997, p. 82) and reinforces a discourse that excludes Kurdish identity (Yeğen, 1996). Consequently, the Kurds' resistance to forced assimilation and their struggle against the cultural and linguistic suppression they endure have led to a prolonged conflict in which they strive to reclaim their identity and demand recognition and restitution of their cultural, linguistic, and political rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008).

The denial of Kurdish existence has profoundly shaped Kurds' perceptions and experiences of their ethnic identity, their sense of belonging, and their relationships with members of the dominant Turkish society. Continuous pressure for assimilation forces Kurds to grapple with questions about accepting Turkish identity "in its ethnic sense, civic sense, or not at all," with significant implications for their perceived level of security and their strategies for navigating Turkish society (Içduygu et al., 1999, p. 996). Those whose heritage language is Kurdish and who lack proficiency in Turkish often experience heightened alienation and insecurity. Içduygu et al. (1999) described three common paths for Kurds in terms of ethnic identity: (a) fully adopting Turkish identity, thus no longer identifying as Kurds, (b) assuming a Turkish civic identity while maintaining Kurdish heritage privately, or (c) outright rejecting Turkish identity. Nonetheless, as Romano (2006) noted, "assimilating and forsaking one's identity is akin to suicide" (p. 4). These patterns were also observed in diaspora settings, where Kurdish self-definition was found to be negotiated across schools, families, and local institutions in the absence of state-backed anchors for language and culture (Arpacik, 2019; Ugurlu, 2014; Wahab, 2019).

These historical dynamics form the backdrop against which Baran's narrative unfolds. As a Kurdish academic, Baran faced the material and cultural insecurities that characterize life for Kurds in Turkey. Their story reflects the enduring struggle to maintain a sense of identity amidst state repression, linking these long-standing pressures to the massive purges after the 2016 attempted coup, and shaping their decision to leave Turkey and pursue human rights advocacy in exile.

Purpose of the Study

Scholarship on the Kurdish question has been dominated by theoretical and commentary-based analyses that emphasize socio-political, ethnopolitical, and historical dimensions (e.g., Jongerden, 2018; O'Driscoll, 2014; Yeğen, 2007). In addition, a smaller body of empirical literature examines the perspectives of teachers, academics, and parents on Kurdish identity, heritage language, and the language ideologies shaping ethnic identification, national belonging, and support for Kurdish language rights and literacy practices (Aydin & Ozfidan, 2014; Golkap, 2015; Ozfidan, 2014). Complementing this work, diaspora studies documented how Kurdish identity is rearticulated through acculturation, schooling, and community organizing in host societies (Arpacik, 2019; Ugurlu, 2014; Wahab, 2019), emphasizing the need for first-person accounts that track identity work alongside political rupture and exile. As highlighted in the historical overview, Kurdish studies encompass interconnected fields (Eccarius-Kelly, 2019), including historical and ethno-nationalist studies, policies that lead to Kurdish assimilation and migration, peace and conflict research, language and cultural studies, intersectional projects, and human rights advocacy.

Despite this robust literature, there remains a gap in first-person, interpretive oral histories by Kurdish academics whose narratives unfold with the 2016 attempted coup and the mass purge of academics in Turkey. This study addresses that gap by centering Baran's oral story and examining how they construct a narrative of persecution by the Turkish government through the lens of Kurdish identity, tracing a continuous line from early-life experiences to the 2016 academic purge, culminating in their decision to escape Turkey and live in exile. Thus, rather than attempting a representative account of "the Kurdish experience," this oral history presents an interpretive and analytical perspective centered on a single narrator, exploring the intersection of ethnic identity, political persecution, and exile.

Theoretical Framework

The ethnic identity development framework served as a sensitizing lens to explore Baran's identity, self-concept, and ethnic community membership, and how these narrated meanings related to their decision to leave Turkey and live in exile (Phinney, 1989; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). In this oral history, situated in the contexts of the 2016 attempted coup and academic purge, I used this lens to trace shifts in belonging across the life course without imposing a linear stage model or claims of representativeness. Ethnic identity and self-concept were shaped by interactions with family and peers, attitudes toward one's group, cultural pride, knowledge, and felt belonging (Aboud & Doyle, 1993; Rivas-Drake et al., 2017). Accordingly, I read how Baran narrated their story and identity, rather than seeking to advance a model or typology of Kurdish identity. This lens also highlighted the relational and interactional dimensions of their ethnic identity from early life onward (Gay, 1978; González et al., 2017; Phinney, 1989). Given the heterogeneity of Kurdish identities across regions, languages, generations, migration histories, and politics, my claims were explicitly confined to Baran's situated account.

Finally, I used ethnic identity development conceptually to interpret how Baran narrated the internalization of dominant Turkish society's negative views of Kurdishness and how this arc connected to their decision to leave Turkey and pursue human rights advocacy in exile, drawing on broader work in ethnic–racial identity, socialization, and belonging (Constante et al., 2020; Erikson, 1968; Huguley et al., 2019; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Research Questions

Given the focus on a single-narrator oral history nested within a broader dissertation study on the experiences of Turkish academics with the loss of academic freedom, the following questions guided this article's analysis:
1. How does the life story of a Kurdish academic reflect their perceptions and experiences with Kurdish identity in the socio-political context of Turkey?
2. In what ways does Kurdish identity shape the academic's personal, educational, and professional journeys, including experiences of persecution and the decision to leave Turkey and live in exile?

Method

This article draws on a single oral history conducted as part of my dissertation (Halpern, in press), which examined the experiences of Turkish academics with the erosion of academic freedom following the 2016 attempted coup and subsequent purge. Thus, the focus on this single oral history was developed *a posteriori*. While conducting the dissertation interviews, I identified Baran's testimony as distinctive: they framed their life story through a Kurdish identity to make sense of the persecution, decision to leave, and subsequent exile following the attempted coup in 2016. On that basis, I adopted a single-narrator design to examine how they narrated their life in this period. This study adopted an interpretive focus on how the account was organized and made meaningful, rather than on external corroboration of events.

Oral history is a qualitative approach that centers on people's narratives, memories, and life experiences (Leavy, 2011; Thompson, 2017). Given this focus, I concentrated on Baran's narrated Kurdish identity and experiences that shaped their life, including persecution after 2016 and the decision to live in exile. The aim was to explore perceptions of Kurdish identity, challenges faced as an academic in Turkey, and the factors informing the decision to leave, thereby adding texture to the historical record of the 2016 academic purge from a Kurdish academic's standpoint. Additionally, in oral history, narrators organize past, present, and anticipated futures in ways that make sense to them (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 1993). Accordingly, I created conditions for careful telling, using open-ended prompts and active listening to elicit memories and reflections on identity and academic life. The analysis attended not only to what was said but to how it was told (word choice, pauses, revisions, silences). While not clinical in purpose, narrating and ordering experience can have restorative effects even when recounting traumatic events (Thompson, 2017).

Participant Selection

Baran was one participant in my dissertation on the erosion of academic freedom in Turkey and the experiences of academics who left after the 2016 attempted coup and purge to live in exile in Western countries. "Baran" is a pseudonym chosen by the participant. The original study employed constructivist grounded theory to gather in-depth accounts from multiple participants, focusing on how the loss of academic freedom influenced their lives in Turkey and in exile. Baran volunteered after a referral through snowball sampling, a strategy

suited to hard-to-reach exiled academics (Clark, 2010; Feldman et al., 2003). The informant highlighted Baran as an information-rich and theoretically salient participant for the study (Patton, 2015).

Baran was among the few participants in the larger study who explicitly linked academic freedom violations to a life story narrated through Kurdish identity. This motivated the present article. Rapport was built by creating a comfortable setting, using open-ended prompts and active listening, avoiding leading questions, and adopting a respectful, non-judgmental approach to storytelling (Seidman, 2019). These conditions supported fuller telling and contributed to narrative depth.

Baran, a Kurdish academic in their forties, grew up during a period when the Turkish government actively suppressed Kurdish rights and enforced assimilation through nationalist policies. After earning higher education degrees abroad, Baran returned to Turkey as an academic and advocated for Kurdish rights. However, Baran and other supporters of the Turkish–Kurdish peace process were persecuted and dismissed in the 2016 academic purge. Like many other academics, Baran left Turkey and lives in exile abroad. Their story provides a distinct perspective on the challenges of navigating identity, persecution, and exile.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

After Institutional Review Board approval (Protocol #2023-78), I obtained oral and written consent to conduct, record, and publish Baran's story. Notably, the process of conducting an oral history is nonlinear and co-constructed, without following fixed, predetermined steps (Mishler, 1986). This participant-led approach was critical given the emotional content of Baran's experiences, allowing them to recount their story in a way that felt natural and safe (Leavy, 2011). I minimized interruptions so Baran could speak at length and determine the sequence of events as they wished.

Four interview sessions were conducted via Zoom in Fall 2023, each lasting approximately two hours. Data were co-constructed in conversation as I centered Baran's authority and knowledge of the topic (Leavy, 2011; Rhodes, 2000). I used open-ended questions so Baran could guide the narrative and elaborate on their identity and the experiences they deemed most significant. Throughout, I focused on their narrative organization, emphasis and omission, word choice, and other verbal and nonverbal cues (Thompson, 2017). I was aware that, in the process of storytelling, narratives are not "innocently encountered or discovered" (Mishler, 1986, p. 149), but rather co-constructed in conversation (Huber & Whelan, 1999) between Baran and me, inviting readers into their perspectives and experiences (Kim, 2016).

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. Instead of producing verbatim transcripts, I relied on Zoom's auto-generated closed captions and repeated viewings of the video recordings to immerse myself, supplementing them with detailed analytic memos to capture initial interpretations, reactions to Baran's experiences, and notes on nonverbal cues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because auto captions can miss nuance, I verified the segments by rewatching key passages and cross-checking them against time-stamped notes. Through ongoing discussions with Baran, I refined my interpretations. For the dissertation, I used constructivist grounded theory with three coding cycles (initial, focused, and reflexive). For this article, I adapted the corpus and conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2016), using those prior analytic insights as sensitizing material to organize Baran's experiences into themes. For presentation, I aligned the themed sections with Baran's ordering of events, while the analysis remained thematic, reflexive, and interpretive.

Researcher's Positionality

Disclosing positionality recognizes my participation in knowledge production (Holmes, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), emphasizes "introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one's perspective" (Patton, 2015, p. 130), and contributes to the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Leavy, 2014). I am a Brazilian academic woman with no ethnic, cultural, religious, or linguistic ties to the narrator, which afforded some analytic distance, with Baran treated as the primary knower of the phenomenon under investigation (Velho, 1978). At the same time, as an academic living outside my home country, I occupied an insider-by-proxy position, as "an immigrant researcher, but from another migrant group that the one being studied… [which] can create a sense of commonality that transcends ethno-national divides" (Carling et al., 2014, p. 50). This dual stance helped me find a balance between objectivity and empathy.

I undertook this study as part of my dissertation on the erosion of academic freedom in Turkey and the experiences of academics who have fled to Western countries after 2016 (Halpern, in press). This topic was developed over my years of interactions with my advisor, whose expertise in Kurdish studies deepened my understanding of the complexities of the Turkish–Kurdish conflict and shaped my sensitivity to the nuances at stake. Aware of the risk of over-identification, I kept analytic memos and made interpretive choices explicit.

After conducting a study on ethnic identity development and heritage language in my own community (see Halpern et al., 2022) and inspired by the stories I heard during my dissertation interviews, I chose to publish one participant's oral history as a standalone piece because it exemplified tensions sustaining the Turkish–Kurdish conflict and factors contributing to the erosion of academic freedom and the 2016 purge. That prior work sensitized me to the complexities of cultural identity and marginalization, informing my interpretations of Baran's narrative.

Ultimately, my positionality made me aware that the meanings associated with the narrator's experiences are relational, situated, and co-constructed through our interactions (Blumer, 1969). While Baran's story cannot be generalized to all Kurdish academics, it offers insight into broader dynamics of marginalization through a single personal account (Elias & Scotson, 2000). Because this article features a single narrator, I obtained explicit consent for standalone publication, selected excerpts for relevance, and added brief contextual notes. All claims refer only to this narrator's experience and are not intended as generalizations.

Findings

Five themes, presented as chapters in Baran's life, highlight the intimate and personal dimensions of the Turkish–Kurdish conflict, the struggle to recognize Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights in Turkey, and the factors contributing to the erosion of academic freedom in 2016 and to the subsequent exile of academics to Western countries.

Chapter One: "We Were Not Humans"

This first chapter explores Baran's early life, marked by a deeply ingrained negative self-concept around Kurdiness, shaped by school-based discrimination and violence. Peers and teachers called Kurds "very poor," mocked "a heavy, bad accent," and dismissed them as "not educated," "people of the mountains." Beyond enduring name-calling and labeling, Baran's schooling years were marked by nightmares, stress, and constant anxiety, alongside the physical abuse and torture by their teachers, and fights with Turkish peers:

> *They hated us because of our dark skin color, language, and accent. I*
> *have been kicked and hit by teachers many, many times…you know,*

> *physically kicking me. In middle school, one of my teachers…she hit me all the time with a stick. All the time. Not just me, everybody, like we were slaves. And, if they heard you speaking Kurdish, they would hit you and beat you, like animals, like we were not humans.*

Shame, low self-esteem, and fear taught Baran to "hide, never tell" they were Kurdish. Even within the family, saying it publicly was off-limits. After elementary school, Baran's father cautioned that continuing education would require hiding their Kurdish identity to avoid discrimination from Turkish peers and teachers. In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, with no middle or high schools in many Kurdish villages, children who passed national exams were sent to free boarding schools in other cities. Away from home, Baran could conceal both identity and the mistreatment at school; they knew their family would have stopped their schooling had they learned about the physical abuse.

Baran was motivated by their father to continue their education: "My father used to tell me, 'If you want to fight for your rights, you need to fight in the right way: through education.'" Even so, Baran wondered, "Why has God made me a Kurd? Why was I born Kurdish instead of another ethnicity?" These questions flooded Baran's mind as they learned of glorified Turkish heroes and claims of Turkish superiority—"one Turkish man equals ten of other ethnicities"—and that "Kurdish people needed to be educated to be accepted into Turkish society." Baran concluded that Kurds did not stand a chance in Turkish society: "When you lose your money, you don't lose anything. When you lose your health, you lose something. But when you lose your personal character, your identity, you lose everything." Consequently, Baran left Turkey to pursue higher education abroad.

Chapter Two: "Why Nobody Talks About Kurdish People?"

Convinced that education was the only path out of constraints placed on Kurds in Turkey, Baran sought study-abroad options in the late 1990s: "I felt I had to leave; otherwise, we were going to be ignorant, back to the village, and never be a part of society." Baran also felt motivated to study abroad after entering a Turkish university where they were confronted with the idea that only students from Western Turkey "deserved" to attend college: "Professors were never happy to see students from Eastern Turkey go to college. They'd say, 'go take care of animals, work in farms, in agriculture; you don't need a college degree.'" Notably, Eastern and Southeastern Turkey are largely populated by Kurds.

Baran chose to study in countries whose degrees would be recognized in Turkey and, for the first time, felt free to be Kurdish: "Nobody cared if I was Kurdish or Turkish. It was the first time I felt free." That freedom empowered Baran to stand up for themselves when a Turkish exchange student mocked Kurds: "Enough! We won't allow this s*it again, not at all! It's rude and hurtful. It must stop!" Baran recalled that "every single person supported us that night, and nobody made jokes about our identity anymore."

Later, Baran's graduate studies in the United States increased their pride and shaped their early Kurdish activism. Conversations about race, ethnicity, language, and religion opened Baran's mind to other minorities' issues and reframed their past experiences: "You learn to put yourself in other people's shoes. I understood that Blacks in the United States are like the Kurds in Turkey." Baran began to assert identity with pride: "I'm Kurdish, speak three languages, and have a different culture," and felt proud to be the first in their family and community to earn a higher education degree. Yet Baran was troubled by the lack of writing about Kurds in Turkey: "Why does nobody talk about the Kurdish people? Research on Kurds is written by Americans, Europeans, Iraqis, Syrians, Iranians, or people who applied for asylum and never planned to return to Turkey." Baran continued,

> *I started to think of writing about Kurdish representation but, at that time, no one could really do that because, as an academic, you never know the consequences you're gonna face... because if you're writing something…you know, anything you write about Kurdish, you face problems when you're back to Turkey. Because it's not allowed to write about Kurds.*

Despite the risks of conducting Kurdish studies, studying abroad moved Baran to give back to their community. Their decision to write about Kurds was shaped by graduate coursework and travel that exposed them to other minoritized groups.

Chapter Three: "I'm Proud to Serve My Community"

A few years later, a favorable political momentum suggested Baran could return to Turkey as an academic, with public discussions of Kurdish rights finally on the agenda. As faculty, Baran felt recognized, appreciated, and hopeful that positive change would finally happen to their people:

> *I was proud to be involved in initiatives to help the Kurdish people. From research, research grants, and courses to universities and newspaper articles, everyone asked for my opinion, my ideas, and anything to help with Kurdish studies and the Kurdish people. I finally thought Kurdish people had a chance.*

Baran looked back on the early 2000s in Turkey with pain and fondness: "I wish I were still in Turkey. I was well-known in my area, had a great network of scholars, a big office, was making good money, my kids were in private schools… I had a wonderful life." It was a time of hope for Baran and other Kurdish scholars when recognition of Kurdish rights seemed newly possible.

Yet the shadows of Turkishness persisted. Colleagues pressed Baran to take classes to "remove [their] accent" so that "more traditional Turkish people would accept [their] talks." One colleague put it bluntly: "Of course you're going to support the Kurdish people, but when you're on TV, if you speak like a Turk, more like Istanbul Turkish, they'll probably criticize you less and accept your ideas more." Baran remembered their father's response with affection as he vehemently disagreed with this colleague's "suggestion":

> *Now's the time to be proud of yourself, to let people know your story and how you've been bullied and abused by those teachers. They have to be ashamed of themselves for how you got your degrees and are helping the communities. Stop taking Turkish classes! You're not Turkish, so why are you trying to be like them and make these people happy? Be yourself!*

Despite encouraging Baran to be themselves, Baran's family members worried about their safety whenever they wrote or spoke on "sensitive" topics. Baran commented on how their family members would check on them every night to be sure they had returned home safely. Being a Kurd working for pro-Kurdish rights came at a high price for their freedom and life.

Chapter Four: "Why Have I Been Fired?"

Symbolic violence and discrimination within Turkish universities increasingly overshadowed Baran's academic role. Anger and frustration mounted as they realized they were not accepted in Turkish society. Requests to remove "Kurdish" from research proposals and academic events, having students "spy [their classes]," and being denied office space to host Kurdish events were some experiences that preceded Baran's persecution and academic purge. Baran talked about the role of the *Yükseköğretim Kurulu* (YOK; translated as the Council of

Higher Education) in gatekeeping their hiring as faculty, being "kicked out of a job interview for being Kurdish," and denied promotions on the grounds that Baran's talks about minority rights "supported division." Because of Baran's graduate studies in the United States, some colleagues labeled them "a terrorist" or "a U.S./FBI agent."

After the attempted coup in July 2016, Baran learned that academic friends who supported pro-Kurdish rights or were alleged to be linked to the Gülen Movement were fired and jailed as "terrorists." Others saw spouses or relatives detained or faced threats of dismissal over research and alleged critical social media posts. Days later, Baran was fired, accused of being a government critic who supported Kurdish movements. Baran questioned this verdict angrily:

> Can you imagine receiving a court decision kicking you out because your colleagues think you're guilty? But guilty of what? Did I kill somebody? No! Did I attend any terrorist organization? No! But still, I'm wondering, why have I been fired? They may say [it's because] I'm Kurdish or I published articles about Kurdish people. But why have Kurdish people been fired?

Baran was advised to "plead guilty" and abandon "sensitive issues" to avoid jail. Paran reflected, "If I were Turkish or pretended to be Turkish, I'd probably have a high position in Turkey's higher education by now. But not as a Kurd. Period." Baran continued to challenge the accusations against them, recalling that their children were expelled from school and relatives were detained for days after Baran published an article on Kurds: "Why did they have to be punished? I don't understand! I think they couldn't accept that a Kurdish person went abroad for their degrees, came back, and became very successful. My mind doesn't accept this mentality." Refusing to trade away their Kurdish identity or advocacy for acceptance in Turkish society and advancement in Turkish higher education, Baran escaped Turkey.

Chapter 5: "I Learned How to Fight"

As an exiled academic, Baran re-examined their life stories and credited their education abroad and their father's bravery and visionary support to continue their life in exile away from their family and loved ones, and work with human rights and justice beyond Kurdish causes: "If you don't accept what you went through, you cannot accept other people's struggles. You cannot fight just for yourself but for human rights." They continued, "Sometimes I ask myself why I went through all these experiences… but I'm proud of everything because I learned how to fight." Baran continued:

> If it wasn't for my family's support and my connections in the intellectual community, I don't know how I would be able to continue living. I'm respected, always receiving messages and phone calls for support. That's what matters.

Baran also reflected that remaining in Turkey would likely have meant never learning to fight: "I would probably have the same mentality as those people," and insisted that "ignorance is the real enemy." Although Baran once said they wished they still lived in Turkey because of the "wonderful life" they had, they recognized the risk, as returning would mean being "in jail the next day, with every colleague celebrating [their] arrest." Thinking about exile, Baran expressed relief: "I don't want my kids raised in that environment, around that mentality. I don't want my kids to go through the life I went through."

> My Kurdish identity made me an enemy of all racist, ignorant people. I don't call myself an intellectual, but I am educated. If something happens to other minority groups tomorrow, I will fight for their rights, too, because it's a matter of social justice, of human rights. I will fight

> *for anybody who goes through anything remotely similar to what I went*
> *through, not just for the Kurdish people, because I learned how to fight.*

In exile, Baran dedicated their work to promoting awareness about the harms of nationalist policies that fuel discrimination, contribute to the erosion of ethnolinguistic minorities, and constrain academic freedom and other civil liberties in Turkey and beyond.

Discussion

This oral history can be interpreted as Baran narrated it: as their way of making sense of their persecution in the face of the 2016 attempted coup and academic purge. It is important to note that what counts as "the Kurdish issue" varies in the literature: it is often presented as a minority question, a national question, a matter of citizenship, or a question of domination (Bezwan, 2018; Jongerden, 2018; N. Kaya, 2009; O'Driscoll, 2014). Here, I followed the narrator's framing: in Baran's account, shaped by their upbringing in Turkey and their human rights activism in exile, the Kurdish issue was presented as a question of rights under Turkish state surveillance and heightened risk, particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 attempted coup and academic purge (Aydin et al., 2025; Jongerden, 2018; O'Driscoll, 2014; Zeydanlioğlu, 2012). Therefore, the five themes presented as chapters of Baran's life described the intimate dimensions of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and pointed to factors contributing to the erosion of academic freedom. I did not claim to define what the Kurdish identity *is*; instead, I examined how one Kurdish academic made sense of their experiences of discrimination, persecution, and exile. Within this scope, my aim was interpretive, attending to both content and form, rather than verifying events (Leavy, 2011; Mishler, 1986; Thompson, 2017).

Notably, across the episodes of Baran's life, coherence and ambiguity coexisted, as they balanced pride in being Kurdish with a conditional sense of belonging in dominant Turkish society. This tension is especially evident in Baran's earliest memories in "We Were Not Humans." These episodes of physical and emotional abuse are presented as the ground on which Kurdishness is first named, as stigma and danger. Such traumatic experiences exposed Baran to the stereotypes about being Kurdish and speaking the Kurdish language early on, consistent with research on how such exposure can harm ethnic minorities' self-concept and belonging (Aboud & Doyle, 1993; González et al., 2017; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Consequently, Baran repeatedly questioned why they were born Kurdish rather than of another ethnicity. It is important to note that Baran's early years unfolded during a period of severe repression of Kurdish culture, language, and political rights in Turkey (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008; Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012).

In this sense, Baran's Kurdish identity was negotiated with audiences (Arpacik, 2019): affirmed within family settings and strategically muted or adjusted in institutional and public contexts. Later, their father's advice to "fight the right way" (i.e., through education) offered a safer path than open confrontation, that is, to study, earn degrees, and work within institutions. Minimizing Kurdishness in public, or passing as Turkish to avoid repression or discrimination, aligns with assimilation pressures documented in the literature (O'Driscoll, 2014; Yeğen, 1999). These dynamics align with the literature on how members of minoritized groups internalize dominant societal views (Erikson, 1968; Gay, 1978) and on ongoing negotiation of ethnic and national identifications (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Wahab, 2019). In Baran's case, tension between Kurdish identity and Turkish norms helps explain shifts in public self-presentation as pragmatic survival, not inconsistency (Içduygu et al., 1999).

Only in Chapter Two ("Why Nobody Talks About Kurdish People"), during their studies abroad, did Baran begin to perceive the benefits of multilingualism and belonging to a minority group. They reframed pluralism as an asset and rearticulated Kurdish identity with pride. This shift aligns with ethnic-identity research, which suggests that exposure to diverse groups can foster a positive self-concept and sense of belonging (Halpern et al., 2022; Umaña-

Taylor et al., 2014). Despite the importance of this shift, Baran's sense that "nobody writes about Kurds" did not align with scholarship in the 2000s (e.g., Jongerden, 2018; N. Kaya, 2009). I interpreted this not as ignorance, but as a change in standpoint, from Baran's internalized Turkishness toward discovery, and as a matter of uneven visibility across languages, outlets, and networks. Moreover, Baran's increased cultural pride and sense of belonging (Aboud & Doyle, 1993; Phinney, 1989) led to a return to Turkey to work on pro-Kurdish rights amid perceived openings in the early 2000s. Their return coincided with policy moves that reduced restrictions on Kurdish-language education and authorized the first Kurdish-language television broadcasting, suggesting limited openings for Kurdish language and media (Aydin & Ozfidan, 2014; Çelik, 2020).

Nonetheless, when Baran returned to Turkey, these identity dynamics proved contingent on their interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). Pride was most linked to family scenes, especially when speaking about their father and community, where Kurdishness was tied to care and dignity (Constante et al., 2020; Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015; Huguley et al., 2019). In professional settings, Baran expected their educational credentials to secure acceptance, which aligns with an institution-facing presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) and the notion that credentials confer legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1996). Yet recognition appeared conditional on assimilation, as evidenced by Baran's colleagues' advice to "sound more Turkish" and gatekeeping in academic and societal settings, aligned with Turkish state discourse and language policy (Yeğen, 1999; Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012). In this sense, the "shadows of Turkishness" persisted, highlighting that identities are produced and contingent on specific historical, political, and sociocultural contexts (Hall, 2000).

The limited policy openings of the early 2000s coexisted with assimilation pressures and major political ruptures. The Gezi Park protests in 2013, the December 17–25, 2013, corruption scandal, the breakdown of the Erdoğan–Gülen alliance (2013–2014), and the collapse of the Turkish–Kurdish peace process (2015–2016) escalated criminalization of dissent, including Kurdish solidarity (Avincan et al., 2023; Aydin et al., 2025). This escalation was exemplified by the Academics for Peace (*Barış İçin Akademisyenler*) petition and severe reprisals, culminating in the 2016 coup attempt and academic purge (Acar, 2018; Özkirimli, 2017; Tekdemir et al., 2018; Turkey Purge, 2022). In that context, President Erdoğan and AKP officials advanced official discourse that framed dissent, including Kurdish support, as "anti-Turkish" and "terrorism" (Evered, 2018; Gunes, 2019; UN News, 2017, 2018). This aspect of Baran's life aligns with documented patterns of intensifying surveillance, dismissals, and restrictions on academic freedom (Acar, 2018; Tekdemir et al., 2018; SAR, 2024, 2025), while not claiming that Baran's experiences exactly mirror the record.

Similarly, Chapter Four ("Why Have I Been Fired?") focused on academic freedom violations tied to Baran's association with and support for Kurdish cultural, linguistic, and political rights. They were denied promotions, censored, had courses and events canceled, and faced obstacles for researching "sensitive" topics, culminating in loss of their academic position and persecution, as documented in previous publications (see Aydin & Avincan, 2021; Aydin et al., 2025; Stockemer & Kim, 2020). Baran's account of colleagues' experiences likewise echoes documentation of arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, dismissals and expulsions, violence and torture, suicidal ideation and killings, and intimidation of relatives (Aydin & Langley, 2021; Fidan, 2025; Quinn, 2019; Öztürk & Taş, 2020; Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021).

Therefore, Chapters Three and Four of Baran's life align with Göle's (2017) characterization of a period of relative empowerment for intellectuals from the late 1980s to approximately 2013, during which scholarly work, personal opinions, and public engagement were comparatively more protected. However, with the growing authoritarianism under President Erdoğan, intellectuals were cast as "enemies of the state" and labeled "terrorists" (Aydin & Avincan, 2020; Aydin et al., 2025; Kandiyoti & Emanet, 2017; SAR, 2024, 2025;

Tekdemir et al., 2018). After 2016, public scholarly expression became riskier and less supported, as emergency decrees enabled mass dismissals, university closures, passport confiscations, travel bans, and criminal investigations under anti-terror laws, with intensified surveillance of teaching and publishing, which align with previous publications on curtailed speech, precarious employment, and withdrawal from public life (Fidan, 2025; Göle, 2017; Gunter, 2016, 2018; SAR, 2024, 2025). In this light, when Baran said "I had to go," I interpreted it less as structural inevitability and more as moral reasoning under constraint. Notably, some academics stayed and resorted to self-censorship (see Abbas & Zalta, 2017; Aktas et al., 2019; Mörner, 2018; Tekdemir et al., 2018), while others, like Baran, left for exile to protect lives and livelihoods (see Aydin & Avincan, 2020; Girdap, 2020; Halpern, in press; Watmough & Öztürk, 2018).

Baran's closing chapter, "I Learned How to Fight," reframed rather than resolved the prior tensions. Through sublimation (Cohen & Kim, 2020), they channeled their suffering into pro-Kurdish and broader minority rights activism, expanding avenues for solidarity (Baser et al., 2017; Eccarius-Kelly, 2019). At the same time, exile entailed threats linked to Baran's escape and depression from prolonged separation from their loved ones after 2016. Thus, the decision to live in exile was interpreted not as a renunciation of civic belonging but as a refusal of assimilationist expectations attached to "Turkishness," alongside the preservation and public affirmation of their Kurdish identity (Içduygu et al., 1999).

Author's Reflections and Implications

My aim in producing this oral history was to document Baran's account, preserve memory, and address an empirical gap in scholarship on Kurds, not to judge or fact-check the account. I did not seek to provide a representative model of Kurdish identity; instead, I treated Baran's story as a situated account that may illuminate similar cases without generalizing beyond this one (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I drew on Elias and Scotson (2000) to consider how local communities categorize people as "established" and "outsiders," and how respect and stigma are assigned; thus, this is not a claim that the narrative represents Kurds as a whole.

Notably, the interview shaped the story: questions, prompts, and the interaction between Baran and me influenced what was said and left unsaid, and later reframed (Brinkmann, 2017; Kim, 2016). Our interviews focused on Baran's loss of academic freedom and exile; the Kurdish identity thread was co-constructed during our interactions, and I later organized the patterns into themes for this publication. In this sense, the aim of this article was constructed through our interaction rather than as a prior objective, and I approach it as an ongoing, situated meaning-making process rather than a finished product (Brinkmann, 2017; Hall, 2000).

Significantly, across the interviews, Baran's answers to my question "How do you identify yourself?" changed depending on the context. In family scenes and activism in exile, Baran said they were Kurdish; when describing professional success in Turkey, they used "Turkish–Kurdish" or "ethnically Kurdish but also Turkish." After experiencing discrimination as a Muslim in a Western, Christian-majority country, they considered adopting a hyphenated identity while contemplating naturalization as a way to seek acceptance and respect. I treat these shifts not as contradictions but as evidence that belonging is interactional, contextual, and intersectional, and that identity work unfolds across relationships and retrospection (Hall, 2000; Kohl, 2021). Ultimately, these patterns reflect how the Kurdish diaspora negotiates identity in the absence of a nation-state, institutions, and legal protections that typically sustain language, culture, and public recognition, as shown in studies from North America and Europe (Arpacik, 2019; Ugurlu, 2014; Wahab, 2019).

Conclusion

This oral history did not resolve questions of identity or risk. It followed one narrator—a Kurdish academic—as they made sense of who they are across shifting conditions before and after the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, a trajectory that resulted in their persecution, escape from Turkey, and ended with activism in exile. In Baran's account, cues to "sound more Turkish" and, later, the casting of Kurdish support as "anti-Turkish" or "terrorism" narrowed what felt possible inside universities, especially amid rising authoritarianism under President Erdoğan and the post-coup academic purge. Baran's activism in exile expanded their opportunities to speak and support others, even as the distance from family and community deeply affected their everyday life. I present this oral history as a situated case that invites reflection rather than verdicts, showing how policies, discourses, and actions opened and closed doors for Kurds and how self-description shifted with place, audience, and risk.

Finally, the study provides a nuanced view of one academic life as a microcosm of broader political, social, and cultural dynamics in Turkey, where pressures to assimilate have deep roots but became especially visible in 2016, with lasting effects for Kurds both within and outside the country. It highlights why academic freedom and plural voices matter: when scholars can teach, research, and speak about "sensitive issues," such as Kurdish rights, without being cast as dissidents, "enemies of the state," or "terrorists," knowledge production is more democratic and strengthens public life in Turkey and beyond.

Epilogue

After I finished the manuscript, two years after data collection, I returned the draft to Baran not for approval, but to observe reflexively what the text did to them and what they did to the text (Thomson, 2006). They said the narrative captured much of their story yet stressed the gap between writing and living it: "You told my story, but I went through it… it represents only 30%." Baran added that reading was costly and painful, as "it took [them] a couple of days to recover" because the pages sent them back to scenes they encounter daily. They noted the limitations of fitting a life into one manuscript and the distance between the narrated life and the written life, especially given my outsider position.

When we discussed how I wrote about the shifts in their identity, Baran thanked me for having noticed that thread and called it one of the strongest parts of the manuscript: "That was a really good catch. I had to change how I talked about my identity to survive." They linked this need to adapt to specific contexts, recounting fear at school of being found "not Turkish," years as higher-education faculty in Istanbul when "every day [they] could feel the hate from [their] colleagues who could never see [them] as equal because [they] were just a 'person of the mountains'," and intimate judgments from colleagues and friends about how their ex-spouse "could ever marry a Kurd."

In the present, Baran did not describe a merely diminished identity but a sense of non-belonging and devaluation: "I belong to nowhere in this world. I never had privilege and never will. It feels useless, because you're not accepted by any community, anywhere you settle." They tied this to the everyday labor of self-presentation under stigma and to the scenes described in this article, and added: "I'm not considered white; I was never considered Turkish; and I don't want Turkish to have anything to do with my identity anymore. I'm done. I want nothing in my identity to be part of that country."

Baran also connected this solitude to wider politics that leave Kurds, as one of the largest ethnic groups without a state, without reliable allies worldwide and, consequently, without rights. They pointed to recent killings and displacement in Syria and Iran, and to Turkey, where pro-Kurdish politicians, including members of parliament and elected mayors, have been jailed

or removed and replaced by state-appointed trustees (Butler, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2020, 2024), linking these dynamics to the present difficulty of affirming Kurdish identity. Baran added, "You run from the rain and get caught in the hail," describing themself as a solitary fighter who longs for an international community of support and whose sense of happiness is held back until there is some form of remedy for their trauma and pain.

Finally, following Goffman's (1963) perspective of managing a stigmatized identity, I interpret our conversation over the returned draft as identity work made visible, involving choices about what can be said, to whom, and at what cost. My intention was not to request permission or to conduct a member check, but to explore what the text reopens and how Baran chooses to present themself in this moment. This conversation did not resolve the tension between lived memory and the written account; it acknowledged it. I close the text with Baran's words, that they are "nothing but a fighter," not as a catchphrase but as the measure of a life carried forward until there is some form of remedy. As a researcher with no prior ties to Turkey or the Kurdish question, I entered this field through stories like Baran's; therefore, I invite readers to sit with this account and to consider what forms of attention, solidarity, and everyday connection they can cultivate in response, including the small, sustained gestures through which distant lives become closer.

Funding Details

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