

No Matter How Close: Relationships of the Circassians with the State Apparatus in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze Circassian relationships with the state apparatus in Turkey which are claimed to be close since the Ottoman Empire. It explores how Circassian activists and intellectuals in Turkey define and narrate their relationships and experiences with the state. Circassian activists in Turkey employ several narratives to explain their relationships with the state and these narratives do not necessarily exclude one another. Despite the popular –and academic- belief that Circassians relationships with the state are different, harmonious and advantageous, when compared to the relationships of other ethnic groups in Turkey, especially Kurds, relationships with the state are narrated not as a homogenous and complete spectacle of harmony in the Circassian accounts. This study aims to reflect on the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Circassian narratives on the relationships with the state apparatus in Turkey and unease the comfort of the monolithic account of Circassians as the loyal element without any problems with the state apparatus. In these narratives, the relationships of the Circassians with the Turkish state include not only bonds of loyalty, embeddedness and harmony, but also a wide range of strategies, maneuvers, resistance, surveillance and fear for various actors.

Keywords: *Circassians, state, diaspora, ethnic groups, Turkey*

Ne Kadar Yakın Olsa da: Türkiye’de Çerkeslerin Devlet Mekanizmasıyla İlişkileri

Özet

Bu makale, Türkiye’de Çerkeslerin devletle yakın olduğu iddia edilen ilişkilerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunun için Türkiye’deki Çerkes aktivist ve entellektüellerin devletle olan ilişkilerini ve deneyimlerini nasıl

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tanımladıklarını ve anlattıklarını incelenecektir. Türkiye'deki Çerkes aktivistler Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ile ilişkilerini anlatmak için birbirini dışlaması çok da gerekli olmayan birçok anlatı kullanmaktadırlar. Çerkeslerin devletle olan ilişkilerinin Türkiye'deki diğer etnik gruplarla, özellikle Kürtlerle kıyaslandığında farklı, uyumlu ve Çerkesler açısından daha avantajlı olduğuna dair popüler ve akademik inanışa rağmen, Çerkes anlatılarında bu ilişkilerin homojen ve eksiksiz bir uyum tablosu olarak anlatılmadığını görmekteyiz. Bu çalışma, Çerkeslerin Türkiye'de devlet mekanizmasıyla olan ilişkilerine dair anlatılarındaki çeşitlilik ve heterojenlik üzerine düşünmek ve Çerkeslerin devlet mekanizmasıyla hiç sorunu olmayan sadık unsurlar olduğuna dair yekpare anlatının konforunu bozmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu anlatılarda Türkiye'de Çerkeslerin devletle ilişkileri sadece sadakati, içiçe geçmişliği ve uyumu değil, direnişi, gözetlenmeyi, korkuyu, -değişik aktörler için- değişik stratejileri ve manevraları içeren bir çeşitlilik göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Çerkesler, devlet, diaspora, etnik gruplar, Türkiye

*Never cared for what they do
Never cared for what they know
But I know*

*So close, no matter how far
It couldn't be much more from the heart
Forever trusting who we are
And nothing else matters
(Metallica)*

This article is an attempt to explore the wide range of Circassians' perceptions on their relationships with the Turkish state through the narratives of Circassian activists. The wide range originates from a variety of relationships and encounters between the state and Circassians in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and the Republican period. For instance, in 1918, at the end of World War I, an anonymous British consular report defined Circassians in Anatolia in the following way:

“Constantinople and the other towns have developed another class of Circassians. Their loyalty and influence of lady relations [such as consorts or wives] in the Imperial Harem raised many of them to high places in the army and Palace. Among the leading families of Constantinople and Cairo, a considerable number are, at any rate, by origin, Circassian. In sentiment they are Turkish –often more Turkish than the average Turk- and they do not think of themselves as a separate people” (qtd. in Gingeras, *Notorious* 92).

The report also defined Circassians as a group from whose less reputable classes many of the assassins, secret agents and other “*fedais*” [militiamen/paramilitaries] of Turkish politicians had been recruited (Gingeras, *Notorious* 92). 91 years after this report, in the general meeting of the KAFFED (Caucasian Associations Federation of Turkey), Onur Öymen, the Deputy Chairman of Republican People's Party (CHP) who received many reactions because of his recent remarks about a 1937 “rebellion” in the Alevi town of Tunceli, stated that Circassians had suffered a lot but “they were able to keep those bitter events to themselves (*içlerine atmayı bilmişlerdir*). They did not abstain from supporting our Republic with all their powers. They had never resorted to violence” (“Çerkesler”).

These two perceptions of the Circassians in two different periods and states are among the many instances of the popular – and also, to some degree, academic- belief that Circassians¹ are

¹ This study uses “Circassian” as a historical category rather than the name of an ethnically homogenous group. The term includes Adyghe and other peoples (Abkhaz-Abaza, Chechens, Ossetians). Though the latter are not considered to be ethnic Circassians, these groups have often become historically and spatially inseparable from the Circassians in Turkey. Furthermore, differences among these groups are not well-known by the non-Circassian actors who call these peoples with different languages, folklore and traditions Circassians as a rubric. As a result of a pragmatist choice, this paper employs the term Circassian as a historical rubric for peoples who were originally from North Caucasus and settled in Turkey in the nineteenth century. The non-Adyghe interviewees were included in

different and advantaged in their relationships with the state, when compared to other ethnic groups in Turkey. Focusing on the Circassian narratives on their relationships with the state in Turkey, this paper is an attempt to put a question mark to this image of Circassians as the loyal elements with no problems with the Turkish state. A close examination of these narratives of the Circassians leads to an unease with the unidimensional account about the harmonious and close relationships of the Circassians with the state since the 19th century and displays the complexity and heterogeneity of these relations of the Circassian diaspora with the Turkish state. Exploration of these Circassian narratives on the relationships with the Turkish is significant to understand not only Circassian diaspora in particular and diasporic communities in general but also the multiplicity of the ways Turkish state has related to ethnic groups in Turkey and *vice versa*.

Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with Circassian activists and intellectuals which were conducted in Ankara and Istanbul in years 2007 and 2008 during the field study of my dissertation entitled “Formations of Diaspora Nationalism: The Case of Circassians in Turkey” at Sabancı University (2009),² this paper argues that Circassian activists in Turkey employ multiple narratives to explain their relationships with the state. These narratives are not mutually exclusive: diasporic subjects as actors that are capable of negotiating, acting, reacting, resisting and narrating within the constantly changing limits set by the politics of homeland, host community and international relations may employ both or more of these narratives contextually and strategically.

Background: On the “Circassian Connection”

Circassians are one of the under researched ethnic groups in Turkey. Still, there are some studies that have touched upon the nature and dynamics of Circassian relationships with the Ottoman

the study to the extent that they were part of the Circassian organizations and groups in Turkey.

² The field research for this study was conducted before 2020, when there wasn't a necessity to get ethical permission from a committee. All ethical procedures were followed by the researcher.

and Turkish states. Kemal Karpat (344) underlines that after their immigration to the empire, a dialectical and peaceful integration at the local level was coupled with an identification of Circassian elites with the state as part of the emerging modern-Turkish speaking Ottoman elite at the upper level. The long-standing tradition of Circassian women entering the imperial harem and Circassian men being recruited into the armed forces enabled the infusion of the Circassian elites after the exodus of Circassians from their homelands in 1864 (Fortna 237, Yelbaşı 259). Within the Ottoman Empire, Circassians became part of the political apparatus and elite since the era of Abdulhamit II (1876-1909): employed within armed forces and government, settled in Armenian and Arab villages and worked for the suppression of these ethnic groups, when necessary; Circassians, through the relationships with their homeland, were seen as a potential gateway for the propaganda of Panislamist thought in Russia (Avagyan 98).

Hence, it has been claimed that by the period of the empire's demise, the army, police and gendarmerie forces were disproportionately comprised of Circassians (Fortna 14). Some biographies of statesmen, politicians and *fedais* of the late Ottoman era point at the "peripatetic careers" that would combine aspects of a "modernizing military, keen to embrace new technologies for warfare and communication, while adhering to long-standing patterns of recruitment of volunteers and based on networks of kinship, households, personal loyalty, and a sense of a shared duty or higher calling" (Fortna 11-12) and therefore, a "Circassian connection" (Fortna 12) that acted as a facilitator in the formation of these personas embedded in the Ottoman state and the national projects to save it from destruction. As a result of these connections, for instance, some regions in which Circassians resided, e.g. South Marmara became a source of special recruits into the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Special Organization) (Gingeras, *Sorrowful* 93).

The "Circassian connection" operated not only in the individual careers but also characterized the Circassian organizations established after 1908: forming an exclusive network of officers, bureaucrats, and intellectuals and consisting of "the most elite

strata of Ottoman North Caucasian society, these organizations became closely tied to state's administrative apparatus, and in certain respects became quasi-arms of the state itself" (Gingeras, *Sorrowful* 27). Such an overt political overlap between the Circassian elite and the Ottoman state became possible with the birth of Turkish nationalism as a political project and its Turanist ideology which was originally a term that referred to a larger geography rather than just the Turkic communities.³ Hence, the relationships of the Circassians with the Ottoman state were characterized by harmony, loyalty and an overlap of Turanism and Circassian nationalism in terms of interests and political projects in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire.

Turkish nationalism even in its earliest versions, even in the writings of two thinkers, Ziya Gökalp and Namık Kemal who are considered "the direct parents of Turkish nationalism" (Deringil 170) imagined Turkish identity not as an ethnic identity, but rather a cultural one. The nationalist program was based on ethnicity whose membership was determined largely by religious affiliation (Zürcher 173).

Till the mid 1920s, the founding fathers of the Republic employed an Ottoman legacy of a nationalist alliance based on pronounced. Throughout the War of Independence, the symbols and references employed were religiously determined (Kirişçi and

³ Among the examples of the cooperation between Turanism and Circassian nationalism are the operations of Enver Paşa in the North Caucasus during the years of the First World War and Ottoman Empire's to the Republic of Northern Caucasus. Yet, not all Circassian presence in the Ottoman state can be explained with reference to the Turanist ideals. There were also careers committed to the protection of an Ottoman identity as Kuşçubaşı Eşref explained in his interview conducted by Philip Stoddard in 1957: "I was an Ottoman. I was not an Ottoman speaking Turkish, a Circassian nationalist having dreams of Daghistan or an Arab or Rum" [*"Ben bir Osmanlıydım, Türkçe konuşan bir Osmanlı, Dağıstan hayali kuran bir Çerkes milliyetçisi, veya bir Arap yahut bir Rum değildim"*] (quoted in Stoddard 139).

Winrow 91)⁴ and the multiethnic character of the National Pact which speaks of “Ottoman Muslims” and not of Turks remained intact (Lewis quoted in Kirişçi and Winrow 92).⁵

However, starting from the mid 1920s, the discourse on the alliance of “sibling nations that live in a mixed way and that have totally unified their goals” (Altınay, *The Myth* 19) was going to crumble as the new regime consolidated a mononational identity and revised the cultural nationalism of Ziya Gökalp and the first generation of nationalists in favor of a dominant ethnic identity (Aktar 63). As Turkish nationalism switched from a civic definition of nation to an ethnic one, the inclusion of non-Turkish Muslim groups became more questioned and insecure, and their inclusion in the national projects had been more ambiguous, conditional and fragile in the discursive level.

Hence, with the end of the empire, the alliance of the Circassians as subjects with overt ethnic identities and projects, and the state was seemingly over. Starting from the 1920s until the mid 1960s, Circassians in Turkey kept their silence in the public sphere and refrained from the idea of the Caucasus. Such a silence and

⁴ The report at the Erzurum Congress referred to “the Muslim majority consisting of Turks and Kurds who for centuries have mixed their blood in an intimate relationship and who form the community (*ümmet*) of one prophet” (Zürcher 164).

⁵ In 1920, Mustafa Kemal explained the role of the multi-ethnic alliance in terms of forming the national borders:

“Gentlemen... What we mean here, and the people whom this Assembly represents, are not only Turks, are not only Çerkes, are not only Kurds, are not only Laz. But it is an intimate collective of all these Muslim elements.... The nation that we are here to preserve and defend is, of course, not comprised of one element. It is composed of various Muslim elements... We have repeated and confirmed, and altogether accepted with sincerity, that [each and every element that has created this collective] are citizens who respect each other and each other’s racial, social, geographic rights. Therefore, we share the same interests. The unity that we seek to achieve is not only of Turks or of Çerkes, but Muslim elements that include all of these” (Atatürk quoted in Altınay, *The Myth* 19).

disconnection were the diasporic maneuvers that resulted from the formation of a new nation-state and its policies of Turkification, e.g. “Citizen Speak Turkish” campaigns of the 1930s, the memories of the affairs of Çerkes Ethem and pro-Sultan riots in Marmara region during the War of Independence; and the loss/assimilation/silencing of Circassian intellectuals and urban elites as remnants of the Ottoman regime.

Despite the disappearance of “the Circassian connection” in the new nation-state, the perception of Circassians as the loyal elements with very close relationships with the state and even an embeddedness in the state has apparently always stayed in the background of any discussion about the Circassians in Turkey and survived a revival with the liberalization of Turkey and the rise of identity politics in the 1990s.

Yet, the comeback of the Circassian connection has had its limitations as far as academia has been concerned. As stated before, Circassians are an under researched ethnic group in Turkey and studies on the Circassian relationships with the Turkish state and peoples of Turkey are further limited. A recent study on the Circassians and the nationalist projects of nation-building and war-making in the Ottoman Empire and early Republican era underlines that Circassians had a well-established image in the eyes of the Turkish state and society despite some problems in the early Republican period (Yelbaşı 264). Most of the academic works just mention the nature of these relationships in their larger research questions. Ayhan Kaya (*Political* 221) starts his analysis of the political participation strategies of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey by stating a common belief that Circassians are more privileged than other ethnic groups in Turkey. For Sevan Nişanyan (138), Circassians, already in a process of losing their mother tongue even in the very early years of the Turkish Republic, was one of the rare ethnic groups in Turkey who “changed their language” in line with state policies. Similarly, Baskın Oran (58) defines Circassians as a group that is far from questioning the Turkish identity and aims for the continuation of their cultural identity and prevention of dissolving in the larger society at best. He claims that the fact that they are not autochthons, but immigrants has prevented the

formation of a full minority group consciousness among them and contributed to their integration and natural assimilation (Oran 58). Likewise, Kirişçi (93) states that Circassians have been considered among the ethnic groups that would easily melt into a Turkish identity and be successfully assimilated. Çelikpala (426) defines Circassians as a group some portion of which lives in harmony with other groups in Turkey and therefore has changed their identities despite the transformation of Circassians from immigrants to diaspora that has been taking place since the 1990s.

In the background of these accounts on harmony with the state lie the comparison of Circassians with the Kurds: Circassians never resisted the Turkish state as the Kurds in Turkey did in the twentieth century. Hence, the parameter of conflictual relations with the state is always the Kurdish resistance not only for Circassians but for all ethnic groups of Turkey. That resistance for the Kurds came with several uprisings in the early Republican era and a period of militarized insurgency against the Turkish state in the 1990s. Therefore, Kurds has always been the threshold for all ethnic groups in Turkey to be considered resistant or disloyal: "The argument of the broken window pane is the most valuable argument in modern politics" as Emmeline Pankhurst explained it (quoted in Kishlansky 727).

In most of these academic accounts most of which do not particularly focus on Circassians *per se*, Circassians are regarded as group that was assimilated in their harmonious and privileged relationships with the Ottoman and Turkish states. These accounts reiterate the popular –and also, surprisingly, academic- perception that Circassians are different and privileged in comparison to the other ethnic groups in Turkey. It is surprising that this perception has found its reflections in academia as there is no research that focuses on the Circassian relations with the state apparatus in contemporary Turkey. As some research focused on Turkish nationalism and its perception of minorities, non-Turkish groups and Circassians in particular (Bora, *Türk*), there are some studies with a focus on the nation-state's policies of assimilation, citizenship, education in addition to the ones with an emphasis on identity and memory (Sunata). Yet, these works don't focus and

therefore explore the claimed harmony between the Circassians and the Turkish state, let alone have a comparative methodology to understand the claimed differences of Circassian relations with the state from the relationships of other ethnic groups in Turkey.

The only works with a focus on the Circassian relationships with the state are Avagyan's work that studied the period from the first half of nineteenth century to the first quarter of twentieth century and Yelbaşı's book on Circassians in the wars and processes of nation-building in the period between the last decade of the Ottoman Empire and the early Republican period. Yet, the time span which studies cover is also part of the problem: our lack of academic knowledge on the relationship between the Circassians and the state in the Republican era is larger than the lack of our understanding of their relations in the Ottoman era. This is due to the fact that Ottoman political system enabled its subjects to be seen as Ottoman subjects with ethnic origins and hence, an informed eye to see the Circassian (or any ethnic actors') agency at any level. As the new republic tried to form a new public devoid of class, gender and ethnic differences, the "Circassian connection" was transformed into a spectre whose existence and nonexistence could not be observed spelled, questioned or analyzed.

Hence, we don't have any solid research-based data about how and to what extent Circassians were/are embedded in the state apparatus; -if there are any- how the mechanisms of embeddedness have operated in different conjunctures and whether or not the relationships of the Circassians with the state were/are different from other ethnic groups in Turkey. We, as the social scientists, happen to just "know" the "Circassian connection" without any need to explore the reality of that perception in the field or archives. To the extent that we take it for granted, it seems that we prefer to "unknow" it. Any systematic and scientific exploration of the reality of that perception and any comparative work about the differences of ethnic groups in terms of their relations with the state are not only missing but these research questions seem to act as academic taboos. Given the unwillingness of social science to deconstruct, reconstruct or, at least, analyze and hence, demystify it, that perception about the harmony and

embeddedness of the Circassians in the state apparatus remains as a sexy and catchy line⁶ in the mystical terrains of pseudo-social science and the rich interplays between gossip [*gıybet*], conspiracy theories, urban legends, myths and prejudice.

Haunted by the spectre of the “Circassian connection”⁷ and its reflections in academia and politics in Turkey, this study is a humble attempt to poke it. It aims to reflect on the multiplicity and heterogeneity of narratives of Circassian activists on their relationships with the state apparatus in Turkey and unease the comfort of the spectre of the “Circassian connection”, that is the monolithic account of Circassians as the loyal element without any problems with the state apparatus. Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with Circassian activists and intellectuals, this paper aims to analyze Circassian activists’ narratives on the relationships between the Circassians and the Turkish state apparatus which are claimed to be close since the Ottoman Empire. Considering interview “a site of knowledge construction,” and the interviewee and interviewer “co-participants in the process” (Mason 227), this article treats the interview responses not as giving direct access to ‘experience’ but as actively constructed ‘narratives’ involving activities which themselves demand analysis, the ultimate of which is *verstehen* in the Weberian sense (Silverman 36).

The narratives of the Circassian activists on their relationships of the Circassians and the Turkish state are analyzed under five

⁶ Lines such as “the half of MiT are Circassians” are abundantly found in the repertoire of the mystic terrains of gossip [*gıybet*], conspiracy theories, urban legends, myths and prejudice. The percentages may change, but the lines do not.

⁷ I borrowed the term “Circassian connection” from Fortna (12-14) who employed it to refer to the career of Kuşçubaşı Eşref Bey, a prominent special agent of *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*. As Fortna uses the term for the Ottoman times, I use it, in the rest of this article, as a reference to the monolithic account of Circassians as the loyal element with the harmonious relationships with the state and a high degree of embeddedness in the state apparatus.

categories which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: indifference, suspicion, harmony, surveillance and challenges.

Indifference: A Life as if No Circassians Live in Turkey⁸

Circassian activists define the Turkish state as ignoring Circassians as a community with its actions and policies. Such a perception by the Circassian activists tends to emerge especially when there are conflicts and problems in the Caucasus in which Russia and/or Turkey are stakeholders and when Circassians in the diaspora and the Caucasus are regarded as an actual or potential part of the problem by the states. Giving an example of the problems that they survived in their relations with the diasporic homeland, Nesibe,⁹ aged 57, a manager in a Circassian organization, argues that the Turkish state ignores Circassians:

“In those days, I think, the prime minister was Bülent Ecevit. An ultimatum came from Russia stating that the [Circassian] organizations were the schools of the terrorists and hence, they should be closed down. It was the time when the Chechenian refugees came into prominence. It stated that the organizations should be closed, and the Republic of Turkey did not reply that except sending police [to our organizations]... And I felt so awful back then, you do not exist. You are nothing... You are not counted at all. If I had the power to do that, I would just announce in the media and say that we were leaving Turkey as a number of people and returning to the Caucasus next day. But unfortunately, I do not have such a power, I do not have support to do that. But I would have liked to do that. Well, would Turkey care about that? I do not know that either” (Nesibe).

Hence, in the case of an international conflict the Turkish state has a tendency to curtail the capacity of Circassian diaspora to have political connections with the homeland communities. The state, blind to the diasporic connections of the Circassians with the Caucasus and the Circassian transnational community, is also

⁸ This phrase was used by Neval, aged 58, a retired state official. She defined that kind of a life as “weird” (Neval).

⁹ In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, within the text, quotations from the interviews are introduced with a pseudo-name.

narrated as blind at the national level. The narrative on the blindness of the Turkish state has emerged in the interviews when most of the Circassian activists narrated their educational experiences in Turkey. Education has been the first extensive relationship of most of the Circassians with the state just like any other Turkish citizen.¹⁰ The interviews with Circassian activists highlight that education in Turkey prioritizes Turkish identity and Turkish language and consider other ethnic groups a deviation from the norm, a group that should be assimilated, a group that should be nationalized and disciplined or at best persuaded to become proper Turkish citizens.

These narratives on education as indifference, exclusion, assimilation or even humiliation are in line with the studies that have explored education in Turkey from a critical point of view starting from the mid 1990s. A study on educational policies in Turkey, for instance, states that starting from the early years of Turkish Republic, Turkish educational system has been based on an authoritarian nationalist-statist ideology that has aimed to exalt the Turkish nation and Turkish state and associates any foreign idea and influence with harm (Kaplan 390). The studies on textbooks similarly underline that textbooks at the primary and secondary levels are flawed with militarism, intolerance, xenophobia,” and Atatürkist nationalism (Tarba Ceylan and Irzık). The stereotype of “internal and external enemy”, the external enemy being the more ambiguous one (Bora, *Nationalism* 65); indoctrination as an implicit objective, the image of the Turks as “superior, privileged and even more divinely empowered than others” (Boztemur 129), admiration of power, violence and authority (Boztemur 146) are

¹⁰ In my field study, these narratives of Circassian activists on education have pertained to three interrelated levels. The first level considers the management of ethnic identity in educational settings, e.g. what being a Circassian means in a school, classroom; what young Circassians are advised when going to schools etc. The second level deals with the use of Turkish as the official language and its coexistence with other languages in educational settings. The third level considers a particular topic in educational curricula that is significant for Circassians in Turkey, the topic of Çerkes Ethem in history classes.

the frequent themes in those textbooks. Regarding the minorities, it is stated that the language of the textbook oscillates between an assimilationist approach, a discriminatory language and silence which implies ignoring or denying the matter outright (Gemalmaz 34).

Similarly, the narratives of Circassian activists on their experiences in educational settings range between indifference, exclusion, assimilation or even humiliation and multiple forms of resistance. Educational system in Turkey contributes to the relegation of Circassian languages to private sphere and to that extent contributes to the indifference that Esat, aged 38, a lawyer highlights:

“For instance, my parents used to talk Abkhazian, it was very often being spoken at home. Another language was being spoken outside. I was naively presuming that there was a street language and a home language, that everybody spoke a street language and a home language... After I started school and started going to my friends’ houses for homework etc., I realized that their street language and home language were the same. Well, that is a violence for sure in the sense that it is being regarded as non-existent, not being counted” (Esat).

Furthermore, the schools actively taught the young members of the group the difference between the language that can be spoken in public and the language that is limited to the private sphere. Schools have disciplined the Circassian subjects through Turkish courses; acts of physical or oral punishment and disapproval by the teacher in the classroom; statements by the teachers that warn the parents about the use of ethnic language; and finally, the appraisal and approval for excellence in Turkish. Discursively, Circassian activists today regard these mechanisms not only as mechanisms to learn Turkish but also to unlearn Circassian. As the national and official language of the public sphere, that is Turkish, is being learned, the language of everyday life for the average Circassian student becomes a barrier to overcome, a language to unlearn. Language, the tool of speaking up becomes an act of masking the difference.

Suspicion / Question Mark / Threat: The State Knows

Circassian activists argue that Turkish state regards Circassians with a question mark. From such a perspective, state is beyond being ethnically blind, but it is particularly interested in ethnic groups, Circassians being one of them as exemplified with the words of Kaya, aged 48, businessman:

“Despite the cadres that we give to the state, I think that state has always regarded us as a question mark. Even if we are unaware of our identity, the state has always known that we are Circassians. Even if we presume ourselves to be Turks, the state knows that we are not” (Kaya).

As these kinds of arguments range between question mark, unease and fear, Esat, aged 37, a lawyer, employs the notion of threat and states that Circassians may have a particular position among other ethnic groups in Turkey in terms of the state’s perception of threat:

“I think that state has two perceptions. First, it regards Circassians as an element which may be historically beneficial in some events or turning points. We can see the second perception when the National Security Council did *fişleme*:¹¹ it was the claim of being Abkhazian and Circassian, not the claim of being Bosnian or Albanian. In state policies which are based on general

¹¹ The Turkish word, *fişleme* is keeping a secret record of someone, a surveillance mechanism that is claimed to be used by various institutions of the states. This instance was claimed to take place in March 2004 when the Land Forces demanded from the local authorities information on some groups and institutions with some “destructive and divisive actions” which included “groups who are in a tendency to see themselves as minority such as Circassians, Albanians and Romans” (“ilginç”).

Next day, KAF-FED (Caucasian Associations Federation of Turkey) issued a public notice stating that the inclusion of Circassians and Abkhazians in such a list was sad, offending, prejudiced and unlucky and underlining their long loyal service to the Turkish state (“Fişleme”).

perceptions of threat, we can think that Circassians are perceived as a small threat in the margins” (Esat).

Tanıl Bora (*Türkiye’de* 37) states that Circassians were regarded as a group which had to be put under some degree of surveillance during the early Republican years. However, one can discern a longer history of the threat perception and inside that history, a multiplicity of discourses of the state and Turkish nationalism that enabled and legitimized such a perception of the Circassians as the threat.

First, the swinging pendulum of Turkish nationalism, after the early 1920s, leaned towards an ethnic and exclusionist direction and hence, perceived the non-Turkish elements as a threat and problems to be solved and corrected. In the second half of the 1920s and 1930s, some policies of the nation-state, e.g. in settlement, language, culture, education and laws were based on such as a perception of threat. In the realm of education for instance, textbooks define Turkish nation as homogenous rather than composed of various ethnicities and ignore variation and consider any difference threatening: as Muslim non-Turkish groups are ignored and seen as threats, non-Muslims are excluded from the definitions of the nation (Altınay, *Human* 84). In the realm of language policies, “Citizen Speak Turkish” campaign was organized.

Second discourse of the state and Turkish nationalism that enabled and legitimized a threat perception for the Circassians focused on a specifically Circassian affair: Çerkes Ethem affair, that is the elimination of independent guerrilla forces in favor of a regular army in the 1920s during the Turkish War of Independence, the constitutive war of the Turkish Republic. Though Çerkes Ethem affair was seemingly unrelated to ethnic and national causes, its results had been destructive for the Circassian groups in Turkey. Ethem bey, after his elimination, was renamed as traitor Çerkes Ethem in the official history. Though Çerkes Ethem has not been called “the traitor” in the history books since the 1960s, the identification still persists. The association of Ethem bey with treason, and his association with the Circassian identity led to an historical image of unreliability at best, and at worst, treason of the Circassians. These custom-made historical images of Circassians as the potentially unreliable and threatening elements have become

the items in the repertoire of Turkish nationalism and state to be used when necessary.

Thirdly, an extreme line of Turkish nationalism from the late 1930s till their trials in 1944 defined Turkish nation racially and, for the first time in the history of Turkish nationalism, defended a total exclusion of non-Turkish Muslims from the nation. These groups, defined as the sneaky, harmful and unreliable elements that the Turkish nationalists should pay attention. Though the Turanist movement of the 1930s and the 1940s was marginalized after the trials of 1944, Özdoğan (230) underlines the significance of this line of Turkish nationalism in cultivating nationalist cadres that would be the base of the Nationalist Action Party in the 1970s in addition to leaving an ideological heritage for Turkish nationalism.

The fourth discourse on the perception of Circassians as a threat comes from the rise of the Kurdish question in the 1990s. As the rise of Kurdish nationalism led to the rise of Turkish nationalism in this period, any narrative on the ethnic groups in Turkey was understood in terms of the Kurdish question. Hence, the fear that other ethnic groups might “follow the Kurds” and start an armed struggle *vis-à-vis* the Turkish state became a general theme of Turkish nationalism in the 1990s. Circassians were either regarded as either the “loyal element” who was seen as an indicator of the fact that not all ethnic groups demanded ethnic rights, or the next ethnic group to follow the example of the Kurds and betray the Turkish state.

Circassian activists narrate the ways they are/were perceived as threats by the Turkish state with reference to this multiplicity of discourses. Let alone being nonexistent, the perception of threat is legitimized by a large and detailed repertoire of discourses by the state and Turkish nationalism. The perception of Circassians as a threat by the state is not a minor crack in the “Circassian connection” but an elaborate and vindictive account of the -actual and prospective- encounters of Circassians and the Turkish state. It is an elaborate account of what happened, what faults were committed, and what can happen in the future.

Harmony, Loyalty and Embeddedness

The “Circassian connection” that is discussed in the previous section has its reflections in the Circassian narratives which highlight the three interrelated themes of harmony, loyalty and embeddedness in the state mechanism. Circassian activists argue that Circassians are in harmony with the state as Hakan, aged 45, a language instructor argues:

“Circassians are generally regarded as loyal citizens who are in harmony with the state, dominant in its organization and who protect the state; they are not a problem in that sense. Furthermore, with this Kurdish problem, there has emerged a general discourse that takes Circassians as an example, as an ethnic group that do not demand those things” (Hakan).

In this narrative, harmony is explained with reference to loyalty on the side of Circassians. All of the interviewees claimed Circassians’ loyalty to the nation-state (not *vice versa*) to be a characteristic of the relationships between Circassians and the state. Loyalty proves to be a significant criterion of inclusion in the national projects not only for Circassians but also for all ethnic groups in Turkey as Yeğen (66) states that the inclusion of the Muslim groups in the Turkish nation for was mostly dependent on their actual or assumed loyalties to the Ottoman-Turkish state. Yet, loyalty seems to form a one-way relationship as no activist mention the loyalty of the state to the Circassians. What Circassians gain from these close relationships of harmony and loyalty are narrated as security and belonging to a homeland which Circassians, as migrants and refugees have lacked. Nesibe explains that such a relationship with the state may be resulted by a consequence of the insecurity of the migrant which Circassians have survived:

“We are a refugee community. This is different from the Kurds; they are the people of Anatolia. We came from outside. Therefore, we would like to stay here, put our feet on the ground. This is why we always take refuge in secure settings. We take refuge. This is why we chose to be in the state tasks, in the army. We chose to be in those [secure] settings so that we would not be expelled again” (Nesibe).

Therefore, the historical experiences of having lost a homeland and a sense of insecurity that followed the migration to the Ottoman lands are narrated as the reasons of the harmony of Circassians with the state apparatus. Yet, a closer look at these narratives displays that harmony is also intertwined with fear, and loyalty and harmony are ensured by some group members in the upper echelons of hierarchies of the ethnic group, e.g. age. For instance, Kenan, aged 48, an engineer, says:

“It is a fear that originates from a protective mentality, and they are using it. Well... The call of our elders not to resist too much... For instance, after the elections someone from the elders said that they are a small group of people and warned to not to pay attention to them [about a group of Circassian activists who organized some public meetings with some independent candidates in the last national elections.]... He openly gave a message to the Turkish state... that Circassians were still on the state’s side, and he warned them not to pay attention to those... the reasons for the development of that fear producing instinct, then, become different, that is getting engaged to the sovereign state structure... You have a standing and a status as the Circassian bourgeoisie. If you tell something contradictory to the system, or if someone from your community voices them too much, and if you continuously have meetings at the state level, then somebody may pull your ear. Most probably that happens to some of them. Well, they do pull their ears” (Kenan).

Hence, the harmony with the state apparatus is narrated as not taking place automatically but being constantly contested by some members and being protected and maintained by some others. Those members of the community who are claimed to be embedded in the Turkish state are narrated to be the buffer zones and the brakes of Circassian community in Turkey functioning as the producers and protectors of the apparent harmony between the Circassians and the Turkish state. The activists narrate on the protectors as the members of the community who are advantaged by their positions in the social stratification, e.g. age, gender and

class: it is highly likely that the protector will be male, old,¹² coming from the upper classes of Circassian community and/or the larger capitalist society.¹³ As Renan defined nation as “a daily plebiscite” in 1882 (Renan), Circassian activists narrate harmony with the state as a daily plebiscite; a result of contestations, negotiations and bargains taking place between different people and groups of diaspora. Furthermore, embeddedness in the state mechanisms goes beyond the individual level but also it is claimed to be taking place in the Circassian organizations. Activists argue that such a relationship often do not operate for the benefit of Circassians as an ethnic group in Turkey.

As the real extent of embeddedness in the state apparatus remains unknown and it is beyond the scope of this article, the forms of such a relationship seem to range from having a task in a state institution to being an informal part of the intelligence and security organizations and networks. Usually, claims of embeddedness have mentioned a particular state institution, *MIT* and its relationships with the Circassians.

Surveillance: Myth of *MIT* (National Intelligence Organization)

MIT emerged as a state institution that had played a key role in the Circassian activists’ relationships with the state throughout the interviews. In addition to an interest in the activist works in the form of surveillance, it is sometimes narrated as an institution with close ties to the Circassians in Turkey. In these narratives, Circassian organizations are “directed by some others” (Meral), and they are

¹² The traditional Circassian culture favors the elderly, the *thamade*, unofficial title for old men with experience and wisdom.

¹³ At this point, we should remind the reader that the infusion of the Circassians into the Ottoman state apparatus in the 19th century, after or even before the exodus, took place at the level of Circassian notables and aristocrats (Besleney 55; Gingeras, *Sorrowful* 26; Karpas 344; Yelbaşı 259). Hence, one can suspect the survival of these mechanisms of creating harmony inside the community. The nation-state which is seemingly blind in terms of cultural differences may also be highly skillful in utilizing those cultural traits and habits in its dealings with the ethnic communities.

under the control of *MİT* and other institutions of intelligence. Interestingly, Circassian activists do not reject or react to the arguments about the “Circassian connection” but rather look for different perspectives and strategies to coexist with it and to continue their activism in its presence. For instance, Mert, aged 47, an architect, perceives his relationships with those institutions of intelligence on a very individual level, in a way that almost resembles familial relations:

“I believe that our associations are being guided by the state. I also know that those who are not guided by the state are prevented by our own institutions or our own people in the state who have either bad or good intentions. I also believe that if there is going to be a problem about me, they will protect me by saying that I am indeed a good and chaste man. But I also believe that they can make the computers of the newspaper that I publish stolen since all data is loaded in that computer” (Mert).

The *MİT* narratives of the Circassian activists usually surpass the institutional level. As surveillance first and foremost takes place inside the community through the elders and/or the Circassian organizations, several of the activists also narrate on their encounters with *MİT* members and other mechanisms of intelligence with laughter but always in lower voices. Sometimes even without my questions, they seemed to enjoy sharing their encounters with *MİT* while they were part of the Circassian organizations. For instance, Kenan who was under arrest in the 1970s for leftist political activism tells such an encounter:

“But during the interrogation, it was not just my leftist political activities that were being interrogated. They also asked what we wanted to do in Turkey as Circassians and they knew a lot. Well, it is always said that there are many Circassians in the police force and *MİT*. [He laughs] Yes, there are. It is not something to hide, it is very evident” (Kenan).

Close ties with the Caucasus and an activist, rather than intellectual, labor seem to be a common denominator in the profile of the Circassian activists who narrate on their encounters with

MİT. In those accounts, it is narrated that “they used to come from MİT when something happens in the Caucasus,” (İzzet) or a Circassian’s friend from MİT calls him/her etc. Rüstem narrates the most vivid encounter in which different types of information gathering mechanisms compete:

“[In 1980], someone from MİT came... He asked the addresses of the Circassian organizations. I told him to leave that question and ask it to Ministry of Internal Affairs... He said that there were organizations abroad and asked their addresses... I said “See boss. Let’s not misunderstand each other. Ask something rational and I will tell; we don’t hide anything... There are a couple of organizations in Europe that gastarbeiters from Turkey go but I really have no idea about their addresses. Even if I know, I would not tell. Because I do not have to.” Then he insisted. Sometimes you have to be firm. I said “See boss. You would like to add something to your files. But this will be no news for MİT... Since you insist, let me tell you another thing about your question. MİT entrusted the head of a [Circassian] organization, financed his travel expenses and sent him to Europe in... [dates]. He went there and visited each organization, he made some recordings there etc. He submitted those to MİT. Therefore, this will not be news for MİT.” Then he was shocked [he laughs] and asked me how I learned about all that. I said “Sir, come on. We are Circassians, we are a society. We hear things from each other. Do you think that ÇİT is asleep while MİT is working?” [O kadar da uzun boylu değil, biz de Çerkesiz, toplumuz. Birbimizden bir şeyler duyarız. MİT çalışıyor da ÇİT uyuyor mu zannediyorsun sen?] He did not understand what ÇİT was. [Another person in the talk] told him that I was joking. He told that Circassians [Çerkesler] made jokes like that by putting Ç in front of the words and ÇİT meant Circassian Intelligence Organization” (Rüstem).

As Rüstem’s narrative insinuates, there are accusations among the activists in terms of who is a collaborator with MİT. Interestingly, these accusations do not constitute any hard feelings or stigmata for the activists. If they accept the validity of those accusations about another activist, they treat those accusations as a piece of knowledge that should be kept in mind and a natural part of politics in the diaspora. Hence, Circassian activists quite

professionally “chest the soccer ball”, that is using his or her chest to gain control over the ball that is approaching them high in the air. What could easily turn into an immediate crisis in the personal relationships in other settings is handled in a very civilized and silent way which aim to prove the underlying message that “we have nothing to hide and therefore, nothing to fear.”¹⁴ Most of the time the accused members do not even survive any outright exclusion. While many activists stated that they knew about the identities of those entrusted people, few narrated on particular instances of deciphering.

In the myth of *MİT*, what matters, what remains unknown but still what is most debated is who is related to the institution. Played like a murder mystery game, it is a game that is played continuously among the community of activists with a list of suspects, claims and proofs. In any moment of the game, surprising turns may emerge, and the accuser may be accused and *vice versa*. As the subjects of the game and their roles are open to constant change, the perception that some Circassians are part of *MİT* and this can be anyone is a constant rule of the game.

Hence, while multiple forms of surveillance are normalized by Circassian activists, surveillance by the mechanisms of the state(s) is taken for granted as a fact of activist life in diaspora. These roles assigned to *MİT* in these narratives give the activists some explanatory power. The myth of *MİT* which implicates that the institution has some degree of control in the Circassian organizations has an explanatory power: it enables any dispute, conflict and differences in terms of homeland and diaspora politics to be understood and explained with reference to state policies. The activists employed the myth of *MİT* as everywhere and

¹⁴ In the interviews, several of my interviewees openly and insistently stated that they have “nothing to hide and nothing to fear”. Therefore, I, as the researcher, too became a suspect in the murder mystery game of myth of *MİT*. Hence, as a researcher trying to collect information about their community and politics I was treated with the statements from the repertoire of the Circassian activists *vis-à-vis* any information gathering agent or mechanism. For a more detailed discussion of my experiences in the field as a researcher, see Doğan.

everybody, as the all-present but unknowable to give meaning to the perceived failures of the Circassians in Turkey as a diasporic community.

As the claimed activities of *MİT*, intelligence services and organizations are normalized with those narratives; their acts and attempts to control the Circassians are regarded by the Circassians as a joke, a memory in life history and a fact of life for the activists in diaspora. With the use of humor, an integral part of Circassian patterns of socialization in Circassian culture, diaspora emerges as an actor that copes with and mocks surveillance by the state mechanism. Therefore, though the myth creates and eases embeddedness in the mentality of the nation-state, it also operates as a mechanism of resistance providing diaspora activists a voice that narrates, suspects, “knows”, guesses and mocks. The act of mocking at this point reminds me of Arundhati Roy’s suggestions to resist the empire, not only to confront it, but to lay siege to it, deprive it of oxygen, shame and mock it “with our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories” that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe (Roy) Hence, mocking, in this particular instance, is a strategy to confront and resist the nation-state and its policies of surveillance.

Challenges: Constitutive Element and New Claims on Citizenship

Circassian activists have been defining themselves as the constitutive element (*kurucu unsur*) in the history of the Republic of Turkey since the 1990s. The discourse of the ‘constitutive element’ emerged as a common theme in the interviews. The discourse has emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to the “silence of the guest” that has been narrated to haunt Circassians since the exodus. Most of the interviewees highlighted the silence of their grandparents and older relatives, and their refusal to talk about migration, relationships with the host community and their experiences in some particular instances of nation-building process, such as “Citizen Speak Turkish” campaigns etc. Mostly, they observed that this silence and refusal was a consequence of the “guest position”,

a caution produced by the fears of losing the only land they had and becoming the migrant and the refugee again. The claims that Circassians are part of the Anatolian history and Turkish national history have emerged in the 1990s as an attempt to overcome the “guest position.” With these claims, Turkish national history becomes not only a ground to be rejected, challenged or characterized by their exclusion from it but also participated by the Circassians in Turkey. Thus, diaspora searches for strategies for inclusion in the Turkish national history.

Such an argument highlights the existence of Circassians in not only state institutions but also the significant turning points of the Ottoman Empire, the War of Independence and the nation-state formation. For instance, Okan, aged 64, a retired state official, further extends the discourse of the constituent element so as to include not only the political realm but also cultural realm:

“Circassians are people who are in upper positions in Turkish armed forces and security forces; they are preferred. They do not earn that, but they are preferred. This is a tradition that has started in the foundational years of the Republic and continued till today. Well, they say that the foundational base of the Republic of Turkey is culture. I make fun of that [argument]. The foundational base of the Republic of Turkey is Circassians because in security forces, intelligence service, armed forces, never mind the rest... literature, art... actor, author... Well, Circassians are really beyond the autochthonous people of this peninsula” (Okan).

The narrative of the constituent element portrays Circassians mostly as a military nation. Circassian history, mimicking Turkish official history, is narrated as the history of wars and military losses. The wars that Circassian activists refer are the same wars that are the basic elements of official Turkish history. Thus, diasporic history is constructed and remembered as a mirror history of the Turkish Republic and diaspora is defined as a military nation similar to the use of the concept of military nation in Turkish nationalism as a foundational myth and an essential discursive component (Altnay, *The Myth*). These claims on the participation of Circassians to the

wars of Ottoman and Turkish states as a military nation imply that Circassian debts to their new state have been paid full and now they can be considered equal citizens, rather than guests, migrants and refugees who are burdened with a debt for settlement:

“We feel guilty for coming here. We left. We migrated. We were exiled. We escaped. We left. And each moment, we feel the anxiety of that. We are afraid that somebody will say you took refuge here. Yes, we took refuge, but we paid its price... No, they did not embrace us... they accepted us because we were useful. They needed soldiers. They needed a soldier nation. And these people died there. They died in exiles, diseases, the worst conditions of settlement and wars” (Nesibe).

“What was the ideal? To go back to the Caucasus, to return to the homeland. But meanwhile, they defended the country which had been a second homeland to them. They had to keep their faces open, this was what their culture demanded. This is why in Gallipoli...” (Gürtuğ).

Borrowing and employing the concept of military nation, Circassian nationalists not only mimic the Turkish nationalist discourse but also challenge it by displaying the multiethnic character of its processes and institutions. Circassian activists with these claims since the 1990s, have tried to develop new relationships with the Turkish state based on a notion of multicultural citizenship. Furthermore, these demands do not seem to be restricted to the activists but find their reflections in the larger community of Circassians. For instance, a survey conducted by Ayhan Kaya in 2002 with the Circassians in Turkey highlights 70% of the Circassian respondents demanded the Turkish state to improve the cultural rights of Circassians and 20.5% demanded democratization of Turkey (Kaya, *Türkiye’de* 150). Meanwhile 6.5% declared that they wanted nothing from the state and 3% stated that any demand from the state would be ungratefulness (Kaya, *Türkiye’de* 150).

As the activists, in the 1970s, considered assimilation the most dominant mechanism of the Turkish state to deal with the Circassians, Circassian activists have, since the first decade of the

twenty first century, started to imagine multicultural state policies in broadcasting, language education, and culture for the ethnic groups of Turkey (Akdeniz Göker 99). Unlike the activists' discourses of the 1970s which regarded Turkish state as an assimilating and homogenizing mechanism; Circassian activists have, since the 1990s, demanded multicultural policies from the Turkish state for the achievement of a substantive equality among its citizens.

Concluding Remarks

The title for this paper, "No Matter How Close" is inspired by Nothing Else Matters, a song of the rock band, Metallica. I reversed the original lyrics, "so close no matter far" to explain the Circassian relations with the Turkish state and *vice versa*. Hence, the title became "[so far] no matter how close". This paper which aims to explore the Circassian narratives on their relations with the Turkish state argues that despite the seemingly close relationships with the Turkish state, the Circassian relationships with the state are complicated, not immune from frictions and continuously undecidable.

These complicated and heterogenous narratives on the relationships with the Turkish state parallel the diasporic condition which refers to constantly shifting categories of identification that are "contested, complex and embedded in multiple narratives of struggle" (Houston and Wright 217). Rather than being organic and unproblematic entities, diaspora communities and their cultures are the instances and products of the processes of diasporization, transplantation and syncretization (Hall 10). As diaspora communities are characterized by heterogeneity, hybridity and identities which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference (Hall qtd. in R. Cohen 138), the relationships of these diasporas with the state apparatuses display a similar heterogeneity, multiplicity and complexity.

Building themselves on "the Circassian connection", the popular and, to some degree, academic monolithic accounts of Circassians as the loyal element with privileged and harmonious relationships with the state and a high degree of embeddedness in

the state apparatus are quite misleading and oversimplified. Similarly haunted by the spectre of the “Circassian connection”, this paper argues that Circassian perceptions on their relationships with the state are heterogenous, and the ways they are narrated range between indifference, suspicion, harmony, surveillance and challenges. Circassian activists, through the myth of MİT, normalize state surveillance on ethnic groups but also resist the mechanisms of surveillance through mocking and hence, demystifying them. With the discourse of the constitutive element most of which is related to the claims of Circassian participation into the wars of the Republic, activists claim a potent agency in the Turkish history and state. The narratives on Circassian embeddedness in the state mechanisms also normalize relationships with the Turkish state and it also operates to empower Circassian activists to some extent.

Finally, I argue that while Circassians in Turkey employ an undecidable position shifting between the migrant, the citizen, the founders of the state, lonely and rootless strangers, the perceptions of the activists on their relationships with the Turkish state shift between neglect, harmony, embeddedness, exclusion and inclusion. Such an undecidability can be a reflection of the fact that the relationships between Circassians and the state are far from being an exact opposition or harmony but rather include an array of strategies and maneuvers that are open to change and transformation but still form a consistent and rich repertoire for both sides.

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