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The Kurds in Turkey and The Tuareg: A shared history of ‘othering’ and oppression at the peripheries of hegemonic nation-states

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Abstract

Identity politics shape 21st century politics together with political polarization and politics of hate around the globe. The world is moving towards further segregation, xenophobia, and social stratification with the rise of populist leaders. Although the fear of being under attack by the Other is ostensible predominantly in the West, this paper examines the ways non-Western hegemonic nation states demonstrate similar discriminatory attitudes within their national borders. Such divisive attitudes result in many socioeconomic and political conflicts; however, the most urgent outcome manifests itself as threats to national security or civil unrest. Furthermore, the divisive nature of establishing hegemony by marginalizing a certain group affects that same group more than others depending on a given time and place. In this sense, the case of Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahara-Sahel provides the necessary context to elucidate the central role identity politics play in the current political climate. Even though the similarities between the two groups are not apparent at first glance, it is argued that their struggles are similar in relation to their hegemonic environments.

Keywords: *Identity, Hegemony, Discourse, Kurdish people, The Tuareg, Sahel, Turkey*

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1. Introduction

21st century politics is fundamentally shaped by the rise of populism; an ideology that positions one group, namely “the people”, against other groups in a certain society. Hence, nations around the globe are governed based on the premise that certain groups deserve more recognition while others are systematically ignored and humiliated. Although populist discourse and othering processes vary depending on geography and grand narratives of different nations, it can be argued that modern societies are stratified based on race, gender, class, and religion. Such attributes make up one’s identity in a given time and place and through this process of identity building, certain groups acquire various positions in stratified societies. Similarly, a group’s acquired position within a society signifies the inequalities experienced or the privileges enjoyed by that same group in relation to the others. This paper explains such dynamics of identity building and their consequences in terms of two trans-border ethnic groups, namely the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahara-Sahel. Even though the link between the two groups is not ostensible at first glance, it is argued that they share the same fate. The theoretical framework of this discussion is based on concepts such as hegemony and discourse as well as the theory of horizontal inequalities.

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2. The Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in Sahara-Sahel: history and demographics

This paper argues that Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahara-Sahel experience similar processes of othering and discrimination due to their trans-border minority status. This section discusses how both groups identify as culturally, and ethnically distinct groups as opposed to the grand narratives of the neighboring nation-states. Accordingly, the complexities in the Sahel region and its effects on the Tuareg will be discussed after the discussion of the historical formation and evolution of Kurdish people in Turkey. Although it is argued that both groups share the same fate in terms of discrimination, ‘Othering’ and economic exploitation, it should also be noted that the grievances of the Tuareg are primarily defined by the environmental injustices experienced in the Sahel region. While the Kurdish lands are also poor and war-torn, the Tuareg experience severe drought and famine due to the exploitation of resources, human activity and the geographical location of the Sahel.

Turkey is a multicultural country that is located at the intersection of Western Asia, the Balkan Peninsula, and Southeast Europe. In order to elucidate the contemporary status of Kurdish people in Turkey, it is crucial to establish the historical evolution of Turkey from the Ottoman Empire. Throughout history, Turkish lands hosted a variety of peoples. Hence, Turkish lands were within the territories of the Ottoman Empire until the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Ottoman Empire was a vast, multicultural and multilingual empire controlling most of Southeast Europe, parts of Central Europe, Western Asia, parts of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, North Africa and the Horn of Africa. Accordingly, the Ottoman Empire had to preserve the cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences of its people in order to avoid possible rebellions that could undermine the Empire. Thus, the Ottoman Empire “applied a multiethnic politics based on loyalty to the Sultan, payment of tribute, and respect for peace and order” (Galletti, 2001).

Kurdish people were one of many minority groups that were subjugated by the Ottoman Empire. Their homeland is Kurdistan which “has been forcibly divided and lies mostly within the present-day borders of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, with smaller parts in Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan” following the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Hassanpour, 1994). However, “much of Kurdistan was under the rule of independent and autonomous Kurdish principalities” in the Ottoman era (Hassanpour, 1994). In this respect, Kurdish people were not united amongst themselves and they were tied to the Ottoman culture with their shared religion, Islam. Consequently, Kurds could not form an independent state based on their ethnic similarities when the Ottoman Empire collapsed after World War I as a result of international treaties such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916). In fact, they fought with Turkish armed forces in the Turkish War of Independence hoping to enjoy autonomy in the future Republic of Turkey. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, “pragmatically talked about a possible autonomy for Kurds in order to guarantee their continued support in the War of Independence against European occupying forces (McDowall cited in Gunes, 2013). However, with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, autonomous Kurdish principalities lost their already limited autonomy. Furthermore, their ethnic identity was denied by modern Turkey. The Turkish Republic has applied a series of assimilation politics which in turn, resulted in the marginalization of Kurdish people living in Turkey today.

The Tuareg, on the other hand, “are commonly described as Berber-speaking nomadic stockbreeders” (Keenan, 1977) who occupy parts of the Sahara-Sahel region from southwestern Libya to southern Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Since both the Tuareg and the Kurds in Turkey are inescapably affected by their surroundings; the social, political and economic climate of the Sahel profoundly impacts the challenges faced by the Tuareg. The Sahel “covers the northern part of Senegal, southern part of Mauritania, middle part of Mali, southern part of Algeria and Niger, middle part of Chad, southern part of Sudan, northern part of South Sudan and Eritrea” (Kitissou, 2013). Since the Sahel is shared by different countries, the Tuareg territories are also divided by various countries. Thus, the Tuareg territories are within the national borders of southern Algeria, Niger, Mali, south-west Libya.

In this sense, the Tuareg are comprised of autonomous and smaller bodies in a similar way to the Kurds under the Ottoman Empire. It can be inferred that the historical lack of political unity and leadership in both groups contribute to their marginalization as culturally and ethnically distinct minority groups. Thus, the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg fall into “Miroslav Hroch’s category of “nations without history”” (Loizides, 2010). The Kurds and the Tuareg never declared their independence in the form of a nation-state throughout history hence, their historicity was intermingled with and oppressed by the hegemonic discourses of the neighboring states. Therefore, their mobilization could not be achieved based on a shared sense of previous statehood and historicity. Correspondingly, both the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg were latecomers in the development of a national identity compared to the neighboring nation-states.

Both the Kurds and the Tuareg are historically clan-like in terms of their respective political formations. The lack of political unity amongst the smaller bodies comprising these groups makes them susceptible to be coerced by the neighboring hegemonic nation-states. However, both groups claim their lands as culturally and ethnically distinct territories even though their cultural boundaries do not match up with political ones. The Kurdish homeland is known

as Kurdistan which “has been forcibly divided and lies mostly within the present-day borders of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, with smaller parts in Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan” following the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Hassanpour, 1994). Although more than 22 million people live in Kurdistan today, Kurdistan as a geographical term has been denied by the Turkish State as well as others. On the other hand, the homeland of the Tuareg is known as Ahaggar, a vast mountainous area in the center of the Sahara (Keenan, 1977). Unlike the Kurds in Turkey, the Tuareg were able to mobilize with the help of Gaddafi (Kitissou, 2013) and managed to establish a short-lived and unrecognized Republic of Azawad. Nevertheless, regional non-state armed groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith), al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) intervened and the Tuareg were defused (Kitissou, 2013). Soon after, the Republic of Azawad rejoined Mali in 2013.

3. Identity politics and the politics of resentment in the case of Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg

It is evident that the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg are systematically exposed to state oppression due to their peripheral status, lack of resources and political unity. Although the state oppression experienced by each group varies depending on the different geographical territories they occupy, both trans-border ethnic groups suffer from socioeconomic grievances such as poverty, state violence and processes of assimilation and marginalization. Thus, it is important to understand the dynamics between state oppression, the demand for dignity and marginalized identities in order to make sense of the ways these trans-border ethnic groups react against their hegemonic environments. Accordingly, Francis Fukuyama’s conceptualization of the three parts of the human soul in his book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018) will be used in this section to discuss identity politics. Fukuyama, referring to Socrates, states that the human soul is comprised of three distinct parts. These are namely, the desiring part (emotion), calculating part (reason) and *thymos* (spirit) and their political implications are referred to as *mesothymia* and *megalothymia* (Fukuyama, 2018). Although Fukuyama explains these terms in relation to the human soul, this section aims to explain that there is a correspondence between the expectations of the human soul at the micro level and the expectations vis-à-vis reactions of these two minority groups at the macro level.

Fukuyama (2018) states that *thymos* “is the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity.” As it was noted in the introduction, certain groups’ demand for dignity is systematically undermined by the hegemonic regimes in racially, economically and politically stratified societies today. In this sense, dignity acquires macro level connotations pertaining to a group’s identity and its position within the larger society. Hence, *thymos* becomes the essential part of the human soul that could give way to possible conflicts between marginalized groups and others. It can be asserted that *thymos* of the Kurds and the Tuareg is constantly frustrated by the hegemonic neighboring states because both groups are constantly and systematically exposed to institutionalized violence, exploitation of their resources and politics of assimilation. Although the denial of *thymos* in the case of the Kurds and the Tuareg manifests itself in various forms, the fundamental problem is the neighboring nation-states’ refusal to acknowledge their distinct cultural and ethnic identities as equals. Thus, the distinctive Kurdish and the Tuareg identities are constantly compromised in comparison to other dominant groups. In this context, Fukuyama’s conceptualization of *mesothymia* is quite useful as it refers to the “the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people” (2018).

In this respect, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory provides the necessary theoretical framework to explain such discriminatory processes of identity politics. Howarth and Stavrakakis (Gunes, 2013) note that the discourse theory “investigates the way social practices systematically form the identities of subjects and objects by articulating together a series of contingent signifying elements available in a discursive field.” Correspondingly, discourse can be described as a “social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing (subject) positions with which social agents can identify” (Gunes, 2013). In this sense, the nation-states neighboring the Kurdish and the Tuareg territories establish a hegemonic discourse that undermines both groups’ position as culturally and ethnically distinct entities. Antonio Gramsci argued that certain groups in society are ought to be coerced or dominated for a class to become hegemonic and achieve the power it needs in order to dominate subaltern groups (Gunes, 2013). In this manner, the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg are dominated so that the neighboring states could maintain their political and cultural dominance and hegemony in their respective territories. Thus, it can be inferred that the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg experience state oppression in the form of *megalothymia* (Fukuyama, 2018). Fukuyama (2018) defines *megalothymia* as “the desire to be recognized as superior”. Subsequently, the hegemonic identity politics of the neighboring states resonates with the desires of *megalothymia*. Thus, the political implications of *megalothymia* contribute to the political and economic marginalization of these trans-border ethnic groups.

It can be asserted that the political implications of *megalothymia* exalted by the neighboring states are based on their status as legitimate nation-states. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that “European imperialism and Third World nationalisms have together achieved the ‘universalization of the nation-state as the most desirable form of political community’”

(Zeydanlioglu, 2008 – emphasis in original). Thus, the failure of the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in establishing coherent nations based on their collective cultural and ethnic identities make them vulnerable to be coerced by the neighboring nation-states. In other words, these nation-states justify their desire to be recognized as superiors (*megalothymia*) by virtue of their nation-state-hood. Zeydanlioglu (2008) also notes that the nation-state-hood is considered to be a criterion for the “Western-ness” of these neighboring states.

The founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk once stated that the “uncivilized people are doomed to be trodden under the feet of civilized people” (Zeydanlioglu, 2008). In this sense, the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg are considered as “the uncivilized people” that could potentially harm the nation-state-hood of the “civilized” neighboring states. Thus, these trans-border ethnic minority groups are systematically marginalized and coerced by the neighboring states in order to maintain the legitimacy of these nation-states. When the Turkish Republic was established in 1923, Kurds in Turkey “faced the new conditions implied by the establishment of the Turkish Republic and the hegemonic discourse surrounding the homogenization of its population” (Loizides, 2010). Correspondingly, the Turkish Republic adopted a nationalistic policy that was based on “creating a new identity for the whole population” (Galletti, 2001). By way of creating such an identity, the Turkish Republic aimed at building “a Western type secular nation-state based on Turkish national, linguistic and cultural identity” (Hassanpour, 1994). Subsequently, the Kurds in Turkey experienced practices of Othering during the Turkish nation-state building process.

Zeydanlioglu (2008) emphasizes that “the “native” emerges as an other that becomes the target of “corrective” and “scientific” projects of modernity and progress” in the process of building Western type nation-states. In like manner, the Tuareg experienced practices of Othering due to European colonialism in Africa. Both the Sahara-Sahel and the Tuareg lost their affluence when the colonization came. Although the Tuareg resisted the French colonial rule, they were eventually subdued, and their territories were largely dismantled and reorganized. Moreover, French colonialism has been impactful in the creation of nation-states neighboring the Tuareg territories. Kitissou (2013) notes that former French Sudan “first formed the Federation of Mali with Senegal when it first gained independence in 1960.” Following the withdrawal of Senegal from the Federation, the new state maintained the name of Mali (Kitissou, 2013). The creation of Mali marked the beginning of the irredentism of the Tuareg as they have been organizing revolts against the central government for greater autonomy since then (Kitissou, 2013). It can be inferred that the Tuareg formed counterstrategies in order to claim their distinct cultural and ethnic identity as well as territory against the central governments surrounding them.

4. A non-dichotomous relationship: Reason and emotions

It can be asserted that feelings of invisibility and humiliation result in resentment towards the source of humiliation. In the context of the Kurds and the Tuareg, their collective humiliation by the hegemonic neighboring states resulted in the creation of the Kurdish and the Tuareg national liberation discourses to construct a counter-hegemonic order in their respective territories (Gunes, 2013). Thus, it is suggested that understanding the dynamics between structural and inter-group sociopolitical relations lies in the fact that human beings are, in fact, not as rational as the Enlightenment thinkers would argue. While the impact of our emotions is generally acknowledged at the micro-level analyses of human behavior, we tend to associate reason—and omit emotions completely, at the macro-level analyses of politics, institutions, social stability, and change. However, it is evident that individual feelings such as humiliation and resentment can manifest themselves as acts of collective resistance as exemplified in the case of the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahel. Hence, it is argued that the conventional binary relationship between reason and emotions is obsolete in the case of the Kurds and the Tuareg because their collective humiliation by the hegemonic neighboring states results in the feeling of resentment which, in turn, leads to social, economic and political instability in their respective territories.

Moisi (2009) argues that three basic human emotions reflect and shape the current political climate. Moisi (2009) associates fear, humiliation and hope with three major geopolitical entities, namely the West, the Arab-Islamic world and Asia. In this manner, he associates the West with a culture of fear in the form of xenophobia. The West experiences the fear of the Other because the contact with the Other ultimately triggers an identity crisis in the Western subconsciousness (Moisi, 2009). Thus, the West is dominated and divided by fear due to this so-called identity crisis. The Arab-Islamic world, on the other hand, is suffering from the feelings of humiliation and resentment as the “absolute Other” (Moisi, 2009). Whereas Asia is defined by a new culture of hope due to its recent economic development and its subsequent elevated position in the global arena (Moisi, 2009). Correspondingly, it is argued that the culture of humiliation is reshaping sociopolitical dynamics in the case of the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahel in relation to their hegemonic surroundings which is dominated by the culture of fear.

Inspired by Horowitz's (1985) "positional psychology", Petersen explains that "resentment is the feeling of being *politically* dominated by a group that has no right to be in a superior position. It is the everyday experience of these perceived status that breeds the emotion" (Cederman *et al.*, 2011 – emphasis in original). Accordingly, the feeling of resentment experienced by the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg stems from their perceived status as the Other. It can be asserted that the hegemonic discourse of the neighboring states represents the culturally and ethnically distinct Kurdish and the Tuareg identities as the 'Other', breeding the emotion of resentment. Hence, the neighboring nation-states create mental categories that construct the "positional psychology" of the Kurds and the Tuareg as inferiors. This process of mental categorization of the Kurdish and the Tuareg identities by the neighboring states can be explained by Tilly's (1999) conceptualization of nationalism as a case of "categorical inequality" (Cederman *et al.*, 2011). Tilly (1999) argues that nationalism "asserts and creates paired and unequal categories either (a) rival aspirants to nationhood (b) members of the authentic nation versus others" (Cederman *et al.*, 2011). Subsequently, it can be argued that the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahel are unequally categorized as "rival aspirants to nationhood" against the "members of the authentic nation" (Cederman *et al.*, 2011). Hence, their status as culturally and ethnically distinct sociopolitical entities is systematically undermined and ignored based on the conflicting categories of (a) and (b).

Tilly (1999) notes that nationalism "involves claims to prior control over a state, hence to the exclusion of others from that priority. It authorizes agents of the nation to subordinate, segregate, stigmatize, expel, or even exterminate others in the nation's name" (Cederman *et al.*, 2011). In this manner, nationalism as an ideology operates as a tool to establish hegemony over marginalized groups such as the Kurds and the Tuareg. Nationalism can also be interpreted as a means of constructing the "positional psychology" of the Kurdish and the Tuareg people in a way that they are systematically Othered and stigmatized. In this respect, the hegemonic neighboring states experience a similar culture of fear that the West is suffering from (Moisi, 2009) as opposed to the culture of humiliation experienced by the Kurds and the Tuareg. In other words, the conflict between the two marginalized groups and the neighboring states results from the reciprocal relationship between the culture of fear and the culture of humiliation. Thus, the cultures of fear and humiliation are interlocked in a way that the culture of fear creates a culture of humiliation through the processes of mental categorization and Othering. The culture of humiliation, on the other hand, exalts the culture of fear by means of its counter-hegemonic resistance which often involves violent propaganda. As social comparisons reflecting superiority or inferiority in stratified societies are likely to trigger conflict (Cederman *et al.*, 2011), the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahel are constantly in conflict with their hegemonic surroundings for they are labeled as the inferior Others.

Moisi notes that the West imposes the idea that it is historically entitled to claim moral and political superiority over other nations and national identities based on its democratic principles (Moisi, 2009). Thus, the West's *megalothymia* not only frustrates the *isothymia* (the desire to be recognized as equals) of the non-Western states but also reproduces non-Western Others. In this manner, the West's desire to be recognized as superior simultaneously becomes the source of the fear of being "conquered by them" (Moisi, 2009). Hence, the hegemonic discourse of the West results in a paralyzing fear of the Other which ultimately strengthens the culture of fear. Therefore, the nation-states neighboring the Kurdish and the Tuareg territories embody the West's *megalothymia* as well. In this respect, the nation-state-hood of these neighboring states and their claims of civility and democracy enable them to act as the West. In other words, even though these neighboring nation-states are not considered Western, their *megalothymia* operates similarly with the West.

These non-Western nation-states are either referred to as Middle Eastern or African by the West, in terms of the Kurdish and the Tuareg irredentism respectively. It is evident that the term Middle Eastern indicates that any country neighboring the Kurdish lands is the "absolute Other – the Muslim" (Moisi, 2009). Similarly, the countries neighboring the Tuareg territory represent another historical "absolute Other", that is "the Negro". It should also be noted that the Tuareg are not only exposed to the *megalothymia* of the neighboring African states, but they are also exposed to the *megalothymia* of Western superpowers such as the United States and France. Therefore, these non-Western hegemonic nation-states mimic the xenophobic attitudes of the West by creating strangers within. In this sense, the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg are alienated from the larger society in a way that they are feared and humiliated. That is to say, on the one hand, the West frustrates both the *mesothymia* and *thymos* (the part of the human soul craving for the recognition of one's dignity) of the non-West as the moral and political superior while the non-Western nation-states (Middle-Eastern or African in this case) frustrate the *mesothymia* and *thymos* of the marginalized groups within their borders. Accordingly, the West provides the historical, political and discursive context and tools for these neighboring states to establish hegemony over the Kurds and the Tuareg.

5. “What makes a terrorist?”: The Kurdish and the Tuareg rebellions

It is evident that the culture of fear dominating both the West and the non-Western nation-states neighboring the Kurds and the Tuareg manifests itself in the form of the “fear of the Other” (Moisi, 2009). Moisi (2009) describes fear as “an emotional response to the perception, real or exaggerated, of an impending danger.” Even though the face of the Other varies depending on the hegemonic nation-state, Western or non-Western, Moisi (2009) argues that the “fear of the Other also includes the fear of terrorism.” In this sense, the culture of fear not only marginalizes certain groups but also attributes dangerous qualities to the marginalized. Hence, the Other is not only stigmatized and expelled from the larger society but it is now the “impending danger” that threatens the social, political and economic domination of the hegemonic state. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the hegemonic states, both neighboring and Western, represent these groups as the “impending danger”. In this manner, they not only channel their feelings of fear and resentment towards these minority groups but also justify their reasons to oppress and stigmatize them. Hence, it is not surprising that the Kurdish identity is often represented in relation to terrorism by the mainstream Turkish media. Likewise, the Tuareg are condemned as Muslim extremists operating in the Sahel by the Western superpowers such as the United States.

The literature highlights that the reinvention of the Other as a terrorist is another way of establishing hegemony over the marginalized groups as the hegemonic states construct the Kurdish and the Tuareg identities in a way that they are perceived as “the terrorist”. Similarly, Gunes (2013) argues that “the concept of myth plays a crucial role in the institution of hegemony.” Inspired by Laclau (1990 cited in Gunes 2013), Gunes (2013) notes that myth is “a space of representation...myth fulfils an important function by providing a ‘surface on which dislocations and social demands can be inscribed.” Accordingly, these hegemonic states create a ‘myth of the terrorist’ through the systematic Othering of the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahel. Hence, the Kurds and the Tuareg were ‘made’ terrorists through the hegemonic discourse of neighboring states and Western superpowers. Nevertheless, the fact that both the neighboring states as well as the Kurds and the Tuareg participate in collective violent actions against one another should not be overlooked in the discussion of terrorism. This section simply aims to deconstruct the ‘myth of the terrorist’ in the case of the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg by describing how their image as terrorists was constructed and maintained by the hegemonic neighboring states and Western superpowers.

Keenan (2013) demonstrates how the United States fabricated the myth of the terrorist and terrorist activities in the Sahara-Sahel region on the pretext of fighting terrorism. Keenan boldly discusses how the United States invaded the Sahel and justified its unjust intervention under the guise of Global War on Terror (GWOT). In this manner, United States not only portrayed the Tuareg as terrorists but also turned the region into an actual terror zone through the false-flag operations it orchestrated in the Sahara (Keenan, 2013). Accordingly, the US Defense Science Board (DSB) suggested the creation of a covert organization “which would carry out secret missions to stimulate reactions among terrorist groups by provoking them into undertaking violent acts that would expose them to ‘counterattack’ by US forces” (Keenan, 2013).

In this respect, it is evident that the US established its hegemony in Africa under the pretext of GWOT against al-Qaeda and the Islamist insurgency in Africa. It can be argued that the US’s fixation on Islamist terrorist groups and orchestration of false-flag terrorism in the region created “the ideological conditions for the militarization of Africa” (Keenan, 2013). As Keenan notes “the ideological obsession of Western governments and their intelligence services with terrorists and Islamists” demonstrates how hegemonic states utilize Islamists as a vessel to make their actions legitimate. In this sense, the Tuareg are the “absolute Other” equivocally, since they are both Muslim and African. Although the Tuareg were incriminated by the US in various levels, their oppression was also exalted by African governments such as Algeria, Niger, and Mali which benefitted from the US military assistance in the region. Keenan (2013) states that “the launch of the GWOT into the Sahara-Sahel region exacerbated the region’s political and economic instability and was a major cause of the Tuareg rebellions that broke out in Niger and Mali in 2007.” Furthermore, it is also stated that the Tuareg not only suffered from the exploitation of their resources but also from “what the local Tuareg called an ‘ethnocide’” due to former President Tandja’s genocidal policy in Niger and major loss of life in Mali (Keenan, 2013). Thus, the African governments neighboring the Tuareg territories tried to expel the culturally and ethnically distinct Tuareg identity along with the US and France’s exploitation of their livelihood.

Cederman *et al.* (2011) argue that “horizontal inequalities between politically relevant ethnic groups and states at large can promote ethnonationalist conflict.” In this sense, political and economic grievances resulting in the “horizontal inequalities” can be considered the major factor in the formation of the Kurdish and the Tuareg insurgencies. Both the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahara-Sahel were dispossessed of their livelihoods and their respective territories were invaded by the hegemonic states. As Cederman *et al.* (2011) note “some ethnic groups came on top of the

geopolitical game, others were conquered early on, and therefore lost out in the competition for wealth and influence.” Thus, both the Kurds and the Tuareg lost their position as influential local powers due to their clan-like political organization and failed to play a central role in the geopolitical game.

According to Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) “realistic conflict theory” (1979), “conflicting claims to scarce resources, including power, prestige, and wealth are likely to produce ethnocentric and antagonistic intergroup relations” (Tilly cited in Cederman *et al.*, 2011). It can be argued that such ethnocentric and antagonistic intergroup relations are relevant to the conflicts between the two trans-border ethnic minority groups and their hegemonic surroundings. Furthermore, the “realistic conflict theory” (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) is particularly relevant to the Tuareg, “as life in the desert has become more difficult, especially in the wake of the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s and the Tuareg rebellions in both Niger and Mali in the 1990s” (Keenan, 2013). In this respect, it can be asserted that the environmental concerns occurring in the Sahara escalate the conflict in the region as the scarcity of natural resources increases due to hazardous human activity in the region. Thus, it is understood that environmental concerns are highly deterministic in the conflict between the Tuareg and their hegemonic surroundings.

Although such environmental concerns in the Kurdish regions of Turkey do not occur due to Turkey’s geographical location, Kurdish regions are also portrayed as ‘terror-zones’ by the Turkish mainstream media. Kurdish people who depend on agriculture and tourism lost their major source of income because of the defamation of Kurdish territories and increased violent activity by the Turkish government. Additionally, a great majority of the Kurdish population had to migrate from Kurdistan to the Western regions of Turkey due to the destruction of agricultural means of production in the Kurdish regions. Consequently, both minority groups experienced environmental and economic injustices inflicted by their hegemonic surroundings. Cederman *et al.* (2011) note that “the perception of injustice generates grievances that serve as a formidable tool of recruitment” in the facilitation of collective counterattacks. Hence, the myth of terrorism that was fabricated by the hegemonic states can be deconstructed by means of the theory of horizontal inequalities (Cederman *et al.*, 2011) and Tajfel and Turner’s “realistic conflict theory” (1979). In this sense, the Kurdish and the Tuareg insurgencies stem from real-life consequences of political, social and economic grievances rather than an “innate” sense of hatred towards the West or anything resembling the West. Thus, it is useful to classify “inequality as a mobilizational source” instead of a “pure “grievance” factor” in the discussion of terrorism (Cederman *et al.*, 2011). Eventually, the answer to the question of “What makes a terrorist?” or “Who becomes a terrorist?” is a complex one despite the West’s simplistic answer: “the Other!”.

6. Conclusion

How identity politics play a central role in current politics through the examples of the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahara-Sahel region was examined throughout this paper. It is evident that the Kurdish and the Tuareg identities indicate how they are “signified” in their respective territories. Although both groups occupy different geographical locations and their historical, cultural and social evolution is predominantly determined by geography, it is argued that the Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg share the same fate. Based on this premise, this paper demonstrates how the politics of resentment creates further resentment, violence, and stratification regardless of different geographies. The Kurds in Turkey and the Tuareg in the Sahel have similar experiences of systematic Othering, state oppression, displacement, and genocide as they happen to be at the wrong side of the geopolitical game. This paper aimed to expose how both trans-border ethnic minority groups have been discriminated against and subdued by their hegemonic surroundings to “demythologize” the demonized portrayal of these groups in their respective territories. Hence, the analysis of both groups aimed to deconstruct the hegemonic discourses of the Western and non-Western actors who continue to play active roles in the geopolitical games in the Middle East and the Sahel.

Abstract processes of Othering and mental categorization have real-life consequences such as the violent counterattacks that continue to threaten the lives of millions today. In other words, ideological processes such as establishing hegemony over other nations and national identities have concrete and often violent outcomes that are generally experienced by the people at the peripheries of nation-states. Although it would be favorable to portray an optimistic future for both ethnic groups in relation to the conflicts in the Middle East and the Sahel today, it is important to opt for realism instead of optimism. It is evident that both groups demand the recognition of their dignity as culturally and ethnically distinct groups in their respective territories. However, the hegemonic nation-states neighboring both groups have been denying their demands for dignity. In this sense, neither the Kurds in Turkey nor the Tuareg in the Sahel are likely to create their own nation-states in near future.

7. Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflict of interest has been observed.

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