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Studying state violence through an embodied approach: methodological reflections

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Abstract. This paper explores the methodological complexities of investigating state violence in Türkiye's Kurdish regions through an embodied approach. This perspective involves exploring the perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and institutional practices and cultures of police and military personnel. Conducting embodied research with individuals who may be perpetrators of state violence necessitates addressing numerous methodological challenges. First, I discuss the procedural intricacies of obtaining permission from state authorities to engage with the security bureaucracy. Second, I examine how to construct a conversation setting where participants feel both comfortable and un-threatened throughout the interview, while also enabling me to delve into their perceptions, emotions, and perspectives – insights that are essential for interpreting the dynamics underpinning the emergence of state violence. Finally, I reflect on how the challenges of conducting such research manifested in my own embodied experiences as a researcher, addressing my fears, ethical dilemmas, and the advantages and concerns I perceived regarding my appearance and positionality. The overarching aim of this study is twofold: to advance scholarly discussions on methodological approaches to exploring contentious subjects such as state violence, geographies of killing, and necropolitics and to provide practical guidance for navigating critical methodological challenges – including field access, ethical considerations, and ensuring the safety of both researchers and participants – when conducting research in complex and high-risk contexts.

1 Introduction

The exploration of state violence and its various manifestations, such as geographies of killing and necropolitics, require delicate research methodologies tailored to contentious and dangerous environments. Studies engaging with contentious subjects, such as killing or letting die, slow violence, organized abandonment, and torture, often face challenges like gaining access to areas under authoritarian regimes or intense militarization and negotiating with authorities to conduct ethnographic studies. This underscores significant methodological considerations regarding field access, ethical research practices, and the safety of both researchers and their participants.

In this paper, I focus on state violence committed by police and military officers in Türkiye's Kurdish-majority regions of eastern and southeastern Anatolia, discussing the various methodological challenges and opportunities that an ethno-

graphic approach to the geographies of violence presents. Beyond the scope of most studies on state violence, I propose an embodied research concept aimed at understanding the fundamental dynamics, motivations, and everyday life perceptions and practices that give rise to this violence. Integrating insights from feminist geographers like Clark (2013), Mountz (2004, 2010), and Sharp (2007), I define embodied research as a nuanced approach that asserts that knowledge is inherently situated, non-universal, and intricately shaped by individuals within specific settings (Longhurst, 2009:429). Mountz (2004:325) advocates for embodied analyses of bureaucracy that extend beyond policy and structural frameworks to explore the everyday, personal interactions that form and contest formal power structures. This perspective diverges from studies that take state violence as a given and primarily focus on its various effects and consequences. Instead, it problematizes state violence itself – examining its conditions of emergence and inherent complexity – by mak-

ing it the central object of inquiry. Based on this theoretical approach, I suggest that by concentrating on the subjective experiences and perceptions of front-line security bureaucrats, particularly police and military personnel, and how they interact within Kurdish geographies, how they understand themselves and the Kurds, and how their institutional subcultures shape their behavioral patterns, we can gain a clearer understanding of the dynamics leading to various forms of violence (such as misbehavior, torture, or killing). This approach is critical for not just understanding the processes leading to the creation of geographies of violence and necropolitics but also identifying ways to mitigate state violence and promote significant changes in state ideologies.

However, adopting an embodied approach to investigate state mechanisms from an inside-out perspective, especially through the lens of security bureaucracy members, presents significant methodological challenges, as noted by scholars like Coleman and Stuesse (2016), Mountz (2010), and Tomforde and Ben-Ari (2021). A significant hurdle is the institutional reluctance to allow researchers access to state personnel, fueled by concerns that such research might reveal sensitive details about bureaucratic practices, expose weaknesses, or invite critique. Additionally, interactions with military and police forces pose extra obstacles due to their tendency towards secrecy and overall lack of transparency, issues that are prevalent even in democratic settings (Tomforde and Ben-Ari, 2021; Coleman and Stuesse, 2016).

While the body of methodological research dedicated to navigating complex and high-risk fieldwork settings remains relatively limited, a significant corpus of scholarship offers valuable insights into strategies for conducting research in such environments (e.g., Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Fujii, 2010; Glasius et al., 2018; Sriram, 2011; Turner, 2013). The literature predominantly addresses key methodological challenges, such as carefully maneuvering bureaucratic structures to obtain research permissions from state authorities in these contexts (e.g., Gentile, 2013; Janenova, 2019; Martin-Ortega and Herman, 2011; Thomson, 2011; Turner, 2013), securing ethical clearance and risk management approvals from home country institutional review boards (IRBs) and funding agencies (Franzoni et al., 2021; Hemming, 2011; Veugelers et al., 2022), and reflecting on the ethical dilemmas and concerns that arise when working with vulnerable groups under authoritarian regimes (Celestina, 2018; Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Norman, 2011). Additionally, scholars have examined the implications of researcher identity, self-representation, and personal security in politically sensitive and often repressive environments (Brown, 2011; Martin-Ortega and Herman, 2011; Mertus, 2011; Thaler, 2021).

However, studies that specifically grapple with the methodological dilemmas of research centered on potential perpetrators of state violence remain particularly scarce (some notable exceptions are Chakravarty, 2012; Fujii, 2010; Jessee and Anderson, 2020; Shesterinina, 2019). By offer-

ing a detailed methodological analysis of the challenges and opportunities inherent in studying state violence through the perspectives of security actors, my research addresses this relatively underexplored dimension within the literature. More broadly, my methodological approach contributes to scholarship on the geographies of killing, letting die, and necropolitics (Hutta and Pohl, 2025) by foregrounding the perspectives of those who enact state violence. Rather than solely examining the effects of necropolitical governance on populations deemed disposable, this approach interrogates the rationalities, institutional cultures, and everyday practices that shape decisions to kill, allow individuals to die, or expose certain groups to premature death. By situating these processes within the lived experiences and embodied understandings of state security personnel, this study provides insight into the conditions under which necropolitical power materializes, the bureaucratic and ideological structures that sustain it, and the spatialized inequalities that govern life and death.

It is evident that no universal methodology can be applied to research in challenging environments, whether these involve complex terrain; authoritarian regimes; or sensitive topics such as violence, killing, letting die, or abandonment. However, each existing methodological example, when carefully adjusted according to specific temporal and spatial contexts, serves as a vital guideline for the challenges encountered in the field. For instance, while the methodological resources I meticulously reviewed before beginning this study sometimes proved inapplicable under Türkiye's unique social and political conditions, they nonetheless offered significant contributions that helped me overcome many difficulties. Thus, another significant contribution of this work is enrichment of the existing literature with a unique sociopolitical case by detailing the specific challenges encountered and the customized strategies developed during my research. These insights offer valuable lessons for future investigations in similar settings. In this capacity, this paper also aims to serve as an essential guide for researchers facing similar methodological challenges.

In this paper, by engaging with geographical and anthropological studies focused on similar sociopolitical contexts, I address three key methodological considerations encountered in my embodied study of state violence. First, conducting embodied research centered on police and military personnel inherently entails the challenge of obtaining official state permission. The relevant state institutions often act as an invisible barrier, obstructing direct access to the front-line security bureaucracy that forms the core of my study. Here, I delve into the dilemma of conducting covert research without official state permission or the ramifications of seeking such permission, which could potentially expose the research to state surveillance. Second, I elaborate on the dynamics of conducting conversations about state violence with individuals at the forefront of the security bureaucracy. Contrary to conventional assumptions, I emphasize the unexpected open-

ness of these individuals to discuss such sensitive topics and delve into the underlying factors that fostered this willingness. Finally, as a researcher, I embodied the stress and ethical dilemmas inherent in conducting a politically sensitive and risky study of this nature. While the first two sections focus on the methodological challenges and the temporary or lasting solutions I devised to address them, in the final section, I turn the embodiment lens inward to reflect critically on the challenges and self-inquiries that arose throughout this process.

The analyses within this paper draw from field research conducted over two phases in 2023 and 2024, totaling 5 months, and an extensive preparatory phase for fieldwork beginning in 2022. My study focused on in-depth interviews with active and retired military and police officers with significant experience in Türkiye's Kurdish provinces. I carried out 17 interviews using a snowball method, comprising 5 retirees and 12 active-duty members. All participants I interacted with were professionals holding junior and midlevel ranks. To ensure confidentiality, I assigned each participant a double pseudonym and intentionally obscured their locations and affiliated institutions in my records. To foster comfort and trust, I employed verbal consent rather than requiring written consent forms. Further methodological details will be integrated into my arguments in subsequent sections.

In the following section, I will examine the historical roots of state violence against the Kurdish population in Türkiye, emphasizing the deep-seated tensions and conflicts that underpin this issue. I will then outline the process I undertook to secure official authorization for this research, followed by a discussion of my experiences conducting interviews with members of the security bureaucracy. In the final section, I apply the embodiment lens to my own positionality, reflecting on the personal challenges and critical ethical inquiries that emerged throughout the course of this study.

2 State violence against Kurds in Türkiye

The origins of state violence against Kurds and the systematic denial of Kurdish identity date back at least to the establishment of Türkiye in 1923 (Gambetti and Jongerden, 2015:3). As the largest non-Turkish ethnic group in Türkiye, Kurds have faced challenges in aligning with the nation-building vision of Türkiye as a homogenous and unified nation-state. Their resistance to this project has been evident through successive rebellions throughout republican history (Gunes and Zeydanlıoğlu, 2014:8). In the early republican era, Kurdish uprisings were met with a harsh crackdown, which was later succeeded by decades of forceful Turkification efforts (Aras, 2014:32). Subsequently, Turkish authorities continuously aimed to assimilate Kurds into the national fabric, predominantly through force and threats (Gunes and Zeydanlıoğlu, 2014:8).

Two significant developments that unfolded during the 1980s further intensified the conflict. First, the emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978 signified the birth of the Kurdish armed insurgency movement. Second, following the 1980 military coup, a de facto authoritarian-militarist regime was established in Kurdish regions, subsequently becoming a permanent fixture (Jacoby, 2005). Although there appeared to be a relative easing of the Turkish state's stance toward Kurds in the early 2000s, in conjunction with Türkiye's EU membership process (Kurda, 2022), the denial of Kurdish identity, assimilationist policies, and state-sponsored violence persist even today (Alemdaroğlu and Göçek, 2023:3). These complex historical dynamics between the Kurdish political identity and the Turkish state ideology, rooted in exclusionary nationalism, are commonly referred to as the "Kurdish question" (or "Kurdish issue") in the mainstream media of Türkiye (Keyman, 2012:468).

The Kurdish question in Türkiye has spawned an extensive body of academic literature, suggesting a rich field of inquiry spanning various disciplines and perspectives (e.g., Alemdaroğlu and Göçek, 2023; Aslan, 2009; Ergin, 2014; Kurban, 2020; McDowall, 2007; Ünlü, 2023). A significant commonality among these works is their emphasis on the role of state violence in the context of the Kurdish question, highlighting its prevalence and impact (e.g., Aras, 2014; Atılgan and Işık, 2011; Duruiz, 2023; Flader, 2014; Goner and Rebello, 2017; Gunes, 2013; Kurt, 2014). However, within this extensive literature, state violence is often presupposed as an inherent aspect of the issue rather than being critically examined as a phenomenon worthy of investigation in its own right. Typically, these studies focus on the outcomes of state violence, such as its racist, assimilationist, and discriminatory effects, while overlooking the specific conditions, scenarios, and interactions that precipitate such acts of violence.

Aligned with Althusser's concept of repressive state apparatuses 2001 (originally 1971), it is recognized that as the direct agents of state power, the military and police are shaped within an ideological framework that predisposes them to enact violence. Nevertheless, this knowledge alone fails to elucidate how ideological orientations translate into everyday practices or illuminate the perceptions, emotions, and cognitions that facilitate acts such as abuse, torture, abandonment to death, or killing. Although it is broadly observed that states often prioritize national security over human rights, leading to widespread violence, the specific nature, targets, and rationalizations of this violence vary significantly across different contexts (e.g., Blakele, 2012; Das and Poole, 2004; Garmany, 2014; Pugliese, 2013; Pulido, 2017; Sluka, 2000). These differences are influenced by a range of elements, such as security forces' interpretations of their environment, their interactions with people, their emotional states, and the norms and subcultures within their institutions. Consequently, I argue that an embodied study that centers on the emotions, perceptions, motivations, and institutional cultures of the security

bureaucracy is crucial for the achievement of a more comprehensive understanding of state violence.

Nevertheless, conducting embodied research by exploring the state mechanism itself presents a unique methodological challenge. In the subsequent sections, I delve into the methodological nuances of my embodied research, designed to address the gap noted within existing scholarship.

3   Entering the field: communicating with the state and carving out safer spaces for research

In Türkiye, obtaining approval from a general ethical committee is not required to conduct social science research. However, the situation becomes complex when interviewing state officials due to the ambiguous language of Article 15 of Law No. 657 on Civil Servants. While this law does not explicitly prohibit state officials from participating in academic research, it does restrict their ability to provide the press with statements or information regarding their duties.[1] This ambiguity leaves the participation of state employees in academic studies in a gray area and effectively subjects any interview with state officials to the approval of higher authorities, complicating the research process.

Obtaining permission from the state introduces its own set of challenges, encapsulated in a significant paradox. This dilemma involves the choice between conducting research without engaging state entities – which could arouse suspicion during any subsequent investigation – or seeking research clearance, which risks drawing undesirable scrutiny to the study. As Glasius et al. (2018:20) highlight, many researchers working in authoritarian regimes often bypass the process of obtaining state permission to avoid the risk of attracting the authorities' attention to their work. However, on the flip side, not applying for permission can create an impression of conducting clandestine research, potentially raising ethical and legal concerns (Glasius et al., 2018:21).

A second challenge related to seeking research permission is the potential for the process to morph into a "Kafkaesque absurdity", as described by Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018:608). Navigating the bureaucratic maze could result in drowning in a sea of red tape, characterized by a lack of response or a long wait only to receive a denial.

In my own research experience, I encountered all these challenges firsthand. The risks associated with the permission-seeking process, as well as the bureaucratic delays themselves, stood as obstacles on one hand. On the other, as I explore in the following two sections, these very challenges also opened up gray areas that made the research feasible.

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[1]Furthermore, specific laws governing military personnel and police do not contain any clauses regarding participation in the media or in academic research.

3.1   Presenting the research in a "boring", nonpolitical, and mundane manner

For me, conducting this research completely clandestinely appeared to be a risky venture. I was uncertain whether interactions with individuals from the security bureaucracy would potentially entangle me in some form of surveillance mechanism. Moreover, colleagues who had previously conducted research in Kurdish regions advised against remaining undercover. They suggested that contrary to secrecy, openly identifying oneself was actually safer. Consequently, I decided to initiate a permission process by engaging the relevant state authorities – even acknowledging the slim likelihood of success – to reduce the risks associated with covert research.

To start the permission process within the state system while also safeguarding the research and myself from risk, I deliberately framed the study in a manner that could be perceived as apolitical or "boring", following the strategy described by Malekzadeh (2016). This approach, commonly adopted by scholars investigating authoritarian regimes (e.g., Art, 2016; Gentile, 2013; Loyle, 2016), aims to minimize security risks by presenting the research in terms that are "bland and gray" (Turner, 2013:398). Presenting a study as apolitical and mundane does not imply concealing the truth or being dishonest; instead, it acknowledges the ontological posture of state mechanisms that defensively shield against potential criticisms and accusations. This necessitates navigating sensitive topics or potentially taboo subjects by employing alternative terminology and concepts (Art, 2016; Glasius et al., 2018).

For instance, Janenova's (2019) research on Kazakhstan's bureaucracy avoided terms with negative connotations within that context, such as corruption, authoritarian regime, or bureaucracy. Instead, Janenova communicated her study using terms like accountability, *ethics*, *civil servant*, and transparency. Similarly, Loyle's (2016) research on Rwanda demonstrated how to circumvent obstacles in authoritarian settings by substituting phrases like state violence or repression with more general and neutral terms like conflict (Loyle, 2016:930). This strategic linguistic reframing allows for the exploration of critical areas without directly challenging the defensive mechanisms of the state apparatus.

To ensure my research was positioned on relatively safe ground, it was crucial to adopt a new lexicon and convey the essence of the study without directly referencing contentious concepts like state violence. Accordingly, I meticulously rephrased all written materials related to my research – such as texts describing the purpose of the study used during the permission process and the letter of support from my institution – to adopt an apolitical, mundane, and unremarkable tone.

For instance, my research question regarding how incidents of violence occur and the institutional, personal, and emotional factors contributing to these practices was reframed and depoliticized as an inquiry into the geographic

experiences and challenges faced by the security bureaucracy. This framing intentionally leaves geographic descriptions vague while still focusing on the core aspect of my research – the everyday life experiences related to the duties of certain front-line security bureaucrats. While the framing completely obscures whether the topic is state violence, the phrase "challenges faced by the security bureaucracy" indirectly opens the door to discussing the conflict and violence prevalent in Kurdish geographies. This approach allows for the exploration of sensitive areas without directly invoking contentious or politically charged terminology, facilitating a more accessible and less confrontational engagement with the subject matter.

Besides depoliticizing the research, another approach Malekzadeh (2016) recommended is presenting the research content using a mundane approach, which can enhance the study's validity. This approach highlights the practical, lived experiences related to the research topic, grounding the study in the real-world nuances that might be obscured in more overtly political or theoretical discussions. In parallel with this approach, my research inherently focused on the mundane aspects of daily experiences, meaning I did not have to alter its framework significantly. As I will explain in more detail in the following section, my priority was never to question 'why this particular individual commits acts of violence. Therefore, I never directly broached the topic of violence with members of the security bureaucracy. My interest lay within the mundane – precisely, in the everyday duty experiences of the security bureaucrats, their interactions with the public, and how they understood and interpreted various events – to explore how instances of extrajudicial violence emerge. In this context, my method of framing the research did not drastically distort the research aim but allowed me to contextualize it within the scope of the experiences and challenges of daily duty. This approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of the subject matter without overtly touching on sensitive or potentially contentious issues.

3.2 Utilizing permission applications as a shield

The sluggishness of bureaucratic mechanisms is widespread, but this issue becomes particularly pronounced in countries with contested democratic and liberal standards, like Türkiye, where responses to official requests might be significantly delayed or vanish within the bureaucratic maze (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Janenova, 2019). In such contexts, embarking on the journey of submitting a research permission application and awaiting a response can turn into a scenario reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot*. However, opting not to initiate the permission process due to the expectation of protracted delays carries distinct dangers, potentially exposing the researcher to a range of legal problems if their undertakings are uncovered.

To address this issue, I chose to navigate the gray area between starting with permission and without it. In 2023,

when I began the field research component of my study, I conducted a pilot interview with a few interviewees accessed through personal contacts. These initial conversations served to test the effectiveness of my interview questions and gauge whether the topics discussed generated any tension. I deemed it risky to alert the state machinery to the nature of my research by initiating a permission process without first understanding how such a study might resonate with participants. Additionally, I anticipated that a response to my permission request could be significantly delayed. The positive outcome of these short pilot interviews encouraged me to initiate the permission process promptly.

I submitted my application for research permission to the relevant state institutions and placed an official "certificate of receipt" in my files as proof of this submission. Subsequently, without waiting for any response, I commenced interviews with research subjects I had contacted well in advance. Starting the research without official permission could have still led to legal issues if detected. However, the absence of a response to my permission letter compared to conducting a study entirely in secret without informing the relevant authorities could have had markedly different – and likely worse – consequences. Having made an application and being in the process of waiting for a reply, I operated under the assumption that I would not be treated as if I were conducting clandestine activities. The importance of holding such official documentation while undertaking research in authoritarian contexts is underscored by Janenova (2019:3), who quotes a verse from a Soviet poet: "Without papers, you are a little bug, but with a piece of paper – like a person". This highlights the protective and legitimizing power of documentation in challenging research environments.

In this context, the inherent ambiguity of bureaucratic processes provided a quasi-legal framework for conducting my research. The existence of laws like the Right to Information Act in Türkiye, even if only on paper, demands a degree of transparency and openness from the bureaucracy. This requirement complicates the process of a research permission request being outright and unreasonably denied. As a result, in response to such requests, swift and clear rejections are often replaced with tactics of delay, diversion, or even the "loss" of the application. For instance, about a month after my submission, I received a response advising me to redirect my application to another government institution. I immediately complied with this advice. Another month passed before I was informed that despite initial instructions to submit my application via postal mail, I was now requested to resend my documents electronically.

This sequence of events illustrates the strategic use of procedural barriers as a means to manage or stall research inquiries without formally denying them, navigating the fine line between legal obligations for transparency and the practicalities of bureaucratic discretion. Nevertheless, this exchange of communications effectively formalized my permission process and served as a kind of shield, indicating

that I was not engaged in clandestine activities. The existence of these documents provided a relative sense of security as I continued with my interviews, resting on the assurance they offered in the background. Thus, the very problems introduced by bureaucratic structures in such regimes can somewhat paradoxically become opportunities, offering a measure of protection that contributes positively to the security of the research.

4 Interviewing front-line security bureaucracy

In research conducted within similar sociopolitical contexts, engaging with state officials often emerges as a distinct challenge (Coleman and Stuesse, 2016; Janenova, 2019; Mountz, 2010). Janenova, for instance, noted that in Kazakhstan, "government officials are reluctant to share their views openly and tend to talk within the 'scripts' of state propaganda" (Janenova, 2019:4). Janenova also mentioned that even if officials initially agree to interviews, they might later employ various excuses to delay or cancel them, or if they do participate, they often avoid making candid statements.

I faced two additional challenges in my research: first, my research entails a fundamental challenge in discussing state violence with the possible/potential perpetrators. This raised the question of how to conduct these interviews in a manner that was comfortable, open, and free of tension for both parties involved. Second, even though the process I initiated to obtain permission might have mitigated the risk of conducting clandestine research to an extent, I still had to negotiate the terms of conducting interviews without having an official permission letter in hand.

Despite the initial challenges, a combination of factors, as outlined below, rendered the interview phase the most straightforward aspect of my research.

4.1 Building trust and rapport in the recruitment process

The absence of significant class or social distinctions between the military, police, and the general public in Türkiye made it relatively straightforward to gain access to these groups through familial or social connections. This convenience was particularly valuable in the recruitment process, where I employed snowball sampling as the primary method. This approach inherently fostered an initial layer of trust, as participants were referred by individuals whom they already knew and trusted.

To further ensure informed consent and encourage participation, I made deliberate efforts to provide potential interviewees with comprehensive details about the scope and questions of my research. Through detailed pre-interview communications and phone calls, I allowed ample time and space for participants to consider their involvement, which contributed to a more transparent and collaborative dynamic.

In addition, my interactions with research subjects often extended beyond the confines of formal interviews, evolv-

ing into casual conversations over tea, coffee, or occasionally beer either before, during, or after the interview sessions. These informal exchanges helped break down the formal boundaries between researcher and participant, fostering a more relaxed and amicable atmosphere. This approach not only facilitated smoother interview processes but also encouraged many participants to reconnect post-interview, offering further insights or clarifications. As a result, the recruitment process not only supported trust-building but also enriched the depth and quality of the information gathered.

4.2 The influence of the theoretical framework on easing the interview process

The idea of theorizing the dynamics behind the emergence of state violence from an embodied perspective, which initially seemed like a significant challenge before starting the research, actually had a structure that defused potential tension from the outset. My theoretical approach posits that understanding the transformation of a geography into a violent space or a realm of extrajudicial practices involves grasping the underlying emotions, prejudices, encounters, rumors circulating within institutions, and myriad other ethnographic details. When it came to interviewing, this approach did not necessitate asking questions that might directly discomfort the respondent. For example, I never had to ask a police officer why extrajudicial violence was applied to Kurds. Instead, by posing a broader question like what the experience of being stationed in Kurdish regions was like, the diversity of responses regarding feelings, prejudices, or everyday experiences naturally unfolded different narratives leading to the mechanisms of violence.

For instance, one police officer whom I interviewed discussed taking firearms as a precaution when traveling to a Kurdish province in his personal car, anticipating potential threats upon entering Kurdish territories. At this juncture, the question of whether this individual had engaged in violence became somewhat irrelevant; the security concerns he felt about the geography he was entering, when combined with other shared stories, were sufficient to illustrate the dynamics leading to the spiral of violence.

Thus, the primary objective of this study was to explore the broad spectrum of experiences and emotions within the security bureaucracy without provoking tension. I designed my interview questions with this goal in mind, utilizing inquiries that steer clear of provocation, judgment, and what Glasius et al. (2018:38) describe as red lines or taboo topics. The questions kept a general tone and remained open-ended, yet subtly guided the interviewees toward the underlying themes of my research. I meticulously noted all nuances, including facial expressions, moments of silence, and topics that were glossed over or emphasized – the metadata, as Fujii (2010) called it, providing a comprehensive account beyond the spoken word.

However, it would be inaccurate to say that I adopted a zero-tension approach. Glasius et al. (2018:67) argue against confronting research subjects in authoritarian regimes, as it is not an effective strategy, distinguishing their stance from Markowitz's (2016:905) approach that advocates for increasing tension by posing challenging questions. My strategy aligned more closely with the former, yet I did not shy away from introducing more probing questions where appropriate after carefully gauging the interviewees' tendencies, tempers, and attitudes toward me. As long as they tolerated my inquiries – a judgment I continuously made throughout the interviews – I could delve deeper into the subject matter. Thus, I argue that with careful observation, a researcher can find a position somewhere between full confrontation and complete compliance.

The interview method I employed not only reduced potential tension between the researcher and subjects but also protected research participants from the risks associated with addressing anti-state issues. From their perspective, the primary questions they answered related to their on-duty experiences and feelings in Kurdish territories. As such, the interviewees did not perceive the sharing of their perspectives and experiences as posing any personal risk, with their narratives often reflecting a sense of pride in their duties and a staunch defense of the state. The content of their narratives predominantly reinforced state ideologies and the legitimacy of combating "terrorism". While some participants did acknowledge the state's historical oversights, such as the insufficient investment and lack of social services in Kurdish regions – which they believed contributed to unrest and terrorism – their overall portrayal did not critically deviate towards a human-rights-focused critique of the Kurdish issue. In fact, nearly every instance of criticism directed at the state was immediately followed, often in an elevated tone and frequently accompanied by profanities, by denunciations of the PKK and praise for the use of violence against it. This alignment with state perspectives meant that their participation did not expose them to the risks associated with crossing paths with the state's punitive mechanisms.

4.3 Empathy from officers in the face of bureaucratic barriers

The process of obtaining official permission represented one of the most significant obstacles to entering the research field for this study. However, this issue did not seem to concern my research subjects much; none of them ever asked me if I had obtained the necessary permission. Nonetheless, when sharing the details of my research with them, I informed them that I had not yet received official permission but had initiated the process and was awaiting a response. They seemed to understand this situation quite well, as they were aware that obtaining permission for such research could be either very difficult or time-consuming. Both Turner (2013:399) and Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018:608) mention in their research in-

volving state officials that the officers were aware of the potential bureaucratic hurdles, and the researchers received some helpful hints from them to navigate these challenges. Although my research subjects did not offer any tips to secure permission, they demonstrated a similar understanding that bureaucratic mechanisms could potentially create barriers between me and my research subjects, and they were sympathetic to my lack of official permission.

This reveals two important points. First, as Glasius et al. (2018:8) suggest, state officials are not necessarily adversaries who obstruct research; many are supportive and understanding of the challenges researchers face. Second, the bureaucratic chaos typical of hybrid regimes – which display characteristics of both democracy and autocracy as Loyle (2016:923) defines them – sometimes leads state officials themselves to view unconventional methods as legitimate, acknowledging the complexities and hurdles within their own systems. Understanding and empathy towards the research process highlight the nuanced positions of state officials within the bureaucratic landscape, where systemic challenges are recognized and informal support can emerge.

5 Embodying the challenges of the research: positionality, ethics, and anxieties

Thus far, I have explored the methodological implications and challenges of understanding state violence through an embodied approach. Seeking to grasp the dynamics underlying the emergence of violence by examining the emotional and cognitive worlds, as well as the everyday practices, of front-line security officers involves navigating several layers of difficulty. These include overcoming the invisible barriers created by interactions with various state institutions and managing the tensions inherent in conducting interviews with officers in a manner free of conflict or discomfort.

However, it is important to emphasize that these challenges extend beyond bureaucratic or procedural difficulties, such as securing permissions or conducting interviews. The obstacles, complexities, and risks inherent in this process are also embodied by the researcher, manifesting as fear, anxiety, and ethical dilemmas. Balancing these emotional and ethical challenges while continuing the research adds another significant layer of difficulty. As a result, the researcher's embodiment becomes a crucial element of this methodological framework. In this section, I offer an embodied analysis by reflecting on the anxieties, considerations about appearance, and ethical stances that I navigated throughout the research process.

5.1 Fear of arrest

From the outset, I was fully aware of the challenges inherent in carrying out this research project. Engaging directly with state officials on a topic that could be considered taboo by the state itself posed a significant methodological and per-

sonal challenge. As a result, I was careful to design a method-ological framework that prioritized the safety of both myself and my research participants. Nevertheless, throughout the research process, the fear of detention or arrest remained a constant concern in my mind.

As Glasius et al. (2018:24) have noted, even when the like-lihood is low, the possibility of being detained or arrested for one's research in authoritarian regimes is far from negligi-ble. This concern was further heightened by the context of Türkiye's last decade, which has been marked by significant authoritarian drift and the erosion of democratic norms and the rule of law. During this period, thousands of academics, journalists, and intellectuals were arrested for various rea-sons.

This awareness profoundly influenced my state of mind. From the moment I submitted my application for official re-search permission to the relevant state institutions, I lived with a lingering fear of being monitored by state surveil-lance mechanisms. This anxiety was particularly acute given my frequent travel between Türkiye and abroad. Each time I approached passport control points in Türkiye, I was appre-hensive about the possibility of being flagged, detained, or arrested.

In response to this constant tension, I took deliberate pre-cautions to minimize potential risks. Aware that my belong-ings could be confiscated in the event of detention, I made it a point to avoid carrying any sensitive data related to my research participants – such as transcripts, audio files, or con-tact information – when entering or leaving the country.

5.2   Reflections on my bodily appearance and manner

In ethnographic research, embodiment and positionality are always significant concerns. Typically, the focus is on how research participants embody certain practices or percep-tions. However, many researchers also note (Clark, 2006; Fu-jii, 2012; Janenova, 2019; Thaler, 2021; Van Roekel, 2020) that the identities and appearances of researchers themselves hold meaning in the eyes of participants and can act as facili-tators or barriers, depending on factors like gender, race, and whether one is perceived as local or foreign.

While I had previously considered how I presented my-self in ethnographic settings, interviewing security forces on a highly sensitive and political topic led me to interrogate my appearance and mannerisms in far greater detail. Security forces, by the nature of their work, often approach individu-als with heightened suspicion. This knowledge – or perhaps bias – heightened my self-awareness, particularly about how I might be perceived.

A pivotal yet unspoken factor that facilitated trust among my research participants and contributed to their relative ease in discussing sensitive topics with me was my positional-ity. Specifically, my identity as a white, secular-looking, educated Turkish man originally from the nationalist and conservative-leaning Black Sea region – frequently inter-

preted as "not Kurdish" – emerged as an important element in establishing rapport. This aspect of my background did not provoke inherent suspicion among the security bureaucracy personnel I engaged with and often surfaced in our conversa-tions as a point of implicit alignment.

However, my own assumptions about the nationalist, con-servative, and masculine tendencies of my interviewees led me to anticipate that certain aspects of my identity – such as wearing earrings, feminine jewelry, or speaking in a polite and sensitive manner – might be viewed as a disadvantage. While I was less concerned about being perceived as fem-inine, as this was unlikely to be seen as threatening, I was more apprehensive about being identified as "leftist", which could imply a critical stance toward their ideas and poten-tially undermine their trust in me. To mitigate potential bi-ases, especially in my earlier interviews when I felt more cau-tious, I consciously adjusted my appearance to appear more "neutral". For instance, I removed my jewelry and opted for formal attire, such as trousers and a shirt, rather than casual clothing.

During interviews, I also found myself unconsciously adapting my bodily manners and conversational style to align with what I perceived to be a masculine subculture among security forces. This was not a deliberate attempt to blend in but rather a reaction to concerns that my usual mannerisms – such as an overly formal tone – might come across as elitist or standoffish. For example, instead of using the more formal Turkish address *bey* or *beyefendi* (sir/mister), I adopted collo-quial terms like *hocam* or *abi* (roughly equivalent to "bro"). Similarly, I adjusted my body language during interactions, such as handshakes and casual exchanges, to reflect a more informal, brotherly rapport.

5.3   Ethical reflections on my stance and behaviors

Throughout the research process, I found myself oscillating between justifying my actions and questioning their ethical implications. For instance, on one hand, I viewed my bod-ily adjustments and deliberate efforts to present an approach-able demeanor to participants as motivated by a desire to re-duce my own tension and foster a more relaxed environment for the interviews. Nevertheless, witnessing these changes in myself also raised questions about my honesty – toward both my interviewees and myself.

Additionally, I grappled with the privilege of accessing my participants with relative ease as a white, non-Kurdish Turk-ish man. While this advantage left me with a lingering dis-comfort about the systemic barriers faced by those with dif-ferent identities, I also justified my position by emphasizing that, as a non-Kurdish researcher, I was contributing to rais-ing awareness about state violence against Kurds through my work.

A more complex ethical dilemma emerged from the overly agreeable stance I often adopted during interviews. As Thaler (2021:24) observes, "to collect data from those pri-

marily identified as 'perpetrators' of violence, there may be a need to act sympathetically towards them, to demonstrate, at least outwardly, understanding of their point of view". Similarly, I frequently found myself nodding along, even when participants recounted troubling anecdotes of violence in a casual manner, treating them as mundane occurrences. Furthermore, when participants shared these unsettling details with humor or laughter, I often found myself mirroring their tone, responding in a similarly lighthearted manner despite my internal discomfort.

These moments left me wrestling with significant ethical concerns. On one hand, I was acutely aware that my outward displays of agreement – such as nodding or smiling as participants spoke – were tied to my role as a professional researcher. My objective was not to judge or challenge their accounts but to capture their narratives authentically and in their natural form. However, like other researchers who have engaged in similar encounters with comparable participants (e.g., Shesterinina, 2019; Thaler, 2021; Van Roekel, 2020), I was left with lingering discomfort about the need to remain a passive listener, seemingly complicit through my demeanor, even as the stories I heard were deeply unsettling. This tension remained an ongoing source of unease throughout the research process.

5.4   The feeling of discomfort in interview settings

Another significant embodied challenge was the spatial context in which interviews took place. To ensure participants' comfort, I allowed them to choose the interview location. As a result, interviews took place in varied environments, including homes, military facilities, police stations, cafés, and hotel lobbies.

Interviews conducted in public spaces, such as cafés, often posed difficulties. Sitting close to other people, I felt acutely aware of the sensitive keywords in my questions, such as "soldier", "police", "violence", or "PKK". The possibility of being overheard distracted me, leading me to speak in hushed tones, which inadvertently created an atmosphere of secrecy. This tension sometimes disrupted the interview dynamic, making both myself and my participants feel as though we were discussing taboo topics.

Interviews held in military facilities or police stations presented a different set of challenges. While these settings offered the opportunity to meet additional personnel and sometimes turned into informal focus group interviews, they also heightened my sense of vulnerability. Each introduction as a researcher triggered concerns about whether my work would be questioned or whether someone might doubt my intentions. Moreover, the presence of other individuals in the background, such as colleagues or supervisors who could overhear the conversation, added to my discomfort. I worried about how they might perceive my questions or my broader research.

6   Conclusions

In this paper, I elucidated the methodological intricacies of my research endeavor, which seeks to interpret state violence within Türkiye's Kurdish regions through an embodied perspective. This inquiry is predicated on a profound understanding of the origins of state violence by examining the perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and institutional practices and cultures within the security bureaucracy. Nonetheless, adopting this approach raises several methodological questions that warrant thorough examination. In this paper, I specifically addressed three pivotal areas of challenge.

The first challenge involves overcoming the invisible barrier that state institutions erect between researchers and their own personnel. For various reasons but particularly due to concerns about sensitive data leaking to the public and triggering a wave of criticism, state institutions often discourage bureaucrats from providing statements in media or academic research. In light of this situation, which is prevalent in many national contexts, many researchers opt to conduct their research covertly rather than navigate the process of obtaining permission from the state. In this study, I explored how leveraging bureaucratic work habits – such as slowness, procrastination, and a penchant for paperwork – can create a gray area between obtaining permission and proceeding without it, thereby enabling the research to be conducted on relatively safer grounds. Additionally, I discussed how presenting the research in an apolitical and mundane manner serves as a shield against potential security risks, a strategy adopted by many researchers in similar contexts.

Even if the obstacle posed by the permission barrier erected by the state is overcome, conducting interviews with state officials about sensitive topics presents another challenge in itself. Often, bureaucrats and researchers do not share the same perspectives, and in cases concerning topics like state violence, they may fundamentally disagree. In such scenarios, the ability to ask sensitive questions without causing tension or jeopardizing the safety of the researcher and research subjects poses a significant methodological challenge. In this regard, I argued that framing research questions in a non-provocative, general, and quotidian manner facilitates the interview process for both parties. Additionally, in this section, I recounted how, despite not obtaining permission to speak with them, individuals working in security bureaucracies display understanding due to their knowledge of how slowly the state operates and how challenging obtaining permission can be. I highlighted how this underscores the potential advantages that complex bureaucratic structures may provide for researchers, contrary to popular belief.

The efforts, risks, and care involved in conducting this research brought with them a host of emotional, bodily, and ethical challenges that I, as the researcher, had to confront and negotiate constantly. One of the dominant emotions I experienced throughout the study was the fear of being monitored by the state's repressive and controlling apparatus, ac-

companied by the persistent anxiety of potentially being detained at any moment. Another pervasive feeling was anxiety, often triggered by the sense that third parties were overhearing and even judging our conversations during interviews. This unease frequently accompanied me throughout the research process. At the same time, the relationships I established with my research participants and the stances I adopted during interviews consistently placed me in a state of ethical questioning. This oscillation led me to repeatedly ask myself whether my actions were correct; whether I was being honest with and fair to myself, my research, and my participants; and how I could reconcile these tensions.

Thus, the process of conducting embodied research to understand state violence from a grounded perspective also became, for me as the researcher, an embodied experience requiring continuous reflection. This dual nature of the research not only highlighted the complexities of the subject matter but also underscored the importance of critically engaging with the researcher's own positionality and experiences throughout the study.

When considering these elements together, this study sheds light on one of the most formidable aspects of research in areas such as geographies of violence, killing, or necropolitics: the need to develop methodologies that enable engagement with and investigation of difficult-to-access terrain. Understanding the factors that contribute to the formation of violent geographies is crucial for generating solutions to such dynamics. However, the areas that most require study and comprehension are also those most resistant to research. For this reason, within the social sciences, we must continue to refine methodologies for studying violent and necropolitical geographies, such as borders, war zones, and occupied colonial spaces.

From this perspective, this study underscores an essential point: despite numerous challenges, conducting research in such complex terrains is feasible when local sociopolitical dynamics are carefully considered and a robust methodological framework is established. By demonstrating this, the research contributes to not only the study of state violence but also broader efforts to develop methodologies capable of navigating and illuminating the most challenging geographies.

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