Ethnicity and Religion in Shaping Threat Perceptions:

Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Turkey[*]

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Abstract:

In a large number of violent conflicts lie polarized threat perceptions between different religious and ethnic groups. Despite the underlying socio-economic disparities identity-group mobilization appears most relevant in driving these conflicts. This paper explores differences between ethnic Kurdish and Muslim religious identities as opposed to Turkish and less observant/secular identities. Using a survey experiment carried out in early 2013 with a nation-wide representative sample in Turkey, we analyze how different combinations of these identities drive threat perceptions across various social groups concerning their life styles. Influence of ethnic and religious identity perceptions upon threat perceptions and how these are likely to shape social and political integration and experiences concerning living together are underlined. Among these influences, special attention is paid to public policy implications concerning the visibility of ethnic and religious identity symbols such as turban (headscarf) wearing and use of native Kurdish dialects.

Introduction

Could you guess the ethnic and religious make-up of a neighborhood by just observing the main street, the shopping area or the bazaar in a given community or neighborhood? Would it then be difficult to guess who will win in an election therein? Two observations result from answers to these questions. One concerns the geographic homogenization of neighborhoods that differentiate political preferences. Election results for instance become more easily predicted solely on the basis of geographic location. "Homophily" or residential sorting hypothesis claims for instance that people prefer to live in neighborhoods who share their beliefs, lifestyle and political preferences (Bishop, 2008). As people of similar socio-political backgrounds and preferences prefer to live together, more and more homogeneous communities emerge. In the presence of homophilic tendencies, not only the like-minded people self-select and come together but also those groups who are not part of the dominating majority tend to remain out of these communities or are effectively pushed out to maintain the homogeneous character of these communities.

This process of self-selection or effective "cleansing" of the out-group minorities from neighborhoods create tensions and conflict. The examples of such homogenization of

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neighborhoods and the resulting tensions are abound in metropolitan settings of both the developed as well as the developing world. As ethnic and religious diversity lead to rising tensions and political differentiation across communities, various explanatory frameworks are offered as to their causes. One line of research on interethnic attitudes in urban neighborhoods has focused on which ethnic groups are more or less favored as neighbors (e.g., Bobo and Zubrinsky, 1996; Hagendoorn and Sniderman, 2001). Another line of research focused on different types of neighborhood residents that are more likely to endorse negative ethnic attitudes (e.g., Branton and Jones, 2005; Dixon, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2010; Quillian, 1995). Havekes et al. (2013, 1077) note that "although these studies yield interesting information on the extent and determinants of interethnic attitudes, they fail to explain the mechanisms behind negative interethnic attitudes between urban neighborhood residents."

As these past research has primarily relied on traditional survey techniques, they fail to disentangle confounding factors that simultaneously effect attitudes together with ethnicity. Many characteristics that are related to ethnicity, such as poverty, religious conservatism and community conformist pressures upon the lifestyle choices of residents, may be confounding factors that affect reactions of people towards ethnicity. Hence, our first objective is to distinguish the net influence of ethnicity upon attitudes of neighbors after controlling for the other non-ethnic but ethnicity related factors. We utilize a survey experiment to disentangle various confounding factors that may be responsible for the observed differences towards ethnicity-based threat perceptions that may be underlying the residential sorting or the homophily hypothesis.

We conduct our study in the socio-political context of Turkey where our survey experiment was conducted in 2013. Descriptions of modern Turkey almost unanimously depict the religious scene in the country as 98-99% Muslim and until quite recently references to sizeable ethnic minorities were seldom and only restricted to references of an on-going conflict with the sizeable Kurdish ethnic minority. This depiction partly reflects a continuation of an old Western preoccupation with non-Muslim groups in the Ottoman lands that found its diplomatic echo in the founding international peace treaty of Lausanne in July 1923 that recognizes only the non-Muslim groups as minorities whose rights are to be protected by the new Republican regime. Although a religious definition of minorities are granted in Lausanne for the non-Muslims, no such explicit recognition can be found for the sizeable Muslim ethnic groups such as the Kurds or sectarian minority groups such as the Alevis.[1]

The ethnic and religious/secular cleavages that underlie the major tensions during the Republican era in Turkey fits quite well into the framework of Şerif Mardin (1973) that is aimed to account for the socio-historical dynamics that underlie Turkish politics. The core argument of Mardin (1973) was that a long historical divide shaped during the Ottoman Empire had been inherited by the Republican regime. A deeply entrenched cultural division between the antagonistic, parochial and traditionalist "peripheral" forces and the ruling elites of the "center" and its societal coalition partners who remained dominant in the Turco-Ottoman polity, forms the basis of Mardin's argument, which remains relevant well into the post-1923 Republican era. This

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[1] See Çarkoğlu and Şahin (2011) on the Lausanne Treaty and Alevi minority.

social cleavage was primarily a cultural one differentiating the ruling elites of the "center" from the subjects of the "periphery". The center's reactionary strategy towards the "periphery" was guided primarily by its self-confident cultural superiority that provides a moral basis for its deep-rooted suspicion about the peripheral forces. The ruling "center" always had a self-ascribed superiority over the subject "peripheral" masses in cultural terms. Under the Ottoman rule, they effectively spoke a different language, listened to different music, and never allowed an alternative economic social class to emerge as a challenger to their power. They effectively "owned" the state and its political apparatus. In modern day reflections, the quasi-autonomous bureaucracy especially of the security circles, together with various layers of mostly state-dependent businesses, and the various branches of the intellectual community and academia, are all integral parts of the "center". During the Republican era the center adopted a top-down modernization program that effectively alienated the peripheral masses. As such, the center has effectively come to be associated with values that remained foreign to the peripheral masses.

In Mardin's framework, the "center" primarily controlled the imperial house and its various coalitions during the Ottoman period. Extending the continuity claim of the model to the case of the "center" Mardin also posits that the nature of the "center" and its relations with the "periphery" remained more or less unchanged during the Republican period. This subtle continuity is underlined by a deep suspicion on both sides of the cleavage. Up until quite recently when the pro-Islamist peripheral Justice and Development (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP) came to power, the "periphery" remained as a mix of ethnic and linguistic as well as religious groups that were systematically kept out of the ruling circles. Such exclusion bound these groups in their rebellious opposition to the "center". Since historically, these groups formed the very source of defiant opposition to the new regime and its modernization reforms in the early decades of the Republic via a series of bloody rebellions, they lie at the root of Republican fears and sensitivities concerning the regime's survival first and then its legitimacy to secure stability in the longer run.

If a cleavage along the lines described by the center-periphery framework is effective in Turkish politics one would expect that cultural characteristics of the center and the periphery as underlined above would be observed in Turkish society. Hence instead of a class divide based on economic cleavages, differences on the basis of value systems and world visions would divide politically salient constituencies. The center was able to keep its autonomous prerogative in various policy areas especially concerning foreign policy and security issues with the help of a large coalition of popular support from various groups with a relatively lower level of religiosity, lower concentration of ethnic and sectarian minorities as well as a more urban presence. In contrast, the peripheral constituencies would be expected to comprise of more religious, rural and lower educated constituencies with significant sectarian and ethnic minorities. As such, socio-political tension in Turkish society is expected to reflect a dichotomy between ethnic and religious groups opposed to relatively less religious or secular and Turkish rather than ethnic Kurdish groups. [2]

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[2] Militarized conflict with the Kurdish ethno-nationalist movement over the last three decades have challenged Turkish democracy and impeded recognition and resolution of the Kurdish issue in social and political spheres. There are substantial numbers of Kurds living in Turkey most of whom are concentrated in the East and Southeastern provinces of the country. Since there have not been any ethnicity or mother

Despite this historical tension in Turkish society, ethnic and religious differences have long been neglected by the students of Turkish society. The study of minority groups in Turkey primarily focused on historical tendencies, legal issues pertaining to minority rights and on theoretical issues pertaining to conceptual clarifications, explanatory frameworks and policy options for societies with a heterogeneous social composition. What remained obscure were primarily the attitudinal and behavioral underpinnings of prevailing social relationships between different groups. More specifically, attitudinal measurements concerning identity and their behavioral implications were largely ignored. In the following we focus on a specific area of such behavioral implications, namely the degree of comfort one feels with having individuals with different levels of religiosity or different ethnicity as neighbors.

Research Design

We embedded a survey experiment into a nationally representative face-to-face survey fielded in Turkey in December 2012 and January 2013. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four different versions of the questionnaire.[3] In each version a short vignette about the hypothetical situation of a new family moving in next to the respondent's apartment/house was presented. The outcome question asked how disturbed, if at all, the respondent would feel upon the move-in of the new family.

Our manipulations consisted of changing the description of the family in question across the dimensions of ethnicity and religiosity. Two versions of the vignette included information suggesting that the family was of Kurdish ethnicity. Specifically, we emphasized that the family used to live in Hakkari – a city in Southeastern Turkey well-known to have a predominantly Kurdish population – and that they could speak Kurdish. The remaining two versions included similar information pointing at Turkish ethnicity– that the family used to live in a city with a predominantly Turkish population and that they could not speak any language other than Turkish.

On the religiosity dimension, two versions of the vignette highlighted that the couple was very observant of religious practices, and that the mother of the family was a housewife wearing headscarf. These features are indicators of a high level of religiosity in the Turkish context. In contrast, in the remaining two versions we pointed out that the couple was not that observant of religious practices and that the mother of the family was a working woman not wearing a headscarf.

This set-up corresponds to a 2X2 between-subjects design with four experimental groups that we label as Kurdish-secular, Kurdish-religious, Turkish-secular, and Turkish-religious (Table 1). The

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tongue question in the Turkish official census since 1965, we have to rely on estimates to determine the size of the Kurdish population. While Kurds formed 7.6% of the population in the country in 1965, (*Devlet İstatistik Enstitüsü* 1969), Servet Mutlu (1996) estimated the proportion of Kurds in Turkey to be 12.6 percent in 1990. Extrapolating from Mutlu's study and assuming the same relative growth rate, Aktürk (2012) calculates the proportion of the Kurds in Turkey's total population to be 16.6%.

[3] A multinomial logistic regression of treatment assignment to respondent characteristics (age, gender, education, speaking Kurdish, living in a metropolitan city) affirms balance among treatment conditions (Wald $\chi^2(15)=8.27$, $p<0.91$).

exact wording of the vignette is presented below, with parts of manipulations highlighted in capital letters.

> *Let's assume that a new family moves in to the vacant apartment/house next to yours. Mr. Mehmet, who is the head of a family who used to live in [HAKKARI/SINOP], is about 35-40 years old with regular income. Mr. Mehmet's wife, Mrs. Ayse, is a [WORKING WOMAN WITHOUT A HEADSCARF/HOUSEWIFE WITH A HEADSCARF] about 25-30 years of age. Mr. Mehmet and Mrs. Ayse are [NOT THAT OBSERVANT OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES/VERY OBSERVANT OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES]. In addition, they [SOMETIMES SPEAK KURDISH WITH THEIR CHILDREN AND AMONG THEMSELVES/DO NOT SPEAK ANY LANGUAGE OTHER THAN TURKISH]*

Table 1. The 2X2 Experimental Setup

|	**Religiosity Dimension**	
Ethnicity Dimension	*Secular*	*Religious*
Kurdish	Kurdish-secular (Group 1)	Kurdish-religious (Group 2)
Turkish	Turkish-secular (Group 3)	Turkish-religious (Group 4)

Our outcome question for all versions is the same and reads as: "Could you tell me how disturbed you would feel, if at all, if Mr. Mehmet and his family became your neighbor on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 indicates "none at all" and 10 indicates "I would feel very disturbed"?"

Results

Figure 1 shows the mean disturbance levels for the different experimental groups in the overall sample. Three observations stand out. First, we see that the overall mean levels of disturbance are quite low around 2 in the 0-10 scale. As such, the overall level of tension between the groups posited in our experimental treatments appear to be not very intense. Second, the secular/religious dimension does not lead to a statistically significant difference in the mean levels of disturbance, both for the Kurdish and Turkish treatments. The ethnicity dimension, on the other hand, leads to different levels of disturbance: The mean levels of disturbance for the Kurdish-Secular and Turkish-Secular treatments are 2.19 and 1.52, respectively, and the difference is statistically significant ($p<0.001$). Similarly, the difference between the mean levels of disturbance for the Kurdish-Religious (2.13) and Turkish-Religious (1.57) treatments is statistically significant as well ($p<0.01$).

Accordingly, in the overall sample, having a Kurdish neighbor is considered to be more disturbing than having a Turkish one. This result holds regardless of the religiosity level of the hypothetical neighbor. The results are robust in regression analyses in which the experimental treatments are included as independent variables with and without covariates of age, education, gender, speaking Kurdish, and residing in one of the metropolitan cities of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir (Table 2).

Figure 1. Mean levels of disturbance across experimental groups

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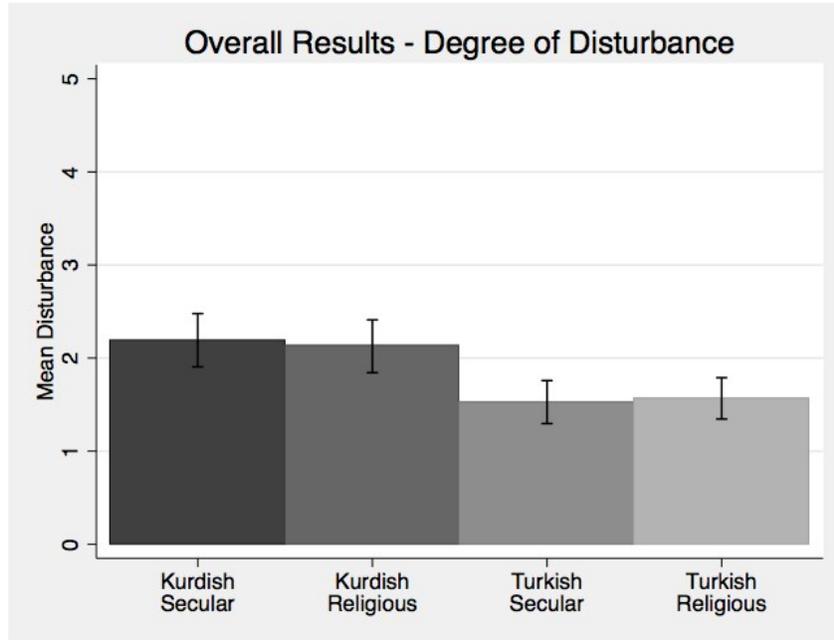
Table 2. Regression analyses of average treatment effects (base category is Turkish-Religious treatment)

	(1)	(2)
DV: Level of disturbance	Without covariates	With covariates
Kurdish-Secular	0.62***	0.61***
	(0.18)	(0.18)
Kurdish-Religious	0.56***	0.60***
	(0.18)	(0.18)
Turkish-Secular	-0.04	-0.02
	(0.16)	(0.16)
Young		0.36**
		(0.14)
Beyond Primary Edu.		-0.05
		(0.14)
Male		0.10
		(0.13)
Kurdish-speaking		-0.83***
		(0.17)
Metropolitan-resident		-0.47***
		(0.13)
Constant	1.57***	1.64***
	(0.11)	(0.15)
Observations	1,595	1,540
R-squared	0.013	0.036

Note: "Young" is a dummy variable taking the value of 1 for respondents below 35 years of age and 0 for others. "Beyond Primary Edu." is a dummy variable taking the value of 1 for respondents with education beyond the primary level and 0 for others. Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Which subgroups of the population are more likely to get disturbed by a Kurdish family as neighbor? In order to answer this question, we pool together the two treatment groups that involve a Kurdish family moving in (Kurdish-Secular and Kurdish-Religious) into a single treatment group, Kurdish-Treatment, and the remaining two groups that involve a Turkish family are pooled together as well. Table 3 presents a regression analysis on the effects of the Kurdish-ethnicity treatment on different subgroups of the sample.

Looking at the coefficients of the interaction variables in Model 3, we see that having beyond-primary-level education (Beyond Primary Edu.*Treat.) and speaking Kurdish (our indicator for respondents' Kurdish ethnicity, Kurdish-speaking*Treat.) have negative and statistically significant effects. Thus, highly-educated individuals and individuals with Kurdish ethnicity are less likely to be disturbed by a Kurdish family moving in. Young individuals and metropolitan residents seem to be less disturbed and males to be more disturbed by a Kurdish family, but the differences in effects between these subgroups and others are not statistically significant.

Table 3. Regression analyses of average treatment effects of (pooled) Kurdish-ethnicity treatment (base category is (pooled) Turkish-ethnicity treatment)
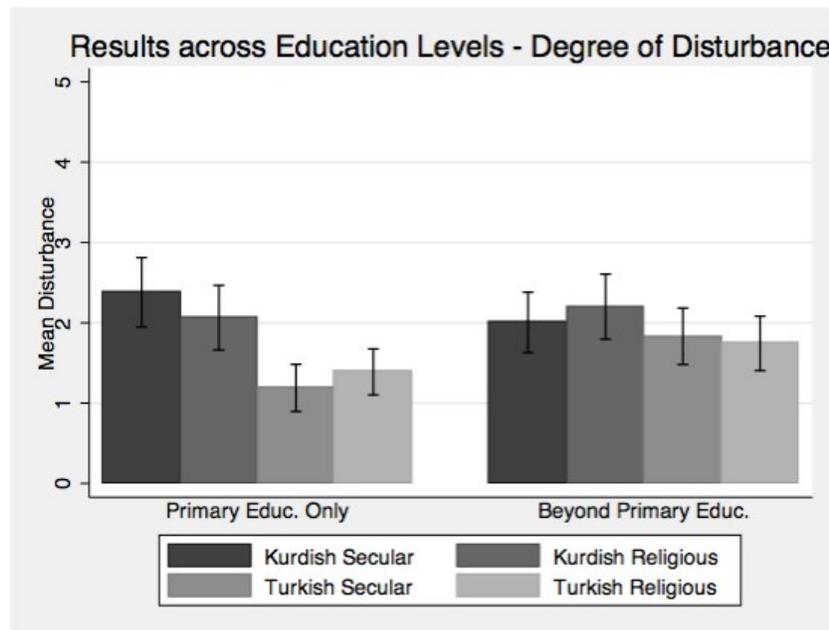
DV: Level of disturbance	(1)	(2)	(3)
Kurdish-Treatment	0.61***	0.62***	1.10***
	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.24)
Young		0.36**	0.46***
		(0.14)	(0.18)
Beyond Primary Edu.		-0.05	0.30*
		(0.14)	(0.16)
Male		0.10	-0.05
		(0.13)	(0.16)
Kurdish-speaking		-0.83***	-0.45*
		(0.17)	(0.23)
Metropol-resident		-0.47***	-0.29*
		(0.13)	(0.16)
Young*Treat.			-0.19
			(0.28)
Beyond Primary Edu.*Treat.			-0.69**
			(0.28)
Male*Treat.			0.33
			(0.27)
Kurdish-speaking*Treat.			-0.78**
			(0.34)
Metropolitan-resident*Treat.			-0.32
			(0.26)
Constant	1.55***	1.62***	1.37***
	(0.08)	(0.13)	(0.15)
Observations	1,595	1,540	1,540
R-squared	0.013	0.036	0.045

Note: "Young" is a dummy variable taking the value of 1 for respondents below 35 years of age and 0 for others. "Beyond Primary Edu." is a dummy variable taking the value of 1 for respondents with education beyond the primary level and 0 for others. Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

For expository purposes, Figure 2 displays the mean levels of disturbance across the experimental groups for individuals with primary education only (left-panel) and for individuals with beyond-primary-level education (right-panel). For individuals with beyond-primary-level education, the mean levels of disturbance across the groups are very close to each other. In contrast, individuals with only a primary education are significantly more disturbed by a Kurdish family than a Turkish one. This pattern holds regardless of whether the family moving-in is secular or religious. The secular/religious dimension does not lead to significantly different levels of disturbance in either group.

Similarly, Figure 3 presents the mean levels of disturbance across experimental groups for Kurdish individuals (left-panel) and others (right-panel). We see that Kurdish individuals are not disturbed by any particular group; neither by a Kurdish nor Turkish family with different levels of religiosity. Turkish respondents (labeled as Others) are significantly more disturbed by a Kurdish family moving in. Again the secular/religious dimension does not play a role here.

Figure 2. Mean levels of disturbance across experimental groups for different levels of education

Figure 3. Mean levels of disturbance across experimental groups for Kurdish individuals and others
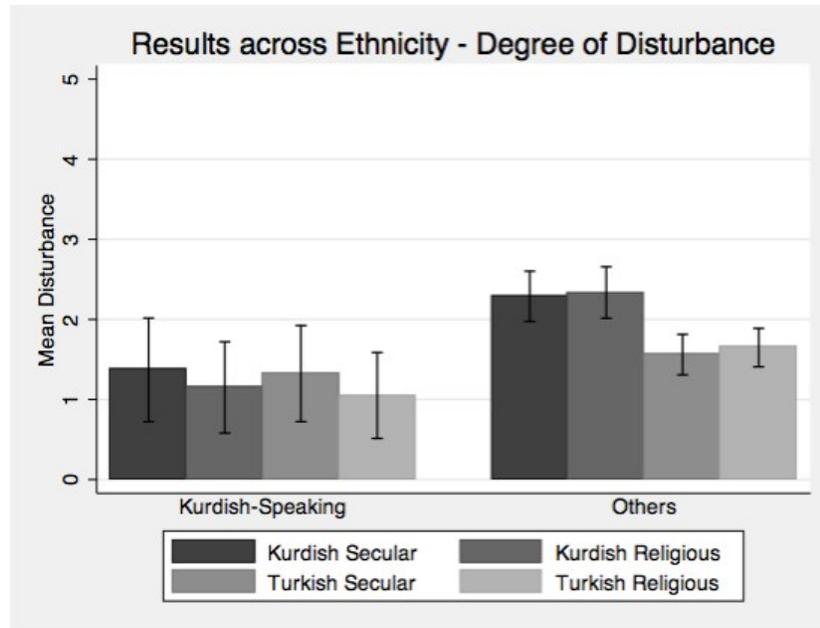
In the regression analysis in Table 3 there was some evidence, albeit weak, that individuals living in the metropolitan cities of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir respond differently to our treatments involving a Kurdish family moving in. To probe this further and to see whether there are region-based differences in individuals' responses to our experiment, Figure 4 disaggregates the results across the metropolitan cities, Kurdish region, and six geographical regions of Turkey. We see that the most striking differences between the Kurdish and Turkish treatments come from respondents living in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions. One immediate reason why such differences might be observed is due to differential influence of the militarized Kurdish insurgency over the last two decades across Turkish regions. Typically the soldiers fighting against the Kurdish insurgents in the East and Southeast would be the ones coming from the western Anatolia provinces. Kıbrıs (2011) clearly shows evidence that soldiers who lose their lives and brought back to their home provinces have a negative impact upon the electoral bases of the incumbent governments. Similarly, we would expect a significant difference between the reactions of the western regions to our stimuli compared to the rest of the country.

Figure 4. Mean levels of disturbance across experimental groups for different regions of Turkey
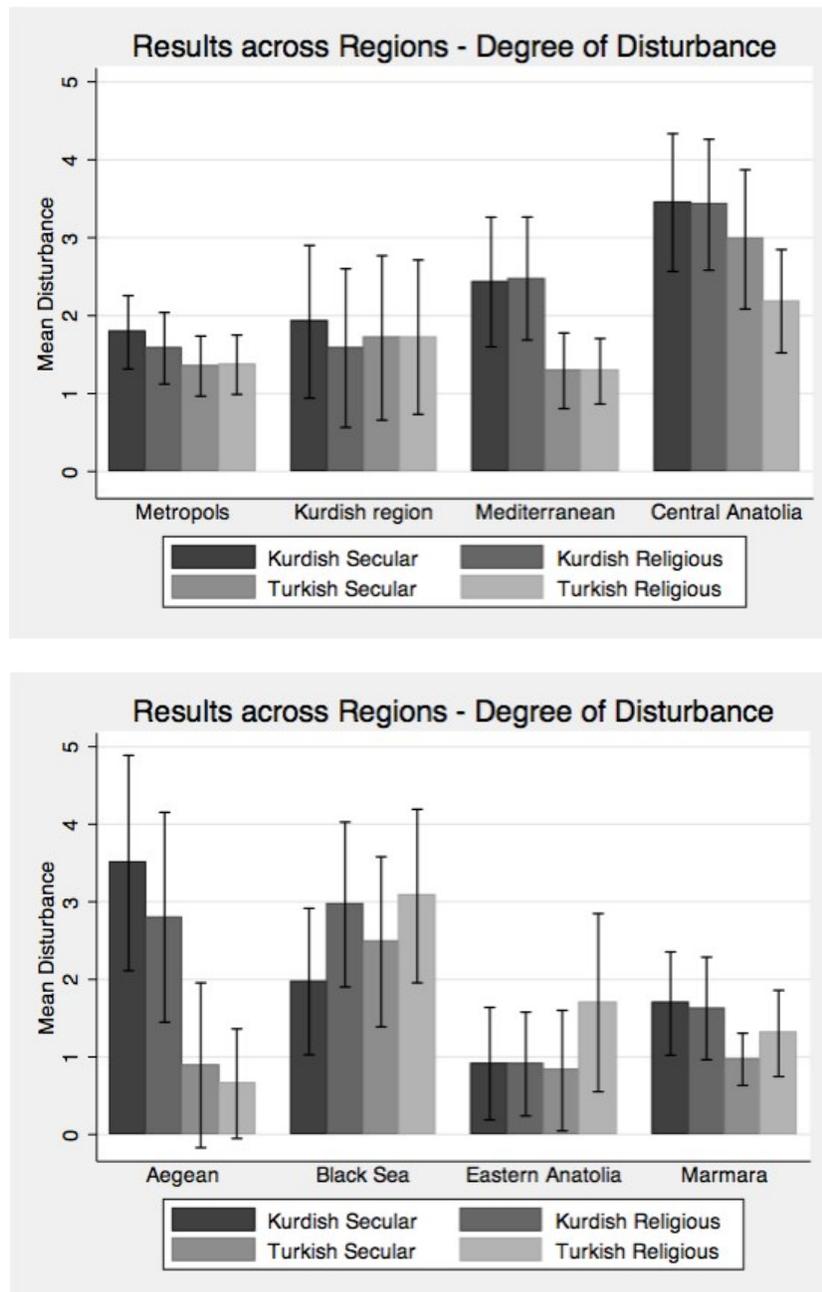
Conclusions

Our ensuing analyses aimed at differentiating the threat stimuli on the basis of four different vignettes. While the ethnicity stimuli focused on Kurdish language and geography, the religiosity stimuli focused on piety and headscarf for women. Our results suggest that while the religiosity stimuli appears ineffective in creating significant differentials in the perceived threat, the Kurdish

ethnicity does. Lower education and non-Kurdish ethnicity together with Western regional location appear to have the largest and significant response to our stimuli over threat perceptions.

The fact that religiosity stimuli not having much of a significant influence over threat perceptions may be due to several factors. One factor is that most of the relevant research clearly shows that most Turks are quite religious to start with. Despite the ongoing tension between the secularist and pro-Islamist groups in the country most Turks report high levels of religious practice. Second, the conservative pro-Islamist AKP being in power since 2002 and effectively resolving the head cover ban problem in Turkish universities might be easing the tension as well. Third, is the observation that about 60% of Turkish women cover their head with some form of head cover. From a skeptical perspective, one might think that although, most of these use politically and religiously less significant traditional forms of head cover (46%), differentiating these from more politically meaningful turban might not have been possible in our vignettes.[4] From a more optimistic perspective, our results might be taken to reflect lessening of tensions between the secular as opposed to the pro-Islamist circles.

Nevertheless, as the resolution of the Kurdish conflict nears the end with the start of negotiations between the two sides, the mass bases of mistrust and fear continue to exist. While the Kurdish speakers do not reflect any threat perception from our ethnicity vignettes, the Turkish side of especially lower educated groups living in the western provinces appear to feel threatened by ethnic Kurds moving in to their neighborhood. Even after controlling for other confounding factors such as religiosity we see continuing significance of Kurdish ethnicity upon threat perceptions. One would expect such deep running mistrust especially in the western provinces to create a potent resistance base for the nationalist parties who oppose any resolution package.

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[4] See Çarkoğlu (2009; 2010) and Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2000, 2006).

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