

ROUNDTABLE

DYNAMICS OF DISRUPTION: ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

## Navigating the Dynamics of Private Security in Turkey: Reflections from a Field in Flux

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Any fieldwork is inherently filled with tension arising from two fundamental yet conflicting obligations: first, the need to treat the field as an already constituted research object, and second, the requirement to continuously reframe, remake, or essentially reconstitute this object during the fieldwork. This double bind places the fieldworker in a blurred position, navigating between the certainty of the former and the uncertainty of the latter. My fieldwork on Istanbul's private security market in Turkey was no exception. While approaching the market as an already constituted research object, I also had to cartographically unfold it as I explored it. My research specifically examined how security, as a peculiar good and service, was translated into a market object in Turkey's private security industry.<sup>1</sup> Despite its relatively recent emergence in 2004, the industry has experienced tremendous growth.<sup>2</sup> By 2019, 1.6 million people had completed private security training, 1.1 million had obtained licenses, and around 320,000 were actively employed in the industry.<sup>3</sup> This translates to nearly 3 in every 100 working-age individuals being trained, almost 2 in 100 licensed, and 1 in 200 working as private security guards.

Framing such a vast field was a task that appeared straightforward yet was, in reality, quite complex. On the one hand, this massive labor- and capital-intensive industry had become so pervasive in urban life that its presence was unmistakable. Additionally, its heavy regulation aided me in treating it as a research-ready object. On the other hand, despite the apparent ease of identifying it as a research object, unfolding it and mapping the complex dynamics among its actors, networks, and spaces proved to be a formidable challenge. The multitude of actors, networks, relationships, and spaces presented a labyrinthine field to navigate. This process involved not only identifying these elements but also navigating surprises, obstacles, and setbacks. Field resistance was pervasive, often casting me in the role of what Michel Anteby describes as an “interloper,” challenging both the

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<sup>1</sup> In economic sociology, the term “peculiar goods (and services)” refers to items that are often valued beyond economic measures, either due to moral considerations associated with them or the challenge in appraising their worth owing to their intangible or elusive characteristics. For further understanding, see Marion Fourcade, “Cents and Sensibility: Economic Valuation and the Nature of ‘Nature,’” *American Journal of Sociology* 116, no. 6 (2011): 1721–77.

<sup>2</sup> Although the introduction of the private security figure goes back to early 1980 when “high-risk” places (e.g., banks) were allowed to establish in-house security units, the market for private security emerged as late as 2004, with the legalization of contractual provision of (hu)manned private security services.

<sup>3</sup> See Cengiz Kıvılcım, “Türkiye Özel Güvenlik Yapılanmasının 15.Yılı” (press release), *Özel Güvenlik Teşkilatı Mensupları Derneği*, 26 June 2019, <https://ogtm.org.tr/2019/06/26/ozel-guvenlik-yildonumu-2019>.

plan and the practice of fieldwork.<sup>4</sup> In short, the tension inherent to fieldwork, which invariably shapes any ethnographic research process, significantly molded my research experience.

Conducting fieldwork in Turkey during the late 2010s involved not only managing the inherent tensions of ethnographic research but also facing the heightened challenges brought on by the country's unstable sociopolitical and economic conditions. Since the mid-2010s, Turkey has experienced significant political, economic, and social changes, creating an environment rife with societal distrust. This atmosphere complicated nearly every aspect of my fieldwork, from formulating the research trajectory to practical tasks such as establishing connections, accessing various research sites, and collecting ethnographic data. The external pressure exerted by this atmosphere was evident not only in conspicuous, significant disruptions but also in the minutiae of mundane interruptions during fieldwork.<sup>5</sup> These challenges, while intensifying my precarity as a researcher, also necessitated a heightened level of adaptability and resilience as I navigated a range of emergent constraints in my fieldwork. These constraints proved to be restrictive, with the potential to disrupt or adversely affect the "well-laid" plans of my research. On the other hand, they also served as catalysts for ethnographic innovation and creativity, compelling me to devise new tactics and strategies to navigate and respond to the obstacles I encountered.

This paper offers an ethnographic account of fieldwork within a disrupted context, in which external forces exacerbate challenges inherent to fieldwork.<sup>6</sup> It reveals how the dynamic interplay of challenges and adaptive responses significantly shaped the trajectory of my ethnographic research, illustrating that the process was as much about overcoming these hurdles as it was about pursuing the initial research objectives. Initially, the paper discusses the early recognition of barriers to field access, followed by a detailed analysis of the strategic, tactical, and ethical responses to these challenges. It concludes with the implications of these experiences for understanding the inherent precarity in fieldwork in disrupted environments and the direction of future research.

## Realizing Constraints

I began my fieldwork in Istanbul in the summer of 2018. Upon my arrival in the city, I found myself in a vast ethnographic landscape. Private security was intricately woven into the fabric of the city's daily life, to the extent that it was nearly impossible to spend a day in public areas without coming across a private security guard. To get a sense of the field, I conducted preliminary on-site observations at bank branches and shopping centers within three business districts over a fortnight. These early observations were crucial in refining the focus and questions of my study. Concurrently, I sought multiple avenues to enter the field, including private security companies (PSCs hereafter),

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the fieldworker's position as an uninvited guest and the ways in which fields resist fieldwork, see Michel Anteby, *The Interloper: Lessons from Resistance in the Field* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Disruption can be interpreted as a methodological phenomenon that leads to interruptions and shifts in the research process. This can range from being perceived narrowly as discrete, significant events to being viewed more broadly as a continuous, inherent potential within every research object, especially those not controllable in a laboratory environment. In this paper, I explore the concept of disruption in its broader, more mundane sense. For an examination of disruption in its narrower sense, particularly in relation to major interruptions akin to substantial disruptive events like COVID-19, see Eric W. Schoon, "Fieldwork Disrupted: How Researchers Adapt to Losing Access to Field Sites," *Sociological Methods & Research*, 18 May 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241231156961>.

<sup>6</sup> The empirical cases that form the basis of this paper have been adapted from the part discussing field experiences within the methodology section of my dissertation; for more information, see Gökhan Mülayim, "Peculiar and Precarious: The Economization of Private Security in Istanbul" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2023).

government regulatory bodies, industry associations, labor unions, training organizations, instructors, specialists, trainees, and, notably, guards employed at various locations. Each potential access point appeared promising, leading my research down different paths. My aim was to develop an approach for systematic and efficient data gathering. Nevertheless, the connections I forged in the field soon made me realize that the apparent abundance of entry points was deceptive.

Two factors underpinned this misleading perception. First, the seeming multitude of entry points was, in reality, a tightly interlinked network. Each node in this network required specific gatekeepers for further progression. For instance, to engage with security guards as research participants, it was essential to secure approval from their respective PSCs. In turn, these PSCs often relied on their client's authorization to permit research access. Access to instructors and experts was generally contingent upon the sanction of their associated training companies. Similarly, engaging with trainees largely depended on establishing rapport with these training organizations. The regulatory public authorities, central yet elusive, were acknowledged by all involved in the field, but only a few could genuinely access them. Therefore, my fieldwork strategy had to focus on identifying the most strategic entry point and skillfully maneuvering through the complex, Kafkaesque labyrinths of the industry.

Second, the volatile political environment in Turkey added layers of complexity to my study of private security. In 2018, the country was still grappling with the repercussions of the 2016 coup attempt. The prolonged state of emergency, declared in its aftermath, was on the verge of conclusion, but a sense of normalcy remained elusive. The transition from a parliamentary democracy to competitive authoritarianism had deepened political fissures; economic uncertainties had swelled the ranks of the unemployed, and societal tensions had intensified over issues such as military operations in Syria and the growing number of refugees within Turkey's borders. Additionally, the government's narrative, rooted in right-wing populism, appeared more focused on controlling this tense environment by vilifying imagined national enemies than seeking inclusive solutions. This indistinct category of enemies encompassed a range of entities, from foreign countries and rival political factions to nongovernmental organizations, social initiatives, activists, journalists, and scholars. This pervasive atmosphere, while not entirely unforeseen, had a more profound influence on my research than initially expected. My research topic and status as a US-based researcher often elicited wariness, if not outright suspicion, from potential research participants in the field. In short, navigating this environment of mistrust added an additional layer of complexity to my fieldwork within the private security industry, often leading to my being categorized as a breach or a threat. Therefore, gaining meaningful access to the field required careful trust cultivation.

Faced with these challenges, I chose the most conventional path into the field: undergoing private security training. Participating in the training program alongside numerous other trainees proved to be both enlightening and instrumental. This experience allowed me firsthand observation of the journey to becoming a private security guard. The formal and hidden curriculum of the program shed light on the industry's underlying principles, which became pivotal in my data-gathering process. Additionally, this route opened doors to relationships that would have otherwise been unreachable or challenging to establish. The possession of an armed private security guard license, acquired at the end of the program, significantly bolstered my credibility. Holding this license not only underscored my dedication as a researcher but also alleviated any security concerns among those I studied, positioning me as someone who had undergone and passed security vetting, rather than an outsider. In short, the private security training served as a strategic entry point into the field, facilitating my full immersion in it. Ultimately, this training transitioned from a preliminary tool for interviews and observations to a comprehensive ethnographic venue, prompting me to refocus my market ethnography specifically on private security work.

## Dealing with Constraints

Each step I took brought its unique set of challenges, ranging from significant hurdles in gaining access to the mundane nuances of interpersonal communication. Each of these challenges, whether big or small, harbored the potential to disrupt and derail the fieldwork in various ways. This potential compelled me to devise strategic, tactical, and ethical solutions to ensure the conduct of data collection.

At the private security training center, my presence as a potential job market connection was a common perception among the trainees. Although I revealed my role as a doctoral researcher from the outset, my background as a Boğaziçi University graduate led many to speculate that I was training intending to either establish a PSC or join an existing one in a professional capacity. This assumption sometimes translated into lighthearted suggestions about my future in the industry, often accompanied by remarks like, “Maybe you can hire me someday,” or “It’d be great to work with someone as educated as you.” These comments, while made in jest, implied expectations of me as a resource in the job market, creating an ethical dilemma since I could not reciprocate their assistance in my study. To tackle this issue, I consistently reinforced my identity as a researcher (by reiterating or hinting at my reason for participating in the training) and integrated myself into the community (by engaging actively in social events ranging from casual smoking breaks to informal gatherings at coffee shops before and after class sessions). This approach helped me foster trust, forge friendships, and attract informed and willing participants for my study at the training center.

As my research progressed and I reached out to instructors, experts, and professionals within the industry, I frequently faced a challenging perception. My study was often seen as potential intelligence gathering, leading to initial caution and guarded responses from contacts. In some instances, individuals expressed nervousness or outright fear in response to my requests for recruitment. Questions like, “What brought you here?” “Why are American universities interested in Turkish private security?” and “Why don’t Americans solve their own private security problems before researching us?” were not uncommon in these interactions. Given the tense political context, such suspicion was somewhat anticipated. Moreover, the industry was heavily shaped by retired and former members of the police and military, institutions known for their strong nationalistic ethos. Instructors and professionals with such backgrounds often displayed this ethos in their interactions through particular discursive patterns, ranging from secrecy and protectionism to skepticism and conspiracy theories about various “others.”

Navigating access and ensuring ethical research conduct in such an environment was undoubtedly challenging. To counter these perceptions, I employed a threefold approach. First, I underscored the global significance of Turkey’s burgeoning private security industry, highlighting its expansive growth and scale. Second, I leveraged my deep industry knowledge, acquired through extensive fieldwork and the armed private security guard license I had earned, to establish my credibility as a researcher. Finally, I used my personal background to differentiate myself from the “others” they might suspect, emphasizing my Turkish, middle-class roots and my family’s military background. Building trust required showcasing my harmlessness through various means, utilizing every resource available to affirm the legitimacy of my research interest and my identity as a researcher. However, accessing the airport proved to be a more formidable task. Although I managed to connect with senior officials in airport private security, their recommendations alone were insufficient. Uncertainty lingered over whether my inquiries were even being processed by the vice governor’s office, which managed the airport’s public security bureaucracy. After two failed attempts, I utilized a connection from the Interior Ministry to secure a meeting with the vice governor, circumventing the airport’s reluctant bureaucracy. The process was arduous, taking five months and requiring me to clear three background checks and secure influential referrals both internally and externally, making me perhaps the most trustworthy individual in the country.

The perceptions of the on-duty guards posed yet another set of challenges. Many initially mistook my interest in their work lives for a journalistic venture. Questions about whether I was gathering interviews for a YouTube channel or which news network I represented were common. These queries reflected a mix of excitement for potential public exposure, a desire to voice their work challenges, and apprehension over job security risks. To address these misunderstandings, I carefully distinguished between journalism and ethnography, underlining the ethical standards guiding my research. My thorough introductions, coupled with detailed recruitment and consent procedures, often helped to ease their concerns, making the more wary guards comfortable and tempering the enthusiasm of those eager for public attention.

Close monitoring in certain environments, however, remained a significant obstacle. At the airport, for instance, both the administration and the PSC closely scrutinized my fieldwork activities. The deputy manager of the project initially led me through the security operations and then appointed a shift supervisor to shadow me. To the guards, I was an outsider, suddenly introduced to their workspace alongside their superior, raising suspicions that I might be an inspector assessing operational weaknesses or evaluating staff performance. This was evident in their initial formality: some guards cautiously chose their words when welcoming me at security checkpoints and lounges, while others directly questioned my intentions. Although explanations of my research goals were enough to arrange interviews, the guards maintained a formal attitude, influenced by the continuous oversight of their supervisors. To overcome this, I deliberately slowed down the recruitment process and extended my time for on-site observations, gradually familiarizing myself with the setting. This approach allowed me to build trust within the security team and eventually led to individual interviews with guards on duty, conducted in a more relaxed atmosphere.

## Conclusion

My fieldwork was a co-creative endeavor, shaped by mutual exchanges between me and various actors across diverse locations and contexts. The notion of “bricolage,” introduced by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, aptly describes this process; it refers to the art of creatively adapting and utilizing available resources in specific situations to make things work.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, my fieldwork transcended the mere implementation of my initial research plan, evolving into an intricate journey characterized by both progress and challenges. This journey, from securing entry to maneuvering within the field, was marked by varying rhythms and intensities with the actors in their respective environments. This extensive journey inevitably shaped my identity as a researcher. As the research progressed, my role continuously transformed—from an outsider to a fellow trainee, from a mere acquaintance to a friend, and from an object of suspicion to a researcher. Reflecting on and understanding my positionalities within this process was as crucial as the research subject itself; it was more of a necessity than a choice.

None of the positions I assumed in that dynamic process offered any form of certainty or stability. Instead, my fieldwork was imbued with precarity, broadly defined as “uncertainty, instability, and insecurity.”<sup>8</sup> Venturing beyond the safety of the armchair, as any fieldworker

<sup>7</sup> The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss’s conception of bricolage refers to the art of improvisation, utilizing whatever resources are at hand to make things function. This approach stands in stark contrast to the engineering model, which prioritizes the flawless execution of a plan, with every deviation viewed through the lens of calculation and risk assessment. In this context, bricolage is seen as an inherently artistic or creative endeavor. See Claude Levi Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Precarity, as a concept, encompasses a broad spectrum, originally denoting a wide spectrum ranging from uncertain, unstable, and insecure employment relationships to generalized ontological insecurity; see Pierre Bourdieu, *Travail et Travailleurs en Algérie* (Paris: Mouton, 1963); and Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004). In this context, I employ the term in its more general sense to characterize the fieldworker’s uncertain, unstable, and potentially insecure position within the field.

does, I encountered the unpredictability of the field, marked by uncertainties, instabilities, and insecurities.<sup>9</sup> The complexity of conducting fieldwork in Turkey's turbulent sociopolitical and economic environment of the late 2010s added an extra layer of challenge. In this role, I grappled not only with the intrinsic uncertainties of the field, contrasting with the certainties outlined in my research plan, but also with the widespread societal distrust that pervaded the field. This pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and fear further magnified the challenges I faced. My position as a researcher based in the United States, the sensitive nature of my research topic, and the intricate organization of the field, including its various actors, networks, and spaces, all posed unique and heightened challenges.

Those challenges not only intensified the precarious nature of my role as a researcher but also demanded greater flexibility and resilience. These challenges often posed significant risks to the planned course of my study, yet they simultaneously acted as a driving force for ethnographic innovation and creativity. This prompted me to develop strategies and tactics to effectively and ethically manage and adapt to the obstacles that emerged during my fieldwork. This experience underscored how the interplay of difficulties and adaptive strategies profoundly influenced the direction of my ethnographic study. The journey became as much a process of navigating, surmounting, and enduring these challenges as it was about adhering to my original research goals. Certainly, these challenges were not uniform across the field. The diverse sites of my research, encompassing an airport, a hospital, and a gated residential community, allowed me to observe and analyze variations in field resistance in different environments. Addressing these challenges pragmatically enriched the depth and breadth of my research design and enhanced my ethnographic practice. However, a detailed exploration of how precarity in fieldwork varied across these different sites is a topic that merits separate, in-depth analysis in future work.

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<sup>9</sup> The precarity integral to fieldwork as an activity is a recurrent theme in numerous ethnographic accounts; for an illustrative example of this in first-person ethnographic fieldwork, see Ashley Mears, "Ethnography as Precarious Work," *Sociological Quarterly* 54 (2013): 20–34.