

## **A Country in a School: Social Identity Negotiations of the Iranian Students in *Fajr* Iranian School of Istanbul**

### **Abstract**

The *Fajr* Iranian School was established at the end of the nineteenth century during the Ottoman Empire. Although there is an almost complete absence of any qualitative studies on this subject in Turkey, the school has operated continuously since 1882, providing education for the Iranian community in Istanbul. This conference paper consists of a chapter from my degree-awarded master thesis, which was an ethnographic exploration into the spatiality of this school. The thesis argues that the school's spatial setting, examined as an ideological state apparatus that creates a state-centered habitus for its subjects in a foreign country, plays a significant role in constructing the social identities of the Iranian students in Turkey. As this paper aims to present a part of this broader project, it only addresses how the Iranian students negotiate their social identities through an Iranian school in Turkey. This study shows that these students negotiate their identities differently based on their self-positionings, which are examined through their collective and personal negotiations. On the one hand, the *Fajr* Iranian School plays a vital role in creating a 'safe' and 'private' space for its students to learn and maintain the culture, history, and language around being Iranian in Turkey; on the other hand, it also constitutes a site of struggle due to constructing a 'closed place' where the symbolic power of the state is differently exercised over its agents as the school aims to exert a dominant Iranian identity. Collective negotiations represent how the students negotiate their identities through a collective group lens. Personal negotiations, however, somehow as counterexamples against the image of group identity, prove to be valuable to analyze that there are different positionings of some student groups in their interpersonal relations within this state-centered habitus. In this way, the study shows that symbolic capital and levels of symbolic power are prone to shifts for particular groups in the school space.

### **Biography of Author**

**Irmak Kurtulmus** holds a BA with an honors degree in Political Science and International Relations from Bogazici University and an MA degree with distinction from Sabancı University. Her interests lie in humanitarianism, forced migration, migration governance, refugee regimes in the Middle Eastern countries, comparative politics, political sociology, and identity. Her main interests have developed out of her professional experiences within the humanitarian field, working with several top national and international organizations in Turkey. Her doctoral research investigates the intersection of state-non-state actors in relation to humanitarianism and the relationship between international organizations' domestic involvement and host state around refugee governance.