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Book Review

Zeki Sarigil, **Ethnic Boundaries in Turkish Politics: The Secular Kurdish Movement and Islam**, New York: New York University Press, 2018, 207 pp., (ISBN 978-1-4798-8216-8).

Zeki Sarigil's study is an interesting attempt to provide a sociological interpretation and explanation of the changing attitude of the secular Kurdish movement in Turkey towards Islam, from indifference or even hostility to accommodation. In the central part of the book, the author traces the relationship of the Kurdish movement (and the Turkish state) with Islam during the past half century. The PKK, like most left and Kurdish movements in Turkey, was initially uninterested in religion if not downright hostile but that attitude gradually changed in the 1990s. Sarigil points to Öcalan's 1991 brochure *The Revolutionary Approach to the Question of Religion (Din Sorununa Devrimci Yaklaşım)* and the decisions of the PKK's Fifth Congress in 1995 as important turning points, at which the movement acknowledged that although conservative Islam had often been used to legitimise oppression, Islam was potentially a liberating and anti-imperialist force. And since most Kurds were strongly committed to Islam, a revolutionary movement that was anti-religious would, in Öcalan's view, inevitably remain alienated from the masses. Among the various front organisations that were inspired by the PKK in the 1990s, there was an "Islamic Movement of Kurdistan" and a "Union of Patriotic Imams of Kurdistan."

Another turning point was reached in the 2010s, when the movement inspired by the PKK directly intervened in the religious sphere by organising "civil Friday prayers" that challenged the authority of Turkey's religious establishment outright. All large mosques are controlled by the state, and the sermons that are part of the Friday service are sent from Ankara and delivered in Turkish. In 2011, the Kurdish movement began organising alternative Friday prayers on open squares in the major Kurdish cities, led by Kurdish *mele* (imams) who delivered sermons with overtly political content in Kurdish – a manifestation of civil society against the state. (This process was later discontinued.) In 2014 and again 2016, the



movement organised a “Democratic Islam Congress” to which it invited a wide range of Islamic groups (including erstwhile opponents). In Sarigil’s view, the movement was transcending mere friendly gestures towards Muslims and was on the path towards a “Kurdish-Islamic synthesis” – implicitly likening this development to the conservative “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” that was adopted as Turkey’s official ideology in the wake of the 1980 military coup.

Sarigil mentions several factors in the political context that must have contributed to this “Islamic opening” of the Kurdish movement (as he calls it): the demise of Marxist-Leninist ideology following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the growing strength of Turkey’s pro-Islamic parties (Refah in the 1990s and the AKP in the new millennium), which successfully challenged Kemalism (and were especially successful in the Kurdish provinces). We might add to these factors the influence of Iran’s revolutionary, anti-imperialist Islamic ideology, and the emergence of (Iran-influenced) Hizbullah as a rival to the PKK. Sarigil’s main interest, however, is not in cause and effect type explanations but in interpreting the “Islamic opening” as a case of shifting ethnic boundaries. He directs his attention therefore to the various types of social and symbolic boundaries and “boundary work” by Turkish and Kurdish elites.

The theoretical framework is set out in the first part of the book, which offers a systematic overview of the theoretical literature on ethnicity and ethnic boundaries since Fredrik Barth’s seminal *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). Barth famously emphasised that the maintenance of boundaries was more crucial to ethnic identity than the “cultural stuff,” and treated transactions across the boundaries as the essence of inter-ethnic relations. Sarigil’s discussion of the literature is clear, well-written and fairly comprehensive. Following the general thrust of the later literature, he argues that boundaries and identities can to some extent be made and remade through deliberate actions by political elites (“boundary work”), although the “cultural stuff” is more resilient than Barth claimed and restricts the kind of boundary work that is possible. Boundaries can be crossed by individuals as well as groups. Ethnic groups are surrounded by external boundaries but also crosscut by internal boundaries; both are subject to boundary work by internal as well as external elites.

Sarigil’s analysis of the “Islamic opening” focuses on the boundaries defining Kurdish nationalists (who, one may assume, are only a subset of all Kurds) and “Islamists” (who include Kurds as well as Turks and others). Where these boundaries overlap, they enclose those “Islamists” who are also Kurdish nationalists (or Kurdish nationalists who are also “Islamists”). The boundary work consisted primarily of efforts by Kurdish elites to move more “Islamists” into this overlapping area and by Islamist elites (the AKP

government) to persuade them to leave it, respectively. These efforts increased in intensity at times of elections in which the AKP and the legal pro-Kurdish parties competed for the votes of the Kurdish provinces and attempted to delegitimise each other's leadership. The Kurdish elites' "Islamic opening" was briefly challenged by Alevi Kurds, suggesting that another internal boundary might become salient, but due to the strong centralised control of the movement that challenge was easily deflected.

I found the analysis somewhat disappointing; Sarigil does little more than restate well-known facts in terms of social and symbolic boundaries. His focus on "boundary work" does not yield new insights, as far as I can see. To some extent this may be due to the rather limited empirical foundation on which he bases his analysis. In the course of his argument, he seems to conflate the PKK, the Kurdish movement, and the Kurds as an ethnic group or nation, and his category of "Islamists" does not do justice to the complexity of Kurdish Islamic groups, which include Hizbullah (anti-PKK but very much Kurdish), the pro-PKK associations, and various independent groups such as Zehra, Med-Zehra and the Azadi Initiative, some of which responded positively to the PKK's call for dialogue but are certainly not under its influence. The more abstract theoretical discussion of boundaries and boundary-making, however, remains relevant beyond the specific case discussed and may inspire readers to make their own analysis of the struggle between various political and ideological forces for the hearts and souls of Turkey's Kurds.

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