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BOOK REVIEWS

Gülay Türkmen, **Under the Banner of Islam: Turks, Kurds, and the Limits of Religious Unity**, Oxford University Press, 2021, 204 pp., (ISBN: 9780197511817).

Reviewed by Cemre Aydoğan

Under the Banner of Islam: Turks, Kurds, and the Limits of Religious Unity analyses the role of religion in ethnic conflicts by focusing on Kurds in Turkey and the story of historical polarization between Kurds and Turks. Gülay Türkmen scrutinizes the constitution of religious and ethnic identities, and discusses how a supranational identity, Sunni Islam, fails in an ethnically motivated conflict. She bases her study on an account of Kurdish history in Turkey, and on in-depth interviews with the religious establishment of Turkey, mostly *imams* and *meles*, both Turkish and Kurdish. While *imams* are appointed by Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs/*Dîyanet* and are generally Turkish, the *meles* are not state appointed and '[prepare] their own sermons' in Kurdish, 'rather than reading the text prepared by the Presidency of Religious Affairs' (p. 1). This dichotomy in Turkey's religious establishment forms the basis for a discussion of the role of Sunni Islam in consolidating ethnic identities, in this case Turkish and Kurdish. In addition, Türkmen focuses on Civil Friday Prayers, that is, Friday prayers that are conducted in Kurdish and held on the streets rather than in state mosques, to trace political and religious challenges against the Turkish government by religious Kurds. The book concentrates on the current political atmosphere in Turkey but undergirds its argument through a historical account. It seeks to show why steps taken by the current ruling party, Justice and Development Party (AKP), to peacefully solve the Kurdish-Turkish conflict on the basis of 'Muslim Fraternity' have failed.

Türkmen's book divides identity constructions among Turkish and Kurdish religious figures in Turkey into four categories: (1) ethno-religious; (2) religio-ethnic; (3) religious; (4) secular. The difference between the ethno-religious and religio-ethnic categories depends on the identity-maker role of either ethnicity or religion. In the former, ethnicity constitutes the main determinant of the identity, while in the latter religion takes over this function. Türkmen uses this typology to show how religion and ethnicity are differently interpreted among Kurds and Turks. Many of Türkmen's interviewees distinguish between ethnicity and religion, and Muslim Turkish religious and political elites have a tendency to prioritize 'Turkish ethnic identity'. This assumed superiority of Turkishness harms the peacemaker and unifier role of Islam, and explains why Islam has failed as a unifying banner in peace-making attempts. Thus, Türkmen shows that while 'Turks and Kurds might seem to be united in religion and divided by ethnicity, the data at hand demonstrate that identity dynamics in Turkey's Kurdish conflict are more complex than meets the eye' (p. 23). She also connects it to Turkey's political history since the beginning of the Republican period (1923) in order to demonstrate to what extent



the Turkish-Kurdish conflict is embedded in the modern history of Turkey and how governments have intervened in the conflict throughout history.

After the introduction, the first chapter, 'Green Kemalism', demonstrates how Islam has functioned as a tool of assimilating Kurdish populations since the establishment of the Republic in 1923. Türkmen summarizes the extent of the role played by religion among Kurdish revolts, arguing that religion and ethnicity went hand in hand in the revolts of the nineteenth century against the Ottoman state. However, revolts and uprisings during the Republican period are different because of their nationalist and separatist character. For example, Türkmen argues that the Sheikh Said rebellion of February 1925 foregrounded nationalist and separatist claims instead of religious ones, which is why the revolt did not influence religiously reactionary parts of Turkey which are geographically close to their Kurdish neighbours (p. 40). In this way, Türkmen underlines how religious and ethnic identity have been changing over the last century.

The second chapter, 'Islam as Cement: The Way Out?' discusses how ethnic boundary blurring is traceable through the narrations of Türkmen's interviewees and their references to the Qur'an. Kurdish interviewees (*meles*) who believe in the unifier role of Islam and its superiority over ethno-nationalism refer to the blurring of boundaries between Turks and Kurds. While ethno-nationalism is conceptualized as 'forbidden' amongst distinct Kurdish religious elites and figures, most Turkish religious elites do not think in a similar manner.

The third chapter, 'Muslim Kurds', discusses in detail religio-ethnic identification and its visibility among Kurdish imams and *meles* (as well as some Turks). Here, Türkmen focuses on how religio-ethnic identity constructions dampen ethno-nationalistic discourse by foregrounding Islamic theology. In other words, for these elites, 'Muslimness' is the main identity maker instead of ethnicity. On the other hand, the fourth chapter, 'Only Turks Can Lead a Muslim Union', analyses ethno-religious identity amongst Turkish religious elites who position Turks as the central element in the *ummah* and Islam. Amongst these elites, 'Turkishness' becomes a primary trope that leads to ethnicity triumphing over religion in the formulation of identity. These two chapters contrast how different actors prioritize either ethnicity or religion in their identity construction.

In addition, Türkmen provides an analysis of why the peace process, which was initiated by the AKP in the early 2000s, came to an end in 2015. She argues that the 'Muslim fraternity' project failed because the AKP changed its discourse and policy after 2015, when they could not obtain an electoral majority in the June election and started targeting the Kurdish party, the Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), as a national threat. The AKP also embraces a Turko-nationalist discourse and defends the superiority of Turks over Islam. Analysing why the peace process failed in 2015, Türkmen lists 'the non-transparent nature of the peace talks', 'the importance of Alevi Kurds in certain Kurdish-majority regions', 'HDP's decision to not support Erdoğan's bid for presidency', and 'the spillover effects of the civil war in Syria' (p. 139) the main reasons. These points are analysed in relation to the religious elites and their narrations of identity, showing that the conflictual situation consolidated ethno-nationalism, especially on the Turkish side.

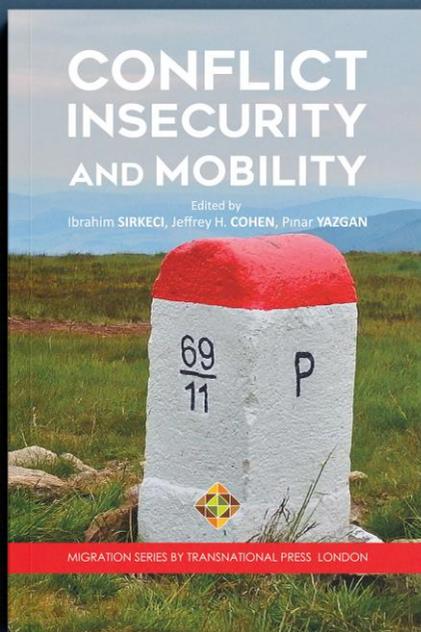
Under the Banner of Islam contributes to the literature on ethnicity and religion by responding to the question of how references to shared Islam fail to bring peace in a conflict situation where populations are ethnically divided but religiously unified. Türkmen's interviews with

Turkish and Kurdish religious elites demonstrate that there is a multi-dimensional identity structure in the conflict. The book synthesizes the existing historical literature, especially at the nexus of Kurdish rights, revolts, and positions in Turkey, and it contributes to the literature by foregrounding narrations of religious figures in the context of the Kurdish conflict. Its methodological design opens a window of opportunity to integrate existing literature and first-hand narrative accounts in an innovative research approach. It also provides both historical analysis and sheds light on the current constitution of ethnic and religious identities in Turkey.

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