

## **BOOK REVIEW**

Zeki SARIGIL, *Ethnic Boundaries in Turkish Politics:  
The Secular Kurdish Movement and Islam*  
(New York, New York University Press, 2018)

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# Ethnic Boundaries in Turkish Politics: The Secular Kurdish Movement and Islam

**Zeki SARIGİL**

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For more than three decades now, the Kurdish question has continued as perhaps the most pressing issue of contemporary Turkey, fundamentally influencing the ebbs and flows of Turkish democracy, authoritarianism, foreign policy, economic development, law and order and societal peace. With intermittently shifting patterns of peace and conflict, the political violence surrounding the Kurdish question continues to haunt the everyday lives of many in Turkey and neighboring territories such as Iraqi Kurdistan and northern Syria. The mainstream actors in the politics of Kurdish question have been the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, founded in 1978) as the illegal armed group, listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, and the legal pro-Kurdish political parties since 1990 (from HEP to HDP today).<sup>1</sup> These two interrelated actors are collectively known as the Kurdish Movement, with a history of Marxist, leftist, and secular nationalist political agenda.

Despite the predominantly conservative and pious Muslim practices of many ordinary Kurds, the Kurdish Movement has traditionally distanced itself from Islamic discourses, symbols and culture. However, in recent years, especially after the 2000s, the Kurdish Movement in general, and the PKK in particular, have become much more accommodative and inclusive towards the Muslim-Kurdish identity. In *Ethnic Boundaries in Turkish Politics: The Secular Kurdish Movement and Islam*, Zeki Sargil calls this shift 'the Islamic Opening' of the Kurdish Movement, and seeks to understand and explain why, how and under what conditions the movement has adopted a peaceful and friendly attitude towards Islam in general, and the pious Kurdish identity in particular. The methodology of the book is based on discourse analysis, interviews, electoral data, and ethnographic field research in Ankara, Diyarbakır, İstanbul and Tunceli between 2011 and 2015. Theoretically, Sargil embraces a widely-applied ethnic-boundary making approach within the instrumentalist tradition à la Fredrik Barth and, more recently, Andreas Wimmer.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 The first pro-Kurdish legal political party was the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi* or *HEP*), founded in 1990. Turkey's Constitutional Court banned HEP on separatism charges and affiliation with the PKK in 1993. Other pro-Kurdish legal parties such as OZDEP, DEP, HADEP, DEHAP, DTP were also closed by the Constitutional Court. The last generation pro-Kurdish political party is the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), founded in 2012.
- 2 For further information, see Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1969 and Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Sarıgil lays out three different periodization in terms of the relationship between the Kurdish Movement and Islam: 1) indifferent or antagonistic approach toward Islam in the 1970s and 80s, when Islam was seen as a reactionary, and somewhat colonizing instrument on the Kurds; 2) still hesitant but increasingly friendly approach in the 1990s, when the emancipatory potential of Islam was being debated; 3) more confidently accommodative and inclusive understanding toward Islam and pious Kurdish identity in the 2000s (p.15). Theoretically, the first stage is discussed as boundary contraction strategy, since the PKK excluded Islam from political Kurdish identity; the second stage, as boundary expansion, since pious Muslim identity was included in the ethnic definition of Kurdishness, and the last stage as boundary reinforcement strategy, where Islam has become an integral part of Kurdishness, as defined by the Kurdish Movement.

Sarıgil discusses the Kurdish Movement's agenda of promoting religious freedoms, embracing the more traditional-conservative historical personalities such as Sheikh Said, Melaye Ciziri, Ehmede Xani as national figures of the Kurds, the Civil Friday Prayers (2011) and Democratic Islam Congress (2014) as evidence of how the movement embraced Islam in the 2000s (pp. 65-85). However, Sarıgil notes that such a discursive and practical shift was mostly informed by the writings of Abdullah Öcalan (as the movement's undisputed leader) on the emancipatory, democratic and revolutionary aspects of Islam in the 1990s. Although the Alevi base of the movement in Tunceli has been critical of embracing Sunni Muslim identity, the Kurdish Movement's highly centralized and hierarchical structure prevented any in-group division and disputes, according to Sarıgil (p. 113).

Why did the Kurdish movement initiate 'an Islamic opening'? How can this boundary expansion be explained? As Sarıgil delves into these essential questions, he argues that there are both ideational and strategic reasons. First, the end of the Cold War and the ideological decline of Marxism around the world pushed Öcalan and the PKK to revise the political and ideological pathway of the movement towards cultural and human rights discourse, and away from a strict Soviet-style Marxist-Leninist belief system. This shift would also open the way for more dialogue with European Union, and reduce the threat from American military might in the 1990s. Secondly, the PKK and the legal pro-Kurdish party needed to expand their social base in Kurdish-majority regions in eastern and southeastern Turkey. Without considering the traditional and religious values of Kurdish masses, the movement would have very limited appeal. A final, and closely related reason, was that electoral competition pushed for boundary expansion, since the main rival of the pro-Kurdish political parties in the region have traditionally been pro-Islamic parties, such as Erbakan's Welfare Party in the 1990s and Erdogan's AK Party in the 2000s. Finally, the legitimacy concerns of the Kurdish Movement changed its attitude towards Islam after rivals such as the Kurdish Hizbullah and state security apparatus sought to delegitimize the movement as 'anti-Islamic' and 'atheist' (pp. 93-132).

Overall, this book provides a theoretically informed and a well-organized explanation for why and under which conditions a traditionally secular-leftist Kurdish Movement has become genuinely inclusive and accommodative towards Islamic Kurdish identity, traditions and values. It is an insightful contribution to the trending scholarly debates on the relationship between Kurdish nationalism and Islam in particular and the religion and ethnic-boundary making literature in general.

However, there are few issues that this study could address more in detail. Firstly, the ethnic boundary making approach usually gives agency to ethnopolitical elites since they are assumed to be the main boundary makers. Sarıgil also predominantly gives agency to the Kurdish ethnopolitical

elites in defining the boundary of Kurdishness. However, this approach mostly neglects the voice of ordinary Kurds whom, I believe, have as much agency in shaping the Kurdish Movement as the movement does in shaping them. Secondly, the shift from secular-leftist nationalisms toward more religiously embedded nationalisms has been a global phenomenon since the 1980s, and the transformation narrative of the Kurdish case should therefore be discussed in a broader transnational and global context. Moreover, the historical legacy of the Kurdish nationalism in the 19th and early 20th century should not necessarily be regarded as detached from Islam, and this historical legacy should be given more consideration. Finally, Sarigil concludes that Islam cannot be an antidote to Kurdish ethnonationalism, a position with which I generally agree, but I remain skeptical about the simplistic either/or approach (i.e. whether Islam is or is not the solution). Islam and the Muslim brotherhood rhetoric may not be able to prevent ethnonationalist sentiments, but still functions in creating gray zones between Turks and Kurds.<sup>3</sup> The more important question is how the socio-political context determines whether Islam becomes a unifying or polarizing force. Overall, I recommend this informative work by Sarigil for those who are interested in studies of ethnicity, religion and nationalism in general and the case of Kurdish question in particular.

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3 For a detailed account of my diverging arguments on the same topic, see Serhun Al, "Islam, Ethnicity and the State: Contested Spaces of Legitimacy and Power in the Kurdish-Turkish Public Sphere", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2019, pp. 119-137.