

**11th Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies
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Title of the proposed panel:

Permeability and Saliency: Symbolic and Social Boundaries in Turkey under Authoritarian Pressure

Abstract

In recent years, Turkey's tumultuous socio-political landscape under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has received tremendous scholarly attention. However, the 'authoritarian turn' of Turkey has been mostly associated with formal institutional erosion, such as the capture and control of formal democratic institutions by the executive. The institutionalist approach falls short of explaining how authoritarianism affects dynamic social relations, such as social group formation, contentious politics and everyday life. This panel aims to study the diffusion and contestation of ethnic, class, gender, national and communal boundaries in Turkey within the context of its 'authoritarian turn' with multidisciplinary insights from political science, sociology, and anthropology. It demonstrates that while authoritarian regimes seek to reify homogenous collective identities out of the heterogeneity of individual and group boundaries through disciplinary and institutional structures, the top-down homogenization attempts are challenged by various societal actors through new social, cultural and political practices by creating permeable boundaries. Using original fieldwork data, panelists integrate insights from social movements, urban studies, collective violence, and nationalism literatures to examine how boundaries are reconstituted, challenged and crossed under authoritarian regime dynamics.

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Panelists

1. Seren Selvin Korkmaz

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Rethinking the boundaries in everyday life: A spatial approach to Kurdish Question of Turkey

As Henri Lefebvre discusses the social space is made up by the networks and channels which are the integral part of the everyday life. Thus, everyday life is an area where the ethnic, spatial and class-based boundaries in society are created, blurred and recreated. My research examines the social exclusion of Kurdish population of Turkey. I argue that Turkey's Kurds have witnessed different exclusion processes in different geographies of Turkey and Kurdish identity is defined and recreated in the interrelations between space, identity and class in the everyday life. Thus, to analyze Kurdish Question as a whole impedes to observe the everyday resistance of Kurdish population towards the state and various incorporation stories. That is why, my research aims to shift the attention to an alternative approach which focuses on the political economy and everyday life together. Rather than a time-centered analysis, I offer a space-centered analysis of Kurdish question.

2. Erol Saglam, Ph.D

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Maneuvering across Ambiguities and Boundaries: Negotiations of National and Religious Identity in Contemporary Turkey

A considerable volume of scholarly corpus has extensively dealt with how national identities have historically been forged out of a multitude of experiences through a series of political, economic, sociocultural, and technological interventions (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 2004; Gellner 1983). These accounts have also pertinently explored how states around the world strived and struggled to generate a homogeneous identity through linguistic, cultural, educational, and juridical policies. In the Turkish context, too, such nationalist agenda of the state has been thoroughly analyzed both through its institutional enactments (e.g., promoting the use of Turkish across schools and discouraging/banning the use of minority languages in public) and how resistance to this socio-cultural homogenization has faced a violent oppression (e.g., discrimination against non-Muslim minorities and oppression of Kurds) (see, Yegen 2004; Ozkirimli 2000; Ustel 2005; Ungor 2011). And yet, how Turkish identity in contemporary Turkey still bears ambiguities through which nationalist imaginaries and boundaries are incessantly re-negotiated, subverted, and breached in the everyday life has rarely been explored through its everyday entanglements. Drawing on an ethnographic research in northeast Turkey, this paper explores how Greek-speaking and yet Turkish-nationalist

communities indeed performatively dismantle nationalist boundaries and bring together what are thought to be mutually exclusive identities (Greek vs. Turkish), forcing us to rethink the scope and everyday maintenance of contemporary identities.

3. Imren Borsuk (convener)

Contentious Politics and Collective Violence and Changing Intergroup Boundaries from Democratization to De-democratization

This article addresses an ethnic conflict puzzle: How does de-democratization affect intergroup boundaries? While the EU-induced democratization in Turkey gave way to the increase of communal violence against Kurds over the last decade, the growing state's monopoly over the means of ethnic violence under the impact of democratic backsliding has decreased it in recent years. However, the popular anger and communal violence have changed the target and diverted from Kurds into Syrian refugees. Locating communal violence into contentious politics literature and focusing on the mobilization process, this article discusses how intergroup boundaries between Turks, Kurds, and Syrians have changed and why the targets of communal violence veered from Kurds into Syrians in a context of de-democratization.

4. Bilge Yabanci (convener)

Breaking and Bridging the 'us/them' Divide: New Forms of Civic Mobilization under Authoritarian Pressure

Particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, the ruling Justice and Development party (AKP) has pushed its authoritarian agenda through religious, political and gender/sexual polarization. This study looks into new civic mobilizations that challenge, contest and seek to bridge the social and symbolic boundary imposed and entrenched by the AKP. The study particularly focuses on (i) the new forms of grassroots women's collective action defying the religious versus secular women dichotomy and (ii) dissident Islamist-leftist networks that seek to create shared definitions of justice and class issues across the left-right boundary. Based on interviews with activists, the study aims to answer 'what collective actions and mechanisms do these groups that initiate and constitute boundary change?' and 'What roles do they play in contesting authoritarian power structures in Turkey?' Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of the role of creative and novel forms of cross-boundary encounters and conversation and the ensuing civic resistance to authoritarian regime dynamics.