Techno-Legal Borderwork: Smuggling and the Making of National Markets in the Kurdish Borderlands of Turkey

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Every year, half a billion gallons of oil and as many packages of cigarettes are smuggled into Turkey through its Kurdish-populated borderlands. Despite extensive military surveillance, punitive anti-smuggling laws, and an increasing number of arrests, the high scale of smuggling has been persistent. How can we understand this persistence? Based on 20 months of ethnographic research in Van, a Kurdish-populated province on the Turkish-Iranian border, I demonstrate how official borders of commodity markets are designated and altered not only by state authorities, but also by smugglers and lawyers through material-technical practices embedded in legal processes. Looking at smuggling cases in Turkish courts, I develop the concept of techno-legal borderwork to examine the processes whereby Kurdish smugglers rework the porosity of national borders. I argue that regimes and infrastructures of anti-smuggling surveillance give unexpected legal and political agency to Kurdish smugglers and their lawyers. I also show how Kurdish smugglers and their lawyers, as members of an oppressed ethnic group, frame their borderwork as a distinct mode of political action countering state sovereignty.

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