

Of course, Martel's focus on discourse shifts the questions usually addressed in the literature on ASEAN as a security community from whether it is one or on the path to becoming one, to how ASEAN uses the language of security community making and the inconsistencies in this discourse. This is what I appreciate the most about the book, and why this is such an important contribution to the literature. The value in using the term "security" is that it makes the community unachievable. ASEAN will always matter because it seeks an unattainable goal (hence why ASEAN documents are "aspirational"; note the example of a drug-free ASEAN [p. 85]) and its main goal is not to achieve a security community of dependable expectations of peaceful change. Its goal instead is to be seen as important—to dragons and sirens alike—and nothing is more important than being a source of security.

The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement: Gender, Body Politics and Militant Femininities. By Isabel Käser.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 288p. \$99.99 cloth, \$29.99 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592722003607

— Güneş Murat Tezcür , University of Central Florida
tezcür@ucf.edu

The active participation of women in armed movements across the globe has animated romantic visions of progressive politics. Such visions perceive women in camouflage and arms as the harbinger of new societies transcending centuries-old patriarchal societal norms and expectations. Most recently, the image of Kurdish women fighting against the self-styled Islamic state espousing a misogynistic worldview has attracted widespread public and media attention. Nonetheless, feminist scholarship remains profoundly skeptical about the emancipatory effects of militarist and nationalist movements and platforms. Armed conflict tends to privilege masculine hierarchies and practices that are hardly conducive to gender equality and democratic governance. Most optimistically, women make symbolic gains (i.e., being the icons of nationalist struggle) that do not necessarily translate into tangible outcomes.

Isabel Käser's *The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement* addresses the skepticism in feminist scholarship by studying a "most likely case" of women's emancipation pursuing armed struggle. The topic of her inquiry is the Kurdish nationalist movement (KNM), which emerged from the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*) established in Turkey in the late 1970s and gradually gained support in all four parts of Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora. The KNM encompasses a wide range of civilian and armed entities, ranging from guerilla forces fighting against the Turkish state to the Kurdish administration in northern Syria, and from parties contesting parliamentary and municipal elections in Turkey to civil society organizations in Europe.

While these entities are connected to each other in opaque and complex ways, they all follow the same ideological blueprint, the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan, the founding leader of the movement, who has been imprisoned by Turkey since 1999. A core element of Öcalan's thought since the early 1990s entails that there is a dialectical relationship between national liberation and women's emancipation: the achievement of a social life free from statist domination ultimately depends on the transformation of gender relations and the end of men's domination over women's bodies and life choices. Large numbers of women have achieved very influential positions in the KNM. They are members of the parliament, mayors, public administrators, as well as guerilla commanders and suicide bombers whose acts of violence are the subject of glorification and emulation.

Engaging with several bodies of literature including feminist international relations and postcolonial feminism, Käser explores the implications of women's widespread participation in the KNM for gender equality and feminism. She poses a highly pertinent and intriguing question, "what does a critical analysis of [KNM], which follows a male ideologue but has women at the forefront of all of its military and political struggles, contribute to transnational, post-colonial and geopolitical feminist literature on nationalism and feminism and militarism and body politics?" (p. 6) Her response is nuanced and her findings are highly ambivalent, and rightly so. While she does not completely eschew feminist skepticism about the effects of militarism on gender equality, she also argues that women's mobilization has generated its own dynamics that constantly challenge various forms of gender inequality and offer many Kurdish women alternatives that would have otherwise been unavailable. While women's activism has changed the movement within, its impacts on broader gender relations at the societal level remain more uncertain and fragile, she suggests.

Käser pursues an interpretivist approach that aims to put the experiences and meaning-making activities of her subjects at the forefront of the analysis. The empirical discussion is informed by her multisite fieldwork including several months in the largest Kurdish city in Turkey during a time of intensified armed conflict, several months in one of the main cities in Iraqi Kurdistan, several weeks in the PKK camps in Iraqi Kurdistan, and around a month in a small town in Iraqi Kurdistan that remains under the PKK administration. She recorded 89 in-depth interviews including five interviews with former militants who have sought asylum in Europe. Käser is able to incorporate a diversity of perspectives into her narrative, ranging from well-known political leaders to ordinary activists, and from active militants to individuals who defected from the ranks. Additionally, her time on the ground enabled her to pursue participant observation about everyday interactions among politicians, activists, and militants.

Following a descriptive chapter offering a historical overview of women's activism in the PKK since the late 1970s, the book has four core empirical chapters. Chapter 2 narrates the experience of women activists in Diyarbakır in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdish insurgency. Chapter 3 incorporates the author's encounters with militants being trained in the camps in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. Chapter 4 switches the focus to displaced Kurdish women whose losses and sufferings form their unshakable bond to the movement. Chapter 5 has a more thematic approach and explores the logic and implications of forming a desexualized militant movement, that is, all romantic and sexual relationships among militants being strictly forbidden for many decades. This chapter also notes that civilian activists of the movement are more open-minded about LGBTQ rights than militants.

Chapter 5 provides the most thought-provoking and original discussion. According to Käser, when women join the movement, they break out of highly restrictive conservative norms and practices. At the same time, they become subject to new forms of power constellations that demand uncompromising loyalty and dedication to a political project with little room for individual autonomy and choice. While women's bodies and movements are no longer subject to male domination, women are now required to embrace asexual subjectivities and devalue romantic affairs and sexual pleasure. This "abstinence contract" underlies "party bargains"—women are emancipated from certain gendered practices while being subject to novel forms of party control and punishment justified on grounds of collective struggle.

I have two main critical observations about the book. Methodologically speaking, interviews prove to be somewhat limited tools to understand women's struggles, challenges, and accomplishments. Most women simply give "party line" responses detached from their actual experiences. To her credit, Käser readily acknowledges this limitation and notes that she gained more insights from observing how women interact with each other and men. Nonetheless, it could have been more appropriate to pursue a life story approach with the help of biographical narratives to demonstrate whether participation in and engagement with the KNM has generated unprecedented opportunities for certain women and contributed to greater gender equality and justice at a broader level. Such an approach would also be an ideal method given the author's interpretivist approach. Substantively speaking, the book would have benefited from a more developed and crisper conceptual framework that could tell us what kinds of women are in a position to achieve greater empowerment than others. While Käser writes, "[f]or some, entering these [party] bargains can be truly emancipatory" (p. 194), she never makes a systematic attempt to

deconstruct the notion of "Kurdish women." A discussion of how intersectional and generational factors make some women's relationship with the movement more (or less) rewarding would help the author address the debate about militarism and feminism in a still more innovative manner.

In conclusion, *The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement* offers an empirically rich discussion of the experiences of Kurdish women and neatly captures the inherent complexities of an emancipatory agenda pursued by an armed movement. It makes a valuable contribution to the blossoming literature on women and contentious politics.

Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle

East. By Raffaella A. Del Sarto. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 208p. \$85.00 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S1537592722003905

— Roberto Roccu, *King's College London*,
roberto.roccu@kcl.ac.uk

Borderlands is the fitting culmination of a long-term research project led by Raffaella Del Sarto. Inserted within debates on the EU's external relations, with specific reference to the "Mediterranean Middle East" (MME), the project allowed Del Sarto to work with and draw on the expertise of a number of prominent scholars. This shows in the book, especially in the empirical substantiation of the arguments advanced, which cover issues ranging from trade to development, from security to migration in the EU's relations with Arab Mediterranean countries, Jordan, Israel, and Turkey.

As much as the study focuses on this regional context, *Borderlands* is also a major contribution to theoretical discussions on the EU as a global actor, as Del Sarto successfully breaks through the impasse between rationalist and constructivist approaches. This is achieved through two major moves. First, Del Sarto develops a borderlands approach, which enables her to centre "the structural power asymmetry" (p. 4) in the EU's relations with the MME without forsaking local agency on the part of (typically authoritarian) rulers on the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores. Second, and related, this allows Del Sarto to present the EU as "an empire of sorts" (pp. 25, 31, and elsewhere), and more specifically as a "normative empire." Building on these two important conceptual innovations, Del Sarto argues that a focus on borderlands allows us to see "the multiple and disaggregated borders with different degrees of permeability" (p. 2) characterising the EU's approach to the MME, simultaneously revealing both the EU's nature as a normative empire and its ability to secure its security and economic objectives in the region.

The first three chapters in *Borderlands* set the stage for the empirical illustrations that follow in the second half of