“The Market on the Road for Pilgrimage: Field Notes on Religion, Economy and Family across the Iran/Turkey/Syria Borderlands”

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This paper examines the mutually enforcing mobilities of smuggled goods and Iranian pilgrims on a bus route that spans from Iran, through Turkey, to a Shi’a pilgrimage site near Damascus, Syria. Instead of taking religion and economy as two given aggregates of social analysis, I show how particular subjects’ spatial practices (1) generate a socially emergent interarticulation of religious practice and economic activity, and (2) produce a historically sedimented landscape of porous borders on the margins of Europe and the Middle East.

Given the recent initiatives of the Turkish state to reconfigure this landscape by creating a visa-free region and securing bilateral economic treaties with Iran and Syria, compounded by the recent tectonic sociopolitical transformations in the region, I argue for a more rigorous analysis of shifting forms and contents of circulation and various subjects’ operations that takes us beyond the “methodological nationalism” that characterize both interdisciplinary fields of Turkish and Iranian studies.

I focus on a simultaneously formal and informal entrepreneur’s spatial practices in the Iranian Bazaar of Gaziantep—a major node on the pilgrimage route traveled by up to 50 buses a day between Newroz (March 21st) and early July. Given that “informal economy” is often conceptually contrasted to the regulatory regimes of both state sovereignty and market integrity, studying cross-border informal movers’ spatial practices through and outside the “market” proves to be analytically productive in two ways: Such an approach takes us not only beyond the flattened and uniform self-presentation of capital and its over-determined productive power, but also beyond the frameworks of crude Marxian analyses or anxious security studies. What we observe in these spatial practices is a negotiated constellation of kinship relations, state formations, economic transactions and religious affiliations.