



‘ESCAPING ISN’T FOR EVERYONE’: KURDISH SMUGGLERS’ NAVIGATIONAL TACTICS AT CHECKPOINTS IN IRAN



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Peyman Zinati

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This working paper is part of the series *Roadblocks and revenues*, which explores the role of checkpoints in dynamics of order-making and conflict. Edited by Peer Schouten, Florian Weigand, Vanessa van den Boogaard, Max Gallien and Shalaka Thakur, the series is a collaborative effort between DIIS, the ICTD and Centre on Armed Groups, and is generously funded by DIIS, the ICTD, and the Carlsberg Foundation through the TRADECRAFT grant.

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DIIS Working Paper series *Roadblocks and revenues* # 09: 'Escaping isn't for everyone': Kurdish smugglers' navigational tactics at checkpoints in Iran

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ISBN 978-87-7236-171-0 (pdf)

DIIS publications can be downloaded free of charge from www.diis.dk

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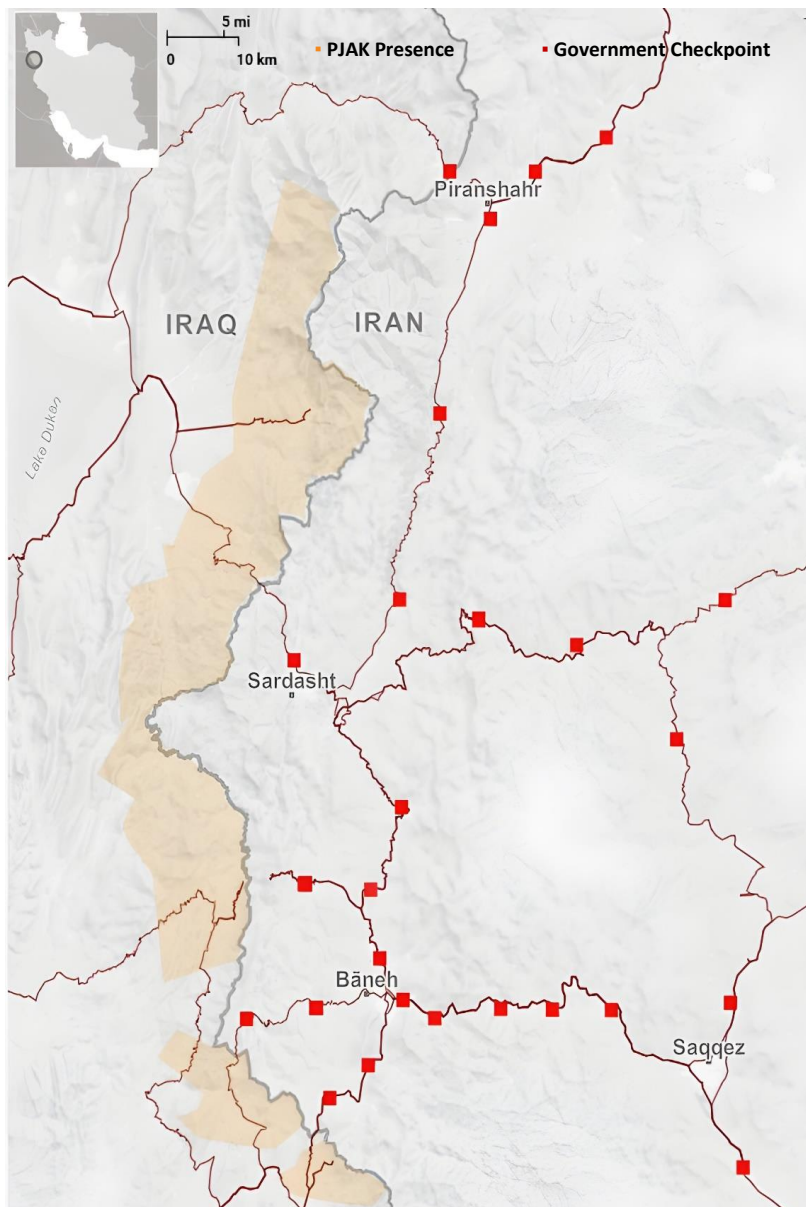
ABSTRACT

This article examines how smugglers navigate state and insurgent checkpoints in the Kurdish region of Iran. Drawing on ethnographic research, it explores smugglers' tactics of '*Persin*' (negotiation) and '*Jimi*' (evasion) that co-produce emergent orders at checkpoints. This article argues that Kurdish smugglers, through their navigational tactics, actively reinforce and challenge the power dynamics at state and insurgent checkpoints. By foregrounding the 'politics of passage' – the mutually constitutive struggles over movement and authority – this article illuminates Kurdish smugglers' agency in navigating both the web of social relation that undergird checkpoints and the practices of mobility in and around the physical infrastructure itself - whether through bribes that secure negotiated passages or using modified cars that enable evasion and circumventions. This article also argues that smugglers do more than just navigate their way through or around formal regulatory regimes established at checkpoints, showing instead how smugglers co-produce contingent informal orders that vary significantly across these spatial nodes of power along illegal trade routes.

INTRODUCTION

Checkpoints operated by the Iranian state security apparatus are ubiquitous across the Kurdish region in northwest Iran (Figure 1). These spatial infrastructures are fortified and seemingly permanent, built from large cement blocks that force vehicles to zigzag, slowing down over five speed bumps; they control the pace of passage for all and the price of passage for some. In the middle of the checkpoint, one or two officers on an elevated platform monitor the flow of traffic, waving down suspect vehicles to stop for inspections. The operators mainly check for contraband and occasionally verify the drivers' identification documents to ensure the vehicles are correctly registered. At times, they may also question passengers about their point of departure and destination. Although most road users comply when instructed to stop at checkpoints, some – particularly smugglers – choose to disregard the orders. In anticipation of such evasive manoeuvres, the checkpoints deploy additional conscript soldiers stationed at either end of the roadblock, armed with AK-47 rifles and positioned in small posts equipped with a rope connected to a tyre spike strip that can be rapidly deployed to halt any vehicles attempting to break through.

Figure 1. Map of checkpoints in the Kurdish region of Iran



Source: Author, 2024.

Yet, in late 2023, in the aftermath of the Women, Life, Freedom¹ uprising, while travelling between Baneh and Saqqez (see Figure 1), I crossed several unmanned checkpoints (Figure 2), which allowed unimpeded passage to all kinds of traffic. There, I observed caravans of mud-caked Toyota Land Cruiser pickups, loaded with bulky contraband – likely home appliances, like flat-screen TVs or refrigerators, covered by a khaki tarp but inevitably bulging out of the cargo bed – easily crossing these same checkpoints. Surprised, I asked Barzan² who is an

¹ A protest movement that started in Saqqez in September 2022 and spread across Iran following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in the custody of the Islamic Republic's Morality Police (see Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2023).

² Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

experienced *Qachaqchi*³ (smuggler), ‘How is this allowed?’ He answered, ‘The government wants to make smugglers happy’. Nonetheless, these free-passage concessions made by the state to appease smugglers and the public during periods of political unrest were limited both in duration and geographic scope. Just a short distance away, the checkpoints around Baneh, especially those closer to or on the Iraqi border, had become ‘stricter than ever’ in Barzan’s words, where ‘no one can cross without paying *reshva* (a bribe)’ and since attempting evasions is risky and is met with lethal violence of armed actors, he cautioned ‘escaping isn’t for everyone’.

Figure 2. Government checkpoint on Saqqez-Baneh route



Source: Author, 2023.

To better understand how smugglers move through such shifting landscapes of power, where the rules of passage through checkpoints and risks of interdiction are constantly in flux, I frame my arguments around what I call ‘navigational tactics’ and join the growing body of work that looks into how checkpoints govern the navigation and allow their operators to derive power from their capacity to deny passage (Lombard, 2013; Schouten, 2019; Schouten et al., 2022) and how navigators actively rather than passively engage with these infrastructures to secure their passages (Agbibo, 2022; Rijke, 2021). Here, I draw from what Henrik

³ *Qachaq*, in both Kurdish and Persian, primarily refers to contraband trade (i.e. trade outside the sovereign law) or simply, smuggling. More broadly, *Qachaq* also refers to various forms of illegality, fugitivity and evasion surrounding the circulation of goods and people that may be legitimate in the culture of their perpetrators but punishable by law (see Yıldız, 2024). I use smuggler and *Qachaqçi* interchangeably.

Vigh calls 'social navigation' to explain 'motion within motion' that underlines smugglers' movement within ever-shifting terrains of relations and regulations that undergird checkpoints. Vigh (2009) argues that 'social navigation' is not merely a matter of plotting a course through a fixed geography. Instead, he proposes that we must attend to 'social navigation' as a constant and dynamic interaction between individual agency and the turbulent structures of social life. Vigh (2009: 43) also reminds us that in social navigation, 'action is plotted, and tactics are generated, in the knowledge that the context of enactment is always potentially changing'. Therefore, '*prediction* and *precaution*' (emphasis in original) remain constant features in 'social navigation', yet there still remains a remarkable capacity for individuals to 'plot, to actualise plotted trajectories and to relate one's plots and actions to the constant possibility of change' (Vigh, 2009: 426). However, recognising that smugglers are not just navigating social relations but also concrete spatial infrastructures built to control mobility, I incorporate the concept of 'subversive mobilities' (Cohen et al., 2017; Shell, 2015, 2019) to highlight how passage is accomplished. These marginalised actors, I argue, utilise mobility to contest dominant power structures and secure pathways that would otherwise be unattainable. These 'subversive mobilities' often involve exploiting gaps and inconsistencies in regulatory regimes created by operators' preference to reach fiscal agreement with those seeking passage rather than to uphold legal ideals (Dobler, 2016; Roitman, 2005), as well as eventual limitation in reach and effectiveness of built infrastructures in controlling borderland communities (Schouten and Bachmann, 2022; Scott, 2009). Here, I rely on Michel de Certeau's distinction between 'strategies' and 'tactics' as contrasting modes of operation within power-laden environments, understanding 'strategies' as calculated plans of action associated with institutions and those in positions of authority deployed to control and manage space. In contrast, 'tactics' characterise the often improvisational practices employed by individuals navigating the constraints imposed by these dominant structures. In doing so, I advance the research agenda on the 'politics of passage' (Schouten et al., 2024), shifting its analytical lens to those who navigate, subvert and negotiate the constraints imposed by checkpoints, highlighting the dynamic interplay between regulation, resistance and the production of informal orders at the margins of state power.

Based on ethnographic observations and interviews conducted between 2021 and 2024, this article identifies two primary tactics for navigating checkpoints: '*Persin*' and '*Jimi*.' '*Persin*' involves informal agreements and fiscal transactions that facilitate the flow of illegal trade, creating a routinised yet unofficial regulatory framework between checkpoint operators and traders. These arrangements, however, are inherently unstable at state checkpoints where authority is personalised and reliant on operators' discretion, unlike insurgent checkpoints where tolls and mechanisms for collecting them are impersonal and institutionalised, as I will discuss later. In addition, this article also highlights '*Jimi*' tactics that often receive little to no attention when discussing the agency of those evading formal and informal order at checkpoints. '*Jimi*' refers to tactics that leverage smugglers' capacity to exploit gaps and fragilities in checkpoints from their operators' greed, to physical limitations of checkpoints being spatial nodes

within a vast mountainous terrain, to the use of tools such as modified cars to challenge the mobility orders enforced by checkpoint authorities. By exploring these two tactics, the article provides a detailed and empirically rich account of the dynamics surrounding the navigation of checkpoints in Kurdistan, highlighting distinct informal orders that emerge through such encounters at checkpoints.

In the following sections, I will first provide a brief background about the militarisation of Kurdistan and its consequences for Iranian smugglers. From there, I expand a critique of mainstream scholarship on the state-smugglers' relationship in Iranian Kurdistan. This will work as a bridge to connect my work with the wider scholarship on the politics of checkpoints, smuggling, mobility and informal order-making. Finally, I turn to ethnographic evidence that details tactics of negotiation and evasion and the distinct informal orders they co-produce across state and insurgent checkpoints.

On checkpoints, mobility and order in Kurdistan

Kurdistan has been a centre of conflict since its division among Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria in the early 20th century (Culcasi, 2006; Tejel, 2023). In Iran, the decline of the Qajar dynasty and the subsequent rise of the Pahlavi monarchy marked a nation-building project that aimed to consolidate the central government. During this period, ethnic and tribal groups were dismantled, and central authority was imposed through military force. Subsequent Kurdish revolts during Pahlavi were also suppressed through military campaigns, setting a precedent for future state-Kurdish conflicts (Stansfield and Hassaniyan, 2022).

Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Republic's government maintained the centralised authoritarian rule of Iran, albeit with a different set of material and ideological basis. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), coinciding with the revival of leftist Kurdish armed insurgency during the same period, marked a significant escalation in the militarisation of Kurdish regions in Iran (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010). Post-war, the state has maintained a substantial military presence to deter resurgence of Kurdish insurgency, resulting in Kurdistan being at times governed via military bases (Elling, 2013: 54). However, Kurdish armed groups, such as the Partiya Jiyana Azada Kurdistanê (PJAK, Kurdistan Free Life Party) have continued to engage in guerrilla warfare against Iranian state forces along Iran's borders with Iraq and Turkey, as recently as 2015 (Gunter, 2020). The Kurdish region of Iran has also been a site of popular protest movements that continually challenge the Iranian state (Moradi, 2024).

In these circumstances, Soleimani and Mohammadpour, (2023) and Mohammadpour (2024) contend that Kurdistan has become a permanent zone of exception,⁴ with '*Kolber*'⁵ epitomising 'bare life', existing in a state where their

⁴ Even beyond Iranian borders, Kurdistan is seen as a zone of exception and necropolitical as a whole, or site-specific at the Syria-Turkey border (Küçükkeleş, 2022; Mabon et al., 2024) and in refugee camps in the Kurdish region of Iraq (Küçükkeleş, 2022; Mabon et al., 2024).

⁵ *Kolbers* are cross-border labourers who carry contraband on their backs. In 2023 alone, according to humanitarian organisations, 41 *kolbers* lost their lives and 293 were injured along the Kurdistan borders, with a significant number of these casualties resulting from direct gunfire. Around 100,000 (Westcott and

lives can be terminated without legal consequences. This is evident in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members having absolute impunity in killing in Kurdistan and the power to suspend the law (Moradi et al., 2022; Soleimani and Mohammadpour, 2020a, 2023). This extreme vulnerability results from the Iranian state's policy of 'firing at will', which suspends legal protections and transforms Kurdish territories into impoverished zones by deliberately dismantling traditional local livelihoods such as farming (Soleimani and Mohammadpour, 2020b).

This spectacle of violence, articulated by Soleimani and Mohammadpour (2023), is not merely incidental but central to the state's governance strategy in Kurdistan. The 'fire at will' policy exemplifies how the state leverages extralegal violence to maintain its authority in regions it deems unruly. As they argue, this policy reflects the broader biopolitical strategy of the Islamic Republic, where state-sanctioned violence is used to enforce a hierarchical social order that privileges the Perso-Shi'i identity while systematically excluding and dehumanising others, particularly the Kurdish population. The routine nature of this violence – whether through direct military action or the tacit allowance of bribery – renders the Kurdish smugglers' experience one of perpetual insecurity, where every encounter with a checkpoint is fraught with the potential for arbitrary and lethal outcomes.

Mohammadpour (2024) expands on how the state's control over Kurdish bodies manifests through both overt violence and the regulation of life itself. In these spaces, the state's power is not just about the ability to kill but about the capacity to decide who may live and under what conditions. This echoes the concept of the 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2008), where legal norms are suspended, allowing for the unchecked exercise of sovereign power (Elden, 2006; Hansen and Stepputat, 2006). Agamben's concept of the 'state of exception' illustrates how sovereign power can suspend legal norms, reducing individuals to 'bare life' and subjecting them to violence without legal repercussions (Agamben, 1995; 2005). This theoretical framework manifests in places such as camps (Dunn and Cons, 2014; Minca, 2015), borders (Hagmann and Korf, 2012; Salter, 2008, 2013) and checkpoints.

In this sense, checkpoints are exceptional sites that embed sovereign power into the territory and delineate its authority by regulating movement. Today, Palestine epitomises this 'exception', where Palestinians are rendered 'bare life' by the Israeli occupation (Alijla, 2019; Ball, 2014; Griffiths and Repo, 2018: 18). Passage here is costly in every imaginable way – physical, mental and economic – as operators impose indefinite immobility or uncertain passages. These practices reinforce occupation by segregating people, subjugating minds, segmenting lands and destroying economic livelihoods (e.g. Amir, 2013; Johansson and Vinthagen,

Ismaeli, 2019: 9) to 200,000 (Moradi et al., 2022: 6) *kolbers* operate along the Iran-Iraq Kurdistan border, alongside an unknown number of transporters, merchants and others working in illegal trade.

2015). Mbembe describes this condition as ‘necropolitics’ – the sovereign’s power to ‘dictate who may live and who must die’ (Mbembe, 2003: 11).

Although a growing body of scholarship on occupation checkpoints in Palestine recognises individual agency facing such brutal infrastructures (Hammami, 2015; Rijke, 2021), such recognition does not take centre stage in studies conducted on Kurdistan. While Moradi et al. (2022: 7) note that *kolbers* employ tactics of evasion, nocturnal travel and solidarity to mitigate risks, they consider these ultimately non-transformative and merely survivalist reactions to state violence. In this sense, *kolbers*’ sovereignty is greatly diminished, if not absent, with them recently being deemed simply as ‘non-sovereign bodies’ (Mohammadpour, 2024).

However, I believe the conceptualisation of Kurdistan as an exception and *kolbers* as subjugated victims is overestimating the sovereign’s power as omnipotent, permanent and absolutely violent while severely underestimating the autonomy of non-state actors and the agency of ‘subject’ populations is critiqued by various scholars (Griffiths, 2022; Lemke, 2005; Murphy, 2021). Hansen and Stepputat (2006), in their reworking of sovereignty, call for its abandonment as an ontological force in favour of a ‘de facto sovereignty’ that is emerging, contested, fragile and plural. They argue that sovereignty is diffused and fractured, as not just the state but also other actors, including smugglers, insurgents and quasi-autonomous police forces, compete to assert ‘informal sovereignties’ (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006: 11). Thus, the state is not the sole centre of sovereignty but one among several entities exerting control over bodies like asylum seekers and criminals, a control that is not just contested but also contingent upon practices and material possibilities on the ground (Agnew, 2020; Beurskens and Miggelbrink, 2017). Additionally, as Brambilla (2020: 229) suggests, ‘border escapes’ are sites of struggle where, beyond simplistic views of militarisation and securitisation, people continue to move ‘outside the purview of the sovereign power’.

Building on previous discussions, this article advances the politics of passage perspective by examining struggles over mobility and trade (Schouten et al., 2024). This perspective acknowledges the multiplicity of sovereignties and the active agency of travellers and traders negotiating territorial infrastructures, particularly checkpoints. Schouten (2019) describes ‘roadblock politics’ in Central Africa, where control over key passage points along trade routes translates into financial and political power. These roadblocks, operated by various actors, including rebels, state agents and local militias, highlight the fragmented and contingent nature of sovereignty. Roadblocks in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR) serve as strategic control points where actors derive revenue through taxation and exert authority by regulating trade flows. However, while informal taxation is common among armed groups, it is not necessarily their primary motive. As academic scholarship argues, armed groups’ taxation practice aligns with their ideological goals and bolsters their legitimacy by fostering compliance and obedience to their policies (Bahiss et al., 2022; Bandula-Irwin et al., 2022). Additionally, by collecting information on the

populations through taxation, these groups effectively register individuals as 'legible', similar to state practices (Scott, 2012).

Extending this understanding to Kurdistan, the fluid and fragile control held by Kurdish armed groups⁶ can be seen as forms of non-state sovereignty that claim legitimate authority over movement and trade. Despite the firm military grip of the state within Iran's borders, enforced through numerous checkpoints along the roads and borders, PJAK still sporadically clashes with state forces and maintains influence in certain mountainous areas along the Iran-Iraq border (Gunter, 2020; Stansfield and Hassaniyan, 2022).

On the Iraqi side of the border, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), part of the Kurdish Regional Government, operates checkpoints along routes to the Iranian border's illegal trade hubs. However, they have a 'modest presence' in the area and largely make 'no effort to intervene with smuggling operations' as long as they are paid (Westcott and Ismaeli, 2019: 5). Elsewhere, the PKK operates checkpoints in Turkey near the Iraq and Iran borders, levying taxes on trade and conducting informal customs checks (Augustova and Suber, 2023; Darici, 2024: 176; Okcuoglu, 2019: 176). However, no detailed studies have explored daily interactions between smugglers and PJAK. This article addresses this gap by discussing state and non-state checkpoints along inner-city roads and the Iran-Iraq border.

Economies deemed illegal, illicit or informal are an embedded part of state and capitalist systems globally (Andreas, 2014; Dobler, 2016; Nordstrom, 2000; Roitman, 2005). Moving beyond the simplistic view of the state's anti-smuggling policies, Gallien and Weigand (2021) argue that various types of relationships emerge between the state and smugglers. These interactions range from genuine enforcement, marked by the government's combative stance against smugglers, to full state involvement in smuggling. Each type of relationship influences the predictability and costs associated with the trade and the routes taken. For instance, Gallien and Weigand (2021) describe how smugglers in powerful 4x4 vehicles engage in a 'nightly game of cat and mouse' with customs officers at the Libya border, leading to either successful evasion or hefty bribes if caught. Another form of agreement is the 'flat rate' system, where smugglers pay a fixed fee to authorities. This system allows for a high level of predictability and stability in smuggling operations by ensuring that goods can pass through checkpoints with minimal disruption. These examples illustrate how sovereigns' legal claims are lucrative inventions that manufacture smuggling through criminalisation, shift its routes of mobility and then extract revenues from it (Brachet, 2018; Brachet and Scheele, 2019; Roitman, 2005). Consequently, a contingent yet workable, albeit illegal, order emerges that revolves around interactions between smugglers and authorities. These interactions are fundamentally violent yet often manifest as mutually beneficial tacit agreements rather than effective prohibition (Gallien and

⁶ Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK) – Kurdistan Workers' Party – in Turkey and Iraq; the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) – People's Defense Units – in Syria; and the Partiya Jiyana Azada Kurdistanê (PJAK) – Kurdish Free Life Party or – in Iran.

Weigand, 2021: 29-31; Titeca and Herdt, 2010: 574-576). Furthermore, as (Roitman, 2001: 250) notes in her study of 'new sovereigns' in the Chad Basin, many of the payments made by smugglers at various roadblocks are made under coercion. However, many people are often quite willing to make these payments to formalise and make their illegal trade logistics and revenues less unpredictable.

When smugglers cannot or will not meet the usual terms of passage, they may choose to evade practising their 'subversive mobility' (Cohen et al., 2017; Shell, 2015, 2019) by deploying various tactics to undermine dominant mobility regimes. They might employ concealment methods, take alternative remote routes or engage in high-speed chases to avoid capture. As Cohen et al. note, smugglers 'create and exploit cracks within regulatory frameworks' (Cohen et al., 2017: 112).

The formation of order at checkpoints happens through interactions between various actors that assert different forms of authority over the movement of goods and people. Lombard's (2013) concept of 'non-centralised modes of rule' is particularly useful here, as it offers a nuanced understanding of how authority at these sites is not just an extension of state power but is dynamically constructed through the actions of diverse actors who operate within and beyond formal state structures. Lombard's study of roadblocks in the Central African Republic illustrates how these checkpoints function as critical arenas where state-like authority is not only enacted but also negotiated and contested. The actors who control these roadblocks, ranging from state-affiliated personnel to insurgent factions and local militias, strategically deploy the symbols, language and practices associated with state power to legitimise their presence and actions. However, this invocation of state authority is often intertwined with, and sometimes overshadowed by, personal or factional objectives that diverge from official state agendas (Lombard, 2013: 160). Lombard highlights that the operators of these checkpoints do not merely imitate state practices; instead, they adapt and manipulate them to fit the local context. They often blend coercion with negotiation to maintain control over the checkpoint. This flexibility is crucial in environments where the state's formal power is fragmented or weak, as it allows these actors to preserve their authority and extract resources through a combination of force, persuasion and strategic alliances with other local powers. The resulting form of governance is highly contextual and dependent on ongoing negotiations between the various stakeholders within these contested spaces that are set in motion through smugglers' mobilities.

Method

This ethnographic fieldwork was conducted from January 2022 to March 2024 in the Kurdish border towns of Iran. Over this period, I spent a total of five months living in the area. This was not my first visit, as I am originally from the region, having lived in Piranshahr, Baneh, Saqqez and Sardasht. My prior connections with traders allowed me to live among them during my visits to a village near Baneh, closely observing their everyday lives. I also conducted a 'mobile ethnography' (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 217), travelling with smugglers as a form of 'participation in patterns of movement' that define their daily routines. This

method involved accompanying merchants and transporters working in the illegal trade, both on routes connecting several smuggling hubs punctuated by checkpoints, and on off-roads linking villages that smugglers use to circumvent the checkpoints. Although no contraband was present during these trips and anxieties were lower, I observed interactions between the smugglers and checkpoint operators they knew from their daily encounters.

Gallien (2023: 12-5) notes in his book *State and Smugglers* that researching smuggling involves making visible activities that often seem hidden. In the Kurdish borderlands of Iran, smuggling is often viewed as a legitimate⁷ work within the community. Consequently, I found smugglers more than willing to share their experiences and stories in the open narratives I conducted under the condition of anonymity. Unlike (Okcuoglu, 2019: 173), who ‘had to get permission... at every checkpoint’ while working in the Kurdish region of Turkey, I was never stopped or questioned during my visits. Nevertheless, I was acutely aware of the potential ramifications for myself or my interlocutors if our presence was known to the authorities. Moradi et al. (2022: 6) have noted that ‘the Iranian state’s security agencies have created restrictions over conducting research on minorities, especially if such research is conducted by minority scholars.’ Given the ethical considerations of researching illegality in Iran, I chose not to carry a laptop, notebook or recorder that could pose risks. Instead, I emailed field notes to myself using a dedicated account and device. Upon returning to the UK, I conducted follow-up narrative interviews with interlocutors through encrypted online messaging apps, reflecting on my field observations and addressing new questions that emerged during our conversations.

***PERSINVS JIMI*: NAVIGATION, NEGOTIATION AND EVASION AT CHECKPOINTS**

Omar, a young *Qachaqci* from Baneh, succinctly puts it: ‘It’s either paid crossings (*Persin*) or evasion (*Jimi*)’. This statement encapsulates the primary strategies employed to navigate checkpoints. However, these tactics are not simply binary. Smugglers may pay for passage only to find that the expected agreement is not tenable due to unexpected enforcement changes, corrupt officials demanding additional fees or unforeseen logistical obstacles. Additionally, fees collected from Kurdish smugglers do not always guarantee passage, resulting in contraband cargo being confiscated if caught (Soleimani and Mohammadpour, 2020b: 756). Similarly, those who choose to evade may still end up paying someone to facilitate their passage. These strategies should thus be seen as fluid and interdependent rather than fixed choices, reflecting the unpredictable and negotiated nature of navigating checkpoints in these contested regions (Lombard, 2013).

⁷ Unless they are illicit or *Haram* (forbidden) such as drugs and to a lesser degree alcohol, rather than just being illegal, similar to other contexts in the Middle East and Africa (Keshavarz and Khosravi, 2022: 11).

Persin. paid crossing

Kamil thinks, 'They [government forces] are all in on it ... Do you know how much money is there to be made?!'. Kami's statement is one widely circulating and common knowledge in Iranian Kurdistan and is reflective of checkpoint operators posterising personal profit over law enforcement. Barzan, who I introduced earlier, claimed he 'feeds' at least ten police officers. Considering he trades in volume, it is a nuisance to pay daily; instead, he keeps a 'ledger book' and pays each of them around \$2,000 to \$3,000 USD per month. The expected payment for each of his Toyota 4x4s at checkpoints in 2023 was at least \$30 per vehicle, contributing to substantial daily earnings for checkpoint operators. Elsewhere, a \$30 per horse crossing at Iran-Iraq has also been reported (Westcott and Ismaeli, 2019: 6). However, the situation becomes more complex when traffic peaks. During these times, the sheer number of passage seekers – thousands of people, mules and cars – forces checkpoint operators to lower their fees, sometimes to as little as \$0.50 per *kolber*, down from the typical \$3 to \$5. Existing scholarship on smuggling in Kurdistan also has noted how regular and routine such payments have become (Bozçali, 2020; Darici, 2024; Soleimani and Mohammadpour, 2020b).

Checkpoint routines are often transient and subject to intermittent disruption, particularly when a new commander is assigned. As Kamil explains, such commanders 'want to turn people's bread into brick', meaning they disrupt the income of both smugglers and checkpoint operators. When I inquired further, Kamil noted that these new commanders sometimes 'don't know how things go here' and attempt to 'act tough... for more money'. These partial closures and stricter enforcements might persist for some time, as other checkpoint staff may become more anxious about accepting payments for passages. They might ask for higher payments, realising that during certain work shifts at their checkpoints, or perhaps at another checkpoint altogether, the passage is more stringently controlled. Nevertheless, as Kamil suggested, even the most strict officers often 'get used to money (*fere pule daben*)'. There is a supply-demand dynamic for financial reciprocity at checkpoints that needs fluctuations in enforcement levels as its price-adjustment mechanism.

The primary mode of transaction at checkpoints underscores the reliance on untraceable exchanges in this particular informal system. Although cash is the standard currency, checkpoint personnel, where trust is established, might also accept bank transfers. Barzan tells me checkpoint operators sometimes prefer gold coins to bank transfers or cash as they are more easily concealed from superiors. Additionally, to garner goodwill, some officers and soldiers might request or accept non-monetary gifts, including hospitality and illicit services, as part of an informal quid pro quo arrangement. These transactions mostly happen outside checkpoints and are managed on phones rather than in person.

Unlike Schouten et al. (2024: 12), who show how receipts are issued for informally collected taxes at checkpoints, in Iran, due to a lack of coordination between checkpoint operators along the route and an unenthusiastic attitude towards paper records of what is legally deemed as 'bribe (*reshva*)', services rendered and

quid pro quos are mostly kept off the record. This system relies heavily on verbal agreements and mutual understanding, making the transactions highly dependent on personal trust and informal networks. The system is, therefore, unpredictable and less traceable by design, as fractures and frictions have created economies of mistrust and ad-hoc arrangements, which involve escorts who scout routes ahead for potential police presence, broker agreements with checkpoint operators and cover escaping smugglers if needed (Moradi et al., 2022). There are many instances when, despite prior negotiations, passage is denied or, worse, an ambush is set up at checkpoints where goods and vehicles are confiscated, and smugglers' lives are put in danger. This highlights the precariousness of the smugglers' operations, where even carefully negotiated agreements can be subject to abrupt changes based on the whims of individual soldiers or shifts in the broader enforcement landscape, embedding unpredictability within the navigational tools of Kurdish smugglers (Lombard, 2013). This dynamic may differ from Max Gallien's analysis of Northern Africa, where a set of predetermined informal taxation regimes reduces the likelihood of individualistic relationships between enforcers and smugglers (Gallien, 2020). In Iran, relations between parties at checkpoints run on the premise of prior acquaintance, reputation and similar factors. This creates a complex system built around personal networks and trust, where the predictability of transactions is contingent upon trust and reciprocity established through prior experiences of doing business or on informal networks that lend credibility and a thin aura of trustworthiness to individuals involved. This is, however, very different from what PJAK offers, which is a semblance of order, strategically opposite to the state's use of unpredictability as a mode of checkpoint governance.

'We don't smuggle in PJAK territory', Ali, a kolber, tells me. I am surprised, thinking they might pick up their cargo from a different place not under PJAK control.⁸ Then he elaborates that they do go through PJAK checkpoints,⁹ but 'everything is paid for... nothing slips from their hand'. This explains the level of control and organisation PJAK exerts over its territory, ensuring that all smuggling activities are tightly regulated and monitored. Unlike other areas where smuggling might involve informal and unpredictable arrangements, PJAK's control creates a structured system where transactions are meticulously overseen, and compliance is non-negotiable. This strict oversight highlights the difference in how non-state actors can effectively govern and maintain order within their regions, often surpassing the efficiency of state forces in managing smuggling. Ali's perception that it is no longer smuggling stems from the formalisation and regulation of these activities under PJAK's authority

⁸ The Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) is designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the U.S. and Iran. For more information about PJAK insurgency (see Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010; Gunter, 2020; Stansfield and Hassaniyan, 2022).

⁹ Based on descriptions from interlocutors, it appears that PJAK checkpoints are often just comprised of a handful of militants with a booklet in hand, standing along the trails ascending the mountains from the depot where smugglers pick up their cargo. Checkpoints here lack substantial physical barriers and are instead controlled through the pervasive urgency to comply with PJAK directives and the presence of mobile militants standing watch or patrolling the route.

transforming what would typically be considered illegal into an accepted and systematic process within the sovereign's jurisdiction. It also implicitly involves a sense of recognition that illegality is only a matter of perspective, and PJAK legalising the trade legitimises them in turn.

PJAK operators impose fees on a per-individual basis for *kolber* and per animal for those in caravans. While the rates of passage are predictable, they vary according to the type of goods and the number of mules or persons transporting them. Certain items, such as alcoholic drinks, attract higher formalised taxes. The leadership within smuggling caravans, particularly the '*Sahib-bar*' who is owner of the goods or their appointed escorts or group leaders, are held accountable as individuals legible to PJAK's authority.

Encounters at PJAK checkpoints are generally less fraught with violence due to their relative predictability. However, individuals can choose to avoid becoming smugglers by paying the required taxes to PJAK. Those who underreport cargo, misreport the type of goods or exploit the chaos of busy days to blend into the crowd and evade payment are treated as smugglers. PJAK maintains a reputation for being particularly harsh with such 'smugglers', enforcing strict punishments to ensure compliance and uphold their authority. This creates a distinct register for defining who is considered a smuggler, contrasting with the state's definitions.

Those subjected to violence shape their own narratives of its justification and the legitimacy of sovereign power. For example, after telling me about mistreatment at the hands of IRGC forces, he continued to say:

I hate them [PJAK] more than *Sepah* [IRGC] ... These guys [PJAK] don't understand reason; they don't even understand our [Sorani] Kurdish language. I don't know where they are from even, maybe Syria! ... Once, the price was so high, that it wasn't worth it for me to work that day. At least they didn't beat me. I've seen people held at gunpoint and beaten up with a wooden cane. This is how they want to liberate us, by treating us like animals, if we don't pay.

Mohammadpour (2024: 124) also discusses how a *kolber* described being reduced to an 'animal' that can be shot by state forces. This sentiment reflects the extreme dehumanisation *kolbers* experiences whilst being subjected to violence, whether under the authority of PJAK or state forces that claim their sovereignties over regulating smuggling. What is surprising is the absence of any mention of PJAK in much of the scholarly work on *kolbers*. This omission may highlight a state-centric focus in existing literature, where the violence and control exerted by state actors are more frequently examined, possibly overshadowing the nuanced forms of governance and enforcement practiced by non-state actors like PJAK. This could be due to the type and severity of violence that different checkpoint sovereignties employ, as PJAK stands to damage their self-claimed legitimacy as an indigenous liberatory force fighting for Kurdish freedom. Therefore, the primary method of control exercised by PJAK is economic; militia members at times impose steep, unpredictable, arbitrary fines on smugglers, especially those suspected of evading taxes or misrepresenting their trade's extent. This tactic results in significant economic risk for cargo owners and group leaders who must bear the cost.

Addressing this gap in research could provide a more balanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of border sovereignties and the varied experiences of *kolbers* under different authorities.

Perhaps another advantage of PJAK compared to state forces is that at least they take [money] once, unlike state checkpoints, which take as often as possible at any point along the trade route. Therefore, greed seems to have a limit with PJAK regulated by a relatively formalised and institutionalised procedures, unlike individual profit-seekers who run the state checkpoints, some of whom are conscripted soldiers serving in Kurdistan for only a year or two. As discussed earlier, government checkpoints, unlike PJAK's, offer only tentative and fragile promises of passage rather than certainty. In this situation, Tahir, who is a *Qachaqchi*, tells me, 'It's no good to pay off everyone you see; they learn to become greedier and ask for more and more'.

***Jimî*: avoid, evade and escape**

In the summer of 2022, I found myself in Baneh, sitting behind the wheel of a seemingly normal family saloon car, struggling to start the engine. Initially, as the car seemed unresponsive, I thought it must be a mechanical fault. Then Salar, the owner, introduced me to the car's hidden switches – a common feature in smugglers' cars. These switches, discreetly located in a hole behind the steering wheel among a maze of colourful wires, required a specific sequence to activate. 'Remember for next time, it's the right one up, the left one down, and ...' he instructed me. This sequence acts as an additional layer of security, making the car inoperable to those not in the know. This also allows for the car to run its engine without the key being in its ignition. This is particularly useful considering that officers at checkpoints might attempt to quickly turn the engine off or take the key to stop smugglers from attempting to escape.

The integration of hidden switches represents just one facet of the extensive range of tactics employed by smugglers, whose vehicles are equipped with a variety of custom modifications designed to navigate the unique challenges of their operational landscape. A particularly inventive example of this is the development of smokescreen capabilities. The car mechanics responsible for these modifications have created a formula that combines old engine oil and gasoline mixed with other ingredients. With the activation of a repurposed dashboard button, a mechanism directs this mixture into the exhaust system, quickly producing a thick smokescreen. When chased by police after a successful circumnavigation of checkpoints, or breaking through roadblocks and 'ambushes (*kamin*)' as smugglers call it (Bozçalı, 2023; Moradi et al., 2022), they can release dense clouds of smoke behind them, drastically reducing the visibility of their pursuers. The tactical use of this smoke, particularly at tight bends or in heavy traffic, not only conceals the smugglers from view but also presents a considerable navigational hazard for the pursuing police officers. Faced with the heightened risk of an accident or collision under such conditions, law enforcement officials may be forced to stop the pursuit, granting smugglers a crucial window for escaping.

There are also other measures taken to modify family cars for the transport of high-value, compact cargo. Techniques such as re-arching the rear leaf springs alter the vehicle's profile, concealing the weight of smuggled goods to checkpoint staffers who are experts in their rights. Though they are less suited for larger items, drivers may choose to install hidden compartments inside the vehicle doors, the chassis, bumper or fuel tanks that allow for the transportation of more high-value goods like satellite receivers and whiskey bottles. For bulkier cargo, like a couple of TVs or air conditioners, smugglers employ simpler, yet effective, methods of concealment. Kamil describes how boxes are placed on the back seat, covered with 'a dark fabric (*chader*)', and obscured further by smoked car windows, making it challenging for checkpoint personnel to detect the vehicle's contents immediately.

In a context where the crackdown on smuggling often results in the confiscation of both goods and the vehicles transporting them, modification to the car serves as a metaphorical and literal shield against state intervention at checkpoints, where control over mobility becomes a central issue. Practical mechanisms like hidden switches are only one element within the broader strategies that smugglers have developed to counter checkpoint operators, allowing smugglers to have a chance at reclaiming autonomy over their mobility. I focused on some aspects of car modification as a tool and symbol of challenging the sovereign's authority, whilst Bozçalı (2023) has focused on mules and horses that have become 'partners in crime' of smuggling in the eyes of Turkey's government. Moradi et al. (2022) also have looked at some of the tactics that *kolbers* employ, such as marking minefields that allow them to choose safer routes that circumvent state forces. These tactics, as Shell (2015) notes employ transportation methods that disrupt the efforts of state authorities to control movement and maintain order. Similarly, Cohen et al. (2017) highlight how smugglers exploit the weaknesses of existing mobility regimes by creating alternative routes and methods that evade detection and enforcement. This interplay between the state's attempts to impose stricter controls and the smugglers' inventive tactics creates a dynamic environment where mobility itself becomes a site of resistance and subversion.

CONCLUSION

Through this examination of smugglers' navigation, negotiation and evasion of checkpoints in Iran's Kurdish regions, this article has aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on sovereignty, mobility and informal economies.

Ethnographically, the article has shown how, within the contested political landscape of Iranian Kurdistan, the tactics of negotiation (*Persin*) and evasion (*Jimi*) – though seemingly at odds – are perceived by smugglers as available options that could be deployed at any time given the chances arise. *Persin*, involving informal agreements and payments, provides a relatively stable yet precarious means of securing passage through checkpoints, while *Jimi*, encompassing tactics of avoidance and evasion, offers an alternative when

negotiation fails or becomes too costly. This flexible approach enables smugglers to adapt to varying enforcement intensities and maintain their operations despite the unpredictable nature of checkpoint controls. It is not contradictory, then, to view these tactics as both precarious and empowering, as they provide smugglers with the agency to navigate the complex mobility regimes imposed by state and non-state actors. Compared to negotiation, evasion is often more dangerous and less predictable, yet it can circumvent the financial and bureaucratic burdens of *Persin*. However, smugglers continue to engage in both tactics as part of a broader strategy to manage risk and optimise their trade routes.

This analysis illustrates how different forms of checkpoint navigation have varying degrees of desirability and are weighed differently by smugglers in terms of risk, cost and predictability. Such distinctions – and their meanings and implications for smugglers – are easily concealed in broad-brush notions of sovereignty and informality, which often cluster diverse practices of mobility regulation together. Illuminating these differences requires a comparative ethnographic focus on the specifics of particular checkpoint interactions as perceived and evaluated by smugglers. This demonstrates that there are nuanced yet important qualitative differences between modalities of mobility regulation that matter for smugglers and influence their strategies and operations. Paying attention to these differences is essential for understanding how non-state actors engage with and navigate state-imposed mobility regimes, and how they configure their tactics in a fragmented and contested landscape of control.

The article's ethnographic approach, moreover, offers a shift from an etic to an emic mode of studying sovereignty and informality that seeks to develop an understanding of these concepts through the distinctions employed by smugglers themselves. Existing theorisations of sovereignty and informality are often based on broad temporal and geographical frameworks for analysing global (or regional) regimes of power and control, characterised by structural, generalised distinctions across geographical and social spaces. While the strength of such analyses lies in their scope and breadth, their limitation is the tendency to reproduce an 'ideal type' of state sovereignty against which different forms of non-state control are measured. Centring the analysis on the experiences and perceptions of smugglers, on the other hand, enables us to understand sovereignty and informality as internally differentiated ways of evaluating and navigating different types of control. This kind of analysis departs from abstract, ideal-typical conceptualisations and moves towards a framework that focuses on sovereignty and informality as lived, experiential categories of everyday life, co-produced by state and non-state actors through their continuous interactions and negotiations.

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