The changing borders and borderlands of Syria in a time of conflict

LEÏLA VIGNAL*

In 2011, Syria's revolution broke out within the confines of its national borders. Demonstrators raised the flag of the pre-Ba'athist era—the three-star flag adopted at independence in 1946—while chanting slogans for a united Syria: *wahed, wahed, wahed, as-sha'ab as-souri wahed* ('one, one, one, the Syrian people is one'). Messages of national solidarity were central to the 2011 uprising. Slogans that supported the regions, cities or neighbourhoods subjected to harsh repression were relayed by video throughout the country.[1] Demonstrators brandished reproductions of the clock located in the eponymous square of Homs (Clock Square) in homage to the bravery of Homsiots, whose city was then labelled the 'capital of the revolution'. As demonstrations spread across the country, protesters invented a national space composed of words, chants and images, in response to the regime's strategy of repression based on fragmenting the uprising.[2]

This insistence on framing the uprising in national terms reflected a sense of common destiny, rooted in a shared territory whose defining features—cities, villages or local landmarks and customs—formed a unified picture of how Syrians saw themselves and their country at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Nearly seven decades after the state 'invented' by the post-First World War settlements had achieved independence, it seemed that Syria's national construction, which had taken place within borders originally imposed by external actors, was not only acknowledged as a practical reality but constituted the framework within which Syrians had come to define themselves.

This is further corroborated by the fact that, in 2011, no mention was made of the controversial, decades-long talks over the demarcation of parts of Syria's borders, such as irredentist claims to the Turkish province of Hatay. On the contrary, it seems that the debate over the borders of the country was not only put aside back in 2011, but that it was settled in the course of the national uprising.

* The research for this article has been supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, the EU programme that supports intra-European mobility of researchers.

[1] On the chants of the 2011 uprising, see François Burgat, Jamal Chehayed, Bruno Paoli and Manuel Sartori, 'La puissance politique des slogans de la révolution', in François Burgat and Bruno Paoli, eds, *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013), pp. 185–95.

[2] Leïla Vignal, 'Syria: anatomy of a revolution', *Books and Ideas*, July 2012, http://www.booksandideas.net/Syria-Anatomy-of-a-Revolution. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 31 May 2017.)

International Affairs **93**: 4 (2017) 809–827; DOI: 10.1093/ia/iix113

It is striking that there has been no open questioning of national borders ever since from any corner of Syrian society—not even (at least so far) on the part of the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD: Democratic Union Party), the main Kurdish party in Syria.[3] In 2014, the PYD did indeed assert its project of autonomy (or independence) in designating the territory under its control as Rojava (western Kurdistan); however, in March 2016 it reframed it as 'Northern Syria', a label more compatible with a Syrian national framework.

Thus, contrary to many media commentaries on the conflict that claim the end of the 'Sykes–Picot order' and attribute the current mayhem in the Middle East to the 'artificial' border-drawing of the 1920s, the Syrian uprising and the subsequent conflict have not been about territorial demands. There is neither intent nor appetite among the different national and subnational political and military actors—not to mention the regional or international ones—for a dramatic redefinition of the post-1918 territorial settlements. In 2011, the borders of Syria were de facto pacified and—with the important exception of the border with Israel, and notwithstanding the national aspirations of the PYD—were accepted as the legitimate boundaries of the Syrian state.[4]

This, however, does not contradict the fact that the unfolding of the Syrian uprising has had deeply transformative effects on the borders of the country. Indeed, since 2012 Syria has been increasingly trapped in the spiral of an internal armed conflict into which the Assad regime has thrown all the might of its military power, security apparatus and external alliances. Although Syrian borders have never been at stake in the revolution, their nature, functions and management have evolved significantly since the uprising first broke out. In the conflict, these borders no longer delineate a coherent territory under the control of the state as a unique and somehow cohesive actor. The continuing territorial and political fragmentation of the country into territories controlled by different armed parties—the Assad regime and its allies, the armed groups and coalitions of the opposition, the PYD, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—has given rise to multiple and fluctuating internal borders and hence to the fragmentation of the external border into segments controlled by the different parties to the conflict. In addition, the local 'erasure' of part of the Syrian–Iraqi border by ISIS has tapped into a regional psyche receptive to symbolic echoes of a borderless *umma* (community of believers)[5] or to what remains of the pan-Arab dream. Hence, in 2017, while the Syrian border is still relevant locally, nationally and internationally, from one segment of the border to another, these three levels of relevance are no longer necessarily aligned with one another.

This article aims at reaching a better understanding of the changing nature of borders in warring Syria. The argument is developed as follows. First, the

[3] Founded in 2003, the PYD is the Syrian branch of the Turkish PKK. The PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party), founded in 1978, first fought for Kurdish independence before turning to calls for autonomy and rights for Kurds within Turkey.

[4] This de facto acceptance is all the more significant given that the demarcation of the Syrian–Jordanian border took place quite late (in the 2000s), and the Lebanese–Syrian border has yet to be demarcated.

[5] See Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, 'Borders and sovereignty in Islamist and jihadist thought: past and present', *International Affairs* 93: 4 July 2017, pp. 917–35.

construction of the Syrian borders since independence is discussed. The next four sections then analyse the transformation of those borders, from the outer boundaries of a state that exercises sovereignty over its territory and delivers state functions and public goods to its citizens, to a spatial envelope in which competing internal legitimacies—and perhaps even alternative forms of sovereignty—operate. The sixth section explores the impacts of these changes on the ways in which Syria's neighbours manage their common border with the country, leading to asymmetric politics of the border. The seventh section retraces the emergence of new borderlands in the process of the war, as territories that were once peripheral and marginal within their own states have become part of the nexus of internal military strife, an object of competition for control, and also sites of massive, if asymmetric, demographic transformation and intense transborder (legal and, mostly, illegal) activity and flux. The last section dwells upon the consequences of this process for the Syrian border as an interface with and within the international order.

One obvious difficulty of this analysis is the continuing fluidity of the situation. At the time of writing, the Al-Assad regime and its allies have regained the upper hand from a military point of view after years of territorial losses, and ISIS has been pushed away from the northern border by the Turkish 'Euphrates Shield' operation—an operation that also aims at destabilizing the PYD strongholds. However, even if some of the transformations experienced by the borders at different stages of the conflict turn out to be transitory, they may yet retain some relevance to the understanding of the general dynamics of the conflict, and possibly of its later evolution.

Constructing the Syrian state: from 'hard' to 'soft' borders

This section goes back to the construction of Syria's national borders in the twentieth century. It reflects on the fact that the process of establishing 'hard' demarcations was accompanied by their partial 'softening'.

Notwithstanding the diversity of situations prevailing in the five dyads formed along Syria's borders (with Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey), these areas were, until 2011, relatively stable and calm. Along the Syria–Israel dyad, stability was largely attributable to the military arrangements that followed the occupation (in 1967) and subsequent annexation (in 1981) of the Syrian Golan Heights by Israel—a situation never recognized by Syria,[6] for which the return of the Golan was a linchpin of its foreign as well as internal policy. UN troops (in the form of the UN Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF) managed the confrontation line locally along a buffer zone, which led to a paradoxically peaceful front between two arch-enemies officially at war.

The borders of Syria were first delineated in the decade following the First World War. They were modified only once afterwards, in 1939, when the Hatay province (*liwa iskanderun* in Arabic) was given to Turkey by France, which was then

[6] Nor by the international community: see UN Security Council Resolution 497 of 1981.

acting as the mandatory power in Syria—a situation de facto recognized by Syrian nationalists at independence in 1946. While official maps have continued to represent the lost province as part of Syria up to the present,[7] the maps of the opposition Syrian National Coalition (SNC) now depict Hatay as belonging to Turkey.[8]

Benjamin White describes the ways in which, under the French mandate, the nation's borders established a new jurisdictional order, but were not yet *practised* as a physical barrier: fluidity still characterized cross-border circulation.[9] Emma Lundgren Jörum recalls that when Syria became independent in 1946, it 'started out as a recently created state, poorly integrated territorially and in terms of population, with borders that had no correspondence to pre-war realities'.[10] The 'consolidation of the territorial state' was therefore a priority of the next decades. From the Ba'athist revolution of 1963 onwards, this consolidation was carried out through the construction of a centralized state, based on an administrative, political and security territorial hierarchy. The country was criss-crossed by a tightly knit network of roads, and large projects of regional development were launched, especially with the aim of developing Syria's peripheral regions. Relying on socialist-type prescriptions, these projects sought to accelerate the economic and political insertion of the country's territorial and social margins into the Ba'athist state. The 'Euphrates Project' in the Jezireh, in the north-east of Syria, was emblematic of this approach: it comprised the construction of large dams to facilitate massive irrigation of the land, the development of state farms, population settlement policies and so forth. However, under the rule of Bashar al-Assad in the 2000s, state farms were dismantled and private investment was encouraged.[11]

This shift away from policies of territorial and social redistribution led to greater polarization in favour of the metropolitan cores of the country. The retreat of the state was strongly felt in the peripheral regions, whose agricultural populations faced several episodes of drought in the 2000s. During that period, the Jezireh in particular experienced massive out-migration, as a large proportion of its population settled in the Hauran region in the south or in the suburbs of Syria's main cities. In Syria's peripheries, this withdrawal of the state, however, allowed for a resumption of various transborder, family or tribal interactions,[12] in the form of cross-border trade and business relations, as well as of informal networks of smuggling or criminal activities. The Syrian occupation of Lebanon until 2005, and the internal conflict in Iraq that followed the US-led invasion of

[7] Emma Lundgren Jörum, *Beyond Syria's borders: a history of territorial disputes in the Middle East* (London and New York: Tauris, 2014), pp. 20–22.

[8] Emma Lundgren Jörum, 'Syria's "lost province": the Hatay question returns', *Diwan: Middle East Insights from Carnegie* (Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 Jan. 2014), http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54340.

[9] Benjamin Thomas White, *The emergence of minorities in the Middle East: the politics of community in French mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

[10] Lundgren Jörum, *Beyond Syria's borders*, p. 9.

[11] Myriam Ababsa, *Raqqa: territoires et pratiques d'une ville syrienne* (Beirut: Editions de l'IFPO, 2009), pp. 105–47.

[12] Peter Harling and Alex Simon, 'Erosion and resilience of the Iraqi–Syrian border', EUI working paper, RSCASD 2015/61 (Florence: European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2015).

the country in 2003, amplified these latter activities—e.g. the traffic of weapons across the Lebanese–Syrian border, or the circulation of fighters such as those who joined the counter-insurgency in Iraq via Syria's eastern border in the second half of the 2000s.

These cross-border circulations were also stimulated by top-down processes institutionalized by state-to-state agreements at a time when most countries of the Middle East were implementing policies of economic liberalization and trade insertion which, in turn, favoured the development of new transnational circulations and networks across the region.[13] In 2004, Syria signed a free trade agreement with Turkey (implemented from January 2007) that included a provision offering free visas to citizens of both countries. This unleashed unprecedented cross-border flows of people, trade and tourism, following decades of cold relations between the two states.[14] With the launch in 2005 of the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), which joined together Arab League member states, Syria's position was redefined as a major route and transport hub in an emerging regional trade space.

This process of 'softening' of Syria's borders, which followed their decades-long 'hardening' for the purpose of national construction, was felt across the country's four active dyads—the one with Israel remaining an exception. Syria's relations with its neighbours changed rapidly. Trade and the circulation of people resumed over the Turkish and Iraqi borders; the demarcation of the Syria–Jordan border was agreed upon in 2004; and refugees from Iraq (up to 1.5 million), but also more temporarily from Lebanon during the war of summer 2006, took shelter in Syria. As for Lebanon, the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005 opened the way for a potential normalization of relations between the two countries,[15] after 29 years of occupation that had in practice led to Syria's unilateral softening of the border. As an occupying force, Syria had taken advantage of its presence in Lebanon to perform economic transactions that were otherwise impossible to carry out at home (e.g. private banking until 2004), but also to reinforce trade and economic ties between the two countries. Moreover, transnational family bonds, as well as Lebanon's role as a labour market for Syrian workers,[16] facilitated close transborder relations between the two countries. The border was also extremely porous for all sorts of illegal or informal traffic that were to a large extent controlled or authorized by the Syrian security apparatus. The withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon did not reverse this dynamic: after 2005, the softening of the border continued owing to the incapacity or unwillingness of successive Lebanese governments to establish tight control over it. Spatially, this unbalanced relation translated into the development of a commercial and banking centre—serving mostly Syria—along the road between the Lebanese border

[13] Leïla Vignal, ed., *The transnational Middle East: places, people, borders* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).

[14] A Syria–Turkey Friendship Dam was also projected to be built on the transboundary Orontes river.

[15] The re-establishment of diplomatic relations was symbolized by the opening of embassies in 2008 (in Beirut) and 2009 (in Damascus).

[16] John Chalcraft, *The invisible cage: Syrian migrant workers in Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

point of Masnaa and the conurbation of Jdita–Shtaura in the Bekaa valley.[17] This asymmetric transborder space had no equivalent elsewhere on the Syrian border until the reopening of the Syria–Turkey border. The latter prompted the development of new cross-border dynamics, based on formal and informal economic exchanges and accompanied by new practices of mobility (e.g. business relations, family visits, tourism and student exchanges), dynamics that mostly benefited the cities of Aleppo in Syria and of Gaziantep in Turkey.

Against this background, the two following sections explore the transformations of political and territorial authority in the Syrian conflict.

Competing legitimacies

Different political projects are competing for legitimacy in Syria: the Assad regime, which is still running the central administration; ISIS; and the PYD, which has had its own administration since 2013. To these are to be added the numerous local authorities in charge of administering the areas held by armed opposition groups all around the country. Some of them are supported by the Syrian interim government,[18] which has set up ministries for different purposes, from aid delivery to education and health provision.

In this landscape of political fragmentation, the Syrian state increasingly operates as a residual state, in two senses: it has lost its sovereignty over many areas; and it delivers limited government functions and public services and goods, even in the areas that remain under its control. On the other hand, in the zones held by the different opposition groups, including the Al-Nusra Front (renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in July 2016 in order to differentiate itself from the jihadist group Al-Qaeda to which it was affiliated), experiments in alternative local administration have been conducted in order to ensure the provision of basic public services (water, electricity, sewage, production and distribution of food, health infrastructure, primary education, channelling of aid, etc.) as well as of government-like functions such as protection (police forces), justice (courts), and state governance (passing laws, raising taxes, licensing investments, etc.).

A large proportion of these local structures of governance began as grassroots initiatives aimed at filling the vacuum left by the retreat of the Syrian state,[19] as for example in the eastern part of the city of Aleppo after the summer of 2012.[20] Armed groups became increasingly involved as the military conflict put them at

[17] Karine Bennafla, 'Chtaura-Jdita: l'émergence d'une place bancaire et commerciale dans la Bekaa centrale (Liban)', in Franck Mermier and Michel Péraldi, eds, *Marchés, boutiques, souks et malls: formes sociales et spatiales de l'échange marchand en Méditerranée* (Paris: Découverte, 2011).

[18] The executive body of the Syrian National Coalition, recognized as representing the different Syrian opposition groups.

[19] It is estimated that there were 800 local active councils in 2015: see Agnès Favier, 'Local governance dynamics in opposition-controlled areas in Syria', Luigi Narbone, Agnès Favrier and Virginie Collombier, eds, *Inside wars: local dynamics of conflicts in Syria and Libya* (Florence: European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Middle East Directions, 2016), pp. 6–15.

[20] Back in 2013, Dorronsoro, Baczko and Quesnay saw the beginnings of a state in east Aleppo: see Gilles Dorronsoro, Adam Baczko and Arthur Quesnay, 'Vers un nouvel État Syrien? Les institutions du gouvernorat d'Alep', in Burgat and Paoli, eds, *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie*, pp. 201–209.

the forefront of local politics.[21] For these groups, the provision of governance, resources and services was also a way to gather popular support and to claim legitimacy. Similarly, from spring 2013 onwards, ISIS in Syria not only based its strategy of territorial expansion on the elimination of all opposition groups and the deployment of terror: it also sought to establish its authority through the delivery of proto-state provisions.

However, all these alternative models of governance—with the possible exception of those led by ISIS and the PYD—are characterized by some form of hybridity. There is no consistency in the delivery of state-like functions from one place to another, owing to political divisions and/or lack of horizontal coordination and vertical integration. Locally, too, there is rarely a unique and cohesive authority that oversees the different functions (courts, schools, councils, etc.), which are often provided in a poorly coordinated fashion by different authorities.[22]

Syria at war is therefore a country in which different school curricula are being taught, three currencies are being used (Syrian pound, American dollar, Turkish lira), different war economies are being run and so forth. After six years of conflict, there have been dramatic shifts of governance across the country, including in regime-held areas.[23] Locally, if some areas seem to have retained coherence and stability in the delivery of governance, others have experienced the contrary, especially in places where control has changed hands several times.

Territorial and political fragmentation

Since 2012, the spatial continuity of Syria has been turned into a mosaic of territories that vary according to various factors including the nature of military and political control, the governance arrangements, the state of security, the level of destruction, the degree of access to resources and the situation of internally displaced people, among others. Syria is divided into areas under the control of different political entities: the regime-held areas, mostly in the western region of the country; the ISIS-controlled areas, mostly in the eastern areas, along the Euphrates river, which are not fully contiguous and have shrunk since ISIS's withdrawal from the Turkish border in September 2016; the areas administered by the PYD in the north along the Turkish border, which are not contiguous; and the zones run by various groups and coalitions of the armed opposition, and by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which are spread widely from the south to the north of the country and characteristically have little territorial continuity with one another. The limits between these territories are defined by more or less militarily active front lines that function as 'internal borders'. The capacity of people or goods to cross these internal borders is inhibited not only by the military situation, but also by the overall disruption in mobility resulting from the destruction of urban and

[21] Samer Abboud, 'Conflict, governance and decentralized authority in Syria', in Martin Beck, Dietrich Jung and Peter Seeberg, eds, *The levant in turmoil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 57–77.
[22] Abboud, 'Conflict, governance and decentralized authority in Syria'.
[23] Steven Heydemann, 'Syria and the future of authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy* 24: 4, 2013, pp. 59–73.

transport infrastructure, the risks for personal security attached to the crossing of demarcation lines, or the sieges imposed on certain neighbourhoods.

Nevertheless, there are no clear-cut lines in the Syrian conflict. First, the internal front lines shift, sometimes very rapidly, according to the military situation. Second, the conflict is not confined to the front lines, but massively disturbs life everywhere, in particular in the opposition-held areas subjected to constant bombing by the forces of the regime (as well as by Russian airplanes since September 2015), making any kind of normal life—not to mention the building of efficient alternative administrations—difficult, if not impossible. More tellingly, perhaps, there is an overlapping of the different types of governance described above. For instance, some state provisions still operate across the national territory, such as the payment of wages and pensions to civil servants across the country. Also, enemies or competitors make ad hoc arrangements to ensure the local continuity of basic services, such as the provision of electricity via the national grid,[24] or the inward and outward transport of goods and resources over the multiple demarcation lines that criss-cross the country.

Over the years, territorial and political fragmentation has indeed given rise to increasingly differentiated local trajectories. Yet the objective of the various opposition groups—with the exception of ISIS[25]—was not to create a rump state in the zones they control, but to topple the Assad regime and establish a new power basis for the exercise of sovereignty within the borders of Syria. The same was true of the Assad regime itself, which explains why, given its incapacity to exert control over the entire territory and over the external border from 2012 onwards, it has given military priority to the internal borders that have emerged from the conflict.[26] On 7 June 2016, Assad declared in front of the Syrian parliament that he would 'liberate every inch of our territory', reflecting the strategy of retaking overall control that was launched in 2013 and intensified with the direct involvement of the Russian air force starting in October 2015. Thus, while the current Syrian mosaic may lead to state decomposition in the future, at the time of writing it still reflects a situation of armed conflict rather than the prefiguration of new political entities. In this sense, the 'battle of Damascus' is still to come, if it ever takes place at all. And national borders remain the envelope within which the fight for Syria unfolds.

Controlling the border: a strategic asset in the war

The control of Syria's external border—or the control of segments of it—is of high military, symbolic and also material relevance for those claiming authority and legitimacy over the Syrian territory.

[24] For instance, the employees producing electricity in the dams and plants of Raqqa and Tabqa, located in ISIS-controlled areas, are still paid by the regime. The electricity is then sold by ISIS to the local population, but also to the regime itself. See Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, *Syrie: Anatomie d'une guerre civile* (Paris: CNRS, 2016).

[25] ISIS's proclaimed objective is the establishment of a transnational caliphate, not a change of regime within the borders of Syria.

[26] Harling and Simon, 'Erosion and resilience of the Iraqi–Syrian border', p. 2.

Borders are strategic assets for all parties to the conflict. First, control of the border allows for the regulation of inward and outward cross-border flows whose volume, nature and direction have changed massively throughout the years since the conflict started in 2011. Outward flows are composed mostly of refugees, wounded fighters, looted antiquities and, on the Syria–Turkey border, smuggled oil; inward flows include combatants, weapons, cash, basic civilian commodities, humanitarian aid, military supplies and also oil. Securing access to the border therefore provides the groups in control with important political and material leverage in Syria over the territories they dominate, and also over the areas adjacent to these territories. Second, the sustainability of warfare is highly dependent on the parties' access to crossing points, as the resources they need—armaments, funds, fighters, export markets (including for smuggled goods or oil)—lie *behind* the borderline.

For opposition groups, access to two borders is especially vital: the border with south-eastern Turkey, where outposts of groups and coalitions that control territories in the north of the country openly take shelter; and the border with Jordan, where the rear bases of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) are tolerated by the kingdom. Cutting the enemy's access to the border is therefore of strategic importance. For instance, in the summer of 2016, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)[27] fought the battle of Manbij—a northern city located close to the Turkish border and occupied by ISIS since 2013—with the aim not only of liberating the city itself, but also of disrupting one of ISIS's main routes along which foreign fighters travelled from Turkey to Raqqa or other ISIS territories. In another example, among the Assad regime's biggest operations in the war were the retaking of the city of al-Qosayr in June 2013 and the battle of Qalamoun (the mountainous range that separates Syria from Lebanon) in the winter of 2013–2014, thanks to which the regime gained control of the Lebanese border. The success of these operations resulted in the opposition-held areas of Damascus (in the eastern and western Ghûtta[28]) being cut off from their supply routes originating in Lebanon.

Access to the border is just as vital to the regime as to other parties to the conflict. In this respect, the other aim of the battle of Qalamoun was to secure spatial continuity between regime-held areas and Lebanon, and hence to retain access to political and military resources and allies in that country, in particular Hezbollah. It also guaranteed access to Lebanon's economic centre, Beirut, and to the ports of Beirut and Tripoli, through which some of the goods that were either banned or under strict control through the international regime of trade sanctions applied to Syria could be imported or exported and then traded illegally to and from Syria. Thus, for all the different parties to the conflict, the dynamics of border control are largely informed by the respective positions of the neighbouring states in the conflict, as summed up in table 1 overleaf.

[27] The SDF is a US-backed alliance of the PYD and independent groups whose main declared objective is the destruction of ISIS—although the dominant role of the PYD in the alliance favours its own territorial and political agenda.

[28] The Ghûtta is the name of the (once) agricultural region around Damascus. This term is still used to designate the (now mostly urbanized) periphery of the city. In the conflict, the eastern and western Ghûtta are strongholds of the opposition to the regime.

Table 1: Border dynamics between Syrian and neighbouring entities

Syria	*Neighbouring state (or subnational entity)*	*Dynamics of the border*
Various opposition groups, regime forces, PYD, ISIS	Ally or tolerant	Forms of co-management
		Porosity
		Vital access to external resources
Various opposition groups, regime forces, PYD, ISIS	Enemy	Official closure
		Tight control
		Prioritization of 'internal' borders

When the neighbouring country is an ally, or at least tolerant to the party in control of a segment of the shared border, its borderlands become a place in which rear bases can be safely established, where wounded fighters can be treated, where new recruits can be trained and so on. The strategic importance of controlling border crossings explains in this regard the instability of some segments of the border area, such as the eastern portion of the Syria–Turkey border, where formal (and informal) border checkpoints have been highly disputed, especially among PYD, ISIS and FSA-related forces.[29]

Conversely, the regime's strategic decision to focus on securing Syria's internal borders rather than on regaining (at least at the time of writing) control over its external ones might be explained by the combination of two factors: the steady political, military[30] and territorial erosion of the Syrian state; but also the lack of strategic interest in fighting for borders shared with enemy states.

The border as envelope of a (weakened) state at war: towards multiple 'border regimes'?

The diversity of forms of control over the Syrian border reflects the current territorial fragmentation of the country, which is the outcome of armed confrontation. This section explores how the border can be viewed as a spatial envelope in which competing legitimacies operate.

In the Syrian conflict, the border represents two things at once. On the one hand, it remains the internationally recognized line that defines an inside and an outside,

[29] For details, see Benoît Montabone, 'The wartime emergence of a transnational region between Turkey and Syria (2008–2015)' in Vignal, ed., *The transnational Middle East*.

[30] In a speech delivered in Damascus on 26 July 2015, Assad recognized that the human resources of the army were under strain. This situation explains the regime's increasing dependence on its allies (mainly Iran, Russia and Hezbollah), as well as the intervention of Russia from September 2015 onwards.

implies different juridical orders, and establishes a clear distinction between territory at war (Syria) and territories at peace (neighbouring countries)—even though the conflict sometimes spills over into the borderlands of Syria's neighbours.[31] This dimension of the border, set in international law, is of course essential to the regulation of some cross-border flows, such as the channelling of humanitarian aid into the country. It is also, obviously, crucial for Syrians seeking shelter abroad: crossing the border not only provides physical security, but also dramatically transforms Syrians' personal legal status from citizens to 'guests' (for most of them) in neighbouring countries, or to asylum-seekers and refugees elsewhere.

On the other hand, one of the most striking features of the Syrian border regime is the state's loss of monopoly over border control. As documented in table 2 overleaf, on the Syrian side the border is indeed longitudinally divided into a succession of segments that are controlled variously by the armed forces of the regime, one of the armed opposition groups, the PYD's Kurdish armed militia known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) or ISIS.

New non-state actors not only control swathes of territory, they actively manage sections of the border on which they also erect new crossing points. These practices on the border allow the groups to establish their legitimacy as they exert locally a state-like function (as noted in the second section of this article above). This is interestingly the case on the section of the border along the Tigris river, where the PYD on the Syrian side and the increasingly autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) on the Iraqi side[32] have opened new crossing points. One of these is the crossing point of Simalka, which connects Syria to the Kurdish region of Iraq in an area populated by Kurds. Simalka has functioned as an informal crossing point on the river since the 1990s, with small ferry services connecting the two shores. In 2013 it was turned into a proper border crossing with the construction of a bridge and customs posts on both sides. Thus, this unofficial but functioning crossing point located on an international border has been established by two non-state/subnational actors—even though neither of these groups was granted legal authority to do so—and it is managed on the basis of informal agreements.

As a result of these various combinations and arrangements, on the Syrian side the legal status, regulatory functions and practical management of the border differ from one segment to another. Syria's former border regime—i.e. the organization of the border's regulatory functions, which were previously bound together and governed by national regulations and international agreements—has been replaced by a multiplicity of new border set-ups, leading in practice to the production of multiple border regimes. Depending on who controls the border, new decisions are made as to who and what can get in and out of the country: people of differing 'status' (civilians, activists, jihadist fighters, opposition fighters, soldiers, traders,

[31] See e.g. the graphics summarizing the different attacks that have taken place in Turkey between June 2015 and December 2016, six of which were carried out by ISIS: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/28/world/middleeast/turkey-terror-attacks-bombings.html.

[32] See Johannes Jüde, 'Contesting borders? The formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's de facto state', *International Affairs* 93: 4 July 2017, pp. 847–63.

Table 2: Border management: the control of Syria's crossing points (September 2016)

Neighbouring state/entity	*No. of border crossing points*		*Actor in control in Syria*	*Actor in control in neighbouring state/ entity*
	Official	*Unofficial*		
Iraq/KRG	2	1	PYD	KRG
Iraq	2	0	1 ISIS; 1 FSA	ISIS; Iraqi government
Jordan	2	1	FSA (1 jointly with nationalist Islamists)	Jordanian authorities
Lebanon	5	0	Syrian government	Lebanese authorities
Turkey	15	4	2 Syrian government; 3 FSA and affiliated groups; 6 nationalist Islamists; 2 formerly ISIS;[a] 1 Fateh al-Cham; 5 PYD	Turkish authorities

[a] Since September 2016, Turkey and its Syrian allies.

Sources: For Turkey: UN 'Humanitarian response' website, updated 22 Aug. 2016, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/turkey_syria_border_crossing_status_update_20160822_en.pdf. For Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq/KRG: various media and NGO reports, and UN organizations.

etc.), money and other financial flows, armaments, goods, humanitarian aid, etc. In a context of conflict, the formal and informal modes of regulation that govern the different types of cross-border circulation on each segment of the border are therefore more fragmented, disaggregated and independent from one another than they were in the pre-2011 context. The combinations, overlaps and competitions between these novel and diverse, multifaceted and volatile border regimes also determine the actual dynamics of the border areas.

Asymmetric politics of the border

This section discusses the impacts of the transformations associated with the multiplication of different actors and different 'border regimes' (official and 'alternative') along the Syrian border in relation with neighbouring states' management of their common border with Syria. For the border as the continuous limit of

state sovereignty now exists only on the neighbour's side—an asymmetry that has weakened the border's traditional role.

First, the policies of neighbouring states for the management of their respective borders with Syria are informed by three main sets of considerations: their position in the politics of the conflict; their own security concerns and national security agenda, including concerns about destabilization; and their capacity to exert proper control over their own border, and hence to enforce efficient border policies.

The positions of the neighbouring states towards the different actors in the conflict influence the ways in which the common border is being managed to a large extent. The approach to border management varies according to whether states are supportive of the Assad regime (Iraq), supportive of (some) of the opposition groups (Turkey and also the KRG, although the latter is not a state) or officially neutral (Lebanon, Jordan—even though the state, in Jordan's case, or some segments of it, i.e. Hezbollah in Lebanon, are effectively supporting one or several parties to the conflict).

Jordan has sought to preserve its own security by maintaining official diplomatic ties with Damascus, and has authorized the entry of humanitarian aid into Syria as well as trade flows through its official checkpoints. However, it has also pragmatically organized the management of official and unofficial crossing points held by armed opposition groups that are for the most part affiliated to the FSA in the south of Syria. In so far as Jordan hosts FSA rear bases and military training camps supported by the United States, it tolerates both the cross-border circulation of activists and FSA fighters and the unofficial movement, via the FSA-controlled border segment, of supplies and goods to opposition groups. It is well documented that Turkey offered a safe haven in the north for groups opposed to Assad. But Turkey also gave priority to internal politics when it turned a blind eye to the use of its border crossings by foreign jihadist fighters joining ISIS, starting in 2014. It did so in order to weaken the Syrian Kurdish PYD that was fighting ISIS in Syria, fearing its connections with the Kurdish movement in Turkey. The operation 'Euphrates Shield', launched by Turkey across the border with Syria on 24 August 2016, aimed in this regard both at dislodging ISIS from the Syrian border town of Jarablus—ISIS's last major redoubt on the 500-mile border—and at stopping the expansion of the PYD and the possible junction of the eastern and western Rojava-administered entities along the border.

Second, and unsurprisingly, the protracted conflict has raised increasing concerns regarding a potential spillover into Syria's neighbouring states, and also regarding the destabilizing effects of the presence of large numbers of refugees among their national communities. Restrictions on the entrance and movement of Syrians have been put in place everywhere. These have translated into a general hardening of the border through a wide array of ad hoc arrangements. For instance, Turkey has begun to implement new technologies of border control, including the building of a wall on some segments of the border. The country's official objective was to tackle illegal crossings and smuggling in mountainous areas that

are difficult to control, for example in the western Hatay province. However, on 23 July 2015, the Turkish government scaled up this approach on security grounds, announcing the construction of a modular security border (wall and ditch) along new segments of the border, including in the eastern regions. It did so in part under pressure from its NATO allies, in order to cut ISIS from its networks in Turkey. Concerns were nonetheless raised in Kurdish spheres that the objective of this securitized wall was also to separate the Kurds of Syria and Turkey from each other. Indeed, the securitization of the border was initiated just as the two-year ceasefire between the Turkish state and the PKK collapsed and Turkey re-started its offensive against the Kurdish party.

In Jordan, too, the government has progressively strengthened its control over the inward movement of people since first welcoming Syrian refugees as 'guests'. For instance, it has been conducting an informal selection of the refugees who are allowed into the country—a selection that excludes Syrian Palestinians. In 2014, in the wake of the expansion of ISIS and the mounting security threats from Islamist-affiliated groups present in southern Syria (such as what was then called the Al-Nusra Front), Jordan began to apply tighter security controls at its border. Both official and unofficial border crossings are currently closed—temporarily or permanently—to the circulation of people. For instance, the kingdom closed the unofficial Rukban crossing in June 2016 following an attack on a military post in the buffer zone located close to the border.[33] These restrictions on border crossings have resulted in a backlog of Syrians waiting to enter the kingdom. Thus, on the Syrian side of the Rukban and Hadalat unofficial border points, the desert is now scattered with makeshift camps.[34] The closure of border crossing points, along with tighter and lengthier controls, is also frequent at the Turkish border. Since the winter of 2015–2016, similar scenes of stranded civilians waiting to cross to safety have been seen on the Syrian side of the Turkish border, as the Assad–Russian operation for the retaking of eastern Aleppo and the Homs–Aleppo corridor (launched in autumn 2015) has resulted in the flight and displacement of tens of thousands of people. Israel too reinforced its (already) tight control over its shared border with Syria, fortifying its 90-kilometre fence along the ceasefire line between the occupied Golan Heights and Syria. However, with the exception of sporadic fire into Syria across the buffer zone (targeting Hezbollah officials, for instance), and the entry of Syrians as 'medical patients',[35] this border remained calm, although not pacified.

For Syria's neighbours, concerns over security are mixed with concerns over the capacity to accommodate large populations of refugees.[36] The governments

[33] 'Jordan closes border to Syrian refugees after suicide car bomb kills 6', *New York Times*, 21 June 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/22/world/middleeast/jordan-syria-attack.html.

[34] See e.g. the situation at the Rukban crossing, as shown on the maps published by UNOSAT: http://www.unitar.org/unosat/node/44/2421?utm_source=unosat-unitar&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=maps.

[35] Crystal Plotner, 'If Israel accepted Syrian refugees and IDPs in the Golan Heights', *Forced Migration Review*, 47, Sept. 2014, pp. 32–4.

[36] In February 2017, the numbers of Syrian refugees officially registered by the UNHCR were as follows: 656,000 in Jordan; 2,855,000 in Turkey; 1,011,000 in Lebanon; 233,000 in Iraq (mostly in the KRG); 117,000 in Egypt. However, the total number of Syrians in those countries is most likely higher, as not all Syrians are

of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have often cited the threat of destabilization in criticizing international donors for providing insufficient levels of support. In January 2015, for instance, Lebanon put in place a six-category visa system—tourist, business, student, transit, short stay and medical—to control the entrance of Syrians into the country. Syrians who are already in Lebanon are also subjected to new regulations for the renewal of their residency permits. The difficulty of meeting these new requirements has forced tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people into illegal status.[37]

The third set of conditions that informs how neighbouring states manage their borders with warring Syria is their actual capacity to exert proper control and sovereignty over their borders. In fact, this capacity is a function of their ability to exert control over their national territory in the first place. In this regard, Lebanon is a structurally weak state that controls neither its territory nor its borders. In the current context, Hezbollah—a subnational actor that has played an active role in the Syrian crisis, including through direct military intervention alongside the forces of the Assad regime—has extended its territorial outreach by controlling most of the Syria–Lebanon dyad from its stronghold in the Bekaa valley. In a different vein, the claims of ISIS (which is not a Syrian group) to establish a transnational caliphate over parts of Syria and Iraq may well connect with a Muslim imagination of the borderless *umma*. Yet it reflects first and foremost the agenda of an opportunistic group that seeks to appropriate territory-based resources, and hence to expand wherever state control is at its weakest—in the present case, over the Iraq–Syria borderlands. Even in Turkey, where the state is undoubtedly more developed than in any other of Syria's neighbours, the decades-long neglect of the south-eastern regions in the country's development plans backfired when it came to applying efficient measures of control over the effectively porous border.[38]

Thus, on the neighbours' side, the crisis is conducive to redefinitions of the regulatory functions of the border. This process is more or less advanced depending on each state's capacity to exert sovereignty over its territory, which is overall weak—a weakness rendered all the more visible by the Syrian conflict and the manifold and pressing security issues it poses. It questions the paradoxical effect that the conflict may be having on border consolidation and national construction—albeit in the case of Syria's neighbours with a strong emphasis on security arrangements and restrictions on mobility.[39] However, the conflict also seriously weakens the border politics of Syria's neighbours in the sense that the manner in which borders were negotiated and managed in the past—i.e. through joint management by two internationally recognized and cohesive states—has shifted with the transition to an asymmetric logic, whereby sovereignty and territorial cohesiveness exist only on the side of the neighbouring state.

UNHCR-registered. See http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php.

[37] Human Rights Watch, *'I just wanted to be treated like a person': how Lebanon's residency rules facilitate abuse of Syrian refugees*, 12 Jan. 2016, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lebanon0116web.pdf.

[38] Montabone, 'The wartime emergence of a transnational region'.

[39] Benjamin Thomas White, 'Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920–1939', *Past and Present*, no. 235, May 2017, pp. 141–78.

Mutations of Syria's borderlands

This section traces the emergence of new borderlands in the process of the war. Indeed, prior to the conflict, borderlands represented marginal and less-developed areas within their own states in Syria and in neighbouring states alike. While on the local level this peripheral position helped to sustain family or tribal cross-border ties as well as smuggler networks and other illegal activities (with the exception of the Syria–Israel border), there were no cross-border transnational spaces *per se* in the region. The Syrian conflict has dramatically transformed these borderlands, in most cases intensifying the level of interactions and circulations across the border. They are now part of the nexus of military strife, an object of competition for control, as well as sites of massive demographic transformation and sustained—albeit asymmetric—transborder legal and (mostly) illegal activity.

Locally, areas that were formerly disconnected have turned into increasingly interconnected relational spaces—albeit as the result of a booming economy of war and the forced displacement of millions of Syrians within and outside Syria, and notwithstanding the destructions and ruptures that have accompanied the conflict. At the same time, these new transnational spaces no longer ensure the historical, political, legal or territorial longitudinal continuity of the border. On the contrary, they replicate its segmentation as they connect spaces on either side of a crossing point, in a spatial logic that is perpendicular to the border. As a result, the different types of cross-border flows of goods and people depend heavily not only on the tides of military successes and defeats, but also on the quality of the relationships between the authorities in control either side of the border (see table 2). For instance, owing to disagreements between the PYD and the KRG, the Simalka crossing was closed between March and July 2016, leading to serious disruptions in the local economy and in the circulation of people in north-eastern Syria; it was reopened by the KRG in August 2016, but for trading flows only.

With the emergence of these spaces of transnational circulation, the position of previously marginal borderlands has changed, not only in the general territorial and political economy of Syria, but also in that of its neighbouring states. In Syria, the border is undoubtedly a vital resource for the war. It is also an asset that is being gradually privatized by the different actors in the conflict—including the Assad regime—in the sense that its regulatory functions are increasingly shaped by the needs and politics of the groups in control, rather than by the objective of serving the collective good. In the borderlands of neighbouring countries, the conflict has translated into a massive refugee presence, the circulation of combatants and traders, the relocation of Syrian economic activity (especially in Turkey), and an increasingly visible presence of international humanitarian organizations and NGOs (see the next section of this article). The conflict has led to the disruption of former economic ties and networks, but also, on the local level, to the emergence of new economies linked to the war and to the flows of refugees. Moreover, the partial or total closure of terrestrial trade routes that previously went through Syria has favoured the deployment of new ones, diverted *around*

Syria: terrestrial routes to the east linking Turkey to the Gulf and Iran through KRG and south Iraq; maritime routes that connect south-eastern Turkish ports to Lebanon, Jordan (through Israel), Egypt and the Gulf. Consequently, borderlands have gained greater geographical depth—for example in Turkey, where the borderland alongside Syria can even be said to have expanded all the way to Istanbul, a city in which more than 400,000 Syrians were estimated to be living in 2016.[40]

The salience of borderlands in the general dynamics of the Syrian conflict explains why in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon these former national margins are now more connected to the core, and currently receive more political attention and funding, than ever before in their history. While neighbouring states do not necessarily have the means, capacity or political will to support their weakened borderlands, the politics of these borderlands—or at least their security aspect—have undoubtedly gained a new prominence.

International scrutiny

This new prominence of borderland politics is also connected to international scrutiny of Syria's borders. Indeed, given the nature and intensity of the conflict, the mingling of international political and military concerns in Syrian affairs has been significant from all sides.

Direct foreign military intervention in favour of the Assad regime has been especially strong on the part of states such as Iran and Russia and of non-state actors such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. Similarly, most ISIS fighters in Syria are known to be non-Syrians. External material and political support has also been provided to opposition groups, either by states that recognize the Syrian National Coalition and its affiliated armed groups (mainly the FSA), or by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in the form of private donations to other, more Islamist-inspired armed groups. Since autumn 2014, the US-led international coalition against ISIS has bombed the group's positions in both Syria and Iraq. Finally, in the borderlands of Syria's neighbouring states, the presence of local, regional and international humanitarian actors and projects is as inescapable as that of Syrian refugees. The UN-led humanitarian operation in response to the Syrian conflict is the biggest humanitarian deployment of the contemporary period, even though its levels of funding are insufficient.

This international scrutiny—and direct intervention—has contributed to both the softening and the hardening of Syria's borders. The first aspect of this joint process can be seen, for instance, in the politics of cross-border humanitarian aid. Since 2011, a key debate in the UN-related aid community has revolved around the question of whether cross-border aid could be delivered into Syria or not—i.e. whether aid could enter the country through borders not held by the regime. This issue became particularly acute as the Assad regime did not authorize the transit of aid to regions held by opposition groups through the territories under

[40] Montabone, 'The wartime emergence of a transnational region'.

its control, and in particular through its ports. Entering Syria via a border point not controlled by the regime (along the Turkish or the Jordanian border) was problematic in that it contradicted the formal sovereignty and legitimacy still held by the Damascus regime over its territory by virtue of international law—as testified by the fact that the Assad regime still holds the Syrian seat at the UN General Assembly. In July 2014, however, the UN finally authorized the delivery of cross-border aid, leading to the de facto recognition of Syria's alternative border regimes and of the role played by new, subnational non-state actors in the management of the Syrian border.

As for the second aspect—the hardening of the borders—neighbouring states' increasing inclination to seal their borders reflects the incapacity of the international community to come up with long-term solutions to the problem of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. The securing of these states' borders also clearly speaks of concerns regarding a potential extension of the conflict—concerns that are shared by the international community, which has been subjected to terrorist attacks on the part of ISIS since 2015, as much as by NATO (of which Turkey is a member).

Conclusion: the future of Syria's borders

The conflict in Syria is bringing about a permanent *reshaping* of the politics of the border, and of cross-border ties and interactions, in Syria itself and also among its neighbours. It is the result of a complex process of *rebordering*—i.e. the mutation of border features—that arises from the various politics, representations and practices of the border involved in the conflict. Indeed, as analysed in this article, the mechanisms of border transformation are linked to the emergence of internal borders in Syria, to the implementation of new border politics in neighbouring countries, and to the 'empowerment'[41] of borderlands as sanctuaries for combatants, centres of war economy activities and sites of refuge. Many actors from inside and outside Syria have played a role in this process, and at the local level as much as at the national, regional and international levels; they include groups in control of the different border segments; the Syrian state; neighbouring states; refugees, traders and smugglers; international humanitarian actors; and international forces intervening in the conflict.

Paradoxical features of the border emerge with this rebordering. The affirmation of more connected borderlands accompanies the politics of hardening of the line. The clear demarcation the border imposes within the international legal order goes hand in hand with the fuzziness of its practices. The resilience of the border as the envelope of legitimacy (for all actors except ISIS) is not contradicted by the multiple regimes and forms of control that characterize it and that reflect the territorial and political fragmentation of the country.

However, this article also indicates that the conflict operates as a process that renders the multiple functions of the border more disaggregated. It highlights

[41] Abboud, 'Conflict, governance and decentralized authority in Syria'.

the disjunctions between 'the territorial borders that regulate the movement of people and goods and define areas of common jurisdiction' and 'the functional borders which define membership in legal framework'.[42] It shows that the multi-dimensional functions of borders are not enshrined in 'the line' but spread over territories, legal frameworks and actual practices.

Finally, the Syrian conflict shows that national external borders can survive extreme cases of fragmentation of the central authority, of competition over legitimacy, and of radical transformation of the nation—such as the massive displacement of more than half of the Syrian population inside and outside the country. It even shows that conflicts may contribute to the reaffirmation, and even the reification, of the border. All these elements question the appropriateness of the Westphalian model of the state—centred on control over territory and borders (internal and external) for authority, legitimacy and sovereignty—in seeking to capture these phenomena.

[42] Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Borderlands: the Middle East and North Africa as the EU's southern buffer zone', in Dimitar Bechev and Kalypso Nicolaidis, eds, *Mediterranean frontiers: borders, conflicts and memory in a transnational world* (London: Tauris, 2010), pp. 149–67 at p. 153.