

# Approaching borders and frontiers in North Africa

JEAN-PIERRE CASSARINO \*

In recent years, four key sets of events have brought the issue of borders back into the public and policy debates in the Maghreb countries. These are: the protracted conflicts in Syria and Libya, including their regional and global consequences; the humanitarian tragedies in the Mediterranean and their intense media coverage in Europe; the temporary reintroduction of border checks within the Schengen area as a response to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’; and, last but not least, reiterated calls for reinforced cooperation on border surveillance and patrolling with countries of origin and of transit in the Maghreb and in Africa (e.g. the 2014 Khartoum Process and the 2015 Valletta summit). Never before have such calls for enhanced cooperation on border controls acquired such strong policy relevance in international forums. The recent UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants, held in New York in September 2016, was no exception. While recognizing the humanitarian needs of vulnerable individuals crossing borders as well as their fundamental rights to leave any country, the summit put strong emphasis on states’ sovereign preserve to ‘take measures to prevent irregular border crossings’,<sup>1</sup> to determine whom to admit and whom to deport. For scholars working on the relationships between states and international organizations, it comes as no surprise to see that the centrality of the state and its law enforcement agencies has remained unimpaired by the proliferation of international and regional consultative processes (RCPs) on migration and border management. Admittedly, neither RCPs nor high-level meetings have been designed to question the principal–agent model in which such relationships may be deeply embedded.<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically, however, over the past three decades or so, the recurrence of multilateral initiatives, at regional and global levels, has been conducive to the

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/summit>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 5 June 2017.)

<sup>2</sup> Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the world: international organizations in global politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

reinforced centrality of states in the control of borders and the movement of people, be they foreigners or citizens. To date, despite frequent calls for policy coherence and solidarity, and despite the widely recognized need for ‘global solutions’ to ‘global concerns’, cooperation remains largely characterized by a certain ‘degree of opposition to formal multilateralism’,<sup>3</sup> and by predominantly bilateral patterns of cooperation on border and migration management. These policy developments pose an important puzzle for our understanding of borders and frontiers, including the ways they are politically addressed. Policy-makers’ resistance to formal multilateralism may be viewed as a response to pressures undermining ‘the unifying, symbolic, dividing and exclusionary role of a border as a founding principle of a sovereign state’.<sup>4</sup> That resistance may also be symptomatic of the growing awareness that border management and controls, once highly politicized and publicized, may contribute to reconfiguring state–citizen relationships at a time when the disengagement of the state from the economy is perceptibly gaining momentum.

With reference to North African countries, this article sets out to analyse the implications of these policy developments for patterns of interdependence among states, for territoriality, sovereignty and mobility, and last but not least, for domestic politics. It is the argument of this article that the abovementioned paradox and its implications can be addressed by venturing beyond disciplinary dogmatism to consider an array of drivers (political, historical, social, economic and geostrategic) that both propel bordering practices<sup>5</sup> in North Africa and determine their effects on the ground.

In adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to borders and frontiers, this article does not seek to compare scholarly approaches. Rather, the point is to show that the comprehensive analysis of multifaceted bordering processes in North Africa requires a conversation across disciplines based on various levels of observation, each having its own heuristic relevance. Only by doing this can the analysis of bordering practices be taken beyond the customary references to securitization and demarcation.

## Borders and frontiers: across disciplines

Over recent decades, border studies have been legion. Scholarly approaches to borders, frontiers, borderlands, boundaries—to mention just a few notions—have evolved alongside one another since the late 1980s. Indeed, numerous academic works have already addressed the multilevel impacts of the institutionalization of borders. These scholarly approaches have in turn generated various disciplinary lexicons and analytical frameworks which stressed the *complex* nature of borders and, hence, the need to find *complex* notions aimed at reflecting their various

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Betts, ‘Conclusion’, in Alexander Betts, ed., *Global migration governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 308.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, ‘Theorizing borders: an interdisciplinary perspective’, *Geopolitics* 10: 4, 2005, p. 639.

<sup>5</sup> David Newman, ‘On borders and power: a theoretical framework’, *Journal of Borderland Studies* 18: 1, 2003, pp. 13–25. See also Anssi Paasi, ‘Borders and border-crossings’, in Nuala C. Johnson, Richard H. Schein and Jamie Winders, eds, *The Wiley Blackwell companion to cultural geography* (Chichester: Wiley, 2013), pp. 478–93; Brunet-Jailly, ‘Theorizing borders’.

implications and consequences for cross-border mobility. It is the argument of this study that the understanding of such implications demands a *combination* of analytical methods. In other words, various disciplinary approaches need to be taken into consideration in order to capture the varying significance of the border in specific regional and cross-regional settings including North Africa.

The need to intensify cooperation with migrants' countries of origin and transit, through capacity-building, training and technical assistance, has gained momentum in talks about migration. Moreover, there is now a growing awareness that the effective control of the EU's external borders, particularly in the Mediterranean area, should also be accompanied by measures aimed at helping Mediterranean third countries in dealing with their southern borders. Countries in the direct neighbourhood of the EU, particularly those of North Africa, have been called to strengthen their border control capacity with a view to limiting migration flows through their territories en route to the EU.<sup>6</sup>

The mobilization and involvement of North African third countries in the fight against irregular migration, together with the EU's call for the reinforced control of their southern borders, have had several implications, some of which are already perceptible: first, for the relations between the EU and North African third countries, owing to the emergence of new patterns of interdependence;<sup>7</sup> second, for the relations between some North African third countries and their immediate southern neighbours; third, for the demarcation of their national borders and the issue of territorial integrity in regional settings; and fourth, for the international legitimacy of their respective national leaderships.

A full understanding of these implications and their corollaries draws on various analytical frameworks pertaining to, among other fields, geography, history, anthropology, comparative politics and International Relations (IR).

### *Geography and borders*

Unsurprisingly, given their interest in the spatial definitions of national territories, geographers have been perhaps the most prolific writers on border studies. Their studies have traditionally assimilated borders to the limits of a territory as a kind of physical demarcation allowing territorial divisions to be secured and marked on a map. Malcolm Anderson identified various types of bordering processes which took place in Africa and Asia, having a certain bearing on the administrative organization and control of the areas delimited by the former colonial powers.<sup>8</sup> Whether the bordering process of a given area was determined by topographic characteristics

<sup>6</sup> In its communication entitled 'EU strategy for Africa: towards a Euro-African pact to accelerate Africa's development', the European Commission proposed to 'support [through the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument] cooperation between the countries of North Africa and their Sub-Saharan neighbours on issues of common concern, including migration': COM (2005) 489 final, 12 Oct. 2005, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> See Emanuela Paoletti, *The migration of power and North-South inequalities: the case of Italy and Libya* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Nora El Qadim, *Le gouvernement asymétrique des migrations: Maroc/Union Européenne* (Paris: Dalloz, 2015); Sarah Wolf, *The Mediterranean dimension of the European Union's internal security* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: territory and state formation in the modern world* (Malden, CT: Polity, 1996).

(such as rivers and relief features) or undertaken by drawing geometric lines on a map, it paid little attention to the pre-colonial social and political organization. For example, boundary-making in Africa often cut through pre-colonial tribal territories, owing to a misperception of the topographic border shaped by a European colonial prejudice, as Anderson explains:

In many places [in the African continent], ill-defined African watersheds serve as centres of population rather than, as in Europe, clearly dividing populations. African rivers have attracted settlements, with the same ethnic group settling on both banks, particularly in semi-arid areas where flood-plains are suitable for agricultural use.<sup>9</sup>

Michel Foucher somewhat qualifies Anderson's assertion, arguing that, in some (limited) areas of the African continent, the colonial powers took into consideration the pre-colonial 'ethnic configuration' that applied to specific territorial entities. In his opinion, the colonial powers had to take into account the existence of 'proto-frontiers' and the pre-colonial local realities that characterized such entities. This concern stemmed from the need to 'rationalise the administrative and police control operations [of the colonial power]',<sup>10</sup> with a view to securing a modicum of stability and facilitating colonial management of the territories.

It comes as no surprise that, following their independence, the territorial limits of most former colonies were turned into state boundaries, hence changing the very function of the border. To grasp the implications of the changing function of the border and of its practical impact on cross-border mobility, political geographers started to design analytical notions which could shed light on border dynamics and relative territorial stability in newly independent countries.

Over the past two decades, the reference to geopolitics has been critical to exploration of the 'multi-dimensional function of boundaries',<sup>11</sup> and of the ways in which they are managed by national governments and understood by local populations, particularly by *borderlanders* (or border people). The perceived need to address the multidimensional function of boundaries was also part of an attempt to come to terms with the persistent border and demarcation disputes, and secessionist crises, that have marked various regions of the world, including the African and Asian continents, from the 1960s onwards.

Clearly, the usage of sophisticated notions pertaining to borders illustrated geographers' desire to catch up with the significant changes that the function and practice of borders have undergone. Several of these notions, beyond the basic demarcating function of the border, need to be mentioned as they illustrate additional and perhaps less well-explored functions relating to borders. One such notion is that of the 'boundary' which demarcates the territorial sovereignty of the state and allows its internal and external security to be assured. The function of the boundary evolves with relationships with neighbouring states. It is the expression of an area which can be spatially limited by topography or by geometric lines drawn on a map. Boundaries may be open or closed to the movement of capital,

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *Frontiers*, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontières: un tour du monde géopolitique* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Newman, 'On borders and power', p. 139.

goods and people. They may also act as barriers, when entities on both sides of the boundary view it as an ‘interface of military confrontation’ separating two areas (e.g. the northern Algerian–Moroccan border).<sup>12</sup> Anthropologists refer to boundaries in an attempt to highlight the symbolic dimension of the notion, as applied to individual and group identities. This dimension is further explored below.

Frontiers are not necessarily delimited from a geographical point of view, which often presents the frontier as an area of interaction across the border. However, political scientists often refer to the frontier as a synonym of the border or the boundary.

The borderland pertains to a wider area than the frontier, viewed as a transition zone within which the boundary lies. Geographers, historians, political scientists and anthropologists alike refer to the local populations living in the borderland as ‘borderlanders’.

Close to the boundary lies the border region whose characteristics, economic, social and cultural, are shaped by the dynamics of the boundary. Anthropologists refer to the ‘hybridity’ of local populations living in border regions.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the barrier differs from the boundary in that it demarcates an area which is unilaterally set by a state, for national security or military reasons. It may be embodied in a fence.

The terminological sophistication of the border lexicon has been a prerequisite to going beyond the mere descriptive observation of the border, viewed as a basic demarcating line between two given areas. The point is to better delve into the complex implications of the border while questioning its taken-for-granted demarcating functionality by focusing on, among other things, patterns of border crossings,<sup>14</sup> the relationships between territory, boundaries and identities, the shifting perceptions and significance of the boundary, and finally the institutionalization of the border, viewed or justified as a historical and political construct.

It is perhaps through the adoption of a sophisticated lexicon that the investigative expansion of border research could take place. As shown below, this may have in turn allowed scholars from various disciplines to further refine the border terminology while broadening its analytical spectrum.

## *History and borders*

Etienne Balibar points out in his insightful analysis that ‘borders have a history; the very notion of border has a history. And it is not the same everywhere and at every level.’<sup>15</sup> Historians view frontiers as changing historical phenomena subject to endogenous and exogenous forces. States’ responsiveness to such forces turns out to reflect the multifarious relationships between territory, state legitimacy and nation-building.

<sup>12</sup> Newman, ‘On borders and power’, p. 143.

<sup>13</sup> Donna K. Flynn, ‘“We are the border”: identity, exchange, and the state along the Bénin–Nigeria border’, *American Ethnologist* 24: 2, 1997, pp. 311–30.

<sup>14</sup> Paasi, ‘Borders and border-crossings’.

<sup>15</sup> Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the other scene* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 77.

Historians look at the ways in which borders have been administered and legitimized by the central power in order to secure territorial integrity. The issue lies not so much in understanding whether the dominant discourse related to border legitimacy is accurate or historically founded; rather, the point is to highlight the principles and referents that have been used by states in order to configure the changing function of their borders through time and space. Such principles, having a historical background, may explain the extent to which borders are closed or open, or even the existence of both types of borders at the same time.

Other principles have also been used to account for the clear territorial demarcation of the former colonies, rather than for the closed or open character of their borders. To give an example, Algeria's territorial integrity is based on the principle of the intangibility of colonial frontiers, according to which, for the sake of regional stability, there cannot be territorial claims. The international law principle of *uti possidetis ita possideatis* ('that which you possess, you shall continue to possess') provides that newly independent states in Africa should comply with their frontiers inherited from the colonial past.<sup>16</sup> This principle was stipulated in a 1964 resolution of the former Organization of African Unity and was aimed—not always successfully—at settling border disputes among neighbouring North African states.

However, another vision, somewhat contrasting with the preceding one, was also considered by some states with a view to claiming historical rights over territorial areas which they had lost as a result of colonialism.<sup>17</sup> Historians could not limit their discipline to the analysis of the principles that shape territorial claims. Faced with the persistence of unsettled border disputes and with the resurgence of borderlands, some historians started

to eschew the traditional view of borders as seen from the centre in favour of a new view of borders from the perspectives of a state's periphery ... [In other words, they tried] to discover which social forces originate in borderlands along with the effects they have had both locally and beyond the borderlands.<sup>18</sup>

The new historical focus on borderlands was aimed not only at highlighting the cultural and exchange dynamics inherent in borderlands, but also at showing that, despite the action of hegemonic state-centred structures, borderlands could reflect specific patterns of interaction between people living on either side of the boundary and sharing a distinctive identity and culture, explaining, at least to some extent, how borderlanders negotiate or deal with the regulatory and controlling function of the border.

In this connection, various levels of borderlands interaction may be distinguished, as has been done, for example, by Oscar Martinez.<sup>19</sup> When interaction is

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Frontiers*, p. 82. See also Michael Willis, *Politics and power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from independence to the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 272.

<sup>17</sup> Actually, respect of *uti possidetis ita possideatis* invariably implies a form of status quo regarding the so-called rightful possession of a territory at the time of colonialism: Foucher, *Fronts et frontières*, p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: frontiers of identity, nation and state* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Oscar Martinez, *Border people: life and society in the US–Mexico borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994).

non-existent, or actually prevented, owing to severe tensions between the adjacent states and/or border populations, the borderland is 'alienated'. In circumstances of persistent border crisis and conflict, borderlands can hardly emerge as places of interaction, as any kind of exchange or interaction beyond the boundary would be viewed suspiciously by the authorities on either side.<sup>20</sup>

Borderlands are 'coexistent' when modest or regulated interaction takes place, in conditions where tensions have been reduced to a manageable level. This type of borderland interaction may take place following the resolution of a dispute or in a status quo situation (e.g. on the Morocco–Algeria border). They may also be 'interdependent', when a 'symbiotic relationship' forms between border regions.<sup>21</sup> In these cases, a distinctive cultural, economic and social system emerges in the borderland. Border cities benefit from national differentials, be they economic, legal or monetary.<sup>22</sup> Such differentials also foster practices which may be formally illegal but remain ordinary and commonplace for local populations. Such practices, indeed, constitute survival strategies for borderlanders. For example, the underground economy at the Libya–Tunisia border, transiting through the cities of Ben Guerdane and Ras Jdeir, is certainly illustrative of the interdependent model identified by Martinez. Cross-border smuggling in the south of Tunisia has been a historically customary practice.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, its tolerance by the Tunisian central administration has allowed social discontent to be managed, rather like a safety valve, especially in a depressed area where local powers are strong and where the effectiveness of the central administration in redistributing national wealth has been notoriously limited.

Despite—or because of—the existence of the boundary, exchanges between border populations contribute over time to the coherence of a specific social, cultural, linguistic and economic reality,<sup>24</sup> which may contrast with the predominant ethno-national conception of nation-building.<sup>25</sup> Finally, borderlands may be 'integrated', when no barriers and no impediments at all to the flows of goods and people exist. This may come about where the state authorities are unable or too weak to control such flows effectively, leading to the uncontrolled porosity of borders and to the emergence of local power structures,<sup>26</sup> and in North Africa 'trans-border territories',<sup>27</sup> which might under certain circumstances undermine state-building efforts.

<sup>20</sup> Ronen Shamir, 'Without borders? Notes on globalization as a mobility regime', *Sociological Theory* 23: 2, 2005, pp. 197–217.

<sup>21</sup> Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli, *Tunisia as a revolutionized space of migration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Hamza Meddeb, *Courir ou mourir: course à el Khobza et domination au quotidien dans la Tunisie de Ben Ali* (Paris: Institut d'Études Politiques, 2012), pp. 45–6.

<sup>24</sup> Ali Bensaad, 'Les migrations transsahariennes, une mondialisation par la marge', *Maghreb–Machrek*, no. 185, 2005, pp. 13–36.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Stokes, 'Imagining "the South": hybridity, heterotopias and arabesk on the Turkish–Syrian border', in Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson, eds, *Border identities: nations and state at international frontiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 263–88.

<sup>26</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'Les frontières mouvantes du continent africain', *Le Monde diplomatique*, Nov. 1999, pp. 22–3.

<sup>27</sup> Karine Bennafla, 'Les frontières africaines: nouvelles significations, nouveaux enjeux', *Bulletin de l'Association de Géographes Français* 79: 2, 2002, p. 140.

Martinez's typology of borderlands allows the historical approach to borders and borderlands to be better grasped, for it emphasizes that borders have a historical background which may eventually have impacts on the social, economic and political realities of borderlands and determine various levels of interaction between people at and around the border.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, by combining a bottom-up and a top-down approach, it also shows that the forms of interactions that may be observable in borderlands, on the one hand, and state-to-state relations, on the other, may differ from one another.

Finally, it demonstrates that a thorough study of the history of borders, in a given area or region, cannot limit itself to the diachronic processes of territorial demarcation and legitimation. Rather, it should also, more often than not, take into account the ways in which borderlanders negotiate the border and live with it. As stressed by anthropologists, borders are not only a matter of territorial demarcation dictated by state-to-state relations: they are also a matter of territorial identity and representation, with a socio-historical background that needs to be investigated in order to understand border life. Understanding how people have lived, and continue to live, in the bordered territory in practice is 'fundamental to an analysis of borders and borderlands because agency and structure interact in the formation of social action and history'.<sup>29</sup>

### *Anthropology and borders (or boundaries)*

The anthropological approach to borders, viewed as physical divisions between two areas, constitutes just one aspect of this discipline's analytical contribution to the field. Anthropologists have also been concerned with the metaphorical or symbolic terminology of the border, while also referring more often than not to social and cultural borders or boundaries. Both terms have been used interchangeably in the literature with a view to analysing how individuals 'strategically manipulate their cultural identity by emphasising or underplaying it according to context ... Cultural emblems and differences are thus significant only in so far as they are socially effective, as an organisational device for articulating social relations'.<sup>30</sup>

The boundary, then, is used as a demarcating identifier between the in-group and the out-group, and also between the individual's subjectivized self-ascription and the group. Consequently, the boundary has a significance which results from the interaction between two social systems or between an individual and a group. Importantly, boundaries change through time and as a result of context.

This metaphorical usage of the boundary is of paramount importance because it shows that 'all borders, including state borders, carry a heavy weight of symbolism',<sup>31</sup> which has impacts on the ways in which the individual lives at

<sup>28</sup> Martinez's typology of borderlands is mentioned in Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Brunet-Jailly, 'Theorizing borders', p. 643.

<sup>30</sup> Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Liam O'Dowd, 'The changing significance of European borders', in James Anderson, Liam O'Dowd and Thomas M. Wilson, eds, *New borders for a changing Europe: cross-border cooperation and governance* (London: Cass, 2003), p. 27.

the border, as well as on entry to and exit from the bordered area, whether it is metaphorically or materially defined. The most important analytical breakthrough may lie in understanding the subjective meaning that is attached to the boundary and whether it coincides with the material border that is designated by the state.

Moreover, the subjective dimension inherent in boundaries is conducive to a sense of difference and distinctiveness which may in turn reinforce the subjective feeling of belonging to an entity: Weber's *Zusammengehörigkeit*.<sup>32</sup> From an anthropological point of view, what do the metaphorical/symbolic and material dimensions of boundaries respectively imply? Anthropologists acknowledge the complexity of processes of 'identity construction and renegotiation',<sup>33</sup> which take place not only between an individual and a group but also between groups. Focusing on the symbolic dimension of boundaries enables a better grasp of group identifiers, processes of self-ascription and ascription,<sup>34</sup> social categorization and self–other perceptions.

As far as material borders are concerned, anthropologists teach us that they can no longer be viewed as delimiting a territory and a citizenry, as a functionalist state-centred approach would have it. They also convey symbols, referents and meanings that make sense to the wider society, including borderlanders. Of course, such signs and symbols may be meaningful to some and imperceptible to, if not ignored by, others. Such signs and symbols may also change through time, depending on how the border is established and used.

It is precisely the study of such contrasts that contributes to our understanding of the reality of the borderland, viewed as a system of closure and openness, as an area whose inherent border can sometimes hardly fulfil its demarcating function, owing to the existence of cross-border relations and interactions, which once established and institutionalized can hardly be interrupted from the top, even if border controls may produce a 'temporary feeling of security'.<sup>35</sup>

Again, as mentioned above, the anthropological approach to boundaries and borders, be they symbolic or material, is a timely one in view of the recent developments regarding the reinforcement of border controls in North Africa. These shifts may convey a redefinition of collective and individual identities which may in turn lead to the emergence of mutual adaptation processes as well as to changes in the perception of the 'other'. For example, Ali Bensaad observes that through the dynamics of trans-Saharan migratory flows in the southern part of Algeria, local populations are facing the emergence of a new 'otherness'.<sup>36</sup> Mixed marriages between Algerian women in the southern city of Tamanrasset and sub-Saharan immigrants are part and parcel of this change. However, Bensaad stresses that this phenomenon coexists with strong expressions of xenophobia from the local population towards sub-Saharan immigrants. Social discrimination

<sup>32</sup> Max Weber, *Sociological writings*, ed. Wolf Heydebrand (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ruba Salih, 'Shifting boundaries of self and other: Moroccan migrant women in Italy', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 7: 3, 2000, p. 330.

<sup>34</sup> Bonnie Urcioli, 'Language and borders', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, 1995, pp. 525–46.

<sup>35</sup> I draw here on Kees Groenendijk, 'Reinstatement of controls at the internal borders of Europe: why and against whom?', *European Law Journal* 10: 2, 2004, p. 170.

<sup>36</sup> Bensaad, 'Les migrations transsahariennes'.

is rooted not only in the historical past of this border region, which shapes the perception of the local population towards the 'other', but also in the gradual formation of a 'bottom-up cosmopolitanism', characterized by the encounter of various languages, religions, values and cultures in the borderland, with various effects. Indeed, this evolution gradually questions the top-down homogeneous socio-cultural identity of Algerian society itself, and disturbs the 'sense of bound- edness' of the host society.<sup>37</sup> Finally, it shows that, despite—or because of—the permeability of the border, the host society needs to respond to the visibility of the 'other' by constructing and reinventing new boundaries of difference and distinctiveness, rendering manageable the porosity of the border.

### *Political science and borders*

While anthropologists have demonstrated that there exists an interrelationship between symbolic boundaries and the function of state borders, political scientists and IR scholars have primarily focused on two interrelated analytical fields pertaining to the state–territory–society nexus, on the one hand, and to border implications for state-to-state relations, on the other. In this field, frontiers or borders—the two terms being more often than not used interchangeably by political scientists—are viewed as institutions *and* processes. Malcolm Anderson explains that, as institutions, borders organize political and public life and define the territorial limits of state sovereignty, as well as the identity of citizens.<sup>38</sup>

As processes, borders have four different dimensions. First, their *power dimension* constitutes an instrument of state policy, allowing laws and rules to be applied over a delimited territory. Second, their *control dimension* refers to their capacity to select the goods, the people and the information that can cross the limits of the national territory. This dimension is under challenge from such phenomena as the arrival of undocumented migrants, cross-national organized crime, cyberspace communications and so forth. Third, their *identity dimension* rests on a taken-for-granted national unity, above all in times of war, crisis and territorial claims. They are markers of identity and convey emotions which may translate themselves into nationalistic behaviours. They may also foster the building of a nation-state which is presented as being homogeneous either culturally, linguistically or ethnically. Border controls are presented as necessary in order to protect citizens from disruptive factors existing beyond the border and potentially jeopardizing the social, economic and political stability of the nation-state. Finally, their *meaningful dimension* varies substantially with time and space. For example, the meaning that borderlanders attach to the frontier may compete with the one that is reified by the central authorities of their respective states.

With a wide variety of trading blocs and integration frameworks involving North African countries (among many others, their bilateral association agree-

<sup>37</sup> Martin O. Heisler, 'Now and then, here and there: migration and the transformation of identities, borders, and others', in Mathias Albert, David Jacobson and Yosef Lapid, eds, *Identities, borders, orders: rethinking International Relations theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 229.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson, *Frontiers*.

ments with the EU,<sup>39</sup> the Arab Maghreb Union, the 5+5 Dialogue and the Union for the Mediterranean), borders in the region have undergone significant change over recent decades on all four of these dimensions, ranging from fragmentation to reconciliation and raising daunting political and societal challenges in the region and beyond.<sup>40</sup> In many cases, the creation of these regional blocs has been justified and legitimized by reference to a fundamental historical and geographical coherence, whether real or (re-)constructed. One emblematic—and often forgotten—example dates from the late 1950s, when North African countries were de facto and strategically integrated by western powers in an intercontinental project called Eurafrica. Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson explain clearly in their recent book the roots of this project in west European leaders' conviction that Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia had to be integrated in a 'modern strategy' aimed at defending Europe against any attack by what was then the Soviet Union against the European industrial heartland in the Ruhr area of Germany.<sup>41</sup> Given the Ruhr's alleged vulnerability to Soviet attack, North Africa's industrialization was presented as a top security priority, justifying the need for the Eurafrica project, which aimed at a state of affairs in which 'North Africa and Europe form one and the same body and the Mediterranean is its circulatory system ... From Casablanca to Berlin, from Kiel to Gabès, everything interlocks.'<sup>42</sup>

Invariably, territoriality remains a key explanatory notion for past and current policy developments in North African countries. It cannot be decoupled from the four dimensions mentioned above. Not only does it refer to the space where legitimate power and legal rules are applied by the state and its law enforcement authorities; it also pertains to an area where state–society relationships can be reconfigured and altered, if not reinvented, to overcome domestic social and political divisions.<sup>43</sup>

It could even be argued that in some cases claims for territorial integrity in North Africa have been used by the sovereign power as means of reinforcing its own political and symbolic centrality in a context marked by the perceptible retrenchment of the state from the economy. To be sure, borders are multidimensional and ambiguous.<sup>44</sup> However, states *make* them multidimensional and ambiguous in order to ensure their own centrality and buttress their sovereignty,

<sup>39</sup> See, *inter alia*, Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Normative empire Europe: the European Union, its borderlands, and the "Arab Spring"', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54: 2, 2015, pp. 215–32; Gregory White, *A comparative political economy of Tunisia and Morocco: on the outside of Europe looking in* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Willis, *Politics and power in the Maghreb*; Eva R. Bellin, *Stalled democracy: capital, labor, and the paradox of state-sponsored development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le syndrome autoritaire: politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003); Béatrice Hibou, *La force de l'obéissance* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: the untold history of European integration and colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 201–202.

<sup>42</sup> The words are those of the French general Joseph de Montsabert, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, cited by Hansen and Jonsson, *Eurafrica*, p. 201.

<sup>43</sup> See in this special issue the framework articles by Louise Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East: myths and realities', and Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Contentious borders in the Middle East and North Africa: context and concepts', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 789–807, 767–87.

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Green, 'A sense of border', in Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnay, eds, *A companion to border studies* (Malden, CT: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 584.

especially when domestic political and social tensions loom large. For example, in Morocco, domestic politics, territoriality, identity and regime stability have become closely intertwined to forge a nationalistic sense of unity among 'previously hostile forces behind the monarchy'.<sup>45</sup> Also, while the reinforced militarization of Algeria's borders with Morocco and Libya has been presented as an attempt to counter cross-border arms trafficking and people smuggling, it has invariably been conducive to the centrality of the military power in Algeria's domestic political apparatus (the *Sulta*)<sup>46</sup> and to the strengthening of opaque foreign alliances with strategic European countries, especially with France, Belgium and Italy against jihadist movements encroaching on the whole North African region. Borders do not imply only a logic of inclusion and exclusion. They also engineer a sense of allegiance to the ruling authority (be it a king or a head of government), especially when territorial integrity is presented as being threatened.

In a similar vein, the former regime of President Ben Ali in Tunisia was quick to understand that boasting of its credentials as an efficient player in the field of border management would not only raise its international legitimacy in the West but also reinforce the power of the ruling party, while concealing mounting social discontent and repression at the domestic level.<sup>47</sup> North African states' involvement in the reinforced control of their national borders has often been tantamount to an attempt to rein in domestic territorial, societal and political challenges. The recent memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed on 2 February 2017 between Italy and the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) headed by Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj serves as an example. The MoU has been officially presented as an attempt to stem migration flows en route to the EU, and to reinforce the control of Libya's southern borders with technological material and financial support from Italy and the EU. That said, one is entitled to view the hasty signature of the MoU as resulting from the GNA's attempt to buttress its international legitimacy in the West at a time when Al-Sarraj's leadership is being increasingly challenged domestically. It could even be argued that the quest for international legitimacy and military support from the West was the major driver motivating the signature of the MoU in the face of local municipal officials' overt reticence, wary of its disruptive implications for the country's deepening civil war.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

We have all learned that borders carry an array of functional attributes and a heavy weight of symbolism. This article has set out to show that the transformations that bordering practices have exhibited to date in North African countries are too complex to be captured and unpacked with reference only to securitization and

<sup>45</sup> Willis, *Politics and power in the Maghreb*, p. 272.

<sup>46</sup> Steven A. Cook, *Ruling but not governing: the military and political development in Egypt, Algeria and Turkey* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Pierre Cassarino, 'Channelled policy transfers: EU–Tunisia interactions on migration matters', *European Journal of Migration and Law* 16: 1, 2014, pp. 96–122.

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed account, see Ronald Bruce St John, *Libya: continuity and change* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

demarcation. Only by drawing on a vast academic corpus across disciplines can we adequately explore how the power dimension in the borderland may interact with other dimensions of the border including control, identity and meaning. Each disciplinary approach, including its heuristic devices, provides a valid explanation of the oft-cited—and sometimes unfathomable—disconnect that scholars have observed in North Africa between the territorially bounded ideal-type of the nation-state and the ways in which it is concretely translated, if not reinterpreted, by borderlanders.

At a state level, strengthening border controls implies recodifying external relations. From the mid-2000s up to the early 2010s, Morocco's reinforced cooperation with Spain on border controls and deportation alienated the country from its traditional sub-Saharan African partners (especially Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger and Senegal). Subsequently, the collapse of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi and the declining influence of Libya in sub-Saharan Africa opened a new window of opportunity. Morocco reactivated its 'African strategy', based on a form of soft power which, incidentally, turned out to be consonant with its desire to co-opt some sub-Saharan countries with a view to narrowing Algeria's scope for action in Africa and to buttressing Moroccan territorial claims on Western Sahara. Moreover, reinforced controls on external borders invariably bring about a reformulation of the relations between the parties involved. Today, unprecedented patterns of interconnectedness among countries located in the western Mediterranean have become so dramatically consolidated that any unilateral form of conditionality (be it soft or coercive) must be carefully evaluated lest a whole framework of cooperation be jeopardized.<sup>49</sup> In their bilateral interactions with North African countries, western countries have learned that conditionalities cannot be coercive when it comes to cooperating with empowered 'partner' countries, which North African countries certainly are. Using an oxymoron, it is possible to argue that, over the past decades, cooperation on border and migration controls has become a central priority in North African–EU relations while at the same time remaining peripheral to other strategic issue areas.

In the borderland, more locally, policies aimed at reinforcing controls on external borders often overlook what political geographers, anthropologists and historians have long demonstrated and observed, namely that 'borders are simultaneously structures and processes, things and relationships, histories and events'.<sup>50</sup> This multidimensional perspective is crucial to understanding the key point that reinforcing border controls from the top may lead to the fragmentation of an area that already intrinsically possesses a grassroots social and historical coherence.<sup>51</sup> Forms of local resistance to state-led bordering processes have their roots in history as well as in the sociological relationships of borderlanders.

<sup>49</sup> Examples abound. Among the direct consequences of this reinforced interconnectedness are not only the potential for North African governments to capitalize on their proactive involvement in the joint management of borders, but also their ability to exert leverage on their European counterparts in other issue areas such as energy security, intelligence and police cooperation in the fight against international terrorism.

<sup>50</sup> Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, p. 62.

<sup>51</sup> Karine Bennafla, *Pouvoirs et acteurs dans les villes du Maghreb et du Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Karthala, 2015). See also Aguibou S. Diarra, *The concept of the 'cross-border area' in the West–African sub-regional integration process: results of the Sikasso seminar 4–7 March 2002*, contribution to Sahel and West Africa Club Special Event Meeting (Accra, 2003).

Today, disregarding the western vision according to which regional integration processes should be characterized by clear-cut bordered areas, some scholars are now advocating that borderlands should be considered as grassroots integration processes capable of tackling the persistent divide between border people's day-to-day realities and the sovereign preserve of states. Viewed in this light, resilient exchanges and patterns of cross-border interaction taking place in borderlands are not antithetical to processes of regional integration. On the contrary, because borderlands span two or more neighbouring state territories, their intrinsic cross-border dynamics should not be disrupted. Beyond the oft-cited reference to securitization, this non-western vision of borderlands may constitute perhaps a first step towards a better understanding of the implications of border controls in North Africa and of the persistence of grassroots patterns of resistance to bordering processes. This is the cross-disciplinary perspective this article has sought to introduce.