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State atrophy and the reconfiguration of borderlands in Syria and Iraq: Post-2011 dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Circumstances in the MENA region invite us to redirect our attention to geographic areas that emerged as primary sites of power-contest. This paper looks into emerging trends in the unraveling of bounded sovereign territoriality in borderlands by examining the contest over military, economic, and socio-political spaces in the wake of the devolution of the monopoly of violence and the rise of a multitude of new and old actors to local prominence. Since 2011, borderlands in the MENA region transformed into considerable sites of contested power by a plethora of actors. The paper points out emergent patterns of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of power in its various forms and manifestations in borderlands. The dynamics of ‘place and performance’ in the borderlands of Syria and Iraq showcase the variety of ways borders were instrumentalized under circumstances of state atrophy and their destructive tendencies for borderlands.

1. Introduction

Many countries in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) have undergone somewhat similar processes of political disaggregation since the year 2010, resulting in the degeneration of power centers as well as localities being left to their own devices to reorganize themselves. This has been most observable in conflict-stricken countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and, to a different extent, Egypt. As the state’s monopoly on violence atrophied (as in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen), or was considerably contested in limited areas, territorial control, centralized modes of social organization and state functions in different localities devolved to new entities in varying degrees. This landscape of political and social fragmentation allows existing or newly formed marginal sets of actors, ideas, and spaces to find a new position of power with greater autonomy, gain geostrategic significance and occupy a centrality in the circulation of wealth and resources. Visible indicators of such transformations in borderlands include territorial control by armed formations, the prominence of warlords, wartime economies and informal networks of distribution and dissemination.

Beyond urban centers, which are often considered the core of

concentrated political, economic and social power, the current circumstances in the MENA region invite us to redirect our attention to areas that were once not only geographically peripheral² but also of relatively marginal significance compared to the region’s post-2011 power-relations. Nowhere is the reconfiguration of political, economic, and societal modes of organization more noteworthy than in borderlands. Borderlands have become centers of political contest with complex topographies of power and evolving power relations and structures, both contested from within, and contesting with a multitude of other spaces over greater autonomy and influence (Akdedian, 2018). Recognizing that not all borderlands were by definition marginalized, or marginalized at the same scale and in similar forms, the paper discerns patterns and trends in the evolution of borders and borderlands since the Arab uprisings rather than providing detailed depictions of specific sites. As these sites are still evolving (or even radically transforming), the analysis focuses on the correlations of borders and borderlands ‘in motion’ under circumstances of conflict and state disaggregation (Konrad, 2015). Given the fluidity and ongoing nature of developments studied, the aim of the paper is not to capture a crystalized reality, but rather highlight patterns, dynamics and impact of change in borderlands.

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² The notion of periphery in the paper designates geographic areas of close proximity to borders. The notion of margin is only used in relation to power relations and concentration of power and wealth.

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The borderland, as a geographic area, is categorized and defined by its proximity to borders. Borders, however, are not mere geographic features of a borderland, the same way that borderlands are not a mere geographic region of close proximity to borders. Rather, the nature of border control significantly shapes power relations, modes of social organization, inter and intra-communal exchanges, political economies, and, more broadly, state-society relations in and around borderlands. Similarly, borderlands and local features shape the function of borders. Thus, looking at the dynamics between borders and borderlands in the post-2011 MENA context implies unpacking the dialectics of place and performance; the ways in which borders and borderlands have changed in nature, impacted one another, shaped and were shaped by surrounding exchanges and activities (Brambilla, 2015, p. 17).

After reviewing the literature and background on border and borderlands in the MENA region, the core section of the paper explores the cases of Syria and Iraq to look into the different forms in which bounded sovereign territoriality unraveled in borderlands. The cases are used for examining contests over military, economic, and social spaces and resources in the wake of the devolution of the monopoly of violence and the rise of a multitude of new and old actors to prominence.³ The paper follows an inductive approach and the two cases are chosen for their analytical significance as they have experienced various forms and scales of state atrophy. The examples mentioned throughout are based on a combination of observations, fieldwork and interviews. Following the theoretical framework and background, four main fields of transformational change are identified and explored. The first field is securitization of borders and borderlands under conditions of state atrophy in Syria and Iraq. This section discusses the importance of borders and borderlands for contesting state power as well as their geopolitical significance for regional and international state and non-state actors alike. The second field is emergent systems of border control and their fluidity. This part provides a typology and categorization of emergent constellations of actors and dynamics of control in and around borderlands. The third explored field is the political economy of borderlands highlighting new forms of generating capital in borderlands under war economies. The last section of the paper concludes with a discussion of the impact of contests on borderlands.

The paper identifies three modalities of border control based on the various constellations of security organisms between 2011 and 2019: a) non-state actors on both sides of borders, b) state actors on one side and non-state actors on the other, and c) hybrid regimes. The nature of securitization and the actors involved determine patterns of devolution of authority and nature of exchanges in context. The devolution of state authority led to novel ways of instrumentalizing borders and creating alternative political economies that determined cross-border exchanges as well as the circulation of wealth and power at the local level. While state structures seem to be undermined more than ever by emergent trends and patterns, state power is not entirely absent. Therefore, the contest over greater influence and reach on behalf of the state and belligerent groups is far from settled and often takes on exclusionary, destructive and violent forms. Local societal actors often attempt to find a balance of power amongst a multitude of powerful stakeholders that impose themselves but would benefit from negotiating and bargaining with local actors and communities. However, under conditions of state atrophy, borderlands have emerged as strategic sites for projecting and contesting power; in some instances, leading peripheral areas to grow demographically and economically, but more often eventually leading to destructive militarization and violence.

³ The notion of space is used to refer to areas or spheres of specialized activities and exchanges regardless of their territorial dimensions. By definition, military or economic spaces are unbounded as they may exist within borderlands while also transcending them (Paasi, 2009).

2. Borders, borderlands and state disaggregation in the MENA region: Theory and background

Borderlands, as areas with proximity and access to borders and cross-border exchanges, are defined based on their correlations to borders. Therefore, when discussing the politics, society, and political economy of borderlands, borders are inevitably a part of that discussion. Borders, as a political term, generally refers to lines that separate states from each other and mark the territorial limits of state jurisdiction and sovereignty (Crawford, 2006). Through regulatory systems of exchanges, borders help define the local and the foreign, and the included and excluded. Therefore, borders cannot simply be assumed as a background accessory of a region.

Given the variety of forms that borders may take and the functions they may perform, the field of Border Studies is characterized by the plurality of disciplines and frameworks that discern and explore their multiple dimensions (Kolossoff, 2005). Regardless of approach, the actual nature of borders can only be factually defined based on their contextual realities - institutional frames and regulations in place, enforcement mechanisms, communities residing around such areas, and the nature of cross-border ties and exchanges. Given the fluidity of these contextual determinants, borders, and by extension borderlands, are constantly 'in motion' and should be constantly re-examined and studied as such (Konrad, 2015). Not only are governing bodies and regulations subject to change, but the movement of people, ideas, goods and even territorial sovereignty, which presents itself as fixed and sacred, are also contingent on myriad dynamic conditions in place.

Despite this fluidity, sovereign power over borders is key in introducing an element of fixity through what Paasi labels 'bounded spaces' (Paasi, 2009, p. 216). Transboundary flows of people, goods and information have increased since the 1950s. Nevertheless, bounded spaces where territorial identities and systems of regulation and jurisdiction somewhat overlap and intertwine to form the territorial extent of sovereign authority also remain a reality (Kolossoff, 2005, p. 611; Paasi, 2009, pp. 216–217). It is important to note that such conceptions of the nature of territorial sovereignty are formulated as an ideal-type model depicting the rationale, ambition and operational logic of state systems. In other words, levels of success in establishing such territoriality vary, and the specific forms they take are context dependent. As Newman affirms, "the loss of sovereignty does not mean the loss of territoriality" (2003: p. 16). This paper supports the inverted statement as well. Loss of territory (or territoriality) does not mean the loss of sovereignty or state power. This is due to the varying capacities of enforcement and influence that state powers and non-state actors may still enjoy over a region despite having lost territorial control. Performances of sovereignty and power take different forms based on strategies endorsed, technological conditions in place and the values attributed to borders (i.e. US-Canadian borders vs US-Mexican borders). Additionally, even when the ability of the state to enforce its control over borders is weakened by insurgencies or internal conflicts (i.e. Syrian north-eastern borders and Iraq's western borders between 2003 and 2008, and 2014 and 2018), the international recognition of the state's *de jure* sovereignty continues to provide the latter with the prerogative to control borders.⁴

The same way that looking into the phenomenology of borders requires taking into account local perceptions, daily practices and lived experiences around notions of borders and borderlands (Newman & Paasi, 1998), sovereignty too, specifically in its territorial form, must be studied in its 'tentative' and 'always emergent' forms grounded in localities (Hansen & Stepputat, 2006, p. 295). It is for this reason that Newman suggests that, "to study borders as dynamic institutions, it is [...] important to study the 'bottom up' process of change" (2003: p. 15).

⁴ The Iraqi government for instance refused to formally open some of the border-crossings with Syria because of the absence of the Syrian government's forces on the other side, even after they were taken from ISIS.

More specifically, the question to answer is: in what forms does the state exist and manifest itself within a given context such as borderlands during state atrophy? This question is specifically relevant in processes of deterritorialization or reterritorialization of power and control. The bargaining process and contest between state sovereignty and 'informal sovereignty', specifically, as witnessed in the MENA region in the form of insurgents, non-state security organisms and illegal networks, is what determines sovereignty in its material form as well as the nature of territoriality in borderlands (Hansen & Stepputat, 2006, p. 305).

Sovereign territoriality is, therefore, more than a mere technical predisposition to maintain territorial and border control. It is imposed, constantly reproduced, and contested through political, economic and social instruments that are not necessarily dependent on territorial control or border enforcement but may lead to them (Berezin, 2003, p. 7; Paasi, 2009, p. 216). In a context where state sovereignty is compromised and directly challenged, the contest over each spatial layer of borderlands becomes more prominent. Political borders, social boundaries, and military frontiers disarticulate and are distinctly contested regardless of their territorial overlap.

Prior to the rise of popular movements in the MENA region, as dictatorships and authoritarian regimes consolidated and concentrated power, scholars focused on states and considered them primary centers of power in the region. This led to either the dismissal of areas such as borderlands, or insufficient attention to marginality (or processes of exclusion in the circulation of power) (Atzili, 2012; Bechev & Nicolaidis, 2010). The 2017 special issue (vol. 93, no. 4) of *International Affairs* edited by Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Louise Fawcett, and Asli S. Okyay on 'Contentious Borders' marked the beginning of a new research agenda aimed at exploring the impact of post-2011 developments on the nature and function of borders. However, to account for recent developments in the MENA region in borderlands, researchers still often resorted to historical narratives about the nature of borders in the region and their impact on their surroundings.

As Del Sarto points out, virtually any piece written on borders in the Middle East includes a discussion of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Del Sarto & Raffaella, 2017). This classic, often-cited narrative that Del Sarto depicts, asserts that the artificial maps and borders of the Middle East were drawn by European imperial powers with no regard for local groups (Del Sarto & Raffaella, 2017). From then on, the narrative goes, artificial borders have become the main source of unrest and violence in the region (Bilgin, 2016). David Patel agrees that this narrative is inaccurate, given that "the Sykes-Picot Agreement had very little to do with the states and borders of today's Middle East [and] much of what was agreed upon in 1916 was never implemented" (Patel, 2016, pp. 2–3; Pursley, 2015). As evidence, Patel points to the southern section of the Iraqi-Syrian border and the northern section of the Jordanian border with Iraq as the only parts of present-day Iraqi border that can be attributed to Sykes-Picot. The actual borders of the Middle East were ultimately determined by the League of Nations in 1932, as well as by negotiation between the Arab governments, which sometimes resulted in the demarcation of borders, as was the case with the Iraqi-Saudi and Iraqi-Jordanian borders. The border between Iraq and Kuwait has also been substantially altered following the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991. Between the period of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the League of Nations' official border delineation, almost half a dozen other agreements and treaties shaped the modern borders of Syria, Iraq, and neighboring countries (Pursley, 2015).⁵ In addition, various local actors participated in different capacities throughout the different

episodes of negotiations and drafting of such agreements (Schayegh, 2015). This raises questions regarding narratives about the illegitimacy of borders in the MENA region.⁶

Conventional narratives about the artificiality and illegitimacy of modern borders describe them as causes or catalysts of regional conflict and separatist tendencies (Neeq, 2012). Although this conception is valid in some cases, such as in northern areas of Iraq and Syria, history reveals that conflict and uncertainty loom when opportunities to reconfigure borders arise (Forster et al., 1989).⁷ In other words, no proof supports the assumption that redrawing the MENA region according to local or nativist attributes would lead to more legitimate borders, and, consequently, less violence. This is especially the case when what may be considered as local, native, or self-sufficient is highly contested (Patel, 2016). As Fawaz Traboulsi argues, what the Arab nationalists call "natural Syria" is actually as artificial as the artificiality of the Sykes-Picot arrangements (Traboulsi, 2016). Therefore, from a conflict analysis standpoint, rather than debating origin or legitimacy, a more useful and relevant point of discussion would be systems of government, regulations, and power relations that influence localities.

Regardless of the immediate impact of borders on conflict in the MENA region, it is reductionist to assume that—despite a century of radical socio-political developments—all conflicts draw their roots from the artificial drafting of borders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This point was perfectly illustrated in footage of ISIS fighters in 2014 crossing the Syrian-Iraqi border on bulldozers and claiming the end of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, as if symbolically erasing cartographic lines and borders would transform the region. Even past regional conflicts that included an element of border disputes were not primarily motivated or shaped by border disputes as such, but rather by myriad political and geopolitical factors (Bilgin, 2016).⁸

Political borders are intrinsic features of the modern state—both effectively and normatively—and are instrumental for establishing and maintaining territorial control. Institutional developments starting in the 18th century enabled states to impose border-control and territorial regimes both internally and externally.⁹ Internal innovations included the creation of "administrative homogeneity through centralization" and "direct rule", mainly through conscription and taxation (Kahler, 2008, p. 36). External dimensions, on the other hand, were methods of "precise border delimitation" and separate "jurisdictional congruence" beyond the confines of political borders (Kahler, 2008, p. 36). Such developments enabled the conception and materialization of the bounded territorial space within defined political borders, where boundaries (social and symbolic spaces), frontiers (military spaces), and borders (political, legal and economic limits) all overlap and are contained through the monopoly of violence and ability of central authorities to

⁶ Foucher argues that even in the African context local attributes were considered for various purposes in drafting the colonial borders (Foucher, 1988, p. 164).

⁷ Although there are many examples of peaceful resolution of border disputes such as the 1956 agreement between Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq in 1982, and on the Arabian Peninsula between 1980 and the mid-1990s, these disputes were not over the sovereignty or title of territory but over the precise location of the borders (Biger, 2012).

⁸ Cases include: The Sand War (1963) between Algeria and Morocco, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1990), and the multiple episodes of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

⁹ Border fixity and bounded territorial sovereignty were extended to the global stage and formalized through international law during the 20th century with the collapse of the last remaining empires and the rise of nation-states. Colonial ventures and subsequent expansion of the modern state saw the dwindling of *terra nullius* (no man's land) as all territories were placed under state sovereignties and the western model of the modern state was exported and installed throughout the first half of the 20th century (Kahler, 2008). These developments rendered borders and their fixity a cornerstone of the modern state system and modern international law (Crawford, 2006).

⁵ The Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the San Remo Agreement in 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, the Cairo Conference of 1921, and the conference of Lausanne in 1922–23.

impose, coerce and/or coopt.¹⁰

Political borders aim to regulate the type and intensity of exchanges that take place between internal and external territorial zones. The state aspires to determine what types of cross-border exchanges are permitted by allowing or restraining the movement of people and goods through military and security deployment on borders. States also aspire to reinforce notions of territoriality by imposing concepts of territorial nationalism to the most active and impressionable segments of society. This takes place by introducing such notions in school curricula and through the institutions of violence that impose such ideas through conscription and the ideological training of conscripts (Tilly, 1975). It is hence that borders are instrumentalized by the territorial state to create a unitary symbolic space. In postcolonial processes of state formation, however, the notion of bounded sovereignty is highly tenuous as various forms of local authority either contest such notions or successfully impose their own (Hansen & Stepputat, 2006, p. 297). Sovereign territoriality therefore interacts and competes with other notions and realities of territoriality (i.e., sectarian, tribal, religious, regional, kinship).

Regardless of this contest, Traboulsi argues that modernist transformations effectively contributed to shaping borderlands and the function of borders today (Traboulsi, 2016). Modernist developments, in the context of post-colonial state formation and later under neoliberal processes, directly impacted borderlands through processes of concentrating labor, militarization (conscription and military housing for key personnel in and around political centers such as Damascus and Baghdad), the concentration of state services, economic regulations and deregulation. Studies looking at structural conditions and policies that have created, reinforced or undermined centers and peripheries reveal varied rates of marginalization of borderlands outside the radius of metropolises, specifically when compared to the development rates of urban centers as opposed to areas beyond (Gries & Grundmann, 2018). Especially under neoliberal processes, urbanization with concentrated populations, resources, and institutions, materialized through either dispossessing other regions of their resources or unevenly distributing the national wealth (Semmour, Florin, Legros, & Troin, 2014). Gries' and Grundmann's work considers processes of economic dispossession and marginalization, particularly those linked to industrialization, urbanization, and, ultimately, neoliberal economic development, pervasive in the MENA region and in processes of power consolidation with limited resources within a globalized economic system. In other words, centralized mechanisms of economic extraction and redistribution create a center-periphery system that favors the center and marginalizes that which is beyond to secondary socio-political spaces that are often impoverished, depopulated, politically undermined, and stigmatized (Florin & Semmour, 2014).

In the context of state disaggregation, borders and border crossings enable borderlands that may have been marginalized to be transformed into centers of power. Similar to processes of civilizational decline described in Ibn Khaldoun's *al-muqaddimah* and Joseph Tainter's *Collapse of Complex Societies*, the post-2011 MENA context is a manifestation of disarticulating socio-political macrostructures (Tainter, 1988; Khaldun, 2015, pp. 165–172). In other words, as societies grow more dependent on the concentration of resources, specialized institutional arrangements, and centralized modes of operation, the weakening of the main organizing force (i.e., the state) unleashes a process of devolution and localization where society breaks into "smaller, less differentiated and heterogeneous, and ... fewer specialized parts" (Tainter, 1988, p. 38). When a superstructure shrinks at the rate witnessed in the MENA region, localities are left to their own fate and are forced to seek new devices of organization and government. In borderlands, different power groups compete over strategic resources as the

¹⁰ Even where this Weberian model of state-system is not fully realized, as in many post-colonial settings, the state's prerogatives, ambitions, policies and actions are wired for the same function.

drivers of bounded territorial space (sovereign space) unravel and each constituent layer of sovereign space (military, economic, and socio-political) becomes a site of contestation. To shed light on the transformation of these constituent layers in borderlands, the next section looks into the cases of Iraq and Syria. Given that borderlands are influenced by cross-border exchanges, looking into these cases includes examining their borders with some of their neighboring countries as well.

3. The cases of Syria and Iraq

Amidst the post-2011 turmoil in Syria and Iraq, key actors emerged in borderlands that transformed power relations. States, militant groups, and other local and transnational actors all responded in different ways to circumstances of growing peripheral autonomy.¹¹ Peripheral autonomy was most noticeable in borderlands and cross border exchanges, and given the geostrategic significance of some of these locations, borderlands emerged as desired sites for non-state actors, which eventually invited fierce territorial contests. Entities operating through cross-border networks and connections were able to reconfigure and repurpose the regulatory system of borders for their own ends. The following sections examine into dynamics of securitization, ensuing border-control regimes, political economies therein and the dominant impact of territorial contests on borderlands.

3.1. Border securitization and significance of borderlands

This section first highlights the significance of borderlands for non-state actors and the conflict dynamics that shaped developments in borderlands, and eventually led to different modalities of border control in Syria and Iraq. The Syrian conflict, since 2012, includes modalities found elsewhere in the region. As the state's monopoly of violence disintegrated and its functions devolved to a multitude of entities, the country became a geographically fragmented patchwork of militarized and contested areas. In Syria's borderlands, border-crossings and the status of borders (the actors therein and the nature of movement and exchanges in and around them) shaped the course of local transformations. Throughout the war, the Syrian state has prioritized internal military frontiers and demonstrating negligence toward international borders. This also applies to Iraq in the central government's battle against ISIS.¹² When on the defensive, the strategies of Damascus and Baghdad focused on internal military frontiers and the protection of supply lines. When on the offensive, the go-to tactic has been a war of attrition to cut off enemy supply lines and suffocate the enemy space. This strategy was evident in the urban battles for Aleppo and Mosul. The most resilient areas against such tactics have been borderlands. Access to borders and border crossings make it virtually impossible to besiege these territories without cooperation from forces on the other side of the border. This reveals how borders in the Syrian and Iraqi cases have acted as decisive resources for the survival of non-state armed groups while simultaneously determining the level of influence exerted by neighboring states and forces.

In addition, borderlands in Syria became strategically important for international actors as well, due to humanitarian and geopolitical considerations. By 2014, as the Assad regime sought to prevent aid and relief efforts from reaching opposition-controlled areas, the UN humanitarian system and private international organizations such as

¹¹ Most notably until early 2014 in Syria, urban areas were under government control and the areas beyond were under the control of various opposition groups. In the Iraqi case, after the rise of ISIS, Iraqi government forces prioritized recapturing urban cities.

¹² The Iraqi-Syrian border in the case of the Iraqi state, whereas for Syria the state almost completely neglected its borders and did not undertake concerted efforts to regain control over them before 2018.

Mercy Corps bypassed the Syrian state entirely and established cross-border operations in partnership with non-state armed groups and entities in control of border areas (Chulov & Beales, 2014). Similarly, neighboring states with a political stake in the ongoing conflict such as Turkey set up military camps along the border and permitted, in various intervals, the movement of people, combatants, weapons, and medical supplies, as well as cross-border access for medical treatment (Vignal, 2017).¹³

In both military and humanitarian domains, border crossings have become indispensable resources. A key member of the local council of al-Qaim, a town on the Iraqi side of the Syria-Iraq border, affirmed that despite being a largely marginalized, rural area, the Syrian town of Al-Baghuz became ISIS's last stronghold (before it was taken by the SDF) not only because of its geographical features that provided refuge to ISIS fighters in the vast *badiya*, but also because it was very close to the Iraqi borders.¹⁴ He added that some of those fighters crossed the borders after losing al-Baghuz, where they dispersed in the adjacent villages on the Iraqi side or the large desert in Anbar (Loveluck & Salim, 2019).¹⁵ It comes as no surprise then that some border areas have been highly contested throughout the conflict amongst different groups jockeying for increased control of border resources. This was also witnessed in the 2014 battle between ISIS and Kurdish forces in Kobani (Ain al-Arab), a strategic city on the Syrian-Turkish border. While ISIS attacked the border-town with genocidal intent, Turkey shut its borders practically besieging local population and militants alike in the face of ISIS. Areas on the Syrian-Turkish border with strong SDF presence presented a serious security concern for Turkey – these northern borderlands once again became the site of deportations and resettlement initiatives which reconfigured the demographic reality in the area in the wake of the withdrawal of American troops and the Turkish offensive in late 2019.

The intensity of the contest over areas around the border and the presence of humanitarian agencies operating in cross-border areas are the biggest determining factors in impact of power struggle in borderlands and the quality of life in nearby Syrian villages. In the short periods of stability around borders and active border crossings, villages have prospered and grown to become towns with new industries and capital, which attracted a host of unemployed and displaced labor, and became an operational base and a lifeline for surrounding areas as well. This was evident in the border-town of Azaz where illicit economies prospered and proximity to Turkish towns and border-crossings played a major role (Tokmajian, 2016). Such dynamics transformed borderlands into highly contested and militarized zones.

3.2. Emergent systems of border control and trajectories of change

Three different types of border-control regimes emerged in the conflict-stricken cases examined: (1) non-state actors and state actors on either side of a border, (2) non-state actors on both sides, and (3) hybrid regimes. This typology does not apply to every borderland of the cases discussed, as the objective here is to only point out regimes of border control that emerged throughout the conflict. The fluidity of systems of border-control implies that these systems did not necessarily endure. Regardless of shifts and changes, the typologies capture patterns and boundaries of transformational change. The three types of emergent systems of control reflect different modalities and expressions of

contested territorial control in borderlands.

The northern and western borders of Syria provide examples of non-state and state actors on either side of the border. Here, border systems in place are characteristically asymmetric. The Turkish government, for instance, could unilaterally decide whether any border crossing is accessible and determine the limits and restrictions of movements therein. Motivated by its own security concerns and strategic interests, the Turkish government's position varied according to the non-state actors it dealt with and the risk models in place. For instance, Ankara offered a safe haven in the north for non-state groups opposed to the Assad regime and even turned a blind eye to the movement of jihadis into Syria through Turkey during the early years of the conflict. Turkey's alliance with opposition groups ensured a robust Turkish presence (and influence) in Syria while also serving as a counterweight to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Ankara considers the armed wing of the PYD, known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), as part of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party, a designated terrorist organization in Turkey. Vignal argues that Turkey's implementation of new border control technologies (walls, fences, trenches, and surveillance mechanisms) sought to effectively close and limit all movement in eastern border regions with a Kurdish presence (Vignal, 2017, p. 821).¹⁶ On the other hand, Syrian borderlands in Idlib and Aleppo found periods of prosperity, with the Turkish-Syrian border providing a vital lifeline for opposition forces and borderland populations in those provinces.

Border control under conditions of state atrophy, regardless of actors involved, was characterized by informal arrangements between forces in place. For instance, the control imposed by the main Kurdish parties in Kurdistan over border-crossings with Turkey and Iran is informal, given that they are neither regulated by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), nor approved by the central government in Baghdad. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) used its military force and amicable relations with the Turkish government to continue a de facto control over Ibrahim al-Khalil, the main border-crossings with Turkey. It also runs the Haj Omran border crossing with Iran, whereas the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) controls the Pashmakh border-crossing with Iran. Even if KRG claims formal authority over these borders, in practice, the military wings of the KDP and PUK manage them. Moreover, the federal government, which claims the constitutional right to control all border-crossings as part of its sovereign power, has failed to extend its control to these crossings. The last attempt was in 2017–2018, following the independence referendum organized unilaterally by KRG.¹⁷

The second type of border regime is made up of non-state actors on both sides of the border. Examples here include the Syrian-Iraqi border after the rise of ISIS and the Lebanese-Syrian border before 2014. There are multiple non-state groups present within these contexts: On the Iraqi-Syrian border, the Kurdish PYD developed a working relationship with KDP and PUK in Iraq¹⁸ It is strategically allied with the PKK, which has a growing presence in northern Iraq and continues to operate through networks of support across Iraqi-Syrian borders, particularly through the informal Smeilka crossing. Meanwhile, ISIS controlled wide stretches on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border prior to being dislodged as part of the international military campaign against the group that began in 2014. On the eastern Lebanese-Syrian border along the

¹⁶ Operations Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield are also clear illustrations of asymmetric power relations.

¹⁷ There are five formally recognized crossings. The largest and most important of them is Ibrahim al-Khalil on the border with Turkey. The central government claims that it has no knowledge of how this border-crossing is run and where the revenue generated through border exchanges settles. The same can be said of Haj Omran border-crossing between Kurdistan and Iran. This is reported from Kazim al-Iqabi, the Director of Border Controls Directorate in Iraq, in a TV interview (Al-Iqabi, 2019). See also (BBC, 2017).

¹⁸ The KRG is a formal constitutional entity but it operates informally over many unofficial border-crossings.

¹³ For example, the town of Kessab in Northwest Syria on the Turkish-Syrian border was attacked in 2014 by rebel groups through the Turkish border and through cross-border military operations. Author's interview with the head of the Evangelical Church in Kessab, reverend Jirayr Ghazarian, February 2017, Beirut.

¹⁴ Closed workshop on "Iraqi-Syrian borders after ISIS" organized by Carnegie Middle East Center and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 11–12 June 2019, Beirut.

¹⁵ Closed workshop on "Iraqi-Syrian borders after ISIS" organized by Carnegie Middle East Center and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 11–12 June 2019, Beirut.

Qalamoun mountain range, Lebanese Hezbollah forces effectively controlled the area (with a minor presence of the Lebanese army) while opposition groups were present on the Syrian side until being pushed out in mid-2014. Additionally, the Iranian-backed Shi'a militias are deployed on the two sides the Syrian-Iraqi border (Kittleson, 2019). Some of these regularly crossed the borders to support the regime-allied forces, and even controlled the smuggling lines (weapons, oil and drugs), benefiting from the closure of formal border crossings.¹⁹

The third type of hybrid systems of border control includes some combination of state actors, non-state actors, and foreign military forces. This arrangement is visible in the recently created and still-evolving circumstances in southern Syria, where a truce agreement was reached between the Syrian state and armed opposition groups in mid-2018. The agreement saw the Syrian state formally regain control over the border while the Russian military effectively ensured the purview over internal security matters. As part of the deal, some opposition groups surrendered their heavy weaponry and were allowed to remain in their cities, while parties opposed to the deal were evacuated to northern Syria (Al-Tamimi, 2018). While hybrid systems compromise state sovereignty, state power remains present and influential in different forms. Prior to the Russian military presence in southern Syria, Jordan maintained diplomatic ties with the Syrian state while also managing border crossings controlled by opposition groups and permitting the movement of humanitarian aid into Syria. Furthermore, Jordan also hosted military camps for some Syrian opposition groups backed and supported by the United States (Vignal, 2017, p. 821). However, as the number of Syrian refugees entering Jordan increased, the Jordanian government implemented stricter levels of border control by limiting, for instance, the free movement of Syrian-Palestinians, before ultimately closing both official and unofficial crossings for the movement of people (Vignal, 2017, p. 821). Jordan's approach to its borders is a case of a state negotiating diverse interests, including those of its allies. On one hand, the Jordanian government preferred not to take a directly hostile position vis-à-vis the Syrian government and maintained diplomatic relations; on the other hand, it did not take an antagonistic position against non-state groups either, allowing the movement of humanitarian aid into their areas of control and permitting the United States to host military camps for training and supporting opposition forces. Similarly, as the Iraqi army and Border Guards reestablished their presence on the border with Syria after the defeat of ISIS, along with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella of Shia militias, and Kurdish Peshmerga, a hybrid regime of border control is in place where non-state actors have developed complementary ties with state actors.

Contested patterns of securitization and control led to distinct border regimes within each locality in question. State and non-state actors have instrumentalized borders to consolidate their presence, promote their interests and those of their allies; they also attempted to create dependencies and asymmetric relations of influence. These were pursued by soft (minimal and limited regulations) and hard (considerable restrictions and controls on exchanges and movement) measures of border-control. Many of the cases examined here revealed a contradictory reality where the same border may be deemed soft regarding certain exchanges and hard for other types. Strategies and methods of control also shifted based on military developments in nearby areas. The informal crossing called Smeilka, between Iraqi Kurdistan and PYD-controlled areas in eastern Syria has been used to support Syrian Kurdish forces in the war against ISIS. It was used to the most part for the movement of US troops stationed in northeast Syria. When they withdrew in 2019, the crossing became open for the movement of people and

trucks even though neither the Iraqi nor the Syrian government licensed or allowed such exchanges.²⁰ According to the director of Iraqi Directorate of Border Crossings, Iraqi Kurdistan had in the last years 21 border-crossings that were recognized neither by the federal government nor by the Kurdistan regional government, but were run by informal local groups (Al-Iqabi, 2019).

The Syrian-Jordanian borders have fluctuated from soft to hard but also include elements of softness and hardness at the same time. This can be seen in the relatively free movement of humanitarian aid contrasted with restrictions on the movement of people across the border. The same can be said of Iraqi-Syrian borders where refugees from the two sides fled to the other side in various times after 2014. In 2018, about 11 thousand Iraqis were still in the Hol camp on the Syrian side of border.²¹ And while PKK, Shi'a militias and ISIS fighters (to a lesser extent today) regularly crossed the borders, access to most parts of these borders is heavily restricted. Furthermore, on the Iraqi side (except Kurdistan) there is what is officially called *al-Ardh al-Haram* (prohibited land); about 10 kms of a buffer zone inside Iraqi borders where a curfew is in place for unlicensed movement. Borders were instrumentalized in multifunctional ways, depending on the actors in place, such as by being hard with regards to the movement of people and refugees but porous in the movement of weapons. Specific patterns of securitization and instrumentalization were contingent upon a variety of variables such as emergent actors, their agendas, capacity and strategies of control, intensity of violence, and power relations in border regions. Such factors were also crucial in determining emergent political economies around borderlands which, in turn, reinforced new constellations of power.

3.3. The political economy of borders and borderlands

Borderland communities in Syria and Iraq, even areas with abundant resources, often only receive a marginal or negligible share of their revenues (Benedict & Nora 2014). This does not mean that development, specifically of the industrial kind was non-existent in peripheral areas. The town of Qaim in Iraq, for instance, throughout the 1970s switched from an agricultural economy to hosting a large phosphate-processing complex operated by the Iraqi state and connected to Baghdad and other major cities through railways. The peripheral city became a hub of new economic production and employment. This further integrated it to the center while contributing to local development.²² However, over the past two decades in Syria and since the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam, the states in question were less inclined, for various reasons, to compensate peripheral communities or provide welfare programs and public, social and economic services (Azmeah, 2019; Hanieh, 2018). This was shaped by myriad factors. In Qaim, the phosphate plant was heavily damaged and lost a great part of its production capacity due to the 1991 bombing and international sanctions afterwards. After regime change in 2003, the area became a major site for insurgency activities and state presence withered. This left peripheral communities deprived of their resources. For borderland communities, this created an array of diverse challenges as well as new operational methods.

While the national politico-legal framework of a functioning state promises benefits, proximity to other jurisdictional spaces and access to illicit cross-border activities afford borderland populations unique economic opportunities. Such opportunities are most prevalent in borderlands where non-state actors enjoy considerable control on different sides of the borders. For instance, subsidized fuel smuggled and sold in territories beyond national borders is a profitable market niche (i.e.,

²⁰ Closed workshop on "Iraqi-Syrian borders after ISIS" organized by Carnegie Middle East Center and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 11–12 June 2019, Beirut.

²¹ Interview by Co-author with a member of the Iraqi Commission for Human Rights, 8 February 2019, Baghdad.

²² Closed workshop on "Iraqi-Syrian borders after ISIS" organized by Carnegie Middle East Center and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 11–12 June 2019, Beirut.

¹⁹ Closed workshop on "Iraqi-Syrian borders after ISIS" organized by Carnegie Middle East Center and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 11–12 June 2019, Beirut.

Syrian fuel sold in Lebanon). The smuggling of livestock was a common practice across Iraqi-Syrian border, often conducted by tribal groups whose members reside on the two sides of the border (such as the case with Shumar tribe). In the case of aggressive neoliberal deregulation and the dismantling of the welfare state, the trajectory of extraction from the periphery to the center remains unchanged while support to peripheral communities is significantly constrained. This was the case in Syria post-2005 when fuel and diesel prices increased exponentially after the government decreased subsidies (Dolbee, 2018, p. 6). The subsequent 2006 drought, coupled with inflation, and lack of adequate state support further intensified processes of marginalization in provincial areas.

With a decreased dependency on the center, borderland communities on the Syrian-Iraqi border intensified their access to informal economies including cross-border smuggling of goods, weapons, and jihadis (Mustafa, 2020). In neoliberal modes of economic production or centrally managed rentier economies, borderland communities are pushed and sometimes even encouraged to develop informal economies. State atrophy, not only diminishes peripheral dependency on the center, the reach of states' coercive power and institutions of violence are also contested. The example of Western Iraq is a case in point. Since 2003, the area became practically ungovernable due to the factors mentioned above. Provinces such as Qaim and Baaj on the Iraqi side of the Syrian borders, became strongholds for jihadist groups, especially in the times when the Syrian regime operated to facilitate the movement of jihadis into Iraq (i.e. first operation against US army was carried out near Qaim in March 2003 by a local jihadi).²³ Also, with state collapse in 2003, Basra, eventually fell under the domination of paramilitaries that also controlled Iraq's only port (um Qasr). It wasn't until 2007, when the Iraqi government waged a military campaign to purge Basra from the militias, that the city's borders with Iran and its outlet to the Gulf began to be managed-albeit not entirely-by the state. Even today, and given the increasing number and growing power of armed factions and militias, the state does not have full control over the port and some of its docking zones are reportedly managed by paramilitaries.²⁴ Just recently, the Iraqi government closed a border crossing on Iraqi-Iranian borders, in the city of Diyala, because it could neither control the illicit trade across the border nor limit the involvement of militias in these activities.²⁵

In such fluid circumstances, borders no longer mark the effective beginning and end of state sovereignty. Rather, borders transform into economic devices generating distinct resources for local economies and beyond. Local networks of knowledge and access to informal cross-border movement and exchange become primary economic agents in borderlands, around which war economies develop and armed groups attempt to tap into. In Western Iraq, the political economy around borderlands utterly changed as armed groups competed for rent extracted from controlling the routes and the international crossings from the Anbar desert towards Jordan and Syria. Al-Qaida used the highways to extract rent either by kidnapping, plundering or simply establishing checkpoints and taxing economic exchanges and transportation activities. Similarly, when the US army began to recruit or support some of the tribal militias in the area to mobilize local forces against al-Qaida, it overlooked the illicit activities carried out by tribal networks and allowed them to control the trafficking routes and international highways (Malkasian, 2017, p. 150).

Informal networks and pathways for cross-border movement and

exchanges are in fact invaluable for state actors and non-state actors alike to secure the resources and logistics needed for survival or expansion during conflict. Despite informal networks and communities in borderlands benefitting from illicit trade, their attachment to the power center is not absent as relations with the state or whichever group is in control are not utterly dismissed but rather renegotiated and often even taken advantage of. On the Syrian-Iraqi border, decades of informal economic exchanges fed into jihadi networks first in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq and later in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising. The overlap of jihadi networks and informal economic networks sustained non-state militant groups before and after 2011 (Neumann, 2014). Meanwhile, the Syrian state had purposely turned a blind eye to these exchanges after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a means of increasing its political leverage in the neighboring country to the east and pressuring U.S. forces based there (Harling & Simon, 2015, pp. 1–10). These pre-existing networks were “entrenched in tribal actors between Deir el-Zor [Syria] and Anbar [Iraq]” who became more active after the Gulf War sanctions on Iraq, Syria's economic woes since 2000, and the sectarian nature of post-2003 Iraqi exclusionary politics (Harling & Simon, 2015, p. 5).

3.4. The future of borderlands

Despite the economic opportunities, cycles of wealth extraction have been tenuous due to the instability and fluidity of enabling factors and circumstances. Dramatic demographic shifts, for instance, have been common examples of destructive patterns. Given the economic and strategic significance gained under conditions of state atrophy, the prominence of non-state actors in borderlands was succeeded by militarized contests that left towns and villages shrink as a result of sustained destruction and militarization.²⁶ Whether those who end up leaving such areas will eventually return depends on their trajectory of movement (internal or external displacement, organized relocation or random dispersing), their status in their new surroundings (legal status, level of integration in the workforce, and living standards), and reconstruction plans and security within their areas of origin. The example of the Yazidi population of Sinjar, a town on the Iraqi side of the border with Syria is a case in point. When the town was attacked by ISIS, most residents fled and crossed the borders along the lines of protection provided by PKK and its Syrian allies, who share with the Yazidis their Kurdish ethnicity.²⁷ Most of them crossed the border again to Iraqi Kurdistan where hundreds of thousands have taken refuge in the region and have not yet returned, even after their original areas were retaken from ISIS.²⁸

The population of the northern Syrian town of Azaz on the Syrian-Turkish border skyrocketed from 30,000 before 2011, to more than 200,000 as of 2017 as a result of the battle of Aleppo, its proximity to the Turkish border and the cross-border resources it provides (Farouq, 2018). In contrast, the population of Sinjar on the Iraqi-Syrian borders have been dramatically decreased from 400,000 before 2014 to 60,000

²³ Interview by Co-author with Hisham al-Hashimi, expert on Jihadi groups in Iraq, Baghdad, 12 February 2019.

²⁴ Interview by Co-author with an official in the Iraqi Directorate for Border-crossings, 20–21 July 2019. Some of this information were also reported by Al-Arabi al-Jadeed in a report entitled “revenues of Iraq's largest port go to political parties and militias,” (al-Jaf & al-Shamri, 2018). See also (Al-Iqabi, 2019).

²⁵ Interview by Co-author with an official in the Iraqi Directorate for Border-crossings, 20–21 July 2019 (Al-Iqabi, 2019).

²⁶ 70% of Kobani city was destroyed in the 2014 fighting (SOHR, 2015). Furthermore, even the town of Kilis on the Turkish side of the Turkish-Syrian border was subjected to continuous attacks with a barrage of rockets from the Syrian side (Girit, 2016). For a systematic study of shift and transformations of borderland economies along the Syrian-Turkish borders of Aleppo in northern Syria see (Khaddour, 2017, pp. 13–17).

²⁷ Closed workshop on “Iraqi-Syrian borders after ISIS” organized by Carnegie Middle East Center and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 11–12 June 2019, Beirut. The information was also confirmed by local residents interviewed by Co-author and Jameel Barakat, Sinjar, July 20–21, 2019.

²⁸ Local residents affirm that the city is today contested between various paramilitary groups, such as a local branch of PKK, the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shi'a militias operating under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Interviews by Co-author and Research assistant with local residents in Sinjar, July 20–21, 2019.

in mid-2019, due to the displacement and migration caused by ISIS invasion of the area, the instability that followed with the existence of multiple militias (i.e. PKK-backed groups, KDP-backed groups and PMF-backed group) and the competition between two local administrations (one supported by KDP and the other by PKK and PMF).²⁹ Meanwhile, the economy, which was largely agricultural and pastoral, has deteriorated, allowing the dominance of informal war economies and racketeering.

In places where armed factions have attempted to replace preexisting networks, the position and role of new economic actors is not necessarily the same as those that prevailed pre-conflict. For instance, when the local council of Azaz appointed new members of municipal government in July 2018, as newly appointed municipal official (*mukhtar*) Mawas Danun affirmed, the Turkish state micromanaged these appointments. Appointees, new to their posts, never occupied local positions before (Danun, 2018). In Qaim, tribal groups, such as Albu Mahal, Al-Karabla and Albu Salman, have long been competitors for land, local authority and trafficking routes. When the jihadists came to dominate the area after 2003, this competition turned into a military dispute between Albu Mahal, whose Sheikhs eventually entered in a conflict with the Zaraqawi-led groups, and al-Karabla and Albu Salman, who supported jihadists (Knarr et al, 2015). Today, each tribe has its own local militia but they are largely subjugated to the better-armed Shia militias that also have more access to state resources and influential patronage networks. The conflict in this area turned security into an essential economic commodity, as each group seeks rent for their role in the securitization of borders and cross-border exchanges. Despite the economic opportunities this provided to local networks, armed groups or state actors, the destructive potential of militarized contests often resulted in their depopulation or even utter destruction.

The Turkish offensive in Northeast Syria upon the withdrawal of US troops from borderland areas, triggered massive casualties, deportations and demographic engineering within borderlands.³⁰ The Turkish offensive, in partnership with Syrian rebel formations, have targeted the Kurdish population in borderlands to drive them out and resettle Syrian Arab refugees from Turkey to these areas.³¹

Furthermore, attempts at power consolidation, including population strategies to alter demographic realities as a means of extending presence and control, are increasingly pursued by states and non-state actors alike (McGarry, 1998; Morland, 2014). Population strategies include strategies of demographic and social engineering, as well as systemic efforts in reconfiguring social perceptions and worldviews (Weiner & Teitelbaum, 2001; Bookman, 1997; Akdedian, 2019). For instance, many of those who managed to flee Sinjar, having realized that without the help of the PKK they would not have managed to escape a looming massacre by ISIS, established new and stronger connections with the PKK - a party that was previously alien to most Yazidis. This culminated in the formation of the Sinjar Resistance Units, a local militia integrated in the PKK's transnational network. This militia operates near the borders and is in competition with another militia, Yazixan Protection Force, which is backed by the KDP. The competition between PKK and KDP has intensified as a result, and this led to further divisions within the Yazidi communities.³² Some locals cite this division as a reason why

the KDP is discouraging the return of Yazidi refugees from its territory, given its long-standing demand to annex the city to Kurdistan region and refusal of roles played by the PKK and the PMF in the area.³³ Ultimately, in such highly contested areas, the control over the movement of people is weaponized to shape local communities and their attachments to the land. Demographic strategies of scale have been and continue to be at work throughout the conflict and specifically in contentious borderlands (Salloum, 2019).

The main motive behind efforts of demographic engineering stems from the following premise: the relative size and loyalty of a population has implications for establishing effective control and governance (Bookman, 1997, p. 18). In other words, in conflicts where identity is politicized as a method of mobilization and recruitment, a locality's homogeneity in terms of social solidarity becomes equivalent to its political loyalty and allegiance.³⁴ Demographic engineering is usually geared toward creating a complete overlap between frontiers (frontlines against enemy spaces) and boundaries (local social relations and demographic composition), in an effort to create a bounded sovereign space (Anderson, 2016).

The harsh treatment of Yazidis by ISIS in Sinjar in August 2014 included textbook examples of hard demographic engineering. Mass executions, forced conversion, sex trafficking, forced marriages, and deportations effectively eliminated a segment of the population that once constituted the majority in an area of strategic military significance. Located at the intersection of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, Sinjar fell near one of ISIS's most crucial supply lines (Highway 47), which it used as a conduit for weapons, goods, and jihadists (The Associated Press, 2015). When ISIS eventually lost control over the highway, the group had to resort to using unpaved roads stretching over longer distances (Kalin, 2015). Other forms of displacement were witnessed in the aftermath of the battles over Qalamoun in Syria. Following a truce, 2,500 rebel fighters along with their families were transferred from the Syrian-Lebanese border area to rebel-held Idlib (Adely & Ibrahim, 2017). Meanwhile, in northern Syria, the relations between Kurdish governing elements and local Assyrian groups also reveal a pattern of internal cooptation of minority groups (Joseph & Isaac, 2018). In addition, the PYD's shutting down of schools and remodeling of educational curricula to promote ethnic narratives of nativism, indigeneity, and territorial entitlement have marginalized minorities living in North East Syria (Assyrian Policy Institute, 2018; Dolbee, 2018; Joseph & Isaac, 2018). As the balance of power between state and non-state actors is growingly compromised, exclusionary and destructive force are becoming more commonplace in borderlands, similar to the dynamics of Northeastern borderlands in Syria.

4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on dynamics and patterns of transformational change in the borderlands of Syria and Iraq. The cases point out the primacy of securitization and its specificities in determining the reality of borderlands during processes of state atrophy. Contested efforts of instrumentalizing borders for different functions and by multiple entities attributed multiple purposes to borders. For borderland communities and locally involved actors, borders provide a diverse (and often contradictory) set of opportunities as a result of logistical accessibility to cross-border exchanges. On one hand, the national politico-legal framework, wherever present, promises state benefits (albeit limited). Simultaneously, borderlands' proximity to other jurisdictional spaces and access to illicit cross-border activities also provides unique economic opportunities. During periods of state disaggregation, however, the periphery's dependency on the center is clearly compromised as the

²⁹ Interview by Co-author with Saib Khedur (MP from Sinjar), Beirut, 11 June 2019.

³⁰ Author's interview with Alva Ali project Director of PEL Civil Waves a non-profit operating in borderland areas in Northeast Syria including Sari Kani (*ras al-'ein*) and Tal Abyad. Beirut, 11 November 2019.

³¹ Closed workshop on "Deradicalization in North East Syria" organized by UN ESCWA, Beirut, 10–11 November 2019.

³² Reported by Research assistant to Co-author after interviews with Haval Teresh, Spokesperson of Sinjar Resistance Units, and with Qassim Sheshu, the Head of Yazixan Protection Force, Sinjar, 30–31 July 2019. See also (Salloum, 2019).

³³ Interview with local residents by Co-author and Jameel Barakat, Sinjar, 20–21 July 2019.

³⁴ Often referred as 'fog of war' in the civil war literature.

state's coercive capacity is more limited. In such instances of deterritorialized state power, borders transform and no longer mark the beginning and end of state sovereignty. Rather, borders emerge within borderlands as centers for informal exchanges generating distinct political and economic resources. Such growth ultimately invites contest and militarization. Where the technologies of violence and political conditions allowed, mass destruction often by state violence or sometimes even by rebel groups (such as ISIS) has been a recurrent scenario. In other cases, where priorities and capacities did not allow, armed factions (state-actors or otherwise) developed a more permissive stance. Therefore the nature of state-society relations is continuously evolving and the asymmetric bargaining process amongst the multitude of actors is far from settled. This asymmetric reality is increasingly tilting in favor of state powers.

In the period between 2011 and 2020, the attempts of the central state in countries such as Iraq and Syria to re-establish its authority in the borderland, while lacking the capacity of securing the previous levels of formal control, reconfigured relations between the national center and local actors. These reconfigurations sometimes led to hybrid arrangements and the further salience of informal tools and networks of patronage, hence granting those actors access to cross-border exchanges as well as access to the central state's rewards. The resulting alliances generated new processes of social engineering, determined by unstable mixture of statist, transnational and local interests, which ultimately produced resistance from those excluded at every level - where opportunities to resist arise. The border becomes a main resource available in borderlands either shared by a multitude of actors or used by conflicting parties to gain an advantage or deny it to the adversary. With the fluidity of local arrangements persisting, borderlands remain the center of military, political, economic and social contests with significant levels of disruptive and destructive propensities for local communities.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

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