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Syria: The border situation between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq

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Guest author: Dastan Jasim

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1 Introduction

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The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that shaped the Middle East as we know it today turned 100 years old, and to this day, the borderlines this contract drew between modern Turkey, Syria, and Iraq shape the region considerably. Now, twenty-nine border crossings exist along this trilateral frontier, of which twenty connect Turkey and Syria, four connect Syria and Iraq, and five connect Iraq and Turkey. However, only eight border crossings are de facto open, while many are closed for multifaceted political reasons. Also, not all of them are crossings acknowledged by the respective states. Nevertheless, thousands of people cross this border yearly, officially and unofficially. In the last years, it became increasingly known as one of the most crucial first border crossings to the overall refugee movements in Europe. At the same time, these borders are essential avenues of multinational economic exchange. Today, for example, the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing between Turkey and Iraq poses one of the most lucrative crossings for Turkey and Iraq and delivers goods to neighboring countries.



Figure: : Map of border crossings between Syria, Turkey, and Iraq (green: open, orange: partially open, red: closed)

What also unites these borders is that in their northern parts, Kurdish people make up the majority of inhabitants. For many, the boundaries are still artificial constructs, dividing linguistic, social, and familiar territories that can not be limited geographically and are still strongly interconnected. Furthermore, de jure and de facto Kurdish autonomies control a vast border area, respectively, the recognized Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) established in 1991 and the non-recognized Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) established in 2012. For Turkey,

especially, the latter poses a threat and consequently has built what is now considered the third longest wall in the world at its border with AANES ⁽¹⁾.

This report will give an overview of the general technical details about the border crossings between these three countries, the spheres of power and control, cooperation and non-cooperation between political actors involved there, arbitrariness, freedom of movement, corruption, as well as the issue of the opening and closing of borders. It does so by referencing studies, policy papers, journalistic articles, and expert interviews as sources.

2 Turkey-Syria border

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Turkey and Syria share the longest border observed in this analysis. It is divided by the Euphrates, cutting the frontier into a smaller western and a larger eastern part. While the territories in the Northwest are Mediterranean with some more mountainous areas, the east is primarily flat. The frontier stretches over 911 kilometers and is politically highly contested.

The contention stems from two sources. On one side, the ongoing Syrian-Turkish border conflict since 1938 shapes problems around this demarcation when Turkey seized the formerly Northwest Syrian Sanjak of Alexandretta, now known as the Turkish province of Hatay, and on the other side because of the specific ethnic gerrymandering done by this very border drawing. Indeed, the frontier runs straightly through various Kurdish urban centers that were once directly connected. Several examples are the bordering cities of Ceylanpınar and Ras al-Ain, Şenyurt and Ad-Darbasiyah, and the most populated example, Nusaybin and Qamishli. The line follows the eastern trail of the Berlin-Baghdad railway. Thousands of Armenian and Kurdish forced laborers and laborers from this region or previously deported to this region realized this late German-Ottoman infrastructure project ⁽²⁾.

1 XCEPT - Cross-Border Conflict Evidence / Policy / Trends (31.3.2020): The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier - XCEPT, <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/the-transformation-of-the-iraqi-syrian-border-from-a-national-to-a-regional-frontier>, accessed 10.10.2023

2 Yadirgi - Yadirgi, V. (1.2017): The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Ceylanpınar and Ras al-Ain	Şenyurt and Ad-Darbasiyah
 This satellite map shows the border region between Turkey (Türkiye) and Syria (Suriye). Key locations labeled include Ceylanpınar, Mng Kargo, Ceylanpınar Cep, Ceylanpınar, Ceylanpınar Öğretmen Evi, Yanılgir, Tell Fasheriyeh, and Tell Halaf. The border is marked with a red line, and various roads and landmarks are visible.	 This satellite map shows the border region between Turkey (Türkiye) and Syria (Suriye). Key locations labeled include Şenyurt, Şenyurt Lisesi, Ad-Darbasiyah, and Darbasiyah. The border is marked with a red line, and various roads and landmarks are visible.
Nusaybin and Qamishli	
 This satellite map shows the border region between Turkey (Türkiye) and Syria (Suriye). Key locations labeled include Nusaybin, Qamishli, and various surrounding areas. The border is marked with a red line, and various roads and landmarks are visible.	

Figure: : Satellite Imagery of Kurdish-inhabited border towns ⁽³⁾

The Kurdish areas in question were heavily involved in the 1920s uprisings against the evolving Turkish republic, and dividing these populations along these lines was meant to prevent further rebellion. Most notably, this region was also a significant scene of the Armenian genocide of 1915, which killed most of the local Armenian population, and where the railway was paramount to facilitating the deportation of millions of Armenians into the southern desert regions of Syria (⁴). Therefore, the decision to use this railway line as the primary blueprint for this border must be understood in the genocidal context in which this railway and this frontier are embedded.

Nevertheless, many Kurds and even some Armenian communities survived and still live in this area. Many familiar and personal relationships cross this border and have made this boundary permeable until the escalation of the civil war and the increased shutdown of the border by Turkey. The systematic economic deprivation in this area and the existing cross-border ties have always rendered the area a center of smuggling and illicit trade.

4 BPB - Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung [Deutschland] (26.4.2016): Die Deutschen und der Völkermord, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/zeit-kulturgeschichte/genozid-an-den-armeniern/218106/die-deutschen-und-der-voelkermord>, accessed 5.10.2023

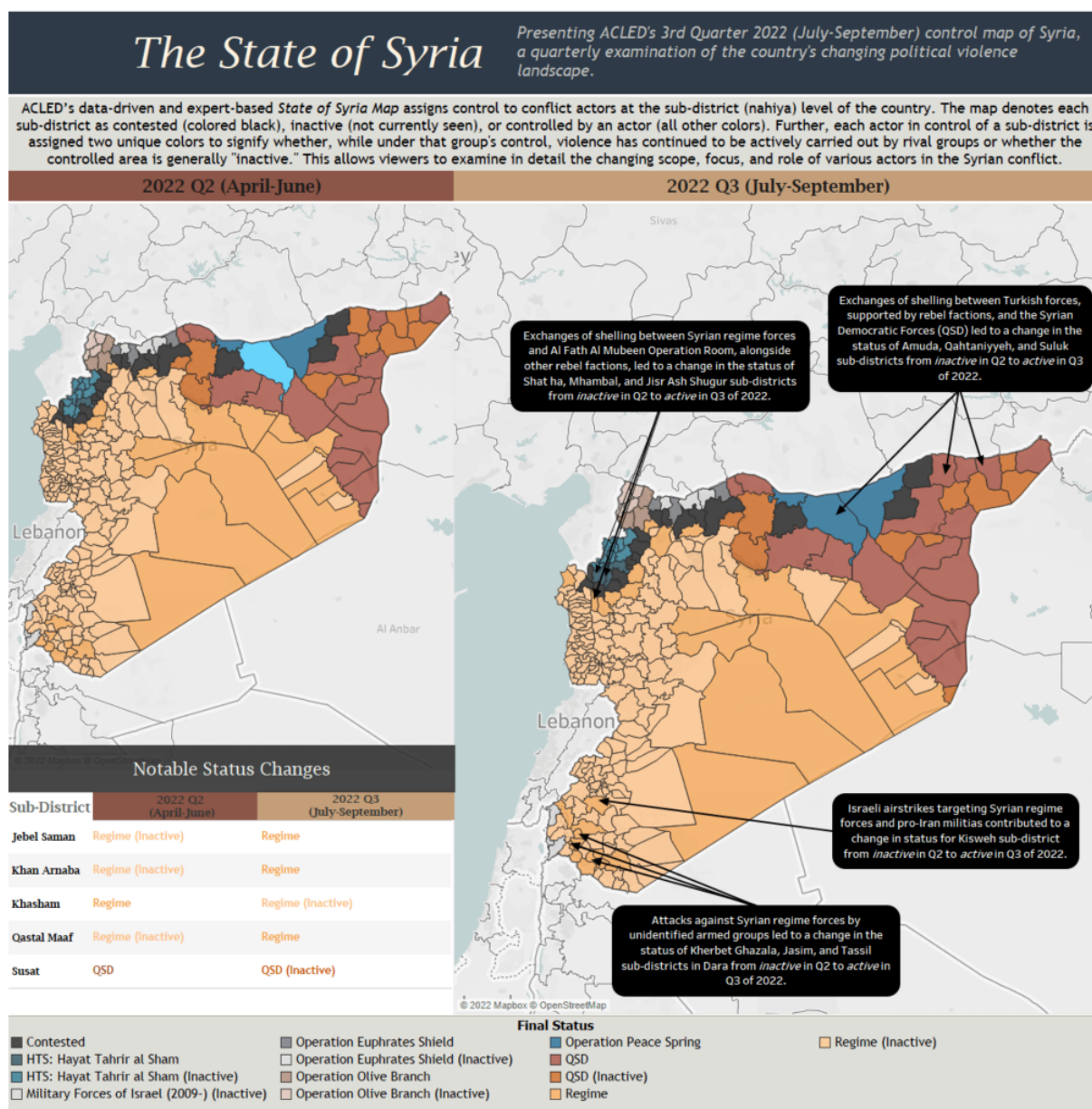


Figure: : ACLED State of Syria Map ⁽⁵⁾

Today, the Turkey-Syria border counts 20 official border crossings. However, due to the war and the Turkish embargo on the 2012 established Kurdish-controlled AANES, only three are open, with six being partially open ⁽⁶⁾. 11 are permanently closed and isolated mainly by the 2014 to 2017 built Turkish border wall. The Turkey-Syria border also hosts the only UN-authorized border crossing where humanitarian aid can flow, the Bab el-Hawa crossing. It connects Turkey on the one side and the last remaining territories of the Idlib region controlled by Islamist militias of the Syrian opposition, mainly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the southern part and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) in the northern part.

2.1 Actors of Control and Their Relations

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The regulation of control on the Turkish side is precise, as Article 4 of the 1988 Law No. 3497 on border issues and Law No. 3497 of 1991 state that the Turkish interior ministry manages the borders of Turkey. The Turkish Border Guard is the military body of control, and the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Law and Regulation sets its relation to other elements of the Turkish military. In the past, the 1998 Ankara Agreement, as well as the "Joint Cooperation Agreement Against Terrorist Organizations," has managed Turkish-Syrian cooperation regarding border control, especially as Turkey sought to normalize relations with Syria in the fight against Kurdish insurgency ⁽⁷⁾. This cooperation, however, ended with the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

However, different actors in the Turkish security sector have divided control among each other, especially since 2017, when Turkey started invading vast territories in northern Syria, as Figure 3 shows. These territories comprise the areas around Jarabulus in the western Euphrates region, controlled since 2017, the northwestern Afrin region occupied since 2018, and the land strip between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ain, invaded and controlled by Turkey since 2019. Ever since, various sections of the Turkish army and the Secret Service MIT (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı) have spread over both sides of the border. In some border crossings, Turkish-aligned militias of the Syrian National Army (SNA) manage selected checkpoints, as the lines are blurred significantly in these occupied areas. Since the bordering Turkish provincial administration often handles these territories, they also work border crossings. For example, the formerly Kurdish-controlled region of Afrin is now controlled by Hatay's provincial administration, and the Urfa provincial administration controls the Turkish-occupied area around Tel Abiyad and Ras al-Ain ⁽⁸⁾.

Therefore, although the Syrian constitution states in Article 11 that the Syrian army and the armed forces are responsible for defending the security of the country and its territorial integrity, this reality has changed not only with the Turkish occupation of bordering territory but also with

6 UNOCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (25.4.2023): Türkiye Syria: Border Crossings Status (18 April 2023), <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/turkiye-syria-border-crossings-status-18-april-2023-enartr>, accessed 9.8.2023

7 CMEC - Carnegie Middle East Center (30.3.2022): Border Nation: The Reshaping of the Syrian-Turkish Borderlands, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2022/03/30/border-nation-reshaping-of-syrian-turkish-borderlands-pub-86758>, accessed 10.10.2023 [Login required]

8 NPA - North Press Agency (1.9.2023): Turkey's appointing single governor in north Syria step towards division, <https://npasyria.com/en/103740>, accessed 5.10.2023

the overall war in Syria. The presence of various other actors that seized land since the start of the conflict in 2011 also led to them taking on de facto control of various border posts.

Regarding the border to Turkey in the northwest, only the Kasab border crossing is under formal Syrian army control but has been closed since 2012^(9; 10). In contrast, all other border crossings to Turkey from Samira to Atmeh are controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist group consisting of former elements of the Syrian opposition, the Syrian al-Qaida, and former Islamic State (ISIS) members. The presence of former and current ISIS members in these areas has become most apparent as high-ranking ISIS leaders have repeatedly been found and executed directly at the border to Turkey, like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, and on May 1, 2023, Abu Hussein al-Qurayshi, the latest leader of ISIS. In the middle of those HTS border areas of control is the Bab al-Hawa crossing, the only official UN access point channeling humanitarian aid. While officially managed by the UN, HTS de facto controls the border and earns significant revenue from taxes and customs duties collected and from cross-border drug trafficking⁽¹¹⁾. Borders in Turkish-occupied areas are controlled by Turkish forces and, in some cases, Turkish-backed mercenaries⁽¹²⁾.

Going more eastward, most of the northern border, from the eastern Euphrates area to the border triangle between Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, is sealed by the Turkish border wall completed in December 2017. Although AANES controls territory bordering Turkey, there is not a single open border crossing and hence no border control there. During past military incursions of Turkey into Syria, AANES has called upon Syria to take on its duty of border protection because the AANES defines itself as a domestic autonomous project and not an administration that takes on state roles, for example, the defense of national integrity. While during the invasion of Afrin and the Peace Spring Campaign in 2019, Assad made moves to approach the border, it did not effectively stop the Turkish incursion and only helped Assad expand his reach in AANES⁽¹³⁾. It is also important to mention that a big part of the border city of Qamishlo is still under the formal control of the Syrian government, along with the local airport. There are occasional lines of contact between the Assad government and AANES, especially when it comes to access to the Tel Rifaat region, which is under AANES control but isolated from the rest of the administration. However, this contact is not formalized and subjected to heavy changes. The fact that Assad and Iran-backed elements were apparently involved in the recent escalations in Deir ez-Zor has also worsened the contact between Assad and AANES^(14; 15).

9 UNOCHA 25.4.2023 - cf. 6

10 RCRSS - Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies (14.2.2021): The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria – rawabt center, <https://rawabetcenter.com/en/?p=7818>, accessed 5.10.2023

11 CSIS - Center for Strategic and International Studies (3.8.2023): Examining Extremism: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>, accessed 19.9.2023

12 TWI/Balanche - Balanche, Fabrice (Author), Washington Institute for Near East Policy, The (Publisher) (10.2.2021): The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assad-regime-has-failed-restore-full-sovereignty-over-syria>, accessed 30.8.2023

13 TWI/Balanche 10.2.2021 - cf. 12

14 NLM - New Lines Magazine (4.9.2023): Assad's Hidden Hand in the Uprising Against the Kurds in Eastern Syria, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assads-hidden-hand-in-the-uprising-against-the-kurds-in-eastern-syria>, accessed 5.10.2023

15 Akif - Akif. K. (5.9.2023): Interview on the Border Situation of AANES with Foreign Relations Spokesperson of AANES, Transcript available from the author

2.2 Arbitrariness, Permeability, and Corruption

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The border areas between Turkey, HTS territory in Syria, and Turkish-occupied parts in northwest Syria are some of the most dangerous in the region. Turkey has used systemic torture ⁽¹⁶⁾ and killed hundreds of Syrians and Syrian Kurds on both sides of its border (HRW, Turkish Border Guards Torture, Kill Syrians, 2023). The number of unlawful deportations of Syrian refugees over this border is rising consistently, with reportedly 2000 in July 2023 alone (Ras, Hundreds of Syrians left in limbo after being deported from Turkey, 2023), although Turkey receives significant EU support to cater for this demography.

Specifically in Turkish-occupied areas formerly under Kurdish control, Syrian-Turkish borderlands have become an area of transnational repression in the overall Turkish warfare against the Kurdish population. Human Rights Watch was among the first to unearth systematic kidnappings of Syrian Kurds to Turkey who were alleged to have worked with AANES that Turkey regards as an offspring of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), at least 63 between 2019 and 2020 ⁽¹⁷⁾. Specifically, gender-based violence against Kurdish women in Turkish-occupied Afrin is rampant, with the abduction of at least 173 women and 150 of them still missing ⁽¹⁸⁾. In areas still under Kurdish control, the border wall and its impermeability of it has led to the separation of hundreds of families, an ever-worsening economic isolation, and an isolation to humanitarian goods. Support for the many refugee camps in AANES only comes through the Semalka border crossing to Iraq and the KRI. Humanitarian aid brought to northwest Syria via Bab el-Hawa is almost exclusively staying in these areas, creating extreme inequality between refugees. This has become most apparent when, during the COVID-19 crisis, both northwest Syrian and regime areas could obtain vaccines as both are internationally acknowledged entities. At the same time, AANES relied on the mercy of these actors' willingness to share the vaccine shipments and the influx of vaccines via KRI ⁽¹⁹⁾. Another recent example was the earthquake in February 2023, during which systematically people in areas of AANES control and Kurdish people under former AANES control were deprived of humanitarian aid ^(20; 21).

While AANES areas are highly isolated and their borders hardly have any permeability, Turkish-controlled and even HTS-controlled regions have developed a solid socioeconomic connection to Turkey ⁽²²⁾. The tremendous humanitarian access to northwest Syria is accompanied by arbitrariness and permanent violence by HTS forces. Repeatedly, HTS attacks humanitarian

16 NH - New Humanitarian, The (25.7.2023): The heavy toll of violence at the Syria-Türkiye border, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2023/07/25/heavy-toll-violence-Syria-Turkiye-border>, accessed 5.10.2023

17 HRW - Human Rights Watch (3.2.2021): Illegal Transfers of Syrians to Turkey, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/03/illegal-transfers-syrians-turkey>, accessed 20.9.2023

18 KuPI - Kurdish Peace Institute (13.2.2023): Discrimination Made the Turkey-Syria Earthquake More Deadly, <https://www.kurdishpeace.org/research/civil-society/discrimination-made-the-turkey-syria-earthquake-more-deadly>, accessed 5.10.2023

19 SYD - Syria Direct (4.5.2021): COVID-19 vaccines reach Syria amid warnings of discrimination in access, <https://syriadirect.org/covid-19-vaccines-reach-syria-amid-warnings-of-discrimination-in-access>, accessed 5.10.2023

20 KuPI 13.2.2023 - cf. 18

21 AI - Amnesty International (6.3.2023): Vital earthquake aid blocked or diverted in Aleppo's desperate hour of need, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/syria-vital-earthquake-aid-blocked-or-diverted-in-aleppos-desperate-hour-of-need>, accessed 5.10.2023

22 CMEC 30.3.2022 - cf. 7

convoys, extorts money from groups crossing the border, and unfairly distributes goods. HTS attacks Syrian civilians trying to cross the border (The New Arab, 2022). Because of internal displacement and unlawful deportations, the Idlib region, as well as Turkish-controlled areas, has an ever-growing number of residents ⁽²³⁾. Consequently, the area has become a lucrative market for Turkish products and a 'transnational economy' ⁽²⁴⁾, where the Turkish Lira is preferred to the Syrian pound.

2.3 Patterns of Opening and Closing of Borders

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The opening and closing of points along the Syria-Turkey border is highly dependent on the UN Security Council and Turkey, where these former actors' decisions are also strongly connected to those of the latter. Turkey exerts pressure on the international community to keep up the isolation of AANES, and the Security Council members veto the use of other UN crossings, like Yaaroubiya connecting AANES and Iraq, do so for this reason ⁽²⁵⁾. Turkey being a vital actor in a) keeping refugees away from Europe b) supporting Ukraine in the war with Russia while having unique diplomatic access to Russia for questions such as the opening of its Black Sea corridor for Ukrainian exports, and c) the expansion of NATO in Scandinavia, both the west and the Russia-Assad axis seek to cater to Turkish requests. Russian influence also plays a significant role in its own right, as it balances its interest to keep opposition areas weak enough not to restart large-scale fighting against Assad while keeping them self-reliant sufficient so that the millions of IDPs living in Idlib will not become the responsibility of the Assad regime that already has massive economic and fiscal problems ⁽²⁶⁾.

3 Syria-Iraq Border

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The Syria-Iraq border stretches approximately 599 kilometers. This border, marked by mostly flat desert spaces, is most known for originating in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, formerly dividing the French mandate on the west and the British mandate on the right after WW1. It has witnessed a complex history of geopolitical tensions, conflicts, and border disputes. The border was always heavily militarized because of the tension between the rivaling Syrian and Iraqi Baa'athi regimes ⁽²⁷⁾.

Although both the Kurdish, Yezidi, and Arab populations along the border have always had transnational relations, an overt permeability between the boundaries was always hindered by both countries, with the crossings being shut down entirely during the 1990s isolation of Iraq under international sanctions ⁽²⁸⁾. This worsened the security situation and led the border areas in Arab areas to become both major smuggling hubs, supporting the isolated Saddam regime,

23 CMEC 30.3.2022 - cf. 7

24 CMEC 30.3.2022 - cf. 7

25 CSIS - Center for Strategic and International Studies (4.6.2021): The Implications of the UN Cross-Border Vote in Syria, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/implications-un-cross-border-vote-syria>, accessed 5.10.2023

26 Harmoon - Harmoon Center (23.11.2022): Why an Assad advance on Idlib is unlikely, <https://www.harmoon.org/en/reports/why-an-assad-advance-on-idlib-is-unlikely/>, accessed 5.10.2023

27 XCEPT 31.3.2020 - cf. 1

28 XCEPT 31.3.2020 - cf. 1

and by this illicit trade enriching tribal actors there that quickly turned from Saddam loyalists to Islamists later ⁽²⁹⁾. The southern border crossings between Syria and Iraq became the most notorious for the influx of Islamists like Abū Mus‘ab az-Zarqāwī, who famously repeatedly crossed the Syrian border region to Iraq to build up the Iraqi branch of al-Qaida that later became ISIS ⁽³⁰⁾.

After the start of the Syrian civil war, the area quickly fell out of regime control, with the north being controlled by a small part by the Kurdish-led forces proclaiming their autonomy in 2012 and various Arab oppositional groups that later, by a large majority, turned into ISIS members and ultimately gave ISIS vast access to this area after 2014 ⁽³¹⁾.

This region was highly significant in the war against ISIS in recent years as it was a focal point for counter-terrorism efforts. The more the US-backed Kurdish troops of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) pushed forward, the more they also gained control of the border area. The heart of the border area around Deir ez-Zor is also where the territorial war against ISIS gravitated. Some main crossings along this border are the Yaarubiyah, Al-Qaim, and Semalka border crossings. While Yaarubiyah is closed, Al-Qaim is partially open and under control of Iranian-backed Groups, Semalka is open and connecting the Kurdish-led AANES with the KRI.

3.1 Actors of Control and Their relations

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The Syria-Iraq border region continues its contested history and is today an area where various actors wield influence on both sides of the divide. Currently, the crossing between Bukamal and al-Qaim is the only official open border between Syria and Iraq. Another open border crossing is the unofficial Semalka crossing between KRI and AANES.

29 CMEC - Carnegie Middle East Center (2.9.2019): Much More Than a Border, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79743>, accessed 10.10.2023 [Login required]

30 Wilson - Wilson Center (28.10.2019): Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>, accessed 4.7.2023

31 Al-Baalbaky/Mhidi - Al-Baalbaky, R, Mhidi, A. (21.12.2018): Tribes and the Rule of the 'Islamic State': The Case of the Syrian City pf Deir Ez-Zor, <https://www.kas.de/documents/266761/4421641/Tribes+and+the+Rule+of+the+Islamic+State+Organization+-+Part+2.pdf/f342c609-141b-ea69-b30a-6ce01676661a?version=1.2&t=1545397267940>, accessed 5.10.2023

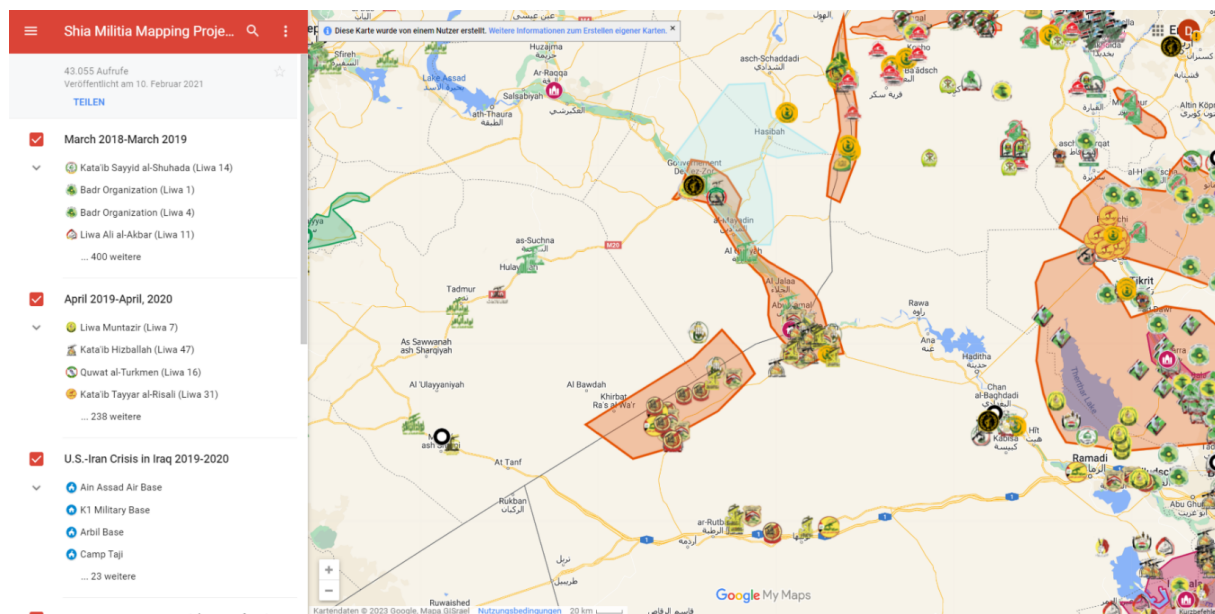


Figure: : Cut out from the Washington Institutes Shia Militia Mapping Project showing the Syria-Iraq border crossing ⁽³²⁾

In Syria, especially in the southern reaches near Deir ez-Zor, the Syrian government led by Bashar al-Assad and its associated forces, alongside Iran-backed groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah, exert considerable control. Recent clashes between local Arab tribes supported by these groups and SDF forces show that the regime and Iranian-backed groups plan to expand their control area ⁽³³⁾. The border crossing between Bukamal on the Syrian side and Al-Qaim on the Iraqi side is in complete control of the regime and on the Syrian side by Iranian-backed groups. It's important to note that Iran-backed militias extend their influence into Iraq, particularly in the border regions, further complicating the situation. However, since the border crossings reopening in 2019 it is increasingly under state control on the Iraqi side ⁽³⁴⁾

On the Iraqi side of the border, the central government in Baghdad holds nominal authority as the Iraqi constitution of 2005 states in Article 110 that the federal government has exclusive jurisdiction to protect the Iraqi national border. However, Iran-backed militias with varying degrees of autonomy challenge this state authority ⁽³⁵⁾. This dynamic highlights the intricate political control that characterizes both sides of the border, with Iran's influence reaching deep into Iraq and Syria. In addition, the US maintains a strategic presence at the Al-Tanf military base to the southwest of the border, aimed at countering ISIS and curbing Iran's expanding reach in the region.

The areas north of Deir ez-Zor are controlled by AANES, especially their military police, the Asayîş and the AANES Border Control Association (Sazîya Reveberîya Sinor) led by Rodî Emîn. On the other side, the Iraqi army, Hashd al-Shaabi groups, and further in the north, the KRI and their border guards hold control. Since the 2020 Russian and Chinese Security Council

33 NLM 4.9.2023 - cf. 14

34 AS2 - Anonymous source 2 (19.9.2023): Interview with Official of Iraqi Border Guard, Transcript available from the author

35 XCEPT 31.3.2020 - cf. 1

veto, the border crossing of Yaaroubiya was closed and is now only occasionally opened for US military movement ⁽³⁶⁾. Just 60km north of this crossing is the Semalka border crossing between KRI and AANES. It was opened in 2012 by the KRI with the construction of a pontoon bridge over the Tigris River. Only a few Kilometers around this crossing are under KRI control on the Iraqi side. However, the rest formally belong to federal Iraqi territory with a significant Hashd al Shaabi presence on the border. Although Hashd al Shaabi was officially integrated into the Iraqi army in 2018, most components directly relate to the Iranian chain of command, most notably that of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Council (IRGC).

In the Yazidi territories in Northwest Iraq, the Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şingal (YBŞ), are part of the Hashd al Shaabi militia network as well. The Yazidi militant group formed itself during the resistance against the Islamic State and its genocide in 2014 against the Yazidi population, which could be saved by a cross-border corridor created by PKK militants leading into AANES territory. However, this cross-border control was ended the Iraqi army started the construction of a wall west of the area controlled by YBŞ, most likely under Turkish pressure ⁽³⁷⁾. Therefore, Turkish interference in Iraq is one of the greatest power limitations to Hashd al Shaabi as an umbrella group.

3.2 Arbitrariness, Permeability, and Corruption

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For civilians, except for the Semalka border crossing, the border is not easily permeable and, for the most part, hazardous. Areas under the control of Kataib Hezbollah and Assad are notorious for their smuggling routes across the border, especially for the trade of drugs like Captagon, which are one of the most important revenue sources for the Assad regime but also for the Iranian government ⁽³⁸⁾. Many ISIS sleeper cells and tribal elements supporting ISIS are also active around the Deir ez-Zor area, which also makes the border dangerous from this security aspect. The more northern borderlines divided by the newly constructed wall are heavily securitized and surveyed.

As the Semalka border is not acknowledged by either Syria or Iraq, crossing the border in both directions is pro forma an illegal border crossing, which is, however, in most cases not persecuted as both sides of the border are under Kurdish control. The crossing is lucrative for AANES and KRI as AANES is exporting its crude oil to KRI and cheap livestock and grain. At the same time, KRI facilitates the export of construction materials into AANES like Iron bars and cement, which KRI imports from Turkey and Iran ⁽³⁹⁾.

The issue of corruption in AANES, especially with its most valuable export, crude oil, is of rising importance. Most famously, the US oil contractor Delta Crecent Energy LLC secured a deal

36 Akif 5.9.2023 - cf. 15

37 Al-Monitor - Al-Monitor (3.5.2022): Is Turkey behind border wall, Iraqi deployment in Sinjar?, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/turkey-behind-border-wall-iraqi-deployment-sinjar>, accessed 5.10.2023

38 XCEPT 31.3.2020 - cf. 1

39 Akif 5.9.2023 - cf. 15

with the administration in 2019 to develop oil fields south of AANES ⁽⁴⁰⁾. However, to this day, specifics about these exports' scale, revenue, and taxation are unclear. Repeated reports come up of influential salesmen who become rich very quickly as they secure exclusive access to the import or export of specific goods, while the administration has a hard time regulating prices. As the issue of corruption at KRI borders is linked to the overall KRI border administration, it will be discussed in the next subchapter on the Turkey-Iraq border.

3.3 Patterns of Opening and Closing of Borders

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Border closings mostly happen in Kurdish border areas, specifically at the Yaaroubiya and Semalka border crossings. The Semalka border crossing is occasionally closed for different political reasons by KRI when intra-party fighting erupts, especially between the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, which dominates AANES. However, these blockades do not hold long as the trade is enormously lucrative for both sides. Channels of diplomatic exchange exist between the autonomies ⁽⁴¹⁾. However, since the start of Turkey's Claw Eagle Operations in 2019 ⁽⁴²⁾, there has been heightened pressure by Turkey on both KRI and Iraq to keep borders closed to isolate AANES, which has led to the construction of the aforementioned border wall.

4 Turkey-Iraq Border

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The Turkey-Iraq border stretches over 367km and is the shortest in this analysis. It is also distinct from the other two frontiers under observation in that it leads through the mountainous territory of the Zagros mountains. Furthermore, it is much more permeable than the Turkey-Syria and the Syria-Iraq border. It is connected by one official border crossing, the Habur-Zaxo border crossing, also known as Ibrahim Khalil, and two unofficial ones, between Çukurca Üzümlü and Serzeri, as well as the newly inaugurated border crossing between Derecik and Zet. Economically and politically, the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing opened in 1969 is the most important, facilitating most Turkish on-the-ground exports to Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. The Üzümlü Serzeri crossing was opened in 2015, and the Derecik Zet crossing in 2023 ⁽⁴³⁾. Both are located more eastward in Duhok province bordering the Turkish province of Hakkâri. These crossings are furthermore less suited for large-scale trade but more frequently used by tourists, as the Ibrahim Khalil crossing is notoriously busy, and such travel-only crossings shall relieve the Habur border. On both sides of the border, Kurds comprise most of the population. Two other unofficial border crossings existed respectively in Gülyazı and Şemdinli in 2012 and 2011, but both were closed.

40 TWI - Washington Institute for Near East Policy, The (31.5.2023): The Inside Story of How Trump 'Kept the Oil' in Syria and Lost, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-story-how-trump-kept-oil-syria-and-lost>, accessed 5.10.2023

41 Akif 5.9.2023 - cf. 15

42 TC - The Commentaries (14.2.2022): Kurdish Allies and Kurdish Enemies: Turkey's New War Against The PKK, <https://journals.tplondon.com/com/article/view/2101/2056>, accessed 5.10.2023

43 Rudaw - Rudaw Media Network (10.5.2023): Kurdistan Region, Turkey inaugurate new border crossing, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/10052023>, accessed 5.10.2023

4.1 Actors of Control and Their Relations

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As stated, Iraq holds formal control of borders. Furthermore, after the failed Kurdish independence referendum of September 2017, the Iraqi government only allowed normalization of relations to the Kurdish autonomy after regaining complete control of border posts after KRI Peshmerga de facto managed these. However, although Iraqi personnel are deployed at border posts, the official border crossing of Ibrahim Khalil and all other border crossings to Turkey and Syria, which the federal Iraqi government does not acknowledge, are under Kurdish control. Specifically, the office of the Ibrahim Khalil Border Crossing is under the direct command of the KRI Interior Ministry, and the representative in charge of the crossing is the KDP official Hamid Ali Spindari, who was previously an official in the party's Parastin intelligence service. The KDP security forces deployed are the Zeravani and the 180 Peshmerga forces. The so-called Roj Peshmerga, a specific unit consisting of Syrian Kurds loyal to the Barzani family, also controls the border to AANES.

Like the Syrian-Turkish case, Turkey uses state and non-state forces to secure and manage its border. The border guards already mentioned in chapter two control the border to KRI as well, and ever since the start of the Claw Operations in 2019, increasingly along with regular Turkish army forces, special forces, and MIT personnel. Furthermore, a growing number of village guards, so-called Korucular, are taking over border security. Turkey installed the village guard system in the 1990s to arm local Kurdish tribes in the war against the PKK, hiring people from different grand clans. At the Turkish-Iraqi border, these are mostly the Goyi, Jirki, Babat and Ertushi tribes. As most of the fighting in the Turkish-PKK war has shifted from Turkish territory to Turkish borderlands in the last years (International Crisis Group, 2023), these guards that used to be deployed primarily in villages where PKK fighters used to get support have become a border force ⁽⁴⁴⁾.

Turkey and the ruling KDP have traditionally always had a close link in their joint fight against the PKK, and this link has intensified during the mentioned Claw Operations since 2019 ⁽⁴⁵⁾. Direct cooperation exists between the Turkish armed forces, the MIT, and KDP elements. This link also includes the village guards, where, through tribal and political connections, different families and the KDP leadership are in contact. There are also reports that the village guards who are Kurds from Turkey also get registered in KRI and get funding from the payroll of the KDP Peshmerga ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Village guards are not only used as security forces but also reportedly for the large-scale deforestation in this border area and the construction of streets for greater military access, which falls into the greater pattern of militarization and almost complete depopulation of the frontier ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

44 AS1 - Anonymous source 1 (4.9.2023): Interview with Independent Iraqi-Kurdish Journalist Focusing on Border Issues in KRI, Transcript available from the author

45 TC 14.2.2022 - cf. 42

46 AQ1 4.9.2023 - cf. 44

47 AQ1 4.9.2023 - cf. 44

4.2 Arbitrariness, Permeability, and Corruption

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The Turkish-Iraqi border used to be a hub of smuggling activities of different Kurdish actors in the economically underprivileged regions of southeast Turkey. However, the mentioned militarization of the borderlands has almost wholly eradicated smuggling and, hence, irregular border crossings. Except for very experienced PKK personnel, no one can cross the Turkish-Iraqi and the trilateral borderlands with Syria. Most refugees even obtain visas to pass to Turkey legally with their smugglers. With the very tight connection between Turkey and KRI, however, it is easy for KRI tourists and travelers to pass to Turkey, and if individuals have no political affiliations that counter KDP or Turkey, they can easily pass the border.

Corruption is widespread with both border guards on the Turkish and KRI side. It is still usual that Turkish border guards handle crossings more quickly if they obtain goods in exchange, for example, cigarettes. The double payment system that village guards profit from has also led to heightened tensions among the population on the Turkish side, where Kurds without affiliations to the Turkish state or the village guard system find themselves migrating in increased numbers to the urban centers of Turkey and even Europe ⁽⁴⁸⁾. The financial crisis and Erdogan's continued securitization of the Kurdish question in Turkey have curbed this. Many who used only to be able to make a living by smuggling have left the region altogether ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

The most lucrative corruption happens on the level of cigarette and alcohol imports to KRI. These imports are also controlled by high-ranking KDP personnel, and they illegally import these goods without duties to sell them much more expensively in KRI. The greatest export of KRI is oil, and since the construction of the pipeline connection to Turkey in 2014, these exports have happened in a large scale without any transparency. Land exports are comparatively rare. However, imports to KRI through Ibrahim Khalil are extensive and far more valuable than trade on all other border crossings discussed in this analysis. However, no public records of duties and taxes collected by KRI respectively KDP exist for this crucial crossing.

In many cases, reports exist that politicians are paid, and large-scale construction projects are paid for by the revenue of Ibrahim Khalil, but there are no traceable calculations ⁽⁵⁰⁾. This is the case for all border crossings under Ibrahim Khalil border office control, hence also the Semalka crossing through which oil from AANES is exported. As KRI is repeatedly in waves of fiscal crisis and outright inability to pay public servants wages, the topic of border corruption is of great importance in public discourse on this topic.

4.3 Patterns of Opening and Closing of Borders

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Except for the weeks following the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017, the Turkish-Iraqi border crossings are open and expanding steadily in trade volume and political importance. Only occasionally, when the Iraqi federal government voices dissatisfaction with

48 AQ1 4.9.2023 - cf. 44

49 AQ1 4.9.2023 - cf. 44

50 AQ1 4.9.2023 - cf. 44

the existence of unofficial border crossings built by KRI, those are closed for a few days until Baghdad's attention fades (⁵¹).

However, Turkey's weak point is that an economically important border crossing like Ibrahim Khalil is in KRI's hands. Although Turkey and the ruling KDP have been working relentlessly together in the last three decades, any form of Kurdish dependence is problematic for the country. This is why on the Ovaköy-Derebun border directly at the corner to Syria, Turkey is trying to open a new extensive border crossing to have a link to Mosul via Tel Afar instantly and, hence, avoid KRI territory all together while having a firmer grip on the tripartite border area. With the political-sectarian clashes that happened in September 2023 in Kirkuk (⁵²), Turkey also has a political interest to claim territory with this new route. Cities like Tel Afar are situated in the so-called disputed territories of Iraq, a region set between KRI and federal Iraq where many minorities, including Yazidis, Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen, live (⁵³). Incorporating this area and the Turkmen population into the national territory of Turkey has always been a cornerstone of Turkish nationalist thought, especially referring to the 1920 Misak-ı Milli demarcation plan (turk.: National Pact), which was drafted and decided by the Ottoman Parliament with strong influence of the later supporters of Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Erdogan repeatedly referred to this plan, saying that Turkish expansion into Syria and Iraq is legitimate and reflects the ethnic distribution of Turkic people in the region (⁵⁴). Therefore, these border construction plans are to be taken seriously in a volatile political setting in the whole area with Turkey at the center of it. The most crucial factor of the openness and the setting of this border is Turkey's political ambitions and, most importantly, their respective approach to their Kurdish question.

51 AQ1 4.9.2023 - cf. 44

52 DW - Deutsche Welle (3.9.2023): Iraq: Ethnic clashes in Kirkuk kill 4 protesters, <https://www.dw.com/en/iraq-ethnic-clashes-in-kirkuk-kill-4-protesters/a-66706261>, accessed 5.10.2023

53 Clingendael - Clingendael - The Netherlands Institute of International Relations (16.8.2018): In the eye of the storm? (In)stability in Western Iraqi Kurdistan, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/in-the-eye-of-the-storm.pdf>, accessed 5.10.2023

54 Politico - Politico (27.10.2016): Erdogan pursues his plan for even greater power, <https://www.politico.eu/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-pursues-his-plan-for-even-greater-power-turkish-president-akp>, accessed 5.10.2023



Figure: : Planned new border crossing and access route to Iraq by Turkey (Own illustration based on ⁽⁵⁵⁾)



Figure: : Misak-i Millî Plan of 1920 ⁽⁵⁶⁾

5 Conclusion

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The analysis has shown that the borderlands between Turkey, Syria and Iraq continue to wield significant influence over the contemporary Middle East. We can hardly talk about conventional politically managed and permeable borders, but in most cases, evacuated war zones where thousands of people lived decades ago, especially along the northern border. Existing bilateral agreements are hardly of value where hegemonial powers and substate actors, often in relation to the powers, control dealings. One striking aspect of these borders is their state of closure and militarization. Many of these border regions have been transformed into restricted military zones, mainly under the control of Turkey and further south, influenced by Iran. These militarized zones reflect the heightened tensions and competition for regional dominance.

The Kurdish population, predominantly residing in the northern border regions, continues to view these borders as artificial constructs that divide their linguistic, social, and familial territories. Additionally, de jure and de facto Kurdish autonomies, such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), have asserted their presence and influence in these areas. The example of the humanitarian corridor from Iraq to Syria in 2014 that saved thousands of Yazidi lives from ISIS shows how the permeability of these borders can be a lifesaver where ethnic cleansing and war are present to day. However, Turkey's concerns regarding the AANES have prompted extensive measures, including constructing one of the world's longest border walls to Syria and initiating the construction of one between Syria and Iraq, which have cut this line. At the same time, populations like Kurds in AANES or Yazidis in northwest Iraq can not rely on state protection. The issue of border openings and closings,

as well as the constraints on freedom of movement, remains contentious. This affects the movement of people and the flow of goods and resources, holding significant implications for regional politics and economics.

In summary, the border regions shaped by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne serve as critical focal points in a region deeply influenced by transnational wars and geopolitical rivalries. The militarization and closures of many of these borders underscore the enduring tensions and power struggles, highlighting the need for continued analysis and diplomatic efforts to address the multifaceted challenges faced by these nations and the people residing within these complex borderlands.

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