

Turkey's post-2011 approach to its Syrian border and its implications for domestic politics

ASLI S. OKYAY*

This article examines the implications of the post-2011 conflict in Syria for the relationship between Turkey's border politics and its domestic politics. The analysis demonstrates, first, that Turkey saw an opportunity to enhance its regional influence through a reconfiguration of the power structure in post-conflict Syria; and, second, that it perceived a threat to its centralized nation-state model in the increasingly intense mobilization of Kurdish nationalism and its territorial claims. The combination of these two factors explains the shifts in its border management modalities, particularly up to mid-2015, after which it progressively sealed off its border. The state's shifting and differential patterns of border management in this period contributed in turn to the accentuation and politicization of the ethnic and sectarian identity boundaries permeating society and politics in Turkey. While touching upon important recent developments with implications for Turkey's border management pattern, the analysis focuses particularly on the period up to the summer of 2015. This is because that period was characterized by major fluctuations in the border management pattern, which generated high levels of contestation and made border politics a central issue on the domestic political agenda. Since mid-2015, the state's border management modality has remained unchanged, and the sealing off of the entire border has continued, along with Turkey's increasing direct transborder military involvement in the Syrian conflict. This seems to have reduced the relative salience of border politics in public debate and contestation, and to have limited its impact on domestic political dynamics.

Turkey's approach to its Syrian border has traditionally been conditioned by two factors: first, Ankara's position *vis-à-vis* the regime in Syria, which has been

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embedded in broader regional and international dynamics; and second, Turkey's concern over safeguarding its territorial integrity and centralized nation-state model against the threat posed by Kurdish nationalist mobilization within and beyond its borders. This second factor has entangled the state's domestic and regional foreign policy interests. Post-2011 dynamics in Syria had a marked impact on Turkey's perception of opportunities and threats, which homed in on two core interests: catalysing a reconfiguration of power, in which the Assad regime would be replaced by a predominantly Sunni Islamist power elite; and impeding the emergence of a Kurdish state, or governance structure with increased autonomous powers and territorial control. Turkey's instrumental use of the border to pursue these interests, combined with the effects of its liberal refugee admission policy on cross-border movement patterns, led to a rather loosely controlled and considerably porous border early in the conflict. While these interests remained largely unchanged, the state's readjustment of its strategies in response to changing power configurations, and newly arising threats emanating from the neighbouring conflict, led to a partial securitization and more selective permeability of the border in 2013 and 2014, and to progressively intensified securitization and closure from mid-2015 onwards.

The analysis presented here will demonstrate that the ways in which border politics linked the civil war situation in Syria with Turkey became highly politicized in the domestic realm between 2011 and 2015, illustrating the increasingly interconnected nature of domestic and international politics in the region post-2011. The perception held by some societal and political actors, that the border functioned as a gateway for some, and as a barrier for others, to some extent reflecting the state's ethno-sectarian preferences, gave rise to a high degree of contestation, and further deepening of ethnic and sectarian cleavages within Turkey.

The case of Turkey is significant in understanding the overall impact of the political transition processes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since 2011 on patterns of border management, on the degree of interdependence between domestic and international politics, on the links between state borders and identity boundaries, and on state–society relations. First, the analysis shows two contradictory types of impact on state border management patterns, conditioned by regional states' post-2011 perceptions of opportunities and threats. Cases of swift and profound political transformation in the aftermath of the upheavals encouraged some states' aspirations to influence reconfigurations of power in other transition contexts in such a way as to enhance their own regional standing. At the same time, a defensive position gained strength: this favoured the maintenance of the regional status quo, as well as the safeguarding of the modern state model based on the congruence between authority, territory and population. This defensive position was informed by the observation that some transition processes generated fragmented states, torn by violent conflict, where various non-state actors challenged the central authority, the idea of centralized authority as an essential pillar of statehood, or the regional state system itself.

The case of Turkey shows, first, that states' pursuit of enhanced regional power through involvement in an external conflict via proxies might lead them to tolerate

the blurring of their own borders, even though this may seem to contradict an essential attribute of statehood and sovereignty. It also demonstrates that the defensive position of seeking to impede the empowerment of those who challenge the status quo might result in not only the hardening but also, paradoxically, the blurring of borders. Second, the case of Turkey shows that in a context such as that of the MENA region after 2011, which has been progressively interconnected, not only as a result of situations of fragmented sovereignty, but also through heightened politicization of sub- and transnational identities, border politics has the capacity to deepen the interdependence between domestic and international politics, and to contribute to further accentuation of existing ethno-sectarian identities within the domestic sphere. In Turkey, border politics shifted in relation to the neighbouring conflict, particularly before the state adopted an approach of full-fledged securitization and closure in mid-2015. Border politics played a significant role in reinforcing ethno-sectarian cleavages, exacerbated by the perception of the state's patterns of border management by certain societal sections as discriminatory or assimilatory. The intensified politicization of identity boundaries as a response to Turkey's contentious border politics highlights the unease haunting most centralized states in the MENA region about how to accommodate minorities.

The Turkey–Syria border before 2011: border politics as a function of the state's perceptions of threat and opportunity

The border between Turkey and Syria displays characteristics of what are popularly regarded as 'artificial Sykes–Picot borders'.¹ First, it is, like many borders in the region, an outcome of the colonial engineering that took place after the First World War. The demarcation line, first agreed on by the French and the incipient Turkish government in 1921, was revised in 1939 when Turkey annexed the predominantly Turkish-speaking Alexandretta (now Hatay province) through another agreement signed with France, despite the objections of the Syrian authorities.² Second, border drawing, here as elsewhere in the region, did not follow the logic of the diverse and occasionally overlapping identity markers characterizing local populations. As a result, border areas have been home to multi-ethnic and multiconfessional populations with trans-state affiliations. In Syria, while there are small groups of Armenians, Circassians, Chechens and Arabic-speaking Christians in the areas near the Turkish border, the bigger minorities inhabiting these areas are the Kurds (8.9 per cent of the total population) and—predominantly Alevi—Turkmen (0.7 per cent of the total population).³ While Turkey has not provided census statistics on ethnicity or religious affiliation since 1965, the composition

¹ For a critical discussion on the popular use of the artificiality claim, see Louise Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East: myths and realities', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 789–807.

² Emma Lundgren-Jorum, 'The importance of the unimportant: understanding Syrian policies towards Hatay, 1939–2012', in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, eds, *Turkey–Syria relations: between enmity and amity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 111–25.

³ See the map of the Columbia University Gulf/2000 Project, 'Syria: ethnic composition', <http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 22 May 2017.)

of Antakya—in Hatay province—gives an idea of the multicultural demography at the borderlands (although it should be acknowledged that it is the epitome of multiconfessional socio-demographic composition): three Arabic-speaking communities, namely, Alawite Muslims (30 per cent), Sunni Muslims (10–15 per cent) and Orthodox Christians (2 per cent), make up half of the entire population.⁴ The Kurds, whose share in Turkey’s population is estimated at around 18 per cent,⁵ inhabit the borderlands further east, adjacent to predominantly Kurdish areas in Syria. This mismatch between state borders and identity boundaries has posed a challenge to state elites—either side of the border—with idealized conceptions of borders as neatly demarcating state territory, containing population and marking the identity of the nation.⁶

Turkey’s management of its border with Syria has traditionally been conditioned by two factors: first, Ankara’s position *vis-à-vis* Damascus, which has been embedded in broader regional and international dynamics; second, Turkey’s concern to safeguard its territorial integrity and centralized nation-state model against the threat posed by Kurdish nationalist mobilization within and beyond its borders. Antagonistic bilateral relations and perceptions of threat translated into hard and securitized borders, while improved relations and a greater perception of opportunity translated into a softening of the border, changing its function from that of separation to that of integration.

Antagonistic relations under Cold War conditions led to heavy mining and militarization of the border from the mid-1950s on. When the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: Kurdish Workers’ Party) embarked on its secessionist guerrilla warfare against the Turkish state in 1984 and started to use northern Syria as an operational base for its violent attacks, Turkey’s perception of threat to its territorial integrity and the degree of antagonism between the neighbouring states increased, resulting in further securitization of the border.⁷ Bilateral relations started to improve, and the threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity posed from within Syria to decrease, after 1998, when Syria deported the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and closed down PKK camps—under pressure from Turkey which had included the threat of military intervention.⁸

While improved bilateral relations began to have softening effects on the border and in the borderlands from 1998,⁹ the main change in Turkey’s border management approach took place following the shift in regional foreign policy during the single-party AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi: Justice and Development Party)

⁴ Fulya Doğruel and Johan Leman, “‘Conduct’ and ‘counter-conduct’ on the southern border of Turkey: multicultural Antakya”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 45: 4, 2009, pp. 593–610 at p. 593.

⁵ Tarhan Erdem, “Türkiye’li Kürtler ne kadar?” [How numerous are the Kurds of Turkey?], *Radikal*, 18 April 2013.

⁶ For a discussion on the function of the border as an ‘identity marker’, see Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: territories and state formation in the modern world* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), p. 2.

⁷ Kemal Kirişçi, *Border management and EU–Turkish relations: convergence or deadlock?*, research report RSCAS 2007/03 (Fiesole: European University Institute, 2007), p. 19.

⁸ Meliha Altunışık and Özlem Tür, ‘From distant neighbors to partners? Changing Syrian–Turkish relations’, *Security Dialogue* 37: 2, 2006, pp. 229–48 at pp. 236–8.

⁹ Julide Karakoç and Fulya Doğruel, ‘The regional repercussions of Turkey–Syria relations’, ATINER conference paper series no. POL2013-0539 (Athens: Institute for Education and Research, 2013).

governments in the 2000s. Unlike the Kemalist foreign policy, which was characterized by considerable disengagement from the Middle East and by the principle of non-intervention in the region, the AKP based its policy on promoting an economically interdependent and stable neighbourhood, in which Turkey would play a central role as the benign leader.¹⁰ This policy change implied that Turkey perceived political and, more particularly, economic opportunities in closer engagement with its southern neighbour, not only because Syria was going through neo-liberal economic restructuring in the 2000s,¹¹ but also because it constituted the main gateway for Turkey to wider Arab markets.¹² At the same time, the somewhat low profile of the PKK after Öcalan's capture in 1999, and the convergence of Iran, Syria and Turkey on preventing the emergence of a Kurdish state-like entity after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, led to a relative soothing of Turkey's concerns about territorial integrity.¹³ Consequently, Turkey started to soften its border from the mid-2000s onwards. Along with the physical border, the 'legal and functional' borders¹⁴ between the two neighbours were also considerably softened, through the signing of a free trade agreement in 2004, the launching of projects for connecting the energy and transport sectors, and the conclusion of a reciprocal visa waiver agreement in 2009.¹⁵

Profound transformation of this kind in state border management patterns is not peculiar to Turkey. Rather, it follows the common state logic of securitizing borders when threats are perceived in times of instability, while softening them so as to foster integration, circulation and economic interdependence in times of stability: a logic clearly also exemplified by the EU. The considerable softening of the border as a result of state discretion also shows that central authorities—in the MENA region as elsewhere—have considerable power over the regulatory functions of borders as political institutions,¹⁶ even though full state control over the entirety of borders is yet another Westphalian fiction.

Turkey's redefined interests in the context of post-2011 Syria

Embedded within the broader regional context of political transformation and turmoil, events in Syria after 2011 had significant implications for Ankara's perception of opportunities and threats, which, this article argues, has largely informed Turkey's border politics in this period. Thus, before we turn to examine Turkey's

¹⁰ Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, 'Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: foreign policy activism in Turkey during the AKP era', *Turkish Studies* 10: 1, 2009, pp. 7–24.

¹¹ Leïla Vignal, 'The changing borders and borderlands of Syria in a time of conflict', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 809–827.

¹² Özlem Tür, 'The political economy of Turkish–Syrian relations in the 2000s: the rise and fall of trade, investment and integration', in Hinnebusch and Tür, eds, *Turkey–Syria relations*, pp. 159–77.

¹³ Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Back to enmity: Turkey–Syria relations since the Syrian uprising', *Orient: Journal of German Orient Institute* 56: 1, 2015, pp. 14–22.

¹⁴ Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Borderlands: the Middle East and North Africa as the EU's southern buffer zone', in Dimitar Bechev and Kalypso Nicolaidis, eds, *Mediterranean frontiers: borders, conflicts and memory in a transnational world* (London: Tauris, 2010), pp. 149–67.

¹⁵ Tür, 'The political economy'.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Frontiers*.

different modalities of border management in the next section, an analysis of these implications for Turkey's interests and actions will be presented here. This section argues that, faced by the transition process in Syria, Turkey's perception of opportunities and threats homed in on two specific core interests: first, catalysing a reconfiguration of power in post-conflict Syria in which the Assad regime would be replaced by a 'moderate Islamist' power elite (dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood); and second, impeding the empowerment of the PKK and other Kurdish actors considered by Turkey to be closely affiliated with it. The first objective was part of a broader post-2011 regional aspiration of situating Turkey under AKP leadership as the leader of a belt of kindred Islamist regimes, by nudging the Syrian political transition process so that it produced an outcome similar to those in Egypt under Morsi, and in Tunisia.¹⁷ The second objective reflected Turkey's rigid opposition to the emergence of a Kurdish state in the region. Turkey was particularly alarmed by a potential PKK return to Syria and the possibility of the acquisition of increased autonomous powers by Kurdish players in Syria close to the PKK, seeing this as potentially exercising a ripple effect on the entire regional Kurdish landscape, including Turkey.¹⁸ While Turkey consistently pursued these interests, over the course of the civil war in Syria—particularly until 2016—realities on the ground, including the continuously changing power balance between state and non-state actors and newly emerging threats, forced Ankara to adjust its strategies.

Turkey's pursuit of these interests translated into three major lines of action in the earlier stages of the conflict. First, after diplomatic efforts for six months from the beginning of unrest in March 2011, Ankara adopted a staunch and vocally expressed position of opposition to the Assad regime. Basing this stance on its defence of democracy and objection to human rights violations and brutalities committed by the regime, Turkey advocated a transition period without Assad and increasingly tried to press the international community for a UN-backed or US-led large-scale military intervention 'aimed at overthrowing Assad'.¹⁹ Second, from mid-2011 Turkey took an active role in incubating the political and armed opposition against the regime among the 'Syrian nationalist defectors' already in its territory, namely, the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA).²⁰ Third, on the Kurdish issue, Turkey made it clear that it was against any attempt at border redrawing or decentralization of authority in Syria. Ankara took a position of cautious opposition to Kurdish political actors affiliated with the PKK and/or with PKK ideology, while supporting the organization of Syrian

¹⁷ Christopher Phillips, 'Into the quagmire: Turkey's frustrated Syria policy', Chatham House briefing paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme, MENAP BP 2012/04 (London: Chatham House, 2012); Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, 'Conclusion', in Hinnebusch and Tür, eds, *Turkey–Syria relations*, pp. 205–25.

¹⁸ Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: political parties and identity in the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 2014), pp. 216–20; Cengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe, 'The impact of the Syrian war on Kurdish politics across the Middle East', research paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme (London: Chatham House, July 2015).

¹⁹ Eric Edelman, Svante Cornell, Aaron Lobel and Michael Makovsky, *The roots of Turkish conduct: understanding the evolution of Turkish policy in the Middle East* (Washington DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2013), p. 45.

²⁰ Faysal Itani and Aaron Stein, *Turkey's Syria predicament* (Washington DC: Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, May 2016), p. 2.

Kurds under the leadership of players affiliated with the PDK (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê: Kurdish Democratic Party) led by Massoud Barzani. Thus, the crucial issue for Turkey was to prevent the potential empowerment of the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat: Democratic Union Party), which was established by former members of the PKK.²¹ Although the party denies any organic relationship with the PKK, it acknowledges 'ideological affinity' with Öcalan's 'democratic confederation' theory, advocating enhanced autonomy and a radical redistribution of authority from the centre to the local level.²² At earlier stages of the conflict, Ankara tried to ensure that the Kurdish National Council (KNC), composed of actors affiliated with Barzani, would become the main representative of Syrian Kurds, or at least the major counterforce against the PYD.²³ Turkey also tried integrating the PYD into the SNC structure, which shared Turkey's opposition to Kurdish autonomy.²⁴

However, realities on the ground—the resilience of the Syrian regime, the continuously changing power balance between the regime and non-state actors, as well as among non-state actors themselves, and the increasing dominance of jihadist actors—over the course of the civil war generated outcomes contrary to Turkey's interests, and complicated the pursuit of its objectives. First, the SNC failed to become the sole legitimate political opposition, owing to legitimacy problems highlighted by Muslim Brotherhood domination of its structure.²⁵ Second, the FSA lost power in relative terms as a result of the challenge it faced from other consortia of armed rebel groups, covering a wide range of Islamist, nationalist, Salafi and jihadist components. Third, regime withdrawal from predominantly Kurdish-populated areas in northern Syria in mid-2012 led to the gaining of control of major border towns by the PYD and its armed wing YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel: People's Protection Units).

During 2013 and 2014, jihadist groups fighting the regime—such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly explicitly affiliated with Al-Qaeda and known as Jabhat al Nusra)—other Islamist/nationalist Arab rebels and the Kurds all expanded their areas of territorial control. The unprecedented territorial expansion of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh), including towards the areas controlled by the FSA and the PYD in the north, meant that Turkey now shared considerable parts of its border with ISIS.²⁶ While the FSA lost further ground as an effective armed opposition, the effective fighting by the YPG against the jihadist groups in particular—also considering that it was largely exempt from fighting against the regime forces—gained it not only further territorial control but also a considerable degree of popularity among local and regional Kurdish

²¹ Gunes and Lowe, 'The impact of the Syrian war', p. 4.

²² Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, p. 209.

²³ International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's precarious rise in Syria*, Middle East Report no. 151 (Brussels, 8 May 2014), p. 18.

²⁴ Fehim Taştekin, *Suriye: yıkıl git, diren kal!* [Syria: crumble and disappear; resist and stay!] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2015), p. 202.

²⁵ Phillips, 'Into the quagmire', p. 7; Taştekin, *Suriye*, pp. 157–8.

²⁶ On the changes in actors controlling the Syrian–Turkish border on the Syrian side, including the official border crossing points, see Vignal, 'The changing borders and borderlands of Syria'.

populations,²⁷ and also the support of the United States. All these developments in that period, and particularly the liberation by the PYD and the YPG of the symbolically important town of Kobane from ISIS in early 2015, rendered the PYD the primary Kurdish player in Syria and led to a further rise in Kurdish nationalist mobilization in the region.²⁸ Emboldened by these developments, the PYD started experimenting with putting into practice Öcalan's democratic autonomy after unilaterally declaring the establishment of the Rojava transnational administration in November 2013 (Rojava being the Kurdish name for western Kurdistan).²⁹

In the light of these developments, while maintaining its core objectives, Turkey introduced some alterations into its strategies. As the Syrian regime proved to be resilient and the international community remained reluctant to intervene, after it became clear that the FSA had failed as an effective armed opposition Turkey adopted a utilitarian strategy of supporting what it saw as the most effective anti-regime consortium. This was composed predominantly of 'Islamists linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood', as well as a melange of 'independent moderate Islamist or nationalist groups, and hard-line Salafi Islamist factions'.³⁰ This utilitarian approach was shared by other states in the region such as the Gulf monarchies, in line with the increasing regional polarization and proxy involvement in Syria along sectarian axes.³¹ In the case of Turkey, its pragmatic support for such a consortium was also in line with Ankara's desire to prevent further territorial gains by the PYD. In the period following the declaration of the Rojava administration, when the PYD enhanced its relative standing locally, regionally and internationally, Turkey's previously cautious approach to the PYD became increasingly antagonistic. Emphasizing the PYD-PKK link, Ankara repeatedly stated that it would not allow further territorial expansion by a PKK affiliate, or the establishment of PYD-PKK governance structures in northern Syria. Turkey also put pressure on the United States to stop supporting the PYD and the YPG, and insisted on the setting up of an internationally backed safe zone in between two PYD-controlled chunks of territory to prevent uninterrupted PYD control all along the Turkish border.

These shifting realities on the ground and Ankara's consequential adjustments in its responses explain Turkey's changing modalities of border management, particularly between 2011 and 2015, as the next section will demonstrate. On the one hand, the desire to exert influence, so as to facilitate or impede the empowerment of state and non-state actors in an external power struggle, persuaded

²⁷ It should be noted that the PYD has continued to have popular legitimacy problems owing to suspicions of its alliance with the regime and its submission to the PKK. See Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, pp. 208–10; International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus?*, pp. 16–7.

²⁸ Gunes and Lowe, 'The impact of the Syrian war'; Vittoria Federici, 'The rise of Rojava: Kurdish autonomy in the Syrian conflict', *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35: 2, 2015, pp. 81–90; H. Akin Unver, 'Schrodinger's Kurds: transnational Kurdish geopolitics in the age of shifting borders', *Journal of International Affairs* 69: 2, 2016, pp. 65–98.

²⁹ Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, p. 208.

³⁰ Itani and Stein, *Turkey's Syria predicament*, p. 2.

³¹ Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East'; Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Contentious borders in the Middle East and North Africa: context and concepts', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 767–87.

Turkey to tolerate the blurring of its borders. On the other hand, the urge to safeguard its territorial integrity and centralized modern state model against rising Kurdish nationalist mobilization emanating from Syria decreed that the state harden its border. Overall, changes in power configurations favouring the rise of—and territorial gains by—the PYD and of jihadist–extremist actors increased the perception of security threats on the part of Turkey. As part of its utilitarian strategy, Ankara initially downplayed the severity of the threat posed to it by the latter actors;³² accordingly, the hardening of the border was partial and gradual until mid-2015, when Turkey adopted a highly securitized border regime.

Turkey's contentious border politics during the evolving conflict in Syria

It is rather difficult to provide exact time-frames for changing patterns of management at the Turkey–Syria border, given the overlaps between different modalities and the high levels of ‘secrecy’ and ‘insufficient monitoring’ relating to how the border was managed after 2011.³³ Nevertheless, following Turkey's initial course of action *vis-à-vis* the power struggle in the early stages of the conflict, its readjusted strategies in the face of changing realities on the ground, and its response to increasing security threats, it is possible to trace back three modalities of border management. These are: toleration of high porosity early in the conflict; gradual and partial hardening in 2013–2014; and full-fledged securitization since mid-2015.

These alterations in border management demonstrate that states have considerable power over managing the regulatory functions of borders. The management pattern changes as a function of what states regard as core interests, at both domestic and regional levels (and at the conjunction of the two). This shows that states, in order to instrumentally enhance their interests, might engage in practices not in line with the delineating and containing functions of borders that are envisaged in conventional conceptions of modern statehood. This seems to be the case particularly when profound transformations in a neighbouring context, marked by power struggle and a situation of fragmented sovereignty, shape states' perceptions of opportunity or threat. As the following section will demonstrate, border politics that are predominantly interest-based, and embedded in such contentious contexts, bear great potential for increasing the degree of interdependence at the regional–domestic nexus and for generating serious implications for domestic politics.

In the earlier stage of the Syrian conflict, Turkey's pattern of border management was significantly modified as an outcome of its liberal refugee admission policy. From the start of the unrest in Syria in March 2011, Turkey pursued a policy of almost unconditional opening of its borders to people fleeing the conflict, labelled as the ‘open door policy’.³⁴ This was part of Turkey's increasing

³² Itani and Stein, ‘Turkey's Syria predicament’, p. 8.

³³ Burcu Togrul Koca, ‘Deconstructing Turkey's “open door” policy towards refugees from Syria’, *Migration Letters* 12: 3, 2015, pp. 209–225 at p. 216.

³⁴ For the admission policy, see Osman Bahadır Dinçer, Vittoria Federici, Elizabeth Ferris, Sema Karaca, Kemal Kirişçi and Elif Özmenek Çarmıklı, *Turkey and Syrian refugees: the limits of hospitality* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, Nov. 2013).

emphasis on human rights, democracy and humanitarian sensitivities in its regional foreign policy already before but especially after the 2011 upheavals,³⁵ and on the more pragmatic side, also served to delegitimize the Assad regime by substantiating Ankara's claims about atrocities committed by it. Initially, Turkey allowed the entry of Syrian nationals indiscriminately, with or without valid documents.³⁶ While some restrictions were introduced after late 2012, leading to increasing numbers of unauthorized entrants,³⁷ overall Turkey has continued its liberal refugee admission policy, and currently provides temporary protection to more than 3 million Syrian nationals.³⁸

The changed pattern of control under the open door policy had a blurring effect on the border in practice, as the regulatory and selective functions of the border in respect of human mobility became largely eroded. In conjunction with Turkey's support of the FSA and its later engagement with a more diverse consortium of armed actors actively fighting in the Syrian civil war, the blurring effect of the refugee admission policy brought with it a highly contentious situation of high porosity at the border. In that period, claims proliferated as to Turkey's deliberate toleration of a high degree of porosity so as to turn a blind eye to bidirectional border crossing by armed rebels, arms transfers—with the involvement of foreign powers such as the United States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar³⁹—and the circulation of foreign terrorist fighters.⁴⁰ The Turkish authorities vehemently and consistently denied all these allegations. Nonetheless, its border management pattern at earlier stages of the conflict can retrospectively be characterized as one that, unintentionally, contributed to the empowerment of extremist groups, in terms of personnel, operational networks and economic resources.⁴¹ This empowerment turned into a security threat to Turkey itself, and the authorities have subsequently sought to reverse it.

While the contentious porosity of the border continued to preoccupy public debate, after the downing of a Turkish jet by Syrian security forces in mid-2012 Turkey started to enhance its military presence at parts of the border, both in

³⁵ Soli Özel and Gencer Özcan, 'Turkey's dilemmas', *Journal of Democracy* 22: 4, 2011, pp. 124–38.

³⁶ Kemal Kirişçi, *Syrian refugees and Turkey's challenges: going beyond hospitality* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, May 2014), p. 14.

³⁷ Dinçer et al., *Turkey and Syrian refugees*, pp. 5–6.

³⁸ As of 17 May 2017, the number of Syrians registered as being under temporary protection in Turkey was declared as 3,013,278. See Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management, 'Temporary protection', http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik.

³⁹ For some examples, see: C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, 'Arms airlift to Syria rebels expands, with aid from CIA', *New York Times*, 24 March 2013; International Crisis Group, *Blurring the borders: Syrian spillover risks for Turkey*, Europe Report no. 225 (Brussels, 30 April 2013); Fehim Taştekin, 'Radical groups operate on Turkey's border', *Al-Monitor*, 17 Oct. 2013.

⁴⁰ According to a study based on the analysis of a fraction of ISIS recruit registry and exit forms from 2013 to 2014, 93% of border crossings to and from Syria in that period took place at the Turkish–Syrian border. See Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, 'The caliphate's global workforce: an inside look at the Islamic State's foreign fighter paper trail' (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center, US Military Academy, April 2016), pp. 25–6. Turkey kept underlining that inadequate intelligence sharing by European countries on suspected foreign terrorist fighters at earlier stages of the conflict had affected its interdiction capacity negatively. See Murat Yeşiltas, 'İç savaşa komşu olmak: Türkiye'nin Suriye sınır güvenliği politikası' [Neighbouring the civil war: Turkey's Syrian border security policy], *SETA Analiz* no. 135 (Ankara: Siyaset, Ekonomi Ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı, Aug. 2015), p. 25; and Itani and Stein, 'Turkey's Syria predicament', p. 5.

⁴¹ Itani and Stein, 'Turkey's Syria predicament', p. 8.

order to deter the Syrian regime and arguably also as a pre-emptive move against the PYD's territorial gains. In October 2012 the parliament passed a motion authorizing the Turkish armed forces (TAF) to engage in extraterritorial operations, justified by the increasing security threat at the Syrian border.⁴² Ankara also requested the deployment of Patriot missiles by its NATO allies in November 2012. These were installed at three locations at the border, representing the invocation of Turkey's international alliances to maintain the border status quo.

Armed conflict in Syria gradually expanded towards the border during 2013, leading to the deterioration of security within Turkey's border areas, particularly those around Hatay province. After some previous casualties as a result of cross-border mortar shelling, the bomb attacks in Reyhanlı in May 2013, killing 53 people, marked the first major spillover of the conflict onto Turkish territory. Following these bombings, the authorities declared the launching of several projects to enhance physical border security.⁴³ These enhanced security measures included the erection of walls at certain parts of the border, including those in the predominantly Kurdish areas, starting in October 2013.⁴⁴ The period when the fence-building project in these areas was being implemented coincided with the declaration by the PYD of self-rule in Rojava, marking a moment of rising Kurdish nationalist mobilization across the region. Illustrating this region-wide mobilization, and intensified connections between the Kurds either side of the border, was the increasing flow from 2013 of Turkey's Kurdish citizens across the border into Qamishli to fight for the YPG against what was then Jabhat al Nusra.⁴⁵ The proliferation of reports of uncontrolled crossings over the Turkish–Syrian border by armed militia belonging to a variety of groups around the time of these hardening measures arguably indicates the partial securitization and selective permeability at the border.

The securitization trend continued as ISIS and the PYD and the YPG increasingly acquired control at the border, as conflict spillover intensified, and as Turkey's international legitimacy started to suffer owing to widely shared suspicions about its toleration of cross-border circulation by armed groups. By 2014, Turkey had erected 13 kilometres of walls, dug 333 kilometres of ditches, and installed 160 kilometres of barbed wire along its Syrian border. By 2015, half of the 40,000 military personnel guarding Turkey's borders were deployed at the Syrian border.⁴⁶

In July 2015, following the ISIS suicide bomb attack in the Kurdish border town of Suruç, the People's Defence Forces (HPG), the armed wing of the PKK, claimed responsibility for the revenge killing of two police officers, whom it accused of

⁴² Taştekin, *Suriye*, p. 215.

⁴³ 'Türkiye Suriye sınırına 2.4 km'lik duvar örülecek' [2.4 km long wall to be built at the Turkey–Syria border], *Milliyet*, 24 May 2013; 'Sınır önlem: duvar, hendek ve tel örgü' [Measures at the border: wall, ditch and barbed wire], *Milliyet*, 27 June 2013.

⁴⁴ Togral Koca, 'Deconstructing Turkey's "open door" policy', p. 219.

⁴⁵ According to an Atlantic Council study, Kurds from Turkey constituted 49.24% of the casualties reported by the YPG between Jan. 2013 and Jan. 2016. See Itani and Stein, *Turkey's Syria predicament*, p. 7, n. 15.

⁴⁶ Yeşiltas, 'İç savaşa komşu olmak', pp. 33–4.

cooperating with ISIS.⁴⁷ In the aftermath of this event, Turkey adopted an explicitly hardline position against the PYD, the PKK and ISIS and declared all three as terrorist organizations posing an equal threat to its security.⁴⁸ As regards Turkey's course of action against these groups and its pattern of border management, the summer of 2015 marked the beginning of a period in which the Turkish state progressively augmented its direct cross-border military action against the PKK and ISIS (while remaining more cautious in terms of active military action against the US-backed PYD). At the same time it accelerated the process of completely sealing off its border with Syria.

Initially, the TAF engaged in air strikes attacking mostly PKK and to a lesser extent also ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. The active cross-border air offensive was accompanied by a large-scale border security project called the 'Syrian border physical security system'. Launched in July 2015 and costing 2 billion Turkish lira, this comprised measures including the erection of modular walls, barbed-wire barriers and mobile watchtowers, and the installation of high-tech cameras at the border.⁴⁹ Within the framework of Operation Euphrates Shield between 24 August 2016 and 29 March 2017, Turkey sent ground troops to northern Syria in support of the FSA with the objectives of clearing the border areas of ISIS and the less explicitly mentioned objective of preventing further territorial expansion by the PYD and its affiliates towards the west.⁵⁰ The details of the operation, and the fast-moving regional and international politics surrounding it, are beyond the confines of this article.⁵¹ Suffice it to say here that Turkey's direct military presence on Syrian soil, which progressively grew in both scope and degree since mid-2015, implied that its pursuit of influence on the dynamics and the eventual outcome of the conflict in Syria largely became detached from its border management manoeuvres. Thus, the trend of securitization and sealing the border has progressively continued since mid-2015. By February 2016, the length of modular walls at the border reached 80 kilometres.⁵² By September the same year, the walls had reached a length of 200 kilometres,⁵³ and by February 2017 383 kilometres of the border were sealed off. Ankara aims to reach its ultimate objective of fencing off 825 kilometres of the 911-kilometre border by the end of 2017.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ 'Kurdish group claims "revenge murder" on Turkish police', *Al Jazeera*, 22 July 2015.

⁴⁸ These events also marked the complete collapse of the already stalled negotiations between the Kurdish parties (including, indirectly, the PKK and Öcalan) and the Turkish state, known as the 'peace process'.

⁴⁹ 'Suriye sınırına 2 milyarlık proje' [Two-billion worth project for the Syrian border], *Milliyet*, 23 July 2015.

⁵⁰ Metin Gürcan, 'Can Turkey afford new battlefront in Iraq?', *Al-Monitor*, 4 April 2017.

⁵¹ For concise analyses on the operation and regional-international political dynamics around it, as well as for different assessments of the operation, see Sinan Ülgen and Can Kasapoğlu, 'Operation Euphrates Shield: aims and gains', Carnegie Europe op-ed, 19 Jan. 2017; Gürcan, 'Can Turkey afford new battlefront in Iraq?'; Cengiz Çandar, 'Operation Euphrates Shield: a postmortem', *Al-Monitor*, 5 April 2017.

⁵² Author's interview with an immigration and border management officer at the International Organization for Migration Turkey, Ankara, 22 Feb. 2016.

⁵³ Sefer Levent, 'Suriye sınırına 700 kilometrelik güvenlik duvarı daha yapılacak' [Additional security walls of a length of 700 kilometres to be built at the Syrian border], *Hürriyet*, 28 Sept. 2016.

⁵⁴ Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Millî Savunma Bakanlığı [Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Turkey], 'Türkiye: Suriye sınırı hattında yasa dışı ve terörist geçişler ile kaçakçılık faaliyetlerine karşı fiziksel engel oluşturması amacıyla başlatılan Acil Sınır Fiziki Güvenlik Sistemi Projesinde çalışmalar devam ediyor' [The work as part of the emergency border physical security system project that was launched with the aim of physically obstructing illegal and terrorist crossings and smuggling activities at the Turkey-Syria borderline is progressing], 3

The impact of Turkey's border management modalities on domestic politics

The civil war in Syria quickly turned into a conflict mainly between an Alawite ruling minority and Sunni rebels: this structured it in sectarian terms from the onset, a structure that was reinforced by the impact of the Sunni–Shi'a polarization in regional politics. The AKP government's presentation of the conflict on similar lines within domestic politics contributed to the sectarian framing of the neighbouring civil war in Turkey.⁵⁵ The rise of the PYD and the growing Kurdish nationalist mobilization has added ethnic overtones to this identity-framed picture.

In a region already characterized by a lack of congruence between state borders and identity boundaries, the accentuation of identity-based cleavages and solidarities within and between states has contributed to a context where societies and politics are increasingly framed by ethno-sectarian interconnections and fragmentations. Turkey's border management modalities, leading to high degrees of porousness and selective (im)permeability before 2015, directly interfered with these ethno-sectarian cleavages and solidarities. The state's border management modalities were strongly contested by sections of society that perceived them as either assimilatory or discriminatory. The ways in which Turkey's contentious border politics led to an increased ethno-sectarian structuring of politics within Turkey highlight the complex links between state borders and identity boundaries, and illustrate the role of border politics in enhancing interdependence between domestic and regional politics. The high levels of political contestation of the state's border management patterns, which reflect highly centralized conceptions of statehood, illustrate the difficulty such conceptions have in accommodating ethno-religiously diverse societies in the MENA region.

Border politics in the context of the Syrian conflict had impact at both local and national levels. The repercussions at the local level were twofold. In border provinces such as Hatay, inhabited by sizeable Arab Alawite communities, the demographic and sociological balance was destabilized by the arrival of large numbers of predominantly Sunni Arab refugees. This destabilization, together with the free circulation of armed rebels in border regions, resulted in a sense of unrest and perceptions of insecurity, particularly among non-Sunni and non-Muslim communities.⁵⁶ Local Alawite populations—particularly in Hatay—interpreted the border politics as part of the government's project of 'Sunnification of the region',⁵⁷ a reading largely shared by the sizeable Alevi community and secular sections in Turkey.⁵⁸ Overall, it can be said that non-Sunni sections

Feb. 2017, <http://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/turkiye-suriye-siniri-hattinda-yasa-disi-ve-terorist-gecislere-kacaklik-faaliyetlerine-karsi-fiziksel-engel-olusturmasi-amaciyla-baslatilan-acil-sinir-fiziki-guvenlik-sistemi-projesinde-calismalar-devam-ediyor>.

⁵⁵ Yasemin Akbaba and Özgür Özdamar, 'Ethnicity, religion, and foreign policy: Turkish–Syrian relations since the 1980s', in Hinnebusch and Tür, eds, *Turkey–Syria relations*, pp. 125–33.

⁵⁶ Jülide Karakoç and Fulya Doğruel, 'The impact of Turkey's policy toward Syria on human security', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 37: 4, 2015, pp. 351–66; International Crisis Group, *Blurring the borders*, pp. 20–22.

⁵⁷ Murat Erdoğan, 'Türkiye'deki Suriyeliler: toplumsal kabul ve uyum', *Yönetici Özeti ve Rapor [Syrians in Turkey: social acceptance and integration research, Executive Summary and Report]* (Ankara: Hacettepe Üniversitesi Göç ve Siyaset Araştırmaları Merkezi-HUGO, 2014), p. 21.

⁵⁸ Hinnebusch, 'Back to enmity', p. 20.

of society contested the role played by the state in generating a situation of high porosity at the border, and what they saw as the assimilatory logic behind it.

On the other hand, local Kurdish populations contested what they saw as ethnically discriminatory state border politics. The construction of fences within the framework of partial securitization of the border, particularly the barrier between Nusaybin and PYD-controlled Qamishli in October 2013, provoked strong protest by local populations and Kurdish political actors.⁵⁹ The pro-Kurdish BDP (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi: Peace and Democracy Party) accused the government of discriminating against Kurdish-populated areas in Syria in its uneven dispatching of official humanitarian aid, and of blocking the border to the passage of locally financed Kurdish aid.⁶⁰ In this case, the contention revolved around the state's effort to engender an impermeable border acting as a wall of separation between Kurds on either side. Reflecting the interconnectedness between Turkey's Kurdish issue and regional Kurdish politics, and its intensification by the conflict in Syria, Kurdish political actors in Turkey interpreted what they labelled the government's 'politics of wall' as an expression of its position against Kurdish self-rule in Syria and of its reluctance to solve its own Kurdish issue.⁶¹

As the first major Syria-linked attack perpetrated on Turkey's soil, the bomb attacks in Reyhanlı generated immense public outcry at national level. The sectarian framing of the event itself, by both government and the opposition, in the aftermath of the attacks contributed considerably to the accentuation of sect-based divisions. Stressing Reyhanlı's predominantly Sunni character, pro-government circles blamed the attacks on the Syrian regime. All the opposition parties—the secularist social democrat Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP: Republican People's Party), the Turkish nationalist Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP: Nationalist Movement Party) and the pro-Kurdish BDP—held the government's biased meddling with Syria and the complete lack of border control responsible for the attacks.⁶² The debate on the blasts between the CHP (traditionally known as the electoral choice for the Alevi and other non-Sunni constituencies, owing to its secularist position) and the AKP further structured politics in sectarian terms. The CHP accused the government of pursuing a sectarian foreign policy, supporting jihadists, and creating fertile ground for domestic Alevi–Sunni conflict through its undermining of border security, in pursuit of its aims in Syria.⁶³ The AKP accused the CHP of being pro-Ba'ath, and the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, claimed that the CHP was exploiting the blasts for the political benefit to be derived from deepened sectarian cleavages.⁶⁴ Erdoğan's later remark under-

⁵⁹ Togrul Koca, 'Deconstructing Turkey's "open door" policy', p. 219.

⁶⁰ Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (TBMM; Grand National Assembly of Turkey), *Minutes*, Term 24, Legislative Year 3, Session 120, vol. 53, 13 June 2013, pp. 765–6.

⁶¹ See e.g. the statement by Gültaş Kışanak, the co-chair of the BDP at the time, 'Rojava Kürdistanı Türkiye'nin komşusudur' [Rojava Kurdistan is Turkey's neighbour], *Milliyet*, 5 Nov. 2013.

⁶² TBMM, *Minutes*, Term 24, Legislative Year 3, Session 103, vol. 50, 14 May 2013; Session 104, vol. 51, 15 May 2013.

⁶³ TBMM, *Minutes*, 14 May 2013, 15 May 2013.

⁶⁴ Tülin Daloğlu, 'Erdoğan's accusation of CHP goes too far', *Al-Monitor*, 30 May 2013.

lining the Sunni identity of the victims of the attack,⁶⁵ and the opposition's sharpened criticism of the government's Islamist outlook domestically and regionally, further added to the sectarianization of politics.

The eventual securitization of the border largely diminished the public and political attention paid to the links between border politics and sectarian cleavages. However, the periods of high border porosity played a role in making it possible for groups with extremist religious agendas, particularly ISIS, to infiltrate Turkey, organize cells, recruit militants and perpetrate numerous violent attacks.⁶⁶ At the societal level, a 2015 opinion poll showed that 8 per cent of Turkish citizens had a 'favourable' opinion of ISIS and 19 per cent expressed neither a negative nor a positive opinion,⁶⁷ while the concern among Alevi communities over Sunnification and vulnerability to targeting by ISIS attacks seems to persist.⁶⁸

Whether the state was using the border as a means of exclusion or inclusion along ethno-national lines became the central question during the siege of Kobane in the autumn of 2014, once more highlighting the interconnectedness of the Kurdish issue within the context of the Syrian conflict, and the role Turkey's border politics played in the augmentation of this interconnectedness. As ISIS encircled Kobane, except for where the town borders Turkey, in early October the HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi: People's Democratic Party)⁶⁹ called on the government to open a humanitarian corridor and to allow the passage of military reinforcements from other PYD-controlled territories in Syria and from the Kurdistan Autonomous Region in Iraq. The government ruled out the option of allowing military transfer to the PYD and the YPG because of their links to the PKK, and instead of opening a humanitarian corridor admitted 180,000 Kurds fleeing Kobane.⁷⁰ After the call by the HDP and local Kurdish actors for street protests, urban riots broke out in Kurdish provinces, spreading to many others. By the end of the unrest that lasted for a week, 46 people had died as a result of armed street clashes and the heavy-handed response by riot police. After the unrest, at the end of October, Turkey allowed the passage of military reinforcements from the Kurdistan Autonomous Region in Iraq to Kobane.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the events left their longer-term effects on domestic politics: the government and Erdoğan held the HDP responsible for inciting violence; the HDP criticized the govern-

⁶⁵ 'Erdoğan: Reyhanlı'da 53 sünni vatandaşımız şehit edildi' [Erdoğan: 53 Sunni citizens of ours were martyred in Reyhanlı], *Radikal*, 14 June 2013.

⁶⁶ While ISIS has not claimed the attacks in Turkey, apart from the attack by a gunman in a nightclub on New Year's Eve 2016/17, which killed 39 people, the government blamed the organization for six earlier attacks between mid-2015 and late 2016 with a cumulative death toll of nearly 250 people. See 'Wave of terror attacks in Turkey continue at a steady pace', *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/28/world/middleeast/turkey-terror-attacks-bombings.html>.

⁶⁷ Jacob Poushter, 'In nations with significant Muslim populations, much disdain for ISIS', Pew Research Center, 17 Nov. 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/>.

⁶⁸ Pinar Tremblay, 'How will Turkey's Alevis react to Syrian gambit?', *Al-Monitor*, 9 Sept. 2016.

⁶⁹ The HDP replaced the BDP as the major pro-Kurdish party in the parliament from 2013 onwards.

⁷⁰ 'Türkiye parlamentosu Kobani için devrede' [Turkey's parliament is taking action for Kobane], *Rudaw*, 22 Oct. 2014. According to other sources, the number was higher than 200,000. See 'Islamic State conflict: Kurdish fighters arrive in Turkey', BBC News, 29 Oct. 2014.

⁷¹ 'Islamic State conflict', BBC News; Richard Spencer and Magdy Samaan, 'First Kurdish reinforcements cross Turkish border to Kobane', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 Oct. 2014.

ment for causing 'emotional rupture' by deepening the perception of Turkey's Kurdish citizens that the state favoured ISIS and by neglecting their sensitivities, and warned it of the long-term consequences of such societal fragmentation for the prospects of a Turkish–Kurdish peace.⁷²

In the longer term, the Kobane protests became a turning-point on the path towards the accentuation of ethnic boundaries, the dramatic deterioration of the peace process, and the replacement of political dialogue by securitized and conflict-oriented approaches and actors. In the aftermath of the Kobane riots and on the eve of the June 2015 elections, the government's political will to continue pursuing the peace process progressively ebbed,⁷³ and the AKP's and Erdoğan's accusations that the HDP was a 'PKK offshoot' intensified.⁷⁴ Around the same period, the PKK began preparations for its newly adopted strategy of an 'urban defensive campaign' in the Kurdish provinces, signalling its return to violent strategies in Turkey.⁷⁵ The resumption of high-density armed conflict between state security forces and the PKK from the summer of 2015 resulted not only in an increasing number of deaths on both sides, but also in the forced displacement of local populations and high numbers of civilian casualties owing to numerous open-ended curfews and continuous fighting in urban centres.⁷⁶ Groups linked to the PKK perpetrated several attacks in urban centres in Turkey, causing casualties among security forces as well as civilians.⁷⁷ Overall, the return to conflict-oriented strategies by both sides has generated further societal fragmentation, which feeds into, and is fed by, politics built on accentuated ethnic boundaries.

Conclusion

This article has examined the impact of the violent transition process in Syria since 2011 on Turkey's border management modalities and the implications for Turkish domestic politics of the state's instrumentally changing border management patterns between 2011 and 2015. Particular attention has been paid to the interplay between contentious border politics and the politicization of identity boundaries. The analysis has demonstrated that dynamics in Syria after 2011 encouraged Turkey to seek enhanced regional sway by attempting to influence the post-conflict power reconfiguration, as well as to safeguard its own territorial integrity and centralized nation-state structure against PKK-linked Kurdish nationalist mobilization. Turkey's constant pursuit of these two objectives, along with its recalibration of strategies in the face of continuously changing power configurations in Syria,

⁷² TBMM, *Minutes*, Term 24, Legislative Year 5, Session 3, vol. 88, 14 Oct. 2014.

⁷³ Cuma Çiçek and Vahap Coşkun, 'Dolmabahçe'den günümüze çözüm süreci: başarısızlığı anlamak ve yeni bir yol bulmak', *Politika Raporu-1*, [The peace process from Dolmabahçe to present day: understanding failure and finding new paths, Policy Report-1] (Istanbul: Barış Vakfı Yayınları, Apr. 2016).

⁷⁴ 'Erdoğan'dan HDP'li belediye başkanlarına tepki' [Erdoğan reacting against HDP mayors], BBC Türkçe, 2 May 2015; 'Akdoğan: Bunlar zaten PKK'nın uzantısı' [Akdoğan: they are a PKK offshoot anyway], *Sabah*, 24 May 2015.

⁷⁵ Unver, 'Schrodinger's Kurds', p. 81.

⁷⁶ Çiçek and Coşkun, 'Dolmabahçe'den günümüze çözüm süreci', pp. 11–12.

⁷⁷ The ten attacks claimed by PKK-linked groups in the year between Jan. 2016 and Jan. 2017 killed a total of 140 people. See *New York Times*, 'Wave of terror attacks'.

and the security threats emanating from the conflict, resulted in changing border management modalities.

The specific ways in which the border functioned as a gateway for some and as a barrier for others, intertwined with the existing identity boundaries that demarcate society in a complex and overlapping fashion within and across state borders, became a highly contested issue. As border management patterns were deeply embedded in regional and domestic politics, structured increasingly in ethno-sectarian terms, the state's specific patterns of border management and their outcomes were seen as a matter of discrimination or assimilation, particularly in the eyes of minorities. The major implication for domestic politics has been an overall hardening of sectarian, and particularly ethnic, boundaries. The case of Turkey demonstrates that border politics have the potential to augment already high levels of interconnectedness and fragmentation in the post-2011 MENA context.

The case of Turkey is also significant in terms of our understanding of the relationship between statehood, sovereignty and borders in the Middle East, in four ways. First, while acknowledging that full state control over the entirety of its borders is largely a conceptual construct, the role played by the Turkish state in the fluctuating nature of the border over decades, and particularly in the years between 2011 and 2015, shows that the central authority has considerable power over the regulatory, and hence inclusionary and exclusionary, function of the border. The use of this discretionary power has significant impacts on both local populations and the entire society, and hence on politics. Turkey's border management pattern during the early part of the conflict also illustrates the point that the problem is not always an unintentional loss of control over the border—a problem often attributed to states in the Middle East—caused by the state's incapacity or indifference in respect of securing its borders. Rather, Turkey's border strategy in these earlier stages shows that the state's discretion over the nature of the border might in fact be the main reason behind increased porosity at parts of it. Paradoxically, this deliberate blurring of the border might be pursued for the sake of preserving the conventional modern state structure and the border status quo, when the state perceives a border-crossing threat to them.

Second, the case at hand reaffirms the difficulty that centralized interpretations of modern statehood and sovereignty, with their presumption of borders neatly confining the nation, have in accommodating minorities.⁷⁸ The difficulty seems to increase when the identity boundaries that define the minorities do not match physical borders. The increasing pressure on authorities holding centralized understandings of statehood is especially acute when the relative erosion of state authority in one of the neighbouring countries leads to enhanced cross-border connections between particular populations, as well as to the strengthening of minority political projects with territorial claims.

Third, Turkey's defence of its understanding of statehood and sovereignty, in line with the conventional model, shows that despite widespread claims of

⁷⁸ Confirming the conclusions reached by Del Sarto, 'Contentious borders in the Middle East and North Africa'.

the artificiality of the Sykes–Picot borders and the lack of roots in the region of western understandings of statehood and sovereignty, authorities largely adhere to both the modern nation-state model and the type of borders it suggests. This point confirms Fawcett’s argument that the status quo is the default position of states, which partly explains border resilience in the MENA region.⁷⁹

Finally, the case of Turkey shows that the state’s use of borders to preserve its sovereignty, sustaining the congruity of territory, authority and the bounded political community, might actually generate an effect opposite to that intended. While such measures might help preserve the state’s formal authority over its territory, on the other hand, particularly for societies demarcated by several complex identity boundaries—as is often the case in the MENA region—they might also lead to strong political contestation and considerable loss of popular legitimacy among sections of the population. If popular legitimacy is understood to be one of its crucial attributes, then this would mean an overall weakening of state sovereignty.

⁷⁹ Fawcett, ‘States and sovereignty in the Middle East’.