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# **Borderland studies, frontierisation and the Middle East's in-between spaces<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been written to serve as a conclusion to a forthcoming *Mediterranean Politics* special issue on 'In-between spaces in the Levant'.

## **Borderland studies, frontierisation and the Middle East's in-between spaces**

Richard Schofield (Department of Geography, King's College, London)

### **Abstract**

This paper provides a conclusion to a special issue of *Mediterranean Politics* that has sought to promote critical approaches for better understanding of spatial process in some of the Middle East region's most prominent in-between spaces. Just as there have been recent efforts to observe bordering processes in and around the region, this collection develops the possibility that a subtly different process of territorialisation is taking place in those in-between spaces where state power is most challenged, compromised and uncertain – frontierisation. In assessing its possibilities and potential, this paper highlights the significant record of past geographical approaches to studying borderland process but also selectively explores the established phenomenon of in-betweenness in the evolution of the regional territorial framework. It concludes by suggesting that any fresh consideration of contemporary spatial process in the Middle East region's in-between spaces should engage with geography's long tradition of studying borderlands as cooperative features and more recent multidisciplinary coverage that tends to view them today as spaces of insecurity in state margins beyond the reach of state authority. Any reinvigorated borderland studies – to which the idea of frontierisation might well have something to say – needs to be multidisciplinary but also would do well to further develop agendas for exploring these regions that have been around for some time.

### **Introduction**

A wider concern of the international community with the marginal areas of the Middle Eastern state (particularly those – like Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen - that have successively suffered territorial fragmentation in civil war) is today perhaps more understandable than any great preoccupation with the alignment and status of their international boundaries *per se*. Whether they're termed the spaces in between or stateless spaces, borderlands in an extended spatial sense are being characterised as insecure spaces beyond the territorial reach of the state and obviously drawing the attention of more academic constituencies than just geography (Schofield, 2018a).

Of course, if one thinks back three decades ago to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and its aftermath, it was international boundaries and their association with conflict (particularly in the northern Gulf) that drew a wider, more general interest in Middle East territorial questions. State limits remained the focus at a practical level, with international peacekeeping forces still deployed mainly in an inter-state

context, just as they were moving increasingly to an intra-state function elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> There was another important reason for this at the scholarly level though – the reality that much of the state system and its territorial framework was still notably youthful, most obviously in the Arabian Peninsula and adjoining regions. The primary record of Britain's frequently rather hurried attempts to square territorial circles before it departed the Gulf region as protecting power was becoming publicly available. It would fuel the processes by which the Arabian territorial framework moved towards finalisation in international law, whether this was through bilateral negotiations, arbitration or adjudication. The same resource would also provide the grist for the mill when it came to telling regional or singular boundary histories. Guaranteed a relatively wide audience in a context of conflict and the apparent need for more precise natural resource allocation, there were good stories to be told in uncovering the origins and evolution of international boundaries<sup>3</sup> (Wilkinson, 1991).

Judging the best moment for a regional, non-Western application of emerging theoretical orthodoxies within a decidedly critical contemporary treatment of borders and territorial questions in the social sciences is always going to be a tough call. After all, the advent of borderland studies in the late 1960s as human geography truly humanised and the inauguration of critical border studies in the last couple of decades – each celebrated within geography as a significant advance on what had become before - were both, at least initially, premised upon what geographers were observing in our backyard, along the southern territorial limits of the United States. It remains difficult to dismiss the accusation that the way we do (and have done) borders and boundaries remains contingent on what is defining agendas in the West or affecting them in one way or another (Schofield, 2015).

Just as critical border studies laid welcome emphasis on the verb forms of border and territory, marking a departure in both the scale and emphasis of study and theorisation, this volume has sought pioneeringly to ponder manifestations of frontierisation in the Middle East and the processes that apparently underscore it. As mentioned, its concern with the liminalities of the spaces in between potentially speaks to a wider contemporary interest in Middle Eastern borderlands that is primarily security-oriented, though the broadening scope of an increasingly multi-disciplinary borderland studies has been discernible for some time now. The conflict borderland has figured increasingly in war and security studies (Larsdotter, 2014), along with all the challenges these in-between spaces pose for regional development (Goodhand, 2008). Historians, too, have pointed out we don't generally know too much about borderlands because of the way Western historical treatments of the colonial world have tended to prioritise cores and elites – with rather too much emphasis until now on their representation there is a still a need to know more about the actual materialities of

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<sup>2</sup> As noted in Zinovia Foka's paper in this special issue: (Foka, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> From different vantage points in boundary/border studies, one traditional and one more critical, Prescott (1999) and Megoran (2012) have both urged that geographers continue to focus on the evolution of individual territorial limits as one of the best contributions we can make to better understanding their operation and dynamics.

borderlands, and what was really going on there (Readman et al., 2014). The main takeaway here is that borderlands are conceptualised within this wider preoccupation as spaces associated with conflict and insecurity and characterised as much more extensive in spatial terms than in more traditional, established geographical notions that gauge the (the generally cooperative effect of an international boundary upon its surrounding landscape.

After these words of summary context, let us now remind ourselves how geography has done borderlands, warts and all, before selectively reflecting upon the Arabian phenomenon and experience of in between space. The latter feature has long been apparent, its reality and prevalence recognised as significant and its deliberate formal institution usually the result of efforts to ease resource exploitation or there being no clear basis for drawing linear boundaries in a region where notions of sovereignty are more generally communal. We'll then ponder the question as to whether the region's well-known in between spaces might be being frontierised – and it is as well to underline that this special issue has examined some of the world's most enduring and entrenched territorial disputes. Recognising process contemporaneously and retrospectively is always going to be a challenge in contexts of territorial instability and flux. As ever, questions of general applicability of approach and viability of appropriate methodology will need work as any frontierisation approach is articulated and developed but we're still at an early stage here. Scale and temporality most obviously warrant careful consideration when considering how any process of frontierisation might manifest or materialise.

### **The borderland tradition in geography**

Even the classical boundary scholars, starting with Ratzel, understood from the outset that the reality of borders was what was there on the ground, their effective width, rather than lines prescribed in treaties or shown on maps (Ratzel, 1897, de Lapradelle, 1928). Yet this observation was often buried and marginalised until the 1960s, when geographers John House and Julian Minghi articulated a borderland studies approach which concentrated upon everyday, routine human and trade flows, exchanges and transactions across international boundaries with the implication that their width could be effectively gauged by prevailing, quantifiable levels of trans-boundary cooperation. (House, 1982: Minghi, 1963; Rumley and Minghi, 1991). Premised upon the territorial stability of the Cold War years, it focused more on the localised effects of international boundary permeability than disputed alignments (and their immersion in inter-state conflict) that had previously been the general focus of earlier geographical analysis. For its day, this approach was quite prescient but its main value would ultimately later be seen as confined to its era of writing with the advent of critical border studies, where it was characterised as somewhat old-hat (van Houtum, 2005).

With the end of the Cold War and increasing levels of globalised movements of people, money and goods, the utility of geography's borderland studies approach was seen as increasingly compromised. This would be the view later taken in contemporary border studies, for instance, of American historian

Oscar Martinez's evolutionary typology of borderlands interaction developed in the early 1990s<sup>4</sup>. Then very much the darling of America's influential Association of Borderland Scholars,<sup>5</sup> Martinez proposed that borderlands might pass through the four stages of alienation, co-existence, interdependence and ultimately integration, as improving bilateral relations evolved to accommodate and enable deepening levels of trans-boundary cooperation (Martinez, 1994a; 1994b). The width of any operative borderlands was therefore defined by the degree of cooperative exchanges and interaction across the international boundary. In his ideas about borderlands society, Martinez also pondered the degree to which borderlanders became transnationalised, perhaps the most important consideration in the formulation of any borderlands milieu – with the other others here being separateness, ethnic conflict and accommodation, otherness and international conflict and accommodation (Martinez, 1994a). The main value (and maybe also weakness) of Martinez's typology remains its looseness and lack of specificity, making it transferable to and arguably still relevant today at an admittedly broad level for a variety of borderland contexts. It has also occurred to me over the years that the 4-stage evolutionary model is potentially reversible, that in some situations, a borderland may narrow as a cooperative zone (if not disappear altogether), with a downturn in bilateral relations – Israel/Jordan might have been subjected to Martinez-like scrutiny had things developed differently after their peace agreement and territorial settlement of the early 1990s. Almost irrespective of the degree to which globalisation has transformed the constellations and constitution of borderlands, the persisting value of Martinez's borderlands interaction typology lies in this general applicability. As with Victor Prescott's boundary dispute-classification of 1965 (Prescott and Triggs, 2008) – which still occasionally finds support in some corners of contemporary border studies<sup>6</sup> – and Minghi's embryonic but much more recent borderscapes classification summarised below, these general classifications were never capable of being applied exactly to individual cases, more to orientate contextually. This, of course, speaks to the unique case syndrome that has always bedevilled the quest in the social sciences for a truly effective comparative basis for viewing border and territorial dynamics (Schofield, 2015). For ultimately, a number of scholars have attempted to apply House's operational cross-border interaction model of the US-Mexico borderlands with its calibration of distance-decay effects to the regional settings, only to find that it was premised too rigidly on the specifics and dynamics of the original case-study.

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<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Victor Konrad, Beer Sheva, December 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Grundy-Warr (National University of Singapore) and I had the misfortune to be pitched against him in a parallel session at the 1991 ABS annual meeting in Reno – the room Oscar was speaking to could have been filled four times over, while the number speaking on our panel easily outnumbered the assembled audience.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly has recently tried to breathe more critical, contemporary life into Prescott's vintage scheme for characterising international boundary disputes – not generally a concern that critical border studies has shown much taste for engaging with. Witness his plenary address at an IGU-supported conference, 'Borders at the Interface: bordering Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Ben Gurion University of the Negev', Beer Sheva, 7-14 December 2014.

Martinez's schema was perhaps the best example of how House's earlier, imaginative embrace of structure, space and time in modelling the US-Mexico borderlands had escaped geography's confines to inspire borderlands research in the humanities and social sciences more widely. The borderland studies approach would continue to be influential in geography, however, with even the odd attempt to apply to a Middle Eastern context. Best-known for co-penning what constituted for decades the only English-language political geography of the Middle East (Drysdale and Blake, 1985), Alasdair Drysdale noted in the early 1990s how generally non-existent levels of inter-state cooperation between Syria and its neighbours not only militated against the development of any fledgling regional trade patterns but predictably meant there was no prospect of any cooperative borderlands being realised (Drysdale, 1994). Another contribution of a similar vintage somewhat optimistically imagined the possibilities for boundary permeability in the Israel/Gaza/Egypt tri-border area (Krakover, 1997).

Continuing but refining the borderland studies approach within geography through into the new millennium have been a number of scholars who have plugged into the discipline's fondness for the ...scapes appendage (after the American anthropologist and globalisation guru, Arjun Appadurai) by developing the notion of borderscapes. Prominent among them, Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) concentrated on the complex layering of human identities in borderlands in developing this term, thereby setting an agenda for critical engagement in contemporary border studies for re-evaluating process in the state margins. The gauntlet has been taken up *inter alia* by Brambilla (2015) who has sought, as noted in the introduction to the volume, to highlight identity reshaping as a re-bordering process and, more recently, Krichker (2019), who has tried to ground what still remains a loose proposition by surveying a number of case-studies to, in Lefebvrian terms, how borderscapes are being produced spatially through social and discursive practices. With its embryonic borderscapes concept, geography has tried to differentiate itself critically from the mainstream contemporary multidisciplinary coverage of borderlands. There are also more visual, impressionistic takes on what a borderscape might comprise. One of the originators of the 1960s borderland studies approach, Julian Minghi, has explored this question by suggesting a classification in which the following themes manifest tangibly in the border landscape: abandonment and elimination; superimposition and conversion; war and confrontation; conflict to harmony; memorialising; exclusion; competition; insurgency; dysfunctional; temporary; and, optimism.<sup>7</sup>

The relevant 'scapes' are not confined to borders when considering in-between spaces either. Sidaway's (2003) notion of sovereigntyscape provides a thoughtful gauge for differentiating which would-be sovereigns (national or local) control which bits of territory in states where the sovereign

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<sup>7</sup> This forms the basis of a well-received lecture Julian delivers each year to the Masters programme in Geopolitics, Territory and Security in the Department of Geography at King's College, London.

reach of government has collapsed. Despite being developed with more of an eye on transpiring events in southern Africa, the idea of cutting a section through Syria from the Golan Heights to its north-eastern borderlands with Turkey and Iraq (traditionally called the duck's beak because of the way they are shaped by international boundaries) would have been intriguing in recent years. Most predictably, to do so would have identified a number of separately-controlled territories, albeit ones whose configuration would change rapidly. After all, who could have imagined that once ISIS were driven from the northern Syrian city of Raqqa late in 2017 that this traditional Sunni stronghold would get a Kurdish female mayor. One other potential benefit of Sidaway's idea is to recognise effective internal borderlands within fractured state territories. Obviously, the temporal dimension needs some work here – how long do territorial constellations have to be in place to constitute a borderland? Anyone travelling through the northern areas of Iraq and Syria in recent years has been subject to plethora of informal document checks and controls. We will return briefly later on to the likelihood of new Middle Eastern state territories emerging, concluding that this seems less likely than at any point in recent years.

We talked earlier of the challenge of bringing critical territorial approaches to bear regionally. For some, the Arab spring and its tumultuous aftermath represented an opportunity to frame research more internationally and globally, allowing Middle Eastern studies to escape from its unique, regional studies straitjacket and be subjected to more critical theoretical, conceptual and methodological treatment.<sup>8</sup> A 2017 special issue of *International Affairs* surveyed social and spatial borders in the region post-2011, while Daniel Meier attempted to extend a declaredly critical geographical eye to regional border questions with a special edition of *Geopolitics* only a year later. There were obvious reasons for covering Middle Eastern border questions that hitherto hadn't excited a great deal of interest for at least a couple of decades. There was the spatial manifestation of the ISIS caliphate, reaching its greatest territorial extent a half-decade or so back, as a trans-boundary entity adjoining the marginal desert borderlands of north-eastern Syria and north-western Iraq. Its rise coincided pretty much with the centenary of the 1916 Sykes-Picot scheme to partition in ailing Ottoman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean, inevitably leading to (sometimes slightly misguided or, at least, overemphasised) observations that the system/framework of state territories that it eventually gave rise to was well past its sell-by date and up for debate (Joffe, 2018; Schofield, 2018a). Undoubtedly the regional phenomenon that attracted most attention in critical border studies, however, was the dramatic increase in the erection or reinforcement of walls and fences by Middle Eastern states along international boundaries and the 'boundary spectacle' (De Genova, 2012) that would ensue when

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<sup>8</sup> This was the underlying theme of BRISMES's 2018 annual conference at King's College, London whose title was *New Approaches to Studying the Middle East*.

vulnerable, displaced human populations encountered these barriers, invariably in trying to flee conflict.

Even before borders, fences and mobility emerged in the last half-decade as the crystallising theme that would make the study of international boundaries almost fashionable again within geography, there had been calls from critical border studies/geopolitics for innovative reengagement with this most obvious and traditional site of analysis. Most notably, Nick Megoran articulated his prescription for boundary biography, that is to explore over time how international boundaries materialise and dematerialise for those that confront, experience or negotiate them at various levels and scales of encounter (Megoran, 2012). It connected in more obviously critical fashion with previous assertions that one of the best territorial contributions a political geographer could make was to chart and characterise the evolution of international boundaries, whether or not their alignment and status had been the subject of serious dispute (Prescott, 1999). Megoran's studies of Central Asia have also showcased an often complex, sometimes relationship between boundaries and borderlands, where governments use boundaries that have been neatly nationally/ethnically cleansed as performative, nationalistic sites within trans-boundary regions or borderlands that are notably mixed in terms of the backgrounds and identities of their inhabitants (Megoran, 2017). Maybe, something akin to a borderland biography might be a logical next step.

### **The phenomenon of In-betweenness in Arabian borderlands and boundary-drawing**

For the area of the Middle East I generally research – the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf – in-betweenness has been omnipresent and multi-scalar. In some ways, Britain's early-twentieth century efforts to give an edge (in the form of boundary lines) to the zones of influence it had established in the north-east, north-west and south-west of the Arabian Peninsula would leave a more problematic territorial legacy than the Sykes-Picot treaty itself (Schofield, 2018b). Before we briefly reflect upon how in-betweenness was itself a factor in the origins of Iraq-Kuwait disputes and continues to characterise the Sinai, it is as well to dwell briefly upon the peninsula itself. Located between the region's two great river systems and the civilisations that had developed around them, Arabia's traditional economy was characterised by a scarcity of resources where human mobility was the key to survival in an integrated system of circulation that involved complementary migrations and exchanges of goods between the various geographical zones within the peninsula, none of which could ever realise self-sufficiency (Wilkinson, 1994). Traditional Arabian geopolitics dictated therefore that mobile nomadic populations necessarily operated within mobile territories, whose size would contract and expand with the availability of resources. The scarcer the resources, the further nomadic tribes had to move to capture them with a resultant increase in the size of their grazing grounds (Schofield, 2018). The size and shapes of such territories was known, even marked though it is important to denote that this in no way equated with indigenous, Islamic notions of sovereignty,

which were communal (Joffe, 1994). Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain generally sought not to embroil itself in the affairs of the desert Arabian interior, seeking to maintain influence by sea, though gradually a strengthening Ottoman presence would cause Britain to cement itself in Kuwait and expand its presence in Aden to much of the Yemen by the end of the 1890s. It could no longer completely ignore the resource-poor space in between the Red Sea and Persian Gulf and would now try to control what it needed from its corners (Schofield, 2018b).

Just as the Rub al-Khali constituted a physical frontier of sorts in traditional parlance, so too did the Zagros mountains way up to the north-east. Here, Britain and Russia had sought to tame the region's one true traditional frontier, the Perso-Ottoman borderlands, in Europe's most prioritised nineteenth-century boundary-drawing project. Ambitious plans to lay down a line from the Gulf to Ararat were premised on a rough and ready approximation of territorial control and localised affiliations as they were perceived by the European powers to exist in the mid-nineteenth century. The complexities of a resilient frontier zone (with its multiple ethnicities, religious affinities and linguistic practices) were wholly underestimated by Britain and Russia (Schofield, 2008), who would soon relegate their mission to merely mapping the frontier zone but would not complete their self-assigned task of laying down a line in stone until the eve of the Great War in 1914 – almost three quarters of a century later than they originally envisaged doing so (Hubbard, 1916). As for the local empires on the quadripartite frontier commissions that tackled this vexed question, the Ottomans had taken the chance to cement its presence in socially complex, marginal regions it wasn't at all acquainted with, while the Persians pragmatically calculated they would probably get a better deal through the British and the Russians than by dealing with the Ottomans alone. As for the borderlanders themselves, territorial identity became a component of rivalry and identity within the borderlands itself – that awareness had been extended (Kashani-Sabet, 1999; Schofield, 2008). As such, the borderlands were not only territorialised spatially but also to a degree, socially. This was that rare example in the Middle East of an international boundary evolving within an established traditional borderland but the defining transitional character of this classic frontier region (Fawcett, 1918) would still largely obtain beyond 1914 – afforded largely – without sounding too deterministic – by its physical nature.

Traditionally Gulf waters themselves had never acted as an in-between space, quite the contrary. There were more contacts between the coastal communities on either side of the Gulf than there were with their respective hinterlands, as the local economy revolved around manipulation of the water resource that joined them. To project its own economic concerns and advance its position vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire, Britain acted to impede traditional maritime mobilities as the nineteenth century progressed, mainly in an effort to make Gulf waters a British lake and a forward defence line for British India (Schofield, 2018b). The ultimate reason for Britain getting into Kuwait and to define was so to deny imperial rivals Russia and Germany a foothold there. In truth, the water-channels and mud-flats that today comprise the Iraq-Kuwait borderlands were a no-man's land coveted by nobody.

The reality of the borderlands as an in-between space was only compounded by the fact that this territorial divide was effectively presided over in the defining, initial phases of the Iraq-Kuwait territorial dispute in the inter-war years by different, competing branches of the British Government, the India and Colonial Offices (Schofield, 1993). In later phases of the historically explosive dispute, an Arab League force would be emplaced for the first time along this border to forestall an inter-Arab state conflict on the occasion of Britain's departure from Kuwait as protecting power in 1961, while, three decades later, a demilitarised zone policed by the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM) would be established along the borderlands as part of the Secretary-General's settlement of the 1990-91 Kuwait Crisis.

Moving across to the Arabian north-west, the Gulf of Aqaba and the Sinai, Britain faced perhaps even more problems in the early years of the twentieth century in negotiating territorial limits for its established zone of interests with the Ottoman Empire. Recent historical geographical research suggests there is more to say about the origins of the 1906 Anglo-Ottoman agreement that introduced a boundary between Rafah and Aqaba – also that narrative approaches might have as full a role as biographies in helping geography do the histories of boundaries and borderlands more effectively<sup>9</sup>. While Evrim Gormus concludes in her contribution to this special issue that the successive failures of central authority to integrate the Northern Sinai's Bedouin communities are only guaranteeing the resilience of in-betweenness here (Gormus, 2020), its spatiality has always generally been characterised as marginal and in between. The peninsula has paid host to alternating territorial control following twentieth century conflict, United Nations peacekeeping forces and most recently the Egyptian government has sought to enforce greater social order with its establishment of a demilitarised zone. There have been some idealistic suggestions from a well-known neo-classical political geographer that the viability of any future Palestinian state in Gaza would be enhanced if it trebled in bulk by expanding into the northern peninsula (Cohen, 1994). If that sounds far-fetched, one should not forget that across the water to the east, Saudi Arabia and Jordan concluded Arabia's most imaginative boundary agreement signed to date in 1965 on the basis of a land-swap that saw Jordan extend its meagre coastline south of Aqaba in return for swathes of inland territory to which Saudi Arabia had laid claim historically (Schofield, 1994).

In trying to link up their established zones of interest in anticipating the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France proposed with their 1916 Sykes-Picot arrangements a new set of zones in the Eastern Mediterranean that were notably loosely delimited (Joffe, 2018; Schofield 2018a). A French buffer wedge extending across the former Ottoman province of Mosul was coveted to separate

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<sup>9</sup> See 'Borderlines and storylines: using the narrative form to reinvigorate geography's study of international boundaries', a paper delivered by Peter Waring to the 'Approaching the geographies and spatialities of Middle Eastern border politics' panel, BRISMES Annual Conference 2018, King's College London (June 2018) and his paper ('Colonial border legacies in the Middle East: the decade before Sykes-Picot'), delivered to the fourth convention of the London International Boundaries Conference, King's College, London (April 2019).

Britain from Imperial Russia but soon lost its saliency following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 (source). The Kurdish territorial entity promised in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres would soon be denied as Kemal Ataturk founded modern Turkey. Turkish claims to former Ottoman territory outside Anatolia were renounced everywhere with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne except Mosul, where the new state dug its heels in – there were admittedly also material reasons of political economy at play here for oil had been found by this stage. Even after a League of Nations fact-finding commission found that its inhabitants wanted to align with the newly British-created mandated state territory of Iraq in the early 1920s, Ankara took some convincing – not formally agreeing to a boundary recognising Mosul province as Iraqi until 1926 (Schofield, 2007). How the various stakeholders in the period since have dealt with the phenomenon of in-betweenness, admittedly one that was clumsily manufactured during colonial times, is a long and well-known story of coercion and thwarted self-determination (stans). In this special issue, Daniel Meier develops the possibility that frontierisation is manifesting in contemporary Kurdistan and its blurry margins with the Iraqi state (Meier, 2020b). Perhaps the frontierisation process has always been with us here.

Establishing a basis for the newly-emergent framework of state territories in the eastern Mediterranean in the period after World War One was never going to be easy. This was particularly notable for the southern limits of the corridor Britain had prioritised in the Sykes-Picot arrangements to link the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf through its mandate control of what would be Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. The Neutral Zones introduced between Iraq and Najd (later Saudi Arabia) and Kuwait and Najd reflected to some degree changing regional power dynamics with the rise of Ibn Saud and possibilities for oil south of Kuwait but they also reflected the lack of any clear indicators for introducing international boundaries and the fact that Britain wasn't too interested in wasting that many resources in finding them (Schofield, 1994; Wilkinson, 1991). Though these zones have disappeared from the political map in the postcolonial era – indeed, as recently as January this year Saudi Arabia and Kuwait finally cleared up remaining issues pertaining to their former Neutral Zone (on land and sea) with a newly-proclaimed agreement (Mills, 2020), formally shared political space has often been suggested as a device for managing persistent territorial disputes. The only part of Arabia where Britain tried to draw boundaries solely on the basis of human allegiance was in the mountainous terrain of south-eastern Arabia south of the Musandam Peninsula from the late 1950s onwards. The result was a patchwork quilt of small and often non-contiguous shaikhly territories, with many of the emirates in the contemporary United Arab Emirates possessing exclaves and also the enduring prevalence of a small number of shared and neutral territorial zones (Walker, 1994). It was in Persian Gulf waters that the application of the shared political space principle really took deliberate shape in the post-World War Two with the institution of joint development zones designed to allow access to what would otherwise be disputed reserves of oil and gas (Blake, 1994). Indeed, that

introduced in a 1958 agreement between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain was the first to be introduced globally specifically for such purposes.

The question of introducing territorial limits from the mid-1930s onwards between Saudi Arabia and Britain's protégé statelets along the Arabian coast in the primary context of developing resource geographies would ultimately result in a paper borderlands in southern Arabia being created by a series of overlapping territorial claims that centred around the Rub al-Khali (Schofield, 1996). The overlapping territorial claims would be trimmed, tailed but in some places even extended to constitute the Yemen-Saudi borderlands that were the subject of bilateral negotiation at inter-state level in the ten year period between Yemeni unification in 1990 and the conclusion of a Saudi-Yemeni boundary agreement in 2000.<sup>10</sup> As the result of that agreement, we now have a lavishly-demarcated international boundary in marble and gold but a deepening phenomenon of territorial fragmentation in a war-torn Yemen that had never really integrated or cohered socially or spatially after unification. In a situation that is in some ways analogous to the historical Perso-Ottoman example mentioned earlier on in this section, we have a delimited and demarcated boundary within a frontier zone (Schofield, 2018a). The themes of frontierisation and territorialisation will be profitable lines of enquiry in analysing process in this borderland as we (hopefully) move into the post-conflictual stage in the next few years.

### **The frontierisation and territorialisation of in-between spaces**

By employing David Campbell's (1999) ontological approach, grounding its ideas in Sack's (1986) reading of territorialisation and developing O'Dowd's (2014) critical reconceptualisation of frontiers as socio-spatial outcomes of power struggles, Daniel Meier began to set agenda in the introduction to this special issue for an examination of the degree to which in-between spaces in some of the region's most enduring territorial disputes were being frontierised (Meier, 2020a). A looser and more fluid form of bordering, frontiering, it was suggested, might prevail in those spaces where the power to project spatially was more contingent, mediated or contested – frontiers, borderlands and in-between spaces always seemed the most likely sites therefore, especially the former with their long-established traditional nature (Fawcett, 1918).

Evrin Gormus's paper concludes by underlining the glaring need to integrate indigenous Sinai Bedouin communities into the formal state economy. She notes how show state bordering and

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<sup>10</sup> Before Yemen laid down a traditional boundary claim in the mid-1990s to reflect, at least partially, the extent of Historic Yemen, a traditional Arabian geopolitical region, some three hundred years previously, there seemed to be a small wedge of desert territory east of the Yemeni *mashriq* that had not been the subject of Saudi and British claims made during its stay in Aden until 1967. In the end, it was no more than an interesting cartographic anecdote and meant nothing on the ground but the wedge did coincide with the tribal territories of the Seiar tribal federation, who had always been known for their fierce independence and resistance to the overtures of central authority in Aden, Sana'a and Riyadh (Schofield).

territorialising efforts historically have left this group marginalised and disenfranchised and how, since 2011, an in-between space of resistance has found expression and support in Islamic radicalism – prompting Egypt to recently introduce its demilitarised zone (DMZ) there. Contemporary instances of frontierisation such as the institution of the DMZ attest, in Gormus's words, to the resilience of this in-between space (Gormus). The processes hinted at by frontierisation (uncertain, mediated or compromised bordering, in a sense) are raised to highlight cleavages and fractures that have recently become apparent in Lebanon's Maronite community in Rosita di Peri's paper. Here, elites used historically to getting their own way are increasingly struggling to b/order (to use Henk van Houtum's perceptive 2012 term), the dissenting margins of an increasingly heterogenous political constituency (Di Peri, 2020).

Reading Zinovia Foka's paper on Nicosia's buffer zone and local practices of de-bordering – particularly its identification of the feature as a dynamic contemporary social construct - took me back to my postgraduate days in Durham in the early 1980s. My then colleague, Carl Grundy-Warr, spent the summer of 1984 traversing UNFICYP's snake-like buffer zone through the island and was impressed by the degree to which the peacekeeping force acted as a communications bridge between the starkly divided communities to its north and south (Grundy-Warr, 1987). The continuingly raw experience of 1974's partition for the islanders was also graphically illustrated in Christopher Hitchens writings and film-making in the 1980s, with his brilliant 1989 'Cyprus: an island stranded in time' for the BBC's *Frontiers* series still standing as one of the best border films this commentator has ever watched (Hitchens, 1984 and 1989). Foka presents a thoughtful account of localised bordering practices since the buffer zone opened up to a large degree in 2003 but I was particularly taken with the concluding section which tries to situate in-betweenness in some sort of context. Noting that binarizing the haves and have-nots, the powerful and the vulnerable, the us and them more generally has perhaps dominated too much of the recent border studies literature, Foka calls for more immersion in the routine grey area that constitutes daily life in borderlands, bringing to mind the still nascent subaltern geopolitics approach epitomised, for instance, in the work of Jo Sharp and Ruth Craggs. She also seemingly welcomes (as most certainly does this commentator) the continued development of a multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary approach to borderland studies.

Daniel Meier examines three localities (Kirkuk, Sinjar and Tuz Khurmatu) in the distinctly blurred disputed territories that separate the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) from the Iraqi state, aiming to gauge the degree to which a new socio-spatial frontier is manifesting as the result of an inconclusive power struggle that has fragmented and divided local communities and spatialities (Meier, 2020b). The disputed territories and their inhabitants have had little time to recover from recent violent upheaval – the extension of ISIS's control, the KRG's recovery of territory and its unilateral 2017 referendum, followed by a more recent reassertion of Iraqi state control in these margins. Gauging process in conditions of such territorial instability is difficult but giving a voice to

those communities who are experiencing could prove illuminating. Deploying the frontierisation approach retrospectively might also be revealing of how older generations of borderlanders have seen successive efforts of competing authorities to border and territorialise, bringing to mind some of Anssi Paasi's work on boundaries as social processes (Paasi, 1998).

'Endless borders', the prefix to the title of Stephanie Abdallah's paper in this volume, is such an evocative term but one that captures the dynamics, scale and permeation of recent Israeli state b/ordering practices on and around the West Bank. It is also given extra cogency by the recently-proclaimed Trump plan and, at the time of writing, Netanyahu's apparent victory in Israel's latest general election of March 2020. As Abdallah attests, the bordering and territorialising practices at work here work against the conventional wisdoms of drawing boundaries, seeking to instil a fractured, discontinuous state territory whose spatial viability would be deliberately and, indeed, terminally compromised. As someone who recalls David Newman speaking the best part of three decades ago at Durham University's International Boundaries Research Unit about the various plans out there or being contemplated for a Palestinian West Bank state – something he wrote on extensively (Newman 1994), it is somewhat chastening to hear the same individual conclude today that established facts on the ground now mean that any such traditional territorial separation no longer has a realistic chance of materialising.<sup>11</sup>

Identifying frontierisation within in-between spaces can potentially contribute a critical approach for exploration of the territorialisation process in borderlands and frontier-like spaces. It obviously relies upon researchers getting their hands dirty in border spaces with fieldwork, something that commentators like Nick Megoran have urged geographers and social scientists, and especially critical border scholars, to do more of (Megoran, 2012). Yet, it is vital that any refinement of academic approaches to in-between spaces or borderlands is inclusive of the pioneering efforts made to critique and characterise them that have come before and that it is multidisciplinary in scope. Here, we are not just calling for the recognition of the real contribution of, for instance, the 1960s borderland studies approach in geography but also acknowledging the observations of historians that we often simply don't know enough historically of the materialities of marginal territories. The notion of borderscape has been developed to promising theoretical and analytical effect in recent years but there is still an awful lot left to say about borderlands and this should ideally combine new critical approaches profitably with the better insights and contributions from the past. In orientating the cultivation of any approach to borderland process (of which frontierisation would certainly be part), geographers can profit by engaging with the rich traditions established by the likes of House and Minghi and also incorporate the frequently astute observations emanating of other disciplines: here the work of

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<sup>11</sup> Address entitled 'Thinking beyond the territorial box: peace with borders in Israel/Palestine?' to the fourth convention of the *London International Boundary Conference*, King's College, London, April 2019.

Goodhand, Martinez and Readman most obviously comes to mind. For borderland studies must be a multidisciplinary endeavour. Lastly, the phenomenon and experience of in-betweenness has been both top-down and ground-up. It has always been present in one way or another in the evolving regional territorial framework – as the middle section of this article has demonstrated, just as a feeling of in-betweenness is a recurring phenomenon in the contemporary lives of many Middle Eastern borderlanders.

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