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Exile, Place, and Politics:
Syria's Transnational Civil War

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Geography

by

Ali Nehme Hamdan

2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Exile, Place, and Politics:
Syria's Transnational Civil War

by

Ali Nehme Hamdan

Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor John A. Agnew, Co-Chair

Professor Adam D. Moore, Co-Chair

This dissertation explores the role of transnational dynamics in civil war. The conflict in Syria has been described as experiencing one of the most brutal civil wars in recent memory. At the same time, it bears the hallmarks of a deeply “internationalized” conflict, raising questions about the role of transnational forces in shaping its structural dynamics. Focusing on Syria’s conflict, I examine how different actors draw on transnational networks to shape the geographies of “wartime governance.” Wartime governance has been acknowledged by many scholars to be an important process of civil wars, and yet it is frequently conceptualized as a “subnational” or “local” process. For Syria’s opposition, I investigate how it both produces decidedly transnational spaces in Syria’s Northwest, while also illuminating the role of a particular network of actors in doing so. For the global jihadi network Daesh (known also as the Islamic State), I illustrate the contrast between its rhetoric of transnational jihad and its practices of governance, which is considerable. Ultimately, the dissertation suggests that tracing these transnational processes not only draws together

literatures on the “local” and “transnational” dimensions of civil wars, but reveals the precarious political contexts which individuals must navigate in wartime.

The dissertation of Ali Nehme Hamdan is approved.

James L. Gelvin

Helga M. Leitner

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John A. Agnew, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

I dedicate this work to those who speak but go unheard.

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2nd Place, California Geographical Society Graduate Student Talk Award, 2013.

Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Award, Summer 2012

History to the defeated

May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.

W.H. Auden, "Spain."

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. A BEGINNING

In the provincial Turkish city of Gaziantep, I found myself sitting across from two Syrian activists enjoying a crisp pilsner as the sun began to dip beyond the horizon. It was a dry and scorching July, and though moisture beaded along the slender brown bottle, minor currents in the air hinted at the merciful arrival of evening. It was my first month of proper fieldwork.

For our meeting we had chosen a bar perched on the third floor of a historic Ottoman structure built of smooth beige limestone, which looked out onto a charming inner courtyard filled with tables belonging to an upper-scale restaurant. The building had once been an administrative center dating back a hundred years to an era when Gaziantep – or Antep, as it was then known – still fell under the jurisdiction of the governor of Aleppo, the third largest city in an empire that had stretched from the Balkans to Yemen to Libya. A border, a century, and several wars had relegated the building to its currently more modest role as an architectural relic or, perhaps, font of historical nostalgia. During the last decade the structure had been lovingly renovated to evoke an imagined (and also erased) history of Ottoman splendor, but in a manner appealing to tourists visiting from Europe and Turkey's bourgeois classes, for whom the Levant still held the charm of the exotic.

It is doubtful that the building's renovators would have anticipated the arrival of its current clientele, however. Between sips of beer I could glance down to the courtyard below to study the suit-and-tie-wearing diplomats, the more sociable aid workers, contractors lively with ambition, and, one could not help but assume, intelligence operatives tucking discreetly into Turkish *mezzes* arrayed on white tablecloths. Americans, British, French, Dutch, Canadians,

Danes, Norwegians, Germans, and above all, Syrians, whose presence had the ironic effect of reconnecting daily life in Gaziantep with events across the border in war-torn Syria. Still, the ties linking the humdrum Turkish manufacturing city to the world's most brutal conflict were unfamiliar, new, and rapidly changing; their architects formed a bizarre cast of characters whose motives were not easy to interpret. Moreover, these ties did not register in any immediate manner or disrupt the atmosphere of what was turning out to be a picturesque summer evening. The restaurant – in fact the building in its entirety – was alive with the echo of amused conversation. Starlings flitted among the balconies, aproned waiters meandered among the tables below, and from the bar above I could glimpse the red-tiled rooves of the city beyond.

The Syrian revolutionary project was still alive and well in the summer of 2015. Across the border and a mere hour's drive to the south of this tranquil scene lay the city of Aleppo, industrial capital of Syria and, at this point, a city still violently divided into zones contested between the Assad regime on one hand, and a loose ensemble of opposition militias calling themselves the *Fatah Halab* (Aleppo Conquest) operations room on the other. The two activists across the table from me – whom I will call Bassem and Ghassan¹ – were at the time spending considerable time, effort, and money traveling between Antep and opposition-held or “liberated” areas like East Aleppo, and our meeting was intended to introduce me in a general sort of way to what exactly this entailed, how these cross-border activities related to the Syrian revolutionary project, and whether the two men would be willing to assist in my research, then in its infancy. Much was on the line.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all names should be understood as pseudonyms intended to protect the identity and wellbeing of my interlocutors.

The conversation began well enough. Bassem explained that he was a musician, video editor, and translator who used his skills in service of the Syrian revolution in ways that I discuss later. Intriguingly, Bassem had made the long passage to Germany through the Balkans along the now infamous “migrants trail,” a theme that would emerge from many interviews I would conduct over two years of fieldwork in Turkey and Jordan. Chuckling, Bassem told the story of how he got by along the way:

I had this way of surviving when I was hitchhiking through the Balkans. I didn't have a lot of money, and I didn't know anyone. So I would buy a cheap pair of sunglasses, or a lighter, whatever, and enter a restaurant. Then I'd eat a nice dinner – a main course, drink a glass or two of *'araq* (anise liquor), maybe have some dessert – and suddenly have to take “a call” outside on my cell phone. But [dramatic pause] I would leave a little food and the sunglasses at the table for “when I came back.” Only, I would disappear and move on to the next city.²

His story was met by uproarious laughter, which in part deflated the tragic reality that we all understood to have shaped Bassem's life for the weeks following his flight from Damascus. The tribulations of refugees like Bassam – Syrians yes, but also Iraqis, Afghans, and sub-Saharan Africans – have spurred the work of scholars in recent years, who have sought to understand the global processes through which these figures leave spaces of violence and poverty in search of spaces of opportunity.

At the same time, these tribulations did not define him in his entirety. He has, to paraphrase Sherry Ortner, his own politics (Ortner 1995). While Bassem certainly encountered the violence of Europe's borders, this violence did not erase his previous self-conception as a *tha'ir*, a revolutionary; nor did it transform his future in a wholesale, predictable manner. In fact, Bassem's narrative fast left behind his passage to Europe, breezily describing a successful application for asylum in Germany before culminating in something that did transform his life: the decision to return – paradoxically, I first thought – to this dull Mesopotamian city abutting

² Conversation with author. Gaziantep, Turkey. July 2015.

the country whose violence he had just fled. His was a story in which Fortress Europe and the evils of borders played but a contextual role. Instead, what truly shone was his personal ability (by no means common) to navigate the condition of displacement and exile in such a manner that enabled him to contribute to the Syrian revolutionary project – if not from inside Syria, then reaching in from the outside. Bassem willingly relocated to Gaziantep in 2014 to participate in a burgeoning opposition media scene which not only set up shop in the border city, but made regular trips into the “liberated territories” of Syria to cultivate radio, television, and textual news services as alternatives to the state-controlled Syrian media.

I was enthralled. My fourth companion – a close friend – sat beside me looking mildly pleased with herself. She had introduced me to the right people, clearly. It certainly helped that Bassem was a lively conversationalist at ease speaking with a new visitor. Ghassan proved more guarded. This was not because he was closed off to foreigners. Far from it. If anything, Ghassan knew too many outsiders who had passed through Antep to take at face value their claims to sympathy for the Syrian revolutionary cause. His forceful gaze marked a quick intellect, and he had sized me up during Bassem’s story. In no hurry to subject himself and the cause he championed to the analytical violence of a stranger, he instead reversed our encounter by questioning me: “You are the academic. So tell me: What,” he asked holding firm eye contact, “do you call what is happening in Syria?”

What indeed.

1.2 BROAD SIGNIFICANCE

Over the last several decades, scholars have grappled with large questions of this kind about how war transforms space in our currently interconnected age. Ghassan's question contained a test, one designed not to gather information (I had nothing to offer him) but rather to locate my scholarly (and ethical) motivations with respect to the conflict. On the one hand, many scholars believe that objective inferences can be made regarding the nature of conflict. Syria's has generally been conceived of as a civil war. As a concept or label, "civil war" seeks to relativize the positions of those involved so that scholars can identify, compare, and ultimately make sense of a general phenomenon, one that unfolds in contexts as diverse as Congo, El Salvador, Sierra Leone, Colombia, and others.

Dramatic shifts have led scholars to reevaluate these concepts. As nation-states adapt to a world of increasingly transnational networks – which we now associate with processes of globalization – analysts began to notice a troubling trend in political violence. Not only was it on the rise, but it increasingly featured the actions of diffuse, irregular armed forces who did not always seek to capture the state. These "new wars" tended to involve higher rates of civilian casualties and enormous damage to the built environment. They were harder to distinguish from criminal networks, and they resulted in widespread forced displacement, especially in rural areas. In 1990, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program introduced the category of "internationalized intrastate conflict" to capture these novel dynamics, and their data shows that they have risen in prominence after the US invasion of Iraq (Pettersson & Eck 2018). By their accounting, today these are the most common form of war.

Many analysts would argue that this concept, and the objective view that it purports to capture, offers a sufficient answer to Ghassan's query. The violence in Syria seems to clearly

align with the UCDP's definition as "an armed conflict between a government and a non-government party where the government side, the opposing side, or both sides, receive troop support from other governments that actively participate in the conflict" (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2018). The Assad regime in Damascus is certainly a government facing a violent challenge from non-government parties, and all parties have drawn on "troop support," but also substantial material and diplomatic support from outside parties. Seeing this conflict as a case of this phenomenon certainly points to a variety of structural conditions that led Syria down its current path.

On the other hand, concepts are far from objective analytical tools. They are very much part of the terrain over which conflicts are themselves fought. They are thus performative in the sense that they legitimate life-worlds, social orders, and political projects that have been thrown into radical flux (Baczko et al 2018). Moreover, and like all concepts, this one evokes the wider theory of which it is but a component, the broader "principles whereby things can be reduced to order" (Foucault 2005:64). At best, the notion of the internationalized intra-state conflict offers a position within a worn typology, one that has already normalized a particular analytical frame for warfare whose chief referent remains the nation-state. Much like the study of refugees, the study of war, its geographies, and key actors remains thoroughly embedded in a "national order of things" (Malkki 1995). This suggests that the analytical categories currently underpinning the study of war center the state even when the processes we seek to grasp necessarily exceed it. In doing so, it obscures the more unusual actors, spaces, and motivations that increasingly shape the processes of war in the 21st century. It obscures how these actors constitute new forms of political order that coexist, if awkwardly, with a world of territorial states.

This dissertation, accordingly, attempts to bring to light the complex, indeed anomalous forms of order that emerge in warzones by studying geographical dynamics of civil war, focusing on the role of transnational actors, refugees in particular. The project is centered on how refugees mobilize politically from exile on the one hand, and on the kinds of space they bring into being inside of the warzone, on the other. While doing so, the argument remains sensitive to the structural challenges facing refugee populations living in exile and the dangers and limitations facing civilian actors residing in the warzone of Syria. At the same time, its geographic focus on Syria's borderlands and on a particular assemblage of refugee actors I dub the "coordinating class," this project also seeks to inject important nuance into the study of Syria's widely maligned opposition movement.

1.3 FROM UPRISING TO WAR

Scholarship on Syria's conflict emerged out of a time of rising interest in the country's internal politics. Beginning in 2011, a series of popular uprisings challenged the decades-long tenure of a number of autocratic rulers across the Arab world. For a brief while, a cottage industry of analysis emerged to unpack why analysts had not predicted the uprisings, what caused them to happen, and whether we might expect their trajectory to lead. While many insisted that we were witnessing a wider "Arab spring," analysts close to the ground insisted that the protests highlighted important national differences among the "Arab" states, foregrounding a newfound analytical attention to the state in the region. At the same time, the state as a political relationship coexists in tension with a number of forces operating across different scales.

Syria stands out in the scholarship as a key outlier. Whereas popular protests led to the ousting of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Syria's Bashar al-Assad clung to power. The Baathist regime dismissed protestors as foreign infiltrators and terrorists, waging a brutal campaign of intimidation by security forces that led to outright violence in the streets. Events escalated when in July 2011 a handful of officers led by Colonel Riad al-Asaad defected from the regime's Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and proclaimed the formation of a Free Syrian Army (FSA) whose goals were to "work hand-in-hand with the people toward the goals of freedom and dignity, overthrowing the regime, protecting one another, and progress for the country" (Al-Assaad 2012, March 20). For analysts of Syria, but also those participating in the demonstrations, its militarization was a foreseeable if tragic outcome of the intransigence of the Baathist regime.

Alongside Bahrain and Libya, Syria shares the dubious distinction of falling among those states where protests were "unsuccessful." Bahrain and Libya witnessed similarly intransigent regimes defiant in the face of mass protests, and both situations were internationalized by robust external interventions. Under operation "Peninsula Shield," a joint force of Saudi and Emirati soldiers arrived to the small island nation of Bahrain to initiate a wave of violent crackdowns on protesters and opposition forces, shoring up the ruling Khalifa family, a key Saudi ally. In Libya, a coalition of NATO forces launched naval and aerial attacks to support armed rebels in March 2011, which both toppled the Gaddhafi regime but quickly led to a collapse of the state and the onset of violent civil war. Failed uprisings in both Bahrain and Libya certainly resemble Syria's in many respects, and yet no decisive factor has brought about structural change in the country's political field. Even the internationalization of Syria's conflict has not led to a decisive outcome. Despite indirect military assistance to Syria's opposition movement by the United States and

others, and even with direct military assistance to the Assad regime by Iran, Russia, and others, the Assad regime retains its hold on state institutions and has only at the time of writing been able to subdue the opposition forces seeking to remove it from power.

Syria has thus raised a number of questions for scholars seeking to understand both how the country transitioned from a popular uprising to such a violent, protracted civil war, as well as how this war has itself transformed the country. Politics in Syria have long been characterized by totalitarian efforts at securing individual and social compliance (Hinnebusch 2004; Heydemann & Leenders 2013), but also subtler efforts to incorporate key social groups into the ruling coalition of the Baathist regime (Haddad 2011; Stacher 2012; Keshavarzian 2014). In the wake of the uprising, more recent work has pivoted to foreground opposition to this regime: the mobilizing strategies of social movements that emerged in 2011 and slightly before (Bayat 2010; Beinin & Vairel 2013; Chalcraft 2016). This has entailed studying the social bases of opposition to the regime, be these religious or sectarian movements (Pierret 2013), ethnic communities like the Kurds (Gunter 2014), or regional configurations.

By late 2013 armed struggle had largely replaced the activist networks that were key in the beginning of the uprising, and scholarship pivoted to capture this transition. A number of books have been published over the last several years, whether designed as general stock-taking accounts of the slide to war (Achcar 2016; Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami 2016; Abboud 2016; Baczkowski et al 2018) or to convey the conflict through the voices of those who have lived it (Yazbek 2016; Pearlman 2017; al-Haj Saleh 2017). In some circles – particularly the policy world – this framing of “what went wrong” was eclipsed by anxiety about the arrival of transnational jihadist militants (Lister 2014) and fears by many that Syria’s uprising would devolve into vengeful sectarian massacres (Byman 2014; Haddad 2017). This was seemingly

confirmed by the advent of Daesh,³ the so-called “Islamic State” in June 2014, which further shifted attention from the uprising to focus on the spectacular violence meted out by a brutal transnational insurgency which seemingly “came out of nowhere” to shake the Middle East to its very core (Gerges 2016; Weiss & Hassan 2016; Samer 2017). All of this is setting aside the enormous (and uneven) output of “gray literature” on Syria’s conflict emerging from think tanks, research institutes, and humanitarian organizations.

In addition to the causes of Syria’s slide into violence, the consequences have proven equally significant – namely, forced migration, internal displacement, and the politics of asylum. Since 2012, a staggering number of Syrians have been forced to leave their homes. Official records from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) suggest that 5.6 million Syrians have fled the country as refugees. The majority of these individuals have sought refuge in nearby states, namely Turkey (3.6 million), Lebanon (938,000), and Jordan (660,000), while hundreds of thousands of Syrians have sought asylum in Europe (UNHCR 2019, May 9; Eurostat 2019, March 13). A further 6.6 million people have become internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Syria, seeking shelter from the frontlines and airstrikes and bringing the total number of Syrians forced from their homes to over 13 million people, half the pre-war population of the country. Given the paucity of record-keeping in conditions of war, and the number of “informal” crossings into refugee host states in its early years, these figures capture at best a portion of the human toll in Syria’s conflict.

³ The English-language acronym “ISIS” stands for the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (“the Levant”). Although many scholars and analysts continue to refer to the group by this acronym in English, I opt (as have others) to refer to it by its derogatory Arabic acronym, Daesh (*al-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah fi Iraq wa al-Sham*). I do so out of a political commitment to remind readers that the group in no way represents the complex, global community of Muslims, despite its pretensions to doing so and its overinflated media presence.

The greater bulk of writing on the “refugee crisis” has centered on the governance of refugees. The ethical reasons for studying this are certainly important: falling as they do into gaps within the international order of nation-states (Haddad 2008), refugees are nonetheless governed by a number of actors unaccountable to them and are therefore uniquely vulnerable populations. With the exception of a wealthy class of entrepreneurs, most Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon face weak legal protections, meagre opportunities in host state labor markets, cultural discrimination, and exposure to physical violence against their bodies. These vulnerabilities vary across and within host states, but they are also produced in conjunction with the interventions of international humanitarian organizations, donor state governments and, indeed, the growing numbers of foreign researchers for whom they become data points. The vulnerable position of most refugees is thus not only an outcome of (host) state policy, but is constituted by a variety of institutions operating across different scales.

1.4 THE CASE

At the same time, refugees have played an active role in the Syrian conflict – specifically, in reshaping the spaces of the country’s warzone. Based in Turkey and Jordan, among other places, Syrian refugees participated in a wide range of activities intended to sustain governance, humanitarian assistance, and political opposition to the Assad regime within what they call the “Liberated Territories” of Syria. These have ranged from journalists documenting human rights violations, to civil society organizations channeling aid and building community centers, to establishing governance structures in exile. In tandem with these activities, and with direct coordination with the Turkish and Jordanian authorities, a parallel movement of Syrians (still residing in the country) has circulated through spaces of Syrian exile in these countries.

Members of the civilian local and provincial councils – key subnational governance bodies inside the Liberated Territories – as well as militants, activists, field researchers, and others cross into the borderlands of Turkey and Jordan where they rub shoulders with their compatriots in exile. The routinization of these relationships, mobilities, and spaces not only underpins the formation of the wider assemblage that we might call “Syria’s opposition,” but contributes to extending the geographies by which the Liberated Territories are governed and sustained beyond Syria’s borders. In essence, these actors and produce what Jeffrey et al (2015) dub an “anomalous geopolitical space” in which rebel sovereignty is articulated through transnational relations (Jeffrey et al 2015).

This project represents an effort to tease out some of the transnational dynamics of civil war, focusing on the case of Syria. It focuses on the role of refugees for the most part, but also of the Islamist group Daesh, in extending and altering the geographies of Syria’s civil war. It does so hoping to show that the participation of refugees in the transnational dynamics of conflict is a far more ambivalent process than is typically conceived. Contrary to popular belief, refugee networks do not operate on the fringes of the state system, but through and in tandem with it as they engage with key processes of conflict. Likewise, even “global” terrorist organizations like Daesh are forced to reconcile their ambitious visions to the realities of everyday governance. Ultimately, however, this project aims to center refugees as geopolitical actors worth taking seriously.

While the role of refugees in the transnational dynamics of civil wars has been well-documented, this role is by and large cast in a negative light. In the context of civil wars, refugees are associated with risk – specifically, the risk of “conflict diffusion” to from the home state (currently experiencing conflict) to the host state (where refugees seek safety). This is

because refugees are motivated by life-altering grievances – displacement and extreme violence – capable of transforming them from victims deserving of sympathy to destabilizing “refugee warriors” (Salehyan 2009; Lischer 2006). Analysts debate how and why this process unfolds, and yet the grievances, political projects, narratives, and mobilizing strategies of refugees have typically taken a back seat to the calculations of states, who are viewed as legitimate actors in civil war.

This returns us to figures like Ghassan and Bassem. We have heard already from Bassem, but Ghassan likewise has a story tied to exile. The evolving dynamics of the war, and the experience of imprisonment and torture at the hands of the regime led him to flee to Turkey. At the time of our meeting in 2015, Ghassan had brought the skills and social networks he had built to a large international development contractor (IDC) that contracts to development agencies and foreign ministries to implement projects in line with their policy goals. His work supported a project called the “Syrian Regional Programming” (SRP), an initiative to build and sustain provincial councils. These councils had quickly become, if not all powerful, then perhaps the most powerful scale of civilian authority in the opposition-held territories of Syria in 2015. Why Syria’s *thuwwaar* wanted to cultivate institutions of provincial and local governance in Syria was quite straightforward: they hoped to one day extend the sovereignty of their social order to cover all of Syria’s territory (Baczko et al 2018). The motives of SRP’s financial backers – the US State Department and British Foreign Ministry – were less so. Ghassan’s job was to liaise between the team at his IDC and the provincial councils inside Syria, to assess their needs, provide them with equipment, facilitate trainings, and connect individuals to one another.

Like Bassem, Ghassan performed a pivotal role stitching together the relations binding Syria’s opposition movement to external actors. Despite their deep commitment to the

revolutionary project of the Syrian opposition, Ghassan and Bassem were unwilling to join the armed struggle directly, and instead found themselves turned into refugees. More accurately, they were displaced because of their revolutionary politics. Ghassan found his way to Gaziantep, where he would be safe from the probing intelligence apparatus of the regime while remaining within reach of his family, which still resided in posh regime-controlled West Aleppo. Likewise, Bassem fled possible arrest, torture, and imprisonment, but traveled further afield, both because his family had also fled the country and because becoming a German resident provided a degree of protection when he returned to Turkey that being a “Syrian guest” in that country did not.

Both eventually returned to these networks of Syrian opposition actors, only this time emerging in exile. These networks took to work connecting what they call Syria’s “liberated territories” – those regions controlled, governed, and made meaningful by opposition actors – into the relations, circulations, and scripts of world politics. In the process, these networks have formed and been formed by a highly uneven geography of exile, one centered on particular places like Gaziantep, but others as well: Antakya, Şanlıurfa, and Istanbul in Turkey, Amman and Irbid in Jordan, among others.

1.5 METHOD & FIELDWORK

Unlike Lebanon, both Turkey and Jordan ratified UN Security Council Resolution 2165 authorizing independent cross-border aid deliveries. Both Gaziantep and Amman are thus characterized by large populations of Syrian refugees, as well as the presence of humanitarian institutions, diplomatic representatives, historical transnational ties, and key infrastructures. They are also located within reasonable access of Syria’s borders.

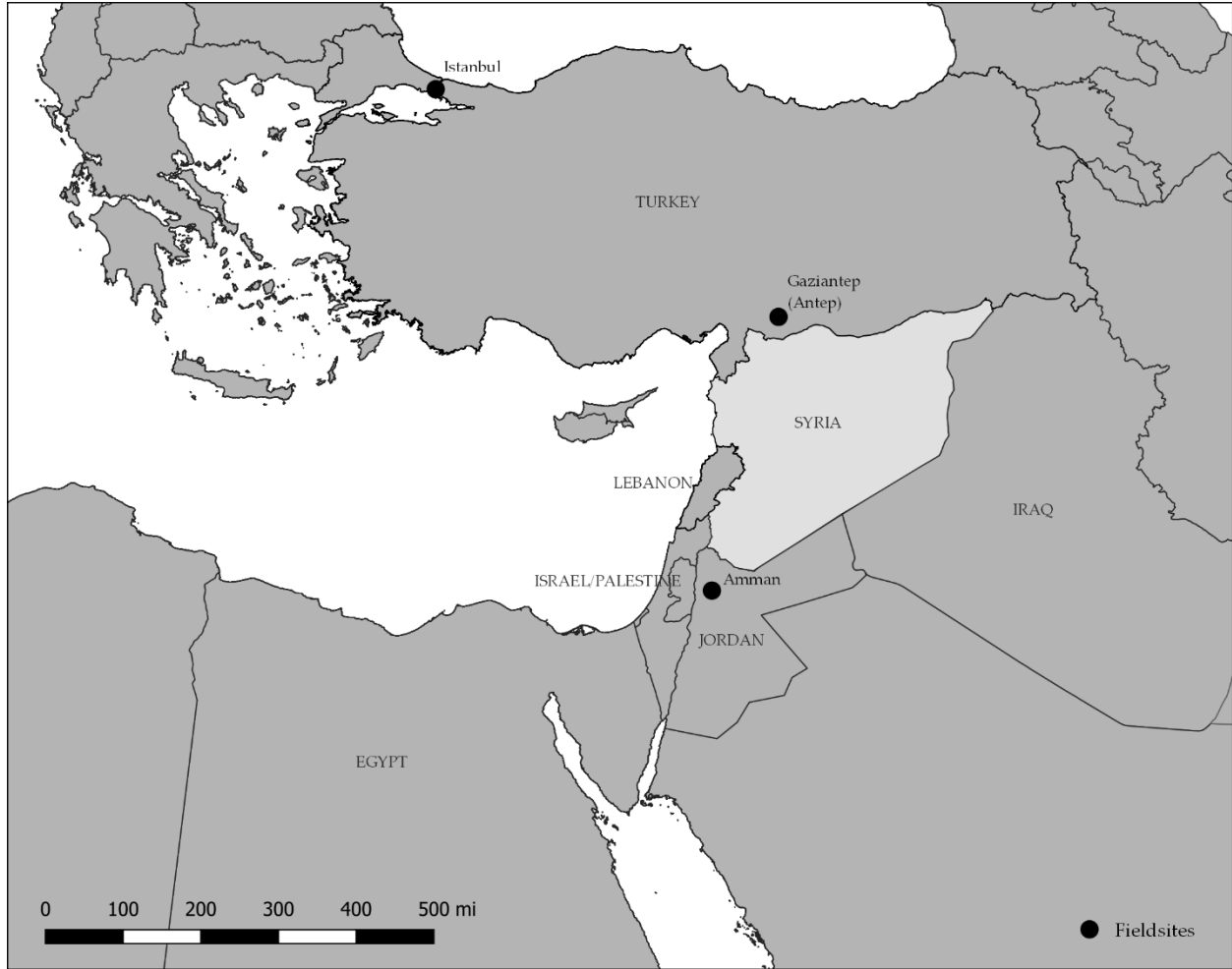


Figure 1.1 – Field sites from fieldwork conducted between July 2015 – August 2017..

Hundreds of politically-motivated individuals have arrived in these cities since 2012, aiming to continue opposition activities from a safe haven. As in other civil wars, their presence in host states is presumed to be destabilizing. Yet both Turkey and Jordan – despite a wide variety of institutional and geographical differences – avoid outright conflict with Syria’s opposition movement-in-exile. Instead, they have managed to live with, and even cultivate, certain types of rebel activity. Focusing on the consolidation of the opposition’s networks in and across these two field sites, my research explores how they adapt opposition activity to exile and

how unique interactions among refugees, host states, and donor states (among others) have enabled the movement to produce a particular *kind* of exile geography in Gaziantep and Amman.

For this project, I engaged in multi-sited ethnography, which involves treating field sites as part of a single, inter-related process extending across space. Its ultimate goal is tracing how the everyday activities and imaginaries of Syria's opposition movement-in-exile respond to and shape the broader geopolitical field surrounding the conflict in Syria (Hannerz 2003; Herbert 2000; Megoran 2006; see also Bayard de Volo & Schatz 2004). Along the way, I developed some insights into the geographies of Daesh. I approached my field site as a network that is embedded in specific locations but whose cumulative effects transcends them, instead of as bounded "cases" of a shared phenomenon to be compared and contrasted in isolation (Gupta & Ferguson 1996; Burrell 2009). This entailed spending 26 months collecting semi-structured interviews (N=120), archival material, and participant observation at workshops, conferences, and meetings between two cities: Gaziantep, Turkey and Amman, Jordan.

This method returns us to Ghassan's earlier question about the role as researcher: whether to offer some form of objective "truth" or to simply act as a relay for the understandings of my participants. Over the course of fieldwork, many Syrians and non-Syrians whom I encountered – some of whom I ultimately befriended – were curious to see through the eyes of an outsider. These participants were not short on interpretive frames for understanding the violence that had so thoroughly torn apart their home and cast them into exile in Turkey, Jordan, or elsewhere. Indeed, for them they were quite clearly living through the tragedy of a revolution that was increasingly exhausted and betrayed by a distant world. Living through it as they did, they sought a wider lens that could make sense of the sheer complexity of experiences they and their country were passing through. At the same time, they were concerned by the increasingly narrow

depictions of the conflict that interpreted this tragedy through crude tropes (a descent into sectarian violence) rather than locating it in the brutal violence of an uncompromising, autocratic regime in Damascus. My participants posed questions to me as an individual, but also in my capacity as a researcher and intellectual (*muthaqqaf*) capable of offering this wider lens. These questions were equal parts challenge and inquiry. I can only answer from the position in which I found myself during fieldwork.

1.6 OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation was motivated by two interconnected concerns. The first is the admiration I felt – and continue to feel – toward many Syrian opposition figures I met during fieldwork in Turkey and Jordan. The individuals I interviewed faced numerous challenges: the crippling absence of resources; fickle allies; rancorous infighting; the trauma of displacement and exile; the arrival of transnational jihadi militants; and of course, the obstinate violence of an authoritarian regime. The passion and fervor with which relatively ordinary people worked to overcome or, at least, navigate these challenges is a memory that I will hold onto for a very long time. At its core, these figures represented a movement against totalitarianism and ethno-sectarian politics in the post-colonial Middle East, goals for which many of us can doubtless find sympathy.

The second reason, equally important, is the troubling ways that analytical writing, media coverage and more popular understandings have narrated Syria's conflict. For the Syrian opposition, this has entailed, on the one hand, inaccurate equations to the jihadi militant groups with which it has sometimes made common cause and, on the other, the inference that opposition groups are little more than dupes of American imperialism in the region. Both tendencies have proven common both on the political right but, more troubling, on the political left as well. I do

not in this project seek to glorify the Syrian opposition as a pet project, or overlook its shortcomings (as seems regrettably common with regard to Syria's Kurds). The growing presence of self-described Islamist groups drawing on the opposition label has rendered any attempt to defend the opposition writ large indefensible. In this context the stakes of ethnographic seduction or relativizing the oppressions of such people are high (Robben 1996). But Syrian actors both acknowledge and struggle with this as a central problem of the revolutionary political project. This should not be forgotten. And so my project is not one of activism so much as it is of recovery and evaluation.

This dissertation consists of three substantive chapters written in the form of self-contained scholarly articles, supplemented by an introduction (this chapter) and a conclusion. It begins by focusing on how war produces new kinds of space and, in turn, how these spaces shape the forms of wartime governance or “order” that emerge in wartime. Although peace and conflict studies is currently undergoing a “spatial turn” of sorts, geographers have further insights that might trouble uncritical conceptions of “the local” or “the transnational” that currently inform this field. Having considered the anomalous spaces that emerge out of war, Chapter Three focuses on a key actor involved in tying these together: the “coordinating class” of the Syrian opposition. Drawing on assemblage theory, it teases out the role played by this transnational class in shaping the anomalous orders of the Liberated Territories. Chapter Four pivots to offer a different perspective on the complex geographies of Syria’s civil war, focusing on the radical Islamist organization Daesh. Whereas scholarship on conflict emphasizes the “local” dynamics of civil wars, writing on terrorist networks – Islamist, in particular – has conventionally foregrounded their “global” nature, as seen in both their rhetoric and

organizational form. This chapter deflates the myth of Daesh's globality. The dissertation closes with a brief conclusion.

Chapter 2: Anomalous Geopolitical Spaces in Syria's War

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In 2011, a popular uprising shook the streets of Syria. Inspired by similar protests unfolding in nearby Arab states, a wide transect of Syrian society joined what was increasingly called a *thawrah* (“revolution” or “uprising”) against the Assad regime in Damascus, which had governed the country since 1971. The rapid spread of demonstrations across the country and their remarkable persistence despite waves of state repression indicated that a “hidden transcript” of resistance – indeed, a particularly embittered one – was suddenly and dramatically coming to light (Scott 1976). As uprising gave way, gradually, to open war, contentious politics became increasingly less attractive as a form of opposition to a government that began wielding excessive violence against its citizens. While many – young men, in particular – took to armed insurgency, this was not the only form opposition came to take.

As early as 2012, a wave of deeply-politicized individuals settled in the Turkish borderlands, which became ground zero for the thousands of displaced Syrians seeking refuge from the violence back home. From the city of Gaziantep, they worked to cultivate international support for the plight of the uprising while sustaining everyday life for those living in communities wrested from the Assad regime, areas they came to call the “Liberated Territories” of Syria (*al-manatiq al-muharrarah*). Over several years, a bewildering array of actors converged on Gaziantep, among them the United Nations, major humanitarian organizations, diplomatic representatives from the “Friends of Syria” states, international development contractors, and of course, various arms of the Turkish host state administration, journalists, and other, more ambivalent actors.

For several years, a complex articulation of civilian, political, and military actors ascribing to Syria's *thawrah* supported an array of activities typically shouldered by states: They sought to ensure the arrival of emergency needs like foodstuffs, medical supplies, winter clothing, and shelters. They supported efforts at civilian governance, organizing elections for Local Administrative Council (LACs) and their provincial equivalents, and provided a modicum of services like road repair, electricity-provision, and water treatment. They attempted to provide security for their populations, forming a Free Syrian Police, court systems, and protection from the depredations of other armed groups. These efforts were modest and only went a short way toward meeting the dire needs of the governed, who lay vulnerable to starvation, random violence, exposure, and the ever-present threat of *qasf* ("airstrikes") by regime planes. They were also shot through with internal contradictions common to relations between "donors" and "beneficiaries," with the political function of these efforts pulled taut between these two. Compared to the highly-centralized Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitaya Demokrat*, hereafter PYD) and the Assad regime – or even the despotic legions of Daesh (ISIS), "the opposition" was for a long time a byword for disorder and malfunction, one that barely merited mention as a coherent, unified actor in Syria's political field.

If not quite "successful," their efforts nonetheless had important political *effects*. For a crucial period of Syria's war, the opposition movement and its many allies stabilized a set of spaces in which new identities, forms of authority, and transnational ties became possible, underpinning a competing sovereign claim to Syria's territory as a whole and extending the geographies of Syria's civil war beyond its borders. In essence, the dynamics of Syria's civil war produced new forms of political order; in turn, these anomalous orders – composed of highly contingent, overlapping articulations of authority and space – became central to grasping how

governance and legitimacy play out in the context of the country's war. In this paper, I explore the kinds of space that have emerged out of the territories "controlled" by Syria's opposition movement. By conceiving of war as *generative* – above all, generative of its own forms of space – I will focus on how these spaces shape and are shaped by wartime governance in civil wars. My aim here is not to pin down definitively what kind of space the Liberated Territories are so much as to consider how war shapes the articulation of space with authority in manifold ways.

2.2 ANOMALOUS GEOPOLITICAL SPACES

New scholarship in peace and conflict studies has changed how we view the relationships between civil war, politics, and space. If scholars previously viewed war as a condition of "all terror all the time, all over the place" (Korf et al 2010:384), we might now think of war as a generative process, one in which new configurations of authority, identity, and territory can come into being (Kalyvas 2006; Wood 2008; Lubkemann 2008). Recent work thus challenges prevailing descriptions of warzones as essentially "black spots" on the world map: spaces where the "collapse" of the state is synonymous with the absence of governance, the ubiquity of violent death, and the flourishing of criminal enterprise.

One of the more productive veins of this scholarship centers on how new institutions emerge and evolve during wartime. A trope common to earlier writing holds that insurgent groups are at their base predatory organizations, which may well cite historical grievances but lack any vision (or ambition) to change political order (Collier; etc). More recent work takes a more nuanced approach, arguing that, on the contrary, insurgent movements have strong incentives to form structures of governance, sometimes even devolving this task to civilian

bodies. These may be to model alternative forms of social organization, to sustain market relations amid war, to cultivate consent from civilians and foster new recruits, or simply to reduce the likelihood that civilians will defect and act as fifth columns (Weinstein 2007; Kalyvas 2006). Dozens of scholars have thus investigated new forms of governance and social organization that emerge in warzones (Arjona et al 2015; Staniland 2012). Wood (2003) and Arjona (2016) have shown how civilians build institutions and push back against armed groups, while Sivakumaran (2009) and Baczko et al (2018) have described how insurgents develop courts and dispute-resolution mechanisms to cultivate legitimacy in Sri Lanka and Syria. Still more work studies the role played by a wide variety of social actors like traditional religious figures (Nordstrom 1997), gender roles, clan and kinship groups, merchant communities (Menkhaus 2006), labor organizations (Wood 2003), humanitarian workers (Martinez & Eng 2016) and migrants and refugees (Lubkemann 2008), among others.

Interpreting these emergent political relations in wartime is far from straightforward, however. Mampilly cautions against a lazy tendency among some analysts to equate rebel efforts at governance to “a form of embryonic state-building,” (Mampilly 2011:20), which both obscures much of what makes these efforts distinctive and, likewise, may well not be what rebels intend. Rather, he argues that “what is really at issue with rebel governance is not state formation but rather the formation of a political order *outside and against the state* (*ibid*: 36, author’s emphasis). What does this order look like? Typically, it is understood as a form of patterned interactions among key actors – namely, incumbent regimes, insurgents, and civilians. These interactions are variously conceptualized: Arjona highlights two key variants of rebel order (“aliocracy” and “rebelocracy”) while Staniland teases out as many as six different “wartime political orders” (Arjona 2016; Staniland 2012).

The nuance with which it conceives of order does not extend to how space shapes, and is shaped by, the evolving processes of civil war. Whether one embraces one theory or another, the forms of rebel wartime governance that they elaborate are typically mapped tidily onto Cartesian space, and therefore are offered as coherent, empirically-identifiable forms of territoriality whose qualities are exhaustive in their influence over political life. Indeed, it is telling that the terms “wartime governance” and “local order” are often used interchangeably in this literature, as if there is some fixed and essential connection between the state of civil war and a turn toward more circumscribed forms of politics. In his famous *Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Kalyvas describes the local as “not the provincial nor the parochial but rather the social and, most importantly, the empirical” (Kalyvas 2006:44; see also Snyder 2001).

For geographers, however, the local does not offer the key to unlocking the political dynamics of warzones, whether as an empirically-salient emic category or as a self-evident level of analysis. Following Massey (2004; 2005), I argue that the spaces of war are relationally constituted. Like all forms of space, warzones are the product of far wider sets of relations, an insight whose implications are far from restricted to the domain of theory. Acknowledging the relational character of warzones means bringing research on wartime order into closer conversation with research on the transnational dynamics of civil wars. Indeed, interactions among incumbent regimes, insurgents, and civilians (to cite but a few) are themselves shot through by other relations that extend quite far, be these the emergence of black markets, remittance flows, the arrival of aid, or the supply of war materiel. It also pushes us to conceive of political order in wartime as spatially heterogeneous, evolving, and therefore highly contingent.

One way to highlight this heterogeneity is to think of wartime order as unfolding in what some geographers call “anomalous geopolitical spaces” (McConnell 2010; Jeffrey et al 2015).

Geographers studying these work to “unsettle an image of political legitimacy that has often foregrounded the sovereign state as the sole arbiter and provider of legitimacy within a territory” (Jeffrey et al 2015: 177), and instead conceive of authority as multiple, overlapping, and evolving over time. If earlier critiques of sovereignty argued that sovereignty is a binary condition which a polity either possesses or lacks – “de facto sovereignty is all there is” – this newer scholarship views it as a relation that is performed through practice. They draw our attention to those sites on the world map where authority, violence, and space are articulated in ways that do not quite cohere with the tidy proscriptions of the nation-state order. This may be because they do not aspire to this vision of statehood or have not quite met its criteria, and so includes “unrecognized states, aspiring states, or simply non-state arenas of political contestation” (*ibid*:177). Jeffrey (2014) thus examines the emergence of governance-by-NGO in postwar Bosnia, while Wilson charts the evolution of the Polisario Front of Western Sahara and its efforts to cultivate legitimacy and govern from exile (Wilson 2015).

Governments-in-exile are one way geographers have investigated these dynamics. As products of war or displacement, occupying a position in world politics “somewhere between state-space and diaspora-space” (McConnell 2010:765). They attempt to claim to be legitimate sovereign authorities in the homeland, justifying these claims by performing governance (and sometimes military prowess) in exile. Shain thus describes such movements among exiled French, Polish, and Russians, while McConnell traces how the Tibetan Government-in-Exile navigates between *de facto* efforts to govern its “citizens” and the *de jure* reality that they are classified as “refugees” by their hosts, the Indian government (McConnell 2009; 2016). Dittmer and others have followed the diplomatic missions of such actors, who seek recognition from states in world politics (McConnell et al 2012; Dittmer & McConnell 2016). Drawing on

ethnographic methods, this work to investigate how unrecognized actors perform authority, generate legitimacy, and shape spatial relations in unexpected ways.

Building on this, Rangwala highlights what he dubs “governments-in-waiting,” which he argues play a key role in understanding the uprisings and wars currently unfolding in Yemen, Libya, and Syria. As forms of order, they are fundamentally transnational, and are defined by pre-emptive efforts at governing “on the inside” of the homeland because of an ongoing state of war or revolution. They are thus

based often, but not always or exclusively, in diasporas, and operate primarily in the expectation that the institutions that have previously controlled their home territory are, or are in the process of, collapsing. They set themselves up pre-emptively to take over full political authority subsequent to that collapse (Rangwala 2015:216).

As Rangwala conceives of them, governments-in-waiting are unthinkable outside an ongoing condition of war or extreme instability, and so anticipate a future in which their efforts at “rebel governance” give way to recognition as the sovereign authority over the homeland. For this reason, many of these entities explicitly describe themselves as “transitional” or “interim” bodies, who will take on a final form once the contest for sovereignty has been won. At the same time, they are hardly home-grown creations. These bodies – which may possess surprisingly elaborate administrations – derive some recognition from the international community, which prefers to legitimate a rebel movement “rather than accept ungoverned space” and the chaos that may result from it. This does not mean, however, that they are fully accepted as members of the system of sovereign states; they occupy an anomalous position in world politics. Moreover, their pretenses to “national” authority often mask quite particularist agendas or composition, as well as their more pressing difficulties in translating this “authority” from a distance into meaningful relations of governance on the ground.

Rangwala has already outlined the chief features of Syria's government-in-waiting, in the process revealing how it reshapes the nature of politics and space amid Syria's civil war. I prefer here to focus quite firmly on the concrete spaces through which new relations of governance have emerged in Northwestern Syria. I start from these spaces partly for reasons that Rangwala highlights – namely, that Syria's government-in-waiting has effectively no presence inside of Syria – but also because no other organization possesses the kind of monopoly over governance to which such an actor might aspire. Rather, by focusing on the spaces of Syria's opposition, we might better unravel the tangle of relations by which Syria's opposition has been able to persist despite serious lack of resources, infighting, and challenges from other actors.

Drawing on ethnographic work by Smirl (2015) and Fregonese & Ramadan (2015), I argue that the spaces of war are not bounded by coherent “orders,” but are instead complex, overlapping “geopolitical sites, connected to and embedded in broader geopolitical architectures, geographies of security and insecurity, and moments of war- and peace-making” (Fregonese & Ramadan 2015:794). They are, in essence, tied up in quite anomalous forms order distinctive to wartime. I illustrate three particular kinds of space that were essential components of the opposition's ability to sustain governance and its political project during the 21st century's most brutal conflict.

This paper is part of a larger project that investigates the transnational dimensions of Syria's civil war, focusing in particular on Syria's opposition movement. I conducted multi-site fieldwork for over 26 months based first in Amman, Jordan (September 2015 – August 2016) followed by Gaziantep, Turkey (September 2016 – August 2017), preceded by several earlier visits to both field sites to establish contacts and gather preliminary data as early as 2012. I also engaged in shorter visits to Istanbul in Turkey and Irbid in Jordan, among others. My primary

method for data collection was semi-structured interviews (N > 120), although I engaged in a limited degree of participant observation and collected archival materials as well. Interviews typically began by building biographical depth, both to establish intimacy with interlocutors and to trace how the intense politicization of social life brought about by the outbreak of civil war shaped their individual experience and social positions. Learning about their ongoing “cross-border” operations, mastering the collaborative networks connecting quite different organizations, and situating these efforts within the broader dynamics of the conflict were at the core of my interviews. Archival materials that I collected consist of statements from local councils, armed groups, and networks of civil society activists, which are publicly available. I also possess internal communications from several international contractors and humanitarian organizations, which were offered by interlocutors. Consequently, I have altered or omitted the names of all individuals involved to ensure protection for my research subjects, in accordance with IRB recommendations.

Although I engaged with many kinds of actor over the course of this project, ranging from humanitarian workers to development contractors to UN officials, my primary interlocutors were Syrians who had been displaced by violence in their home country to Turkey and Jordan. Although most are legally “refugees,” many eschew this subjectivity in favor of other terms.⁴ While I do not offer my research as a definitive account of all Syrians displaced by conflict, it does reflect the internal and external contradictions that characterize those Syrians living in exile who support the opposition to the Assad regime in various forms. Most of my participants at least tacitly supported the 2011 uprising against the government of Bashar al-Assad, came from a

⁴ Many Syrians eschew the term *laji* (“refugee”) preferring to identify as *naazih* (“displaced”) or as living *barraa* (“on the Outside”). Still more rarely, some describe themselves as living *bil-manfa* (“in exile”).

variety of confessional, regional, class, and gender backgrounds. Their professions ranged from politically-motivated figures like journalists, activists, and humanitarians to politicians, lawyers, and militants, as well as more prosaic roles like doctors, dentists, electricians, and waiters. Their lives were transformed by Syria's uprising, and upended by the war that followed.

2.3 SYRIA'S WAR

Syria and the surrounding region have been deeply scarred by civil war. For one, Syria has become an arena for four “competing social orders,” each striving to govern inside of Syria while, at the same time, cultivating transnational networks. In Syria's northeast, the Kurdish PYD has claimed authority over a series of cantons which it calls “Rojava,” while in the far east *Daesh* (“ISIS”) attempted to upend territorial conceptions of authority altogether by establishing a 21st century caliphate. That said, the Assad regime has proven responsible for more deaths than the Syrian opposition, PYD, and ISIS combined.⁵ Its recourse to air power has wreaked collective havoc on civilian communities across the country in an all-out effort to render impossible the opposition's efforts at governing. For this reason, civil war in Syria is best understood as a result of a recent breakdown in the Baathist regime's fragile ruling bargain (Heydemann & Leenders 2013) rather than long-standing structural conditions like the “Sykes-Picot” borders, timeless sectarian hatreds, US imperialism, or most reductively, the occurrence of drought (de Chatel 2014; Gleick 2014). The underlying “master cleavage” that has shaped both the conditions of the war and its meanings has been between the Assad regime and what I call here simply the Syrian opposition.

⁵ SOHR

The conflict has certainly been destructive. At the time of writing, UNHCR places the number of Syrians displaced beyond their borders at 5.6 million, currently the largest number of refugees from a single country of origin.⁶ Despite the hysteria surrounding Europe’s “refugee crisis,” Syria’s millions of refugees are overwhelmingly hosted in five states in the Global South: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Meanwhile, 6.1 million people have been displaced within Syria (i.e. as IDPs, internally-displaced persons), bringing the total number of persons displaced by the violence to a staggering 12 million, 50% of Syria’s pre-war population (“Humanitarian Compendium,” 2018; UNHCR, 2018/2019, June; “2018 Progress Report,” 2018). Between a quarter and a third of Syria’s housing stock has been destroyed or seriously damaged by fighting, according to different estimates (World Bank 2017, July 10; Syrian Network for Human Rights 2018, May 31). As early as 2014, some 18% of the country’s schools had been seriously damaged, destroyed, or claimed as headquarters for armed groups (Save the Children 2014). In 2018, armed offensives by the Syrian government to retake control of southern Syria (in violation of the January 2017 Astana agreements) forced schools for displaced children run by international aid organizations to close due to the severe risk of bombing (Save the Children 2018, June 28). Hospitals have been systematically targeted by regime- or Russian-led aerial forces, with the result that medical workers and humanitarians have been killed and thousands of already-vulnerable civilians have lost access to medical care (Alahdab et al 2014; UN OCHA 2017, November 21; Li 2017; Fouad et al 2017; Physicians for Human Rights 2019). In the face of ongoing siege warfare, the ability to draw on external military, humanitarian, and logistical support thus became ever more essential to the Syrian opposition (PAX 2019, March

⁶ The second-largest number of refugees by nationality is Afghanistan, where violence has displaced over 2.6 million people beyond the country’s borders.

6), with the result that external actors and mediators play increasingly important roles shaping the structural dynamics of the conflict (Eng & Martinez 2016, January 26; Berti 2016, July 6).

Violence and displacement have also spurred serious demographic changes across the country. While many IDPs have fled to regime-controlled cities – primarily Damascus, but also the coastal cities of Tartous and Lattakia – most dramatic has been the massing of internally-displaced persons along the northern and southern borders in rebel-held territory. Eschewing attacks so close to its neighbors, the Assad regime has instead prioritized campaigns to retake communities along the central spine of the country running from Aleppo in the north to Daraa in the south. After starving out rebels, as took place in Eastern Ghouta, the regime has engaged in various forms of land-grabbing. On April 2, 2018 the Assad regime passed the infamous Law 10, which legalized the seizure of property in areas designated as “redevelopment zones.” The Law imposes serious obstacles for displaced persons to claim their property and offers no mechanism for appeal, effectively dispossessing anyone residing in rebel-controlled territory regardless of their actual political loyalties (Human Rights Watch 2018, May 29). It also appears that these efforts – what could be described as accumulation by dispossession – represent one of the regime’s most immediate strategies for repaying steep debts to its own external allies, as it doles out construction contracts to Iran, Russia, and China (Heydemann 2018).

These processes constitute the emergent geography of Syria’s war. Taken together, they have effected the fragmentation of space at multiple scales, as represented in conventional media through ever-changing color-coded “maps of territorial control.” Many of my interlocutors had to learn how to navigate markedly different political conditions as they traveled even between neighboring towns in search of relatives or safety. Indeed, keeping pace of this changing landscape is an essential component of the labor of many of my interlocutors. A consequence of

this has been increasing divergence in forms of governance, security, and livelihood prospect across regions. This radical autonomy is noteworthy in a country that was so highly centralized prior to 2011 that even members of municipal councils (*baladiyat*) were appointed from the center.⁷ These twin dynamics exacerbate long-standing regional disparities – between the north-south corridor of western Syria which the colonial French dubbed *la Syrie utile* (“useful Syria”), the eastern *badiyah* (desert steppe), or the Alawite-dominated *sahil* (coast). They also introduce new wartime geographies, the theme I pursue below.

2.4 SPACES OF WARTIME ORDER

Syria’s opposition has struggled since 2011 to present itself as a legitimate authority to those living inside of wartorn Syria. Most writing on civil war typically focuses on “control” of territory to gauge the balance of the conflict. This is measured in square kilometers, strategic towns, or sometimes in the number of people residing in those territories. By these measures, the opposition posed a considerable challenge to the regime in the early years of the conflict (2011-2013). Over time, however, it has gradually lost such “control,” beginning in the eastern *badiye* (steppe), in the central cities (Aleppo, Homs), in provincial cities (Douma, Darayya, Rastan), and in the rural South (Daraa, Bosra al-Sham) were eventually retaken by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its allies.⁸ The Northwest, however, has been the most stable territory controlled by the opposition since 2014. It has changed hands only among rival *fasa’il*, as Syrians refer to the armed factions. Although its contours have evolved with the conflict, the area consists for the

⁷ Interview with SIG guy

⁸ It should be stressed that, much like Syria’s opposition, the Assad regime also relied existentially on external allies, whether these be friend state governments (Iran, Russia), militias (from Lebanon and Iraq) or paramilitary movements organized by Syrian elites (the National Defense Forces).

most part of Idlib province, western Aleppo province, and small portions in the north of Latakia and Hama provinces, leading some to refer to it as *Idlib al-Kubra* (“Greater Idlib”). For the sake of consistency, however, I will simply refer to these collective territories possessed by opposition *fasa’il* as Syria’s Northwest.

As the largest coterminous area controlled by Syria’s opposition, the Northwest is a microcosm of the challenges it faces. The opposition has consistently faced aerial shelling since the very beginning of the conflict. This has rendered normal life almost impossible for civilians and crippled the ability of opposition institutions to function. Shortages of goods are routine and winters are brutal, muddy affairs, especially for those in the growing IDP camps. Infighting among opposition *fasa’il* is common, and while the region hosts some of the local councils with the highest approval ratings, even these struggle to provide a modicum of governance and maintain independence from armed groups.

At the same time, a fixation on territorial control masks the more complex, overlapping geographies of sovereignty that are distinctive to civil war. Korf et al (2010) note that in such a context space is not fragmented in a straightforward manner but instead is relatively unstable, overlapping, and thus highly situational; the forms of order that do emerge “become effective in a particular social condition, place, and time” (*ibid*: 390). In Syria, for example, the Assad regime continues to pay salaried teachers to cross into opposition territory, where they continue to teach in public schools. Similarly, much of the electricity in Idlib province comes from the regime’s public utility grid (Heller 2016, November 29). The ability to govern and shape conduct clearly transcends frontlines. So too does it transcend Syria’s borders. In what follows, I describe three spaces central to governance in the opposition-held “liberated territories” of Syria, spaces

that are produced out of complex extensive relations, rather than tidily-bounded “local orders.” They are: crossings, exile-capitals, and inner frontiers.

2.4.1 CROSSINGS

Border crossings became crucial spaces through which the opposition’s humanitarian, military, and civilian actors negotiated the ties drawing them together. In a tepid response to the Assad regime’s sustained turn to siege warfare, the United Nations announced in 2014 that it was “deeply disturbed by the continued, arbitrary, and unjustified withholding of relief operations and the persistence of conditions that impede the delivery of humanitarian supplies to destinations within Syria, in particular in besieged and hard-to-reach areas” (United Nations Security Council 2014, July 14). The result was the ratification of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2165, which authorized the United Nations and its partners to convey direct humanitarian assistance to opposition-controlled Syria via cross-border operations in Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. UNSCR 2165 pinpointed four border crossings in particular: al-Yaaroubieh in northwestern Iraq; al-Ramtha in northwestern Jordan; and two border crossings with southern Turkey: Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salameh.

These latter two became crucial sites for shaping the political dynamics of Syria’s Northwest.⁹ Bab al-Salameh (“The Gate of Good Health”) connects the Turkish province of Kilis to the small Syrian town of Azaz in rural northern Aleppo Province, opening onto a highway to

⁹ Although Turkish authorities would later re-open the Jarablus-Karkamış crossing in eastern Aleppo province, its omission from UNSCR 2165 meant that access would be reserved for Turkish NGOs, or those few Syrian NGOs granted by Turkish authorities. One Syrian humanitarian speculated that the NGOs best able to secure access to the Turkish “safe zone” were those whose leadership possessed ties to Syria’s ethnic Turkmen minority, which has a large presence in eastern Aleppo.

Aleppo, Syria's industrial capital and largest city. Bab al-Hawa ("The Gate of the Wind") connects the Turkish province of Hatay to Syria's rural Idlib Province, but has the advantage of offering roads leading toward both Aleppo and Idlib, two regions with high-need populations and, not coincidentally, areas held by opposition forces.

Crossings are far from straightforward sites of transnational encounter. During fieldwork I came to know Valerie, a Western humanitarian officer, who was for a time responsible for overseeing the logistical hub connecting humanitarian operations in Turkey to Syria's Northwest. She recounted a difficult process where "[T]he big work is at the beginning when nothing exists. In 2014 there was not a [logistics] hub... You need to set up all the relationships with all the actors involved, so... it's very complicated at the beginning."¹⁰ After some time, these networks assumed a degree of complexity, but also routine. At 6AM, Syrian trucks arrive at the border with Turkey:

Turkish authorities receive the details of the Syrian trucks the day before. They know which trucks are going to cross. They scan them, and then the Syrian trucks go inside the logistics cluster hub. Inside the hub there will also be the Turkish trucks, and this is where the cross-loading takes place. When the Syrian trucks are loaded, we make a convoy, basically, with the logistics cluster and the *jandarma* [Turkish gendarmerie], and the customs authorities, and we go to the border, the three kilometers, five kilometers maybe... [Then] we arrive at the border. Until one month ago also some Syrian trucks were scanned, but just a percentage... say, just twenty percent of the trucks were scanned as a random check. The [United Nations Monitoring Mechanism] is [also] part of the convoy, right? And then... the operation of the day is over when all the Syrian trucks cross the Zero Point and go back to Syria.

The everyday labor of individuals like Valerie helped routinize the movement of humanitarian aid into Syria while harmonizing among a wide range of actors, key among them the Turkish Interior Ministry and "implementers" inside Syria. Destined for the communities of Syria's Northwest, Bab al-Hawa has long seen the highest volume, growing with the scale of the

¹⁰ Valerie, Humanitarian Official. Interview with author, January 2017. Gaziantep, Turkey.

humanitarian crisis from 1,168 trucks in June 2016 to 1,931 a year later, with some 2,285 trucks passing through between January and August of 2018.¹¹

The significance of crossings only increased over time. The routinization of movement coincided with the gradual securitization of Turkey's border at large, effected by means of an imposing concrete wall and an emboldened border patrol service (CITE). This twin dynamic meant that unofficial entry to Turkey by *tahrib* (lit. "smuggling") declined sharply and IDPs instead were forced to find refuge in camps near the crossings, which have since turned into important localities in their own right. Issam, a high-ranking Syrian contractor and activist, noted how

some of the highest population numbers...are in the IDP camps. It's kind of safer than other places. If I were to compare between [the city of] Saraqeb and...Atmeh [Camp] for example...Atmeh – which is near the border – will have an air strike maybe twice a year. But in Saraqeb the air strikes come daily.¹²

Syrian humanitarian workers, activists, and sub-contractors thus established permanent offices nearby. The Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM), a relief organization launched and organized by diasporic Syrians, likewise opened its hospital near Bab al-Hawa. Funded by 12 donors, the Bab al-Hawa Hospital is the largest hospital in Syria's north, operating an essential blood bank and hosting some 56 doctors, nine operating rooms, and roughly 50 beds.¹³ Similarly, IDPs have sought safety near Bab al-Salameh in the town of Azaz, whose population has swelled to several times its pre-war size. In December 2016 the Local Council of Azaz, the town's civilian governance body, reported that the town now hosted 80,000 IDPs

¹¹ [https://logcluster.org/sites/default/files/turkey - cross-border operations 180917 0.pdf](https://logcluster.org/sites/default/files/turkey_-_cross-border_operations_180917_0.pdf)

¹² Issam, employee at a major firm working on the local councils. Interview with author. January 2017. Gaziantep, Turkey.

¹³ Zaydun al-Zoubi, executive director of UOSSM. Interview with author, January 2017. Gaziantep, Turkey. See also UOSSM (2015).

compared to a host population of 50,000, and that in one week alone they recorded 1,135 families arriving to the town from as far off as Mosul and Tel Afar in Iraq.¹⁴

These transnational processes thus find distinctive local articulations at crossings, which loom large in the strategic imaginary of the conflict's military actors, especially the opposition *fasa'il*. On the one hand, *fasa'il* who control the crossings are not only able to shape access to humanitarian goods, but they enjoy superior access to direct assistance from external patrons. The Islamist militia Ahrar al-Sham ("Free Men of the Levant") has been closely associated with the Turkish and Qatari governments, who provide extensive support via Bab al-Hawa crossing. *Fasa'il* were sometimes able to derive a kind of legitimacy or *hadinah sha'biah* ("popular embrace") from policing these kind of external ties, using this to deepen their interventions into regulating the daily lives of civilians in the Northwest. This sometimes resulted in clashes between the more ideologically neutral *fasa'il* affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) umbrella, who generally supported the system of local and provincial councils, and the more Islamist groups, who aimed (albeit pragmatically) to found new institutions capable of fomenting their various strands of political thought.

As a form of war-time order, crossings are highly unstable articulations of authority and space. Naked struggles over the crossings threatened to destabilize these articulations of legitimacy, mobility, and material support. In the summer of 2017, the formerly al-Qaida-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, "Committee for the Liberation of the Levant") wrested control of Bab al-Hawa from rival Ahrar al-Sham, prompting a series of panicked email

¹⁴ Public statement, Local Council of Azaz, December 8, 2016.

exchanges from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the agency overseeing the humanitarian shipments through Bab al-Hawa:

With some of the NGOs suspending their operations during the clashes and before where HTS was asking for 10-20% of the food baskets for their fighters, HTS decided to ensure humanitarian community that they will not interfere in the operations and distributions. They know that humanitarian aid arriving from Turkey provides a lifeline for the population in Idleb and without this the local communities might turn against them.¹⁵

HTS quickly reached out to placate humanitarian officials, sending the following letter which they translated into English:

We as HTS would like to clarify the following:

1. We confirm on the importance of humanitarian operations in the liberated areas, and the importance of humanitarian assistance provided to our people.
2. We ensure the principle of independency and neutrality of humanitarian organizations, and work on keeping these principles in place.
3. We are working hard to remove all the challenges humanitarian organizations face, to keep responding and reaching people in need.¹⁶

Given the wider effects of a closed border on the Northwest, HTS opted to continue the practice of other *fasa'il* before it of giving over day-to-day administration of the crossing to a “neutral” civilian administration while moving their actual bases to villages near the crossings. Indeed, these manoeuvres over Bab al-Hawa reveal the stakes shaping how armed actors, civilians, and external actors articulate new forms of authority, legitimacy, and governance in the Northwest.

2.4.2 EXILE-CAPITALS

[The man] took his leave not long after I arrived, staying to chat a little before saying his good-byes and politely ducking out. [Munzer] Sallal, meanwhile, was clearly tired from a long day of meetings, all of which seem to have taken place at Topkapi [Sarayi Restaurant] – for which

¹⁵ Internal correspondence, IOM. August 2, 2017.

¹⁶ Internal correspondence, IOM. July 30, 2017.

convenient reason he asked if we could meet there. Sitting in the covered patio, where arguileh are still allowed, every time a person would stand up and move around his eyes would follow them around the room – less a sign of paranoia than of familiarity with nearly all the Syrians seated there that evening. There was even a kind of festive atmosphere, which I attribute to a long day of work for the organizations in question, transitioning at last into the relaxation of the evening and weekend. A group of men 30-40 years-old eventually stood and made for the exit, waving to Munzer as they walked, to which he replied “Try to catch up with us later, okay?” These, he noted to me, were Free Syrian Army members, come to Antep for medical treatment.¹⁷

About an hour north of Bab al-Salameh by car lies the Turkish city of Gaziantep. Until Turkey began closing its border in spring 2016, Gaziantep was a veritable weigh station of sorts, witness to the comings and goings of all sorts of character. It was what I dub an “exile-capital” for Syria’s opposition movement, conveniently close to the battlefields of the Northwest. Members of the civilian local and provincial councils, militants, activists, aidworkers, and journalists based “on the inside” (*bil-Dakhil*) visited the city to reconnect with friends, family, and colleagues “on the outside” (*barra*). Syrians made a kind of home of Gaziantep, an uneasy but familiar refuge captured in the not-unaffectionate description of it as essentially *Halab ‘al absha’* (“Aleppo, but a bit uglier”). The city seemed to embody an extreme example what Doreen Massey calls a common “feeling of throwntogetherness,” one that helped Syrians displaced by war construct a minimum referent for home while making sense of their curious plight. Writing in 2015, Oday al-Zoubi commented that “Southern Turkey – Antep in particular –

¹⁷ Fieldnotes, October 28, 2016

is the Syrian Revolution's backyard. Here the Revolution breathes easy" (al-Zoubi 2015, May 11).

The city thus became a kind of space defined almost entirely by its connectivities to the Liberated Territories and, by extension, to the warzone of Syria as a whole. Beginning in 2011, thousands of Syrians found their way across the northern border into Turkey fleeing violence, in particular the rancorous fighting over Aleppo, Syria's largest city and industrial capital. Gaziantep – or Antep as it is more widely known – was a convenient and somewhat familiar refuge, and many Syrians settled there for what they hoped would be a short period. By 2013 some 21% of all Syrians in Turkey were registered in Gaziantep province. The most destitute were drawn into the burgeoning textile factories on the city's outskirts, while the more fortunate sometimes opened restaurants, small shops, or found work as *samasira* or *wusataa* ("middlemen") helping refugees access services, documents, and navigate the complex Turkish bureaucracy. Over time, more and more Syrians arrived fleeing direct threats from the regime on account of their participation in the 2011 uprising. Indeed, for many of them the uprising was a signature politicizing moment, and despite leaving the country they sought to carry on mobilizing support for opposition to the Assad regime in Damascus.

Munzer Sallal epitomizes how the city became a localized form of the war's transnational processes. Originally from Manbij in eastern Aleppo province, Sallal participated in nearly every dimension of the Syrian Uprising, from early protests to insurgent campaigns in Aleppo city and Homs to, eventually, entering the political institutions of the opposition movement. At the time of the interview, Munzer Sallal was director of the Stabilization Committee (*hay'at i'aadat al-istiqaar*) a body tasked with establishing local councils in territories retaken from ISIS in eastern Aleppo province. Though he was based "on the Inside," Sallal routinely traveled to

Gaziantep every week or so to meet with potential donors, coordinate with implementing partners, and report to the Aleppo Provincial Council, at the time headquartered in exile in the city. These dynamics are not unique to Antep per se; the cities of Antakya and Sanliurfa in Turkey, and Amman and Irbid in Jordan, were likewise safe from regime airstrikes and yet close enough to ensure routine, material ties to events inside Syria. I focus on Antep to illustrate the potential for exile-capitals to develop into quite complex ecologies of international organizations, diplomatic staff, and international contractors, among others. These actors set up offices in the city, citing its proximity to the Syrian border, its well-developed infrastructure, and connections to the Turkish port of Mersin as making it the “natural choice” for their base of operations.¹⁸ For a period, Gaziantep thus became a place on the edge of Syria’s conflict and yet central to shaping the processes of the war.

The leisure spaces of Antep were another way in which the local and the transnational came together with respect to Syria’s conflict. Beyond the confines of the office, many of these characters engaged in long, evening gatherings (known as *sahra*) passed in a particular set of well-known restaurants and cafes scattered throughout the city – in essence, they would “hang out.” More than simply a reprieve from the workday, these gatherings offered unstructured opportunities to mix freely with all sorts of figures. The many and sundry characters populating Syria’s pro-opposition landscape passed through these establishments with great frequency, sharing lunch or coffee, conducting meetings, or simply working for hours from a laptop, all accompanied by an atmosphere of casual fraternity and fragrant arguileh smoke. Over the course of fieldwork interlocutors and friends would routinely point to this or that table and offer a backstory to several people as they tucked into grilled chicken – both to impress upon me the

¹⁸ Valerie, January 2017. Gaziantep, Turkey.

social dynamism of the space, but also I suspect to reveal their competence in navigating the complex social networks that pass through it. Indeed, I myself could not help but begin recognizing individuals.

Like all spaces, Gaziantep as an exile-capital is defined as much by the contradictions it contains as it is by the relations that pass through it. As part of the geography of Syria's war, the city was in many ways a product of transnational mobilities that were always quite unstable. Rabeh Ghadban, a Lebanese-American implementer described how changes over time meant changes in the significance of the city and its role in the conflict:

We had a team inside the country who were our field officers. Kind of located in the areas that we plan to work in, or were working in. And they would provide us with atmospherics and updates of what's happening on the ground: Develop relations to some extent, though I'd say most of the relationship-building happened with the staff here in Gaziantep. Because for a long while – I'd say, for the first couple years – there was someone coming in from the country every single day. The borders weren't so restricted...Gaziantep was this true hub. It was like an extension of Syria. So our office had people coming in and out. [Emphatically] Definitely not from like, the Ghouta or Daraa, but you know, from Hama, from...Aleppo, from...Idlib, Raqqa, Dayr al_Zour. So a lot of the contacts were with us. As time progressed and as access became more difficult, we came to rely on our field team [much more].¹⁹

Ghadban refers here to the mounting securitization of Turkey's border with Syria. As the Turkish interior ministry grew more preoccupied by unofficial crossings, it imposed restrictions that ultimately led many Syrian organizations (and their donors) to radically reduce their programming. In this sense, exile-capitals offer unique spaces for the transnational processes of civil war, and yet they are deeply affected by the politics of host state governments.

2.4.3 INNER FRONTIERS

The third space I want to depict here are *inner frontiers*, which capture the dynamism (and effort) that characterize governance as an incomplete process of war. If exile-capitals represent a

¹⁹ Rabeh Ghadban, humanitarian implementer. February 2017, interview with author. Gaziantep, Turkey.

kind of emergent center that is paradoxically outside the country, we might conceive of inner frontiers as its inverse. The frontiers of wartime order are highly unstable; they expand and contract, creating new centers and peripheries in the process. This constant transformation (at least, in the case of Syria) presents those aspiring to govern with an arena for intervention that is at once highly unpredictable and extremely heterogeneous.

Assaad Al-Achi is executive director for the NGO Baytuna Syria (“Our Home is Syria”), a well-known presence in Gaziantep that not only provides space for Syrians to organize political and cultural events, but also offers small grants for community organizations inside of Syria. Chuckling to himself, al-Achi described to me the challenges of implementing projects in such an environment:

This is one thing that is very true of Syria today. It’s extremely local – extremely fragmented, and extremely local. The dynamics cannot be evaluated even at a provincial level. To understand the dynamics, you have to go to the locality, because each locality has its own dynamic, which makes it very hard. That’s what makes it so complex.²⁰

Al-Achi’s words echo a common refrain for those working from the exile-capitals of Syria’s conflict: the near impossibility of following events on the ground, inside the country. Syrians and expatriates alike struggled to keep pace with changing battle-lines and damaged infrastructure, but also the social context of their efforts.

Ongoing hostilities in the rebel-held Northwest of Syria presented implementers with an unpredictable programming environment inside the country. For both non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international development contractors (IDCs), overcoming the fog of war entailed daily struggles to render legible the broader social and physical terrain of the war as

²⁰ Assad al-Achi, executive director of Baytuna Syria. Interview with author, October 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.

a means of identifying more specific sites of intervention. Most of those whom I interviewed noted the need to remain in constant contact with their partners “on the Inside,” most organizations employed at least one individual whose main function was to chart evolutions in the broader dimensions of the conflict and connect these with local developments occurring in communities of potential beneficiaries. The demands on these individuals can be quite far-ranging. Working for an IDC, Nazim describes just how wide-ranging the kind of information they need can be. He was tasked with

trying to collect information about...military updates, how it affects programming, local council members, elections...elections for the provincial councils, spaces and opportunities for CSOs, Syrian civil society, relations to extremists...this kind of...it’s not. It’s not *mukhabarat* [“intelligence”]-style [chuckles]. It’s more of...trying to understand how to make programming better, in a way. So you link it to...so we did some community profiles before, where we study an area – like Aleppo city. We study local councils, we study the relation of the council with civilians, with military groups, what are the military groups, what are they doing, who’s providing aid, who are the donors that are working in the area, what are the perceptions of civilians who are doing this kind of local governance, do civilians favor local governance bodies over the FSA? Or over HTS? All of that.²¹

These efforts do not simply relay an objective rendering of “the situation” in Syria, but instead saturate space with a range of meanings and values by which they are to be acted upon – or not.

One basic means through which inner frontiers were made known was the prism of “need.” Shifting battle lines, destroyed infrastructure, or simply relative deprivation brought particular communities into view as new objects of concern. Identifying the frontiers of their activity – whether of governance structures or humanitarian networks – fell to figures like Nazim or Hamzeh. Hamzeh, who worked as an assistant director at the Hurras (“Guardians”) child protection network, stated quite matter-of-factly that they enter these areas

based on the children’s needs. We would come to know that in the countryside the need would be higher – and of course, our security study showed that the security situation was more appropriate

²¹ Nazim, project analyst with an international development contractor. Interview with author, July 2017. Istanbul, Turkey.

[ansab]. We certainly wouldn't establish an office without knowing for sure the situation from all angles.²²

The frontiers of service provision – in this case, education and child protection – thus expanded and contracted not only due to “needs assessments” carried out by field officers of various kinds, but in light of threats to safety. Indeed, Hamzeh noted that they are only able to operate in areas controlled by the opposition.

Risk is thus another prism through which the inner frontiers of wartime order are determined. UN OCHA maps assessing conditions of access inside the country point to

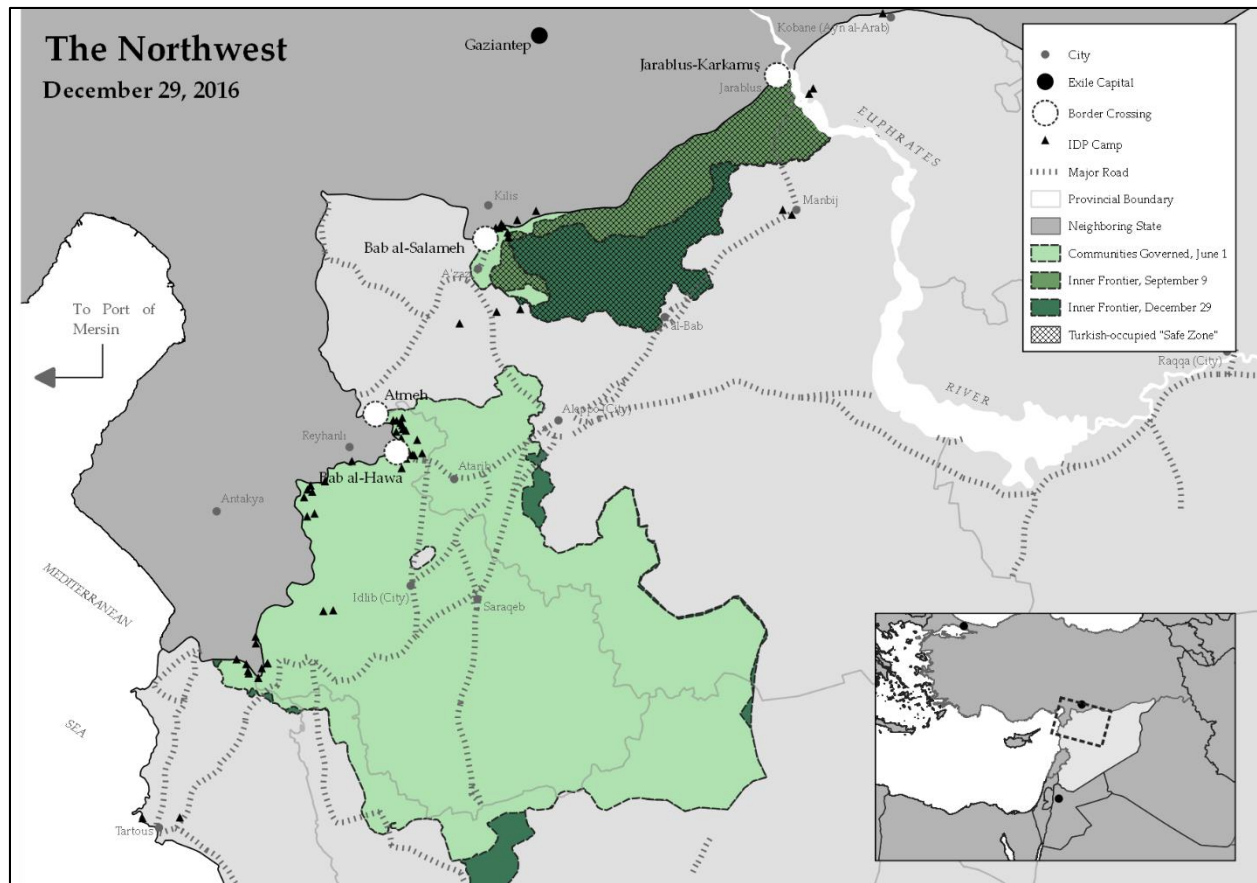


Figure 2.1 – Map displays the anomalous geopolitical spaces of Syria's opposition in the half-year period between June 1, 2016 (ISIS reaches furthest northwestern extent) and December 29, 2016 (Turkish armed forces intervene to establish the so-called “safe zone” around Jarablus).

²² Hamzeh Abu al-Ammar, assistant director of Hurras Network. Interview with author, January 2017. Gaziantep, Turkey.

“hard to reach areas,” primarily citing ongoing conditions of siege warfare and the presence of the violent extremist group ISIS (UN OCHA 2018, February). Alongside these kind of “kinetic movements” (changes in battle lines), risk also manifested bureaucratically in ways that shaped what lay within or without the “Liberated Territories.” Under Chapter 113b (Sections 2339a and 2339b) of US Code it is a federal crime in the United States to offer material support to a government-designated terrorist group.²³ In the Syrian context, this meant that any organization, contractor, or subcontractor drawing on US funding was required to avoid implementing programming in communities with a known presence from ISIS or, more likely in Northwestern Syria, the former al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (now renamed Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS). As one Western implementer bemoaned, this stringent requirement meant that

a lot of the work was...just...conflict assessment. Trying to figure out...okay, if we’re doing a project in Idlib, and it’s a service-delivery project that is being done in cooperation between the local council and a civil society group, but Jabhat al-Nusra just took over that city, can we actually continue to do this project? And if we can, is it *smart* to continue doing this project? Do we put individuals at risk? Are we, by delivering this service, further legitimizing Jabhat al-Nusra? By giving this service, are we *not* legitimizing Jabhat al-Nusra, and showing that the civilian bodies are the representative...so all of these kind of questions were a frequent part of the day to day.

The stakes of these questions were quite high for communities in the rebel-held Northwest. Humanitarian organizations and IDCs might shut down programming in whole communities to avoid even the slightest risk that they be linked to funding terrorist groups. Indeed, this form of risk led to a serious scandal within the United Kingdom, where a government-funded contractor was accused by journalists of allowing money and equipment to fall into the hands of extremist groups (BBC 2017, December 4). Meanwhile, a neighboring community might experience no

²³ Title 18 US Code, Chapter 113b, Sections 2339a, 2339b. This section of US Code defines material support broadly to include money, services, property, equipment, documentation, lodging, and weapons.

interruption at all.²⁴ In this way, external programming served to both connect isolated communities in Syria's Northwest, but at the same time disconnected them from one another.

Inner frontiers represent both the processual nature of ties between war, space, and governance (i.e. emergent) as well as the uneven outcomes of these ties. They are never complete geographic "facts" as such. For those still residing in these spaces, life – and political loyalties – are highly unpredictable, despite the claims of armed groups to have "liberated" them. Understanding how these spaces are integrated and isolated in the context of civil war sheds a great deal of light on the kinds of challenges civilians are forced to navigate as they seek to survive the collapse of political order as they once knew it.

2.5 CONCLUSION

The three spaces I have described above illustrate how the "complex connections between geopolitics and everyday life become tangible" in the context of civil war, looking at the case of Syria (Fregonese & Ramadan 2015:798). Here, I have demonstrated how these connections played out in the context of Syria's civil war, focusing on three spatial arrangements. For the Syrian opposition movement, border crossings become sites not only for the movement of displaced persons, but for strategic military actions, the delivery of humanitarian relief, and the emergence of new infrastructures like hospitals and camps. Based in exile-capitals, refugees who support the Syrian opposition have formed governments-in-exile or loose networks to support their compatriots "on the inside," all while rubbing shoulders with foreign diplomats, international organizations, and host state bureaucrats. Interactions like these can become so

²⁴ Issam, interview with author.

localized and quotidian that the Turkish city of Gaziantep became “like an extension of Syria” itself with respect to the process of Syria’s ongoing conflict. Finally, war produces new peripheries just as it does new centers; one of the primary challenges of wartime governance is keeping track of the changing inner frontiers by which political order is established. These inner frontiers are highly mutable and unpredictable in the face of changing battle lines, varied socio-economic compositions, and even physical terrain.

Other examples doubtless abound. Apart from the insights it affords the case of Syria, there is good reason to foreground the explicitly geographical nature of civil war more broadly. Looking to the geographies of civil war as composed of various “anomalous geopolitical spaces” of this sort offers new insights into wartime governance by situating interactions among insurgents, civilians, and other actors within the historical-geographical context in which they unfold. Analytically, it distinguishes between where battles take place and the emergent geographies of war, which increasingly fail to align with the boundaries of nation-states. Moreover, it pushes beyond familiar tropes of sovereignty in wartime as “fragmented” to understand how it re-emerges as overlapping and spatially embedded arrangements. In this way geographers may help push the study of conflict – and indeed, peace – beyond the methodological nationalism through which it continues to be framed and which is embedded in the very analytical vocabulary of which “civil war” is but an example.

Foregrounding anomalous orders that emerge in wartime is also an important ethical contribution that geographers can make to the study of conflict. Given the longstanding normative threads tying peace and conflict studies to state security and, arguably, American hegemony, much of the scholarship evinces a considerable bias towards rebel groups who may have meaningful grievances with the states who claim to represent them. Anomalous orders offer

tools for not only taking rebels seriously as (geo)political agents, but for denaturalizing sensationalist discourses about conflict spillover, which unduly tie any and all forms of transnational wartime coping with criminality. Finally, it foregrounds the everyday, embodied experiences with conflict and, in so doing, return human security to the center of analysis.

It is important to note, however, that these anomalous geopolitical spaces are highly situated achievements, and given the rapidly changing nature of wars a key challenge for researchers will be to develop conceptual tools that account for this change. Indeed, by late 2016, many of the spaces I have described here began to lose their durability as new developments unfolded. The fall of East Aleppo to regime forces in December dealt a crushing defeat to the opposition, one that signaled a longer decline. Writing in 2019, the insurgent geographies of Syria's opposition have all but been erased from the map of Syria. At present, it is likely that the Northwest will witness a prolonged assault by regime and Russian forces, bringing Syria's conflict to a catastrophic, if long-awaited, conclusion. Such an event would mark the reassertion of the Assad regime's sovereign claim over the country. But like all state-building projects, it will likely prove unable to erase the legacies of competing projects from the map of Syria.

Chapter 3: Syria's Coordinating Class

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement is widely recognized as one of the greatest, most tragic consequences of civil wars. At the same time, refugees have played a surprisingly important role in shaping the dynamics of the conflict. Specifically, they have a large role shaping how governance and service provision reaches territories controlled by the Syrian opposition movement. In this paper, I focus on an assemblage of refugees I dub the “coordinating class” of this movement, investigating how exactly they contribute to the provision of services and day-to-day governance in what they call Syria’s “Liberated Territories” (*al-manatiq al-muharrarah*). Not only does their labor illustrate the agency of refugees; it reveals that in particular conditions they are capable of shaping conflicts from across borders. They thus represent an important, if ambivalent, actor shaping the transnational dynamics of conflict.

To do so, the paper adopts a situated, multi-site approach that foregrounds “the ordinary spaces and practices that make places” over the power-laden discourses of elite actors (Clark 2017:3; Gupta & Ferguson 1996; Hannerz 2003; Burrell 2009). I thus conducted twenty-seven months of ethnographic fieldwork between July 2015 and August 2017 in two cities key to the Syrian opposition: Amman, Jordan and Gaziantep, Turkey. During this time, I collected over 120 in-depth, qualitative interviews and engaged in participant observation with actors working to stabilize governance and provide services in Syria’s liberated territories.

3.2 REFUGEES AS TRANSNATIONAL ACTORS

3.2.1 Transnational Actors in Civil War

Over the last decade, scholars in peace and conflict studies have acknowledged that civil wars have important transnational dimensions. This partly reflects a wider theoretical trend across the social sciences away from methodological nationalism and toward acknowledging that social processes are often extensive, networked, and border-crossing in their nature, as well as a deeply-felt belief that, empirically, transnational processes are more important now than ever before. For the study of conflict, this has sparked vibrant debates over whether we are witnessing the emergence of a fundamentally new kind of war (Kaldor 1999; Kalyvas 2001; Malesevic 2008; Reyna 2009), what kinds of networks play a role in 21st century warfare (Gleditsch 2007; Checkel 2013), and the conditions under which conflicts diffuse into neighboring states (Stedman & Tanner 2004; Salehyan 2007; Harpviken 2010). Even “civil wars,” the most intimate and internal of political disputes, are being rethought in light of a world that is ever-more interconnected.

Refugees figure ambiguously in this work. Where other research has primarily highlighted the relatively emancipatory potential of transnational politics for dispersed and marginalized communities (diasporas, activist networks, and refugees), in peace and conflict studies scholars are more pessimistic. They approach transnational politics as fundamentally destabilizing and more often than not, criminal. Scholars of conflict have generally focused on more dangerous actors like foreign fighters, criminal networks, smugglers, and terrorist networks, framing their work as revealing the unacknowledged “dark side of transnationalism” (Salehyan 2007:26). By and large, refugees have been lumped in with other “dark” actors, associating their agency with threat – specifically, the threat of ungoverned violence:

Over the past 25 years, it has been increasingly acknowledged that refugees have some degree of political agency in exile and that this agency has strong transnational dimensions. A main form of cross-border mobilization includes organized violence within displaced populations with the aim of gaining political influence in the country of origin. Popularly referred to as 'refugee warriors,' the phenomenon has been thoroughly analyzed (Harpviken & Lischer 2013:89).

The “refugee warrior” is one of two dominant tropes through which the geopolitical agency of refugees is interpreted. Refugee warriors not only threaten their home states, but also prospective host states. Salehyan predicts that “[c]ontests between territorially organized states and transnational insurgents – ‘rebels without borders’ – are a dominant mode of civil conflict, and they necessarily extend to engulf rebel host states in a complex tapestry of interaction woven across the internal-external divide” (2009:17). Like Salehyan, Lischer (2006) suggests that militant refugees are a predictable consequence of mass displacement and political violence, but one that is entirely preventable if a host state is vigilant:

[e]very year, millions of people flee their homes to escape violent conflict. Often the resulting refugee crisis leads to an expansion of violence rather than an escape. In some cases, refugee crises function as a strategy of war. For exiled rebel groups, a refugee population provides international legitimacy, a shield against attack, a pool of recruits, and valuable sources for food and medicine. In essence, refugee camps function as rear bases for rebels who attack across the border (Lischer 2006:2).”

Analysis in this vein draws on notable cases where refugees certainly did destabilize politics in host states like Lebanon, Afghanistan, Zaire (now Congo) and others. It thus runs parallel to the insights of research on diaspora politics more broadly, which finds that diasporas are often far more ideologically radical than those “back home,” drawing on lingering grievances to disrupt peace talks that might otherwise end conflicts (Orjuela 2008; Brinkerhoff 2011).

The other trope for conceiving of refugees’ transnational politics is as proxies or dupes of states, who are the real actors in world politics. This extension of the “refugee warrior” thesis suggests that refugees are incapable of representing an autonomous force in world politics and are ultimately dependent on others to “animate” them. Inspired by a view of diasporas as socially

constructed and therefore requiring ongoing political “work,” Betts & Jones (2016) argue that refugees become more effectively as political actors when their animators come from within the community. These animators – typically elites – perform the important role of

[bringing] to life a new way of thinking, seeing, or interacting by injecting focus and energy into a social group. It is thus narrower than mobilization, as it refers specifically to that form of mobilization associated with the creation of an identity group, in contrast to the vast range of activities which fall within the ambit of mobilization” (Betts & Jones 2016: 28).

For Betts & Jones, animators who are “internal” (i.e. members of the diaspora itself) and “institutionalized” (rely less on informal social capital) will last longer and stand a better chance of having some autonomous political influence, whereas more networked, externally-reliant diaspora networks may flare brightly but ultimately fizzle out as political actors. In passing they note the likelihood that Syrian refugees in Turkey and Jordan will be manipulated by external states.

There is some truth to both tropes, but there is much to be dismissed as well. Analytically, they depict two sides of a coin through which refugee political agency is represented as on the one hand, criminal and on the other, derivative. In doing so, both tropes fall into the “territorial trap” of assuming that non-territorial actors are necessarily destabilizing, deficient, or dependent on other actors. Beth Elise Whitaker refutes the idea that refugee transnationalism is universally destabilizing in itself, noting that whether it does “depends largely on the conditions that exist in the host country even before the refugees arrive” (Whitaker 2003:226). The figure of the “refugee warrior” reinforces the association between refugee transnationalism, risk, and criminality by raising the fear of mobile, ungoverned violence. Indeed, the criminalization of refugee militancy not only distracts from the many peaceful forms of refugee transnationalism – for instance, the extensive networks of remittances that shape

Somalia's conflict – but underlines as well a palpable statist/counter-insurgency bias that pervades writing on conflict, for which “rebels are not deemed worth speaking to and grievances are considered largely irrelevant to understanding conflict” (Keen 2012:766). Even at its most well-intentioned, these tropes thus underpin discourses of securitization around the issue of asylum that justify daily, intensive forms of policing that make camps into sites of desperation for highly vulnerable populations.

In addition, Betts & Jones' emphasis on internal versus external animators is used to explain not the effectiveness of a diaspora movement, but rather its “life-cycle.” By this measure, a “successful” diasporic movement lasts long but might achieve few goals. In this sense, being internally animated does not seem to make refugee movements any less politically impactful. If anything, it obscures interesting questions about what *kind* of relations refugees might enter into with external animators.

3.2.2 Syria's Opposition as an Assemblage

If these two tropes are partial, they at least offer a beginning point for acknowledging refugee agency as ambivalent. On one extreme, the Syrian refugees I interviewed are vulnerable, to the extent that state governments look at them as undermining the “national order of things,” to use Liisa Malkki's words (1995). On the other, states may well find refugees to be suitable agents for pursuing their own goals. While refugees benefit in terms of resources and access, their long-term agendas may well be open to influence from their external patrons. Understanding the agency of refugees in the context of Syria's war only becomes possible given a robust grasp of how they both interact with, as well as become, various forms of “animator.”

To make sense of these multifaceted relationships, I draw on a particular strand of assemblage theory. Derived in part from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's discussions of a more "rhizomatic" social theory, assemblage theory represents an intellectual effort to take seriously the interconnected, collective nature of social processes while acknowledging that "the parts of an assemblage do not form a seamless whole" (DeLanda 2006:4; Deluze & Guattari 2000), avoiding essentialism about their nature. Geographers have drawn on the concept of assemblage over the last two decades to make sense of materiality and urbanization (McFarlane 2011; Anderson et al 2012; Anderson & McFarlane 2011; Hammond 2014; Dittmer 2017), emergence, mutability, and contingency in social relations (Jones 2009; Allen 2011; Swanton 2013) and even methodological considerations (McCann & Ward 2012). Assemblage has thus offered an idiom for pushing forward the "relational turn" in critical human geography as advocated by a wide swath of geographers (Anderson et al 2012; Massey 2005).

The term does not want for detractors. The fact that assemblage can be deployed "slightly differently as a descriptor, ethos, and concept," means that although it has provoked considerable discussion, it also lends itself to analytical imprecision and contributes to the problem of conceptual "churning" in the discipline (Anderson & MacFarlane 2011:125; Adey 2012; see also Jessop et al 2008; Paasi 2008). More provocative has been the realist ontological foundation it draws on and advocates, or what some call its ethos. Ontologically "hard" deployments of assemblage (as a "thing in the world") have raised pointed questions about the role of structure in analysis and, by implication, the place of power relations in understanding how assemblages function in practice (Muller 2015; Muller & Schurr 2016). If advocates of assemblage thinking believe that the concept handily acknowledges structure while foregrounding flux and

contingency, others believe that it has merely introduced a “naïve objectivism” to its analytical gaze (Brenner et al 2011).

This echoes the critique of other flat ontologies (namely actor-network theory) which, while different, likewise foreground the micro-practices of drawing actors and matter into alignment at the expense (to many) of describing – or even theorizing – the wider power relations that made these micro-practices possible, what Brenner et al call the “context of context” (*ibid*:234). At issue is whether the concept overstates the contingencies of socio-material relations and, in so doing, fails to take seriously the structural forces shaping patterns of urban development (Wachsmuth et al 2011), regions (Jones 2010), and forms of difference that work through the body (Kinkaid 2019), to name but a few. The radical contingency of an assemblage “ethos” does little to describe the lived experiences of bodies with material spaces and social structures

For this reason, I draw on assemblage as a concept embedded within a wider theory, rather than as a mere descriptor or (more ambitiously) an ontological orientation toward phenomena. In this I draw loosely on the work of Manuel DeLanda, but also the work of scholars who have used the concept variously to foreground practice, change, and contingency. Assemblage as concept is in many ways compatible with the “practice turn” in social science research, and has allowed scholars to draw the micro out of “macro” topics like the study of diasporas, transnational mobilization, and geopolitics (Davies 2011; Acuto & Curtis 2014; Craven 2018). Rather than see these phenomena as shaped by pre-determined structural constraints, assemblage thinking pushes us to think through their everyday reproduction and contestation. “Assemblage flags agency,” argues Tania Li, “the hard work required to draw heterogeneous elements together, forge connections between them and sustain these connections

in the face of tension. It invites analysis of how the elements of an assemblage might or might not be made to cohere” (Tania Li 2007:264). Indeed, rather than thinking of refugee transnationalism as locked in a structural dependency on its external animators – in this case, Syrian refugees relying on the United States and other states – assemblage thinking reminds us that this relationship is always unstable and embedded in still wider relations. It is a contingent achievement of bringing quite disparate wills together, one that must be constantly renewed – not simply assumed from state interests or the international system as such.

What sort of agents can we view as “assembling” Syria’s opposition movement? How do they shape wartime governance in Syria? Within Syria, this consists of:

- *armed factions or fasa’il*, some of whom are linked to the “Free Syrian Army” (FSA), while others are explicitly Islamist movements²⁵ of various stripes;
- *civilian residents* living within territory “liberated” by the *fasa’il*, who navigate the dangers and opportunities of the war in order to survive by means of a variety of coping strategies;
- *subnational governance bodies*, which consist of the local administrative councils (LACs) or simply “local councils.” These represent the most pervasive governance structure in the liberated territories of Syria, and are complemented by “provincial councils.” Both local and provincial councils are nominally – but not functionally – tied to the hierarchy of the aspiring national institutions of the opposition;

²⁵ I exclude from my conception of the *fasa’il* two Islamist groups in particular: Daesh (the so-called “Islamic state”) and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, or the “Sham Liberation Committee”). For the former, I do so because it in no way collaborates with the “opposition,” and in fact, actively worked against it. For the latter, I do so because even as HTS (Jabhat al-Nusra in its previous guise) strategically cooperated with branches of the FSA against the Assad regime, these collaborations were always temporary and grudging; participants were clear in differentiating between the opposition (*al-mu’aridah*) and HTS.

- *Syrian implementers*, within which I include both for-profit consulting firms that have sprung up in the wake of the conflict as well as not-for-profit civil society organizations (CSOs) and humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These are generally small-scale organizations, all of whom enter into sub-contractual relations with IDCs and donor state governments with varying degrees of durability. Syrian implementers maintain a presence in Turkey and Jordan but generally cultivate strong relationships “on the Inside” of Syria.

Syria’s opposition is not confined to the country’s warzone as such, however. Based *barra* (“outside”) the following actors nevertheless have quite powerful effects on dynamics in the Liberated Territories, whether by offering resources, facilitating access, or shaping narratives by which these relations can be interpreted:

- *Donor states* – namely the “Friends of Syria Group”²⁶ – who provide the bulk of financial support for humanitarian and political aid to Syria’s opposition, and thus shape the political economy within which refugee transnationalism becomes possible;
- *Host states* like Turkey and Jordan, who preside over the daily governance of refugees, offering some degree of collaboration with donor states and with refugees while seeing to their own interests;
- *International humanitarian organizations* (INGOs), primarily those affiliated with the United Nations;

²⁶ The Friends of Syria Group originally included many countries, most significant of whom are the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark.

- *International development contractors* (IDCs), large-scale organizations who bid to implement projects on behalf of donor state governments and then, subcontract components of these projects to
- *Syrian refugees*, who have sought shelter in host states, even if temporarily; and
- *Aspiring national institutions* of the opposition. These are, namely the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which acts as the SOC’s “implementing body,” and the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), all of which constitute something of what Rangwala (2016) describes as a Syrian “government-in-waiting.”

Figure 3.1 offers a schematic diagram representing how these actors are positioned relative to one another, and relative to Syria’s border. Arrows indicate the flow of resources (funding, social capital).

It goes without saying that these categories are provisional. They can be further refined: for instance, despite being both “host states,” Turkey and Jordan represent quite distinctive contexts of exile for Syrians, while also approaching the Syria crisis from radically diverging geopolitical positions. Further categories could also be added: host state civilians; long-distance Syrian activists, based in the Global North; sectarian or ethnic minorities like the Kurds, Turkmen, or Assyrians; all of these might be included in some respect as distinctive components of this assemblage. And categories frequently overlap: over the course of their revolutionary politicization, a great many of my participants described moving from active roles in subnational governance bodies to the government-in-waiting to international development contractors or Syrian implementers. This overlap is important and I will return to this later.

This represents a far wider grasp of the relations constituting Syria's opposition. Yet while listing out the different components of the Opposition – “disassembling” it, as it were – is helpful, it is still no substitute for an analysis of how power works within and through these relationships. The relations underpinning these positions are highly mutable, yet are tied to quite real differences in resources, knowledge, skill, and experience, differences which “never exist in an abstract space but are always intimately related to concrete social entities such as interpersonal networks and organizations” (DeLanda 2006:65). The different parties of the assemblage occupy quite different positions with respect to one another. The highly personal, situated, and affectively-charged social ties among Syrian implementers thus are quite differently positioned relative to the financially-powerful and globally-extensive, bureaucratic ties through which the US State Department is able to act.

Tania Li (2007) offers insight into how we might begin thinking through the roles played by different actors. She describes six practices key to producing and maintaining an assemblage: forging alignments, rendering technical, authorizing knowledge, managing failures and contradictions, anti-politics, and reassembling (*ibid*). This paper argues that two of these practices are particularly important for understanding the transnational role played by refugees in the opposition. Based on fieldwork and interviews, these two practices are forging alignment and rendering technical.

These two practices are important to understanding how such a wide set of actors became implicated in governing space inside of Syria's warzone. Li defines forging alignments as “the work of linking together the objectives of the various parties to an assemblage, both those who aspire to govern conduct and those whose conduct is to be conducted” (Li 2007:265). As for

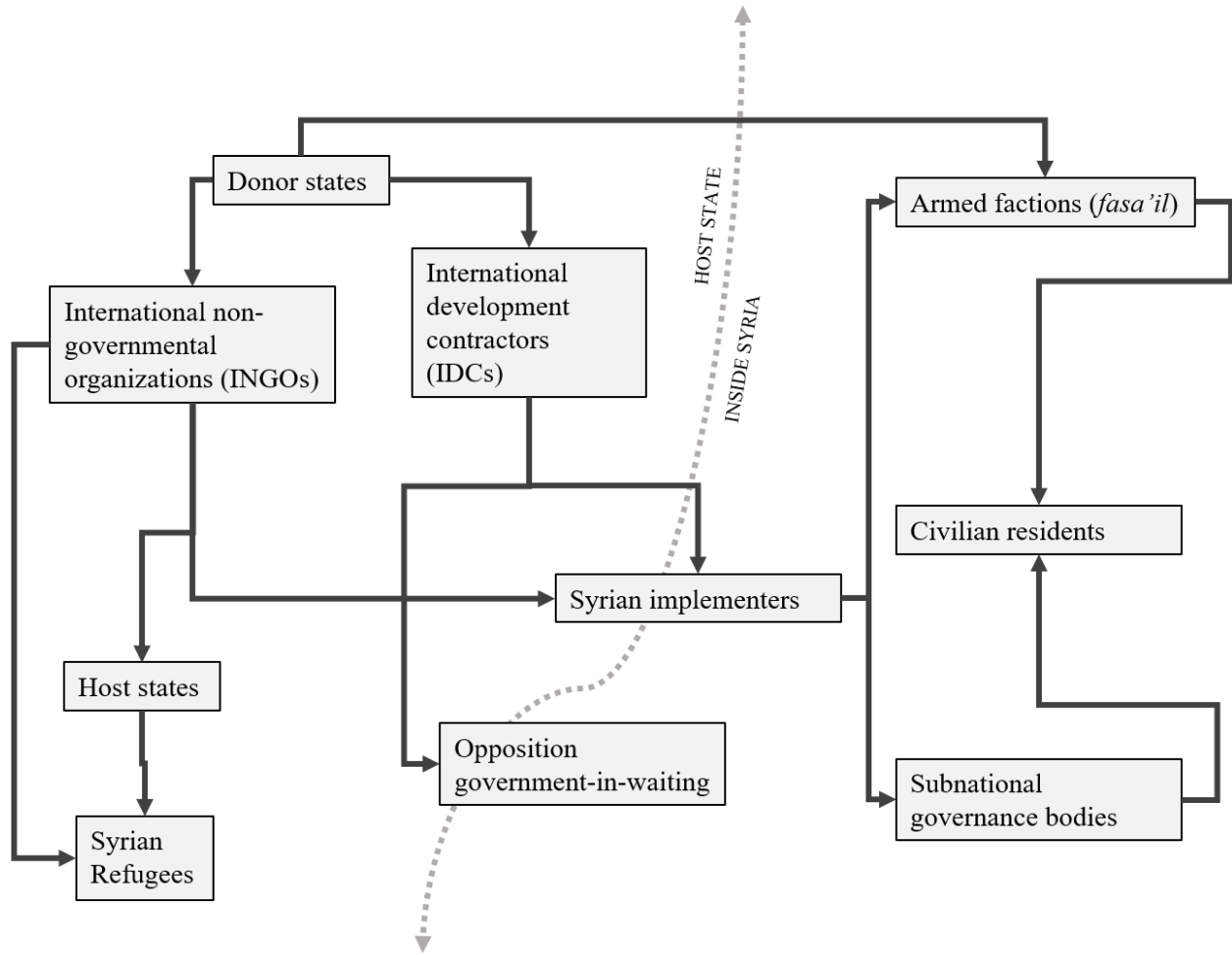


Figure 3.1 – Schematic diagram depicting the opposition as assemblage.

rendering technical, she describes this as “extracting from the messiness of the social world... a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which problem (a) plus intervention (b) will produce (c) result” (*ibid*). It should be clear that neither of these tasks are well-suited to donor states or host-state governments, for whom Syria’s complex socio-spatial dynamics are far from legible. At the same time, the opposition’s aspiring national institutions have proven more an arena for pre-figurative power struggles among the old guard of the opposition than they have an effective agent for the day-to-day administration of the “liberated territories” of Syria. The most obvious candidate for such activities – a government-in-waiting – has thus failed to

introduce coherence to the diasporic politics of Syria's refugee community in exile. In what follows, I will describe what does attempt to do so.

3.3 FROM CIVIL UPRISING TO “THE OPPOSITION”

If there is no single overarching collective body capable of speaking for Syria's dissatisfied millions, this is in many ways a product of decades of authoritarian rule in Syria. Arguably, the 2011 uprising represented the greatest outburst of political opposition to the Assad regime since 1982, when a rogue branch of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood began an armed uprising in the city of Hama. After brutally crushing the revolt, the Baathist state began a systematic campaign of intimidation, imprisonment, and violence against dissidents across the political spectrum. While this imposed a stability previously unknown to postcolonial Syria, it was delivered by means of a harsh “authoritarian bargain,” by which citizens purchased stability at the cost of accountability (Heydemann & Leenders 2013). In the long term it also produced a diaspora with strong opposition inclinations with noticeable presence in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Qatar, and Jordan (Moss 2016). By the time of the 2011 uprising, many of the children of these exiled dissidents had come of age, returning “home” to Syria to participate in what quickly became a countrywide movement for change.

The uprising upended the political field of Syria. Considerable work has explored the dynamics of the uprising itself in finer detail, but I wish to highlight two countervailing tendencies that emerged early and help explain the complexity of Syria's opposition today. The first is that in the absence of strong political parties or social movements independent of the Baathist state, activists began forming what they called local coordination committees (LCCs, or *majalis tanseeq mahalliye*): decentered, place-specific networks capable of organizing

demonstrations within a common framework of peaceful protest and inclusivity. The rhizomatic organizational form of the LCCs proved highly effective at exhausting the regime's security apparatus and mobilizing popular opinion across a wide variety of ethno-sectarian, class, and regional backgrounds. Their effectiveness waned when the Assad regime began employing violence to intimidate protestors – in particular at funerals – which catalyzed a second tendency: armed insurgency. Not only did the LCCs' message of peaceful protest appear utopian in the face of the regime's brutal collective violence against civilians, but that very violence sparked a transformation whereby the LCCs gradually shifted from contentious politics and toward providing emergency humanitarian relief. Many individuals involved in the early LCCs mark this shift toward "service-provision" as the beginning of the end of the uprising.²⁷

By 2013, a crude division of labor had segmented opposition circles. Men – in particular, young men from poor provincial towns – formed militias or armed factions (*fasa'il musallahah*) to "liberate" territory from the Assad regime. They expressed little interest in governing and generally lacked conscious ideological orientation. Meanwhile, newly-forming "local administrative councils" or simply "local councils" (LACs, *majalis mahaliyye*) had all but replaced the LCCs on the ground, attempting to offer services and administer the recently liberated territories. This division of labor became more elaborate over time.²⁸ Provincial councils joined their local counterparts to form a kind of subnational governance structure that was replicated across the country, with the hopes that they would be gradually integrated into a more consolidated government-in-waiting. Indeed, such aspiring national institutions emerged in the form of the Syrian Opposition Council (the *Etilaf*) and its subsidiaries, based originally in

²⁷ This emerged out of numerous interviews, and is corroborated in the work of others.

²⁸ It should be noted that this was itself not a tidy transformation, but certainly played out differently across space and time.

Egypt, then Turkey. Syrian NGOs and CSOs began forming in exile as well as in the “liberated territories” in order to ensure access to medical care and other humanitarian needs, working independently of, though in contact with, local and provincial councils. These were undergirded by the locating of “Syria response” missions by the large international humanitarian organizations in neighboring Turkey and Jordan, in particular those associated with the UN. This meant that humanitarian organizations became increasingly dependent on these “host states,” which also hosted the bulk of Syria’s wartime refugee populations, with Turkey and Jordan hosting over a half million each in 2013.

Meanwhile, a concurrent process unfolded whereby the Friends of Syria Group began a concerted effort to support institution-building in the rebel-held territories of Syria. While some “donor state” governments directly funded Syrian organizations, most gave over implementation to a range of international development contractors (IDCs), who bid to implement particular projects whose substance ranged from cultivating lofty values like democratic values and women’s empowerment to more mundane, “apolitical” skills like accounting, public administration, and digital security.²⁹ In turn, IDCs frequently sub-contracted to Syrian implementers, whom they could pay less money and who had access to considerable social capital within the warzone. Syrian implementers ranged from civil society organizations (CSOs) to new but small for-profit Syrian-run consulting firms, which by 2017 were beginning to offer their new “expertise” in managing projects in conflict environments in Iraq and Central Asia. They also worked with INGOs, distributing humanitarian supplies and providing other services.

²⁹ Although this last point may seem odd, opposition institutions of all stripes suffered repeated disruptions from regime hackers.

3.4 A COORDINATING CLASS

It should by now be clear that Syria's opposition must be understood in the context of this complex, shifting and geographically-extensive assemblage that makes it possible in its current form. Studying armed groups or even civilian institutions would certainly reveal a great deal about the dynamics of Syria's civil war, but would also answer a limited set of questions about how wartime governance unfolds in Syria's "liberated territories." At the same time, there is insufficient space for this paper to tease out all of its dynamics. Rather, the rest of this paper focuses on the crucial puzzle of how the opposition holds together, despite its deeply heterogeneous, contradictory character. Attending to this radical contingency and mutability distinguishes assemblage theory as an analytical tool, such that accounting for why relationships do not break down as often as we might otherwise expect becomes a crucial task for the researcher. Given the logistical challenges and contradictory forces working to tear Syria's opposition apart – violence, identity, profit, distance, and geopolitics – it is not enough to assume that Syria's opposition stays together. In this section, I describe the actor whom I believe to be responsible for performing the labor of stitching it together.

A key force for consolidating these many shifting relations is an actor I call here the *coordinating class* of Syria's opposition. I conceive of this actor in several ways. First, it is not a discrete institutional actor, but rather a structural position. It is composed of individuals who mediate between what we might call "external actors" on the one hand (donor states, host states, INGOs, IDCs, and so on) and "internal actors" on the other (Syrian civilians, subnational governance bodies, *fasa'il*, and so on). These individuals typically occupy institutional roles within three of the categories I have already described: as Syrian implementers; as employees of an IDC; or as members of a subnational governance body inside of Syria. While not forming a

single institutional body – a government-in-waiting or revolutionary party, for instance – they are participants in what Syrians referred to as *jaww al-munazzamat* (“the NGO ambiance”) of the Turkish borderlands.

The second element defining this class is that the individuals involved share a relatively privileged position within the assemblage relative to other Syrian refugees. The greater part of Syrian refugees struggle to find a position within the labor market of host states like Jordan (where it has long been illegal to work) and Turkey (where it is subject to restrictions). A significant number of displaced Syrians, however, possessed key forms of expertise (social networks, relations with armed factions and local councils, day-to-day military developments, needs assessments) and skills (grant writing, project management, English proficiency, translation, legal training, accounting) or experiences (as diasporic dissidents). Typically, I found that these individuals originated from a higher socio-economic background in pre-war Syria (or its diaspora), and were thus able to leverage these faculties to position themselves as valuable intermediaries for INGOs, but also IDCs and Syrian implementers. Not all members of the coordinating class were well-resourced prior to the conflict; many became important figures in Syria’s opposition movement by dint of what we might call the “revolutionary capital” they had accrued during the early years of the uprising. The legitimacy and fondness with which many activists in exile were regarded stemmed in no small part from years spent organizing protests, documenting regime abuses, and other efforts to support the goals of the uprising.

Third, the coordinating class is motivated by a “force of desire” that stems from a commitment to the goals of Syria’s uprising (Muller & Scharr 2016). Although there is considerable evidence that many individuals in the “NGO ambiance” of Turkey are primarily

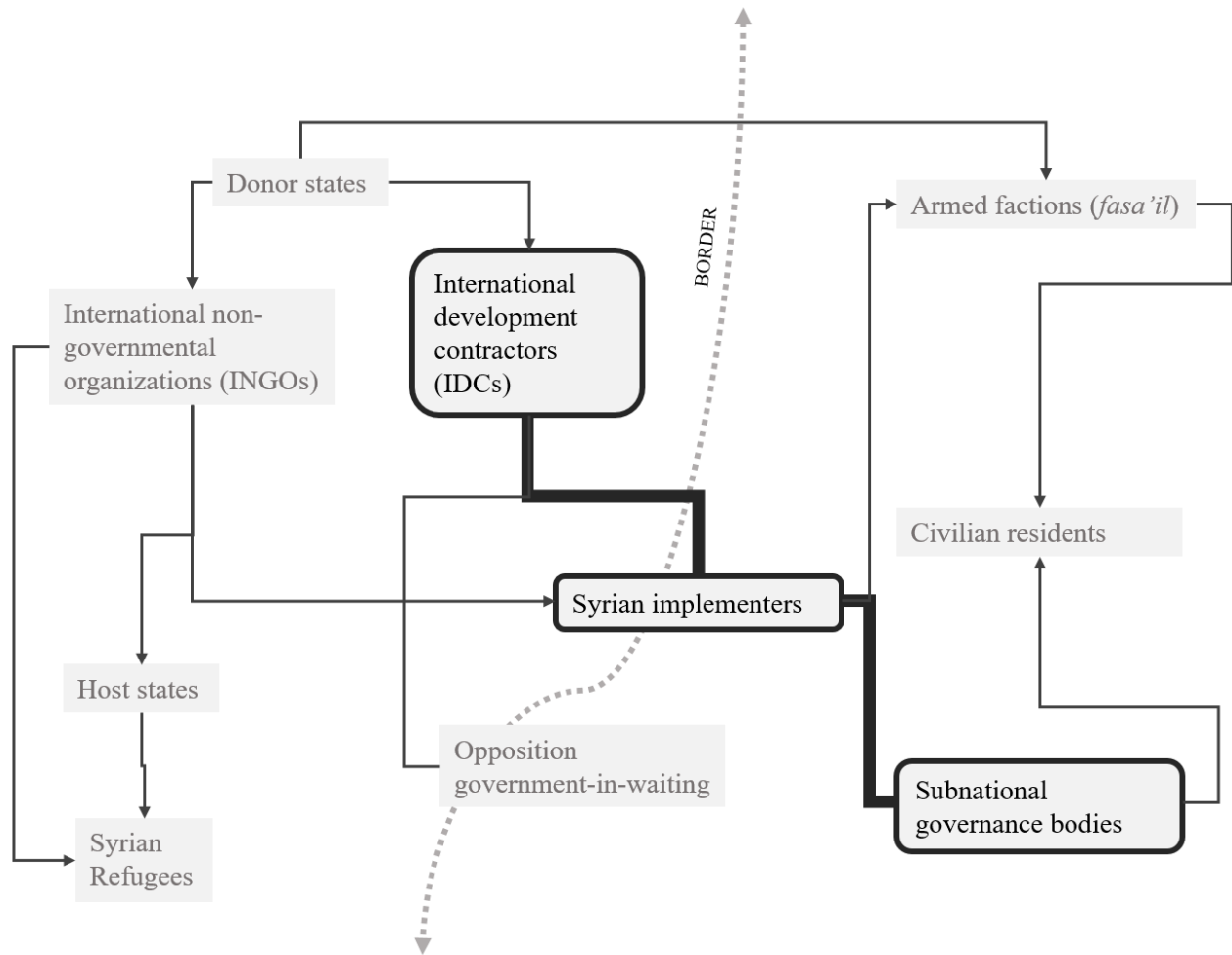


Figure 3.2 – Locating Syria's "coordinating class" within the wider opposition assemblage (bold)

motivated by profit, this explanation does not seem able to account for the many individuals I interviewed who devoted sixteen hours per day contacting beneficiaries in remote villages inside Syria, tracking changing battle lines, or meeting with donors to hammer out the details of grant proposals. It also seems an unlikely explanation for the affective disposition of my participants, which varied daily according to the vicissitudes of Syria's war. I would argue instead that the greater part of the coordinating class is motivated by a revolutionary ethos grounded in a series of goals, some of which are vague (democratic change in Syria, ending sectarian politics), others of which are quite specific (ousting of Bashar al-Assad, de-Baathification of the state, the end of the emergency Law 161). These goals not only motivate their work, but are fundamental to it.

Indeed, much of what these figures “coordinate” is between the needs and goals of Syrian civilians, governance bodies, and armed groups inside of Syria and the opaque whims of donor states and IDCs on the outside. The coordinating class thus represents what Thomas Pierret describes as “cause entrepreneurs,” individuals who are ultimately selling a political future that differs from that of radical Islamists, the PYD, or the Assad regime (Pierret 2016).

Fourth, the coordinating class shares a geographical imaginary of the liberated territories as an interconnected whole. This is worth remarking because it is frequently argued that in conditions of civil war, the local assumes a prominence that it did not previously enjoy. This comprehensive geographic imaginary is derived ideologically from the revolutionary ethos which I have just mentioned, an ethos which is grounded in a claim to popular sovereignty over the entirety of Syria, not just with those spaces it actively governs. But it is also derived from a shared subjectivity shaped by practical, at times embodied engagements with these spaces. John Allen argues that subjects are

constituted by the spacing and timing of their own activities as much as they are by those of others who seek to influence their behavior; their conduct is shaped as much by what they absorb and imagine, the ‘truth’ of their circumstances to be as it is by the physical layout, distribution, and organization of their surroundings (Allen 2003:83).

Situated beyond the peripheries of Syria’s warzone, the coordinating class is deeply shaped by its movements across the Turkish and Jordanian borders into Syria’s Liberated Territories. Donor states and IDCs are “based” in the exile-capitals of Turkey and Jordan, while local councils and *fasa’il* are quite firmly grounded in the contexts in which they operate. The coordinating class, however, is a class of “mobile subjects” who perform the everyday labor of fostering what Allen calls “simultaneous presence,” ensuring that the revolutionary project of the opposition is not swallowed by the distance dividing its many actors. For them, the opposition is not an abstract

goal, but is both an interconnected space of intervention as well as an ongoing product of a political project.

Fifth, and finally, it behooves me to explain what these practices are exactly. At its core, the coordinating class of Syria's opposition is defined through practice: it coordinates. It is in this way that some Syrian refugees have been able to act as a transnational force in the conflict. Rather than some already-existing force that is then transferred across space, Allen invites us to see power as emerging out of relationships and, arguably, those who cultivate them. It is a "relational effect of social interaction...it is always constituted in time and space" (Allen 2003:8). Even "powerful" actors like the United States cannot simply extend their influence into Syria from afar and shape events at a distance – save through violence. They require intermediaries. These intermediaries perform two key tasks: forging alignment among quite disparate actors and rendering technical the "problems" which the assemblage is intended to govern.

3.4.1 Forging Alignment

The many actors, places, and resources that make up Syria's opposition are not of one mind regarding the ends to which they have come together. Motivations vary: *fasa'il* sought to defeat the Assad regime on the battlefield; donor states like the United States and United Kingdom hoped to redirect their attentions toward fighting Islamist groups like *Daesh* and Jabhat al-Nusra. The aspiring national institutions of the opposition (the SOC, SIG) sought to govern based on international recognition, while subnational governance bodies guarded their autonomy while watching the military advances of the regime with mounting concern. Syrian CSOs sought to

keep alive the spirit of the 2011 uprising, while IDCs hoped to bid successfully to keep their main projects running. These are but a few of the countervailing motivations pulling apart the Syrian opposition. One of the most important tasks of the opposition's coordinating class is therefore to "forge alignments" among these disparate actors, whereby one might plausibly govern the conduct of another (Li 2007).

At the core of these novel alignments lay an effort to cultivate relations of accountability in a context where trust is scarce. Donor states and international agencies fund a variety of initiatives in the Liberated Territories, from civil society organizations (CSOs), humanitarian groups, and journalist networks to local and provincial councils. These bodies accept funding in return for ensuring that funds are properly employed. One key manifestation of these efforts was the mobility of field officers into the Liberated Territories in the form of field visits.

Take for example the words of Mulham Samir, a former activist I spoke with in Istanbul. Samir helped found the Aleppo Provincial Council before Aleppo city fell to the regime, but eventually fled following a frightening run-in with an Islamist group. Fleeing to Gaziantep, he found work in 2014 with a Lebanese NGO reaching out to local councils in the rebel-held Northwest. He described his experience as follows:

I went inside [to Syria] to meet with the local council in Saraqib [in Idlib province]. I described to them our work and told them that we would be monitoring their finances for irregularities as part of a transparency initiative for local governance in the liberated territories. The guys from the office then looked at me like I was some flavor of crazy. They turned to one another and asked "who is this guy?" [Chuckling]. It took a serious amount of effort and a lot of time, but in the end we succeeded in convincing them that the work was worthwhile.³⁰

Samir would have been part of the earliest wave of Syrian implementers arriving to local and provincial councils, which had only just achieved wider recognition as quasi-democratic

³⁰ Interview, Mulham Samir (July 2017), projects officer for formerly Gaziantep-based Menopolis. Istanbul, Turkey.

subnational governance bodies. The primary function of figures like Samir was “convincing” local councils – often in communities isolated by war – that not only did his interests converge with theirs, but that they should orient their programming in ways that aligned with donor standards (and expectations).

Once field officers opened contact, a more robust array of relations were able to form. Funded by donor state contracts, IDCs began hosting capacity-building trainings and workshops in Gaziantep and Antakya in Turkey. These became weekly occurrences for several years (2014-2016), even flying in Syrians from “the South” (i.e. Daraa and Quneitra provinces) via Amman, Jordan. These events brought media officers, citizen-journalists, trainers, translators, civil defense trainees, policemen, judges, lawyers, and women’s groups into these exile-capitals, where trainings focused on general “capacity-building” efforts on organizational management, accounting, proposal writing, among other more specialized topics. Above, all, local councilors (*‘adou majlis mahalli*) and provincial councilors (*‘adou majlis muhafidhah*) were targeted for such trainings given the burden of responsibilities that potentially weighed upon them in their communities inside. Members of the provincial councils – in particular, their executive committees – also met directly with donors to make more intimate cases for much-needed projects in their jurisdictions.

For example, the Stabilization Committee of the Aleppo Provincial Council implemented a project dubbed “Our Streets are Colorful” (*Shawari’na mlawwaneh*) designed to efface the ubiquitous black flags and propaganda of the Islamic State from the recently-liberated city of Jarablus.³¹ Ultimately, their purpose is to routinize governance practices and social relations in

³¹ See report, “A Year of the Stabilization Committee.” Issued by the Office of Media and Research. Accessed <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B0dpVqcB8JSmcTEzZ1ZKNm1mY1U?usp=sharing>

the liberated areas. Perhaps for this reason trainings target local councilors above all, because their responsibilities range from managing infrastructure projects, distributing humanitarian aid, social service provision, and balancing budgets.

This reciprocal traversing of the border served to routinize relations of governance for a window of several years (2014-2016). With time, visits from field officers and project managers (based in Turkey or Jordan) became quite familiar to residents of the Liberated Territories.

Abdur-Rahman offers a strong example of how these visits did not so much provide material benefits in themselves as they did serve to forge alignments between particular communities and external actors:

[I]n the areas we've most succeeded in, normal people – our project beneficiaries – have noticed a precision in the work we do, and a clear benefit. This is the furthest step toward building trust. We're always in touch with them, you know: What their concerns are, their problems...because if I don't know these [things] I can't really help them. For the local councils, I can't [directly] offer that kind of help...for example, let's say they propose as a project digging a well. I don't have that kind of funding...So maybe in this particular area I'll help put them in touch with a [civil society] organization, an international one, that can offer this form of support. This kind of work, I've felt, shows that the local councils have a sense of how we [i.e. implementers] can act as intermediaries in bringing sources of support to these areas, sources of services.³²

For Abdur-Rahman, these regular field visits form the backbone of their work. As program director for a Syrian implementer (the East Mediterranean Institute), he spends between 3-6 months per year inside Syria.

Tensions among these many actors often reverberated along these alignments in quite banal guises. By the time of preliminary fieldwork (summer 2015), Syrians based on the inside of Syria began relying on trainings as a means to facilitate other encounters in the exile-capital of Gaziantep. These ranged in their nature, from purely personal affairs (visiting with relatives,

³²Abdur-Rahman Qaddour, Project Manager with the East Mediterranean Institute (EMI). Interview with Author. Gaziantep, November 2016.

reconnecting with friends now living in exile) to meeting with other potential sources of support, be these donors, INGOs, or Syrian implementers. At one point, Creative Associates (one of the primary IDCs implementing trainings on behalf of the US State Department) began holding its trainings in a hotel far from the city center of Gaziantep, with the goal of forcing councilors to socialize more thoroughly with one another. This caused great consternation to councilors, who had come to rely on their circulations through Gaziantep as a means of not only socializing as such, but gathering and verifying information as well.

3.4.2 Rendering Technical

Field visits and trainings not only served to forge alignments among actors, but to produce schematic knowledge accessible to donor states and IDCs. The coordinating class thus plays a key role in rendering technical the sociological complexity of Syria to actors capable of supporting the local and provincial councils financially.

Nazim was a young man I met in Istanbul, who for several years had thrown himself into journalism, but also working in a provincial council in Syria's east. He later found work with a key IDC, where he regularly compiled community profiles, in which he tracked changing battle lines ("kinetic movements"), gauged public opinion and functioning services ("atmospherics"), as well as historically-specific actors and institutions. The nature and scale of external programming in the Liberated Territories was such that this knowledge has typically been coded in an explicitly geographical manner.

Drawing on pre-war social networks and field officers spread throughout the country, other actors like Nazim relay information on armed clashes, infrastructure, human rights abuses,

commodity prices, and humanitarian needs to offices typically (though not always) based in Amman and Gaziantep. For field officers or the analysts who coordinate with them, personal, embodied experience and closeness to daily events in Syria is essential to their credibility. For example, the Syrian Research and Evaluation Organization (SREO) provides humanitarian organizations with needs-assessment, security briefs, and monitoring and evaluation services. Founded by Syrians in Gaziantep, they contrast their services with the “pseudo-expertise authored by faraway folks who’ve rarely been overseas and don’t know local languages.”³³

Even in Amman, where authorities are far more guarded and Syrians barely possess the right to work, a US State Department-funded program trains young Syrian journalists to cultivate networks of informants inside Syria, whose information on conflict dynamics (rather than human-interests stories) are then translated into English by American students of Arabic.³⁴ This information is made available either online via websites or to paying organizations in the form of reports and surveys, but it also circulates freely among Syrians in social settings, reinforcing trust among organizations and sorting truth from rumor.³⁵

Importantly, these forms of reporting are not a straightforward relay of information, but rather are designed to render legible a “subject of needs and aspirations, but also the object of government manipulation” (Foucault 2007:105). For example, the village of Atmeh became an important object of study for these figures during the summer 2017, when rival Islamist groups HTS and Ahrar al-Sham began clashing in the area. EMI wrote one such in-depth community profile that clarified the “key forces” in the village as well as the “nature of the relationship

³³ Website, Syrian Research and Evaluation Organization. Accessed <http://sreoconsulting.com/>

³⁴ Keenan Duffy, (former) editor-in-chief of Syria Direct. Interview with Author. Amman, September 2015.

³⁵ Fieldnotes, Gaziantep. October 9, 2016.

between these different forces,” drawing on everything from the prevalence of particular *fasa'il* to the nature of the local economy to the role of particular families in the area:

The relationship between the local council and the notables/elders is an intermittent relationship that varies according to the family and its support for the legitimacy of the local council such as Al-Sheikh family who supports the local council while Najib family considers the local council as a rival of the service section of Ahrar Al-Sham. However, with the current changes in the city there is a type of convergence between all families to restructure the local council through public voting. This process is still at its beginning. Syrian implementers routinely noted the importance of determining the relevant *wujahaa* (“notables”) in each community as a means of incorporating local concerns and navigating local tensions into their programming.³⁶

These kind of details – from who the relevant *wujahaa* are to the main faultlines among them – help render legible the community of Atmeh to external actors. In this sense, the coordinating class does not only reveal what is obscured by the fog of war, but plays a key role in interpreting and systematizing into community profiles and reports what are in fact quite fluid realities. In this sense, they work to open up one component of the assemblage – the relations among *fasa'il*, civilians, and subnational governance bodies – to intervention by another.

3.5 CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the key role played by a particular set of actors, whom I call the Syrian opposition’s coordinating class. For those involved in Syria’s opposition, the significance of their work, and the relationships they maintain, are all too clear: they sustain governance in the “Liberated Territories” of Syria in the midst of ongoing civil war. The efforts of the coordinating class have ultimately sustained a competing claim to sovereignty over the Syrian state, in many ways far more meaningfully than either armed *fasa'il* or the opposition’s government-in-waiting. Through forging alignments among disparate actors and rendering

³⁶ “Conflict Mapping.” Eastern Mediterranean Institute (10 March, 2017), page 7.

technical the sociological landscape of the warzone, it has been able to stabilize an opposition space, community, and political project in the face of dramatic pressures and across great distances.

This paper also hopes to demonstrate the importance of thinking about refugee transnationalism – and transnationalism in general – as a more ambivalent process, rather than starting from the *a priori* view that it constitutes either a threat or a smokescreen for other interests. In a context where refugees are so often viewed as threats or proxies for state interests, it is important to foreground the nuanced geopolitical position in which refugees may find themselves. To draw out the distinctive role of refugees in Syria’s opposition, the paper turned to assemblage theory, which encouraged me to view the coordinating class as a group of “situated subjects who do the work of pulling together disparate elements without attributing to them a master-mind or totalizing plan” (Li 2007:265). For the coordinating class, a number of them were able to attain a measure of personal well-being while continuing to mobilize against the Assad regime from exile. At the same time, their new liaisons drew them into a web of interests, material realities, and obligations that they frequently struggled to navigate.

As mentioned before, the tensions and contradictions that define the wider assemblage which the coordinating class sustains are constantly changing, and not always in encouraging ways. At the time of writing, both Turkey and Jordan have imposed further restrictions to cross-border movement, but have also begun closing down organizations participating in the Syria response – international and Syrian alike. The Trump administration has, since fieldwork, ended funding to many of the organizations I studied, transforming the political economy upon which it relies and pushing many of my participants out of work. And importantly, the passion with

which many of my research participants engaged in this work is giving way to fatigue and, for some, bitterness in the face of these new realities.

Given the dimming “force of desire” with which my interviewees look to these developments, it is difficult to imagine refugees playing a role in the political future of Syria. At the same time, Turkey and Jordan have slowly begun normalizing relations with the Assad regime, in hopes that the millions of refugees will begin returning home. After years of trauma, displacement, loss, and struggle, it is unlikely that Syria will be a safe place for them so long as the country remains “Assad’s estate.” As with the 2011 uprising, the only certainty in their future remains uncertainty.

Chapter 4: Breaker of Barriers? Notes on the Geopolitics of the Islamic State

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1906, a young British gentleman returned from a long journey in the upland reaches of what is now northern Iraq and Syria. During his travels he wandered in extravagant style between Mosul, Aleppo, and southern Anatolia for some time, venturing even into the Kurdish mountains at Jabal Sinjar. Returning to England he followed the fashion of the times for a man of his position, writing up his exploits as a window onto the state of the Ottoman Empire (Sykes 1907a; 1907b). This he presented to the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1907, where it was popularly received and helped launch a career in the British Foreign Office, one with far-reaching consequences for state-formation in the Middle East. His name was Mark Sykes.

More than a century later, a militant, garbed in black and sporting a dusty black baseball cap, speaks Sykes's name into a camera. The man is Chilean, and his English is peppered with religious utterances in Arabic. Smiling meaningfully, he ambles up an earthen berm that rises unnaturally above the sun-blasted scrub of eastern Syria. With apparent ease he crests this modest heap of soil, calling it the "barrier of Sykes-Picot," the material contour dividing one state (Syria) from another (Iraq). The usual performances of state sovereignty are conspicuously absent, all save a few: the sign identifying the quarters of a commando unit, its soldiers long gone; the patches they cut from their uniforms as they fled, strewn across the dirt floor; an Iraqi flag. Each of these he proceeds to tread on in turn with a studied, theatrical indifference. "They say that [Caliph] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the breaker of barriers," he says. "God willing, we will break the barrier of Iraq, Jordan, *Lubnan* [Lebanon]...all the countries" ("The End of Sykes-Picot," 2014, June 29).

Like our Chilean narrator, many have come to equate Mark Sykes with a number of secretive diplomatic arrangements that divided the Middle East after World War I. This is to the extent that one such arrangement – known as “Sykes-Picot” – has taken center stage in recent narratives of state-formation and, indeed, disintegration in the Middle East. As the story goes, the borders worked out by Sykes (with his French counterpart) ignored ethnic or religious identities supposedly essential to politics in the Levant (Friedman 2014, August 26; Stansfeld 2013, July 10; Blockmans 2013, October 1; Caris & Reynolds 2014, July; Alhayat Media Center 2014a; Osman 2013, December 13). Pushed to its logical conclusion, the states built on Sykes’s “line in the sand” are thus artificial creations whose inevitable collapse we are simply witnessing a century later. Scholars have thankfully turned a more critical eye on this narrative, especially with the recent rise of radical Islamist militarism in the region. In recent years, scholars have explored how this story underpins the territorial rhetoric of groups like al-Qaida and, indeed, the so-called Islamic State (in Iraq and Sham³⁷, hereafter ISIS). But there are deeper ways geographers might engage with ongoing events in the Levant.

This paper offers an extended commentary of sorts, one that argues for a geopolitics of ISIS grounded in the politics of place. It aims to underline the more material, pragmatic struggles of lives and livelihoods in specific contexts, and how ISIS has adjusted its political practice within these. Geographers have paid considerable attention to the discursive, territorial aspects of their rhetoric – in particular, the role of “the caliphate” as a transnational, distinctly “Islamic” form of territory. But deconstructing their border-breaking theatrics is on its own unsatisfying and in some ways distracting. Indeed, this all-encompassing territorial vision is often quite at odds with its political activities, which reflect an acute consciousness of spatial variation. This

³⁷ *Sham* or the fuller *Bilad al-Sham* corresponds roughly to the English term “Levant” or, more specifically, a region of “Greater Syria” roughly comprising the contemporary states of Israel-Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria itself.

suggests that ISIS is, more than anything a highly pragmatic and adaptable actor, even to the point of incoherence. In turn, the ideological, imaginative, and the discursive underpinnings of ISIS – which it shares in large part with other groups – receive more attention than they may deserve.

Instead, I propose a geopolitics of ISIS grounded in historical-geographic context, one that considers how this particular transnational network of religious militants has managed to articulate its apocalyptic discourses into the local politics of quite different places. By way of example, I examine a region called the Jazirah, the long Syrian-Iraqi, and indeed, Turkish borderlands that now form the rump of the “Islamic State” and, significantly, the location of Sykes’ 1906 journey. I do so through a combination of examining ISIS’ communications, secondary research, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jordan and Turkey beginning in July 2015. The paper begins by summarizing the Sykes-Picot narrative and its role in ISIS’ vision of the “caliphate,” before emphasizing the more recent developments that have transformed the Middle East and laid the groundwork for ISIS’ emergence. It then proceeds to highlight how the Jazirah as a series of interconnected places, not the caliphate as a vision, is crucial to understanding the geopolitics of ISIS.

4.2 A STORY WITH DEEP ROOTS

Historians of World War I have poured over the impact of the “Sykes-Picot” arrangements for some time, and it is a story at once alluringly simple and bewilderingly complex (Barr 2013; Fromkin 2009; MacMillan et al 2003). To summarize, secret wartime negotiations conducted by Mark Sykes with France’s François Georges-Picot led to the territorial division of the Ottoman Empire during the postwar Paris peace talks in 1919. Unlike Eastern Europe, which was offered

self-determination, the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire were “carved up” into nominally-sovereign Mandate territories to be administered (and further divided) among France and Great Britain. It is this incident that Stuart Elden uses to frame the fragile territorial sovereignty of contemporary Iraq, one of several states formed from the fallen Ottoman Empire. “What is significant,” wrote Elden, “is the way in which the Ottoman Empire was divided. The borders were not drawn along the lines of internal divisions, as were the Spanish colonies in South America...[r]ather, the divisions and the newly created countries were products of another round of great-power politics and a renewed colonization” (Elden 2009:47).

Indeed, despite promises to the Hashemite rulers of the Hijaz, the British traced a rough line on the map “from the ‘e’ in Acre to the last ‘k’ in Kirkuk,” as Sykes famously described it (Neep 2013).

But there is more to the story than imperialist duplicity. For instance, one must interrogate the common assumption that self-determination would have led to more “natural” pan-ethnic nation-states (for Turks, Arabs, Kurds) or perhaps a return to some form of caliphate. To be sure, secular Arab nationalists and Western analysts (including Jon Stewart of the Daily Show) have long favored the former interpretation of this story (The Daily Show 2013, September 4). To be sure, some Arab nationalist groups based in Damascus, Beirut, and Antakya rejected colonial boundaries outright (Thompson 2000; Provence 2005). More recently, a television mini-series aired in 2008 Syria – “Lawrence: the Betrayal” – bemoaning the division of “natural Syria” (Hajj Abdi 2008, June 24). But research points to a more ambivalent, contested story. For instance, popular politics in post-WWI Damascus was more keen on a separate Syrian republic rather than a united Arab Kingdom ruled by a Hejazi monarch (Gelvin 1998; Arsuzi-Elamir 2004). At the same time, the Hananu revolt emerged in Aleppo and

encompassed southern Anatolia, with Arabs, Turks, and Kurds collaborating to reinstate a caliphate. Indeed, loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan persisted surprisingly long after the empire dissolved. Finally, many historians note that one of the region's *most* fragile states – Iraq – was in fact constructed based on pre-existing Ottoman *vilayet* (provincial) boundaries. As historian Reidar Visser (subtly) asserts in the title of one such article, “Dammit, It Is NOT Unraveling.” Despite the *post facto* narratives series of Arab nationalists, there was no obvious alternative to the Ottoman Empire waiting in the wings (Visser 2013, December 30; Danforth 2013, September 11).

Nevertheless, ISIS does present its vision as the inevitable, singular alternative to colonial boundaries in the region – as “God’s promise.” Unlike ethno-nationalists, who rejected *particular* borders, ISIS claims to reject the bounded territoriality of the Westphalian order writ large. This is contrasted with the supposedly fluid political space of the caliphate, a global political order characterized by the *boundless* sovereignty of God (Elden 2009; Hobbs 2005; Parvin & Sommer 1980; Brauer 1995; Hiroyuki 2000; Abou el Fadl 2003). In a recent issue of *Dabiq* (ISIS’ periodical propaganda magazine), “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi asserts these very territorial aspirations: “Today we are upon the doorstep for a new era, a turning point for the map of the region, rather the world” (Alhayat Media Center 2014). The issue is fronted by a photo-shopped image of the Vatican beneath the black banner of ISIS. Another issue features a different “border-smashing” performance, this time a bulldozer plowing through the earthen berms dividing Syria from Iraq. Like the earlier clip of the Chilean man, itself dubbed “The End of Sykes-Picot,” this image draws a direct connection between the destruction of symbols of territorial sovereignty, the “Sykes-Picot” story, and the boundless political project of ISIS. As the issue recounts:

[I]t was only a matter of time before the oppressive *tawaghit* (tyrants) of the Muslim world would begin to fall...[...] The *mujahidin* had taken a major step in casting off the shackles of the *kafir* (unbeliever) nations and proving that no *kafir* was strong enough to separate the Muslims from one another (Alhayat Media Center 2014a).

Bulldozers, shackles, and Qur’anic vocabulary. These are powerful images meant to authenticate the success (and thus truth) of ISIS’ political project.

But there are less dramatic practices through which ISIS performs this transnational reach, emphasizing the essential unity of the Islamic world while calling into question the borders that divide it. For instance, during Ramadan 2014, al-Hayat (one of ISIS’ media wings) released a special video titled “Eid Greetings from the Land of the Khilafah,” in which recent arrivals to Raqqa describe their new lives in the caliphate. Respondents are invariably middle-aged, male, and holding assault rifles or children, speaking a variety of languages (almost none of them Arabic), but an intriguing detail is the structure of the pseudonyms they adopt. These include three components. First is a *kunyah*, a teknonym formed on the pattern “father of so-and-so” (*Abu Fulan*). This is followed by a *nisbah*, a toponym usually derived from one’s place of origin but, curiously in this case, is often derived from the origins of their parents or grandparents on the pattern of “the toponymic” (*al-makani*). Finally, they note an *actual* place of origin, written English, which is often quite different from the toponym and reflects the global backgrounds of ISIS militants, many of whom are the children of Muslim immigrants to non-Muslim countries or Western converts to Islam.

For instance, a militant named Abu Abdullah al-Habashi (from Britain) praises communal life in Raqqa, with *Habash* being the classical Arabic term for Ethiopia. Similarly, there is Abu Jandal al-Yamani (from Indonesia) as well as Abu Abdurrahman al-Trinidad (from the United States). Perhaps the clearest example of this is a militant introducing himself as Abu Shu’aib as-Somali, who speaks nothing but Finnish into the camera. What these pseudonyms

achieve, apart from masking the identities of those involved, is to gesture at the universality of Islam (because omnipresent and multilingual) while rooting these figures in the religion's foundational essence. For these names have the ring of historical authenticity, wiping away the lives of these individuals before they undertook *hijrah* (migration), as well as the relevance of modern state borders – even as they acknowledge their ongoing salience. In their place, individuals are reborn as globally-situated believers, inviting the audience to join them in the land of the *khilafah* or caliphate (Alhayat Media Center 2014, August 2).

Examples of such rhetorical strategies abound, but we should be wary of fixing our gaze on them overmuch. For one thing, Sykes-Picot is for ISIS but one part of a much larger communications strategy dominated by appeals to quality of life rather than righting the dusty wrongs of history. For instance, ISIS', "post-racial" discourse is very much targeted at the descendants of Muslims living in Europe and North America. "If you thought London or New York was cosmopolitan," writes *A Brief Guide to the Islamic State*, "then wait until you step foot in the Islamic State...I cannot see a Baltimore riot springing up here anytime soon and that is a dead cert" (al Britani 2015:30-31). The guide also offers information on technology, employment opportunities, transportation, and even kinds of food available to new residents of the caliphate. Such media is filled with scenes of remote, pure nature, smiling children, and seemingly calm, bearded men clutching assault rifles.

But it is not so successful among local populations in Syria and Iraq, who for their part criticize ISIS within the discursive tradition of Islam. For instance, an unverified *hadith* (prophetic adage) has entered popular discussion in forums on Islamist websites, even appearing as the epigraph to a recent book on ISIS called *The Black Book*. Attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib³⁸

³⁸ Ali ibn Abi Talib was significant for being both the cousin and (eventually) son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the First Imam in Shi'a Islam. The significance of this "prophecy" (though its origins are

and recorded in *Kitab al-Fitan (The Book of Schisms)*, a repository of eschatological prophecies, its text reads eerily relevant today:

When you see banners of black, hold your ground – do not move your hands or feet. What appears will be a weak, insignificant people. They are the masters of the state, with hearts like lumps of iron, uttering no pact or covenant. They will call you to justice but know nothing of it. Their names are assumed, their origins obscure, and their emotions are so unrestrained that, like women, they disagree among one another until God gives justice to whosoever desires it most (al-Marwazi 844/1996).

ISIS' own strategic use of "black banners" has doubtless fueled allusions to this dubious prophecy. Similarly, the label "kharijite" has been applied to followers of ISIS, in reference to an early puritanical sect of Islam famous for its violence and practice of *takfir* (excommunication). In response to this, another *hadith* has regained popularity: "When one man brands his brother a *kafir*, then [at least] one of them is surely correct" (Markaz al-Fatwa, accessed 2004, August 31). Practicing Muslims, Arabs and otherwise, have thus been more than capable of countering the rhetoric of ISIS on its own terms.

Finally, and more generally, the geopolitical narrative of Sykes-Picot is, like many stories, quite a-historical: Charles Tilly argues that such stories reduce explanation to "self-motivated actors in delimited time and space [and] conscious actions that cause most or all of the significant effects" (Tilly 2002:28). In other words, a few fateful decisions have predictable consequences, and strong personalities shape events more than faceless structural processes.³⁹ It is also a-geographical, casting figures like Mark Sykes as the only means of encounter between

dubious) is thus double, as it not only is attributed to a founding figure in "unorthodox" Shi'a Islam, but Imam Ali was himself killed by a *kharijite* (explained below) fundamentalist.

³⁹ Eugene Rogan, for instance, has argued in his recent *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* that English-language scholarship on World War I gives undue attention to figures like Sykes and T.E. Lawrence while marginalizing the agency of actors in the Middle East. Indeed, the description of the Middle Eastern front as a "sideshow of a sideshow" summarizes how agency in the war has been folded into geographical categories. See also: Justin Marozzi, "The Long Read: Forget Lawrence of Arabia, Here's the Real History of the Middle East and World War 1," *The National*, February 26 2015.

the political discourse of an “enlightened” Christian West and a Muslim East hopelessly mired in tradition. Counter to the claims of many, the Levant was not some eastern *tabula rasa* onto which Europeans foisted wholesale the Westphalian state system, nationalism, and bowler hats only after World War I (Arsan & Schayegh 2015). Rather, historians increasingly point out that prior to the Mandate period, the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms (1838-1876) had already transformed the individual’s experience with urban and political space in the region. In fact, by 1850, these notions of “enlightened” governance (less so the bowlers) had diffused even to peasants in rural Palestine, who quoted verbatim from reform edicts to challenge the traditional oppression of the landowning classes (Doumani 1995; Freas 2010).

What ISIS calls “Sykes-Picot” did not on its own set the Levant on an inevitable collision course with Western discourses of state-building. It was not a given that future states should align neatly with such ethnic or religious divisions. The post-War politics of the Arab world was marked by remarkable flux, ambiguity, negotiation and contradiction. Syria in fact was so eager to adopt the sovereign territorial model in 1920 that it preemptively declared independence before French troops could reach Damascus and set up many of its own institutions; as a contingency, they actually requested an American Mandate (Gelvin 1998). There was thus some degree of give and take – between local populations, nationalists, and colonial powers, which I discuss below.

Having contextualized “Sykes-Picot,” let us devote less time to British diplomats and more time to local dynamics in the region. If we are speaking of border disputes and territorial questions, it was not ethnic or religious identities but local, familial circuits and ties that carried the day (as I explore later). If we are speaking of state formation more generally, then it was the deeper structures of European Mandate rule that smothered this: monopoly capitalism, divide-

and-rule governmentality, and brutal colonial violence (Gregory 2004; Sluglett2007; Neep 2013; Bou-Nacklie 1993). These very avoidable practices of imperialism, more than ethnic divisions or caliphal aspirations sabotaged by treacherous villains, left marks that would last well into the twentieth century. But it would take a radically reconfigured context, many years after independence, to deliver a crippling blow.

4.3 TOO MUCH TERRITORY?

On June 9, 2014, Iraq’s second largest city was overrun by militants bearing a black flag. Syria’s “cauldron of chaos,” as the media described it, coalesced suddenly (it seemed) into a blitzkrieg that carved across its eastern border deep into northern Iraq, capturing Mosul and making a mockery of territorial sovereignty (Kaplan 2014, August 27). In complete disbelief, it took five days for the Maliki government in Baghdad to grasp what had truly happened (Cockburn 2015). By month’s end, ISIS had announced the establishment of a *khilafah* (caliphate) stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala near Iraq’s eastern border with Iran.⁴⁰

The fall of Mosul represented a turning point of sorts – but not because it marked the “return” of Islam into politics. Despite the claims of ISIS, the evaporation of the Syrian border with Iraq was far from inevitable – so too with the “rebirth” of the caliphate. Indeed, ever since the Turkish Republic dissolved it in 1923, efforts have abounded to re-theorize and reinstate the caliphate as a political institution within a world of sovereign territorial states (Black 2001:308-348). What was unique in 2014 was the extent to which “non-state” actors like ISIS could now challenge them. To some, this justifies the increased interest shown by scholars in “political

⁴⁰ Of course, this claim to territorial control should not be taken at face value. Diyala Governorate is a north-eastern province of Iraq bordering Iran and lying to the immediate south of the Kurdish Autonomous Region. Aleppo is Syria’s largest city and industrial hub.

Islam” as an ideology violently at odds with the increasingly interconnected nature of the world (Huntington 1997; Barber 1992/2010; Friedman 2007; Mendelsohn 2012).

But geographers have been more willing to deconstruct the Islamist rhetoric of such organizations, and to embed them in larger analyses of political economy and world politics. In this light, ISIS is less a vengeful force of history than an example of how “seemingly anachronistic identities and dormant territorial disputes...can take on renewed symbolic meanings amid the dislocations of globalization” (Tuathail 1996:254). That is to say, radical Islamism can only be understood *from within* the flux, circulation, and ambiguity of what Ó Tuathail calls our increasingly “postmodern geopolitical condition” (Tuathail & Luke 1994; Tuathail 2000). Everywhere states have encountered challenges to their territorial sovereignty in the face of a more fragmented and volatile world economy, but also in the form of drug cartels, insurgencies, and indeed, Islamist militants. These organizations are not fundamentally alien to the Westphalian order, as is commonly believed (Tuathail 1998; Sidaway 2003; Mountz 2013; Bilgin & Morton 2002). States have even deliberately constructed such networks in pursuit of inter-state rivalry. ISIS’ own predecessor, *Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* (the “Monotheism and Divine Struggle Corps”) formed alongside al-Qaida during the Cold War, emerging in coordination with American, Saudi, and Pakistani intelligence agencies in order to threaten the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (Gregory 2004; Lia 2007; al-Shinawi 2014; Akoum 2014). Alluding to this history, geographers like Elden have argued that groups like al-Qaida are not as “placeless” or universal as they depict, but enact an elaborate political geography worthy of study.

Only, approaches to this geography have tended to fixate on three elements. The first is the *Islamic* nature of al-Qaida and ISIS’ political practice, a characterization that merits closer

scrutiny. For one, in the rush to highlight territorial alternatives to the Westphalian state system, interest in “Islamist territoriality” edge uncomfortably close to essentialism. For instance, Stuart Elden argues in *Terror and Territory* that “Islamism acts as a challenge to the *relation* between state, sovereignty, and territory. Non-state actors can control territory; many states cannot” (Elden 2009:34). But it is not clear that “Islamism” represents a stable category or discourse capable of challenging this system; we might see parallels in how the religious authority of the Pope and Holy Roman Emperor once did, but no longer does. Moreover, it is unclear whether Islamism is *necessarily* a challenge to sovereign territoriality, or if it is simply particular manifestations that are. It certainly is not the caliphate *per se*; indeed, the late Ottoman Empire conceived of the caliphate as, essentially, a state whose national identity was Islam. Finally, theories of the caliphate’s role in politics are as diverse as their composers, ranging from the oft-cited Qotb and al-Mawdudi to more abstract or moderate theories like the Khilafat Movement in turn-of-the-century India (Black 2001; al-Rasheed et al 2012).

Second, a focus by geographers on the *territorial* dimensions of this practice reflects more the theoretical concerns of specific scholars than any singularly important analytical framework. Indeed, it is Stuart Elden’s concept of territory that is most often brought to bear in this regard – that is, that representations of territory underpin and shape social relations through the use of violence (terror). In this case, it is the fluid, transnational vision of the Caliphate and coercive power that carry most analytical weight (Elden 2009; Elden 2007; Jabareen 2015). Building on this, a recent piece by Jabareen elaborates a distinction between what he calls *conceptions* and *tactics* of territoriality with regards to ISIS. He thus differentiates territorial rhetoric and representations (of interest to Elden) from territorial practice, which reflects “the subordination of resources to political ends, with the aim of shaping, producing, reproducing,

and controlling specific territories” (Jabareen 2015:52). His account thus distinguishes ISIS from its erstwhile partner, al-Qaida, disaggregating the category of “Islamist” groups (Whitlock 2004, October 3; Mendelsohn 2015, February 13; Sack 1983). At the same time, Jabareen’s focus on state failure and spectacular violence also turns both organizations into caricatures, the former focused single-mindedly on the conquest of territory (in a very tangible sense), the latter on the propagation of universal terror. Whether in Jabareen or in Elden’s conception, “territory” only goes so far to elucidate the geopolitics of ISIS.

Third, and resultantly, one must emphasize the *gap* between ISIS’ border-breaking discourse and how this actually plays out in specific contexts. Indeed, territorial representations mask how variegated the political geography of ISIS actually is. Far from a unified territorial conception or set of tactics, ISIS’ strategy is, crucially, marked by a pragmatic appreciation of the differences between places, and how to exploit these. This is critical because it reminds us that ISIS only really breaks *some* borders. The next section accordingly examines how we might better understand this variability through a closer reading of the key historical-geographic context in which ISIS operates: a borderland between Syria, Iraq, and Turkey known more commonly as “the Jazirah.”

4.4 SLAPDASH CALIPHATE

One need not speak of territory to contemplate a geopolitics of ISIS. Rather, we might ask: how are their rhetoric and actions mediated by the political specificities of particular places? Stathis Kalyvas argues that the “master cleavages” of war adjust according to “transaction[s] between local and supralocal actors.” That is, political actors often adapt their visions to local realities pragmatically, “even when their ideological agenda is opposed to localism” (Kalyvas 2003:486).

Similarly, John Agnew has long argued for “a *geographical* imagination that takes places seriously as the settings for human life and tries to understand world politics in terms of its impacts on the material welfare and identities of people in different places” (Agnew 2003:129). What so greatly distinguishes ISIS from al-Qaida is that the former possesses such an imagination, while the latter sees places not as differentiated bundles of political opportunities, but as temporary nodes, targets or havens. In this section I explore not the imaginative geography of the caliphate, but the pragmatic geographies of the Jazirah, considering the politics of place in two strategic places in the region: Dayr al-Zur in Syria, and Gaziantep in Turkey.

4.4.1 An Island by Other Names

The Jazirah is what residents call the very region through which Mark Sykes meandered in the early twentieth century. Its name – “the Island” – refers to the swath of arable land lying between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, stretching northwest from Baghdad’s northern hinterland, across the *badiya* (steppe) of eastern Syria and into southeastern Anatolia. Rocked by Mongol invasions and tribal migrations for centuries, by 1906 Mark Sykes was able to remark that

all that remained in the Jazirah were a few small towns at Rakka, Harran, Deir, Ana, Tell Afar, and Sinjar. Most of these were destroyed by the invasion of the Shammar Arabs, who broke in about that time and established Bedouin rule in the country and enslaved the surviving nomads (Sykes 1907:247).

It was to address this sorry state of affairs that the Ottoman state began a number of projects designed to integrate and make the region productive. As in the new province of Transjordan, the government in Istanbul initiated numerous projects variously aimed at the “consolidation of Ottoman rule in the more peripheral Arab and Kurdish provinces” (Rogan 2002; Rogan 1996:104). This included regulating migration routes, protecting the *hajj* (pilgrimage) caravans, and educational reforms (Kasaba 2009; Saliba 1984; Lewis 1987). One

such reform was the opening of the *Aşiret Mektebi* – the Tribal School – in Istanbul, whose mission was “the indoctrination of tribesmen in state values through formal education” by enrolling the children of tribal leaders. Finally, the Istanbul-Baghdad railroad was meant to tie this region closer to the imperial center; in fact, one of Mark Sykes’ main purposes in his report to the Royal Geographical Society was to suggest a particular route for this train.⁴¹ With Ottoman collapse in 1918, there followed several uncertain years in which the British and French attempted to reconcile Bedouin circuits with other growing interests – namely, their flourishing Persian Gulf trade and ongoing oil exploration (Schofield 2008; Visser 2009; Neep 2013; White 2012; Thomas 2003). It was here that the effects of new borders became most tangible in the practical geographies of everyday life.

4.4.2 *Dayr al-Zur*

One place whose fate exemplifies the ambiguities of state-formation in the Jazirah is Dayr al-Zur. Situated in the *badiyah* (wastes) between Baghdad and Damascus, a fertile agricultural plain near oil reserves, the small town was once an independent *sancak* (sub-province) in the late Ottoman period, quite distant from trade centers but owing much to tribal connections in Iraq and northern Syria. Indeed, the harsher dialect of this region, more like that of Iraq, sets Dayris (as they are known) apart from the rest of Syria. In 1918, the “Dayr al-Zur Incident” was the first of several border disputes to pit locals against bureaucrats in London, France, and nationalists in regional cities like Damascus, Aleppo, and Ankara. Similar incidents occurred across the Jazirah in cities like Raqqa (now in Syria), Diyarbakir (Turkey) and Mosul (Iraq). In this particular case,

⁴¹ The irony is that this very train, meant to integrate the Jazirah further, became the de facto border between the post-Lausanne 1923 Republic of Turkey and the Mandate territories of Syria and Iraq – through no effort of Mark Sykes’.

locals effectively forced these outside actors to define their priorities in the region and respect local autonomy. Thanks to the ambiguity of postwar negotiations, Dayr al-Zur very nearly entered British Mandate Iraq, before locals besieged the British garrison at the instigation of Syrian agents. At the same time, it became a wedge issue driving apart the Iraqi officer class residing in Aleppo from the Syrian middle officers of the Arab Army, who were less insistent on Iraqi independence. The issue subsequently coalesced into two distinct Arab nationalist political parties: al-Ahd (for Iraqis) and al-Fatat (for Syrians).

Though communities contested the *course* of the border in particular locations, as in Dayr al-Zur, they did not challenge borders *as a political technology* for sorting locals into categories like Syrian and Iraqi (Tauber 1991; Jones 2009; Neman & Paasi 1998; Newman 2006; Bauder 2011). By the 1930s, some claim that European maritime trade had so decimated economic links in this region between Aleppo in Syria and Mosul in Iraq that these “did not constitute factors or forces capable of impeding, certainly not preventing, the establishment...of two separate political entities [Syria and Iraq]” (Gilbar 1992:64). What did were local concerns for autonomy and economic sustainability than by national categories as such. But with time, these social dynamics of the region changed. The gradual sedentarization of the Bedouin – begun with the Ottomans, carried to its pinnacle by the French and post-1946 Syrian regime transformed Dayr al-Zur from a sleepy market town into the largest city in independent Syria’s east, a critical agricultural center, and Syria’s chief producer of petroleum. Moreover, the French construction of new market towns in this northern region – Kobane, Qamishli, and more – were intended to direct economic life away from towns which now lay in Turkey or Iraq, as well as to settle Christian refugees fleeing Anatolia. The advent of sustained irrigated agriculture in the forties and fifties only deepened this re-orientation of fates in the Jazirah toward Damascus. Under the

Asad regime, the region became a “showcase of Ba’thi agrarian socialism,” providing jobs, wealth, and water to the region in ways that integrated this peripheral zone into the popular politics of Syria’s Ba’th party (Hinnebusch 2001; Ababsa 2005; Zeidel 2008).

While these processes may have territorialized the states of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey in the Jazirah, there are sources of flux and ambiguity that remain significant for contemporary politics in the region (Woodward & Jones 2005:240). To begin, it is undeniable that the borders between newly-formed Syria, Iraq, and Turkey had profound impacts that rippled as far as Aleppo and Mosul; these effects were, to use the words of historian Martin Thomas, “locally devastating” on both urban and Bedouin populations in this region (Thomas 2003:551). Even today, as many as 97% of residents of the Syrian Jazirah maintain contact with relatives on the Iraqi side, who do not passively accept the border’s presence. Indeed, prior to Syria’s civil war a smuggling economy worth \$2 billion had developed that circulated labor, capital, and oil between Mosul and Aleppo (Denselow 2008:106). In the 1990s, and intensifying with Bashar al-Asad’s 2000 ascent to power, decades of populist Ba’thist policies benefitting the countryside were suddenly reversed in favor of deepening privatization, impoverishing the Jazirah, its former breadbasket (Haddad 2011). A severe drought struck in 2004, long after these social safety nets had been dismantled, causing massive out-migration and unemployment to other agricultural regions like the Hawran, of which Daraa is the administrative center (de Châtel 2014).

It did not help that in 2003, an American invasion destabilized Syria’s neighbor to the east. Not only did the Americans disband Iraq’s armed forces (including its border guard), but there is reason to believe that Bashar al-Asad began releasing radical Islamists from Syrian prisons with the stipulation that they enjoy their newfound freedom in Iraq. As we increasingly learn, ISIS has built on the networks that these fighters established with former Iraqi Baath party

officers from the Iraqi Jazirah (the provinces of Salah al-Din and Anbar) (Natalie 2015, April 24). Although the Asad regime has held onto Dayr al-Zur proper for some time now, it has shown little interest in the region apart from protecting its eastern oil reserves, preferring to concentrate on the populous urban corridor running between Aleppo and Daraa in the west. Meanwhile, Dayr al-Zur has been under siege by ISIS militants since April 2014, having taken control of the Iraqi border city of Albu Kamal (*The Daily Star* 2014, April 10). By now, ISIS has had a dramatically *practical* impact on life in the Syrian Jazirah: It operates with relative impunity across the 599-km border between Iraq and Syria. They have drawn to these countries as many as 20,000 “foreign fighters,” calling on technical experts to come help them rebuild the caliphate. And according to their own reports, they have put the region’s impoverished farmers back to work and integrated marginalized tribal leaders into their governance structure (Neumann 2015, January 26; Alhayat Media Center 2014c:4). For these very reasons, Sami Moubayed argues that the institutions set up by ISIS will be very difficult to dislodge (Moubayed 2015).

The strategic location of Dayr al-Zur, the presence of oil reserves, local grievances with the Syrian state, and the American invasion of Iraq. These quite recent strategic shifts in the political geography of the Syrian Jazirah have made this city a desirable target for the kind of brutal territorial tactics described by Jabareen. But if we turn our gaze elsewhere in the Jazirah, these tactics appear to be quite different indeed.

4.4.3 *Gaziantep*

ISIS did not simply “come out of nowhere” when it captured Mosul in June 2014, nor when it took Raqqa in March 2013. Journalists have long observed their activities in northern Iraq,

pointing out that the much-hailed American-backed *Sahwah* (Awakening) Movement of 2005 merely drove them underground and into the cracks of the Iraqi state, where they began dispensing protection and collecting “taxes” throughout Mosul. The rise and spread of ISIS should thus not be understood simply as an extension of pre-existing networks of al-Qaida. Rather, it reflects deep changes to the nature of radical Islamist militarism in the region: from al-Qaida’s streamlined, “remote attack cells” staging symbolic operations in the grand struggle against “the West” to insurgencies more entangled in local theaters of this drama in specific states. For this reason, it is actually difficult to take seriously the apocalyptic tone of their discourse – border-breaking and so on – in light of its typically reactive, strategic nature in practice. Indeed, organizations like ISIS and al-Qaida undergo so much re-branding over time that the *Pan-Arabian Enquirer* (an English-language satirical publication) has likened this process to the sugary optimism of corporate mergers and acquisitions (“al-Qaeda to Acquire Boko Haram” 2014, November 2).

This pragmatic picture of ISIS emerges more clearly when we cross the Syrian border north into nearby Turkey. Located some 120KM north of Aleppo, post-war Gaziantep (or by its original name, Antep) has become a key exile-capital for political opposition to Bashar al-Asad – of all kinds. The city was originally a satellite city of Aleppo in northern Syria, and much like Dayr al-Zur adjusted with great difficulty to its marginal status in the new state of Turkey. But more recently, the Turkish government’s Southeast Anatolia Project (the GAP) has made Gaziantep into one of the country’s rising “Anatolian Tigers,” a booming industrial and agricultural center in its own right (Demir et al 2004).

Current depictions of Gaziantep suggest that militants from ISIS lurk beneath every rock, that there is constant danger of violence, and that the city is effectively beyond the reach of the Turkish state. As Robin Wright noted in the *New Yorker*:

This fall, U.S. officials came to Gaziantep to brief Americans working for nongovernment agencies. The advice was blunt: Keep a low profile. Don't gather in groups in public places. Don't wear sports or university insignia that would advertise nationality. Stay away from Starbucks (Wright 2014).

This kind of fear certainly evokes Elden's notion of "terror" and territory somewhat, but to foreigners living in Gaziantep, these come across as hyperbolic. The article in question, titled "The Vortex," was received with a degree of amusement and, in some cases, ridicule. As one aid-worker noted:

A sort of fun fact about that...is that in the article she was saying that US State Department folks have given *blanket* information to all the foreigners, or all the Americans in Gaziantep to not go to the Starbucks in Gaziantep because it could be potentially a target...

First of all, *no one* ever told me not to go to that Starbucks. I was talking to my boss, because he goes to that Starbucks all the time. And I was like, "Hahaha, you've seen the Robin Wright *New Yorker* article, you better watch out at Starbucks!" And he was like, "Oh yeah! I didn't tell you. I used to work for her. She interviewed me *at that Starbucks.*" So I was like, alright, come on, *you're* going there. Please.⁴²

The aid-worker quoted above does not emphasize ISIS' presence in the city so much as the *meaning* of that presence – the relevance of "terror." More than anything, he deflates Wright's analysis of Gaziantep, which is intended to both bolster her credentials as a conflict researcher, to overstate the nature of the city's imbrication in Syria's civil war, and to paint ISIS' activities as uniformly terrifying within the territory it enters. Indeed, he continues to note that she is "not such a fucking daredevil" that she alone could fearlessly work from the Gaziantep Starbucks.

⁴² Interview, "Expat 01," July 14, 2015

What such theatrical depictions of Gaziantep do is paper over the very banal, subtle, and indeed, strategic behavior ISIS has shown within Turkey, and in turn, the accommodating attitude adopted by the Turkish state:

I think the only thing that would change that is if ISIS attacked Turkey. And right now there's kind of this... Turkey's not going to go into Syria unless ISIS attacks Turkey, and as long as Turkey stays out of Syria ISIS has no motivation to do that, so...there's kind of like this balance.⁴³

The silent presence of ISIS has become a regularized fact of life which has made Gaziantep at once the most active and the most boring external front for Syria's civil war. As another aid-worker put it, "...the thing that is weird about Gaziantep is that you know that...dangerous individuals are here. And like, you know that there are ISIS militants here. There just are...[and] if they want Western targets, *they're here*. Everybody knows where the expats go." She continues:

[I]t feels so normal here but then there was a report in the last couple weeks that, I think, like 50 – maybe that's high, maybe there were fewer – ISIS militants were like, captured in Gaziantep on their way to Syria. And occasionally, weapons caches get captured here as well, and like...that's one of those things where like, only *some of those instances* make it into the media, and you know that much more is happening.⁴⁴

At the same time, she noted blithely that "you are more likely to die of boredom in Gaziantep than from ISIS." Importantly, ISIS achieves more by staying under the radar: Gaziantep is believed to be one of the primary channels through which ISIS smuggles its antiquities and new recruits back and forth between Syria and Iraq (*ICSR News* 2013, December 17; Hassan 2014; Collard 2014, August 16; Pringle 2014, June 27). Rather than "breaking," a geopolitics of balance structures their activities in states like Turkey.

⁴³ Interview, "Expat 02," July 14, 2015.

⁴⁴ *ibid*

It is important to look beyond the territorial visions of ISIS to the calculations, ambiguities, and missteps that more fully characterize their actions. The contrast is quite stark. In Syria and Iraq, the brutality with which ISIS realizes its discourse has astounded al-Qaida, and though they may claim “an extensive history of building relations with the tribes within its borders,” they had to massacre 900 members of the al-Sha’aitat tribe of eastern Syria in order to intimidate the remainder (Alhayat Media Center 2014d; Aljazeera 2014, August 17; Holmes & al-Khalidi 2014, August 16; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2014, December 17)). Recent setbacks on the battlefield have seemingly encouraged them to seek targets outside the region as a show of force, with recent bombings rocking Baghdad, Beirut, and Paris. And yet foreign fighters have returned home more often disillusioned by their experiences than eager to do violence to “the West,” and those who remain receive higher salaries than locals, who complain of discrimination (Byman & Shapiro 2014, September 30; Abi-Habib 2015, March 9). This exacerbates the spectacular failure of ISIS’ agricultural “policy,” which has failed in large part thanks to their willingness to use dams as a weapon against the Iraqi state (Hage Ali 2014, June 21). The exodus of Iraq’s Chaldean Christians, the rape and sectarian cleansing of Yezidis in Jabal Sinjar, and the burning alive of Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh have successfully alienated any regional populations indifferent to or in denial of ISIS’ very existence. Deepening Turkish and Russian involvement represent a new, murkier chapter. In the face of these challenges, the ISIS we see depicted in the media – the coherent, territorial, ideological actor – may well be less powerful, less coherent, less pervasive than its rhetoric would suggest.

My purpose in conveying this contrast is to deflate a fear-driven narrative that equates the story ISIS tells about its actions with the strategic, even slapdash manner in which this has actually taken place. While the group’s Islamic background and territorial visions are important,

these de-historicize and disembed the group from the contexts in which it acts – in this specific case, the evolving geography of the Jazirah. It tends to push analysis closer to ideal-type comparisons – Westphalia vs. the Caliphate – which, ultimately, reinforce civilizational binaries rather than complicating them. And it tends to confuse the practical grievances of Syria’s peripheries with the political movements to which they turn for an alternative (Khaddour & Mazur 2013). These are embedded in the politics of specific places and should steer clear of the absurd clash of fundamentalisms that continues to motivate military policy in the United States.⁴⁵ A geopolitics of ISIS must transcend the tendency to situate politics in the Middle East within the realm of ideology and discourse rather than in political economy and local specificity. Indeed, such unreflective analyses of Islam, coupled with a heavy hand abroad, have convinced many Muslims across the world that it is not short-term interests the United States or “the West” pursues, but the comprehensive destruction of Islam across the globe (Roy 2004; see also Birke 2015, February 5). It is this recent reservoir of grievances that gives ISIS its residual appeal – not the caliphate. As geographers, we do well to question how ISIS represents the Middle East; we do better to trace the even messier political geographies that bring this volatile region into being as it currently is. These are not one and the same.

4.5 CONCLUSION

...the new barbarian is no uncouth
Desert-dweller; he does not emerge
From fir forests; factories bred him;
Corporate companies, college towns
Mothered his mind, and many journals
Backed his beliefs. He was born here.

W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety* (1947/2011)

⁴⁵ Indeed, one of the first popular books to explore the origins of ISIS oddly devotes far more time to an anti-Palestinian agenda than to ISIS itself. See Jay Sekulow, *Rise of ISIS: A Threat We Can’t Ignore* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

Mark Sykes originally described the Jazirah as “not a borderland between East and West, but a borderland between North and South” (Sykes 1907a; Atia 2010). In a sadly poetic sense, this remains true. Shortly after my arrival to Gaziantep in July 2015, a suicide-bombing rocked the nearby border town of Suruç, killing activists intending to cross into the Syrian city of Kobane and triggering a wave of unpredictable reactions from the Turkish state, among them the bombing of Kurdish militants in Iraq. More recently, prominent anti-ISIS journalist Naji Jarf was shot dead in Gaziantep in broad daylight. This raises important questions about the future of ISIS’ “balance” in Turkey as much as it does about their weakening control over Syria. Stretching across the Syrian, Iraqi, and Turkish borderlands, the Jazirah is now at the center of global circuits of capital, militants, and arms that connect local opportunities and livelihoods with quite global political developments. In many ways, it would be difficult to uncover stranger bedfellows than those who are building the caliphate atop the rubble of Syria.

As a region of lived experience – as a pragmatic geography – the politics of place in the Jazirah have greatly shaped ISIS’ political practice more than its vision does (Tuathail 2010). If I am wary of overmuch focus on discourse, it is because it is not self-evident that discourses of “Islamic” territory and politics are sufficient tools for investigating geopolitics in the Middle East, ISIS or otherwise. Their relevance is neither automatic nor straightforward, and should not be perfunctorily slotted into a polarized theoretical debate over the concept of territory, as is at present *de rigueur* in critical geopolitics (Gelvin 2004; Nyroos 2001; see also Jabareen 2015). For the Middle East, as much as elsewhere, “geography is dynamic rather than static” (Agnew 2002:4). The more properly geographic question seems to ask how and where a given discourse has come to resonate. This, in turn, calls for greater attention to the politics of place. To echo the

words of Gearoid Ó Tuathail: "...we are engaging not only geopolitical texts but also the historical, geographical, technological and sociological contexts within which these texts arise and gain social meaning and persuasive force" (Tuathail 1996:73). Geopolitics is representation, but these are embedded in interests, resources, and how these emerge out of and come together in specific places (Agnew 2003).

I have thus followed in Sykes' footsteps through borderland of the Jazirah that we might better situate the claims of ISIS within their larger historical-geographic contexts. The contexts in which these claims arise change, adjust, and are forgotten, and the meanings of terms like the caliphate change with them. Examining these requires a more exhaustive appreciation of the region's political geography than geographers have been willing to offer at present. In overstating the discursive, the territorial, the Islamic, we risk divorcing ISIS from the politics of place in which it flourishes, which have actually been around for some time. And in overstating the role of characters like Mark Sykes, we forget just where he actually fits into the story. Indeed, the negotiations with which Sykes is associated never came to pass; they were passed over by the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres and years of painful negotiations and incidents, which Sykes was very much unable to attend, having died of the Spanish Influenza the previous year in Paris (Schofield 2008; Culcasi 2014).

Whatever their rhetoric, it is enough that ISIS poses a very tangible, murderous alternative to the contemporary states of the Middle East in ways that have irrevocably transformed the everyday lives of thousands already. If only for this reason, recent events should be seen as just that.

Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks

Understanding the political geography of civil wars is of mounting concern to world politics. Even as some argue that war is ultimately declining worldwide, plenty of evidence suggests that both the form of political violence and its spatial manifestations are undergoing serious changes (Pinker 2012). These transformations have triggered ongoing debate within the field of peace and conflict studies, both over the methods by which analysts offer insight into conflict and the conceptual categories through which these insights are interpreted. Indeed, despite its essence as a fundamentally internal conflict, the very notion of the civil war has been exposed to deep questions about whether conflicts can truly be domestic affairs in an ever-more-integrated world. Some even argue that the field is undergoing a “spatial turn” of sorts.

At the beginning of this dissertation, I argued that these discussions travel only part of the path toward rethinking civil war as a “spatial” or geographical process. Specifically, I suggested that the field of peace and conflict studies remains analytically and normatively wedded to a conception of war whose essential spatial referent is the territorial nation-state. While this is in itself neither remarkable nor unique to peace and conflict studies, more so is the peculiar manner in which scholars believe this problem is being transcended. On the one hand, theories of wartime governance evoke tidily-bounded territorial configurations of “local order,” while analysts cast the “transnational dynamics” of civil war as necessarily at odds with world politics as we know it. Not only is the novelty of this bifurcation overstated – there have always been transnational and local dimensions to civil wars – but it is in many ways postponing a deeper, more critical engagement with how war reshapes the spaces and actors of politics.

I have illustrated that different conceptions of the political geographies of war are possible by focusing on the case of civil war in Syria. Some have described this conflict as “the greatest human disaster of the twenty-first century” (Phillips 2016:1), and I have already described the extent of its human toll. But Syria’s conflict also illustrates how the processes shaping civil war are not, strictly speaking, internal to it. Foreign military advisors, ground and aerial forces, as well as jihadi networks, have flocked to the country’s battlefields; humanitarian organizations have established complex linkages to the civilian governance bodies across the country; and external sources of funding have formed new economic relations. These dynamics have doubtless prolonged the duration of the conflict, but writing in mid-2019 it is beginning to show signs of coming to a close.

To demonstrate these processes, I chose to focus on Syria’s opposition movement, on the one hand, and the global jihadi network Daesh, on the other. At a military disadvantage, and beset by infighting, the Syrian opposition struggled to govern civilians and provide services in communities which it “liberated” from the Assad regime. These struggles, in turn, placed the opposition in a position in which it was forced to engage with external actors whose agendas did not always align with their own. Conversely, Daesh cultivated both a vision and reputation as a fiercely global actor with deep roots in the Islamic world. Both required skillful use of rhetoric in ways that obscured contradictions within its political realities.

Central to understanding how wartime governance emerges in Syria’s civil war is an understanding of the spaces which these actors both produce and inhabit. It is important to note that while the Syrian opposition “controlled” a particular array of territories throughout the conflict – known widely as the “Liberated Territories” – these territories did not constitute a coherent whole onto which we might map tidy categories of “local order.” Rather, these

territories were embedded in anomalous geopolitical spaces (McConnell 2010) that were dynamic and contingent, but also overlapping and transnational in their nature.

Drawing on external support as it did, border crossings came to figure prominently in the Syrian opposition's ability to access resources and generate legitimacy in a relatively durable manner. Not only were border crossings central to the transshipment of humanitarian aid, but they facilitated the circulation of activists, local and provincial councilors, journalists, and militants (among others) between the Liberated Territories and the spaces of exile for Syria's opposition. At the same time, they became sites where armed *fasa'il* competed for control of these circulations on the Syrian side. Only when aid threatened to come to a halt did infighting quiet down and *fasa'il* came to agreement.

Exile-capitals were another anomalous space through which Syria's opposition was able to govern and, indeed, survive the war. Although displacement threatened to fragment and thin out the ranks of Syria's opposition, spaces in exile became key sites for political mobilization. The pronounced involvement of refugees in Syria's conflict (in support of the opposition) was by no means a given. Rather, their ability to generate agency was a historically- and geographically-situated process. Owing to geopolitical and logistical considerations, Syrians circulated back and forth along particular borders (Turkey, Jordan); they also took place within a particular time-frame (2012-2016) whose end-date reflected changes in these states' policy goals relative to the Syrian conflict. In that period, Amman, Jordan, but especially Gaziantep, Turkey, became surprisingly vibrant sites where Syria's opposition could cultivate ties with external actors and regroup in the safety of exile. In this manner, these exile-capitals formed rear bases of sorts, where the transnational relations essential to the survival of the Liberated Territories were cultivated, coordinated, and routed into Syria's Liberated Territories.

If these spaces lay at the center of the opposition's efforts at wartime governance, inner frontiers lay at their peripheries. Throughout the duration of Syria's conflict, the opposition inevitably seized territory from other actors: the regime, Daesh, and (rarely) the Kurdish-dominated PYD. These spaces were not only deeply damaged by recent fighting, but required distinctive efforts to integrate them into the opposition's wartime governance structures. As such, they formed the inner frontiers of the Liberated Territories, spaces where political relations stood in a heightened state of flux and that required particular forms of intervention. Not only did these inner frontiers come into view as spaces characterized by extreme need, but also as spaces of extreme risk, into which the opposition may well be unable to extend its presence more fully.

The spaces I have described in this conflict do not represent neatly-bounded "local orders." Rather, forms of authority, legitimacy, and space manifest in Syria's warzone as complex, emergent, and overlapping articulations. Acknowledging and identifying these anomalous geopolitical spaces represents an effort to push beyond the "territorial trap" that continues to characterize conventional theorizing in peace and conflict studies (Agnew 1994).

The Syrian opposition not only navigates this emergent geography of Syria's war, but is in many ways fundamentally shaped by it. Governance within the Liberated Territories was in many ways a product of the circulation of councilors, humanitarians, activists, journalists, and so on, but also of the wider relations which made these circulations possible. These relations were by no means given, but rather required a great deal of labor to ensure that ties between the opposition and its external "allies" did not routinely break down.

I thus described the coordinating class, a particular component of the Syrian opposition which I identify as crucial to maintaining its survival in this anomalous context. This coordinating class occupied a position of relative privilege among Syrian refugees in that its

members were predominantly educated workers capable of entering the burgeoning aid economy in the borderlands of Turkey and Jordan. At the same time, this position rendered them uniquely able to act as intermediaries between external sources of support (donor states, host states, international non-governmental organizations, international development contractors) and those Syrians still residing within the Liberated Territories (civilians, sub-national governance bodies, armed *fasa'il*). By forging alignments among these actors, and rendering technical those dimensions of the Liberated Territories in need of intervention, the coordinating class assisted in bridging the distance between actors and, consequently, articulating “the local” of Syria’s conflict within its “transnational” dimensions.

The “global” jihadi network Daesh (known more widely as “ISIS”) also plays an important role in navigating and shaping the geographies of Syria’s civil war. Its ability to inspire terror depended in large part on the global manner in which it represented its political project: as “breaking the barriers” of statehood that had divided Muslims from one another for (at the time of writing) a century. At the same time, this representation of itself has been taken too often by analysts as a statement of truth about its political practice.

Daesh has altered Syria’s warzone by transforming the eastern *badiye* of the country into the site of a putatively global state-building project. It is believed that thousands of foreign fighters have traveled to this revived “Islamic state,” while it has also engaged in the looting and sale of Syria’s archaeological artifacts as well as petroleum resources. More specifically, Daesh has cast this project as an attempt to the revival of the “caliphate,” an Islamic polity which its jurists argued recognized no earthly sovereignty. At the same time, a more guarded examination of its political practice reveals that it is far more local in its strategic calculus than others have suggested. Indeed, Daesh has played a pragmatic game of encroaching upon particular sites that

have been marginalized by their autocratic governments: Mosul in Iraq, Raqqa and Dayr al-Zur in Syria. As for its operations in Turkey, however, Daesh has shown very little willingness to “break the barriers” dividing its territory from Turkish soil. In this sense, it displays a pragmatic willingness to adapt in the face of local political constraints in ways that seem to belie its aggressively “global” propaganda.

This project has demonstrated that a keener geographic sensibility is important to the study of conflict and civil wars in two ways. First, civil wars are not only destructive, but are also generative processes, and space is one of the best means through which this can be witnessed. Civil wars rarely unfold according to the neat and tidy categories with which we attempt to explain their dynamics. They are complex and evolving processes, the result of which is an anomalous geopolitical space in which authority, legitimacy, and space articulate in quite novel ways. Syria’s warzone – in particular, the “Liberated Territories” offers a window into how civil war reshapes space and, through this, the very significance of “the local” and “the transnational.”

Second, it has shown that how these relationships transform should never be taken for granted, but rather, entails work that merits investigation. While the transnational nature of the “Liberated Territories” came in large part as a result of geopolitical and logistical conditions, the coordinating class of Syria’s opposition played a key role in ensuring that the relationships that emerged did not fall apart due to misunderstandings, divergence in interests, or the difficulties of distance. In a political environment defined by the absence of formal institutions of governance, even informal networks like this can play a key role in ensuring a base level of cooperation. The role played by the coordinating class as an agent of spatial transformation was crucial to making

sense of the Syrian opposition and its efforts to govern. Doubtless, attention to similar agents will prove valuable in the study of similar cases in the future.

This research has provided an important window into the changing geographies of conflict in the twenty-first century. It illustrates that the transnational dimensions of civil war are not secondary, but can instead be central to how wartime governance becomes possible even at a local level. It shows how individuals are not merely victims or agents of violence, but instead play an active role in shaping the political geographies of conflict. Any political geography of civil wars thus must take people and their agency as the start of analysis. The geographies of conflict are important not because they reveal what we dread most about politics. They are important because they reveal the profoundly meaningful worlds that individuals struggle to build, even when they seem most elusive.

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