



Heterotopic Ossifications

Scanning the urbanism of Turkey-Syria borderscape

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Master's Thesis

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Abstract

The research investigates the Turkey-Syria border as a project, reading it through spaces made and remade by its mechanism, the struggles it produces, and the narratives that emerge from it. As an extension of how powers control the terrain, the border is intended to be eternal, thus it is made through bordering continuously. Due to this inherent dynamism, the border becomes thicker than a bidimensional line on maps, and as the circulations it modulates and the bodies it controls design the spaces, it becomes a landscape. Among the different spatial implications of the border as a project is to pushback, which turns it into a site of struggle where movements confront the bordering as an act of violence. In the case of the Turkey-Syria border, historically being a “bone of contention” ever since its demarcation on maps following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it has reached its current status as a security mechanism project promoted by Turkey and the EU. The research is grounded in architectural thinking about the border, spatializing it to understand better what it does, and exploring the tension between architecture and its complicity in forming the border as a project. Different methodologies are used, starting with investigating three borderscapes through specific push-back stories and researching into the design of the weaponized Turkey-Syria borderscape. This involves scanning the territory by re-mapping its spatial conditions, thus revealing a sort of X-ray and reimagining the “bone of contention.” The research was further developed with a visit to the region in May 2023, soon after the earthquakes hit, which enabled an engagement with the territory to observe how people live in the space they inhabit and a photographic investigation. The research unlocks the relation between space and the narratives of the territories that are investigated analytically using the Foucauldian notion of “heterotopic ossifications.” Deriving from the six principles of heterotopia, these are six spatial objects selected from the engagement, which are considered deviations of the “bone of contention.” The proposal is to look beyond the imposed aesthetics of the border as a security mechanism in the mass media narrative and the limited understanding of conventional cartographies, and instead to mobilize architectural intelligence to confront the logic of design and the project of the border. Thinking of the border as a bone, in all its material, symbolic, and organic dimensions, and the X-ray as a method of inquiry under their surface and immediately visible elements, it is possible to reveal the spatial conditions as “species of spaces,” or other spaces and therefore heterotopic ossifications. This allowed the territorial-scale reconstruction of this investigation, making it a provoking reflection in the architectural design discourse of the border.

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Justification and context

The tension between architecture and the project of the border has been my preoccupation for a long time. Being born and raised in Turkey, often referred to as the country that bridges Europe and the Middle East, I have been exposed to the discourse around its borders for a while, whether through mass media outlets or in the streets.

Even today, everyone is still talking about borders, from politicians of different political ideologies to taxi drivers and butchers. However, it took me until I started my master's degree at Politecnico di Torino and participated in the Architecture, Society, and Territory B course to start questioning the sociospatial aspects of what the field of architecture practices. This is because I then recognized architecture as a tool that could be used in forming the project of the border, rather than as a principle obsessed with constructing objects, which encouraged me to think through the logic of design within the borders.

Once I began investigating the Turkey-Syria border, I realized how underresearched the territory is in terms of architectural understanding. Therefore, unlike the state of the art around the border discourse in Turkey, I attempted to confront architectural intelligence and the project of the border. In doing so, I propose to look beyond the imposed aesthetics of the border as a security mechanism in the mass media narrative and the limited understanding of conventional cartographies.

Since my family's roots trace back to eastern Turkey, even though I was not raised there, my interest in the region continued to grow throughout my life, thanks to frequent visits and the stories I have heard from the people who shaped me. While this is not the only reason why I chose the Turkey-Syria border as the case study for my thesis, the emotional link I have with the region cannot be overlooked. I wanted to understand the region where my family originates, as well as understand the border.

This interest increased even more when news about Turkey and the EU's project of securitizing the shared border with Syria proliferated over the last decade. Particularly, Turkey's inconsistent border policies, starting with the open-door policy that allowed people fleeing from the conflict in Syria to enter Turkey in 2011, shifted drastically and rapidly to fortifying the 911-km-long border and violently pushing back migrants in weaponized border spaces. This is without mentioning the ongoing armed conflict in northern Syria, with Turkey taking an active role by conducting military interventions, supporting opposition groups, and proposing a "safe zone" within northern Syria to send back Syrian migrants residing in Turkey.

While northern Syria is what remains today after the territorial scale destruction of the built environment, public institutions, and infrastructures, the power vacuum that emerged during the ongoing war has resulted in the emergence of more than one Syria within Syria. As the conduct of hostilities and the inability to meet basic needs have been suffocating the inhabitants of the region, an increasing migration influx towards Turkey has emerged.

Although Turkey has operated different kinds of bordering over the years, the recent intensity of the violence confronted by the movements

prompted my research. Given the opportunity to write a master’s thesis to complete my studies, putting my thoughts in this territory at this period of time seemed just right.

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Research investigation

The research investigates the Turkey-Syria border as a project, reading it through spaces made and remade by its mechanism, the struggles it produces, and the narratives that emerge from it. The main research question is, then, what are the spatial implications of bordering and how can the architectural thinking confront the project of the border?

Starting from exploring the complexity of the concept by confronting the different ontologies of the border, the thesis unfolds some of the different ways in which the border exist. In doing so, the thesis focuses on the materialization processes of the border, which has effects in space that are linked to how we understand the concept. The question that arises is then to know what the border does in order to exist; said differently, what are the spatial effects of the border?

As a dispositif used by powers to control the terrain, the border is intended to be eternal, thus it is made through the continuous act of bordering.[1][2] Since it modulates circulations, controls bodies and design the spaces, the border gets thicker than a bidimensional line on maps, and therefore becomes a landscape, or a borderscape.[3][4][5]

Among the different spatial implications of the border as a project is to push back, which turns it into a site of struggle where movements confront the bordering as an act of violence.[6] Looking into different pushback stories by selecting three distinct landscape elements (river, forest, hill) as weaponized borderscapes from around the world, the thesis reveals some of the different consequential effects in the material dimension.

In the case of the Turkey-Syria border, the thesis researches into the design of its weaponized spaces, making it evident that historically, the Turkey-Syria border has been a “bone of contention,” ever since its demarcation on maps following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and continues now as a security mechanism project promoted by Turkey and the EU.[7][8] And there arises another question on how to use architectural intelligence to confront the project of this very border.

The thesis proposes a sort of X-ray and reimagining the “bone of contention,” through scanning the territory by re-mapping its spatial conditions. Furthermore, the research was developed with a visit to the region in May 2023, soon after the earthquakes hit, which enabled an engagement with the territory to observe how people live in the space they inhabit and a photographic investigation. The engagement is transcribed in a field diary format, spatially detailing the visit through an architectural gaze.

1. Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 194–228.

2. Henk von Houtum, “*The Janus-face: On the ontology of borders and b/ordering*”, Simulacrum: Beyond the Horizon, 2010, 18.

3. Stuart Elden, “The Instability of Terrain,” in *A moving border: Alpine cartographies of climate change*, ed. Marco Ferrari, Elisa Pasqual, Andrea Bagnato (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). 50-61.

4. Thomas Nail, Raffaele Picione and Rocco Pergola, “Borders, Movement, and Being-in-Between,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis and Education: Subject, Action & Society* 2 (2002): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.32111/SAS.2022.2.2.1>.

5. Camillo Boano and Ricardo Martén, “Agamben’s urbanism of exception: Jerusalem’s border mechanics and biopolitical stronghold,” *Cities* 34 (2013): 6-17.

6. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2013), 18.

7. Fabrice Balanche, “The Levant: Fragmentation and Remapping,” in *Lines That Bind: 100 Years of Sykes-Picot*, ed. Andrew J. Tabler, (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016), 4.

8. Armenak Tokmajyan and Kheder Khaddour, “Border Nation: The Reshaping of the Syrian-Turkish Borderlands,” Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, March 30, 2022.

The research unlocks the relation between space and the narratives of the territories that are engaged by analytically using the Foucauldian notion of “heterotopic ossifications.” Deriving from the six principles of heterotopia, as mentioned in Foucault’s “Of other spaces,” these are six spatial objects selected from the engagement, which are considered deviations of the “bone of contention.”[9]

While proposing to look beyond the imposed aesthetics of the border as a security mechanism in the mass media narrative and the limited understanding of conventional cartographies, the thesis mobilizes architectural intelligence to confront the logic of design and the project of the border. Reimagining the border as a bone, in all its material, symbolic, and organic dimensions, and using the X-ray as a method of inquiry to delve beneath their surface and immediately visible elements, it is possible to reveal the spatial conditions as “other spaces” and therefore “heterotopic ossifications.” This allows for the territorial-scale reconstruction of what the research investigated, making it a provocative reflection in the architectural design discourse of the border.

Literature review

The literature is varied and incorporates various fields of study, with the theoretical framework grounded in articles and books by authors mostly from the fields of border, migration, and media studies, philosophy, politics, geography, and sociology. These are complemented with urban studies and architectural references, as well as official documents, reports, web articles, and journalism. Among the different languages, the literature examined was mostly in English, Turkish, and Italian, with occasional use of other languages when needed.

Both for the Turkey-Syria border territory and the border itself, creating a historical account of events unfolding since the migration influx began and powers increased, restricting movements of people, has been crucial to developing the thesis. The concept of the border has been studied through active consultation of books and articles from various authors who question notions of bordering. Most of these authors are not directly from the field of architecture and urbanism, as the complexity of a multifaceted phenomenon like the border requires interdisciplinary consultation for better understanding.

Although there is an ocean of sources about the concept of the border, the thesis starts with confronting three different ontologies of the border to filter the vast literature and focus on the authors elaborating the border in the spatial dimension. To cite a few, first, while confronting the border as an object: Balibar É., Sferrazza Papa E. C., von Houtum H., Zibar L. Second, while as a mechanism: Foucault M., Nail T., and d’Eramo M. Third, while as a landscape: Mezzadra S. & Neilson B., Elden S., Boano C. & Martén R., Brambilla C., Perrera S.

Owing to Brambilla, the thesis embraces her suggestion on the use of borderscape for a thicker understanding of the border, then explores three spatial examples, that are according to Mezzadra and Neilson, site of struggles. The narrative of border being a project of powers that pushes back and therefore becomes a site of struggle is further spatilized and detailed through reports of various newspapers and NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, The

9. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Space,” in *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, Routledge, eds. Michiel Dehaene, Lieven De Cauter (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 13-22.

New Humanitarian, REACH, PAX, AIDA, UN Reports, together with official documents and statistics issued by the governments.

In the case of Turkey-Syria border, as the topic is rather under researched in the literature from authors of architecture and urban studies, therefore the literature is consulting mostly the work of political scientists, authors from migration related studies, besides incorporating mostly the identified reports and documents. Some of the rare exceptions of authors referred in the literature are Olejárová B. and Yilmaz Ö., helped deeply on elaborating the he changing border policies of Turkey from open doors to the recent fortification unfolding.

While looking into the design of the Turkey-Syria border, derived from the work of Tabler A. J., there are some striking historical moments to be mentioned, in order to reveal that the border has been a bone of contention ever since it was proposed as a sketch on maps. This tracing back was further developed by mentioning the aesthetics of the Turkey-Syria border as a security mechanism in the mass media narrative in Turkey, thanks to the work of Tagliapietra A. on media influence on public perception, and the elaboration on the context of major media groups and their relations with the Turkish government by authors like Yaşlı F., Karlıdağ S. & Bulut S.

In order to look beyond the limited cartographies and the imposed mass media aesthetics of the border and see the spatial conditions that are not immediately visible, the thesis proposes the X-Ray as a method of inquiry, deriving from the medical procedure and encouraged by the book of Colomina. Furthermore, the thesis instrumentalizes the spatial concepts like Foucault's heterotopias, and embraces its origins in the medical terminology as heterotopic ossifications, ultimately to confront the project of the border with architectural thinking.

Structure of the thesis

Part 1, named "*Border Portrayals*," traces various texts to confront three different ontologies of the border, namely as an object, a mechanism and a landscape. By emphasizing the multifaceted material nature of the border, this part acknowledges that the border is not only made but also does things in space and, therefore becomes thicker than a bidimensional line on maps as it modulates circulations, controls bodies, and makes and remakes spaces. Following this, this part reads the border again as borderscape to stress the necessity for a thicker understanding of the border as space and other aspects of bordering, especially the struggles it produces. Looking into different pushback stories by selecting three distinct landscape elements (river, forest, hill) as weaponized borderscapes from around the world, this part reveals different consequential effects in the material dimension. Namely in the Rio Bravo: US-Mexico border, the Białowieża Forest: Poland-Belarus border, and the Naked Hil: Turkey-Syria border. Following this, the thesis delves deeper into the design of the weaponized Turkey-Syria borderscape, through a brief historical account that reveals the border has been a "bone of contention" ever since its demarcation on maps following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, until exploring its aesthetics as a security mechanism promoted by Turkey and the EU in the mass media narrative.

Part 2, named "*Scanning the border*," proposes scanning the identified "bone of contention," revealing a sort of X-Ray, by remapping the territory through overlapping various layers of spatial data. This part consists of speculative cartographies that aim to look beyond the limited representation of borders on conventional maps and confront the identified aesthetics. Thinking of the border as a bone, in all its material, symbolic, and organic dimensions, and the X-ray as a method of inquiry under their surface and immediately visible elements enables to uncover the spatial conditions "beneath the skin."

Part 3, named "*Engaging with the bone of contention*," is a field diary consists of heterogeneous pieces of articles from the author's notebook during the trip conducted in May 2023. As a transcribed collection of different encounters, it encompasses the journey through 5 border region cities in Southeastern Turkey. This enabled an engagement with the territory to observe how people live in the spaces they inhabit, starting from the seriously damaged city of Hatay after the earthquake; the industrial zone of Gaziantep; the rural areas of Şanlıurfa; a CDO providing migrant infrastructure in Mardin; and the petroleum refinery site in Batman. Incorporating interviews, pictures, and spatial descriptions, this part aims to tell the stories from the other sites of the border, where the name "border" may not be mentioned daily but rather inhabited.

Part 4, named "*Heterotopic ossifications*," reveals six spatial objects selected from the engagement, deriving from the six principles of the Foucauldian notion, of heterotopia. Referring to the origins of the concept, this part embraces the medical term that Foucault initially drew inspiration from, heterotopic ossification, which indicates an orthopedic condition involving the presence of bone in soft tissue where bone normally does not exist, thus a deviation. Therefore, such conditions are considered as deviations of the "bone of contention," the other spatial conditions of the border, revealed through mobilizing architectural intelligence, ethnographic data, and philosophical literature. This allows for the territorial-scale reconstruction of what the research investigated, making it a provocative reflection in the architectural design discourse of the border.

Methodology

The development of this research took about two years, involving analysis, data collection, and its representation following a complex path that was neither circular nor linear. I moved back and forth, sometimes up and down, mobilizing different methodologies to better understand the phenomena of the border and putting myself in the mess to better comprehend the complex Turkey-Syria border territory.

Given that it is a bone of contention where conflicts of different sorts unfold daily, architecture as a field on its own is certainly not sufficient to encompass such complexity surrounding the Turkey-Syria border. Especially because the region itself has not been extensively researched by authors from architectural and urban-related fields. Therefore, to contribute a spatial understanding of the Turkey-Syria border, literature from various studies was crucial, including authors from border studies, philosophy, politics, and geography.

The research is deliberately written in English to emphasize the international scope of the investigation. However, the field trip and studies on the context of specific cities were conducted with my Turkish knowledge. In the analytical process, literature primarily in English, and occasionally in Italian, was used.

Tracing back various literature from different fields of study, I was able to instrumentalize spatial concepts like borderscape, which allowed me to think that border is inhabited and investigate the different conditions of inhabiting it. Borderscape is the territorial composition that functions as a dispositif, which was further explored in border studies that could be used to operate pushbacks violently. This evidently results in producing struggles, thereby turns it into a site of struggle.

In order to exemplify three sites of struggles through specific pushback stories, I gathered data mostly from journalism articles or NGO reports, as well as documentaries and interviews made with people who confronted violence at these borderscapes. This enabled to understand the increasingly restrictive border-related policies the powers adapted in the given territories.

After introducing two examples one from America and one from Europe, I approached to the main case study, Turkey-Syria border, as an attempt to research into the design of its weaponized spaces. This was possible through collecting an archive of historical maps to trace back the border line and its basis of being a bone of contention, as well as images from mass media outlets and social media to reveal the aesthetics of the Turkey-Syria border as a project that performs like a security mechanism.

To challenge this imposed aesthetics as well as the limited and bidimensional understanding of the border on conventional maps, the research manipulates cartographic analyses, statistical and territorial data to remap the space by using architectural tools. This, substantially is referred as scanning the territory, a sort of X-Ray, as a method of inquiry to look for what is not immediately visible when the border is analyzed.

Although the idea of engaging the territory and conducting a field study along the cities of the Turkey-Syria border was already discussed, it was the twin earthquakes hitting the region in February 2023 that prompted the trip. Three months after that, during the Turkish presidential election week, I traveled to the border and drove over a thousand kilometers, encompassing five different cities along the border and collected data through interviews, personal experiences, and photography. While doing so, I kept a diary of the travel in my notebook, which formed the foundation of the text used in the thesis, evidently written in the first-person perspective, which is different than the rest of the parts in the thesis.

Since the armed conflict in the northern Syria region has not reached an end and almost all border crossings for arbitrary travel are restricted by Turkey, the only way for me to get around the border areas was through Turkish territories. Given my interest in that region as well as my ability to speak the language, I took the opportunity to engage with the territory and gathered ethnographic data which could be useful for the research. Indeed, thanks to the trip, I encountered the “other spaces” of the border, ones that could be considered as deviations, therefore giving an

opportunity to reimagine the border through a different perspective. Ultimately, I instrumentalized the spatial concept of heterotopia to read the borderscape through these deviations.

Deriving from the six principles of what makes a place heterotopic, I focused on six spatial objects that I encountered during my engagement. By using modeling tools, I deconstructed and reconstructed these objects to reveal the other spatial conditions of the border. This resulted in a proposal of representation suggesting that the border territory is continuously constructed and negotiated through these different spatialities.

Starting from referring to the Turkey-Syria border as a bone of contention, and employing the method of inquiry of scanning its conditions like an X-Ray, the research keeps a closer connection with the spatial aspect of medical terminology. This led to the use of “heterotopic ossification” instead of using the term solely as “heterotopia,” which essentially originated from the medical irregularity where biological material is in another place.

In the end, the thesis uses architectural intelligence to problematize and explore the tension between architecture and its complicity in forming the project of the border. In doing so, the thesis does not propose solutions but a territorial-scale reconstruction of the investigation, aiming to provoke reflection in the architectural design discourse of the border.



“Philosophy has struggled to define what a border is. The question is first and foremost ontological: along with the question of what borders are, we are forced to ask the question of their existence, which is by no means obvious. Do borders actually exist?”[1]
(Sferrazza Papa, 2022, p. 8).

“The idea of a simple definition of what constitutes a border is, by definition, absurd: to mark out a border is, precisely, to define a territory, to delimit it, and so to register the identity of that territory, or confer one upon it. Conversely, however, to define or identify in general is nothing other than to trace a border, to assign boundaries or borders (in Greek, hams; in Latin, finis or terminus; in German, Grenze; in French, borne). The theorist who attempts to define what a border is is in danger of going round in circles, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition.”[2]
(Balibar, 2002, p. 76).

To avoid going round in circles, owing to Balibar’s warning, this chapter will not attempt to define what the border is, as such an endeavor is inherently tied to the act of marking out boundaries, potentially underestimating the fluid and shifting nature of the border.[3][4] In contrast, we will trace back various literature to acknowledge its complexity by confronting the different ontologies of the border in three sections, namely, “border as an object,” “border as a mechanism,” and “border as a landscape.” In doing so, we will fundamentally explore the different ways in which the border exists and will focus on its materialization, which has effects in space that are linked to how we understand the concept. In essence, this is an important argument that will set the stage for the spatial investigation of the Turkey-Syria border in the next parts of the thesis, guiding us on how to read it.

First, “border as an object” will explore the multifaceted material nature of the border by using examples from different geographies and will emphasize how the border becomes visible in various ways, connecting its existence to the meanings attached to it in different times and spaces. [5] Subsequently, the section will introduce the border as a complex articulation of material and immaterial elements, a dimension often overlooked in human understanding.[6] Finally, it will confront the notion of the border as a human-made entity intended to be eternal, leading people to surrender to their own imagined truth.[7]

Second, “border as a mechanism” will shift the focus from the border itself to the dynamic and continuous process of its objectification.[8] In other words, it will explore the various forms of bordering by highlighting the flexible and polysemic nature of the concept. Later, the section will take the border as a dispositif, given that it is a complex mechanism sustaining power in historical and geopolitical contexts.[9] Subsequently, it will introduce how the border is not static but kinetic, modulating circulations and controlling bodies — all of which are continuous spatial implications that shape and reshape the border spaces.[10]

Third, “border as a landscape” will challenge the cartographic representations of the border, as the arbitrary line of zero width gets

1. Ernesto Sferrazza, “A Political Ontology of Territorial Borders” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis and Education: Subject, Action & Society* no. 2 (2002): 7-18. <https://doi.org/10.32111/SAS.2022.2.2.2>.
2. Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 76.
3. Ibid
4. Suvendrini Perera, “A Pacific Zone? (In)Security, Sovereignty, and Stories of the Pacific Borderscape” in *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory’s Edge*, eds. Prem Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 201–227.
5. von Houtum, “The Janus-face: On the ontology of borders and b/ordering”, para. “the border makes and is made.”
6. Ernesto Sferazza, “Filosofia e Border Studies. Dal confine come “oggetto” al confine come “dispositivo””. *Rivista di Estetica*, 75, no.3 (2020), 184-197.
7. von Houtum, “The Janus-face: On the ontology of borders and b/ordering”, para. “the border makes and is made.”
8. Ibid
9. Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” 194-228.
10. Nail, Picione and Pergola, “Borders, Movement, and Being-in-Between,” 2-3.

11. Marco Ferrari, Elisa Pasqual and Andrea Bagnato, *A Moving Border: Alpine Cartographies of Climate Change* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2019)

12. Boano and Martén, "Agamben's urbanism of exception: Jerusalem's border mechanics and biopolitical strongholds," 14.

13. Chiara Brambilla, "Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept," *Geopolitics* 20 (2014): 14–34. doi: 10.1080/14650045.2014.884561.

14. Suvendrini Perera, "A Pacific Zone? (In)Security, Sovereignty, and Stories of the Pacific Borderscape," in *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics and Territory's Edge*, eds. Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 201-227.

15. Mezzadra and Neilson, "Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor," 18.

16. "Rules and regulations," Thousand Islands Bridge Authority, 2023, <http://www.tibridge.com/crossing-the-bridge/rules-and-regulations/>

17. "St. Lawrence Islands National Park," National Geographic, 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/st-lawrence-islands-canada-park>

18. Daniel Wiessner, "Texas must remove Rio Grande migrant barrier, U.S. appeals court rules," *Reuters*, Texas, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/texas-must-remove-rio-grande-migrant-barrier-us-appeals-court-rules-2023-12-01/>

19. Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "Migrant bodies found in the Rio Grande at the US-Mexico border," *CBS News* (Washington, DC), 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-bodies-found-rio-grande-us-mexico-border/>

20. The White House, *Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada* in Joint Press Statements, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/23/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-trudeau-of-canada-in-joint-press-statements/>

thicker and transform into a territory in the material dimension.[11][12] Moreover, the section will emphasize the need to find a new concept that will respond to the inherent conceptual and spatial complexity of the border.[13] This will lead to the introduction of the ‘borderscape’ concept, capturing the fluid and shifting process of bordering and its consequential effects in material dimension.[14] Finally, it will connect the effects of borderscaping to the sites of struggle, which will be further investigated with three geographical examples in the next chapter titled ‘bordering as a violent act.’[15]

1.1.1
Border as an object

Thousand Islands National Park is located next to the St. Lawrence River, which runs between New York and Ontario, creating the invisible US-Canada border. This green park, composed of islands and islets, is connected through an international bridge with the same name. Inhabitants on each side of the river can pass through it to go boating, trekking, or have a picnic in the established facilities without encountering armed border patrol officers, as if the division between the two states were merely a body of water.[16] The border becomes visible to the naked eye only when one has to cross the bridge, where each person must have their personal document approved by officers from each state.[17] However, this process is not necessarily discouraging, as border crossings for various reasons take place on a daily basis – even for activities such as buying cheaper medicine or having lunch on the other side of the border.

In contrast to the hardly visible border in St. Lawrence, approximately 3000 km to the south, the Rio (River) Bravo cuts across Texas and Coahuila, where the border appears to be a body of water but is certainly more discouraging for those wishing to enter the US from Mexico. Anyone who attempts to cross without the required documentation has to endure arduous journeys, involving exploitation by human trafficking gangs and confronting the violent bordering actions of the state itself. Along the riverbank are coils of razor wire, and occasionally, a 305-meter-long floating barrier in the river — all of which are part of Texas Governor Abbott’s strategy to prevent migrants from crossing. [18] Hence, the river has become a trap for the sake of national security where two people – including 3-year-old boy – were found dead while attempting to cross in September 2023. [19] The example of two rivers within the political boundaries of the US makes evident how the border has more than just a face, even if they are both water streams flowing in the same country.

There are indeed different material conditions that make the border, in other words, that construct the thing we call a border — whether it flows like a river or acts as a barrier. The faces that appear to the naked eye are linked with the meaning attached to these borders in specific places and times. While the legal formality of bordering in the St. Lawrence River reflects the political relations between the US and Canada – defined by Prime Minister Trudeau as “each other’s closest allies” – the violent bordering in Rio Bravo projects an absolute anti-immigrant vitriol.[20]

It goes without saying that the border has a multi-faceted nature, with different meanings and forms. Why can one go boating in the St. Lawrence River while a family in Rio Bravo drowned attempting to cross

the floating barrier? Why are some national borders just a legal formality, while others serve as a space for segregationist violent actions? Such questions cannot be answered solely through architecture, as it requires expertise of many different disciplines. This may emphasize the inherent complexity that is often taken for granted; in order to understand the border one needs to look beyond its physical form.

As Sferrazza Papa suggests, the border must be treated as a complex articulation of material and immaterial elements.[21] The immaterial elements of the border are as substantial as its material form. Therefore, the border should not be understood only by looking at the space where it is visible, but also by considering the invisible aspects that are attached to it.

We can take another example from a highly contested border to elaborate on the previous point: Russia and Ukraine. This border becomes visible as a combat zone due to the Russian invasion and the harsh living conditions resulting from the conflict. These visible aspects are intricately linked to invisible ones, notably the longstanding conflicts in the relations between both states. While the border symbolizes the fight for territorial sovereignty for the people of Ukraine, it also stands in stark contrast to Vladimir Putin’s goal of fulfilling Russia’s historical mission to ‘conquest and fortify,’ which denies Ukraine’s right to exist as a sovereign country. [22]

To develop in different words, owing to what Layla Zibar said, the border exists as an extension of how powers control the terrain in which it is visible.[23] Therefore, what the border symbolizes for the people is intricately connected to the historical and political relations of each neighboring state. For this very reason, understanding the border as an object requires more than looking at its physical form in the material dimension, as it is inseparable from the aspects of which are immaterial.

The aforementioned complex articulation of material and immaterial dimensions is often disregarded in the human understanding of borders. This is because borders are often treated as a natural outcome or a simple necessity for states and their sovereignty, with little consideration given to why we need them in the first place. Moreover, this understanding has been problematic since our first encounters with maps in various aspects of our lives, such as navigation apps, newspapers, public transportation, and even school atlases all prominently feature political boundaries scratched onto them, making it hard to imagine an alternative framework for understanding the Earth.[24]

Diener and Hagen suggest that humans are “geographic beings for whom the creation of places, and by consequence the process of bordering, seems natural. But borders are not ‘natural’ phenomena; they exist in the world only to the extent that humans regard them as meaningful.”[25] Making a border real requires people who believe in the meaning, cause, or movement it embodies. Since no border is made to be temporary, the desire to make a border is inherently tied to the pursuit of permanence. [26] In modern times, the imaginary borders of our imaginary nations have often been portrayed as sacred, with border walls acting as the foundation of the temple and its gates resembling the entrance to heaven and earth.[27] Hence, many believe that borders are necessary for the utmost security of their temple — the national homeland — while others

21. Ernesto Sferazza, "Filosofia e Border Studies. Dal confine come "oggetto" al confine come "dispositivo"," *Rivista di Estetica*, 75 no. 3 (2020), 184-197.

22. Kataryna Wolczuk and Rilka Dragneva, "Russia's longstanding problem with Ukraine's borders," Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/russias-longstanding-problem-ukraines-borders>

23. Layla Zibar, "Shifting geographies of "Presence": (In) voluntary Displacements and Territorial Biographies from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," (Seminar for Politecnico di Torino, Turin, Italy, March 23, 2023)

24. Henk van Houtum, "Free the map: Creative, artistic and democratic mapmaking," TED Talks, May 5, 2015, video, 18:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vow11HYG7HQ>

25. Joshua Hagen and Alexander Diener, *Borders: A Very Short Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

26. von Houtum, "The Janus-face: On the ontology of borders and b/ordering", para. The border makes and is made.

27. Ibid

fantasize about a borderless atlas. Either way, it seems certain that the border is inescapable, as if an imagined truth to which we are compelled to surrender.

1.1.2
Border as a mechanism

Human understanding of the world is very much tied with the borders that humans themselves have created.[28] Paasi suggests that the border must be understood as a constitutive element of the practices by which social groups and their identities are constructed and governed. This underscores the need to have a critical exploration of the border-making process — since it is portrayed as ideological forms as well as symbols and markers of identity.[29]

Owing to this, when studying the border, it is fundamental to establish that the main focus is no longer the border per se, but the dynamic and continuous process of its objectification, which is explained by van Houtum as the power practices attached to a border construction that bears a spatial effect, giving a demarcation in space its meaning and influence.[30]

The different forms of bordering, thereby, lead to different realities of how the border exists, or how it is interpreted by those who inhabit it. Such differences emphasize the flexibility of the concept, in tandem with its polysemic nature. For instance, an inhabitant on one side of the border might view it as their bread and butter, while for another, the border acts as a fortress that keeps unwanted strangers away. Some may not even realize they have crossed a border until the language on traffic signs changes. Thus, the definition of the border seems inescapably attached to the meaning given to it at a specific time and space.

To understand how the border exists as a thing, we should also explore the effects of its existence. In other words, what does a border do in order to exist? The materialization process of the border generates socio-spatial effects, which makes it, in Foucauldian terms, a dispositif. In essence, beyond its physical form, the border operates as a complex system involving various elements with strategic functions that sustain the exercise of power in diverse historical and geopolitical contexts. [31] Undoubtedly, the way in which this dispositif exists in the material dimension is always subject to change. However, one thing is certain: despite the common misconception, borders have not always existed. On the contrary, borders are made and endlessly re-made, and their making has never ceased. In other words, creating an eternal border requires continuous actions. It involves establishing a reciprocal relationship between the desire to possess and the actions taken to achieve it. Therefore, making a border is bordering continuously.

Within this continuous process, bordering modulates the circulation of things; “it continually distributes and redistributes flows of movement that pass through or around it.”[32] The materialization practices of the border, thereby, is fundamentally kinetic, made and remade by patterns of motion, as Nail emphasizes, “all space is made by movement. There are patterns of movement that reproduce and reform border spaces.”[33] In other words, the border as an object, whilst materialized, orders and reorders the circulation of things – whether it is the circulation of people

28. Ernesto Sferrazza, *Le Pietre e il Potere. Una critica filosofica dei muri* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020), 22.

29. Anssi Paasi, “The changing discourses on political boundaries: Mapping the backgrounds, contexts and contents,” in *B/ordering the World*, eds. Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer (England: Ashgate, 2005), 17-31.

30. von Houtum, “The Janus-face: On the ontology of borders and b/ordering”, para. “A border is a verb.”

31. Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” 194-228.

32. Nail, Picione and Pergola, “Borders, Movement, and Being-in-Between,” 2-3.

33. Ibid

on lifeboats, goods, or even information...

The kinetic and continuous action of bordering has a material dimension, as it happens in space, and through the previously mentioned movements it modulates, the border makes and remakes spaces. As a consequence, the line on the map representing the border exists, in the material dimension, as a territory of its own — shaped by the motions that make and remake it, having characteristics that are sometimes “rigid and sometimes elastic, sometimes impassable and sometimes flexible.”[34]

The actions of bordering create a spatial effect that gives it a meaning. Therefore, it is imperative to consider the border not only as a noun but also as a verb, inseparable from its material actions.[35] Viewing it as a verb shifts the focus towards understanding what the border does purposefully, which fundamentally is organization and reorganization of territories. The intention behind bordering is intricately connected to the creation of border spaces, which allows the control and regulation of circulations. Hence, the border continuously functions as a mechanism operating in the pursuit of its endurance and its spatial implications.

1.1.3 Border as a landscape
Boano and Martén suggest that the border lines on the map are “just a geometrical representation, without width or depth, just the tracing of an illusory and, many times, arbitrary flow.” [36][37] The geometrical abstraction of the border indicates a political limit, owing to the fact that such boundaries have always been the outcome of power relations.[38] [39]

The problematic approach towards the borders on the maps heavily contributes to the framework in which we understand the world. As Elden and Graham emphasize, “we are prisoners of the cartographic imagination, where complex landscapes are reduced to two-dimensional representations.”[40][41] Therefore, the maps remain overly simplified, since “adding a vertical axis is one thing, but it is volume — depth as well as height, slope, texture, and form — that best helps to make sense of the complexity of physical landscapes.”[42]

The border cannot be understood merely as a line of zero width on the cartographical dimension; it constantly makes and remakes spaces, thus becoming thicker than a line without width or depth. Said differently, the border continually performs in space, combining the physical elements of the terrain and the overlay of human and non-human presence. Therefore, the border behaves as a landscape in material dimension that modulates circulations, controls bodies, and modifies territories — constantly and in different modes of operation.

To further develop the previous points, it should be emphasized that the understanding of the inherent spatial (and conceptual) complexity of the border remains unaddressed, particularly in terms of its performance in space. Although the shift from ‘border’ to ‘bordering’ has marked a turning point in the understanding of borders, as Brambilla suggests, there is still a need for further analysis of “the relationship between bordering processes and the ‘where’ of the border.”[43]

At this point, the concept of ‘borderscape’ fills the gaps left by previous notions attempting to enhance the understanding of the borders.

34. Alejandro González-Milea and Olimpia Niglio, *On Surveillance and Control at Borders and Boundaries: Landscape, Infrastructures and Architecture*, (Rome: Tab, 2022)

35. von Houtum, “The Janus-face: On the ontology of borders and b/ordering,” para. “A border is a verb.”

36. Stuart Elden, “The Instability of Terrain,” 55.

37. Boano and Martén, “Agamben’s urbanism of exception: Jerusalem’s border mechanics and biopolitical strongholds,” 14.

38. Marco Ferrari, Elisa Pasqual and Andrea Bagnato, *A Moving Border: Alpine Cartographies of Climate Change* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2019)

39. Marco d’Eramo, “Border lines,” *SIDECAR*, New Left Review, October 13, 2023, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/border-lines?s=08>

40. Stuart Elden. “Secure the volume: Vertical geopolitics and the depth of power,” *Political Geography* 34 (2013): 35-51.

41. Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (New York: Verso, 2016)

42. Stuart Elden, “The Instability of Terrain,” 55.

43. Chiara Brambilla, “Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept,” *Geopolitics* 20 (2014), 14–34. DOI:10.1080/14650045.2014.84561

It accomplishes this by capturing the dynamic process of bordering in space and its consequential effects, addressing the fundamental question of what the border does to exist and what the effects are that result from it in material dimension. Subsequently, the borderscape has the potential to advance critical reflections on borders by “connecting it to the phenomena of contemporary political and social life in the era of globalisation and transnational flows.”[44]

Perera argues, thereby, the ‘borderscape’ concept can express “the border as a space that is not static but fluid and shifting; established and at the same time continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships that highlight endless definitions and shifts in definition between inside and outside, citizens and foreigners, hosts and guests across state, regional, racial, and other symbolic boundaries.”[45][46] Such notion gives us a chance to comprehend the actual borderscaping “as practices through which fluctuating borders are imagined, materially established, experienced, lived as well as reinforced and blocked but also crossed, traversed and inhabited.”[47]

The continuous processes of making and remaking of the border mechanism, as previously discussed, are not natural. As a consequence, such unnatural performances have been both rejected and fought against, as well as embraced and fought for. Mezzadra and Neilson argue that “it is the intensity of the struggles fought on borders around the world that prompts our research and theoretical elaborations.”[48] To illustrate, we can revisit Rio Bravo and the St. Lawrence River, demonstrating the various processes of objectifying the border — encompassing rivers, forests, barriers, and razor wires — which underscores the multiplicity of the border’s performances in space.[49] In other words, struggles arise from the very performances of border objectification, all too often forcing migrants to confront matters of life and death.[50]

As an attempt to combine the cartographic representation of the borders and struggles that arise from the border mechanism, d’Eramo suggests a metric that is straightness, as an indicator of the violence inherent to and inscribed in how the boundary itself has been drawn, by saying, “Where borders are sinuous and jagged, every indentation and protrusion tells a centuries (or millennia) old story of rivalry, conflict, compromise, agreement. Where borders are rectilinear, on the other hand, there has usually been no such negotiation between the two parties, but an autocratic diktat expressed in the exactitude of the geometry.”[51]

Even when uncarving the different geometrical representations of the border, one can see the variety of struggles that happened within or outside the border spaces. Following this, according to Mezzadra and Neilson, the border as a ‘site of struggle’ can become a method for understanding broader socio-political dynamics in the contemporary world.[52] This underscores the fluidity of the border as it is established in the material dimension and performed in different ways throughout history, leaving continuous effects on contemporary social, political, and natural life.[53] Therefore, according to Mezzadra and Neilson, shifting the focus towards “struggles also ensures the punctuality of border as method. It guides us not only in the selection of the relevant empirical settings for our investigations but also in the very construction of the

44. Brambilla, “Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept,” 30.

45. Brambilla, “Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept,” 19.

46. Perera, “A Pacific Zone? (In) Security, Sovereignty, and Stories of the Pacific Borderscape,” 201–227.

47. Brambilla, “Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept,” 30.

48. Mezzadra and Neilson, “*Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*,” 18.

49. Stuart Elden, “The Instability of Terrain” 55.

50. Mezzadra and Neilson, “*Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*,” 18.

51. d’Eramo, “Border lines”

52. Mezzadra and Neilson, “*Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*,” 18.

53. Ibid

‘objects’ to be studied.”[54] In a way to connect this point towards the argument of the thesis, we can say that borders are designed by many forces and intentions, but at the same time, they design territory, spaces, and movements. Borders are a project.

After revisiting the way we understand the border by tracing back the literature from various disciplines, first chapter confronted the different ways of the border’s existence. First, by emphasizing the border as a complex articulation of material and immaterial elements, which, in essence, responds to its multifaceted material nature.[55][56] Secondly, by exploring that the border is not only made but also does things as a dispositif, performing spatial implications continuously.[57][58] Lastly, by arguing that the border is thicker than a bidimensional line on a map, as the circulations it modulates and the bodies it controls make and remake spaces; thus, it behaves like a landscape.[59][60][61] As a conclusion, by reading again the border as ‘borderscape,’ we emphasize the necessity for a thicker understanding of the border as space and other aspects of bordering, especially the struggles it produces.[62][63] [64]

The following chapter will focus on three specific sites of struggle, in different geographies and visible spatial forms, in which pushing back is a deliberate act — an intentional effort to make migrants confront the bordering as a violent act.

54. Ibid

55. Sferrazza, “A Political Ontology of Territorial Borders,” 13.

56. von Houtum, “The Janus-face: On the ontology of borders and b/ordering”, para. A border is a verb.

57. Ibid

58. Zibar, “Shifting geographies of “Presence”: (In)voluntary Displacements and Territorial Biographies from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq”

59. Stuart Elden, “The Instability of Terrain,” 55.

60. Nail, Picione and Pergola, “Borders, Movement, and Being-in-Between,” 2-3.

61. Boano and Martén, “Agamben’s urbanism of exception: Jerusalem’s border mechanics and biopolitical strongholds,” 14.

62. Brambilla, “Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept,” 19.

63. Mezzadra and Neilson, “*Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*,” 18.

64. Perera, “A Pacific Zone? (In) Security, Sovereignty, and Stories of the Pacific Borderscape,” 201–227.

1.2
Bordering as a violent act:
Introducing three sites of struggles

“The border can be a method precisely insofar as it is conceived of as a site of struggle. ... it is the intensity of the struggles fought on borders around the world that prompts our research and theoretical elaborations. Once we investigate the multifarious practices with which migrants challenge borders on a daily basis, it becomes clear that border struggles are all too often matters of life and death. ... This focus on struggles also ensures the punctuality of border as method. It guides us not only in the selection of the relevant empirical settings for our investigations but also in the very construction of the ‘objects’ to be studied.”[1] (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p.18).

As developed in the previous chapter; border is designed, but at the same time, it designs the territory. This means that the border is not only a demarcation but is essentially a project in itself, as it shapes and reshapes the territory through circulations it modulates and the bodies it controls. Therefore, with all its spatial implications, the border behaves like a landscape.

The political discussion, hereby, should not be the border itself but the “politics of crossing,” as named by Sferrazza Papa, and the politics of the “borderscape.”[2] Within this discussion, what prompted our research, parallel to that of Mezzadra and Neilson, is the intensity of struggles migrants face at borders. Simply because the border as a project is designed to push back, which leads to struggle in the first place.

We therefore consider the border as a site of struggle and investigate the struggles that it produces and struggles that arise from its confrontation. [3] Put differently, such sites both produce violence and are produced by violence. This reciprocal relationship, resembling a vicious circle, begins with security-obsessed states implementing their barricade policies, often under the guise of offering safety to their citizens.[4] This results in the construction of violently hostile spaces that forcefully push back people who are in search of safer grounds. The struggles for life and death thereby emerge, pushing migrants to seek clandestine routes, which, if not adequately executed, result in tragic consequences.[5]

It should be emphasized that the methods migrants use to cross the border become irrelevant, as the urgency to “smuggle one’s body” comes first.[6] This is because, when the right to a decent life is ignored, and people attempting to cross the border are systematically humiliated and offended, especially in prison-like detention or removal centers guarded by armed officers, the most important thing becomes crossing the border that separates dignified humanity from the migrants considered undeserving by those in power.[7] Therefore, there is an extreme emergency that is inherent in the act of crossing the border, which is captured by Didi-Huberman and Giannari (2017):

“To cross [the border]. To cross at any cost. Rather die than not cross. To cross in order not to die in this cursed territory and its civil war. To have fled, to have lost everything. To cross to try to live here where the war is less cruel. To cross to live as subjects of the law, as ordinary citizens. The country matters little, as long as it is a rule of law. To cross, therefore, to

1. Mezzadra and Neilson, “*Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*,” 18.

2. Ernesto Sferrazza, *Le Pietre e il Potere. Una critica filosofica dei muri* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020), 225-229.

3. Mezzadra and Neilson, “*Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*,” 18.

4. Sferrazza, “A Political Ontology of Territorial Borders,” 226.

5. Ibid

6. Sferrazza, “A Political Ontology of Territorial Borders,” 228.

7. Ibid

cease to be outside the common law. To cross to feel protected by international conventions, by human rights, by a justice before which crime will remain unpunished. And to pay a smuggler, a brigand, if it is necessary to cross: to become an outlaw. To make this decision, even with fear in the stomach, even with terrible fear for one’s own life, for that of the children. In any case: to cross in order to live.”[8][9] (Didi-Huberman & Giannari, 2017, p.33-34, as cited in Sferrazza Papa, 2020, p. 228-229)

The migrants who risk their lives to cross borders in order to survive are expected to obey the arbitrary laws made by security-obsessed states and remain in their cursed territories of origin, without receiving any protection whatsoever. But to cross, even as an outlaw, mirrors some hope for the future. Therefore, the critical-political question becomes how to cross the border that denies access and barricades the path to a decent life.

To elaborate this spatial implication of the border, we can argue that while preventing crossing, the border establishes a hierarchy between the two parts. As noted by Sferrazza Papa, power relations and moral hierarchies become spatialized through the materialization of the border into heavy objects such as walls, fences, wires, or any sort of barriers.[10] In this way, border becomes an object of inhibition. Nonetheless, this object has its weaknesses, and crossing it means exploiting those weaknesses, whether by finding shadow zones or having to pay smugglers or even patrol officers.

Despite its weaknesses, when the border is weaponized to push back violently, countless stories of struggle emerge from migrants’ confrontation with it. While many stories remain unheard, numerous others have been documented in news articles, documentaries, or reports. This chapter will retell some of these stories, aiming to reflect on the unheard ones, in order to prevent the normalization of violence that people confront. This is because, as Luiselli said, “perhaps the only way to grant any justice – were that even possible – is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us.”[11]

This chapter will look into different stories, starting with grounded testimonies of migrants who have confronted violence at weaponized borders. These stories will be dissected to investigate the specific site, mobilizing a rather unconventional range of materials including documentaries, poems, journalistic literature, and reports from various NGOs and authorities. This will help us to understand the border as a project designed to push back, thereby becoming a site of struggle where migrants confront the bordering as a violent act.

To observe the contrast in how borders and violence interact across various geographies and spatial forms, this chapter will present three examples based on their different geography and materiality:

First, “*the Rio Bravo: the US-Mexico border*,” since it is a central site for the architectural understanding of the border, having been extensively researched over the years. We will explore the increasing hostility in the river, an extension of local authorities’ anti-migrant policy, employing floating barriers, armed guards, and prisons to repel migrants, which

8. Sferrazza, “A Political Ontology of Territorial Borders,” 228-229.

9. Georges Didi-Huberman and Niki Giannari, *Passare a ogni costo* (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 2019), 33-34.

10. Sferrazza, “A Political Ontology of Territorial Borders,” 225.

11. Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017), 30.

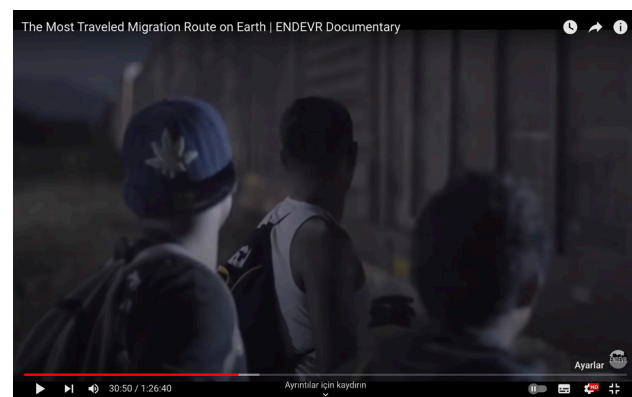
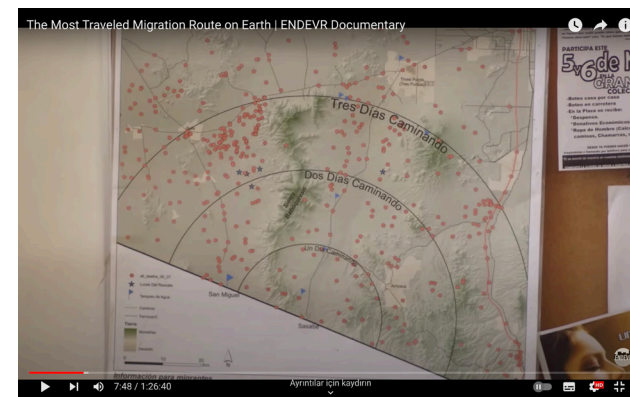
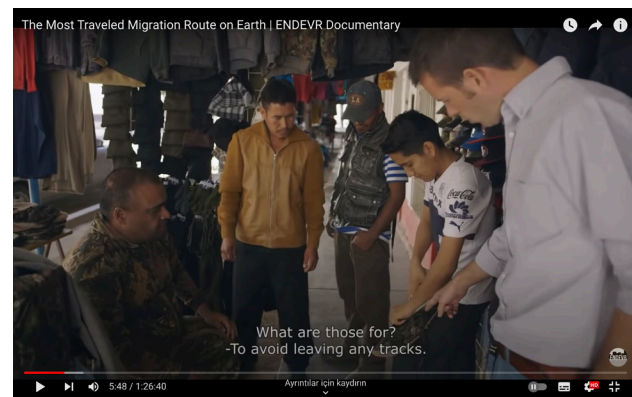
ultimately causes more struggle, all under the guise of a “response” to humanitarian crises.

Second, “*the Białowieża Forest: the Poland-Belarus border*,” where the proliferation of weaponization is rather recent and relatively underexplored. We will focus on Białowieża, one of the last primeval forests in Europe, which embodies an orchestrated trap, squeezing migrants into freezing wilderness and subjecting them to systematic detention and deportation processes by armed border guards.

Third, “*the Naked Hill: the Turkey-Syria border*,” which is a site of struggles and crises, has a complexity that requires far more research than has been conducted. We will introduce the fundamental case study of the thesis, shedding light on the dire conditions in northern Syria amidst the ongoing territorial conflict, as well as Turkey’s reactions, in collaboration with the EU, to fortify the border against fleeing Syrian migrants. This involves violent pushbacks and armed aggressions, resulting in injuries, torture, and deaths, as well as damage to essential infrastructures.

These three distinct landscape elements (river, forest, hill) are borderscapes weaponized for violence, therefore showing different consequential effects in material dimension. This underlines with spatial examples that the border, as a project of powers, is thicker than a dimensional line on maps, and has a tangible presence on the ground. On the other hand, the struggles resulting from the violent act of bordering go beyond the physical and territorial materiality of the border, which will be discussed further in this chapter.





1.2.1
Rio Bravo: the US-Mexico Border

Rio Bravo, United States
Circa 2019

“I remember seeing something white on the banks. I bent down to touch it and it turned out to be ice. So i told my brother: ‘it is ice, Walter!’ ... The river was almost frozen, and we felt that when we went in. It was freezing cold, but I jumped. ... My brother was already on the other side when I was only midway. At that moment, my body started to break down, I became sluggish, the cold started to affect me. So I thought: ‘Rest now and try again later.’ But then I thought: if I stop now, I’ll never make it. ... I don’t know what gave me strength but I started swimming faster, and when we reached the other side, I said: ‘We touched American soil!’ ... I looked back and just couldn’t believe it. Wow! The river was so deep and the water was freezing cold. ... My brother and I sat there for a bit longer, and we said to each other: ‘We’re in America now.’”

Osman, a young migrant from Honduras, featured in the documentary (2022)[12]

During the presidential debate in 2015, Donald Trump used the phrase “bad hombres,” referring to the undocumented migrants entering the US through the border with Mexico, advocating to “get’em out.”[13] Despite his government taking radical actions upon taking office, many migrants continue to risk their lives to cross the border and enter the US. Osman, a “bad hombre” from Honduras, jumped into the freezing waters of the Rio Bravo from Mexico and swam to the other side of the river, hoping to find a decent job to support his wife and baby back home, where he could no longer make both ends meet.

It is a certain fact that the struggle for life and death does not start at Rio Grande, as the arduous journey of migrants begins in their country of origin, with many having to cross other borders before reaching Mexico. The countless ongoing conflicts around the world have led migrants to seek safer grounds, with nearly 400,000 people having attempted to enter the US through the “southwest section of the border” in the last fiscal year.[14] This emphasizes the magnitude of people’s challenges at the US-Mexico border, confronting constant pushbacks, being held in detention centers, and still facing a significant risk of deportation.

To start with, Rio Bravo del Norte (in Mexico) — or Rio Grande (in the US) — is a river approximately 3,000 km long. Originating from Colorado, it flows into the Gulf of Mexico, serving as the natural border between Texas (in the US) and the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. The river has been consistently weaponized to deter migrants from entering the US, owing to its crucial location along the border for approximately 1,500 km, which accounts for nearly half of the entire US-Mexico line.

In specific sections of the river, local authorities installed floating traps to push people back to Mexico. As a tragic consequence, in late September 2023, US Border Patrol officers in Eagle Pass (Texas) discovered the bodies of two drowned migrants who had tried to reach American territory by jumping into the river from Piedras Negras in Coahuila, Mexico.[15] One of the nameless bodies was identified as a child from Honduras, seemingly caught in the string of red buoys placed by the order of

12. ENDEVR, “The Most Traveled Migration Route on Earth | ENDEVR Documentary,” Youtube, July 24, 2022, video, 1:26:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGpVp_tDRcl

13. Merrill Perlman, “The linguistic backstory of ‘bad hombres,’” Columbia Journalism Review, 2016, https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/bad_hombres_presidential_debate_trump.php

14. Valerie Gonzalez, “Court orders Texas to move floating barrier that drew backlash from Mexico,” PBS, December 1, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/court-orders-texas-to-move-floating-barrier-that-drew-backlash-from-mexico>

15. Raja Razeq and Elizabeth Wolfe, “Four migrants, including an infant, drowned in the Rio Grande River over 3-day period, official says,” CNN, July 4, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/04/us/migrant-drownings-texas-mexico-border/index.html>

Texas Governor Abbott earlier that summer.[16] The 1.2-meter-tall and 305-meter-long barrier, tethered to the river bottom with heavy cable wires, had been placed on the “strategical” sections to “protect” migrants by preventing them from crossing.[17][18] This barrier was part of the “Lone Star Operation” launched by the Texas Government to use “available resources to enforce all applicable federal and state laws to prevent the criminal activity along the border.”[19]

With a budget of about \$1 million spent on deploying the buoys near Eagle Pass in Texas, the Governor Abbot had announced that “the state lawmakers provided \$5.1 billion to pay for the state’s ongoing effort to secure the border.”[20] However, not long after the state of Texas deployed the barrier, the federal government sued them, arguing that it is illegal to place any structure in a navigable waterway.[21] Subsequently, the judge ruled in favor of the federal government, ordering the removal of barriers; but, a federal appeals court decided that the buoys would remain in place until the supreme court process plays out.[22] While the issue of buoys still remains unsolved, in a December 2023 interview, Governor Abbott stated that he not only plans to keep them but also intends to take additional actions, including “more razor wire barriers with National Guards standing behind them,” and “passing a law against illegal entry,” which will enable them to arrest the migrants only for crossing the border.[23]

The director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, Steve McCraw, believes that such actions are taken with good intentions, saying, “We don’t want anyone to get hurt. In fact, we want to prevent people from getting hurt. We want to prevent people from drowning and this is a proactive way.”[24] However, his argument falls short when considering the fact that the barrier pushes migrants to go around the buoys, leading them to highly dangerous sections of the river due to unpredictable currents and the uneven riverbend. This specific section where the buoys were placed was considered ‘strategic’ because of its relatively lower depth, allowing migrants to cross more easily. However, the barrier does not seem to work as it only pushes migrants to cross by swimming through deeper parts.[25] Indeed, a migrant who was interviewed by a journalist, passed by and took pictures of the buoys as she laughed and said, “*Eso no sirven de nada por que aquí estamos con fuerza,*” which translates to, “Those things don’t do anything because we are forced to be here.”[26]

Furthermore, if one manages to cross the river, there are razor wires, another hostile barrier before entering the American soil that resembles a torii — symbolic gates placed before the sacred space of shrines in Japan. Except, the riverbank of Rio Bravo welcomes the migrants to the sacred American land with razor wires. Besides these fixed structures and the US Border Patrol officers, there are around ten thousand National Guards put during Operation Lone Star, equipped with weapons and patrolling around the river and land — enforcing the laws that seem bleak.[27]

According to an investigation done by ABC News, there is a confusion about the arresting power of these guards since they cannot enforce immigration laws against migrants, such as arresting someone for being undocumented.[28] The State of Texas utilizes these guards to enforce more guaranteed laws like trespassing, predominantly charging migrants

16. Marian Navarro and Dan Katz, “Dead body found stuck to Texas Gov. Abbott’s border buoys in the Rio Grande,” *Texas Public Radio*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.tpr.org/border-immigration/2023-08-03/dead-body-found-stuck-to-texas-gov-abbotts-border-buoys-in-the-rio-grande>

17. Mireya Villarreal and Jim Scholz, “Reporter’s notebook: Traveling along the Rio Grande amid immigration buoy controversy,” *ABC News*, August 2, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/reporters-notebook-traveling-rio-grande-river/story?id=101914865>

18. Frank Heinz, “String of large buoys to deter migrants from crossing the Rio Grande into Texas,” *NBCDFW*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/local/texas-news/texas-to-install-a-string-of-buoys-to-deter-migrants-from-crossing-the-rio-grande/3273761/>

19. Texas Indigent Defense Commission, *Operation Lone Star*, July 6, 2024, <https://www.tidc.texas.gov/operation-lone-star/>

20. Frank Heinz, “String of large buoys to deter migrants from crossing the Rio Grande into Texas”

21. Gonzalez, “Court orders Texas to move floating barrier that drew backlash from Mexico”

22. Camilo Montoya-Galvez, “Bodies of 2 migrants, including 3-year-old boy, found in Rio Grande,” *CBS News* (Washington), September 21, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-bodies-found-rio-grande-us-mexico-border/>

23. Fox News, “Won’t back down: Greg Abbott will continue to fight for border buoys,” Youtube, December 3, 2023, video, 8:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Za5ve0vJU-4>

24. Frank Heinz, “String of large buoys to deter migrants from crossing the Rio Grande into Texas”

25. Camilo Montoya-Galvez, “Bodies of 2 migrants, including 3-year-old boy, found in Rio Grande”

26. Villarreal and Scholz, “Reporter’s notebook: Traveling along the Rio Grande amid immigration buoy controversy”

27. Ibid

28. Ibid

29. Ibid

30. “Harboring: Overview of the Law,” Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., 2013, <https://asistahelp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Harboring-Overview-of-the-Law-CLINIC.pdf>

31. Haley Yamada, “What is Operation Lone Star? Inside Texas’ state border policy,” *ABC News*, June 17, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/operation-lone-star-inside-texas-state-border-policy/story?id=85439356#:~:text=In>

32. Ibid

33. “Asylum Grant Rates Climb Under Biden,” Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, November 10, 2021, <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/667/>

34. Dan Fucetta Jr., “Asylum seekers three times more likely to be approved in liberal New York or California than Texas or Florida,” *New York Post*, November 2, 2023, <https://nypost.com/2023/11/02/news/asylum-seekers-3x-more-likely-to-be-approved-in-new-york-or-california-than-texas-or-florida/>

35. Neena Satija, “Port Isabel detention center, where immigrants will be sent before reuniting with children, has long history of problems,” *The Texas Tribune and Reveal*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.texastribune.org/2018/06/27/port-isabel-detention-center-long-history-problems-immigrants-reunific/>

36. Riane Roldan, “Homeland Security report: Tensions rising in overcrowded migrant detention facilities,” *The Texas Tribune*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.texastribune.org/2019/07/02/tensions-rising-overcrowded-texas-migrant-facilities-report-says/>

37. Sophie Terp et al., “Deaths in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention,” *AIMS Public Health*, 8 no.1 (2021): 81-89, FY2018-2020.

38. Dan Katz and Norma Martinez, “‘Our river is crying’: Flowers in the Rio Grande honor migrants who died trying to cross,” *Texas Public Radio*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.tpr.org/border-immigration/2023-08-08/our-river-is-crying-flowers-in-the-rio-grande-honor-migrants-who-died-trying-to-cross>

with non-violent offenses to discourage them from crossing the border. [29] It also argues that if migrants enter private property in Texas – which is almost inevitable since the migrants are being pushed to cross the border through private properties, enabling law enforcement to arrest them. Moreover, if a US citizen attempts to help an undocumented migrant, it is considered a crime.[30]

To elaborate further, while migrants may believe they are encountering federal agents enforcing immigration policy and turn themselves in to seek asylum, this is not the case with the aforementioned guards who promptly arrest migrants for trespassing.[31] Later, guards bring migrants to hold them in overcrowded detention centers, where detainees spend days, weeks, or even months.[32] However, in fiscal year 2021, only 37% of the people who asked for asylum were granted in the US; in other words, 63% of the people were denied asylum, leading to eventual deportation.[33] Moreover, particularly in Texas, the denial rate appears to be three times higher than in states like New York and California, with a number exceeding 80%.[34]

The detention centers in the area are designed like prisons for everyday criminals, proving that the state of Texas treats migrants as criminals, even if the people held there are awaiting decisions on their asylum requests and have never been charged with a crime.[35] Surrounded by guard towers, double rows of razor wire, and very high fences, these centers look identical to a prison, except there are no criminals but migrants from various countries, families with little kids, and pregnant women, all seeking asylum. Regarding the internal conditions, while there is a lack of comprehensive information, some journalists report on detention centers in Texas, indicating that “detainees were shouting and banging on cell windows, pressing notes to the glass and pointing to their beards as evidence of their time in detention.”[36] The same report also notes many overcrowded rooms “with families covered in mylar blankets, sleeping side by side on a concrete floor.”

According to a research on the detention centers in the US, only from fiscal year 2018 to 2020, 35 detainees have died — 9 committed suicide by hanging, and 26 died of medical causes.[37] It is certain that these people were neither first nor the last ones. Another research shows that between 2018 and 2023, at least 91 bodies of drowned migrants were found in Rio Bravo.[38] Although it is not very common to see photos of the drowned people because “they are deemed too grotesque for American media and its audience,” we know that rescue personnel call these bodies ‘floaters,’ due to the fact that “they have been in the water for hours or days by the time they are retrieved, and their bellies, limbs, and faces are bloated, rotted to terrible distortion.”[39] While across the entire US-Mexico border territory, according to a report, from 1998 to 2020, “at least 8,000 undocumented migrants have died attempting to cross the border,” because of “drowning, extreme heat, dangerous smuggling operations, fall-related injuries from the border wall, and actions from CBP (US Customs and Border Protection) officers...”[40]

On the other end of the spectrum, there is also the minority who did manage to cross the border and get out of the detention centers without being deported. One of them is the young migrant Osman mentioned above.[41] After being detained for a while, his sponsors in the US helped him find a job at Johnny’s Paint in southern Arizona. However, like many

asylum seekers, he could not obtain a work permit immediately and faced lower wages for being undocumented, which seemed to compel migrants to purchase fake green cards and social security documents to live without the constant fear of being caught and deported. Nevertheless, Osman was happy to be able to send \$200 per month back to his wife and baby, hoping to one day bring them to live with him on American soil.

Although the thesis does not attempt to unpack the social and political dynamics in the US and Mexico, one can observe, from the example of Rio Bravo, that the actions taken by the states do not seem to address the humanitarian crises. Instead, the very border appears to become more hostile each day. Neither the floating barrier and razor wire nor the guards and prisons have stopped the flow of migration. This river as an example emphasizes how the power relations reflect on the different ways the border exists; in this case, as a violent act that has continuous socio-spatial effects, linked with continuous struggles of life and death. As the drowned body of the nameless child who got stuck on the red buoys, or Osman, who was detained in a prison, proves how this this body of water is weaponized to constantly work like a mechanism that pushes back, and sometimes traps within.

As a concluding note, we turn to Gabriel Dozal (2023), whose poem revisits such struggles experienced amidst the violent realities of the US-Mexico border, highlighting its hypocritical nature as a project utilized by the powers for both exclusion (anti-migrant policies) and control (supposedly preventing humanitarian crises).

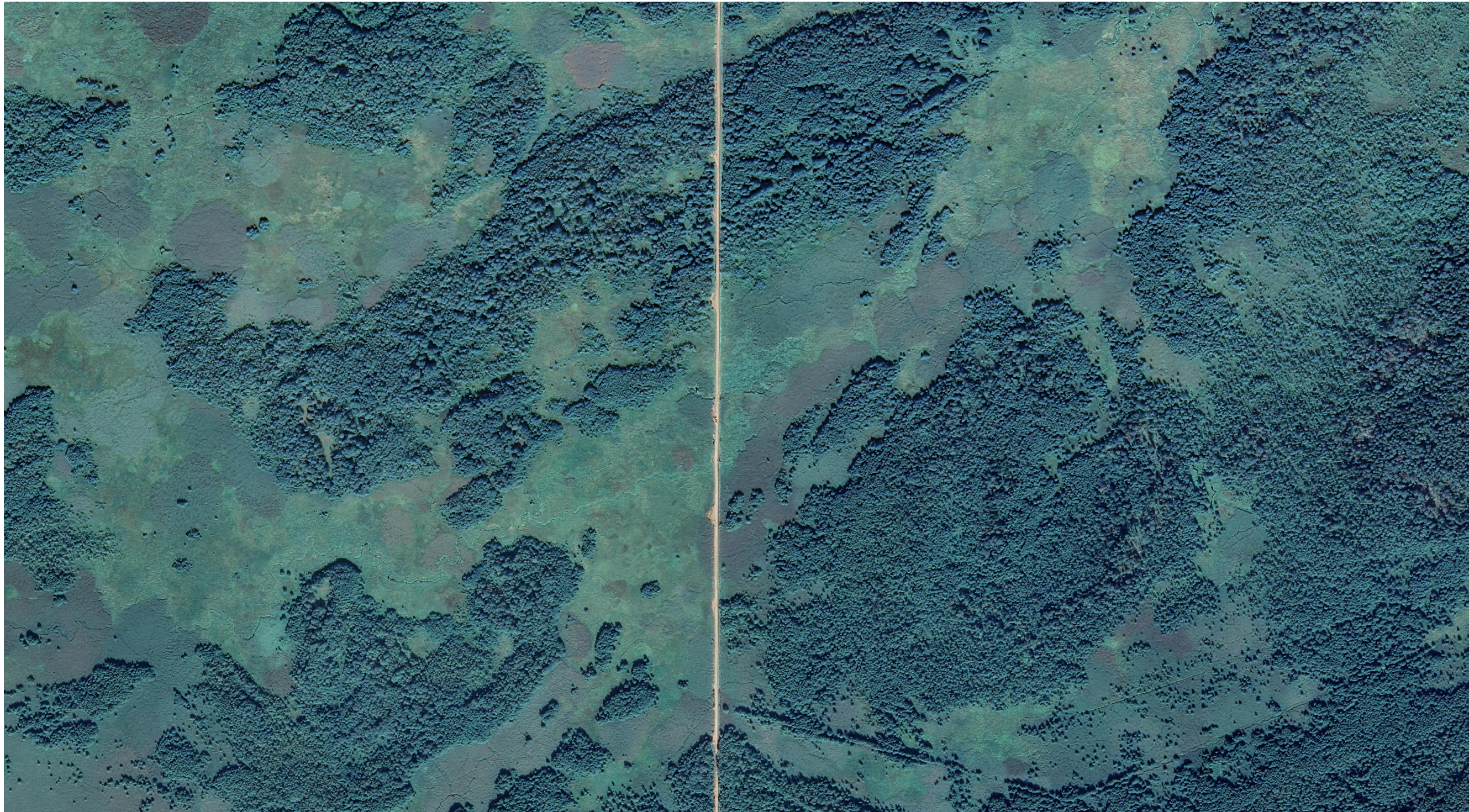
“The border is a tactic and a symptom. It accuses
you of committing the crime it is committing. You of landing
what it is lording. There’s a border and then there’s a hidden border
one I can only access through murmurs.
I murmur for the cages in children.
I murmur for the butter patrol.
I murmur for the costume agent.
I murmur for the Daewoo that carries me to my new home.
I murmur for the Rosser, the plot,
and the king of illegal streams.”[42]
(Dozal, 2023, para. “You Can’t Un-Latino Me”).

39. Debbie Nathan, “FLOATERS: Our reflection in the Rio Grande,” *The Intercept*, September 2, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/09/02/border-rio-grande-migrant-children-drowning/>

40. “How many people die crossing the US-Mexico border?” USAFacts, USA Facts Team, March 28, 2023, <https://usafacts.org/articles/how-many-people-die-crossing-the-us-mexico-border/>

41. ENDEV, 2022.

42. Gabriel Dozal, *The Border Simulator: Poems*. (Random House Publishing Group, 2023), para. “You Can’t Un-Latino Me”.





1.2.2
Białowieża Forest: the Poland-Belarus Border

Białowieża Forest, Poland
October 2021

“We had no water nor food with us. Our phones that could have helped us for directions were turned off, and we had to spend two weeks in the forest. One night, while we were sleeping, my younger brother, who was only 19, got bitten by a snake, and he started bleeding. At a certain point, he couldn’t walk as fast as we wanted him to, so we had to walk more slowly. Then, he lost his vision and kept walking like that for three days. ... On Friday, the fourth day, he passed away. It happened around 5 or 6 pm. He asked me if we could rest a bit, so I sat him down next to me. As we were there, he suddenly changed position and I understood it was all over. ... I spent the rest of the day and half of the night digging a hole to bury him. I had some dead wood to dig his grave. It wasn’t properly dug, but I did my best so he wouldn’t be visible at all. ... Then we started to walk again, but also my second brother started to feel really bad. He needed water, he was thirsty, very thirsty. At one point, as we were crossing small ponds with stagnant water in the forest, he drank it. Because of this and the lack of food, he started to vomit blood a few days later. He felt that he was about to die, but I couldn’t believe it. ... During the day, when we paused, he told me, ‘You need to keep fighting because that was your goal, to study and complete your education.’ But he didn’t think he could make it at all, and that’s how it happened. At night, we went to bed, and the next morning, when I tried to wake him up, he was already dead.”

Roger, a young migrant from Cameroon, featured in the documentary (2022a)[43]

The young migrant featured in the documentary by Radio Télévision Suisse, Roger, left Cameroon to study in Russia, spending four years until he could no longer finance his education.[44] Facing this, he decided to leave Russia and try his luck in Europe. With his two brothers and a friend, they believed the only way was to go to Belarus first and then cross the border into the first EU country, Poland. As it is featured in the documentary, his two brothers tragically died attempting to cross the border, but Roger and his friend survived and managed to find a trail leading to a small village. Seeking help, they knocked the door, but within five minutes, the police arrived to capture and push them back to the Belarusian side of the border. Roger and his friend resisted, which resulted in injuries. While the documentary did not specify how they were injured, later they were sent to a hospital and then transferred to a detention center, where Roger received a notice of deportation.

The Poland-Belarus border, the site of Roger’s struggles, is marked on a landscape of forests, rolling hills, river valleys, and wetlands, including the Białowieża Forest — a UNESCO World Heritage site.[45] Besides being Europe’s last primeval forest, protected since the 1400s, Białowieża Forest hosts a variety of fungi, mammalian, and bird species.[46] The animals, including the European bison, wolves, snakes, and bears, used to move freely through the forest, occasionally crossing national borders.[47] However, this is no longer possible due to the presence of the fences and the militarization of the Poland-Belarus border territory, isolating European wildlife in natural lands.

43. Journeyman Pictures, “Death in the Forest: Poland’s Forgotten Migrants,” Youtube, May, 2022, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7E6cuhLkOM>

44. Ibid

45. Douglas Main, “Polish-Belarusian border wall: An environmental disaster,” National Geographic, January 31, 2022, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/polish-belarusian-border-wall-environmental-disaster>

46. Main, “Polish-Belarusian border wall: An environmental disaster,” section, para. 2.

47. Main, “Polish-Belarusian border wall: An environmental disaster,” section, para. 3.

The construction of the Poland-Belarus border fence in 2022 represents yet another consequence of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the territory since the summer of 2021. The very crisis that has caused migrants like Roger to struggle the violent pushbacks in the wilderness. In order to rewind the events since 2021, we can refer to reports from NGOs, activists, and journalists. A report by Human Rights Watch (2021) on Poland-Belarus border details the abuses of the states together with how the crisis broke out, “In May 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on Belarus in response to Belarusian authorities forcing a commercial Ryanair passenger airplane to land in Minsk and arresting two passengers,” one of them being the opposition activist Roman Protasevich.[48] As a response, President Aleksandr Lukashenko announced that Belarus “would no longer help prevent illegal immigration at the EU border,” and enabled migrants mostly from Africa and Middle East to “travel to Belarus by facilitating tourist visas, and allowing them to travel to the border area with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.”[49]

In other words, Belarus orchestrated a “migration route” for people primarily from countries facing armed conflicts and human rights violations, making it seem like an easy path into Europe through the false claims of travel agencies.[50] Featured in a documentary, an undercover journalist captured a deal in one of those agencies located in Istanbul — a popular transfer point for the migrants — run by a Syrian national who organizes such trips to Belarus.[51] Their arrangement includes the visa, a flight to Minsk, accommodation for one night in a hotel, and transportation to the Poland-Belarus border the next morning via taxi, all costing \$2500.

Another report based on the data gathered by the activists of Grupa Granica (2021) details that migrants transferred to the border from Minsk “are placed in camps located within the areas of military and border guard infrastructure. They were then forced by Belarusian officers to make irregular entry into Poland, outside the official border checkpoints.”[52] Later, the Polish Border Guards, similar to a police service, push migrants back to the Belarus side of the border if they are already in Poland.[53] Meanwhile, Belarusian troops, serving as armed forces for border security, “beat and detain those who return, and coerce them to try to cross into Poland again.”[54] In most cases, migrants did not have the chance to return to their own countries, as neither Poland nor Belarus allowed them to enter.

At the end of the summer 2021, Polish authorities constructed razor-wire fences along the Poland-Belarus border and imposed a state of emergency within two miles of the border territory, preventing access for journalists, activists, volunteers, and others.[55] On the other side, Belarusian authorities established a secure zone within 10 km, accessible only to residents; while within the 3 km zone, all access is once again blocked.[56] In addition to the so-called safe zones, the Polish government deployed over 20,000 troops, including soldiers, border guards, and police — the data regarding the number of Belarusian armed forces in the territory is unspecified.[57]

When trapped in the militarized border zone in Poland, migrants are often pushed back to Belarus by the Polish Border Guards without further due process.[58] However, if they are injured or sick, Polish authorities take them to a hospital. In a similar case, some migrants who were released

48. “Die Here or Go to Poland”: Belarus’ and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses,” Human Rights Watch, November 24, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/24/die-here-or-go-poland/belarus-and-polands-shared-responsibility-border-abuses>

49. Ibid

50. “Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border,” Grupa Granica, June 4, 2022, <https://www.grupagranica.pl/>

51. Journeyman Pictures, “Inside the Migrant Camps at the Belarus-Poland Border,” Youtube, January, 2022, video, 13:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I888ZG4HTJY>

52. “Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border,” page 11.

53. “Die Here or Go to Poland,” 1.

54. Ibid

55. “Die Here or Go to Poland,” 2.

56. Ibid

57. “Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border,” 8.

58. “Die Here or Go to Poland,” 2.

from hospital said that “they were taken to a border guard station for fingerprinting, photographing, confiscation of travel documents, and questioning and were given documents allowing them a temporary stay for six months in Poland with the condition that they report weekly to the border guard station and reside in a shelter in Bialystok, 50 kilometers from the border.”[59]

Family members or friends of those taken to the hospital are usually pushed across to Belarus, staying separated from their loved ones. [60] Ali, featured in a documentary, is one of the migrants who stayed in a shelter in Poland. These shelters are considered as guarded open refugee centers — poorly equipped, and did not have enough beds as it had exceeded its capacity.[61] Ali escaped Taliban with his son and pregnant wife, and together, they attempted to cross the border to seek haven in a EU country. His wife, pushed by a Polish guard and started bleeding, was later taken to a hospital where she recovered and was transferred to this refugee center. However, Ali and their son were not taken together with her to the hospital and were pushed back to Belarus. Therefore, they made multiple attempts to cross and reunite the family, and only after their eighth attempt did they succeed in crossing the border and being sent to the same refugee center.

Ali stated that while attempting to cross the border with his son, Belarusian soldiers forced him to cut open the barbed wires, resulting in wounds on his hands. The same documentary also featured a migrant named Yousef, who came from Syria in search of a job to support his wife and two daughters. Yousef, after crossing into Poland, was pushed back to Belarus, where he was captured, searched, and kicked in the face by Belarusian soldiers, resulting in a broken nose. He mentioned that, after paying the Belarusian guards \$200, they escorted him and his group to another point along the border. There, they were left to pass the barbed wires once again by themselves — using stones, sticks, and their bodies.

According to the report by Human Rights Watch (2021), individuals pushed back to the territory of Belarus are captured by Belarusian border guards and gathered in open-air collection points along the border[62] Later, the guards take migrants to different parts of the border and “force them to cross back into Poland.”[63] The same report also emphasizes that Belarusian border guards prevent those who do not want to cross the border again, leading people to “spend several days up to several weeks stuck on the border in the open, without shelter or access to basic necessities, including food and water.” Yousef and Ali’s stories, along with the testimonies given to Human Rights Watch, show that migrants experienced “abuse, theft, and extortion by Belarusian border guards.”[64]

Trapped in dense woods, swamps, and primeval forests with wild animals and freezing weather, migrants were moving back and forth across the Poland-Belarus border for days — sometimes weeks. With nothing to eat or drink and nowhere to seek shelter, they were constantly hiding to avoid being pushed back, over and over again. As a consequence to such conditions, many people suffered from starvation, hypothermia, frostbitten limbs, physical injuries, or even deaths — mostly caused by hypothermia and drowning.[65][66] Since the crisis broke out in summer 2021 until the end of 2023, at least 53 deaths have been confirmed on both sides of the border,” according to Grupa Granica’s post.[67]

59. “Die Here or Go to Poland,” 14.
60. “Die Here or Go to Poland,” 2.
61. Journeyman Pictures. 2022b.
62. “Die Here or Go to Poland,” 2.
63. Ibid
64. Ibid
65. “Die Here or Go to Poland,” 1.
66. “Periodic report on the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border,” Grupa Garnica, February 17, 2023, 3-4, <https://bit.ly/3UGpqUd>
67. Grupa Granica, “Szacunku i godności – nam wszystkim ‘Kiedy chowamy tu któregoś z braci, którzy zginęli na granicy...’” [Image attached], Facebook, December 31, 2023.

However, the total number of people who died while attempting to cross the border is unknown, due to the months of inaccessibility to the militarized border area for independent investigators, aid organisations and journalists.[68]

Returning to the construction of the border fence, completed by the Polish government in summer 2022, it did not mark the end of the migration route; instead, alongside the ecological consequences it brought, the wall has made crossing the border even more dangerous.[69] With migrants jumping over the or being forced “to cross rivers, marshes or wetlands, and as a result, more people are injured along the way and require medical assistance.”[70]

The 186-kilometer-long, 5.5-meter-high border fence is fitted with steel square profiles, barbed wires and equipped with an electronic surveillance system along the nearly 400-kilometer-long border with Belarus.[71][72] The area is constantly patrolled by thousands of armed forces. Despite this hostile mechanism’s cost of over \$400 million, there were around 26,000 crossing attempts in 2023 — nearly 10,000 more than the previous year when the fences were erected.[73][74] According to the data published by the Polish Border Guard, since August 2021, there have been more than a total of 80,000 illegal crossing attempts. [75] Given that many people made multiple attempts, this figure does not necessarily represent the precise number of migrants; however, it certainly indicates that the migration route remains open despite the construction of such a violent infrastructure.

Beyond the border fence, individuals who irregularly crossed the Poland-Belarus border and were not immediately pushed back are often held in detention facilities managed by the Polish Border Guards. The holding mechanism in Poland is based on two types of detention centers, “both used for detaining asylum seekers and foreigners subject to return procedures.”[76] These are namely guarded open centers and “rigorous” detention centers — referred to in Polish as “areszt dla cudzoziemców,” meaning “arrests for foreigners.”[77]

There are currently six of the so-called rigorous detention centers in Poland, and due to their highly restricted entry, finding data or visuals about the conditions in each is rather difficult.[78] Indeed, the centers appear like prisons with “thick walls, bars in the windows (Krosno, Białystok, Przemyśl) and on the corridors. In addition, all centers are surrounded by high walls topped with barbed wire.”[79] After the crisis broke out in summer 2021, Polish authorities passed new laws reducing the living space to 2 square metres per person and limiting amenities. [80]

Observers reporting on the inside conditions have noted that these detention centers lack “privacy, adequate sanitary facilities, access to doctors or psychologists, or legal assistance;” and even worse, a volunteer witnessed “constant sounds of gunshots and the hallmarks of torture.”[81][82] While before the crisis, there were 500 spaces in “nine open centres and five detention camps operating,” then, as a response to the crisis, Poland created “1,600 new places by setting up containers in the detention camp yards and using the 2-square-metre norm to squeeze in more people.”[83]

68. Grupa Granica, “Szacunku i godności.”
69. Ibid
70. Ibid
71. Benjamin Bathke, “Poland again registers increase in irregular migrant arrivals from Belarus,” *InfoMigrants*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/49141/poland-again-registers-increase-in-irregular-migrant-arrivals-from-belarus>
72. Deutinger, Theo Deutinger, *Handbook of Tyranny* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2018), 46.
73. “Poland plans to spend over \$400 million on wall on Belarus border,” Reuters (Berlin), October 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-plans-spend-over-400-million-wall-belarus-border-2021-10-13/>
74. Adriana Sas, “Number of attempts to illegally cross the Polish-Belarusian border in Poland from August 2021 to December 2023,” Statista, January 2, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1271292/poland-attempts-of-illegal-crossing-of-the-polish-belarusian-border/>
75. Ibid
76. “Place of Detention: Poland,” Asylum Information Database, May 22, 2023, <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/poland/detention-asylum-seekers/detention-conditions/place-detention/>
77. Ibid
78. Malgorzata Tomczak, “Held Without Rhyme or Reason: Poland’s Detention System for Migrants Labeled a Farce,” *Balkan Insight*, February 1, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/02/01/held-without-rhyme-or-reason-polands-detention-system-for-migrants-labeled-a-farce/>
79. “Place of Detention”
80. Tomczak, “Held Without Rhyme or Reason.”
81. European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). (2023b, April). Seeking Refuge in Poland: A Fact-Finding Report on Access to Asylum and Reception Conditions for Asylum Seekers (p. 27). Retrieved from <https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Seeking-refuge-in-Poland.pdf>

In 2021, according to the Polish Border Guard, 94% of those who crossed the border and sought asylum were placed in detention, typically with a default duration of 6 months.[84] However, this duration is often exceeded as the Border Guard initiates the paperwork arbitrarily. As for the outcome, if the court grants asylum, they will be released “but obliged to transfer to one of the open centres and forbidden to leave Poland;” and if the court denies the asylum request, it will result in deportation, “which involve being escorted directly from a detention camp in a convoy to the airport, taken to the plane by a border guard and fastened into their seat.”[85] Migration lawyers state that approximately 90% of migrants held in detention centers disappear after release, with many believed to be involved with human traffickers, attempting to leave Poland and reach Germany.[86]

Alongside those who disappeared after being detained in prison-like holding spaces, there are also people who went missing while attempting to cross the border without access to basic necessities. A report reveals that from summer 2021 until January 2023, 317 people have gone missing, with at least 12 of them found dead, and some discovered in detention centers in Poland.[87] Grupa Granica reported an increase in the number of people seeking their support compared to the previous year, with 7,550 migrants asking for help in 2023, of whom the organization could only reach 3,366, and 1,377 people were deported.[88]

The violent pushback actions, coupled with the prison-like detention facilities, have evidently failed to close the migration route, perpetuating the struggle for life and death along the border. Poland has increased hostility towards migrants and asylum seekers, while Belarus continues to weaponize individuals and provide false hopes of a ‘simple’ route to Europe. Both states are jeopardizing lives in militarized border zones, conducting systematic detention and deportation processes that, in some cases, push migrants toward human traffickers. Given the actions taken by Poland and Belarus since the summer of 2021, the ongoing struggles are likely to continue.

Similar to the previous chapter, the thesis does not attempt to delve deep into this specific territory, but aims to revisit the Białowieża Forest as a site of struggle where we witness the emergence of another humanitarian crisis, openly orchestrated by powers. The forest, as an example, reveals a different facet of bordering in material dimension; it generates the space for violence, therefore becomes a weapon itself. The tragic stories of Roger’s two brothers who died in the forest, Ali being separated from his family by the border guards, and Osman facing brutalization and months of detention — all illustrate how the green forests of Poland and Belarus systematically function as a violent mechanism; pushing back or trapping bodies in swamps, prisons, or under poorly dug graveyards.

82. Tomczak, “Held Without Rhyme or Reason.”

83. Ibid

84. Ibid

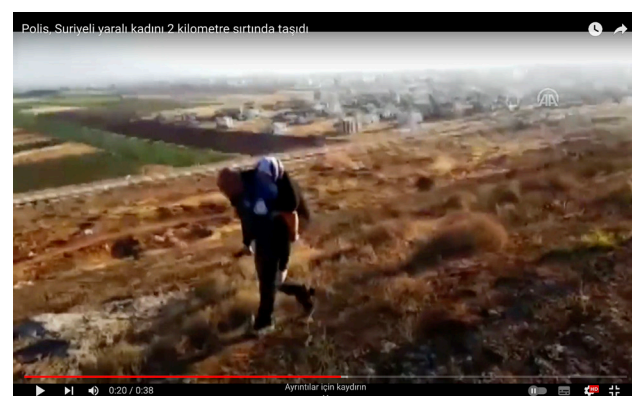
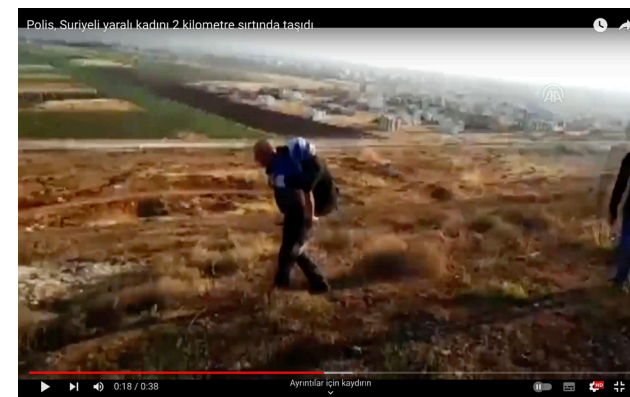
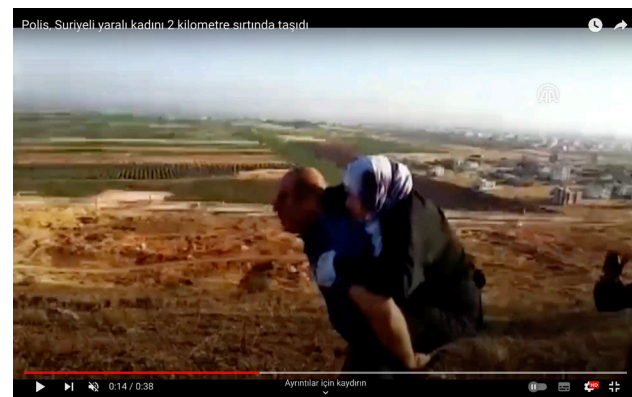
85. Ibid

86. Ibid

87. Grupa Granica, “Szacunku i godności.”

88. Ibid





1.2.3
Naked Hill: the Turkey-Syria Border

Reyhanlı district of Hatay, Turkey
September 2018
“While we were on duty around 6 am in the morning, I heard a lady shouting very weakly in the hilly area on the border line behind us. It was difficult to reach because the area was rocky. The injured lady had crossed into our region by violating the border. She had no shoes on her feet. She probably got injured in her hands as she walked through the iron wires on the border walls. I chatted with her to calm her down a bit, and I told her that we would not harm her and that she is an “emanet” (someone entrusted to care) of Turkish State ... Since there was no highway, it was impossible for emergency teams to get to the person’s location. We informed the emergency teams and carried the lady to the point they could reach ... Even though [Syrians] are outside our borders, our bond of “gönül” (heart) with them has never been cut. It is about compassion, all law enforcement officers who are in my place would approach with the same sensitivity.”
Ömer Kılıçarslan, a police officer at the Turkey-Syria border, in the interview (2018) [89]

On the 4th of September in 2018 early in the morning, a Turkish police officer, who serves at the foot of a hill in the Turkey-Syria border region, heard some distant screams. He informed his colleagues and, together, they tried to understand the source of the noise. After taking a few steps around, they started to identify the constantly repeated screams which later appeared to be a woman’s cry for help. At first, it was a mystery since there was no one in sight, but her sound was still audible. They kept casting around the rugged hills in the region, which were not easy to move on, as if the border line was intended to be a crippling terra firma. The closer they got to the top of the hill, the louder it got. And finally, once they reached the other side, the faces of the screams appeared. There was a woman with her two children who had attempted to cross the border wall that “divides” Turkey from Syria. She was screaming because she got hurt while trying to pass through the border that was, in fact, designed to hurt.

The wall is not the only element of this hostile mechanism which is fully equipped with items all around. Massive concrete blocks of 2 meters by 3 meters had been collocated and stranded throughout the border region, just as they were meant to smear the horizon with a gray line; it follows you with its gaze, despite where you stand.[90] This Mona Lisa Effect is not only a result of a stripe of concrete; it is juxtaposed with traps inside and outside. The walls assembled with edged wires are often in parallel with 4-meter-deep trenches dug to capture people even before stepping on Turkish territory.[91] And if one manages to pass across, there is a throng patrol road encaged with metal wire mesh partitions, which is furnished to “welcome.”[92] Here, migrants face an inner monitoring mechanism through watchtowers on land and various aerial vehicles in the air; it is illuminated all night long and accommodates officers in several stations inside, performing frequent substitutions.[93]

The “naked” hill where the story unfolds is between Hatay province in Turkey and Idlib governorate in Syria — a barren landscape with so few

89. CNN Türk, “Polis yaralı Suriyeliyi 2 kilometre sırtında taşıdı,” CNN, September 6, 2018, video, 1:39, <https://www.cnnturk.com/video/turkiye/polis-yarali-suriyeliyi-2-kilometre-sirtinda-tasidi>

90. Chase Winter, “Turkey to finish Syrian border wall in five months,” DW, September 28, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-to-finish-syrian-border-wall-in-five-months/a-35915857>

91. Anadolu Agency, “Turkey finishes construction of 764-km security wall on Syria border,” Daily Sabah, June 9, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/06/09/turkey-finishes-construction-of-764-km-security-wall-on-syria-border>

92. Ibid

93. Ibid

trees that one could count them at a glance. This characteristic scenery extends along the rest of the 911-km-long Turkey-Syria border line, with the pattern of bare hills becoming greener near streams of water — or in the farmlands. As the scale of the border is massive, one can grasp it by considering the distance from Amsterdam to Milan. Driving across the Turkey-Syria border from end to end would take approximately 11 hours. Yet, Reyhanlı district of Hatay makes only a small portion, situated on the margin of these unnamed hills that serve as the natural border. The town hosts a population of around 90 thousand, with many engaged in agricultural activities, while relying heavily on trade, due to the presence of the Cilvegözü (Bab al-Hawa in Syria) Border Crossing.[94]

The migrant woman encountered the pushback on the hills of Reyhanlı. Coming from Syria and wounded in her attempt to cross the border, she was found by two police officers, one of whom carried her for two kilometers before she was transported to a hospital by an ambulance. Although there is no information about what happened to her after leaving the hospital, Ömer Kılıçarslan, the police officer, became a “national hero” and was awarded a certificate of achievement.[95] He gained wide public recognition through interviews and articles published by mainstream news agencies. In contrast, no agency has pursued information regarding the story of the injured woman, leaving her name and condition anonymous to this day — the only information disclosed was that she is Syrian.

We can revisit this encounter by considering the hostile border mechanism that caused her injury as a project constructed by Turkey, while viewing the police officer who rescued her as an enforcer (and part) of that very mechanism. Moving on, the ambulance that transferred her and the hospital where the doctors treated her all operate within the same state-sponsored system. This highlights the entanglement; as a migrant attempting to cross the border is pushed back, rescued, and treated — all funded by the same state. Although there are plenty of questions to be asked, one cannot help but wonder why the police officer is being portrayed as a hero if the injured woman whom he rescued was hurt by a project constructed by the powers he polices for. The police officer is noted as a courageous character for saving a victim, but it is unclear against whom (or what) he had stood courageous. Thus, the story reveals the inherent ambivalence of the border, with its enforcers saving the lives of those who attempt to cross the imaginary line that they are restricted from crossing.

Turkey-Syria border has systematically become militarized and securitized, resulting in the daily pushbacks of migrants attempting to enter Turkey from Syria. The initial quote by the police officer, “Even though they are outside our borders, our bond of heart with them has never been cut,” serves as an evidence of how the border is a project conformed by the state, not reflecting people’s sentiments but acting as an extension of power relations. In other words, even the law enforcer working at the border has the consciousness of the recency of the growing hostility, despite playing a part in its materialization process. The increased weaponization of the border, thereby, is rather recent; wired concrete walls and deep trenches did not exist long ago.

The previous point brings us to the radical changes the border has undergone, which could be considered an under-researched topic,

94. Reyhanlı District Governorship. (2018, December). Nüfus [Population Data]. Retrieved from <http://reyhanli.gov.tr/Nufus>

95. Anadolu Agency, “Yaralı Suriyeli’yi 2 kilometre sırtında taşıyan polise ödül,” NTV, September 12, 2018, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/yarali-suriyeliyi-2-kilometre-sirtinda-tasiyan-polise-odul>

when considering the vast pool of data on US-Mexico or Poland-Belarus borders. The limited research keeps under cover the significant shift in the act of crossing the Turkey-Syria border, particularly the contrast that grew starker in less than a decade. Unlike the anonymized migrant's story of being pushed back, people were able to freely cross the border in 2009, when Turkey and Syria had mutually abolished the need for visas between them. However, this lasted only two years, until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The events that unfolded in Syria ever since, and Turkey's reactions towards them have influenced the way the shared border exists, resulting in this increased security-oriented approach.

To develop further, we can briefly trace Turkey's inconsistent border policies, starting from the open-door policy that allowed people fleeing from the conflict in Syria to enter Turkey, as opposed to being pushed back.[96][97] Then, only within a few years, Turkey re-introduced the visa requirement and began erecting barbed-wire fences (on 3-meter-tall prefabricated concrete posts) in some border regions.[98][99] Following was the start of the concretion with the first section of the wall being constructed in August 2015; and in less than three years, by June 2018, a total of 764 kilometers was erected along the 911-kilometer-long Turkey-Syria border.[100] In short, Turkey's once open doors had been completely closed, wired, and filled within a span of 7 years.

Beyond the material change, there are innumerable factors that have influenced this radical shift in Turkey's border policies. Deriving from the "complex interplay between security, humanitarian, social, political, and economic dimensions," these factors are intricately intertwined, requiring a multi-faceted analysis.[101] However, the thesis does not aim to unpack the entire complexity. Instead, we will underline three specific issues suggested by Olejárová (2018) to introduce Turkey's fortification process better. First, the geopolitical issue concerning the "territorial integrity and sovereignty of Turkey, which are closely linked with Kurdish separatism." Second, the security issue regarding the spread of terrorism, organized crime, illegal border crossings by jihadist groups, "but also domestic insurgencies and street clashes between migrants and Turkish population." Third, the foreign policy issues such as "Turkish relations with Syria; the Turkish NATO membership; terms of the EU-Turkish Statement and activities of international community in the area." [102]

Turkey is located centrally amidst all the issues mentioned, while remaining a bridge between the EU and the Middle East. During the territorial conflicts in Syria, Turkey's geographical location played a crucial role in the fortification process as well. It is the transit country both for "European jihadists travelling to Syria," and the "jihadists on their way to carrying out attacks in Europe," as well as millions of people migrating from Syria for the Schengen space.[103] This helps us to understand the substantial domestic and international pressure Turkey came under, which eventually resulted in closing the borders with Syria.

The 2016 agreement between Turkey and the EU has solidified "the objective of creating an impassable border by constructing a wall." [104] Referred to as the "Turkey-EU deal," it originally aims to prevent migrants from entering Europe via Turkey, especially to Greek Islands, by sending any "irregular" arrivals back to Turkey. [105] As part of the so-called deal, Europe has paid €6 billion to Turkey for taking "any measures necessary"

96. Barbora Olejárová, "The Great Wall of Turkey: From „The Open-Door Policy” to Building Fortress?," *Pogranicze Polish Borderlands Studies*, no. 6 (2018): 117-133, 10.25167/ppbs55

97. Asylum Information Database, *2011-2014: Temporary Protection Based on Political Discretion and Improvisation*, 2017, <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkey/2011-2014-temporary-protection-based-political-discretion-andimprovisation>

98. Olejárová, "The Great Wall of Turkey," 118.

99. Theo Deutinger, *Handbook of Tyranny* (Lars Muller Publishers, 2018), 46.

100. Özcan Yilmaz, "Turkey and the Middle-East: From Imperial Temptation to National Closure," *Global Challenges*, October 2018, <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/4/>

101. Olejárová, "The Great Wall of Turkey," 119.

102. Ibid

103. Yilmaz, "Turkey and the Middle-East," para. A walled-in country.

104. Ibid

105. "What is the EU-Turkey deal?," RESCUE, March 18, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/eu/article/what-eu-turkey-deal>

to stop the influx of people. However, as this information is not publicly disclosed, we are not informed about how this money is being spent. Nonetheless, news agencies report that the Turkish state has invested \$673 million solely in the construction of the wall and the patrol road along the border. [106] However, this seems like the tip of a massive iceberg, considering all the officers, watchtowers, vehicles, drones, guns, ammunition, and more.

Despite the EU's condemnation of Turkey's authoritarianism and human rights violations, the security-oriented approach at the border has been growing thanks to the EU's financial assistance and supply of surveillance technologies to Turkey.[107] The fortification of Turkey consequently expands the human-trafficking market and pushes many migrants to choose dangerous routes, such as the Syrian woman in the initial story.[108] To better understand the environment where migrants face dangers prior to reaching the Turkish side of the border, it is important to briefly mention the constantly changing map of the Syrian side (northern Syria) with its different areas of control.

We can further explore this through the introduction of Hani Fakhani (2021), who states, "North of Syria emerged as a territorial name to identify a Syrian geography in contradistinction to what remained under the regime military forces after the ease of violence, rather than defining a homogeneous region administratively, politically, socially, or ecologically. Today, sub-areas of the 'North' live entirely different realities from each other and from their pasts. Since the withdrawal or defeat of the regime forces, public institutions collapsed, and different de-facto powers filled up the resulting vacuum of power creating new political order." [109] Those powers include a small portion ruled by pro-Assad forces and the Islamist HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) group in the northwest; ethnicity-based Kurdish forces in the northeast; and Turkey-affiliated military forces in between (Afrin and north Aleppo as well as Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ain). Therefore today, there appears to be more than one Syria within the pre-war borders of Syria.

Delving deeper into the status quo in northern Syria, thanks to Hani Fakhani (2021), it is clear that both regional and international powers with conflicting agendas have utilized proxies on the ground to extend their influence in the region. Consequently, this has led to further divisions on social, institutional, and political levels as well as obstructing a possible unified political opposition in areas outside the regime control. As a result of being "outside," northern Syria has lost its pre-war socio-economic ties with the rest of the country, with examples including its industrial hub Aleppo losing connections to its suburbs, resulting in the lack of essential services and the labor force that previously supported its factories. However, this resulted in new connections emerging, such as with Turkish cities across the borders. Therefore, when the pre-war economy mostly collapsed, "its elite has been replaced by the rising warlords and new economic elite while maintaining a war economy and an over-dependency on humanitarian aid." [110]

Amidst the ongoing catastrophe on multiple dimensions, the demographics of northern Syria have significantly changed as well. Referring again to Hani Fakhani (2021), this shift is attributed not only to migrants who have left Syria but also to the movements of thousands of internally displaced people (IDP) who previously lived in other regions

106. Winter, 2016.

107. Yilmaz, "Turkey and the Middle-East," para. A walled-in country.

108. Ibid

109. Fakhani Hani, "Session 4 presentation: Syria Border," (Territory presentation for Architecture, Society and Territory B, Politecnico di Torino, Turin, October 29, 2021).

110. Ibid

of the country. In these areas, they experienced intense violence from the regime’s urbicidal war strategy (siege, bombard and evict), which resulted in the complete destruction of cities and the relocation of surviving populations to areas where the regime regained control. This population transfer is viewed as a strategy by the regime to manipulate demographics in their favor, aiming to create a more homogeneous population. Additionally, population movements in northern Syria are influenced also by fears of regional powers’ intervention, such as the ethnic Kurdish communities having the fear of Turkish interventions. As a result, some areas received fewer IDPs, while others saw their original population outnumbered by incoming IDPs.[111]

To understand the magnitude of the population movements, we can only refer to the data published by UNHCR and Turkey. According to UNHCR, since 2011, over 14 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes with more than 7.2 million remain internally displaced, where 70% of the population is need of humanitarian assistance and 90% live below the poverty line.[112] Meanwhile, over 3.6 million Syrian migrants sought protection in Turkey during the first decade of the war, and as of March 2024, the Turkish state suggests that the number currently stands at 3.1 million.[113][114] This population is considered people of concern by UNHCR, with the majority residing in various urban, peri-urban, and rural areas, while about 60,000 staying in camps with severe vulnerabilities. [115][116]

During the peak of the refugee crisis, northern Syria became a “crossline” for IDPs seeking refuge in Turkey or aiming to transit through Turkey to reach Europe. This alarmed the EU states and brought the region into the spotlight, leading to the “Turkey-EU Deal,” which prompted Turkey’s decision to close and militarize the border. This left thousands of people in northern Syria to a dangerous route to find a safe ground across the border — despite the hostile hosts — and if not, stay in the region where the intense fighting still has not stopped after a decade. Therefore, the way EU and Turkey responded to refugee crisis has been only aggressive, with a security-oriented approach that increasingly weaponized the border areas.

On the other hand, as perception towards the border shifted, so did perception towards the refugees. As an example, Olejárová notes the shift in Turkish public opinion from viewing the open-door policy as a “manifestation of solidarity and Turkish dominance in the region” to seeing Syrian migrants as a “threat to social order, economic growth, and security,” thereby supporting the fortification.[117] Erdoğan, who once referred to Syrian migrants as his “Muslim brothers” and “guests,” later initiated the closure of the border and proposed the establishment of a “safe zone” in 2016. The zone, spanning 480 kilometers in length and 30 kilometers in depth, is intended to be entirely under Turkish control to relocate millions of migrants and prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state along the Turkey-Syria border.

Although neither Russia nor Western powers fully supported the “safe zone” plan, Turkey seized control of a significant territory in northern Syria. Here, there is an attempt to establish a new order by Turkey’s central authority. In fact, institutions like the police, Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs), schools, universities, and hospitals are already established, with even parks and streets being renamed to

Turkish. According to BBC News Türkçe, the Syrian regime considers it a potentially permanent invasion of Syria.[118] However, Turkey insists that its military escalation is aimed at creating a “safe zone” to secure its borders and ensure the return of Syrian migrants to their countries. Furthermore, Erdoğan stated that Turkey has prepared enough housing projects in Turkish-held areas of northern Syria for nearly one million people.[119] Inevitably, these areas are undergoing a painful process of establishing a new political and administrative structure — therefore, not stable nor secure.

The control of the areas by Turkey was seized through a series of Turkey-affiliated military interventions, both directly — with four major interventions since 2016 — and indirectly through proxies on the ground. [120] Unlike other targets such as Daesh and the regime, Turkey’s relationship with Kurdish forces is more complex. Briefly because, Turkey, the EU, and the US designate the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as a terrorist group, and Turkey considers the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the autonomous administration governing the Kurdish-held region as close affiliates of the PKK. [121] As a result, the decades-old Kurdish conflict persists, with clashes between Kurdish forces and the Turkish army continuing today, including those between the SDF and Turkey in northern Syria.

In October 2023, after Turkey escalated its ongoing drone strikes on Kurdish-held areas in, essential infrastructure was damaged, resulting in serious disruptions to water and electricity for 4.3 million people in northeast Syria; at least 18 water pumping stations and 11 power stations became non-operational.[122] The suspension in water supplies and the reduction in water flowing down the Euphrates River, which is the most significant source of water and electricity for northeast Syria, have contributed to an increase in waterborne diseases, including cholera, food insecurity, and the risk of malnutrition.[123] This example alone demonstrates that, although the regime’s war strategies bear primary responsibility for the destruction, both the opposition and international actors have contributed to the devastation.

To develop further, the war between regional powers has brutal consequences, affecting both people and the environment. After 13 years of armed conflict, significant natural resource destruction has occurred. According to PAX, “The lack of access to electricity and fuel pushes large scale logging for heating and cooking, while displacement and intense fighting further contribute to forest loss.”[124] Besides impacting the natural environment, the war has drastically changed the urban fabric, with high levels of damage to city infrastructures, essential civilian facilities, and residential neighborhoods, making them unrecognizable. In northern Syria, for example, around 6 buildings per hectare are labeled as damaged or destroyed in Ar-Raqqa city, due to various stages of conflict, including operations against Daesh. In Idlib city, roughly 2 buildings per hectare face similar classification, primarily due to regime bombardments in residential neighborhoods under HTS control.

Already dire conditions worsened in February 2023 when twin earthquakes struck southeastern Turkey along the border with Syria. Particularly in the rebel-held northwest, which was most affected, millions were left without access to rescue operations or life-saving aid for more than a week.[125]

111. Ibid

112. “Syria Refugee Crisis Explained,” UNRefugees, March 13, 2022, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

113. Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior Presidency of Migration Management, “Temporary Protection,” April 18, 2024, <https://www-goc-gov-tr.translate.google/ gecici-koruma>.

114. “Situation report: Syria,” Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, April 18, 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#>

115. Semih Tumen, “The case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye: Successes, challenges, and lessons learned,” 2023, April, p. 16.

116. “Situation report: Syria,” Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, April 18, 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#>

117. Olejárová, “The Great Wall of Turkey,” 120.

118. BBC News Türkçe, “Kuzey Suriye’nin değişen haritası: Türkiye ne istiyor?,” Youtube, December 21, 2022, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sG_NpegGv9I&t=572s

119. “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: 1 milyon mültecinin ülkelerine dönmelerini sağlayacağız,” Euronews, May 19, 2023, <https://treuronews.com/2023/05/19/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-1-milyon-multecinin-ulkelerine-donmesini-saglayacagiz>

120. BBC News Türkçe, “Kuzey Suriye’nin değişen haritası.”

121. “Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Disrupt Water, Electricity,” Humans Right Watch, October 26, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/26/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-disrupt-water-electricity>

122. Ibid

123. “Driven out by war, displaced in desperate conditions,” Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024, <https://www.msf.org/syria-depth>

124. “Axed & Burned: How Conflict-caused Deforestation Impacts Environmental, Socio-economic and Climate Resilience in Syria,” PAX, March 21, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/axed-and-burned-how-conflict-caused-deforestation-impacts-environmental-socio-economic-and-climate-resilience-syria>

125. “Syria: Events of 2023,” Humans Right Watch, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/syria>

The earthquakes measured magnitudes of 7.8 and 7.6, followed by hundreds of aftershocks, resulting in the deaths of more than 56,000 people — although since local authorities stopped counting, the toll might be much higher.[126] Additionally, an estimated 15 million people in Turkey and 8 million people in Syria lived in the areas most affected by the earthquake.[127] While in Turkey, a minimum of 273,000 buildings were destroyed across 11 provinces; in northwest Syria, at least 10,600 buildings were either completely or partially destroyed.[128][129] In the end, 3.3 million people in Turkey and 392,000 families in Syria had been displaced, either migrating to less affected cities or still residing in container/tent settlements at the time of writing.[130]

In terms of the camps, especially after the twin earthquakes, conditions have become even more challenging. While most Syrian migrants in Turkey (more than 98,5%) live outside the camps, a significant number of IDPs in Syria still reside within them. According to REACH's report in November 2023, there are twelve camps in the northeast region, accommodating around 140,000 people. Another find in this report is that 520,000 people live in host communities, collective centers, or informal settlements. The report also indicates that IDPs in camps are mostly those displaced by the war and unable to return to their areas of origin. With insufficient incomes, these households heavily rely on aid but still have very limited access to essential goods and services; consequently, food security is high, shelter conditions are poor, and healthcare services are lacking.[131]

Returning to the initial story, we are uncertain why the injured woman found on the naked hills of Reyhanlı was attempting to cross the border. Given that she carried her two little children with her, we can only imagine that she was seeking for a safe ground for her family, having little left in her place of origin in Syria. However, due to a lack of media interest, both Turkish and global outlets failed to reveal her initial motivation. Nonetheless, the issues unfolding in northern Syria does not leave a lot of choices to its inhabitants, as living conditions in the region gets only more dire. The lack of critical infrastructure, limited access to essential aid and services, deepening economic and humanitarian crises, ongoing armed conflicts. Are these enough to lose one's hope and leave? Unable to return home or endure the present conditions, many become involved with smugglers to help bring them cross Turkey-Syria border; a very dangerous journey in search of a potentially brighter future abroad.[132]

Unlike what the police officer from Reyhanlı argued in his initial quote, stating that rescuing the injured lady was “about compassion” and that “all law enforcement officers [in his] place would approach with the same sensitivity,” he is repeatedly proven to be wrong. In fact, the uncompassionate and hostile border mechanism actively pushes back migrants attempting to enter Turkish territory, resulting not only in injuries but also in killings. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, between October 2015 and April 2023, “the monitors recorded at least 234 deaths and 231 injuries, the vast majority of which occurred while victims attempted to cross the border. Twenty-six incidents involved children, with at least 20 killed and 15 injured. Significantly, at least 6 people who were not attempting to cross the border were shot dead and another 6 were injured.” Furthermore, the HRW's report adds more data, stating that “Of the 234 deaths and 231 injuries, the data indicates that 225 died and 177 were injured by Turkish border guards using weapons,

126. “2023 Turkey-Syria Earthquake,” Center for Disaster Philanthropy, March 11, 2024, <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/2023-turkey-syria-earthquake/>

127. Ibid

128. Ibid

129. “Türkiye-Syria Earthquakes,” UNDP's response, United Nations Development Programme, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/turkiye-syria-earthquakes>

130. Ibid

131. “Camps in Northeast Syria - Humanitarian Needs,” REACH, October 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/camps-northeast-syria-humanitarian-needs-october-2023-syria#:~:text=Northeast%20Syria%20has%20twelve%20camps,collective%20centres%2C%20or%20informal%20settlements.>

132. Mahmoud Abo Ras and Melissa Pawson, “The heavy toll of violence at the Syria-Türkiye border,” *The New Humanitarian*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2023/07/25/heavy-toll-violence-Syria-Turkiye-border>

and 9 died and 54 were injured due to physical assault at the hands of Turkish border guards.”[133]

To delve deeper into the topic of physical assault, we can refer to other reports on the recent tortures that unfolded in Reyhanlı, the same province where the compassionate police officer heroically saved an injured Syrian migrant's life. According to New Humanitarian, “On 11 March, eight Syrians were reportedly apprehended by Turkish guards after crossing irregularly into Türkiye; two of them were killed, and the six others were returned to Syria with serious injuries.”[134] A further report conducted by HRW interviewed one of the victims, Zakaria Abou Yahya, 34, who said that he went to Turkey due to the dire economic situation in northwest Syria, where he has nothing and cannot find work. Moreover, HRW revealed details on 11 March, stating:

“... border guards captured [the interviewees in Reyhanlı] after they had walked about 150 meters past the border wall, which they had climbed over by using a ladder they brought along with them, and transported them in a vehicle to a nearby empty field. There, the guards tortured the Syrians, relentlessly beating and kicking them and hitting them with rifles and batons, [Zakaria stated]: ‘They broke me into pieces. They put us on the ground, stomped on both my hands ... they even stomped on my genitals with their boots ... and [they] poured 20 liters of diesel oil from the steel can [on me]. I started [shaking] my head but I don't know, I swallowed what they were pouring. I spent two hours throwing up after that.’”[135]

The horrifying events of March 11, involving the torture of eight individuals and resulting in the deaths of two, received media attention, and eight days later, a court ordered the pretrial detention of three Turkish soldiers and conditionally released three others.[136] However, due to a confidentiality decision issued by the public prosecutor's office in Reyhanlı, the details of the investigation are not disclosed.[137] Mazen Alouch, who heads media and public relations for Syria at the Bab al-Hawa crossing, informed HRW that they witness deportees arriving at the crossing daily. He stated, “Some get beaten lightly, others more severely, and some are tortured. ... The day before [this incident], we received 12 people who were beaten even more than this group, the difference is that there was media attention because of the two fatalities [in the March 11 incident].”[138] Alouch's statement makes us question whether the public would have been informed about the ongoing tortures if the killings had not taken place.

In order to investigate further the hostility towards the migrants coming from Syria, we can take another aspect that comes after crossing the border: the deportation. As previously mentioned, the perception towards Syrian migrants in Turkey has dramatically changed, reaching a point where the mass media and Turkish politicians scapegoat them for the country's worsening context, with many advocating to “send them back.”[139] When started, the way this deportation was portrayed by Turkish authorities and media was a “voluntary return,” arguing that they can now inhabit the so-called “safe zone.” According to the Turkish Minister of Interior Affairs, Ali Yerlikaya, as of February 2024, approximately 625,000 Syrians had “voluntarily returned” to Syria.[140] He also mentioned that the number is expected to increase as their government continues to provide services to the “safe zone.”[141]

133. “Turkish border guards torture, kill Syrians,” Human Rights Watch, April 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/27/turkish-border-guards-torture-kill-syrians>

134. Abo Ras and Pawson, “The heavy toll.”

135. Human Rights Watch, “Turkish border guards torture.”

136. Ibid

137. Abo Ras and Pawson, “The heavy toll.”

138. Human Rights Watch, “Turkish border guards torture.”

139. Elise Daniaud Oudeh, “Welcome No More: How Turkey Targets Increasingly Vulnerable Syrians,” The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, October 11, 2023, <https://timep.org/2023/10/11/welcome-no-more-how-turkey-targets-increasingly-vulnerable-syrians/>

140. “Bakan Yerlikaya: Evlerine dönen Suriyeli sayısı 625 bine yaklaştı,” TRT Haber, February 16, 2024, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/bakan-yerlikaya-evlerine-donen-suriyeli-sayisi-625-bine-yaklasti.html>

141. Ibid

On the contrary, deported Syrians confirmed to HRW that, “Turkish officials arrested them in their homes, workplaces, and on the street, detained them in poor conditions, beat and abused most of them, forced them to sign voluntary return forms, drove them to border crossing points with northern Syria, and forced them across at gunpoint.”[142] According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the arbitrary arrest is done on a daily basis, “under the pretext that they do not have official documents.”[143] Following this comes the detention, interviewees of HRW were either held in local police stations for a short while, or taken to one of the removal centers. A report shows that, in Turkey, “as of May 2023, there were 30 removal centres with a total detention capacity of 16,008 places.”[144]

According to the HRW, the conditions of such removal centers raise concern, as all the interviewees reported being held in overcrowded and unsanitary rooms, sharing limited beds while enduring a lack of food and access to showers.[145] Furthermore, all interviewees claimed to have been assaulted or to have “witnessed officials kicking or beating other Syrians with their hands or with wooden or plastic batons.”[146] The duration of their detention seems to be arbitrary, particularly for those unable to reach their lawyers or families, which eventually leads to detainees being forced to sign papers expressing their “voluntary return” to Syria.[147] According to Syria Direct, “some 29,895 Syrians were deported from Turkey from the start of 2023 to the end of August.”[148]

Following the detention comes the deportation, SOHR reports that after the arrest, the Syrian migrants were sent to “areas controlled by Turkish-backed factions in north Aleppo countryside, where they inhabit in camps that lack basic livelihood, while others are sent to areas controlled by Hayyaat Tahrir Al-Sham in Idlib city and countryside.”[149] Unlike how it is being portrayed by Turkish authorities, “The United Nations (UN) and its affiliated institutions have repeatedly warned that Syria is not safe for the return of refugees,” with the arbitrary detention, mistreatment and torture still ongoing in the country.[150] SOHR’s report adds to this, “the dreadful living conditions, lack of job opportunities and poor assistance provided by humanitarian organisations and relevant authorities,” all proving that there is not an appropriate environment to return.[151]

When the Turkish police officer in the initial story found the injured Syrian woman, the opportunity for heroism knocked his door, which he answered by saving a vulnerable migrant, while being filmed by his other colleague. Later, this footage was released to the mass media, targeting a specific audience, advocating the goodwill of border patrol officers, and portraying Turkey’s well-functioning fortress with its conscientious enforcers. Sadly, there are not many research studies published to prove otherwise. The aggression among authoritarian powers in the region also affects individual endeavors, potentially leading to scapegoating – to say the least – of those who publicly criticize Turkey’s border policies.

For the previously developed reason, this chapter primarily referred to reports and articles from NGOs or other humanitarian organizations, with a few exceptions of research studies done by scholars. The level of complexity surrounding the Turkey-Syria border is telling of it being a site of struggles of many dimensions. The dire living conditions in northern Syria, during the ongoing aggression, make it clear that Turkey and the EU’s aggressive actions to keep migrants away from Europe and dump

142. “Turkey: Hundreds of Refugees Deported to Syria,” Human Rights Watch, October 24, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/24/turkey-hundreds-refugees-deported-syria>

143. “Contrary to Ankara’s statements about voluntarily return of 625,000 Syrian refugees | Turkish authorities continue forcible deportation of Syrians,” The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, 2024, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/325781/>

144. “Place of detention,” Asylum in Europe, July 10, 2024, <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/detention-asylum-seekers/detention-conditions/place-detention/>

145. Human Rights Watch, “Turkish border guards torture.”

146. Ibid

147. Ibid

148. Hamza Al-Nasser, “Deported Syrians struggle to wrap up loose ends in Turkey,” Syria Direct, January 10, 2024, <https://syriadirect.org/deported-syrians-struggle-to-wrap-up-loose-ends-in-turkey/>

149. “Contrary to Ankara’s statements about voluntarily return of 625,000 Syrian refugees | Turkish authorities continue forcible deportation of Syrians,” February 16, 2024, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/325781/>

150. Al-Nasser, “Deported Syrians.”

151. The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, “Contrary to Ankara’s statements.”

them in northern Syria are not possible without force. Therefore, this project is executed through the Turkey-Syria border, serving as a tool that violently pushes migrants back, becoming a site of struggle where injuries, torture, and deaths occur. This pushback even extends to those who already migrated and reside in Turkey through the arbitrary arrest-detention-deportation process.

In the next chapter, the thesis will delve further into our fundamental case study, the Turkey-Syria border, with a “designerly” approach that investigates the border that hurts through its design. This will involve tracing the shape of the Turkey-Syria border through historical cartographies and significant disputes among states, as well as examining the current media depiction of the border as a security mechanism in Turkey, indicating the media’s influence on public perception of the border.

Map.1 (1855)



Map.2 (1890-1900)



→
Historical
cartographies

Map.3 (1918)



Map.4 (1920)



Map.5 (1927)



Map.6 (1940)



Map.7 (1944)



1. All maps are retrived from:
<https://www.loc.gov/>

1.3
Designing a weapon

Turkey-Syria border has been a site of struggle due to its violent pushback against migrants, especially since Turkey decided to take actions to turn it into an “impassable” security mechanism. While the previous chapter mentioned the fortification process of the Turkey-Syria border since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, this chapter will briefly trace back the line to its demarcation on maps and its basis for becoming a bone of contention. After, we will look into the aesthetics of the Turkey-Syria border as a project that is promoted by politicians to perform as a security mechanism in the media. Going through different archives of material will allow us to better understand how the border project is designed to reorganize border spaces, as well as weaponize them for pushback.

First, “A bone of contention: Tracing back the Turkey-Syria border line” will initiate with an archive of historical cartographies dating back to the late Ottoman period in 19th century, until the border line took its present shape in 1939. The chapter will then delve into the basis of the Turkey-Syria border as a bone of contention by capturing a brief historical account — as the thesis does not aim for a thorough analysis, we have deliberately left out a significant portion of the region’s history. This account will show that disputes between neighboring states over the border have been present ever since the line was first demarcated. Although the contention peaked in 1998, changing power dynamics and a signed agreement reversed things, leading to significant collaboration between Turkey and Syria until the civil war broke out in 2011. Since the war, Turkey initially adopted an open-door policy to accept anyone fleeing Syria, but then rapidly closed the borders, securitized, and weaponized the region.

Second, “Aesthetics of Turkey-Syria border as a security mechanism” will delve into the influence of the media on public opinion regarding the border in Turkey by looking into its aesthetics of how the border is being promoted as a security mechanism. The chapter will start with the ascension of Erdoğan’s AKP to power, how they came to terms with the majority of media groups, and began using media as a political tool to promote pro-government ideas. This is crucial since the primary source of information for the majority of the population in Turkey is such media, which can potentially influence their mental images regarding certain events that are otherwise out of sight. Since the politicians designed the border as a project, mainstream media outlets produce pictures that influence the perception of the people on realities that are often not the same as what happens in space. Therefore, the chapter will conclude by proposing to look beyond such manipulative pictures and to use architectural intelligence as a critical intervention in the way the media is being used to promote the border as a security mechanism.

1.3.1
A bone of contention: Tracing back the Turkey-Syria border line

In 1516, when Sultan Selim I waged war against the Mamluk Sultanate and seized control of modern Syria, a 400-year-long Ottoman rule began in the region.[1] What is now considered the Turkey-Syria border was once part of a territory where caravans, merchants, and hadjis would

1. BBC News Turkey, “Suriye Nasıl Kuruldu? Osmanlı’dan Bugüne Suriye-Türkiye İlişkileri,” Youtube, 2020, video.

cross daily, on the saddles of their mules or horses.[2]

The division of modern Turkey and Syria was demarcated only after World War I (1914-1918), when “the sick man of Europe” Ottoman Empire collapsed and lost control in the region.[3] However, even before the end of the war, France and Britain had already started negotiating the future of the Ottoman Empire, eventually leading to the secret pact of Sykes-Picot in 1916: “the basis of the modern Middle East.”[4] The agreement was demarcating the areas of influence in the Ottoman Empire following its defeat in WWI.

Referring to Balanche (2016), France demanded control over “natural Syria,” a vast territory extending from the Taurus Mountains in the southeast of modern Turkey to the Sinai Peninsula in the northeast of modern Egypt, and from Mosul in modern Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea.[5] Same work also reveals, however, these interests conflicted with those of Britain, which demanded to reduce French influence and establish an Arab kingdom led by Emir Faisal al-Hashemi, the son of the Sharif of Mecca, a leader of the Arab resistance against the Ottomans. In conclusion, Balanche states that Britain recognized France controlling the Lebanese coast and the Syrian interior, whereas France recognized British control over southern Iraq and the Baghdad area. It was also agreed that Palestine would be internationalized and divided into various areas of influence, with Russia (in May 1916) and Italy (in August 1917) gaining control in Palestine and parts of Anatolia in modern Turkey.[6]

Although the modern nation-states of the Middle East are not precisely as they were sketched on the map by Sir Mark Sykes and Monsieur François Georges-Picot’s pens, “the League of Nations ‘mandates’ that eventually became these states were subsequently sponsored by Paris and London.”[7] In fact, Arab nationalists who support the idea of a pan-Arab order and advocate unifying different Arab states argue that Western domination of the Levant has resulted from this very agreement. [8] This is evident today, from the jihadists controlling parts of northern Syria to Daesh, which has been explicit about its desire to destruct the Sykes-Picot.

To develop further the previous point, the map of Sykes-Picot never became real, and it looks nothing like the map of today, with the areas of influences in the region has a stark contrast than what was demarcated by France and Italy. However, the agreement left behind a legacy, as Kramer (2016) suggests, “It wasn’t the Sykes-Picot borders but the Sykes-Picot order that survived.”[9] Before WWI, the region from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf was under Ottoman rule. During and after the war, Britain and France occupied and divided the area into new states, drawing borders to minimize friction between them.[10]

The occupation of Ottoman territories and the demarcation of new border lines by the Allies were not easily executed, with various military campaigns waged by the Turkish National Movement against the Allies and those who supported separation. One significant conflict was on the Southern Front (in southeastern Turkey), where the Franco-Turkish War took place, arising from French interests in the region originating from the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Hostilities between French-mandated Syria and Turkey were ultimately ended by the Ankara Agreement of 1921, where today’s Turkey-Syria border line was first drawn.[11]

2. Ibid

3. Fabrice Balanche, “The Levant: fragmentation and remapping,” 5.

4. Ibid

5. Ibid

6. Ibid

7. Andrew Tabler, “Introduction,” *Lines That Bind: 100 Years of Sykes-Picot*, edited by Andrew J. Tabler, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016. 1.

8. Ibid

9. Martin Kramer, “Repairing Sykes-Picot,” in *Lines That Bind: 100 Years of Sykes-Picot*, eds. Andrew J. Tabler (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016) 81.

10. Ibid

11. Tokmajyan and Khaddour, “Border Nation,” 2-3.

The drastic changes in the region led its inhabitants to suddenly find themselves on either side of the border as citizens of two different countries, disrupting the organic relationship between cities, such as Aleppo’s economic and social ties with its north. In fact, during the establishment of modern Turkey up until the 1950s, migration was directed towards Syria, with Armenians, opponents of the newly founded Turkey, smugglers, and others choosing to migrate there.[12] However, when crossing the freshly drawn border, they did not go through any security checks and probably did not even realize they had entered Syria until they encountered a French soldier. Therefore, the appearance of the border back then was very different from today.

While the line was agreed upon on maps, physically delimiting it on the ground took a longer process, especially regarding the ends of the border.[13] In northeastern Syria, the line follows the Baghdad railway; but in the northwest, the parties had a conflict of interest over the Sanjak of Alexandretta (or Hatay in Turkish). When France-mandated Syria became independent in 1936, Turkey applied to League of Nations for the independence of Sanjak (Hatay), leading it to become “the State of Hatay.”[14] After being an independent state for around a year, the agreement for “the Final Settlement Of Territorial Questions between Turkey and Syria” was signed and Hatay officially became part of Turkey. [15] With the Hatay issue settled, the Turkish-French Joint Declaration was signed in 1939, right before World War II, when Turkey “determined its policy on behalf of the anti-revisionist states.”[16]

The shared border has been “a bone of contention” ever since the establishment of modern Turkey and Syria, with the annexation of Hatay being one of the first major issues.[17] Although the border remained a source of tension for the rest of the twentieth century, the line separating Turkey and Syria on maps had not changed until the time of writing.

Another issue unfolding in the region was the smuggling, often fuel or goods such as tobacco and tea, which led Turkey fencing off and laying mines in certain regions of the shared border and placing areas on the Turkish side under martial law in 1960.[18] However, these actions did not end smuggling, and by 1981, it was estimated that the monetary value of smuggling surpassed the value of legal trade.[19] Moreover, even after Syria and Turkey improved relations in the early 2000s or following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the practice continued.

Smuggling was not the only dispute between Syria and Turkey over their shared borders after the annexation of Hatay, as the 80s and 90s were the actual peak points of tension among them. Especially because the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and its militants were based in Syria and Syrian-occupied Lebanon between 1980 and 1998. So much so that this harboring led Turkey’s military and diplomatic threats to invade Syria, who then made concessions and agreed to ask Öcalan leave the country. [20]

Later the same year, in 1998, Turkey and Syria signed the Adana Agreement on that matter which over the years was followed by further accords such as the “Joint Cooperation Agreement Against Terrorist Organizations.”[21] This meant that each country will refrain from supporting the groups that the other has declared as terrorist organizations, especially the PKK and affiliates. Furthermore, Annex 2 of the Adana Agreement stated that

12. BBC News Turkey, “Suriye Nasıl Kuruldu?”

13. Tokmajyan and Khaddour, “Border Nation,” 2-3.

14. Figen Atabey, “Hatay’ın Anavatana Katılma Süreci,” *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi* 3, no. 7 (2015): 193-209, <https://doi.org/10.33692/avrasyad.509271>.

15. Ibid

16. Ibid

17. Tokmajyan and Khaddour, “Border Nation,” 2-3.

18. Ibid

19. Michael B. Bishku, “Turkish-Syrian Relations: A Checkered History,” *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 42.

20. Tokmajyan and Khaddour, “Border Nation,” 2-3.

21. Ibid

Turkey had a “natural right to self-defense,” while Annex 4 granted Turkey the right “to take all necessary security measures inside Syrian territory to a depth of 5 km.”[22] Turkey has cited these to justify its intervention in Syria during the ongoing conflict, particularly in relation to Erdoğan’s proposal for a “safe zone” within Syrian territory along the shared border.

Another conflict regarding the border between Turkey and Syria involves water, particularly the Euphrates River, which originates in Turkey, flows through Syria (providing 86% of its water), and then continues into Iraq. [23] Turkey began constructing dams on both the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers starting in the 1960s, leading to the development of the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) in the 1980s, a major investment comprising 22 dams and 19 hydraulic power plants. This project alarmed Damascus, as it was estimated to reduce the water flow to Syria by 50%, worsening relations between the two countries during a period of already high tension.[24] The situation escalated in 1990 when the filling of the Atatürk Dam reduced the water flow to Syria and Iraq from 500 cubic meters per second to 165.[25]

After the Adana Agreement in 1998, the rise to power of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, along with changing local and international dynamics such as Syria’s worsening relations with Israel and the US, brought Turkey and Syria closer, enabling them “to go beyond the border as the defining factor in their bilateral ties.”[26] Indeed, both states took steps in each others favor, such as Syria’s support of Turkish military operations against the PKK inside its territories, while Turkey increased water flow to Syria.

The improving relations between Turkey and Syria were marked by a substantial increase in trade volume, rising from \$600 million in 1998 to \$2.3 billion in 2010, as well as cross-border mobility with more and more citizens visiting each other’s country.[27] Syrian official data shows that the number of Turkish nationals visiting Syria increased from 170,000 in 1998 to 730,000 in 2009, and then to 1.45 million in 2010 when the states mutually abolished the need for visas between them.[28] Turkish official data also indicates an increase in Syrian nationals entering Turkey, from about 100,000 in 1998 to 900,000 in 2010, even Assad himself had a Blue Voyage in Turkey.[29] Furthermore, the economic relations grew significantly to the extent that Turkey became the largest single foreign investor in Syria, with Syria surprisingly starting to buy electricity produced by the GAP project from Turkey.[30]

Shortly after the relations between Turkey and Syria became closer than ever, the Syrian Civil War broke out in 201, reverting the whole progress made over the border policies as well as the socioeconomic implications. In a very short period, Turkey began radically changing its policies, supporting anti-Assad movements, closing its embassy in Damascus, a and cutting of water flow to Syria.[31] Moreover, Turkey took a strong stance against the establishment of a Kurdish state in the shared border, backing some Islamist rebel groups that share similar ideologies to Turkey’s.[32] In the aftermath of the ongoing war, more than 500,000 people died, over 8 million fled the country, and approximately 4 million migrated to Turkey.[33]

These are among the factors that contributed to Turkey’s inconsistent

22. Ibid

23. BBC News Turkey, “Suriye Nasıl Kuruldu?”

24. Tokmajyan and Khaddour, “Border Nation,” 2-3.

25. Mark Dohrmann and Robert Hatem, “Hydro-Politics in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria,” *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (Autumn 2014): 574, 579.

26. Tokmajyan and Khaddour, “Border Nation,” 2-3.

27. Ibid

28. Ibid

29. Ibid

30. BBC News Turkey, “Suriye Nasıl Kuruldu?”

31. Ibid

32. Ibid

33. Ibid

and increasingly restrictive border policies, as it was detailed in the previous chapter. Turkey first brought back the visa requirements, closed the border crossings, erected walls, and fortified the border into a complete “security mechanism,” as well as conducted (and backed) military interventions in the Syrian territories along the border.

The “golden age” of Turkey-Syria relations ended shortly after the outbreak of the war, leading to a state of many conflicts. The shared border, therefore, remained a bone of contention, now dividing not only Turkey and Syria but also Turkey and the various actors controlling different border areas in the contested northern Syria.

Neither the ongoing conflict, nor the inability to meet basic needs seem to be ending in the near future, and migrants still search for safer grounds outside Syria. For those intending to cross the Turkey-Syria border and seek refuge in Turkey (or the EU), the border performs very differently. Unlike some decades ago, when an Ottoman citizen could cross daily on their mules, now the “Fortress Turkey” is securitized and weaponized to prevent those attempting to cross, by constantly pushing them back.

The next chapter will examine the recent weaponization of the Turkey-Syria border by revealing its aesthetics as a security mechanism. This will be particularly evident through the images distributed by pro-government media outlets in Turkey, which promote the border as a project that must be securitized at any cost.



Fig.1

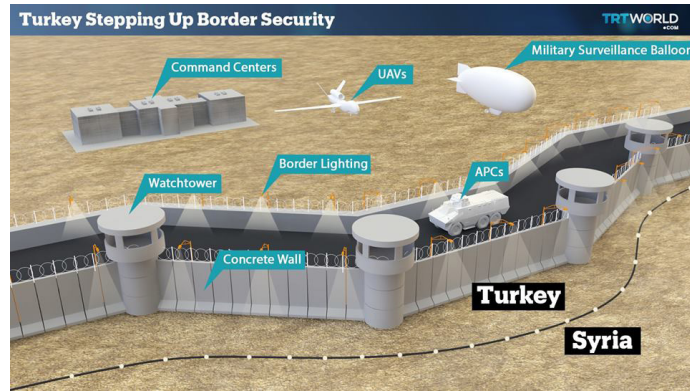


Fig.2

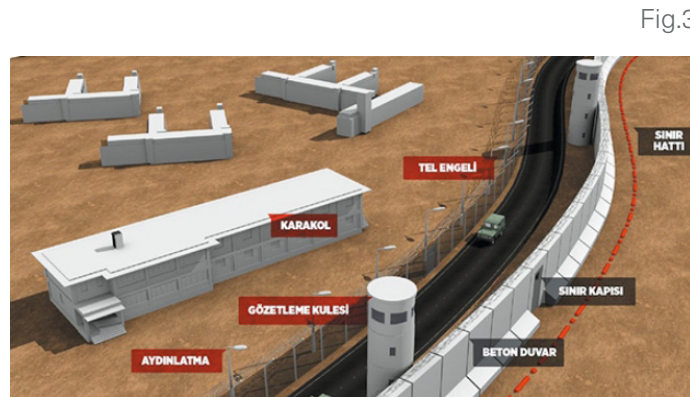


Fig.3

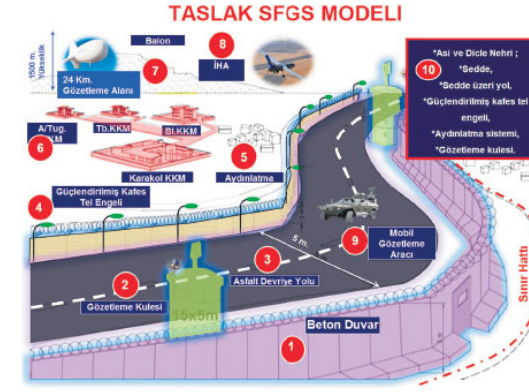


Fig.4

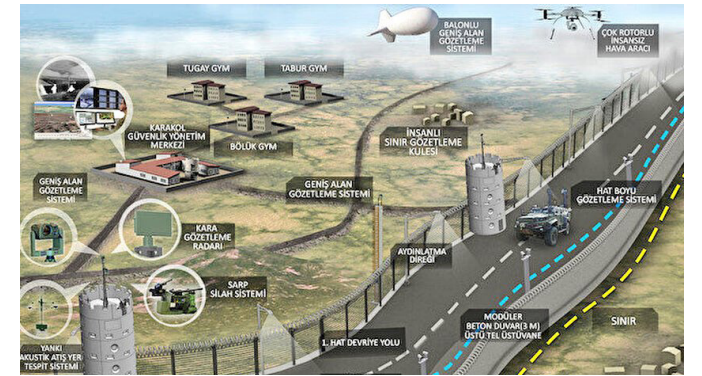


Fig.5

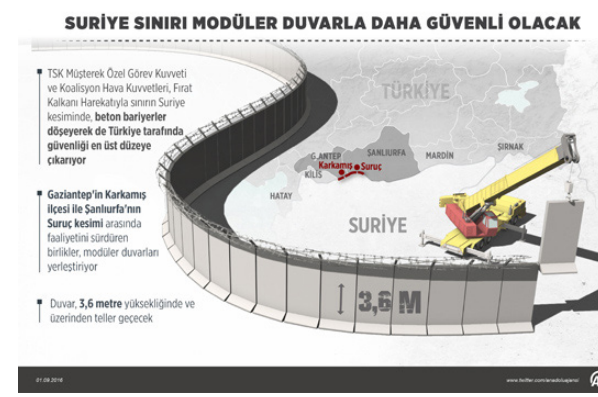


Fig.6



Fig.7

1. Fig. 1,3,6: <https://www.aa.com.tr/>
2. Fig. 2: <https://www.trtworld.com/>
3. Fig. 7: <https://www.haberturk.com.tr/>
4. Fig. 4: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/>
5. Fig. 5: <https://www.haberyenigundem.org.tr/>

1.3.2
Aesthetics of Turkey-Syria border as a security mechanism

If someone did a Google search on the “Turkey-Syria border,” the immediate results would very likely be about the construction of the border walls, or perhaps something related to the migration crisis and the Turkish military interventions in the region. The result for the images would be numerous maps showing the territorial conflict, videos and photos of migrants waiting at the border crossings, or pictures taken during and after the construction of the border wall. Such contents are mostly produced by newspapers, anonymous social media accounts, research institutes or scholars and they certainly influence how we visualize the border as individuals.

To develop further, the way the Turkey-Syria border appears on the screens of media-consuming individuals is relevant because securitization involves an issue being considered a security concern when the public perceives it that way. [34] Therefore, the increasingly security-obsessed discourse regarding the Turkey-Syria border in the majority of Turkey's mass media outlets is an example of how securitarian actors use the media as a tool to legitimize their actions. As Tagliapietra (2021) suggests, “securitisation combines the process of definition of an issue with the process of governance of it.”[35]

The previously developed point is crucial because, referring to Lippmann, media are the primary sources of the pictures individuals have in their minds about the world outside, which, for most people, is out of sight or reach.[36] Meaning that the pictures people have in their minds are not always the same as what is actually happening in space, and therefore are likely to be manipulated. In fact, when there are events that people did not experience directly, they will have a mental image through the stories shared by the media, which could be misleading.[37] Therefore, the media is capable of influencing the perception that people have of reality, leading them to form opinions on events and act in specific directions.

To give an example from the EU, we can mention how media coverage portrayed the migration issue as the “migration crisis.”[38] According to Eberl, such media coverage can substantially influence public attitudes towards migration, as the perception towards a crisis is evidently different than an issue.[39] Similar to this, in the case of the Turkey-Syria border, the media plays a crucial role in portraying the border as a project that “keeps Turkey safe” from migration, terrorists, and more.

In parallel to the influence media has on public perception, we should also briefly mention the relationship politics has with dominant media groups in Turkey. According to Karlıdağ and Bulut, with the accession of Erdoğan's AKP to power, media ownership shifted to groups with close ties to political power.[40] They also add that the mainstream media was turned into a political tool that stuck strictly to the government's narratives, while other media groups outside this circle were pacified by threats to bring them into line with the government.[41] Therefore, the critical voices in the media are limited to low-circulation publications and social media posts, while the pro-government outlets are clearly dominant.[42]

34. Alberto Tagliapietra, “Media and Securitisation: The Influence on Perception.” *IAI Papers* 21|34 (2021): 1-17, ISBN 978-88-9368-211-4.

35. Ibid

36. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922

37. Tagliapietra, “Media and Securitisation: The Influence on Perception,” 4-5.

38. Tagliapietra, “Media and Securitisation: The Influence on Perception,” 7.

39. Jakob-Moritz Eberl et al., “The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects: A Literature Review,” *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42, no. 3 (2018): 207-223, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2018.1497452>.

40. Selda Bulut et al, “Turkish Media and the Root of the Problems Serpil,” *Global Media Journal TR Edition* 11, (Spring 2021): 3.

41. Ibid

42. “Turkey Media Guide, BBC News, August, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17992011>

To elaborate on the previous point, we can refer to BBC's “Turkey media guide”, which suggests that television is still the leading news medium and that “statements by officials and live speeches by President Erdoğan are staple features of coverage.”[43] The same guide also mentions that critical media outlets face police raids, hostile measures, tax fines, and the arrest of journalists on charges of terrorist organization membership, such as reporters for Kurdish media. Furthermore, it shows that courts regularly ban websites or block pages from critical news sites, considering them linked with terrorism.[44]

While the mainstream media outlets are largely unavailable for those who are critical and/or support opposition in Turkey; such media outlets depend on social media to share their views. According to BBC, by July 2022, about 84% of Turkey's population use internet, whereas 72% also use social media.[45] Nevertheless, the government gained the power to regulate social media content through a 2020 law that “obliges major platforms to store user data in Turkey and appoint a local representative to carry out content removal requests.”[46]

Being aligned with the mainstream media outlets and having the ability to regulate social media content, the government in Turkey has the power to influence the primary sources about the outside world, which is out of sight or reach for much of its population. The discourse around the Turkey-Syria border is, therefore, heavily influenced by the media being used as a political tool by the government, together with outlets opposed to Turkey's border policies visibly disempowered. Hence, the path was cleared for creating new mental images of how the border should perform and appear. This is, substantially, how the border as a project performing like a security mechanism is being sold to the public.

When the majority of the population in Turkey consumes media (both mainstream and social), the aesthetics of the border as a project are essential to promote it. This is because the securitization can be justified when it becomes a public opinion that the border has to be securitized. Therefore, the legitimization of what the securitarian actors do, both towards international and domestic audiences, goes through designing a border that performs like a fortress, constantly pushing back migrants and aiming to be impassable. Only then can the border project be sold as a necessity for securitization, justifying even the violence that takes place and the struggles it produces.

The pictures shared by the mainstream media outlets in Turkey regarding the shared border with Syria are thereby relevant to better understand the border as a project. Such pictures are often not high production and usually consist of collages that combine various components of military technology such as drones, zeppelins, watchtowers, trucks, walls, barbed wires, trenches, and more. These pictures depict scenes of border areas where such military components are juxtaposed in the same location, as if along the 911-km-long Turkey-Syria border, everywhere looks like those scenes in reality.

The severe exaggeration in collocating different military elements within the same scene is extended from the fact that there is a certain pride in defending the border at all costs. The highest technologies, the tallest watchtowers, and the biggest drones... The radically changing and increasingly restrictive border policies of Turkey are complemented by

43. Ibid

44. Ibid

45. Ibid

46. Ibid

media that aim to influence public opinion on the Turkey-Syria border and related issues such as the migration influx and Turkey's stance towards the ongoing conflict in Syria. From its aesthetics, we can see the growing security obsession with a hostile narrative towards migrants — especially those from Syria. This hostility is also evident in the election propaganda of Turkish politicians, who continuously scapegoat Syrians for Turkey's domestic issues like the financial crisis. Nonetheless, this is ironic considering the open-door policy Turkey adopted in 2011 for those fleeing the war in Syria, which has completely reversed to today's fortification and “hudut namustur” (border is namus) policies.

Namus is an expression borrowed from Arabic to Turkish, originally meaning law or custom but somehow referring more to a notion of prudish morality in the colloquial use of Turkish.[47] For example, a family's namus would be associated with how romantically or sexually “pure” its females are, and if a wife sleeps with another man who is not her husband, she'd be “defiling” the husband's namus. Although this story seems to deviate from the border discourse, the previously mentioned expression suggests that the border itself is namus for the country, and therefore the fact that it is being irregularly crossed by the migrants is “defiling” Turkey's namus.

According to Yaşlı, slogans like “border is namus” proliferated in Turkey, together with “I don't want refugees in my country,” especially after the “secular-nationalist” politicians and their supporters promoted these claims on social media thousands of times, asserting that the country is under Syrian invasion.[48] He also highlights that from time to time, different disasters or important issues would be blamed on Syrian migrants, such as the wildfires that broke out in different regions of Turkey or an ordinary street fight being labeled as a clan fight between Syrians and Turks. These attitudes resulted in Syrians becoming the first suspects in rape or harassment incidents, and if a Syrian committed such a crime, it would be attributed to all Syrians in the country.[49]

The slogan “border is namus” can be seen even in the streets, sprayed onto the walls, hung as banners on fences, written at the gates of military barracks, printed on t-shirts, or painted on the border walls... It is also very common to see specific groups of secular-nationalist politicians advocating for the fortification of the border and the deportation of migrants to their home country, holding banners that say “border is namus.” This makes evident once again that politicians are manipulating the mental images people have about issues they are otherwise unaware of by using such slogans repeatedly both on social media and in the streets.

In the end, it is clear that the “streets” perceive the border in a limited way, primarily through the pictures provided by mainstream and social media outlets. Therefore, to better understand the Turkey-Syria border, it is essential to investigate the aesthetics that emerged through such outlets. Since the politicians designed the border as a project, mainstream media groups aligned with them produce images that influence the perception of the people, imposing realities that are often not the same as what happens in space.

For this very reason, we propose looking beyond the manipulative pictures imposed on the public regarding the Turkey-Syria border and

47. Sevan Nişanyan, “Namus,” in Nişanyan Sözlük, December 10, 2015, <https://www.nisanyansozluk.com/kelime/namus>.

48. Fatih Yaşlı, “Hudut Namustur: Seküler-Popülist Milliyetçiliğin İzinde”, *Fiscaeconomia*, no 7, (2023): 2641-2642. <https://doi.org/10.25295/fsecon.1322158>

49. Ibid

using architectural intelligence as a critical intervention in the way the media is being used to promote the border as a security mechanism. This is because there is an urgency to reimagine the aesthetics of the border as a project, one that is neither a fortress nor a hostile push-back weapon.

Ever since negotiations over a new Levant map began between Turkey and Syria, the border line sketched on the map has significantly changed from what was originally proposed. However, one fact remains: the Turkey-Syria border is still a bone of contention. After briefly tracing the history of the line, this chapter looked into the aesthetics of the border as a security mechanism in Turkish media to better understand the discourse surrounding the border. Finally, the next part will propose a method of inquiry to critically intervene in the media by scanning the bone of contention and reimagining it by revealing a sort of X-ray of the border.

Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.14



Fig.15



1. Fig. 8,9,10,14: <https://www.ciddigazete.com/>
2. Fig. 12: <https://www.onedio.com/>
3. Fig. 11: <https://www.ciddigazete.com.tr/>
4. Fig. 13: <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com/>
5. Fig. 15: <https://www.memleketpartisi.org.tr/>

“An X-ray is a quick and painless procedure commonly used to produce images of the inside of the body. it is a very effective way of looking at the bones and can be used to help detect a range of conditions. ... X-rays are a type of radiation that can pass through the body. They can’t be seen by the naked eye and you can’t feel them. As they pass through the body, the energy from X-rays is absorbed at different rates by different parts of the body. A detector on the other side of the body picks up the X-rays after they’ve passed through and turns them into an image. Dense parts of your body that X-rays find it more difficult to pass through, such as bone, show up as clear white areas on the image. Softer parts that X-rays can pass through more easily, such as your heart and lungs, show up as darker areas.”[1] (Walkden Gateway Medical Practice, “X-Ray”).

What would you see if you X-rayed a territory? What would constitute the skeleton of a mountain? How would the internal organs of a city be laid out? And what about its bones and joints? Can you detect a tree’s broken hip, or a bone growing in an apartment’s soft tissue? Then how would the border appear; as clear white, indicating higher density, or darker, where X-rays pass through easily?

As absurd as it may sound, the process of a radiographer X-raying a body is somewhat similar to a researcher investigating a space. By using architecture as a tool to scan a territory, one can detect its different spatial conditions and the ways in which it is inhabited. This investigation goes across the layers of data, turning them into an image that absorbs overlapping information. The ultimate products are portrayals of urbanism that render intricate spatial conditions visible to the naked eye. In other words, such images can expose stories that are made invisible, such as struggles of life and death, or the weaponization and securitization of spaces.

What do you do with an X-Ray image of a body? A radiographer typically forwards it to the attending physician, who examines the image to detect problems in the internal organs or soft tissues of a patient. Subsequently, the physician reacts to solve it, whether by prescribing medication or performing surgery. But what about an X-Ray image of a territory? What would a researcher do with it? There is no cure, surgery, or medication that a researcher can prescribe by themselves, let alone perform surgery. Instead, the researcher exposes the hidden (or made invisible), offers a diagnosis, or rejects the accustomed diagnosis, thereby opening a discussion. So, scanning a territory does not necessarily aim to prescribe a spatial solution but to challenge restricted ways in which we understand the territories, factors that affect its conditions, spatial implications of projects like borders, and the ways in which people inhabit them. Therefore, the process of X-ray is not something done to an object, nor is it the implementation of any project.[2] As Colomina suggests, “the object is already transparent, and the X-rays allow us to see it as such,” rather it serves as a diagnostic tool.[3]

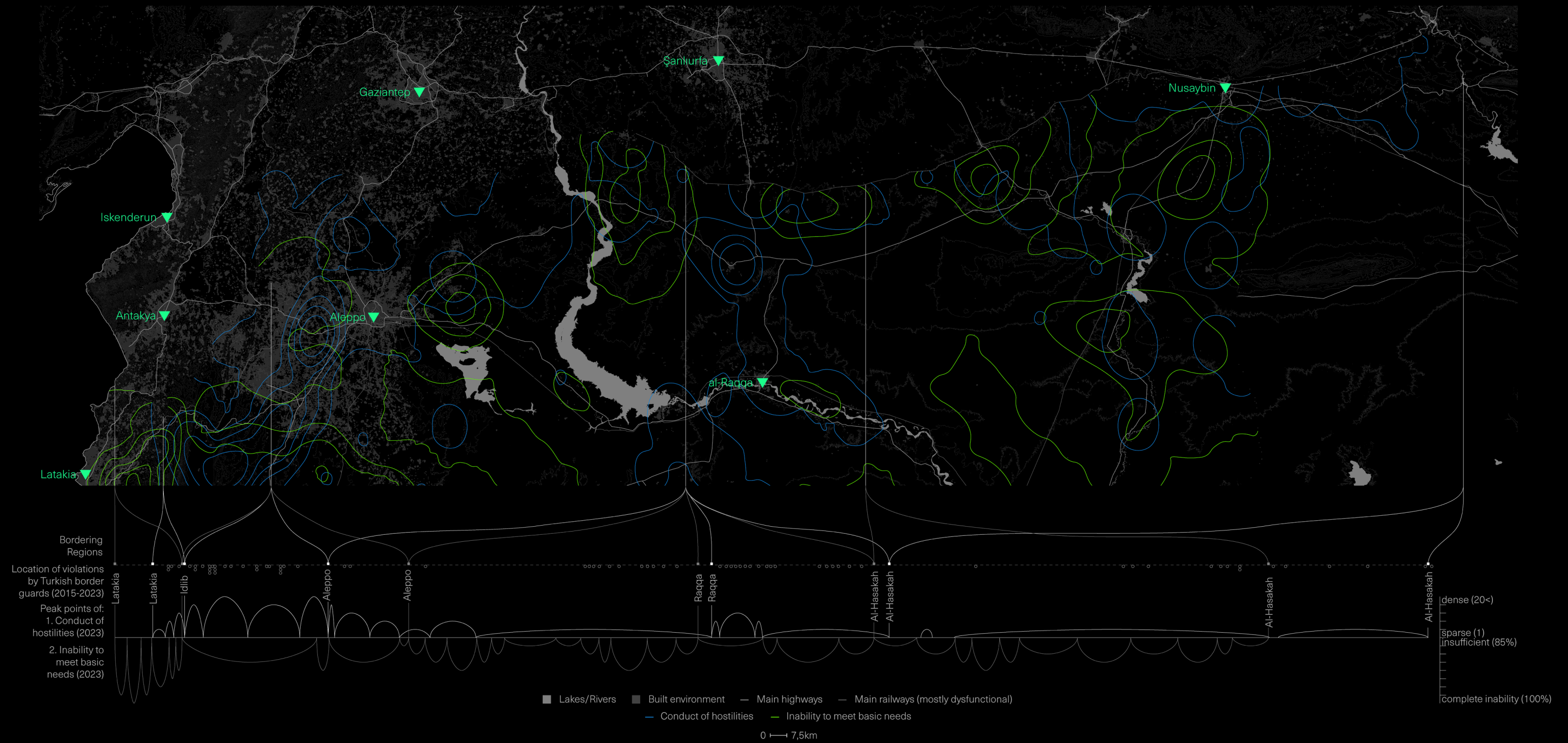
1. “X-Ray,” Walkden Gateway Medical Practice, April 20, 2022.
2. Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 120
3. Ibid

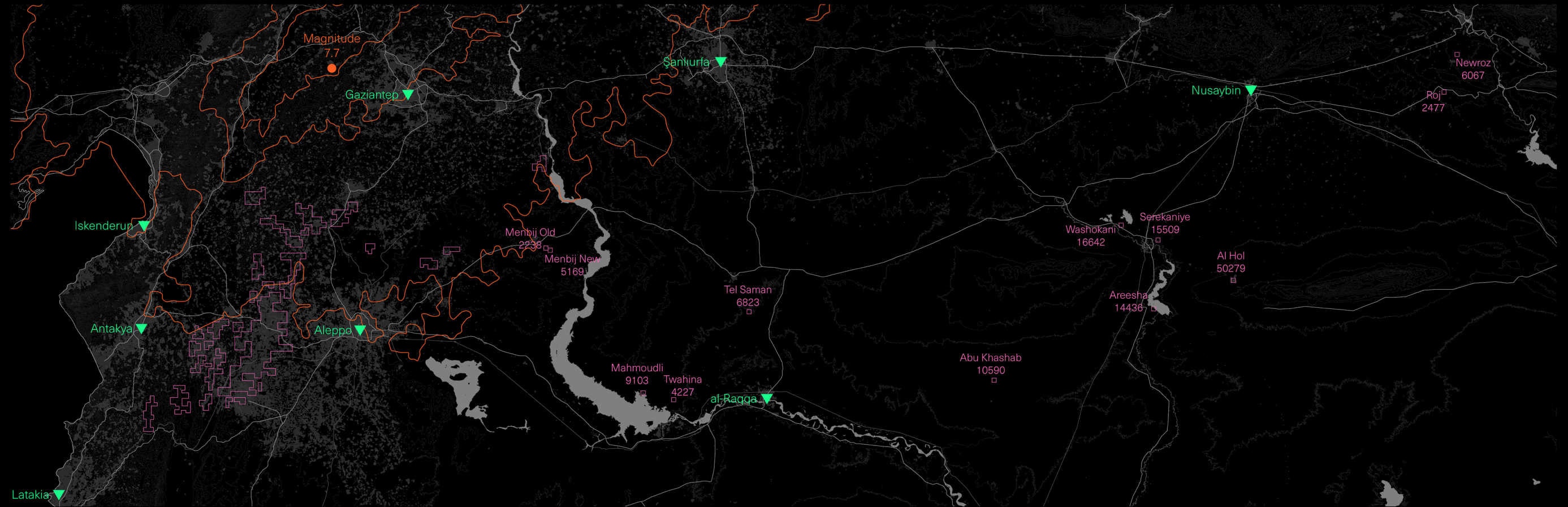
As one can imagine, not every physician is trained to examine every single part of the body; when an orthopedist examines an X-Ray image, they would focus on the patient's musculoskeletal system. Likewise, a researcher would concentrate on a specific object, which in our scenario is the border, particularly the one shared by Turkey and Syria. Looking at an X-Ray image of a border involves observing the systems it orders, the flows it controls, and the spaces it generates. Attempting to understand the border and the environment in which it is situated in Turkey and Syria is a confrontation with these materialization processes of the border.

In our scenario, X-ray is a notion instrumentalized to read the spaces it makes and remakes, in a different way than what was being imposed on the mainstream media outlets run by pro-government organizations in Turkey. The border discourse of the government imposes the aesthetics of the border as a project of securitization, but once we analyze the territory through the lenses of architecture (and more), the aesthetics of that same border shifts, and reveals different nuances. Scanning a territory, thereby, is to use architectural intelligence as a critical intervention and proposes to mobilize a different intelligence of the territory to unpack the border project.

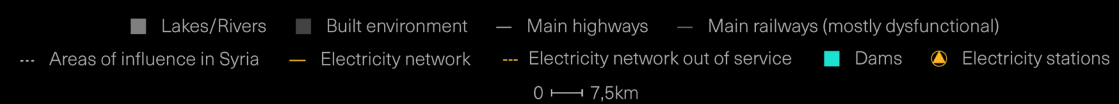
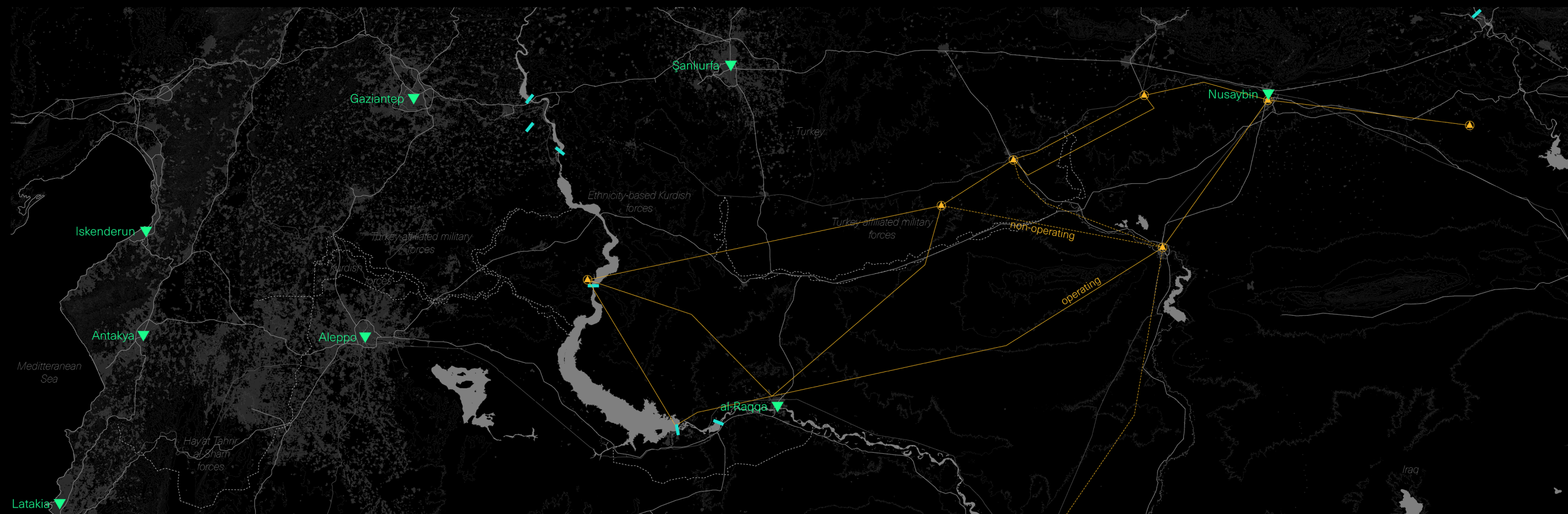
To challenge this imposed aesthetics as well as the limited and bidimensional understanding of the border on conventional maps, the research manipulates cartographic analyses, statistical and territorial data to remap the space through using architectural tools. This, substantially is referred to as scanning the territory, a sort of X-Ray. Thinking of the border as a bone, in all its material, symbolic, and organic dimensions, and the X-ray as a method of inquiry under their surface and immediately visible elements, it is possible to reveal the different spatial conditions.

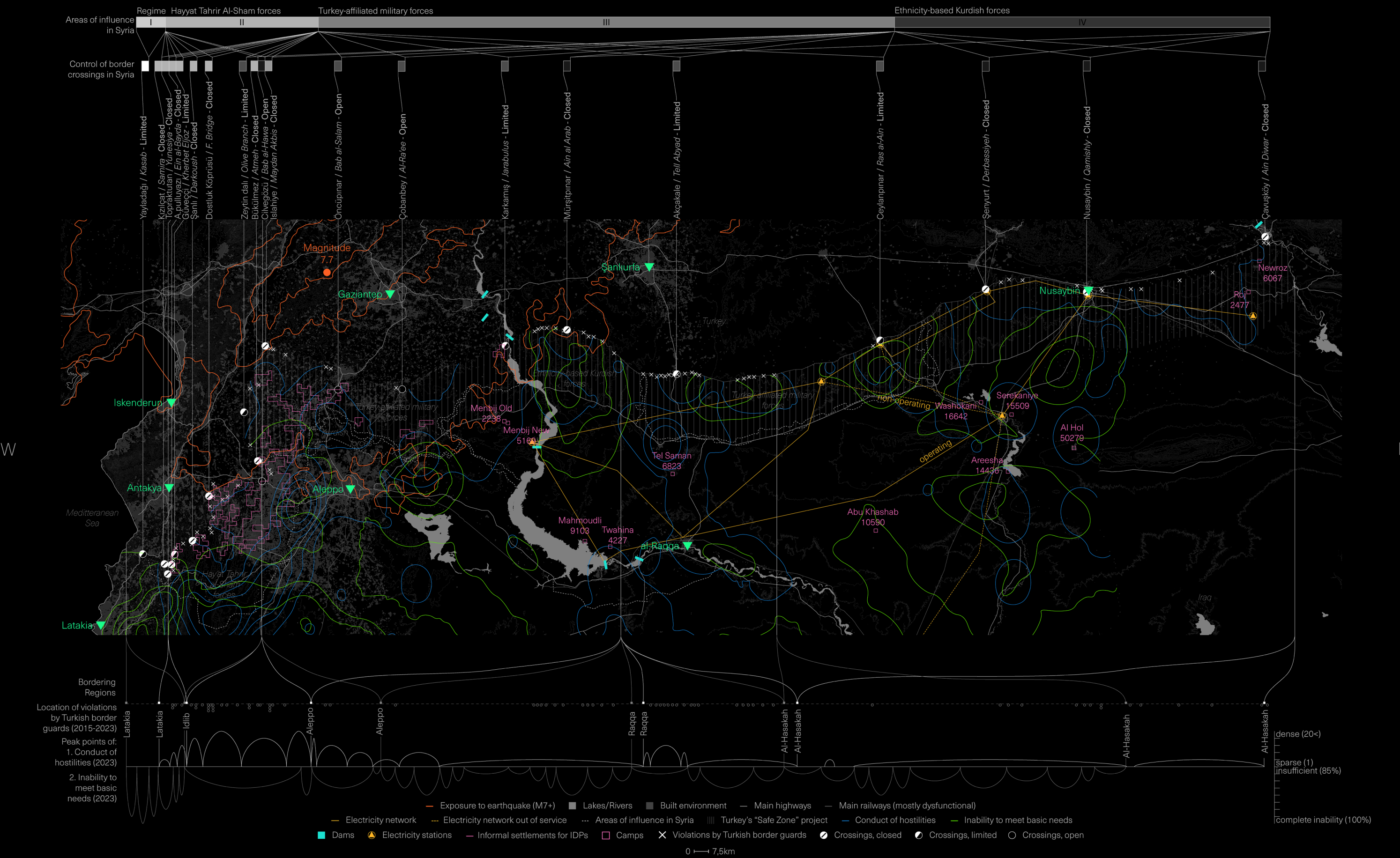






■ Lakes/Rivers ■ Built environment — Main highways — Main railways (mostly dysfunctional)
 — Exposure to earthquake (M7+) — Informal settlements for IDPs □ Camps
 0 — 7,5km





2.2

Reading the maps

By using a number of maps published by different sources online, especially the UN organizations, NGOs, research institutes, and journalists as well as the GIS data provided by the Humanitarian Data Exchange, this part offers a speculative mapping of the territory.

As we argue that the border is thicker than a two-dimensional line and should be treated as a landscape, the border line is deliberately not drawn. Indeed, one can already discern the division between the two states by looking at the maps, as certain layers of data are only revealed in the Syrian territories.

Examples include the inability to meet basic needs, functioning and damaged electricity lines, informal settlements and IDP camps, frequent hostilities, varying areas of influence in northern Syria, and the groups controlling the border crossings with Turkey. This encompasses the conditions at each crossing and the violence encountered around them.

While looking at the whole picture, the maps overlay several sets of spatial data. They begin with the terrain and water bodies of the territory, illustrating the dams on both the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. They also display the main highways that were primarily used (and now mostly dysfunctional railways), highlighting the infrastructure for mobility and the popular routes historically followed by movements.

To spatially depict the population along the territory, the maps reveal the urbanized areas through the density of the buildings, and juxtapose this with exposure to different earthquake intensities to understand their spatial impact.

The maps enabled us to get closer to the border by scanning it through the spaces it makes and remakes, however, to fully engage with the territory and unlock the relation between spaces and narratives, we decided to journey along the Turkey-Syria border and get even closer.

Engaging with the “bone of contention”

3.1

A field study along the Turkey-Syria borderscape

When the region was hit by the twin earthquakes in February 2023, the research took a different turn. Until then, most of the reviewed literature focused on the Turkey-Syria border related to migration influx and the EU-supported border policies of Turkey, from open doors to fortification, increasingly restrictive in approach and violent in action. We had located our thoughts on a historical account that investigates the forces shaping the territory, which fluctuated when the territory was brutally shaken by the earthquake.

Although a field trip to the region was already being discussed, the earthquake significantly prompted it, and three months later, in May 2023, we finally engaged with the territory. As the Turkish presidential election week was unfolding at that specific time, there was high tension due to the polarized and heated debates among supporters of different political ideologies in the territory. Since the trip was not directly related to the elections, observing people engaging in conversations about politics only revealed different perspectives about the places and how they inhabit them.

The journey covered over a thousand kilometers, encompassing five different cities along the border, and collected data through interviews, personal experiences, and photography. During this process, many moments were transcribed as a travel diary in the author's notebook, forming the foundation of this part. The text is evidently written from a first-person perspective, different from the rest of the thesis, to keep the feelings and personal experiences attached to it.

Since the armed conflict in the northern Syria region has not reached the end and almost all of the border crossings for arbitrary travels are restricted by Turkey, the field study along the borderscape was not realized in the Syrian territories of the border. Therefore, we reached out to people living in the Turkish cities bordering Syria and found a diverse group of inhabitants with different occupations, ethnicities, and locations. Specifically, an Aleppo soap factory owner in Gaziantep, a farmer family in Şanlıurfa, a Civil Development Organization in Mardin, and a worker in the petroleum site of Batman responded to our efforts to conduct interviews and show us where they live.

The trip starts from the city of Hatay, one of the most damaged cities after the earthquake, at the western end of the 911-km-long Turkey-Syria border, and moves eastward to Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Mardin, and Batman, respectively. Besides the collected data and personal experiences, this part provides occasional historical accounts on specific issues and places, as well as spatial descriptions of the environment in which the journey took place.

[illegible]

- Sabun vs saponat & sabun
gibi sabunlar sabun da
da aslında ~~oldu~~ oldu.
- Kaplan kapama olan
sektörler den etrafinı kapata
- "İlk yollarda Almanya'daki
Türkler gibi."
- Sımp'de seriat hukuk var.
① → TR'de Sımp'de bir
sektördeki ulna doküman
gibi gonderiler
- ② → Afyon'un içindeki gıda
- İsan kurtuluşu altyapı
② Kaplan gıda
- Peket kurtuluşu
↳ İsan'ın pekeli
- Garibin Va bula tırnakları
gibi oldu
- İsan kurtuluşu
② İsan kurtuluşu
- Gazeteler "Halkın" gibi
"Türk" gibi ②
- "Türk" de ismi ②
İsan kurtuluşu
- "İsan kurtuluşu
② İsan kurtuluşu

Day 2:

16/05
Chlor-alk

→ Fabrika gearsi, hup / Nrup
→ Ufa'ja chek-in
→ Ufa' dehiwite nekwin
Bakwin' dehiwite nekwin
Mandri' dehiwite nekwin
→ Batanga dehiwin!
→ Note down the interviews
that were made through
the Batanga-Arup trips.
→ Where to eat in Ufa?

→ Taw bay;
"2021" der bu you nton siera"
nawanda,
"4 father stant wa"
↳ Gk. stant...
↳ Nasil stant
oganta?

→ So → it's a programme?
no letter, no class?
TK → no letter, no programme?
→ And no letter means less
classmate often?
→ "nasal" signal means no letter
classmate.
→ Nasil qui gaderachela?

[illegible]

3.2
Hatay

Hatay, Antakya
12:05 Arrival at Ataturk Bulvari, first impressions

I did not know where to stop the car, but all this anxiety came to an end when I realized I really had to use the toilet. So I stopped when I saw one made of a container, took my first steps on Antakya to enter, and it did not take so long until I realized that there was no water. All the waste was piled up underneath the infamous a la turca hole. There was a crippling smell that is hard to resist even for a minute, even worse with the stubborn flies that encircled me. This first impression showed instantly the living condition emergency that was unfolding.

Since I did not know who to talk with, it seemed easier to talk with a law enforcement officer standing in the corner, who told me about the locations of container/tent settlements as well as where I should walk. “Go to the other side of the river,” he said, “you’ll see the destruction better.” This clear indication paved my second stop.

12:30 Stop at İzzet Güçlü Caddesi, walking around the rubbles

I found a place to leave the car that was far enough from the nearest highly damaged building which gave me the impression that it could collapse in any second. Afterward, I took a long walk along the riverside that cut across the city center. For the first hundred meters or so, I paid attention to every single step I took; not only the fear of an instant aftershock that could destroy an already highly damaged built environment but also the rubbles that seemed very homogeneous from afar though they were a mix of unidentified wastes.

I did not know what I was walking on. This highly self-conscious walk was accelerated over time after I got used to being accompanied by hundreds of flying insects while feeling the peculiar ambient scent in this dusty environment that caused less than usual visibility range.

12:45 Stop at a kebab shop in the rubbles, a conversation with the locals

After circling around a bit, I finally gathered enough courage to interact with a local who was sitting in an outdoor kebab shop with a couple of empty tables, surrounded by rubble, as if it was the only place standing still in the dystopian scene. This seemed like an opportunity to have a subtle conversation, so I stepped forward: “As-Salaam Alaikum!” After this greeting, I asked for a bottle of cold water. At first, this request from a random gringo with a camera around his neck baffled him, as he was apparently only covering the shop for his brother, who was going to be back soon.

After explaining to him the reason why I was there, he immediately embraced the situation and started talking about the current struggles they had been facing.

The first thing he mentioned was the debt they are deep in, “We’ve lost everything we had; I had to borrow a little money from a friend, but now I do not know how to pay him back.”

The government offered cash support to the quake victims (10,000 Turkish Liras a month for each household) but their worries are constant and can not be resolved with a humble cash inflow, which by the way did not reach all the victims who had applied.[1]

He was not complaining, but they had experienced so much in such a short time that it led to inevitable exhaustion. People were still in a state of shock, which made it difficult for them to clearly express what had happened. “It was so bad,” he could only repeat, “I do not find the words that could describe what we experienced.”

Like many inhabitants who were not severely wounded, he joined the rescue operations as soon as he was rescued. “So many people I knew died,” he added to his scattered words describing what he went through. “We were picking up the bloody pieces of corpses... Our friends, they were under those rubbles... I remember pulling out my friend’s arm. Now it all came flooding back, but I can hardly ever unsee it.” I did not ask any questions as he did not go into more detail, but the silence ceased when he reproached. “The number of casualties was way more than what was reported in the mainstream media.” At the time of this interaction, the reported death toll was over 52,000 in Turkey and Syria combined.[2]

The frustration was obvious when he talked about those days; after he finished his sentences, he gave one last pause, looking at me as if he wanted to digress. So I asked about the first thing I noticed when I took a glance around: the significant number of law enforcement officers in the streets. “Soldiers have been patrolling the streets, but even when they switch positions or simply move, the risk of looting remains,” he said. Besides everything else, this made it evident that the inhabitants still did not feel safe.

The question of safety made me curious about where exactly they were inhabiting after the disaster. “We are still in our original apartment on the hills,” he responded. In comparison to the city center of Antakya, where the scale of destruction is massive, the surrounding villages on the hills are less damaged. So there are still people living in their houses, although some buildings have been advised to be demolished by the experts. But here is the deadlock: Where else could people go to live?

Many inhabitants from the quake region who migrated to other cities in Turkey have been facing financial troubles due to inflated rental prices alongside the unemployment crisis. In some places, such as private hotels that hosted the inhabitants of the quake region for a while, these “guests” will soon have to leave when the tourism season finally arrives. As the Turkish proverb goes, “It is easy to say ‘come’, but difficult to say ‘leave’ (to guests).” Here, the segregation that migrants feel is substantial; being a “guest” only underlines the temporariness of their condition, whereas they all need more solid plans for their future.[3]

On the other side of the spectrum, people from the region who did not migrate are in a different waiting process; the oblivious proposals made on the reconstruction of the destroyed cities solely focus on mass housing development. Although the housing crisis is supposed to be the priority, many other dimensions before reconstructing destroyed cities have to be taken into account since reconstruction does not only mean making buildings.

1. "İçişleri Bakanlığı depremzedelere yardımla ilgili sıkça sorulan 7 soruya yanıt verdi," Euronews, February, 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/02/19/icisleri-bakanligi-afetzedelere-yardimla-ilgili-sikca-sorulan-7-soruya-yanit-verdi>

2. "Earthquake death toll in Turkey rises above 45,000 - AFAD," Reuters, March, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/earthquake-death-toll-turkey-rises-above-45000-afad-2023-03-01/>

3. "Al Madafeh/The Living Room," Decolonizing Architecture Art Research, 2016, <https://www.decolonizing.ps/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-living-room-in-Permanent-Temporariness-art-and-theory-2019.pdf>

According to a statement issued by the Turkish Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change on March 18, 2023: “As of today, we have conducted inspections in 1,875,000 buildings comprising 5,397,000 independent units in the earthquake-affected provinces. Within these, we have determined that 301,000 buildings, consisting of 883,000 independent units, need to be demolished, are in urgent need of demolition, are already collapsed, or are in moderate damage.”[4]

As evident from the Turkish Minister’s statement, the inspections conducted in the 11 cities affected by the earthquake reveal the scale of destruction in the region. However, it is widely known among the inhabitants that these inspections did not include a comprehensive forensic analysis (for legal purposes to detect any potential crimes) of the rubble, let alone a meticulous soil survey before any construction. Moreover, the authorities decided to quickly remove the rubble without allowing for a criminal investigation in many cases and immediately started constructing mass housing projects in the same region. Thus, what remains unsold are some scattered under-construction residential buildings in the rural areas of the region claimed to be earthquake-resistant this time. However, due to this strict focus on the resistance of the material, the quality of life for the inhabitants is once again overlooked.

The 2023 Turkish general election campaigns prompted a kick-start of the “reconstruction” of the post-earthquake areas since the quantity was going to play an important role in their win. This materialistic approach treats the inhabitants of the region as potential votes, and the aforementioned projects as what will convince more votes. Hence, the people who did not migrate will have to be living in their damaged dwellings until they’re destroyed and reconstructed; or in the container/tent settlements relying on aid and limited facilities.

As of April 24th, a total of 449 tents and 313 container camp areas have been established in the earthquake-affected provinces to meet the temporary housing needs of the citizens. Within these areas, 783,411 tents and 75,879 containers have been set up. A total of 2,683,562 earthquake victims have been placed in temporary shelter points, with 2,537,868 in tent camps and 145,694 in container camps.[5]

One of the people who did not migrate was the man who welcomed me to his kebab shop. Later, we were joined by his brother, who gave me suggestions for the next stop. “You should see the historical city center, Ulucamii; it is really valuable for us, but now it is mostly ruins that remain.” I took their recommendation, and before I departed, I wanted to pay for the water. “It is on us; you are a journalist... Just let them witness the condition we are in,” they said.

13:00 Arrival at the city center, a walk around

As I made my way to the next stop, I found it hard to navigate to the historical city center. Being in this city for the first time, walking through the destroyed buildings in blocks full of rubble, it seemed as if the streets had disappeared; there was no reason to name any path. This homogeneity of the environment pushed me to ask someone for directions. The question on my mind was simple. I was going to ask the

4. Hasan Hüseyin Kul and Büşra Çoban, “Bakan Kurum: Bir Yıl İçinde 319 Bin, Ardından da Toplamda 650 Bin Konutumuz Bitireceğiz,” AA, April 20, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/bakan-kurum-bir-yil-icinde-319-bin-ardindan-da-toplamda-650-bin-konutumuzu-bitirecegiz/2877821>.

5. Sefa Şahin, “Deprem bölgesinde kurulan konteyner sayısı 75 bini aştı,” Anadolu Ajansı, April 24, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/asrin-felaketi/deprem-bolgesinde-kurulan-konteyner-sayisi-75-bini-asti/>

first person, “Where is Ulucamii?” But for a second, I stalled and realized that the question had to become, “Where was Ulucamii?” as there is no Ulucamii anymore. This slip made me notice that I was present in a changed chronological arrangement; a disrupted flow of time.

Nevertheless, the inhabitants who remained had to find new ways of living, such as setting up street food corners made of tents on the sidewalks or using downtown thoroughfares filled with clustered containers serving as banks, notary offices, jewelry shops, money transfer agencies, and more. During my walk in the city center, I encountered many of these new daily customs of the inhabitants.

After circling around, I returned to the car to explore other areas of the city. Even driving felt different; many streets lacked traffic lights, with armed soldiers now in charge of directing car traffic. In areas where the asphalt was severely damaged, I had to navigate in the opposite direction. Everyone else seemed to be aware of the new order

13:45 Drive around the different zones of the city, observing the abandoned streets

I kept exploring the city, stopping at various places to see everything in full measure. Eventually, I stumbled upon a container settlement nestled amidst severely damaged building blocks where actual buildings once stood but were now swept away. It was at this moment that I decided to park the car and wander around this quiet residential neighborhood.

The facades of the buildings had missing pieces, allowing you to see through them; balconies were intertwined as they stacked on top of each other like dominoes; trees had fallen and fire hydrants turned upside down; everything was in the wrong place. Scanning through the perforated building envelopes, I was able to see the memories of the people who had lived here until a few months ago. Looking at the clocks that had stopped, calendars remaining still on the page of February 6th, 2023, it was beside the point to perceive what day/time it currently was.

These left-behind objects inside the buildings — that are considered not too damaged to demolish immediately but too dangerous to step inside — were now shaping the new environment. At the very least, they represented what remained of the original built environment.

In one of those evacuated, highly damaged buildings, there was writing on the wall visible through the fallen section of the facade: “Geriye dönük şekilde anlaşılır ama ileriye doğru bir şekilde yaşanır,” meaning “Life can only be understood by looking backward; but it must be lived looking forward.” Apparently, some inhabitants had embraced this quote from Kierkegaard so deeply that they had it written on their living room wall.

On the other side, amidst all those buildings, the container settlement seemed very quiet; all the doors were closed except for one, where an old gentleman was sitting in front of the door, smoking his cigarette slowly – as if he were looking backward. After a momentary eye contact, he looked away, so I walked back to the car.

14:45 Drive to Reyhanlı province, following the border walls

After leaving the city center, Antakya, I was moving towards the next province in the city: Reyhanlı. The province is located next to the Turkey-Syria border — including the Cilvegözü border gate. Apart from the everlasting farmlands along the route, one thing that struck me most were the stranded border walls that followed for hundreds of kilometers. Roaming farm animals grazed in the grasslands under the shadow of these barbed wire walls. The shepherds seemed accustomed to these territorial limitations, attentively leading their animals away from the walls.

Not farther from the plantations, I noticed irregular but massive grey piles that clearly did not belong in those green areas. When looked carefully, it could be understood that these were stacked rubble seemingly from the post-quake region. Considering the scale of destruction across more than ten cities, it is easy to assume that there is much more to these piles and the ecological consequences they bring. Not only the contamination of land and water, but also through the air; all the living species were inhaling various toxic particles. Both short and long-term repercussions are expected.

15:30 Arrival at Reyhanlı, walking around Yeni and Yenişehir neighborhoods

Moving on to urban areas, despite all the built elements of this full-scale surveillance machine, at the entrances/exits of certain provinces such as Reyhanlı, I also encountered traffic security checkpoints conducted by armed law enforcement officers. After driving through the busy streets, Reyhanlı seemed as if it had not been hit by the earthquake at all, apart from a few highly damaged buildings that were being demolished under control.

It later became evident that the conditions in different provinces of Hatay are significantly contrasting; while some are completely destroyed, others are still standing.

Continuing down the streets, I could not help but notice Arabic signs on numerous shops, becoming more prevalent as I traveled closer to the Syrian border. It is the only province in the city where the number of Syrian citizens exceeds that of Turkish citizens. In order to gain local insights, I interacted with some small business owners (esnaf), asking them their thoughts on the current situation.

One of them, a Turkish man, hesitated at first and asked, “But for what purpose? Who are you?” As it was the day after the first round of the 2023 Turkish general election, many mistook me for a journalist or a member of a political party who might be on a field study.

“Two out of three esnaf here are Syrian, they have taken over most of the jobs,” he said. Although not all the Turkish people in Reyhanlı would agree with him, it was not the first time I had heard such a comment. He continued, “They are cheaper laborers and they work without a license,” In fact, the majority of Syrian citizens do not have Turkish documentation, so some employers have been exploiting them by giving jobs with much lower wages. Consequently, many Syrian citizens, especially the young ones, have become a cheap workforce, and a significant number of Turks

believe that this has led to a decrease in their share of the cake. I went on asking if the Syrian community here had an elected representative such as a headman (muhtar), but another local resident, also a Turkish man, stated: “They had an attempt to run a candidate for the local elections but the Turkish tribes in the region did not allow them.” This made me curious if this rejection had caused any backlash, later he added: “They are not in a position to provoke a rebellion.”

Given this attitude by the people I encountered, it was not surprising that Syrian citizens were unable to prominently establish such an organization of their own. Since I continued to inquire about their thoughts on the border walls. The first man responded: “We are nationalist men, we do not want to allow them to cross the border. But the walls do not work! Whenever it rains heavily, the soil under those shallow concrete elements slides, so people can cross as they want,” Although there was no proof to what he said, he was not the only person believing that border walls had not stopped the crossings. “If the border walls work, how come the majority of the people here are Syrians?” he added.

I decided to approach the border walls to see them myself. Locals suggested that I go to a millet bahcesi, a lake park project that the government had initiated recently, located at the foot of a hill that is equipped with border walls. Upon arriving at this park, I could not help but feel a sense of irony; it seemed as if I was not right underneath the massive concrete blocks that supposedly “safeguard Turkey from Syria”. Instead what I witnessed was a different scene; both Syrians and Turks were enjoying time with their children, sharing drinks, riding bikes, and engaging in conversations around a small lake within this forest garden. So perhaps, they could live together in the end.

17:15 Departure from Reyhanlı, last impressions at Yenişehir Göl Parkı

It was a good opportunity to have a break while observing the environment, so I stopped for a while in the park and ordered a coffee in a family tea garden – which refers to a wide commercial concept in Turkey where the establishments sell mostly hot beverages and snacks, but usually do not comprise a diner or any alcoholic drinks. As befits the name, usually families or groups of friends go to such places to have some tea while playing a renowned table game, backgammon.

After sipping my tea with a view of the border walls and the sound of the kids playing around, I slowly headed off to leave Hatay and reach Gaziantep. While I was driving towards the next destination, the highway rendered many curves that were next to the watchtowers and patrol roads of the border walls. Ironically enough, I did not feel safe to stop and walk around to take pictures, as it could be misinterpreted and caused worse consequences – although they meant to “keep us safe.”

Gaziantep

20:00 Arrival at the city of Gaziantep, first impressions at the city center

After a two and a half hour ride towards the north, I had finally reached the city center of Gaziantep. As I entered the main avenue, the difference between the two cities had baffled me. Sparkling lights coming from the commercial district of the town were the indicator of how life goes on for Gaziantep, which is very close to both the epicenter and the border. The ninth-largest city in Turkey did not seem to care about all the tension

happening above and below its ground. The flashy signs of the kebab restaurants seduced me into tasting the local cuisine. A guilty paradise for a carnivore, it is known as 'the city of gastronomy' with more than 300 varieties of dishes that demonstrate the multiethnic community of the territory. There is no doubt that here, the food brings people together.

22:00 Return to the Motel, lights out

I had woken up at 4.30 am in the morning, made a long trip from Istanbul to first Adana by plane; then a 466 km drive through Hatay to finally reach Gaziantep. The very first day of the trip took seventeen and a half hours, during which my five senses registered much more than I could possibly translate into words. I saw the inside becoming outside; I smelled the scent of which still remains; I touched what seemed to belong to no one; I heard stories of endurance; and I tasted what holds people together. By the end of it, I was able to perceive the space in a way that I could not have perceived from afar.

→
A photographic
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Antakya, May 2023



Antakya, May 2023



Antakya, May 2023



Antakya, May 2023



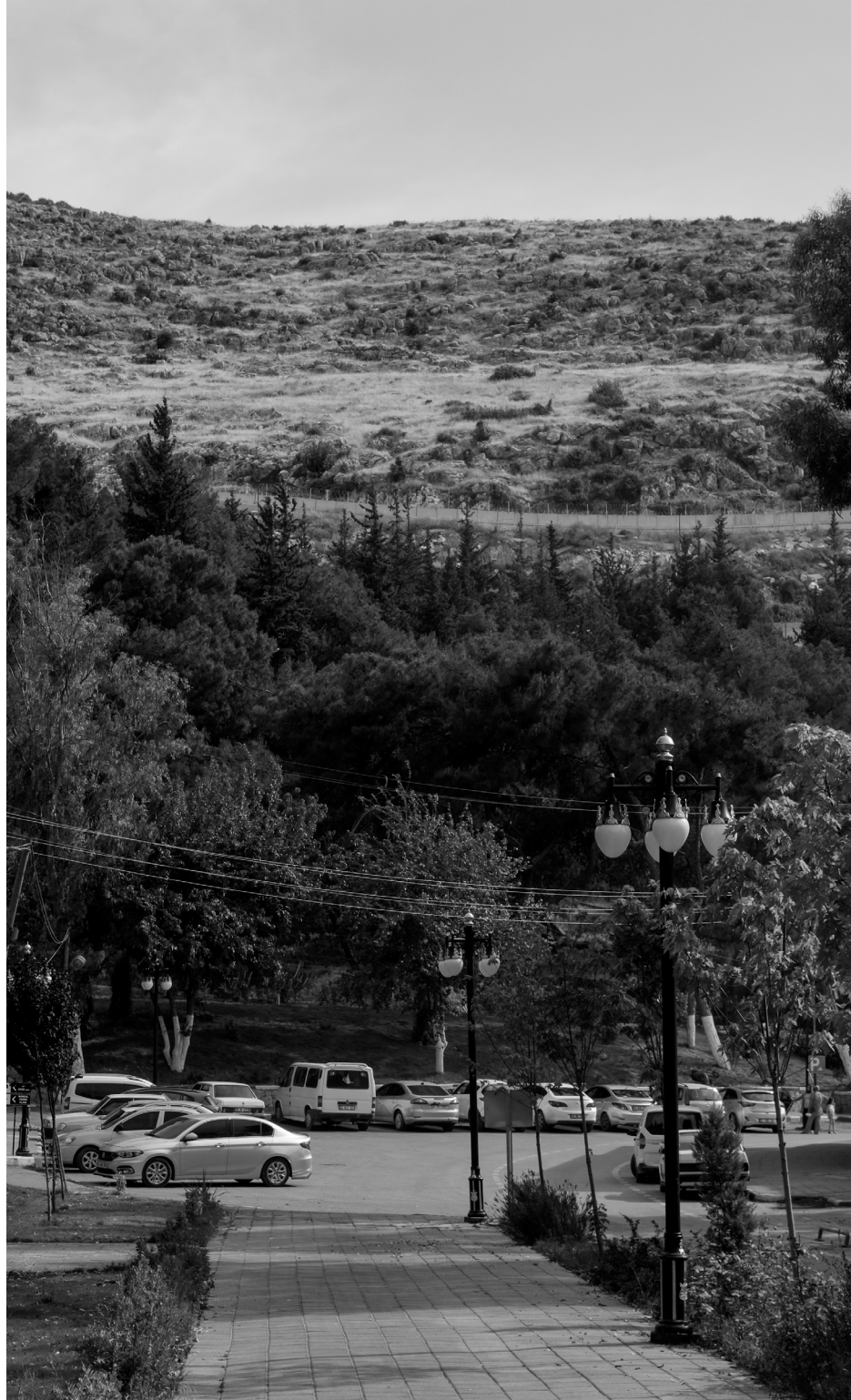


Antakya, May 2023



Antakya, May 2023





3.3
Gaziantep

Gaziantep, Nizip
11:30 Arrival at Nizip Industrial Site, an interview at the soap factory

After checking out from the motel, I headed east to a district called Nizip. Apart from being the biggest district of Gaziantep, it is also known for its fairly large agriculture-based industry — mainly the production of pistachio, olive oil, Aleppo soap, etc.

I had arranged a meeting beforehand with one of the factory owners, who is in charge of a company that has been operating since the seventies. My goal had been to interact with as many people from the territory as possible; especially people who had different types of occupations (and naturally the status) in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the space. Hence, I reached out to everyone I know from the territory to find out if they could direct me to their connections, or the connections of their connections, etc. In the end, my efforts proved effective since I could arrange visits almost everywhere I went during my trip. The very first arranged meeting was with the factory owner; upon his request to be anonymous, his personal information was not mentioned.

Arriving at the industrial site full of different types of factories spread over a surface area that is bigger than 500.000 m²; 47 companies operate their production side-to-side.[6] Much larger than my expectations, I had finally found their factory after a while of exploration. I left the car at the gate and stepped towards the entrance of the building. Inside, there was a man who greeted me with a facial expression that was easy to read; he was confused why a random young man with a camera on his neck would have visited a soap factory; he was clearly not informed. So he phoned the factory owner to confirm, and soon after I was climbing the stairs to reach the owner’s office.

A seemed to be in his late thirties was waiting for me at the door; his shiny glasses and big watch caught my eye immediately. He introduced himself as the son of the owner; although I had thought I was going to have a meeting with his father, he later clarified that this is a family business for generations; and currently, he is the one who is in charge of the operations.

One handshake later, he had asked if I wanted to drink tea or coffee – the very first question millions of people would ask in the region whenever a guest appears on their premises. After I accepted the offer, he quickly picked up his phone to order, “Two glasses of tea for us,” and once he hung up, he looked at me, “How can I help you, Mr. Mustafa?”

I had not written down questions to ask him prior to the meeting, as I had planned these interactions to proceed organically. Therefore, my intention was to start our conversation by asking very general questions to get to know the interviewee first; so then I could have a chance to conduct the rest accordingly. After introducing him to my research and telling him what topics could be of interest, I got my notebook and pen ready.

6. “Statistics of Nizip Industrial Site”, Nizip OSB, 2024, <https://www.niziposb.org/firmalar/>

What is the story of this family business?

“The ongoing business originated from my grandfather’s enterprises about 50 years ago;” he showed me the old man’s portrait hung on the wall proudly, “aside from producing the traditional Aleppo soap, they had grown olive and pistachio trees, just like many others at the time.” He continued, “During the Ottoman era, they had initiated a number of devlûp in the region; so, even the older generations were occupied with agriculture.”

He emphasized the importance of their job: “Until a few decades ago, soap production in Nizip had satisfied half of the entire country’s needs.” When I asked what happened afterward, he criticized, “We failed to take advantage of the technological enhancements.”

As a result of its advantageous location, the authorities had invested in the region to enhance production activities for decades. Thus, Gaziantep became the most developed among all the cities in the territory with a major part of its population that was employed in agro-industry.[7] The investments had created new job opportunities which led to significant numbers of workers migrating to Gaziantep at the time. Moreover, the construction of the interregional highway E-90 made transportation between the cities much easier, which played a crucial role in the development of both the city and the territory.[8]

How did the war in Syria affect your business?

“Many people complained that Syrian immigrants were cheap laborers since they had taken away jobs... But look outside,” he pointed at the window, “we have Syrian employees and we have been getting along very well for years now.” He then added, “Besides, not only laborers but also the business owners had immigrated, which helped us to open our work in the international market.”

I asked if they lived together in the same neighborhoods as the Syrian community, “More or less...” he stuttered; “Neighborhoods are quite mixed.” Until this very last question, he had given confident answers. However, it seemed as if he was equivocating, “The fact that they had terminated the refugee camps caused a refugee inflow to the city.” he continued. “I consider them as the first generation of Turks who had immigrated to Germany, they were doing cheap labor to survive.” While we were talking, the man who had greeted me earlier brought the tea. This short pause gave me an opportunity to decide my next question.

What are the other fields of business within the region?

“Industry of the grain products plays a key role in the economy of the region, especially in Şanlıurfa. Then, there are the traditional crafts of each city, such as making slippers and carpets in Gaziantep.” He later added “smuggling” to his response, “Also smuggling is a very serious matter, especially in Mardin.” When I asked about the specific items, he laughed, “Everything!” and continued, “For example, smuggling fuel oil from the other side of the border is a common occurrence.” He then looked away; at that point, it was clear that not everyone was comfortable with discussing this topic.

7. Selim Erdoğan, “Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesinin Ekonomik Yapısı,” Dicle Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi, 5, no. 5 (October 1992): 263-71.
8. Emin Sönmez and Zafar Başkaya, “anayi ve ulaşım fonksiyonlarına bağlı gelişen bir şehir: Nizip,” Doğu Coğrafya Dergisi, 17, no. 28 (2012): 79-102

I remember vividly that I had to learn when to stay quiet throughout the interviews. However, it was difficult not to grip it firmly since I had a particular interest in the topic of smuggling; a transnational shadow economy that has played a significant role in the economy of the region. [9] It was in fact a field of business, as the dwellers of the border region had metaphorized the border gate in the Turkish figurative speech as “ekmek kapısı”; which literally means “the door to the bread”, where one makes his/her living.[10] This allowed me to steer the conversation towards the border crossing, “Even the refugees cross the border by walking through the door...” he reacted.

When considering the border crossings, do you think the border walls are operational?

“I am trained as a lawyer,” he said in a boasting manner. “And I am a partner of a law office besides this family business.” I was tempted to hear what could come after this introduction, “We send refugees off to their countries,” he eventually said. Although obviously problematic, the narrative he used was very parallel to the election propagandas happening excessively at the time of the interview.

In Turkey, almost all the major political parties that ran for the elections in 2023 had adopted an anti-refugee attitude. One popularized statement was “The Syrians should be sent off to their country,” it had been repeated for so long that I found it hard to interact with people who were not accorded.

Even though the interviewee had initially revealed his proud collaboration with the Syrian employees outside the window; he was also very proud to be sending refugees off to Syria. Later he added, “If a Syrian lays a finger on a Turkish citizen, he could be dispatched no matter what.”

He then continued talking about himself, “I used to be a fascist,” he said. I was stunned by his nerve. Not knowing how to respond, the absurdity of this sudden confession made me laugh. “No longer though... It was just a phase during university.”

“We are nationalist men,” he made clear, “while studying at university in Cyprus, we had to stand up to PKK supporters.” It was a justification by underlining his naivety at a younger age as well as blaming on the other groups of students. “We had many fights,” he turned to me, “wouldn’t you do the same if they put the Kurdistan flag in your faculty?”

He seemed tempted to talk about the recent elections, “I don’t know about your political ideology though...” This was a very common attempt to start a discussion about politics at the time; I had witnessed it during the trip almost everywhere. People who used this statement often paused right after and looked me in the eye — as if they expected an immediate reaction. It was an interrogation without asking a question; perhaps they did not feel safe to criticize or even praise the authorities without verifying.

As political polarization has been profoundly present in Turkey, speaking of politics was a play with fire. Indeed, the interviewee was very confident doing so. “I had enough with this government,” he then lowered his voice, “My parents have been voting for those in power but our generation

9. Hatice Pinar Şenoğuz, “Demarcating Kilis as A Border Town: Community, Belonging and Social Mobility Among Socio-Economic Strata on the Syrian Border of Turkey” (doctoral dissertation, Middle East Technical University, 2014).

10. Ibid

has opened their eyes.” He emphasized his desire for change, “for us, nationalists, there is only one candidate to vote: Sinan Ogan. He represents our ideology,” He “justified” his choice over the two other candidates who had run, “the others walk arm in arm with the terrorists!”

He wanted me to agree with him, “Mr. Mustafa, would you accept if a candidate from HDP won the local elections in your town?” He said that he would not accept the results of a democratic election, and he knew that he was not alone. If people could dare to threaten and abuse the election process, is there still a democracy in question? He was insistent: “Mr. Mustafa, can I ask if you voted for them?” My exasperation towards this question finally reached a point where I had to terminate the discourse on politics. The play with the fire had overwhelmed me.

His father, the elder successor of the family business, entered the room eventually. The young man stood up very quickly to show respect to his father; so quick that I could not keep up with his pace, so I remained seated hesitantly. The old man left the room shortly after. We both finished our tea and I asked if he could show me around the factory, “I can not let you leave before we offer you lunch, Mr. Mustafa.” he said. It was a gesture of goodwill towards guests, “People of this region are famous for their hospitality.” To be concise, this could be valid not only in this region but also in the other regions of Turkey. Even in households with low financial means, sensitivity towards guests is at a high level. It is clear to understand that many people in the country would perceive hospitality as a tradition, as the concept of respecting and satisfying your guest is embedded in the culture.

We got to the kebab restaurant near the factory after a couple of minutes; it was conditioned along the highway that held the entrance/exit to the industrial site. The restaurant was a part of the truck stop diner, surrounded by gas stations, large supermarkets, and naturally, the trucks. As we stepped in, the waiter at the restaurant welcomed us; the interviewee led us to “the usual table” and eventually ordered “the usual for two.” Shortly arrived a silver tray with a pile of food; the bottom layer consisted of grilled vegetables accompanied by bulgur rice and red cabbage salad with parsley; scattered on top three types of meat as well as lahmacun and pide; moreover, they kept bringing more side dishes in small plates. I was stunned by the extravagance; this was definitely not a lunch for two — at least not the usual two.

We kept talking while having lunch; however, since it was off the record, I did not proceed with my questions. Instead, it became more of an informal chat where he also asked me questions such as “Mr. Mustafa, can I ask where you are from?” or “Mr. Mustafa, when did you move to Italy?” and so on. Even if my answers were brief, they somehow triggered him to talk more. “Originally, we are Turcoman,” he continued, “when they drew the border line, a significant part of our family stayed in Jarabulus, Syria.” This was in fact a solid example of how the border had functioned as a partition among the extended kinship bonds of multiple ethnicities that inhabit the region.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, many ethnicities such as Armenian, Greek, Assyrian, and other Christians as well as Kurds and Turcomans; all sought refuge in the French mandate Syria. [11] Nevertheless, there were certainly many people who had stayed

11. Benjamin Thomas White, “Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920–1939,” *Past and Present*, no. 235, 1 (2017): 141–178.

in Anatolia. Thus, scattered along the border line were the different extensions of families, with the exact family of the interviewee being one of them.

14:15 Return to the factory, a trip around the plot

The headquarters was a bundle of buildings with an area smaller than 180 m². It seemed to have been occasionally incremented by different people with different visions as all of its elements were marching to a different drummer. The ground floor consisted of an entrance framed by open shutters, resembling a garage when closed; in pistachio green the company name with a brown background made of vertically placed wooden elements encircled the entrance; the main facade was perforated by four disproportionate windows with one of them being covered permanently from inside; everything aside, there was a hayrat fountain (or a fountain of benevolence) conditioned in the name of the grandfather who had initiated the business.

Instead, the first floor consisted of the office at one end, a staircase in the middle connecting the structures at both ends and another room made of an additional metal structure at the opposite end; there is a level difference among one another, which is compensated by placing a canopy diagonally. The second floor alternated between functioning as a rooftop or the top floor that consisted of more rooms; situated on the rooftop, the fluttering flag of Turkey; this bundle of buildings were framing the administrative section of the company.

Onto the production section, we walked across a courtyard as big as the aforementioned section. This in-between place is especially useful for logistical reasons since it serves as an outdoor connection between administration and production, and it is accessible also by car through the entrance gate located next to the administrative section. Following was the factory building; another multi-storey bundle of structures that occupies around an 800 m² surface area. The gate opens from the courtyard towards the first storey, where the centuries-old traditional production of Aleppo soap takes place.

The soap is made by the “hot process”: First, the olive oil is brought into a large tank along with water and lye; beneath the tank, there is a fire to heat the contents; this boiling process lasts for three days as the oil interacts with the lye and water, transforming into a dense liquid soap mixture; the laurel oil is added at the end of this process, and after it is mixed in, they are taken from the tank and poured over a large sheet of waxed paper on the floor; at this point, the soap is a large, green, flat mass, and it is allowed to cool down and harden for about a day; while the soap is cooling, workers with planks of wood strapped to their feet walk over the soap to smooth it until it reaches an even thickness; the soap is then cut in cubes to be stacked in cylinders for allowing maximum air exposure to dry; the cylinders are left to age for six months to a year. It takes approximately a year from the initial moment of this entire process until the soap is packaged.

The upper storeys were accessible through the staircase situated in the courtyard; half of the structure looked as if it was unskinned since the upper two levels were missing facades; these could be considered as two elevated terraces which were crowned with a gable canopy that sat

on a truss system; occasionally though, there were some parts enclosed, which seemed to function as offices or storage rooms; instead, the most of the terraces were occupied by the storage tanks that included various contents. However, the bigger storage tanks, being as large as 30 m² in area, were situated outside this bundle.

Crossing the first storey, there lay another courtyard where the soap cylinders were left to dry, and massive storage tanks stood. Apart from soap production, the company also manufactured feed oil, contained within these tanks. Besides, a fenced garden measuring around 600 m² was described by the workers as a private area for cultivating vegetables and raising chickens to provide eggs.

15:00 Departure from Nizip Industrial Site, last impressions

The buildings had reinforced concrete skeletons, with their skin made of hollow bricks painted in pistachio green and white; accompanied by occasional metal structures, sometimes as canopies and sometimes as structures of their own. Moreover, there were hundreds of liters of storage in the form of steel tanks. Instead, the ground was mostly covered in cement, except for an interval of the garden. The whole plot was surrounded by fence walls made of hollow concrete blocks, creating a color scheme that alternates between pistachio green, white, and cold gray.

The use of wall painting appeared as a solitary attempt to address concerns for aesthetics. The frustrating negligence of form and aesthetics was not only present in this particular factory but also in its neighboring surroundings; as functionality was the primary concern, aesthetics were not taken into account.^[12] Consequently, it was difficult to trace the contribution of an architect; the structures rather seemed to have erected themselves, and incremented occasionally; whenever and wherever it was needed.

Leaving aside the gaze of an architect, the interview instead also exemplified a substantial model in my personal understanding of the territory. I interviewed a Turkish inhabitant, with Turcoman origins, whose kinship lies across the border region. Despite his young age, he was in charge of his family's Aleppo soap factory as a third-generation successor. The traditional production in the factory is a shared history among the people of the border region, who also benefit from this very business since there are workers of Syrian origins present. It could be said that the economies of the border region have fostered strong business relations among its people.

Moreover, it became evident that the interviewee portrayed a patriotic image based on his own statements such as denying a hypothetically elected HDP member as mayor; confessing to his fascist ideology during his university years, and proudly running an anti-refugee law office aiming to send the Syrian refugees back to Syria. It is important to note that these statements provided by the interviewee solely reflect his personal opinions; the fact that I transcribed them should not be misinterpreted as an endorsement of his reflections.

From my own experience in the region, it was rather easy to find other Turkish inhabitants who would fit into such a patriotic image as

12. Ferhan Şensoy, *Falınızda Rönesans Var*, (İstanbul: Ortaoyuncular Yayınları, 1999)

exemplified by the interviewee in the soap factory. Given the presence of such a patriotic ideology, one might expect a violent interethnic conflict. However, what I experienced was rather different, as the hatred towards minority groups was disguised, especially when the question of border business or cheap labor was at stake. The financial benefits were hiding the tension under a thin layer of a blanket, which could be easily ripped apart once a migrant did “something wrong.”

After the tour around the factory, during which I had photographed the space, I was ready to depart for the next destination. However, before leaving, I wanted to ask one last question to the interviewee: whether it would be possible to take a picture of him or not. He hesitated at first, but eventually “Not my face, but below my face is fine.” he said. And when I was about to take the picture, he posed with a chunk of Aleppo soap in his hands and said: “I don’t want my face to appear in Europe.”

17:00 Arrival at the city of Şanlıurfa, first impressions at the city center

This very long visit to the Nizip Industrial Site ended after the brief photo shoot, so I headed towards my next destination: the city of Şanlıurfa. As I was moving more distant from the epicenter of the earthquake that hit the region 3 months ago, its relics appeared to be less visible at first sight.

The city is larger than the total surface area of the previous two cities combined. However, the population is nearly the same as Gaziantep, with approximately 2 million registered residents. Due to the region’s climate, dry farming is often considered to be the viable option, similar to Gaziantep. Mostly wheat, barley, corn, chickpeas, cotton, isot pepper, and pistachios are cultivated. Nonetheless, Şanlıurfa holds particular significance as a substantial portion of its land is dedicated to farmlands, making it exceptionally large. In terms of demographics, the city boasts a more diverse population compared to Hatay and Gaziantep, where the dominance of Turkish inhabitants is evident. Here, Kurdish inhabitants are also significantly present, alongside Turkish and Arabic-speaking ethnicities.

The ride took around 2 hours, and finally, I made it to the city center. As eventful as it seemed, I was too tired to explore further. So I moved towards the motel where I was supposed to accommodate that night. It was a historical neighborhood full of narrow streets and two or three-storey stone buildings, so narrow that maneuvering the car was quite challenging; it barely fit with only a 20 cm gap on both ends. After parking the car in the nearest lot, I began walking to the motel that was situated on that very narrow street. It was a cozy konak that welcomed me with its patio, accessible through a beautiful wooden door. Inside this 100 m² patio, a fountain made of marble was situated in the middle, with one large tree nearby; laid around were the wooden tables and chairs with one bar serving both as reception and kitchen.

The hot climate had a significant influence on the way they traditionally designed the streets and the buildings in the region. The use of thick walls made of limestone along with the use of earth roofs, greatly mitigates the summer heat which can reach up to 45-47 °C; the streets instead were designed to provide shade, its narrow paths with high walls ensure that one can walk without being burned by the sun at any time of the day.[13]

13. Cihat Kürkçüoğlu, İnançlar Diyarı Şanlıurfa, (Ankara: Şanlıurfa Valiliği Kültür Yayınları, 2000), DOI:10.1093/pastj/gtw048.

Since there is a lack of forest in the region, traditional construction of houses seemed to lean towards the use of limestone, which was more accessible. Eventually, when the concrete took over the construction industry, houses built with traditional techniques became rarely visible.

These traditional houses had separate parts for women and guests (haremlık and selamlık), hidden from the street by windowless, high walls, reflecting the privacy requirements of Muslim family life. The reason behind the large floor plans of the konak was a result of clusters of families living together because male children in the family preferred living in their paternal homes upon marriage with their new families.

Despite the windowless high walls that give them the appearance of fortresses closed off from the street, Şanlıurfa houses often featured wooden and stone decorations in their interiors. These decorations were intended to create a more pleasant environment for the women of the family, who spent their entire day at home.[14]

As I entered the motel through its beautiful patio, I greeted the receptionist who was cooking some kebab for himself. “I am a night-worker,” he said, “this is my breakfast.” He insisted that I join him in eating; as it did not matter if I rejected his offer, I agreed to have a glass of tea. I sat down in one of the wooden chairs of the patio, took a sip, listened to his life story on how he first studied mechanical engineering in Ankara and then ended up as a bellboy in a five star hotel in Antalya where he eventually became an administrator. I took another sip and listened to how he was originally from Şanlıurfa and his job as an administrator terminated due to his health conditions so he turned back to his hometown. I had a few sips left when he mentioned that he had taken this job to support his family of three: his wife and his 5-year-old son, whom they had tried to conceive for more than 7 years until his birth. As I was taking my last sip, he started venting on how he was unhappy with the 2023 Turkish general election results; complaining about the current government and its actions concerning the economy. He then added to his list of complaints, saying, “Even though I am on a pension, I still have to work night shifts to afford my kid’s school.” Which took a different turn when he continued, “But Syrian children easily get scholarships while our children can not. It is unfair!” I finished the drink just as he began scapegoating and headed to my room.

23:00 Return to the motel, lights out

The second day of the trip brought a stark contrast to the first, both physically and mentally. After having a good night’s sleep, I drove for 153 km from Gaziantep through Nizip Industrial Site to reach Şanlıurfa. It marked my very first planned interview with a stranger for the first time in my life. And throughout the day, I was lucky enough to experience yet another incredible cuisine and meet great folks. The heavy emotions from the previous day’s encounters had shifted. As I had become someone who had witnessed the absence the destruction brought, my mind recognized the presence of relics as something I had been accustomed to. In the end, this day turned out to be the most restful of the trip, it left me eager to start the next.

14. Ibid

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A photographic
investigation

Nizip, May 2023











3.4
Şanlıurfa

Şanlıurfa
09:30 Exploring the city center, a walking tour with a local

The third day of the trip started with a visit to the historical city center of Şanlıurfa. Being one of the oldest settlements of Mesopotamia, the city had a strategic importance throughout history due to its proximity to water resources and its location on trade routes. Based on archaeological excavations conducted in Balıklıgöl, Nevalı Çori, Göbeklitepe, and other sites, the history of Şanlıurfa dates back to 12,000 years ago.[15] It had been a stage for many significant milestones in the history of humankind; a variety of emperors and ethnicities with different religions and occupations; from the Paleolithic period to this very day.

As one would expect, the city had an immense collection of places for tourists. Therefore, upon my arrival, I had planned a very brief tour around the historical city center with a local called Emin: a young Kurdish man who is originally from a village in the outskirts of Şanlıurfa. While I was searching for inhabitants who were occupied with farming in the region, I reached out to Emin's family through the connections of my connections – similar to my interaction in the soap factory. Luckily, his family showed great interest in my work and accepted the request to visit their home village where they operate their farms; and even offered me this very tour.

After a short walk from the motel, I finally reached the meeting point, from where we were supposed to start. While I was looking around to find Emin, I spotted a man in his twenties waving his hand at me from across the sidewalk. He was very enthusiastic, even from the handshake, and immediately began talking about the tourist attractions we could visit. “Let's head towards Haşimiye Square; that's where we can start exploring,” he said.

While navigating through the busy streets of Şanlıurfa, we introduced ourselves to each other. Emin was a personal trainer in “the biggest hotel of the city.” Most of his family members had relocated to the West but some remained in Şanlıurfa; and only a few left in their home village, where he visits a few times in a year. After his graduation, he searched for a job in İstanbul and eventually worked in his relatives' kebab restaurant as a courier, dishwasher, waiter, and cook, respectively. The overwhelming experience of the big city did not satisfy him, so he decided to return. “I did not find what I was looking for,” he said. “My mom needed me here anyway.”

Our first stop was the fifteenth-century mosque known as Hasan Padişah Camii. Due to several damages caused by the earthquake that hit the region three months ago, it was not possible to visit inside. However, we had managed to catch a glimpse of its courtyard adorned with trees; this large outdoor space creates an opportunity for its visitors to engage in prayers in the shade, or simply to take a break from the extremely dry and hot summer days.

Until this very stop, I had not seen one single tree in the streets of Şanlıurfa. The lack of greenery was not surprising; considering that the

15. Mehmet Rızvanoğlu, *Kültür ve İnançlar Diyarı Şanlıurfa (Şanlıurfa: Şanlıurfa Valiliği İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü Yayınları Şehir Kitablığı Dizisi, 2016)*

city has the second smallest forested land area in Turkey, a situation heavily influenced by the region's climate.[16] Although the surface area of the city is one of the largest, the majority of the land being used for agricultural purposes certainly contributed to the green absence.

Our second stop was the bazaars of the city, located in the heart of the historical center. These bazaars have been functioning as shopping malls, the oldest dating back to the sixteenth century. Their complex system functions mostly for commercial use, as well as satisfying the social and spiritual needs of the inhabitants around the province. Therefore, the area where Ottoman city bazaars were located constituted the center of city life.

Neither the location of the bazaars within the city nor the internal distribution of those buildings was random; surrounding the key structures of the Ottoman bazaar system, being mosque or bedesten, is a belt of commercial areas where the people engage in trade. And within this belt, you can also find structures like inns, bathhouses, small mosques, and coffeehouses.[17] The particular example in Şanlıurfa occupies more than 30.000 m² surface area; although it started operating centuries ago, it has expanded throughout history. Thus, it is inevitable to see the mixture of architectural approaches; yellowish limestone being the fundamental material, concrete, metal and steel occasionally interrupting its historical texture.

One of the fundamental characteristics of internal distribution is the deliberate separation of manufacturing areas, especially those involved in activities that could disturb the people around; these manufacturing areas, such as tanneries, wool workshops, dye houses, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, and more are located either around the periphery of the commercial areas or at the outermost edge of the bazaar system.[18] Similarly, markets for livestock, horses, agricultural produce like wheat, and more are situated deliberately at the very edge.

Despite its initial distribution, more business lines have been integrated within this very system throughout the centuries. When we stepped inside from one of the many entrances of the bazaar, I could only see so many objects of different kinds furnishing the narrow streets side by side for meters. It was a neighborhood of its own, with plastic soldier figures living next to local spices; copper plates right above the replica Adidas shoes; and refillable perfumes underneath the dried peppers hung on the wall. According to Emin: “You can find anything you want here.” Even an odor so unique that you can not find anywhere else.

We stopped at the biggest building in the complex, known as Gümrük Hanı. Its large courtyard gathers local coffee houses where people enjoy the famous coffee types from the region. One of these is menengiç, a warm beverage derived from a tree of the same name. It is prepared by drying and roasting the tree's fruit and then cooking it like Turkish coffee. However, despite its reputation as coffee; it is not a coffee and naturally does not contain any caffeine. Often referred to as wild pistachio coffee in English, it is served with a sprinkling of pistachios on its creamy top layer.

Emin talked about his personal experience in the city: “I am in love with our city,” He then gave a pause, it was evident that he tried to avoid

16. Orman Genel Müdürlüğü, Türkiye Orman Varlığı, April 2021, <https://www.ogm.gov.tr/tr/ormanlarimiz-sitesi/TurkiyeOrmanVarligi/Yayinlar/2020%20T%C3%BCrkiye%20Orman%20Varl%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1.pdf>.
17. Mehmet Sait Şahinalp and Veysi Günel, “Osmanlı Şehircilik Kültüründe Çarşı Sisteminin Lokasyon ve Çarşı İçi Kademelenme Yönünden Mekansal Analizi,” *Milli Folklor Dergisi* 93 (2012): 149, <https://doi.org/10.33692/avasyad.509271>.
18. Ibid

speaking badly of Şanlıurfa, “but it is difficult for me to live here. I mean the people, they poke their noses into everything.” He continued, “And there are not plenty of job opportunities, let alone any social life.”

For decades, people who grew up in this region, like Emin, mostly relocated to western cities in search of “higher standards” of living. Not only students but also thousands of families hoping to find better education, healthcare system, or simply prosperity, have been following the same path. As the exodus from the eastern to the western part of Turkey reached its peak, people began to claim that big cities like Istanbul had “streets paved with gold.” In 1927 – when the total population of Turkey was right above 13 million – the ratio of the urban population to the rural population was 24.22%. However, by the year 2000, this ratio had increased to 64.90%.[19] It is estimated today – when the population of Turkey is right above 85 million – this ratio has exceeded 70%.[20]

Turkey has been experiencing dense and rapid migration from rural to urban areas, resulting in significant urban sprawl. This urbanization pattern did not originate from industrialization; rather, it was spontaneous. One outcome is the unauthorized constructions known as *gecekondu*, which literally translates to “settled overnight.” At first, these types of shanties, built by the people who migrated to big cities, did lack even a proper sewerage system, let alone any permissions to build in the first place. However, many people chose to deal with the scarcity of housing by building *gecekondu* on unauthorized plots; thus emergence of the slums, denser and denser each year. Instead, the authorities have been awarding construction amnesty for those who inhabit these slums; a justification for the poor and inadequate living spaces. One could expect that the negative consequences of this sprawl, including the high density of migration, continue to impact the legal, economic, and social/cultural aspects.[21]

“My uncles relocated to Istanbul decades ago,” he said. “One by one they brought their families after they were completely settled.” Just like many others, Emin’s relatives had initially lived in slums. As their *kebab* business grew, they transformed their entire way of life. Now, they have moved into a big house in the city center, bought an expensive German SUV, and sent their daughter to university. None of the kids speak a word of Kurdish. According to Emin, “They’ve expanded their business a lot, *mashallah!*”

“If it was not for my mother’s illness, I would have stayed in Istanbul,” he said, and later started talking about his desire to move abroad, “Some of my friends immigrated to the United States, and they bought a supercar after working for a couple of months!” This was not the first time I had heard such aspirations from young people in Turkey, especially regarding the purchasing power in Western countries. “If only I could speak English,” he sighed, “then I would settle in the United States and bring my mom next to me.” He was determined, “But I will start taking courses; I’ll take care of it.”

I was curious how he was planning to enter the country since there are strict regulations for Turkish passport holders to immigrate United States, “My friends first went to Mexico, visa-free,” he began explaining, “then they paid cartels to help them cross the US-Mexico border wall, and when

19. Serdar Sağlam, “Türkiye de İç Göç Olgusu ve Kentleşme,” Hacettepe Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları, 3, no. 5 (2006):33-44

20. Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, Statistics of the Turkish Statistical Institute, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.tuik.gov.tr/>.

21. Sağlam, “Türkiye,” 34.

they crossed, American soldiers imprisoned them. But they usually make it through the prison because they pay other cartels to sponsor and bail them out,” he said, a process that could take days, weeks, months, or even years, according to him.

In 2020, 2,580 Turkish citizens entered the United States illegally; in 2021, the number increased to 4,989; and in 2022, the number surged to 19,470 people.[22] I was hoping that Emin was aware of the inhumane conditions the people went through to seek refuge. “I probably would not do it anyway, I have a degree that I can use,” he said.

11:30 Stop at Balıklıgöl (Dergâh) City Plateau, exploring the religious site

In the south of the city center, where many historical and religiously significant buildings are located side by side, there is a district known as Balıklıgöl (Dergâh) City Plateau; perhaps the most popular tourist destination. It consists of a large green area with small lakes – the biggest one being the Pool of the Sacred Fish – and a number of historical buildings scattered around. The buildings include mosques, educational spaces from the Ottoman era known as *medrese*, as well as the places where the religious cults known as *tekke* and *zaviye* operated. Overall, it occupies a surface area over 75.000 m².

Right when we entered the site, Emin introduced me to what we were about to see, “This is a very, very sacred place!” His enthusiasm convinced me that he was a man of faith, as was solely talking about the holiness of the place rather than anything related to its history. When we began walking towards the first stop, called *Mevlid-i Halil* (or *Dergâh*) Mosque, he suddenly stopped and looked very excited, “If you are lucky enough, you might see the hair of our Prophet Muhammad; *Sakal-ı Şerif!*” He continued, “The first time I saw it, I was a little kid. I still remember the goosebumps I had... You are about to see a piece from our Prophet’s body, can you believe it?”

We stepped inside the mosque and immediately approached the corner; there was a built-in shelf covered with a wooden frame and glass protection. Here, they displayed *Sakal-ı Şerif* – pieces of Muhammad’s hair in a small glass tube – alongside two of his belongings and the footprint. Emin kept expressing his excitement and encouraged me to take pictures of this shelf. However, my neutral facial expression did not satisfy him, “You are very lucky, I wish I could experience my first time seeing it again!”

Heading south from this city plateau, the elevation increases, and there appears Şanlıurfa Castle upon a hill, which is another site of historical significance. Within the hill were the caves, where Abraham was believed to have been born. This sixteenth-century mosque, along with its surroundings, was built at the foot of the same hill. Stepping outside, we walked through the courtyards that surrounded the mosque and passed by the people lying in the shade, waiting for the call to prayer.

A modest queue awaited at a door that opened to a room. Inside, there was a glass wall where you could see the depth of the cave; it is considered the exact birthplace of Abraham. The cave on the other side of the glass was partially filled with water, which was drinkable through a small fountain installed in the room. People believed that this water

22. “Meksika’dan ABD’ye kaçak geçen Türk vatandaşların sayısı 1 yılda 3 katına çıktı,” Euronews, February 4, 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/02/04/meksikadan-abdye-kaçak-gecen-turk-vatandasların-sayisi-1-yilda-3-katina-cikti>

from the sacred cave brought health, so many were filling their bottles to share with their loved ones or simply having a glass to drink there.

A substantial location for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Mythology; not only because it is the birthplace, but also because it is where Abraham was miraculously rescued from the flames after Nimrod (or his father) attempted to burn him. As the story goes, they stretched a rope between two columns in the castle, lit a pool of fire beneath the hill, and threw Abraham into this pool. Miraculously, the fire turned into water, and the logs that ignited the flames transformed into fish. Thus, it became the Pool of the Sacred Fish that we know today. As one could expect, the interpretations from different religions had a variety of versions. Overall, the site hosts archaeological artifacts from thousands of years ago as well as being considered a stage for mythological events by three major religions.[23]

When tourists visit the Tower of Pisa, they fulfill their responsibilities by striking that specific pose that everyone recognizes. Instead, here in Balıklıgöl, the tourist tradition is to pose while feeding the fish in the pool. After completing our task, it was time for lunch. “If you have come all the way to Dergâh, you have to taste kuşbaşı and ciğer,” Emin suggested. They are the typical recipes from the region – fried veal and fried liver, respectively. We sat in a small restaurant that is right outside the city plateau, in another busy commercial district of the town.

13:00 Departure to the outskirt villages, visiting a farmer family

My plan for the rest of the day was to first visit the villages, and then head to the next city: Mardin, where I was going to spend the night. We walked to the motel after enjoying yet another gastronomic feast in the region. After checking out, I was about to carry my luggage to the car, but Emin jumped right in and began walking with my stuff in his hands. Even though I was used to the hospitality by now, I did not expect this much to happen. “Let me carry them, Mustafa,” he said, “you are a guest.” One had to accept this gesture since there was no other choice. But more came when we arrived at the parking lot; he even paid the ticket in the twinkling of an eye. “You would do the same if I came to your town,” he claimed while I was trying to figure out what just happened. I was caught off guard.

“Can we pick up my mom from first? She wanted to visit our relatives in the village as well,” he asked. We made our way to the house where Emin and his mother lived and waited at the door until his mother, Fehime, arrived. During our one-hour-long trip to the village, they gave me an introduction to their relatives living there, “They are the only part of our family that remained in the village,” Fehime said. “It is my cousin and her husband, they live with their two kids.” Emin added to what she said, “And their animals, they raise a lot of them.They are occupied with animal farming, but they also do seasonal work in farmlands.”

The common agricultural practices in the territory are livestock (often sheep and goats) raising and cultivating wheat, barley, corn, chickpeas, cotton, isot pepper, and pistachios. Since most of these farmlands do not require constant site work, inhabitants are able to occupy themselves with different practices simultaneously.

23. Can Kürkçüoğlu, Şanlıurfa'da Canlanan Tarih (1990-1995) (Ankara: ŞURKAV Yayını, 1995)

We drove across the farmlands, vast plains of light brown color – partially green in some places. Our direction was towards the north of Şanlıurfa, where the city’s peripheries stretched until the Euphrates River, which originates in Turkey and flows south, through Syria, and then into Iraq. In the last century, the government started the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP, Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi) in this very region; where Turkey shares its borders with Syria and Iraq, which occupies a total of more than 10% surface area of whole country.

The state’s scope was to take advantage of the natural resources in the region, claiming to accelerate its socio-economic development. The Euphrates and Tigris rivers were at the center of the project. The initial idea came from Atatürk in the 1930s, who envisioned a water resources development program encompassing irrigation, electricity generation, and freshwater diversion.[24] The project is considered one of the largest and costliest of its kind, comprising 22 dams, 19 hydropower plants, and an irrigation network covering almost 1.8 million hectares of land. Considering this, over the last few decades, the initial water resources development project has evolved into a regional development program that includes multiple projects intended to transform the social, economic, and physical geography of the region.[25]

As one could expect, a project of such dimension comes with many negative effects regarding different scales. Given the fact that the river follows downstream in first Syria and then Iraq, where a significant flow reduction together with higher saline and pollution in the water from Turkey’s agricultural inputs, as well as irrigation, are at stake.[26] Therefore, outside the border, the consequences of this implementation could be accounted responsible for heightening the conflict between the countries sharing the water of the twin rivers. However, also inside the border, there have been controversies the project created about ecological destruction, involuntary resettlement, and the submergence of archeological sites in the region. Given the political characteristics of the region due to its ethnically heterogeneous population, with 50.9% speaking Kurdish, 34.2% Turkish, 9.4% Arabic, and 5.5% Zazaki as their native language, there have also been complex political implications for the project. This is in addition to the triggered controversy regarding the longstanding Kurdish question.[27]

To better understand the implications, I would like to give a brief account on the Kurdish question. The definition of who is a Kurd has been a deeply political issue, with some even denying the existence of Kurds. However, there has been improvement in the last decades, especially because of the international pressure linking the recognition of the Kurdish question with the long-awaited European Union (EU) membership of Turkey. Its recognition has been increasing throughout Turkey, with a focus on addressing political, social, economic, and other disparities; an example of which is the GAP project.[28]

The Southeastern Anatolia region, where the majority is Kurdish, has been the stage for many struggles related to Kurdish separatism, particularly concerning the activities of the insurgent Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK - Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) and how the state reacts to them. Although the state has promoted a Turkish identity that aims to unify all different ethnic minority groups — the largest being Kurds — under its umbrella, many people continue to maintain their strong identities,

24. Leila Harris, “Water and Conflict Geographies of the Southeastern Anatolia Project,” Society Natural Resources 15, no. 8 (2002): 743–59, https://www.academia.edu/255082/Water_and_Conflict_Geographies_of_the_Southeastern_Anatolia_Project

25. Olcay Ünver, South-eastern Anatolia Project (GAP), Water Resources Development, 13, no. 4 (1997): 453-483

26. Daniel Hillel, Rivers of Eden: The struggle for water and the quest for peace in the Middle East (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

27. Arda Bilgen, “Turkey’s Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP): a qualitative review of the literature,” British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 47, no. 7 (2020): 652-671, DOI:10.1080/13530194.2018.1549978

28. Harris, “Water and Conflict Geographies,” 751

challenging the initial Turkish nationalist ideal.[29] Since the group initiated the insurgency in 1984, the conflict between the PKK and the state’s response has caused devastating destruction in various aspects of the region, including social, economic, and ecological dimensions. In addition to the over 40,000 people who have been killed, many others have been displaced, forced to evacuate, or have chosen to move away in search of stability.[30]

At this point, I should underline that my intention is not to engage in a debate about the definition of PKK, as the outcome of the conflict continues to affect the lives of thousands, I try to avoid evoking strong emotions by acknowledging the extreme sensitivity of the topic. Moreover, as a researcher, my goal is to understand how this part of the region’s past impacted the present, the space, and the people. I need to comprehend these aspects to depict their stories, and it is inevitable to mention the presence of PKK while doing so.

Before the establishment of the Turkish Republic, even during the Ottoman Empire, there were policies to control the population in Southeastern Anatolia, including the settlement of nomadic groups as an attempt to enhance stability and loyalty to the state.[31] These settlement policies aimed to fragment these groups into isolated villages, to keep them under supervision. After the foundation of the Turkish Republic, such policies went on regardless. The Turkish government used incentives to encourage people to transition from “nomadic pastoralism” to settled agriculture.[32]

In his early work on the politics of resettlement, Koehl (1953) states the logic of resettlement as “the attempt to dominate a politically doubtful region by filling it with a controllable population and removing from it all those who are believed to be uncontrollable on national, political, or class grounds.”[33] Thus, the resettlement practices could be interpreted as an attempt to control the territory by “tuning the population.” The author connects this to the shift from empires to nation-states. He adds that in the 18th century, political theorists valued a productive population as a nation’s true wealth and aimed to increase it through marriage or conquest without paying much attention to cultural characteristics. [34] However, in the 20th century, when empires like the Ottoman disintegrated, the emerging new states embraced the nationalism model, which refers to the alignment between political and cultural units. This model argues that the power of a state relies on how well its citizens embrace the cultural identity associated with that nation.[35] As one would reasonably expect, often the political and cultural units were not aligned as the state expected, which triggered the response of “tuning the population” to rationalize the map that is delineated by political boundaries.

Unlike the Ottoman approach, the Turkish state incorporated these settlement policies into their nationalist agenda aimed at promoting Turkish identity, together with the promotion of the Turkish language in various aspects of public life, including institutions, place names, schools, and even mosques. Inevitably, all these policies, the conflict between the state and PKK, displacement, resettlement, and many other factors not mentioned have indeed had a destructive impact on the region. The devastation was felt deeply by different segments of the population, both socially and economically, in fact, the high illiteracy rate of the region

29. Kemal Kirisci and Gareth Winrow, *The Kurdish question and Turkey: An example of a trans-state ethnic conflict* (London: Frank Cass, 1997)

30. Harris, “Water and Conflict Geographies,” 751

31. Selahattin Erhan, “The social structure in the GAP region and its evolution,” *Water Resources Dev.* 13, no.4 (1997): 505-522, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07900629749593>.

32. Ibid

33. Robert, Koehl, “The Politics of Resettlement,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 6 (1953): 231–242.

34. Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds* (The Netherlands: Brill, 28 May. 2007)

35. Koehl, “The Politics,” 231

is very much related to the frequent school raids and closings besides restraints in the use of other languages than Turkish.[36]

Then, it is not surprising that the policies and programs of GAP have systematically evolved into a regional development plan aimed at transforming both the social and economic aspects of Southeastern Anatolia. However, over time, the project has focused more on the economic dimension, with the biggest positive outcome being higher GDP per capita and the developed industrial infrastructure in the region. It did not seem to stabilize the population as it was planned initially to reduce the high migration rates from the region.

On the other hand, although the establishment of Multipurpose Community Centres for Women (ÇATOM, Çok Amaçlı Toplum Merkezleri) was a part of the project to develop the status of women, their literacy rate in the GAP region remained still at very low, as well as their employment rates. In addition to this, the involuntary resettlement caused by the construction of dams, as well as irrigation systems, has had a dual effect on family dynamics. The worsened economic conditions have forced women and children to become engaged in agricultural practices, which were considered to be heavy work, in addition to their domestic responsibilities. Moreover, families of various ethnic backgrounds in areas with irrigation systems may have had more privileged livelihoods compared to other families from different areas.[37]

15:00 Arrival at the village of Oymağaç (Necaruk), first impressions and the interview

After exiting the highway and going through the villages in the rural north of Şanlıurfa, we followed a potholed asphalt road that cut across the vast plains. The landscape transitioned from light brown to green as we neared the Euphrates River. Although it was a two-way road, it was barely wide enough for two cars to pass side by side. Whenever I spotted a car coming, I would slow down and move to the side to let it pass.

Behind, Fehime pointed to the window, “We are approaching; take a left from here.” I saw a small village with no more than twenty buildings, most of which were single-story residences. Some appeared as barns or storage units from a distance. When looked carefully, it was evident that the earthquake had left its mark, with a few rubble piles still visible. One of them being the partially demolished minaret of the village’s only mosque.

As we stepped out of the car, the relatives greeted us with great interest. It was a family of four: the teenage daughter, the son in his twenties, and their middle-aged parents. It was evident that there was a significant age difference between the couple, which was common in the region, especially in rural areas where women were often expected to marry at a much younger age than men. We entered their property through a green front yard, where chickens roamed freely among the trees, under the laundry hung on a taut line. This yard seemed to function as a workshop, with tools and pieces of cut wood scattered on the grass.

We took off our shoes and entered this single-story family house. The building covered an area of approximately 100 m², comprising two bedrooms, one bathroom, one kitchen, and a central space that served

36. Harris, “Water and Conflict Geographies,” 751

37. Çiğdem Kurt, ‘The Impact of the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) on Displaced Families: Household Livelihoods and Gender Relations’(PhD diss., Newcastle University, 2013)

as the living room. It was a reinforced concrete structure with hollow brick walls that had been plastered but left unpainted. As we stepped into the living room, the only piece of furniture present was a blue plastic chair, while the rest consisted of large cushions placed on the carpet along the wall, providing a backrest. I sat on a cushion and put my camera bag, notebook, and pen on the floor. The mother went to the kitchen and returned with a big tray filled with little tea glasses, spoons, and saucers. She headed back to the kitchen for the second time and brought a double teapot that is very common in the region, two pots stacked on top of each other – the bottom one for hot water and the top one for brewed tea. She then poured the tea into each one of our glasses. Everyone, except the kids, lighted their cigarettes. As the room fell silent, the father looked at my notebook and pen on the ground. This silence had a meaning, by staying quiet, people were telling me to initiate the conversation. They had no idea who I was or why I was there. Frankly, I was not entirely sure myself.

What is your occupation in the village?

The father answered very shortly, “Animal breeding, farming... That is all.” By the looks of it, the ice was not fully broken. “They also have hundreds of turkeys!” Emin added to him. However the father was timid; as it is considered a disgrace, he did not want to talk about his wealth. “We breed turkeys here for almost half of a year until it is time around the new year’s, then we sell all of them,” he continued, “but I will stop doing it because it is difficult to manage hundreds of turkeys by myself.”

In this household, like many in the region, women often do not engage in agricultural practices. Therefore, men in the house are in charge of managing the income of the whole house, as women are occupied with domestic responsibilities. In fact, when I asked this very question, no one else intended to talk; everyone knew that the father would “rightfully” take it personally.

What about the rest of the family?

“My son lives here and helps me with the fieldwork. My other three sons have moved away from the village. And my daughter here goes to middle school,” the father responded. I had not seen any school in this tiny village of fewer than 200 people, so he added, “She attends school in the larger village nearby, where they have both primary and middle school buildings.”

He was describing the more central village in the area, Ovacık. With a population of 700, it was just a 15-minute drive away and also included the station for law enforcement officers and a small health care clinic. While passing through this village with the car, I could not help but notice that the police station building was larger than both the school and the clinic.

I wanted to know more about the school infrastructure as the region holds the lowest rate of literacy. “Primary and middle school take 4 years each, we send our children to the closest central village. Schools here send a bus to pick up and then drop off the kids.” The father continued, “But afterward, they would have to go to a boarding high school in the city, Şanlıurfa.”

All of the schools mentioned above are state-owned schools lacking many facilities in comparison to the schools in the urban areas – especially in the West. This contrast made evident that there had not been enough investments in the school infrastructure of the region. Besides this, the only language of instruction is Turkish, which is mandatory, even though two out of three students in the region do not have Turkish as their mother tongue.

The mother began speaking after the father finished his response, “Our other sons, live in Istanbul now.” I was curious about their occupation, “They did not go to university; they work at our relative’s kebab shop,” she responded. It was the same place mentioned earlier, where Emin also worked.

After the visit, I discovered that they actually had another daughter in her twenties, even though they had not mentioned her earlier. I was told by someone who knows the family that she eloped with a man she met online after they disapproved of their marriage, which is probably why the parents renounced her in the end. Unfortunately, this was an occurring pattern in the region; an analysis conducted with ten adolescent girls who eloped in Turkey revealed that they had a negative self-concept before running away from home. They lacked social support, and effective communication, and did not consider themselves meaningful members of their families. Instead, after running away, they experienced adaptation problems, suffered from family and social oppression, and predominantly felt disappointment and regret.[38] Another study shows that the majority of the families of the girls who ran away are within a traditional patriarchal structure where women’s education is prevented, they are forced into marriage at a very young age, and their rights to make choices about their lives are restricted.[39]

Later the conversation turned to politics, based on my previous interactions on the trip, I knew that people were deeply interested in discussing the recent elections. Emin, as enthusiastic as ever, expressed his dissatisfaction with the election results, while the hosting family was content with the outcome. Although I had avoided making comments, I was interested to know how the voting was carried out in these rural areas.

During the general elections in Turkey, it had gone viral on social media that in some villages of Şanlıurfa, collective voting at polling stations had occurred. It was claimed that some individuals had illegally cast votes on behalf of their family members, friends, or else. The father jumped right in, “Of course, I would go to vote for my wife! What is she supposed to do there?” After this reaction, I had no interest in taking this topic any further. As the room fell silent, the mother asked in Kurdish, “Do you want more tea?”

The family did occasionally speak in Kurdish, especially during the small interactions with each other. At one point, the mother turned to me and said, “I apologize if I disturb you but I am not very fluent in Turkish.” This showed me how some people in the region still feel humiliated speaking in their non-Turkish mother tongue.

How do you refer to your village? In Turkish or in Kurdish?

38. Duru Erdiñç and Gökmen Arslan, “Evlenmek Amacıyla Evden Kaçan Kız Ergenler: Bir Olgubilim Çalışması,” Turkish Psychological Counseling and Guidance Journal, 5 no.41(2014), 36-48

39. Gözde Kesgin, “Kaçarak ve kaçırılarak evlenen kadınlar: Niteliksel bir çalışma,” Journal of International Social Research, 12 (2019): 687-697, DOI:10.17719/jjsr.2019.3617.

While they were speaking in Kurdish, I noticed that they had used different words to refer to this village. “Before, its name was registered as ‘Necaruk’, but the state has changed it to ‘Oymaağaç,’” the father said. “If you ask someone ‘Where is Oymaağaç?’ no one would understand; we have been calling this place Necaruk for years.” In fact, although there is a lack of sources, it is considered to be a Zazaki Kurdish name, which is also the language of an ethnic group inhabiting the region, before it was changed to Turkish.[40]

The (re)naming is part of a process that involves delineating boundaries, assigning social significance and identity, and serving as a repository of values. These changes in place names are considered to be related to the ideological transformations regarding nation-building and state formation. In addition to this, the toponymic strategies seek to establish a new connection between culture and space, often erasing ex-ante representations on topographic maps.[41]

The (re)naming of the geographical locations in Turkey goes a long way back, as explained before, it is among the policies of making an identity. To elaborate, around the beginning of the 20th century, first, the late Ottoman Empire (towards non-Muslim communities) and, subsequently, the Republic of Turkey had Turkification projects to produce such national identity, which were often aimed at regions with a majority of non-Turkish ethnicities. The state has systematically attempted to eliminate toponyms from various languages and insert them with Turkish meaning by replacing the “old” names with “new” Turkish ones.[42]

In the 1950’s, the state officially established “The Special Commission for the Change of Names” (Ad Değiştirme İhtisas Komisyonu) under the Ministry of the Interior. This commission systematically changed the names of hamlets, villages, mountains, and any geographical locations within the borders of modern Turkey. By the late 1980s, up to 90% of place names in the provinces of Southeastern Anatolia had already been changed.[43]

While some name changes are direct translations from the original language, there are instances where this is not the case. Examples range from changing original names to reflect republican values, ethnic identity, or religion (particularly Islam). Additionally, many place names are generic terms related to nature – even if it is not related to the nature of the particular location.

In the short film *The Address*, the director depicts the story of a teacher in this very region, who is assigned to teach in his village, originally called ‘Gundik’, literally meaning ‘small village’ in Kurdish. However, due to these changes of place names in Turkey, his assigned village does not appear with its original name on official documents. Instead, it appears as ‘Yeşilköy,’ which means ‘green village’ in Turkish – even though the village seems more like a dryland. Consequently, he struggles to find the same village he was appointed to, leading to a story about someone who becomes lost in his own geography.[44] As mentioned earlier, also our visited village (Oymaağaç/Necaruk) had two names: one that is written on the maps, mail, or other official documents accepted by the state, and another used daily by its inhabitants for decades.

40. Sevan Nisanyan, Index Anatolicus, “Türkiye yerleşim birimleriyle envanteri,” January 12, 2013, accessed July 9, 2023, <https://nisanyanmap.com/>.

41. Kerem Öktem, “The Nation’s Imprint: Demographic Engineering and the Change of Toponymes in Republican Turkey,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 7, no.7 (2008), <http://www.ejts.org/document2243.html>

42. Jongerden, “The Settlement Issue,” 32

43. Ibid

44. Navnîsan - *The Address*, Aram Dildar (2022; Nuve Film), Film.

Another relative who lived in the village knocked on the door, entered, and sat right next to his elder brother, the father of the family. He expressed great excitement about having a stranger in the village and immediately engaged in conversation.

What do you know about the former settlements in the area?

First, the father replied, “They say the Armenians used to inhabit this area.” He then lowered his voice and added, “Until they were all displaced...” At this point, no one else commented or reacted to what he said. There was a peculiar silence as if people had not heard him. It was evident that the annihilation of Armenian presence in the region was still not well acknowledged. Indeed, the explanation for their absence is framed by the Turkish state as a “relocation” of the Armenian community, and the use of the word “genocide” only occurs with a “so-called” at the beginning. It should be noted that my main intention here is not to engage in a debate about genocide, but rather to depict the image that has helped me understand how the painful events are perceived today by different people in the region.

Soon after the pause, which indicated the people did not want to talk about the Armenian question, the brother jumped in, saying, “You should see the artifacts of the church!” He was referring to archaeological ruins that had remained for decades. “They say it was from an Armenian Orthodox Church,” the father said. Indeed, Armenian settlements along the Euphrates could be found on different maps dating back hundreds of years until the early 20th century. Although there is no data about the first settlements in this particular village, one can easily assume that its history goes back a long way. So long that even the name Mesopotamia, which is considered very important as one of the ancient places where early civilization developed, comes from the Greek words “land between rivers,” referring to Tigris and Euphrates.

“There are more artifacts in the area,” the brother said, “in fact, even in this village, they were digging the hill to look for gold.” It was evident that treasure hunters had tried to take advantage of the potential historical artifacts underground, especially in this region. But since such actions are strictly illegal in Turkey, if someone discovers such an artifact, the state immediately claims ownership of the property it was found in; leaving no option for those who found the artifacts to make a profit. As one might expect, the villagers were not enthusiastic about the topic, but they also did not seem to consider it unethical. This was clear when the son told me, “I had kept one coin as a souvenir, do you want to see it?”

I was intrigued to know where exactly the treasure hunters had dug in the village, so the father offered, “The boys, referring to his son and Emin, should take you for a walk before you leave; you can see the hill on the riverbank that they dug.”

Who owns the properties in this village?

“All of these lands you see,” the father was pointing around, “not only in this village but also in the other villages, and their surrounding farmlands... In short, every place you saw on your ride is owned by aghas (ağa).” The term “Agha” has been used in various contexts, but in the context referred to by the father, it serves as an honorific title for influential men

who are typically the heads of their families or chiefs of their tribes, and they own significant amounts of land.

The logic of this kind of land ownership dates back to the Timar System (Timar Sistemi) that lasted until the 16th and 17th centuries during the Ottoman period. All lands were owned by the state, but some soldiers, known as timariots (Timarlı Sipahiler), were in charge of managing and collecting the income from the lands assigned to them. These timariots would provide military service to the state, in return for the lands, including villagers who work, that are given. In the last centuries of the Ottoman, the Timar System was changed and timariots were replaced with a civilian class (aghas) — similar to the feudal structure.[45] Aghas, much like Lords, own land in rural areas; they permit villagers to live on and cultivate their land, expecting regular payments from the villagers, similar to taxes. In return, they “protect” the villagers and allow them to reside on their land.

During the Ottoman period, ethnic minority groups owned a considerable amount of land that was utilized for agricultural purposes. However, a significant portion of their land was taken away by the state after they had been displaced, or annihilated, which left their properties behind without an owner. Moreover, a significant land abundance emerged, and since the population compared to the available land was very small, many of these properties were allocated to the migrants who were forced to move to Anatolia from the regions where the Ottomans lost territory. [46]

Such policies were made throughout the history of the Turkish Republic as well, however, the topic of land ownership together with the landlessness of the villagers has been a sensitive and complex issue that has remained unresolved to this day. It is considered to be related to the powerful position of influential landowners (aghas) in the administration of the country. Although the land reform law was passed in 1945, because of the influence of aghas in the administration, this law was applied inadequately by distributing only some of the state-owned lands (less than 3%) to the landless villagers, instead of taking over the lands of aghas.[47] Despite decades of efforts to diminish their influence, they continued to unofficially exist and maintain their influence, as visible from our interaction with the hosting family.

Neither the father nor the other members of the family made any further comments about the influential presence of the agha in this particular village. Even with the questions I asked, the father only added, “The agha built a three-storey building for his family,” he pointed to the window, “the one next to the mosque.” I was curious if the aga was there at the time of the interview, “They live abroad,” the mother responded, “in Germany or somewhere... They only come to the village during the summers.”

16:00 Reach the Euphrates riverbank, a walk around the village

Emin and the host family’s son were showing me around the village, as we stepped into the front yard, they pointed out the turkeys and chickens roaming about, along with a spacious fenced garden for growing various vegetables. Later, while passing through the land where they graze their sheep and goats, we encountered a shepherd navigating his herd with a wooden stick in hand. He had tied his donkey to a utility pole and was

45. Gülcan Işık, Ülkü Ayşe Oğuzhan Börekçi, Filiz Erdemir Göze, “Ağa”lık düzeninin kültürel ürünlerde eleştirisi”, Gazi Türkiyat, 30 (2022): 13-26.

46. Heinrich Böll Stiftung Derneği and Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, Toprak Atlası: Toprak, Araziler ve Tarlalar Hakkındaki Olgular ve Rakamsal Veriler 2015 (Potsdam, Germany: Heinrich Böll Stiftung Derneği, 2015), https://tr.boell.org/sites/default/files/toprak_atlasi_en_son_hal_-_final_1.pdf.

47. Ibid

waiting for the slowest members of his crowded group to catch up. We kept walking through the green shrubs of the village, slowly approaching the riverfront. They were so dense that, while trying to navigate myself in these wild bushes, my feet started to disappear. “Be careful, there might be snakes,” the son said, and in case of seeing one he suggested, “Just run!”

When all that the treasure hunters had found was “worthless,” they decided to leave the land as it was; massive molehills on the hill next to the Euphrates riverbank. Ironically, after this abandonment, ground-nesting birds embraced the molehills as their home and dug plenty of holes in them. According to the villagers, birds had been accommodated here for a long time, although they were absent at the time of my visit. The remains of their settlement were easy to distinguish from all the green hills surrounding the riverfront; the incomplete excavations had extracted a portion of this grassy hill and left with a scar in the form of perforated soil.

After climbing around the hill that is abandoned both by the treasure hunters and the birds, we reached another hill that was higher, and it was right next to the Euphrates River. A body of water that had been influential for thousands of years, seemed very calm at that time. We had to reach the top first and then climb down to the other side where the riverbank was located. Along the way, there were water pipes that lifted water from the river using pumps positioned above the ground, besides the utility towers that transported the energy. Similar systems were repeated in many of the riverfront villages in the region. Besides the infrastructure – which was quite expected – there had been an object of mystery awaiting me.

It was a tiny rectangular shelter, occupying an area no larger than 5 m²; its base was constructed from limestone and cement, while its two-meter-tall walls were built using hollow concrete blocks, also plastered with cement. This peculiar structure was positioned right at the edge of the hill, with just a few steps down leading to the calm waters of the river. It was covered with a roof made of wooden beams, cement, and hollow bricks altogether. It seemed as if the people who constructed this had used whatever material they could find around at that moment. One long edge of this rectangular shelter featured a locked door, while the short one had a small window without glass. However, the presence of window guards prevented any entry.

Here the first thing that caught my eye was the window guards, doors, and their outlines that were roughly painted in green – a significant color in Islam symbolizing heaven or individuals considered heavenly. I took a brief look inside and realized that the place was indeed considered a türbe (the tomb of someone notable). It struck me as a poor attempt to bring sacredness with its sloppy architecture that stood out compared to other similar contexts in the country. Looking inside, I saw the interior covered with plaster all around, and in the center of the room was a mound representing a grave, though it was merely a pile of dry concrete. This distinctively gray room had been cosmeticized with various items, including a green outline painted around the “grave” and a piece of cloth with prayer beads placed on top.

At one end of the “grave,” there was a bump resembling the head of the

deceased, covered with a prayer cap commonly worn by Muslim males in the region. At the other end, there was a piece of cardboard paper, resembling a tombstone, upon which it was written, “the Tomb of Imam Sayyid Martyr Zayn al-Abidin” along with the information one under the other, “Born in Medina on January 4, 659; died on October 13, 713...” Besides the general details about the deceased, there were also written some invocations from the Quran as well as myths, such as “he was martyred four times” or “his one drop of blood was martyred in this village, Necaruk.” When I asked the son of the family about this replica tomb, he replied, “It has always been here. I don’t even know who has the keys to its door.” This lack of information did not come as a surprise, as the structure appeared to have been abandoned for a long time.

17:00 Departure from the village, heading to the next city

I departed for the next city, Mardin, where I was supposed to spend the night. Getting more and more distant from the epicenter of the earthquake that hit the region, I could hardly see the effects at first sight.

Mardin is regarded as one of the oldest settlements in the Middle East, making it incredibly rich in historical sites. While the city’s industrial infrastructure may be less developed compared to other cities in Southeastern Anatolia, Mardin’s rich cultural heritage attracts the most tourists in the region. Throughout its thousands of years of history, Mardin has been home to various ethnic and religious communities. Even today, the area is inhabited by Muslims, Christians, and a very small number of Yezidis. Additionally, Mardin serves as a significant center for the Syriac community, who consider themselves the earliest Christian denomination.[48]

Furthermore, the community in Mardin includes various ethnic groups such as Turks, Arabs, Assyrians, and Kurds living together, making the diversity in both religious and ethnic backgrounds an important characteristic. At the time of my visit, the population was known to be less than 900,000, making it at least two times less populated than all the previous cities I had visited on the trip. This is not surprising considering the lack of alternatives in the source of income. A significant portion of Mardin’s population lives in rural areas, and the economy primarily relies on agriculture, followed by public services, transportation, trade, and construction. When comparing its economic indicators to the averages of other cities in Turkey, Mardin’s position has been towards the bottom of the list.[49]

21:30 Arrival at the motel in Mardin, lights out

After driving for over 300 km, starting from Şanlıurfa’s historic city center, and passing through its riverside villages along the Euphrates, I finally reached Mardin. Whether as a guest, tourist, or researcher, I never ceased to observe and register data in my mind throughout the journey. The emotions I experienced while interacting with locals, listening to their stories, traveling in their land, and sharing meals and laughter, had become a defining part of my work. This single day taught me many things that significantly contributed to my understanding of the territory.

48. Ayhan Bekleyen, Neslihan Dalkılıç and Nurtekin Özen, “Geleneksel Mardin Evi’nin Mekansal ve İsisal Konfor Özellikleri,” TÜBAV Bilim Dergisi, 7, no. 4 (2015): 28-44, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/tubav/issue/21537/231000>

49. Abdürrauf Aydın, “İktisadi açıdan bölgesel dengesizlik: Mardin ili örneği,” Elektronik Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, 7, no. 24 (2008): 304-312, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/esosder/issue/6138/82354>

→
A photographic
investigation

Şanlıurfa, May 2023



Şanlıurfa, May 2023



Şanlıurfa, May 2023



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Şanlıurfa, May 2023



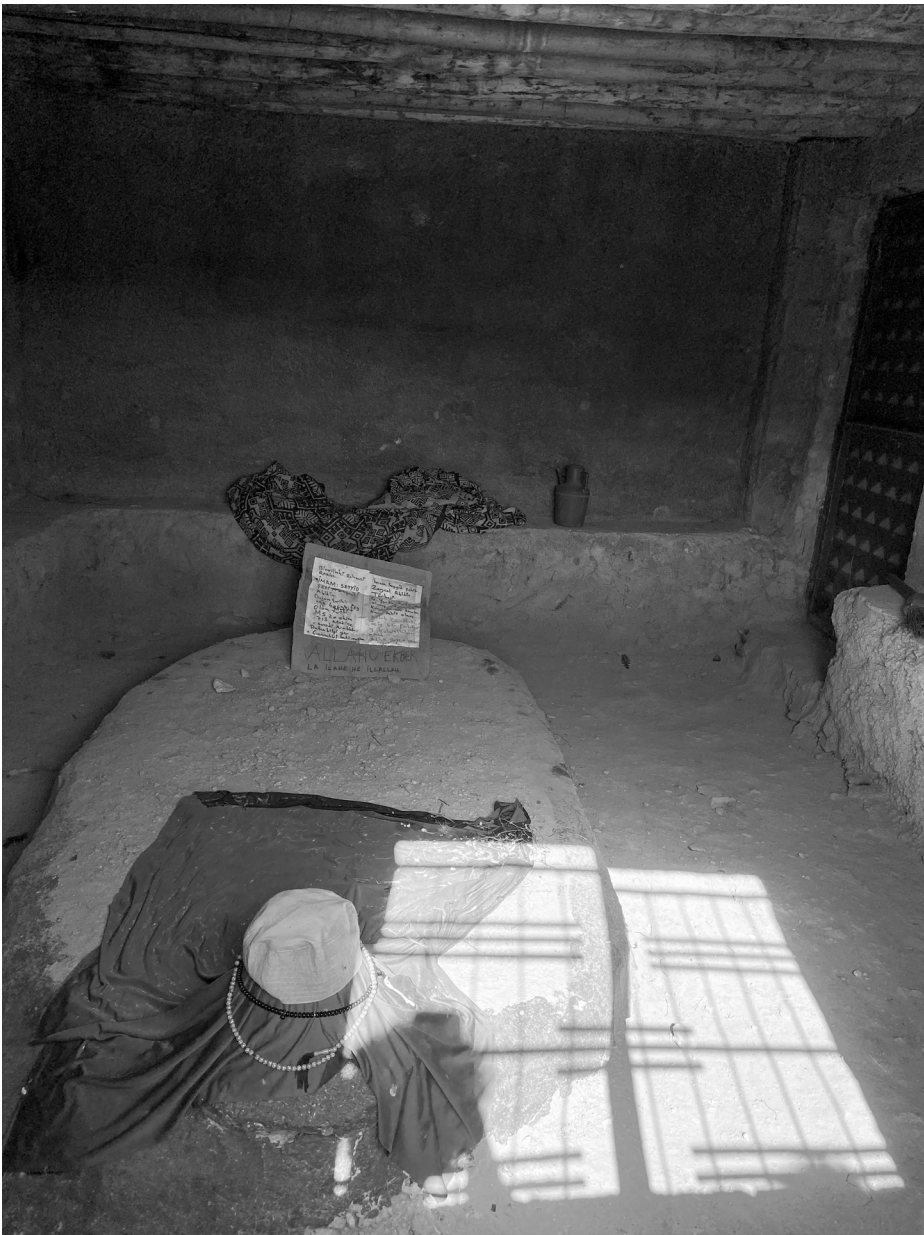




Hilvan, May 2023



Hilvan, May 2023





3.5 Mardin

Mardin

10:30 Arrival at Artuklu province, interview with a Civil Development Organization

The final full day of the trip began with a quick breakfast at the motel. Soon after checking out, I started the engine. The plan for the day was to first conduct an interview with a Civil Development Organization that has been active in the region for decades, particularly in the field of rural development with both social and income-generating projects. Additionally, they have been conducting inclusive early childhood and social integration activities for asylum seekers. To gain a better understanding of the long-standing immigration issue, I wanted to talk with some members of this organization. Similar to my previous arrangements, I used multiple contacts to reach someone who works in their office in Mardin. After a short drive, I arrived in Artuklu, one of the most populated provinces of the town, comprising new urban settlements around the hill where the historical old city is located.

I entered an eight-storey residential building, with the first two storeys housing the CDO's offices. I walked through the corridor and asked for the person I had the appointment with, Derya, a young Psychosocial Support Officer. Soon after, she greeted me in her office, and since it was a busy day, she suggested we begin the interview immediately.

"The therapy room is available now," she said, "we can go there." As we entered the room, I noticed that three of Derya's colleagues, namely Tamer, Halime, Hatice, and Salih, also stepped inside. Their interest in participating surprised me, as I had only arranged the meeting with Derya. And without further delay, I started the interview by asking some general questions that were once again not prepared in advance. This time, however, I should note that I had recorded the audio of the conversation with everyone's consent and then transcribed the text from the very recording.

Since the civil war broke out in 2011, during which periods have you experienced more people seeking asylum, and consequently, when have you been more actively engaged?

A colleague of Derya, who is named Tamer, asked if he could begin responding first, as he was in a rush to work. Tamer serves as the CDO's representative in the province of Mardin, a bordering province. He took this first question and responded: "When the events began in 2011, no one expected the situation to become this bad. In retrospect, it started as a conflict between a very influential family and the state. It then became a political mess."

He continued by steering the conversation towards the border, "My province, Kızıltepe, is particularly significant. Before the borders were delineated, the area was part of the same region as some large cities that are now considered part of a different country. As a result, many people had to be separated from their first-degree relatives, who became citizens of a different state."

"In Kurdish, 'bin hat' and 'ser hat,' meaning 'below the line' and 'above the line,' are common ways that locals use to refer to these areas..." At this moment he paused and said, "I was about to talk politics, maybe I should not..." As can be seen, Tamer was an instinctive person who surfed through various topics — which continued throughout the entire interview.

Later I kindly urged him to continue, "From the perspective of many Kurds, the place is also seen as four separated pieces of one land; each portion is considered to be within Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. So the scale of the separation is even larger," he said. His hesitation seemed normal as the Kurdish question was a highly sensitive topic, as it was discussed before.

"Now, to go back to your question, when the civil war broke out in 2011, one of the first places where people sought asylum was the Kızıltepe province, because it is in Mardin, and many already had relatives in the area." This example could also be valid for the other cities in Southeastern Anatolia that share a border with Syria. "When the people who left Syria did seek refuge here in Mardin, the locals were reacting very positively. The hospitality towards them was in many ways very effective, both financially and socially. Because at first, the locals of Mardin considered them as guests, they thought of it as a temporary situation, it was not all politicized yet," he said.

Derya added, "In fact, the status of many of the Syrian citizens here is registered as 'guests under the temporary protection.' On the other hand, 'refugee' status is different, many were not able to be registered in that way."

What are the different statuses registered by the government for Syrian nationals who entered Turkey since 2011?

"There are refugees, people who got Turkish citizenship, guests under the temporary protection (usually Syrian nationals), and others who are under international protection (usually Iraqi and Iranian nationals)," Derya said. I asked which status was more dominantly present at the time of the interview: "Most definitely the Syrian guests under the temporary protection," she responded.

According to the Ministry of the Interior's statistics in 07.09.2023, the number of people who are registered as Syrian guests under the temporary protection in Turkey is 3,293,934; with around 72% of them comprising women and young population, around 97% inhabiting the urban areas.[50] However, on 05.10.2022, it had been stated that the 526,932 Syrian nationals moved (or forced to move) away from Turkey, which is a number that has been growing ever since. And in addition to all of this, only 223,881 people were able to obtain Turkish citizenship.[51]

Who is considered "eligible" for getting Turkish citizenship; what are the common characteristics of those who obtained it?

Tamer began explaining, "Some common ways are: getting married, residing in the country for over five years, and being financially privileged, such as owning companies and properties."

50. Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı, Statistics of the Ministry of the Interior's Presidency of Migration Management in Turkey, 2024, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/>

51. "Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Sayısı Mayıs 2024," Multeciler, 2024, <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>

His colleague in the room, Halime, a case worker in Mardin, added, “We should also note that those who moved in with their relatives applied for citizenship by providing evidence that some of their family members were already residing in Turkey.”

Finally, Derya also commented, “Let’s not forget those who ‘know someone.’ There are cases of corruption where they need to pay their way through as well.”

How has the local reaction been towards the refugee influx?

Tamer led the discussion, “The people of this region are familiar with the topic. In retrospect, decades ago, many Iraqi Kurdish people had to enter Turkey to seek a safe ground due to the uprisings against Saddam. However most of them returned to Iraq eventually, locals thought this would be the case for the Syrian refugee influx; temporary guests who will soon go back.”

It was in 1991, later the Kurdish uprising against Saddam Husein’s regime in Iraq failed, and about 500,000 Iraqi Kurds sought refuge in Turkey. Concerned that this influx would trigger the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, the Turkish state called for international efforts to facilitate their return. This resulted in massive military operations and the establishment of a de facto autonomous region in Northern Iraq for Iraqi Kurds, allowing the majority of them to return to Iraq quickly. However, the creation of this safe zone, which shares a similar logic with operations in Northern Syria, is considered to allow PKK to operate easily by controlling the very land. [52]

According to Tamer, the case of the refugee influx of Syrian citizens to the region resembled what happened with Iraqi Kurds, “At first, the locals welcomed the Syrians very nicely, thinking that they would only stay for 5-6 months,” he said, “especially the older people who remembers well what happened — and how fast it happened — in Iraq.”

He continued, “But now, after 12 years [since 2011], our society is broken because of an extreme influx of refugees, and the locals here began taking advantage of this situation,” meaning the exploitation of the minority groups. “I will give you a simple example: the citizens of the Turkish Republic who were involved in the straw business in the region used to earn 400-500 Turkish liras as a daily wage. But now, this number has dropped to 70-80 Turkish liras.” He added, “The influx of refugees was turned into an influx of cheap laborers because of some locals who have been exploiting them.” This great contrast in the wages of the workers is not only a concern in Mardin but also present in the cities with the highest GDP per capita in the country, such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir.

Some locals saw the increasing influx of refugees as a potential source of cheap labor, while others regarded them as scapegoats because locals themselves could not find jobs. Tamer added, “Especially during the first years of the influx since 2011, thanks to the Kurdish Reconciliation Initiative [2013-2015] of the government, the economy of the region was more stable. However, when this reconciliation process ended, and following the Turkish economic crisis [since 2018], people started to look for someone to blame.” As an extended result, he said: “It became

52. Anna Getmansky, Tolga Sinmazdemir and Thomas Zeitzoff, “The allure of distant war drums: Refugees, geography, and foreign policy preferences in Turkey,” *Political Geography*, 74 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102036>.

chaos in the society; unfortunately, many people from the region began flaring up against the refugees... The Syrian nationals became the target for the drug trafficking, sex work, and burglary in the region, which lit the fuse, the conflict exponentially became bigger and wilder.”

Although the Kurdish Reconciliation Initiative (2013-2015) was the largest attempt to find a solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey, it did not succeed in achieving the goal of a permanent ceasefire between PKK and the Turkish state. Since it is a very complex process involving different actors from the Kurdish political movement as well as politicians from the Turkish state, it did not seem to have the expected impact on society, according to interviews conducted with the involved actors.[53] It is also claimed that there was not enough support from international actors for the PKK to cease fire, let alone receive public acknowledgment.

“Later, in 2019-2020, people started forming groups against each other; Syrian nationals began settling in specific neighborhoods to unite to protect themselves,” he continued. “As the Syrian community grew larger, they stood out more in the eyes of the locals. During those years, when the economic crisis began impacting the people, purchasing power decreased drastically. At that time, even the social and financial support the Syrian nationals received from the state triggered the conflict. I remember some locals saying, ‘They live off the taxes we paid, whereas we can’t even afford to buy medicine prescribed by the doctor,’ and this approach still has not ceased.”

What are your thoughts on the making of the scapegoating narrative, how did it reflect on the region?

“It is easier to blame a minority group,” as their other colleague, Salih said. “Especially on social media, creating an open target appears like a simpler solution to our complex problems in the country,” he added.

In the eyes of many locals in Turkey, the Syrian community has shifted from being warmly welcomed guests to becoming open targets, subjected to systematic scapegoating. During my trip to the region, various people I interacted with shared a similar perspective — partly due to the political agenda at that time. Anti-refugee propaganda from major political parties during their 2023 Turkish general election campaigns fueled this fire in hopes of gaining potential nationalist votes. However, the election results indicated only a questionable impact of such propaganda.

A study shows that concerning foreign policy interventions and the presence of Syrian nationals, Turkish citizens who live closer to the border support such interventions less than those who live further from the border.[54] I should also mention the fact that I did not encounter much of an anti-refugee campaign during my trip to the region, where a significant part of the Syrian community resides. Overall, the scapegoating narrative has been triggered by the political agenda through its associated media organizations, including troll farms.

Later, Tamer began speaking after Salih, saying, “In the early stages of this scapegoating narrative, locals started arguing that the Syrian community is young, strong, and energetic. So they questioned why Syrian nationals would not fight in the war as they would for Turkey, instead of escaping, which they saw as dishonorable.” Tamer continued,

53. BBC News Türkçe, HDP’nin 11 yılı: Çözüm sürecinden kapatma davasına,” Youtube, 2023, video, 38:32.

54. Getmansky, Sinmazdemir and Zeitzoff, “The allure of distant war,” 30

“I believe the fundamental issue was that people knew the problem was more complex and it had to do with bigger crowds. But since they lacked the strength to change anything, they shifted blame onto the smaller crowds, the ethnic minority groups.”

“In the later stages of this scapegoating, even the left-oriented Kurdish nationals started to complain — let alone the Turkish nationalists. They argued that the Syrian community in public premises was provided with support in Arabic and allowed to use Arabic in their store signs, whereas the Kurdish community has been living in this geography for decades without such linguistic rights,” Taner said. The monophony that generated the narrative of scapegoating, over time, has become a polyphony, with the involvement of voices from the Kurdish community, as well as individuals with left-leaning or non-nationalistic perspectives.

Regarding the reactions from the Syrian community according to your interactions; what do people think about the future?

Tamer, once again began, saying, “The accusations towards the Syrian community in Turkey naturally disturbed them, leading to violent conflicts between locals and Syrian nationals who began reacting. Even though it did not receive extensive media coverage, I witnessed three Syrian nationals being killed in interethnic fights,” Derya added to him, “We should emphasize the role of the media in this situation. Media often portrays the Syrian community as the ones to blame, making news of Syrian nationals only when they commit a crime, which escalates the hate speech.” She continued, “In fact, NGOs and CDOs, such as ours, started to play a more active role in the region as discrimination and hatred grew.”

I emphasized the second part of the question, focusing on feelings and thoughts about the future, to which Tamer responded: “Reducing real people with emotions to numeric data is dehumanizing. They were once individuals who socialized, traveled, and enjoyed food and drink. Now, they’ve become statistics — 1 in a flow of 3,000,000 refugees, 1 among the casualties of 600,000 civilians... The perception has been forced to this shift.”

He continued talking about the emotional aspect by giving an example from my immigration to Italy: “I assume, at least for once, you felt discriminated in Italy, but imagine people throwing that in your face every single day, Mustafa. Both in body language, with mimics and gestures, as well as verbally... Of course, it has a negative impact on how Syrian nationals feel.”

He kept reflecting on the later stages of the refugee influx, “At one point, around 2020-2021, we observed that a significant number of Syrian nationals had started leaving their initial places of refuge in the Southeastern Anatolia and were relocating to the western cities of Turkey. As people began feeling uncomfortable in this region, mainly due to financial concerns, the influx shifted towards the West. Which made the situation even worse as the anti-refugee sentiment is more present in those areas.” He continued reflecting on this diversion, saying, “After a certain point, even the massive western cities of Turkey became incapable of accommodating such an influx. As a result, people began seeking refuge in European countries by sea, attempting to cross the

border gates in Edirne to reach Greece or Bulgaria, as well as reaching Serbia to move around the surrounding European countries...” He once again hesitated to comment on the Turkish politicians; he paused and expressed his frustration with these words: “I do not think the government wanted to deal with this. Really... Their horrendous policies dragged us into this rabbit hole, in which we are still struggling.”

As the topics we were discussing were sensitive, the interviewees sometimes became emotional, given their first-hand experiences with the very people in that very space. It was during one of these moments in the conversation when the atmosphere in the room became tense, when Tamer said, “Do you want to know why we are so upset, Mustafa? It is because the worthlessness of people’s lives, even the social rights granted to them, is now being thrown in their faces. But their hatred is never directed towards its real source; they always divert it to whom they can get their teeth into, so the ethnic minorities.”

Throughout the decade-long history of changing narratives regarding Syrian nationals in Turkey, which have grown increasingly hostile over time, the multi-layered open-door policies have constructed “open wounds,” as Iscan (2021) suggests. Initially, the government welcomed Syrian nationals with an “open-door policy,” referring to them as “our guests” and emphasizing the temporariness of their stay in Turkey, which limited their rights as citizens and their social status in the country. However, the narrative later shifted, portraying refugees and migrants as “burdens” on the state, which proves the acts that escalated the emotional and political (un)belonging. Furthermore, the final and ongoing narrative involves psychological and physical violence performed at the border.[55]

On February 28th, 2020, after Turkish President Erdoğan claimed that he had “opened the doors” at the Pazarkule and Kapıkule checkpoints in Edirne, where Turkey shares borders with Greece and Bulgaria, an estimated 30,000 migrants gathered to cross the border and enter Europe. [56] People of different nationalities, including Syrians, Somalians, Libyans, Pakistanis, Afghans, and more, arrived at the borderline where they faced militarized policing, hazardous sea crossings, and deadly encounters.[57] Both Greece and Bulgaria closed their borders, and the border checkpoints became stages for violent responses by soldiers against these large groups attempting to enter Europe.

The violent actions by the states themselves resulted in deaths, injuries, and missing persons at the border. As the changing narratives regarding refugees and migrants have grown increasingly violent over time, the outcome has been the formation of borderlands by performing militarization and securitization.[58] After 30,000 migrants gathered at the border shared with Bulgaria and Greece, with both states attempting to prevent people from crossing their borders, and Turkey not providing an immediate return to the cities where these individuals lived, people found themselves squeezed in this in-between land for a while.

What stimulated such actions in the borders of Turkey with Greece and Bulgaria is intertwined with the ones of the Turkey-Syria border, all of which are shadowed by the complex policies of neighboring states, whether externally or not. The Turkish government reduced the complexity of the Syrian civil war to the creation of an independent Kurdish state

55. Gizem Iscan, “Open Doors and “Open Wounds”: Bearing Witness to Borders and Changing Discursive Formations on Refugees and Migrants in Turkey,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 38, no. 5 (2021): 745–763.

56. Ibid

57. Ibid

58. Ibid

below the borderline shared with Syria, considering it a threat. Since this was framed as a national security issue, public polls showed support for the government.[59] Subsequently, the responsibility for the military operations was externalized to Western countries, as the government employed a power play, threatening to “open the doors” to migrants in Turkey, which eventually succeeded in obtaining the necessary silence to continue the military operations.[60]

In his work on the Safe Zone policies, Eralp (2020) depicts a comprehensive image, by saying: “The suffering of the Syrian refugees is unheard and unacknowledged – they are reduced to stateless bodies whose fates depend on great power politics among regional hegemony. This is a political tragedy, as Europe externalized its borders and hired Turkey to act as a bouncer to knock off the illegals from entering the Club Europe. It inadvertently led Turkey to imitate the same policy of border externalization via hiring Syrian Jihadists to cleanse Northern Syria from the Kurdish ‘terror.’”[61]

Regarding the threatening discourse of the government on the refugees and migrants, how does it reflect on the people’s sense of belonging in Turkey?

Derya took the question and responded, “Let me give you an example, my tailor in Kızıltepe, who is a Syrian national, tells me that he goes to visit his family in Qamishli, Syria, on the weekends. Like many others who live near the border...” She then continued, “Especially those who have been here for a decade feel more attached. I know many parents prioritize their children’s education, which plays a crucial role in their decision to stay in Turkey. The state makes it easier for Syrian children to be accepted into schools and provides them with scholarships. They don’t have such stability in Syria; there are far too many uncertainties.”

Halime added to what she said, “According to my observations in the field, only people who are more dependent on this region tend to stay, but those who are independent leave the region. Besides moving to western cities in Turkey, I witnessed many people attempting to flee to Europe through illegal ways. Some actually managed to reach Europe, like fathers or sons of a family who are capable of earning money to send back to their relatives in this region.” She continued, “The reason why the refugee influx to Europe has escalated is that their relatives communicate the higher living standards, purchasing power, and social support to the people who reside in Turkey. Naturally, this encourages those in this region to seek refuge in Europe. People have told me that they don’t want to go back to Syria because there is still a war, but they also don’t want to stay in Turkey due to the financial and social struggles they face. So, Europe appears as the third option.”

Derya began talking, “Regarding the sense of belonging, we know that people in this region, regardless of their ethnicity, often express the desire to be buried in a cemetery in their hometown or village if they die. However, this feeling is more prevalent among the older generation. The younger refugees and migrants who have spent most of their lives in Turkey find it easier to adapt, so they imagine a future here.” When discussing the challenges of living in Turkey as a refugee or migrant, she added, “But certainly, there are negative aspects: for the older generation, it is primarily related to homesickness, while for the younger

59. Doga Eralp, “The Safe Zone for Undesirables on the Turkey-Syria Border,” *Peace Review*, 32, no. 2 (2020): 181-189.

60. Ibid

61. Ibid

generation, it is often about dealing with peer bullying in school.”

Hatice, a psychologist, commented, “From my therapy sessions with the children, I know that they do not want to move back to Syria. Thousands of kids were born or raised in Turkey since the civil war broke out in 2011 and their families moved here. They speak in Turkish, sometimes even better than Arabic; they listen to Turkish music and watch Turkish series...”

Derya continued by approaching from the parent’s perspective, “They tell me their lives don’t have anything left worth living for; they’re only living for their kids’ future.” Tamer added, “To complement the family typology that Derya mentioned, there is another type as well. It might sound strange, but we need to address this... Some parents even force their kids into sex work. It is sad but true...”

Halime, adding to the subject of forced sex work, said, “Since these people are labeled as sex workers, sometimes Turkish citizens do not even want to rent their apartments to Syrian citizens. As a result, some people had to inhabit the ghettos; in more sketchy zones of the urban areas.”

Since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, millions of migrants and refugees moved to Turkey, and among them is an invisible crowd; sex workers. A study conducted with twenty-six Syrian sex workers in Turkey shows that although this group of people pushed to be invisible, there is a significant number still present.[62] Additionally, the invisibility includes also the neglect of the problems and needs of Syrian sex workers in terms of their general health and human rights. Because of dynamics like gender, refugee status, sexual identity, the sex worker label, and poverty, Syrian sex workers in Turkey are marginalized in social and economic life and face stigmatization, discrimination, violence, murder, and suicide. [63]

In the same study, a female sex worker, who is a Syrian national who lives in Turkey, described her experiences: “In Syria, my husband died in the war. When the war came closer to our neighborhood, I had to take the children and escape. The journey was very difficult, with hunger and thirst. We had to pay money to the smugglers to take us. But since I didn’t have any money, I had to have sex with two of them – which later recurred with other smugglers while crossing the border. And after a while, I realized that I can make money from this. Many people actually make money off of you, from the smugglers to the authorities. Now, I work on my own. I make money. I’ve faced difficulties, but I guess that’s how life goes.”[64]

After experiencing human rights violations, Syrian sex workers face limited access to justice mechanisms and services provided by public institutions, NGOs, and CDOs, which have further worsened their vulnerable position as a disadvantaged group.[65] In addition, the study also shows that their invisibility also leads to the neglect of the problems and needs related to the general health and human rights of Syrian sex workers, and these issues persist as they remain unresolved to this day.

After this question, Tamer, Salih, and Hatice left the interview due to their rush at work, so the rest of the interview was conducted with Derya and

62. Kemal Ördök, Türkiye’de “Geçici Koruma” Altında Suriyeliler ve Seks İşçiliği (Kırmızı Şemsiye Cinsel Sağlık ve İnsan Hakları Derneği, 2017).

63. Ibid

64. Ibid

65. Ibid

Halime only.

It is a question perhaps I was supposed to ask at the beginning, but how do CDOs, NGOs, or aid in general help this current status, what do you do?

Halime and Derya agreed to explain the topic through an example, Halime began first by saying, “In the provinces around the border, such as Kızıltepe, people are usually occupied with agriculture, therefore the Syrian nationals, who settled around the border, are typically occupied with agriculture. For instance, some families work as sulamacılar (irrigation workers) on massive farmlands, and the landowners provide them with small shelters on the property. In exchange for their labor in the farmlands, they receive an annual payment, which is a share of the income generated from their work on the farmlands, along with these small shelters where they don’t have to pay rent or bills.”

Derya continued, “Especially large families prefer this occupation because the farmlands here are enormous, with acres of land requiring irrigation. But the complications this occupation brings to the family dynamics should be underlined as well. There are often sharp distinctions between women’s and men’s domestic duties, and children struggle to access education. They are isolated in the farmlands, making it challenging for them to learn Turkish. Even if they attend school, heavy winter snow often closes the roads in the region.” She then mentioned their organization’s contributions, saying, “NGOs and CDOs like ours usually become involved in the region by protecting these people at risk, children who lack access to education or healthcare services, or victims of violence by identifying specific family units.”

Could you elaborate on the financial aid mechanism in the region?

Derya began speaking, “Some Syrian nationals I interacted with think that the billions of euros in funding from Europe are not distributed fairly among the refugees, and the state keeps a significant share for its own purposes. On the contrary, I can say that our salaries, as well as social and psychological programs conducted by the NGOs and CDOs, are funded by this share.”

Halime elaborated on a specific type of aid they provide, saying “We also have a fund for urgent needs. For instance, when we identify risk factors in specific family units during our site research, we are able to provide them with this fund, which could include hygiene kits, school supplies, and so on. However, this is just a temporary aid system, provided one time only.”

Derya continued, “However, there are also aids that include regular financial support, such as those provided by larger organizations like Türk Kızılay (The Turkish Red Crescent), whose administration is known to have close ties with the government.” She then said, “In the end, the distribution of aid funds is conducted separately, depending on the size of NGOs and CDOs, whether they are international, and the number of offices they have.”

Halime added, mentioning, “Some Syrian families I have worked with told me that when they change their city of residence within Turkey, they need

to visit the Migration Management Offices in the new city and reapply for regular financial support from the Turkish Red Crescent, or else it will be cut. When it gets cut, it becomes a significant problem since these families can no longer afford to send their children to school.”

Finally, she concluded, “Based on my field experiences, none of the CDOs or NGOs have long-term financial aid structures. It is typically provided one time only, based on urgent needs at that moment. However, many families require ongoing assistance or a regular income. What we can offer is momentary... Our role is to prevent crises rather than provide comprehensive solutions.”

What happened to the aid infrastructure when the earthquake hit the region?

Derya answered, “Our organization gets annual funds, and after we prepare two contracts (each for 6 months) to execute throughout that year. So when the earthquake hit the region in February, we were already executing a pre-funded program. But I have to add that there has been a drastic increase in the funding inflow towards CDOs and NGOs such as ours.”

Halime added, “Before the earthquake, our target population was the ethnic minority groups in the region as well as the most disadvantaged local population, and the financial aid would be distributed 70% to 30%, respectively. But after the earthquake, many organizations like ours left behind this distribution according to ethnicities, because many locals who had not needed aid before the earthquake now are victims. Therefore, now our target audience includes also the locals who are affected badly by the earthquake.”

Derya diverted the topic of discussion, by mentioning how the Syrian community approaches the aid organizations in the region. She said, “Although many think that the fund obtained by Europe is not fairly distributed to people in need, refugees and migrants also know well it is not our fault. They embraced us so much that they feel more comfortable expressing themselves here rather than in public institutions of the government.”

Halime added to this, saying, “For example when the Syrian citizens who do not speak Turkish go to a hospital, they usually do not get translation assistance. Because only in some public offices do they place secretaries who speak Arabic, but not everywhere. That is why sometimes the Syrian citizens would come to us and even ask for help in translation during their health exams, or any other appointments in public premises.”

Halime continued by sharing how Syrian citizens who do not speak Turkish experienced fraud, saying, “Some locals introduced themselves as members of aid organizations to Syrian families, offering to help them apply for financial aid from the state. To do this, you would need an identity card, so these scammers took the documents from the Syrian families and conned them out of their financial aid payments.” Derya added to this, “In fact, this identity card requirement traumatized some Syrian citizens so much that when they come to our office for the first time, they immediately put their documents on the desk, even if we do not require any, and say, ‘Take all the identity cards as long as you help

us get aid.' In the end, they are quite open to the risk of fraud..."

Halime continued with a personal anecdote, saying, "While we were delivering hygiene kits to a very old Syrian woman, we realized there were so many hygiene pads inside the kit. Thinking that the lady would not require them anymore, I attempted to take the kit back and replace it with another. But she stopped me, saying, 'No, no! I want to keep the pads; I will sell them!' Although she made me laugh at that moment, this encounter also showed me how desperate people can get to receive aid."

Regarding the distinction among CDOs, NGOs, and the state; which type of aid targets which specific population group?

Halime began responding, "All of them help many people actually, for example, when a young individual who has the status of a guest under the temporary protection needs money, he/she would go to apply for KızılayKart (Turkish Red Crescent's organization that provides cash aid through banking) which is supported by the state. However, since these young individuals may not be able to meet their individual needs or contribute to their families with this limited aid, families might compel these children to start working instead of attending school. In such situations, NGOs and CDOs like ours get involved to identify these cases. If a family unit cannot access the necessary assistance, we are responsible for reporting their situation as well."

Finally, she concluded with an example that baffled me, "Many families I have interacted with tend to have more babies to receive financial support for each one of them. Because if only the 'dependent' members in the family outnumber the 'independent' members, they are able to utilize this aid."

As the final question, I would like to ask: regarding the anti-refugee campaigns of the populist politicians in Turkey, do you think the Syrian community would like to leave Turkey and return to Syria?

Halime started talking, "I am originally from Şanlıurfa, and my first interaction with a Syrian citizen had been there, a decade ago, when our neighbor married a Syrian girl, who was underage... But many of the neighbors repeated, one after the other we started to have Syrian brides in the town, which in the end, offended the local women in the region." She continued, "Moreover, these marriage arrangements created a kinship between the locals and the Syrian community. Later they had their kids born in Turkey, who first learned the Turkish language, and grew up in Turkish culture, not Syrian."

She gave another example of a Syrian family, this time in Mardin, saying, "When I moved into Kızıltepe, I had a Syrian couple next door neighbor, one of them was Syrian Kurd and the other was Syrian Arab. Therefore they had many relatives and friends throughout the borderline. I remember seeing different people going in and out of their house every day, they were very sociable."

She then continued, "Long story short, they will not want to leave behind their relatives, and if we put aside family ties, there are also many people who have found jobs and established a new life here. Since we are at the border, when you look beyond from here, you already see Syria; the land

is the same land... People who have built their lives and routines here will certainly not want to leave."

Derya gave her final comments, saying, "We are talking about a process that has been ongoing for over 10 years... I agree with Halime that the majority would not leave Turkey. They might only change their minds if they were promised new business or housing opportunities in Syria, but would not go to a destroyed Syria with no promises whatsoever. On the other hand, no one can force them to leave. Both kinship and professional ties are quite strong, and if they were subjected to forced displacement, it might even result in a civil war."

12:30 Stop at the historical center of Mardin, a very brief tour

The city of Mardin is considered the most attractive tourist destination in the Southeastern region. Despite having limited time before moving on to the next destination, I wanted to visit the thousands of years old city center, which has a historical atmosphere characterized by ancient stone craftsmanship in its built environment. As I strolled through the narrow streets, I followed the scent from one store to another, eventually realizing that the famous pastries of the town were being made in the old bakeries around the corner. A few steps further were the tourist shops selling silver jewelry and Süryani Nazar Taşı (Syriac evil-eye beads), believed to ward off evil. Another one was a wine store – although not very common in the other cities of the region – the Syriac community in Mardin is renowned for their ancient wine-making methods and naturally, their famous wine.

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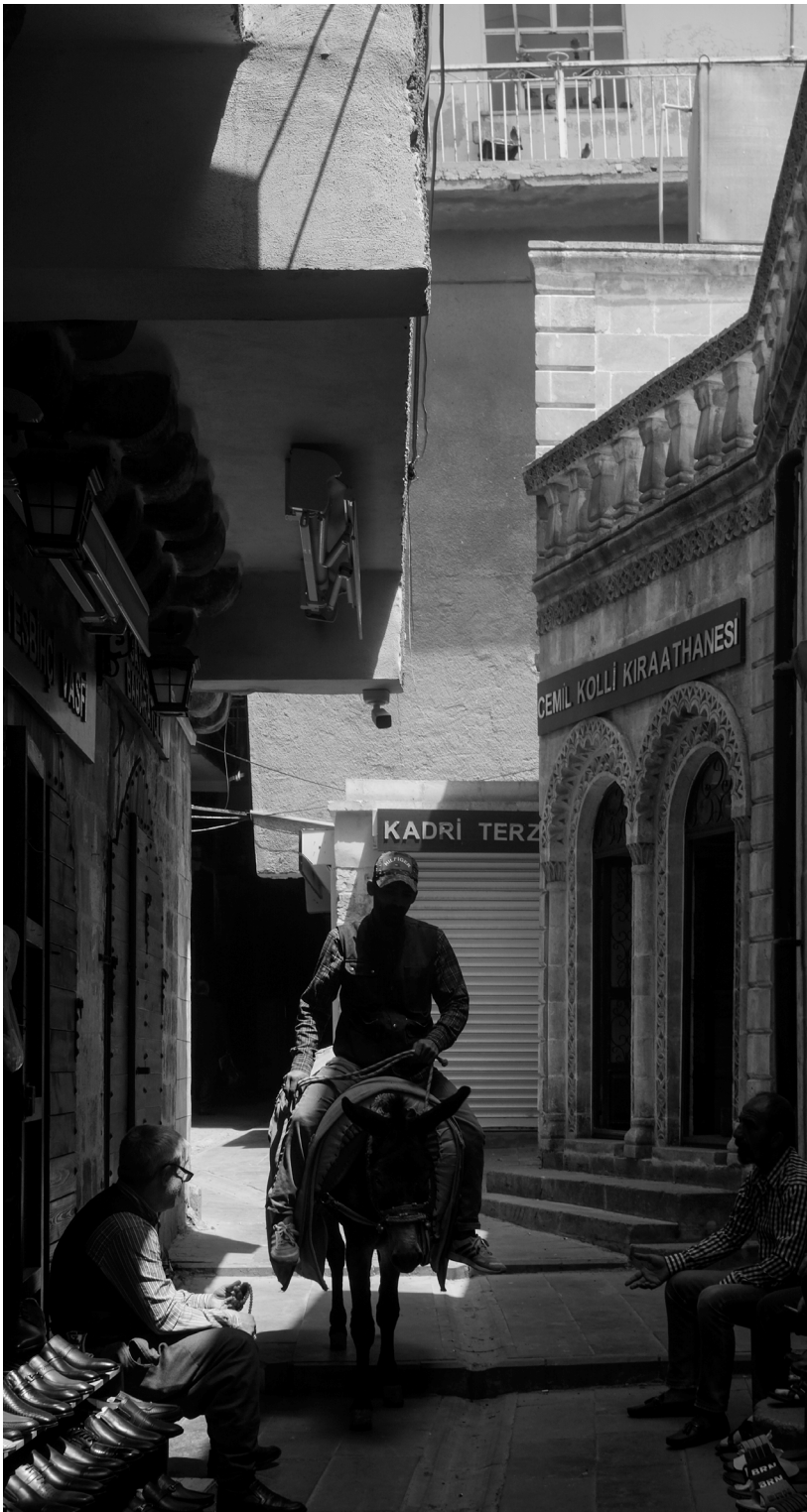
Part 2 |

Mardin, May 2023



| Scanning the border

Mardin, May 2023



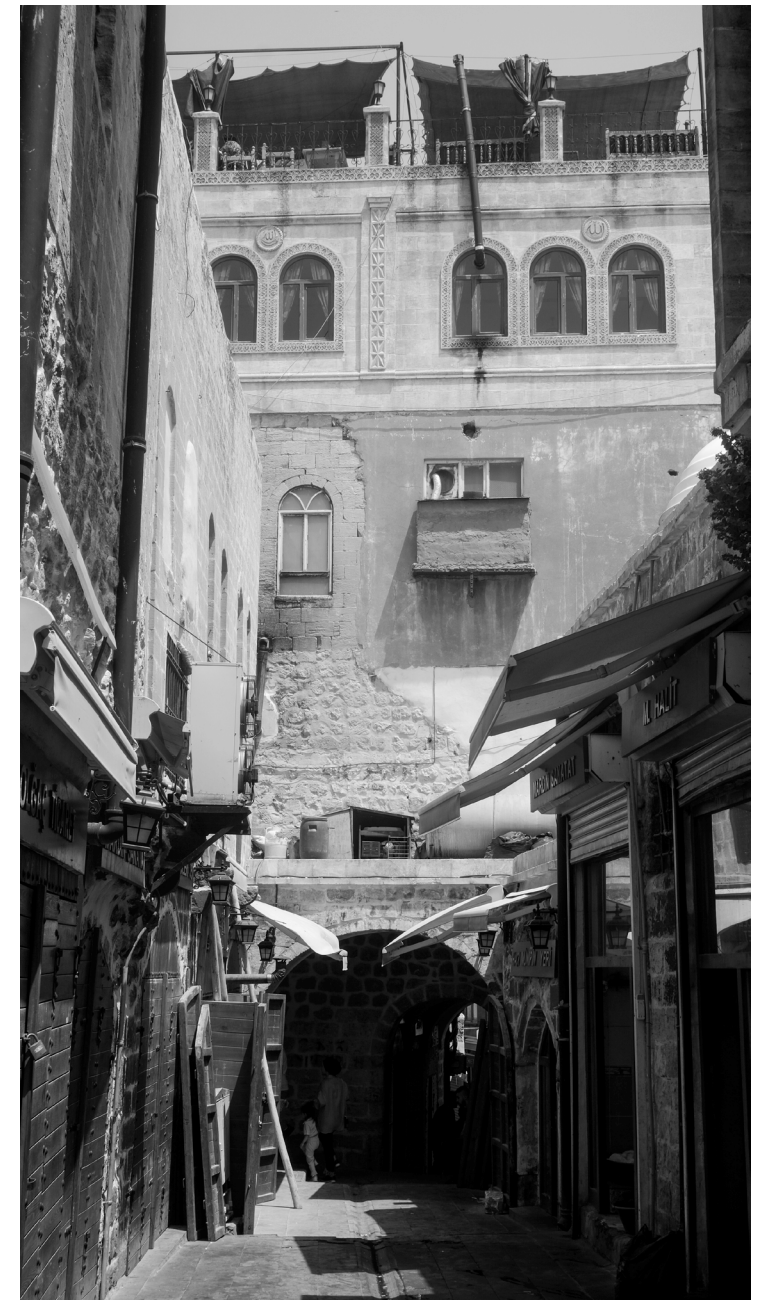
Mardin, May 2023



Mardin, May 2023



Mardin, May 2023



3.6
Batman

Batman
15:30 arrival at the city of Batman, a visit at the petroleum site

Despite sharing its name with a superhero, the city of Batman is primarily known for its petroleum resources. In fact, the city has earned the nickname Petrol Kenti (the city of petroleum). Before the oil strike in the 1940s, Batman was a village called İluh, located within the Siirt province in the Southeastern region. As Turkey was heavily reliant on oil imports from other countries, the Turkish government of that time accelerated oil exploration efforts in the region, which had been ongoing since the Ottoman era. Eventually, these efforts led to the discovery of oil in the Meymuniye Strait of Mount Raman in 1940. Subsequently, in order to process the extracted oil, the Batman Experimental Refinery (Batman Tecdübe Rafinerisi) was established in 1948, followed by the Modern Batman Refinery (Modern Batman Rafinerisi) in 1955.[66]

The process of extracting and processing oil led to significant growth for the small town of İluh, which had a population of 409 people in 1940's, and it rapidly turned into the city of Batman that hosts over 600,000 residents.[67] Unlike the others in the region, the economy of the town is not only based on agriculture and industry but also its petroleum resources.

Inevitably, the discovery of oil made this town the new focus of interest, attracting both national and international capital as well as laborers from surrounding towns. The locals, who previously lived in rural economic relations, changed their attention to the industry and service sectors, which led to a drastic population growth in Batman.[68] In parallel with the influx of people, the state invested in transportation infrastructure, prioritizing the construction of railways and highways to make this newly emerging town more accessible.

Oil companies from abroad, engineers, and laborers began establishing themselves, which brought new business opportunities for the people of the surrounding rural areas in the region.[69] New housing projects were being developed for engineers, laborers, and their families, while simultaneously, the town kept expanding both its job opportunities and the housing market.

To provide an appealing lifestyle to its residents, these housing projects built around the petroleum refinery were complemented with schools, stores, hospitals, sports facilities, and various other social spaces (even a cemetery), which created this neighborhood called “Site,” managed by TPAO (Turkish Petroleum Corporation). However, this emerging oasis, which was certainly ahead of its time considering all the expensive features it was equipped with, became the focus of many thefts.

Taking into account that the Site was built within an underdeveloped rural area, its aggressive growth brought a stark contrast with its surroundings. Presumably, for this reason, the authorities implemented many security precautions even before stepping inside the Site. Thus, it was systematically turned into a high-security, class-oriented environment. Finally, it appears now that this isolated neighborhood has become a city

of its own. While the fences of Site physically divided Batman into two parts, they also created civic, social, and cultural boundaries between modern and traditional spaces.[70]

After a two-hour drive from Mardin, I arrived at the final destination of the trip: Batman. My was to first visit the famous Site and interact with the people working at the petroleum refinery. However, after contacting some locals in Batman, I was informed that visiting the refinery is nearly impossible due to highly restricted access. Nevertheless, I managed to get in touch with someone who works at the Site, specifically in the workshops where they repair the components of the oil rigs currently operating in the region. After talking on the phone with this local named Fatih, I headed towards his workplace close to the refinery.

I entered the peripheries of the city and began searching for a way to enter the Site. It took me quite a while to drive around the fences of this enormous neighborhood, but I finally found the entrance gate which also served as a security checkpoint. There, since I did not have any permission document to enter the Site, I was asked by the guards to leave my identity card. One of them approached my car and said, “It is for security purposes.” Soon after this ritual, I started driving inside this gated neighborhood, hoping to find the location where I was supposed to meet Fatih. And even from the first few meters, it was evident that this place was built differently from the rest of the city of Batman.

As I passed by the streets of industrial and administrative buildings as well as a hospital, I finally reached the street where the workshops were located. During this short ride, I felt completely disoriented since there were no street signs or any car traffic whatsoever. Finally, I met Fatih, a laborer in his late twenties. He guided me to the entrance of their workshop, where I had to pass through yet another local security checkpoint. We entered a massive area, as large as two football fields, including one warehouse where the machines were located, along with offices, bathrooms, and lockers. Also an outdoor area for storing, washing, coloring, and repairing the components from the oil rigs.

People were on a break from work, and Fatih told me to join them and wait for him while he went inside to ask his boss if I could take pictures of the workshop. While waiting for him, I took a seat in a small container situated outside the workshop, where the laborers usually took their breaks, which typically meant drinking tea and smoking.

They offered me some tea and started explaining what they do, which essentially resembles a repair shop for oil rigs that operate both on land and sea. After this brief introduction to the basics of their work, they began discussing the issue of insufficient salaries they have to deal with. This issue has been voiced repeatedly as the company running the refinery is criticized for inadequate payments and questionable dismissals. However, the workers avoided delving further into discussions about the administration or the Site's system. I sensed a certain timidity, and not knowing what else to ask, I stepped outside the container when Fatih returned and said, “Mustafa, let's take a tour.”

As we walked outside the warehouse, Fatih began pointing out each corner and explaining its function, saying, “Each category of component from the oil rigs is located in one corner, like these big pipes on the left

66. Serhat Akcan, “Batman’da Petrolün Bulunması, Kente Sosyoekonomik ve Sosyokültürel Etkileri (1940-1970)” (master’s thesis, Batman Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2018), 45, <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12402/1869>.
67. Ibid
68. Hasan Biçim, “Şehir İçinde Şehir: Batman ve Tpaö,” Atatürk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, 65 (2020): 247-263, <https://dergipark.org.tr/pub/atauniefd/issue/58201/842319>
69. Ibid

70. Ibid

and the adaptors on the right...” He kept showing me around and giving a very detailed explanation of every single component, “Look, we are still using pieces from 1950s or 1960s. Thank god, work accidents do not happen so often but when they do, they can be very fatal.”

Later, when I attempted to take out my camera, he reacted, “Try not to be seen with the camera, I do not want to tell you not to take pictures, but we might get in trouble if they see you doing so.” I was curious why there was such restriction, so he said, “I am not sure, it has been always like this, but lately they have been more aggressive with the restrictions. In fact, a couple of months ago, they fired someone from the refinery because he posted a picture from inside (on social media).”

As the clock approached 5 pm, Fatih’s shift in the workshop was nearly over. Therefore, we headed back to the warehouse with the other laborers. While waiting for Fatih to get ready, I had the chance to meet his boss inside. He felt the need to explain himself for not allowing me to take pictures, saying, “The administration is very strict; forgive us.”

We headed outside together with Fatih. He offered me a tour around the Site, during which he showed me other streets, most of them filled with hundreds of different components from oil rigs, even an old oil rig from the 1950s that was situated inside like a monument. The gloomy atmosphere reminded me as though I was in a cemetery for industrial machinery. Ironically, going south in Site, right below the industrial areas, one could start to see greenery, condominiums, villas, football fields, swimming pools, restaurants, and so on. However, right outside the fences of this neighborhood, were situated the ghettos of Batman which is very much the opposite.

The city center of Batman, so the zone around the Site, expanded its peripheries as laborers from other towns moved in to find jobs in the newly emerging city. Since there were not enough housing projects developed at the time, the high influx of laborers coming from underdeveloped rural areas led to the emergence of slums, which today seemed to take over the city center and resulted in people of higher socioeconomic status to relocate further north, away from Site. Thus, in the different zones of Batman emerged even starker contrasts.

We arrived at the street where he lived, and before stepping out, he said, “Look, this place is called “Sanat Sokağı” (Art Street). They tried to make it look modern with all those drawings on its walls, but it became the “Death Street,” I hear people getting stabbed, or even shot, every single week.” Although it was not a common occurrence in the city, Fatih’s words emphasized the contrast among the different zones: north and south, and within the south (city center and Site).

17:30 Arrival at the city center, walking with a local

I headed out to walk around the city center with another local contact I had found, who was a young dentist called Behime. “There are not many things to do here,” she said, “apart from having food and drinks.” Therefore we headed to a renowned restaurant of the town. One thing I realized while walking with Behime was the fact that a significant majority of the people in the streets of Batman were males, and people were staring at us without hesitation. But she did not seem to take it seriously,

“I am used to it by now, our people love staring,” she said.

Behime told me more about her story, saying, “My family is originally from Mardin, but a couple of decades ago, just like many others, they moved into Batman in search for a job.” She continued, “I was born here, but we all moved into Istanbul when I entered University. And after I graduated, I left them in Istanbul and moved back to Batman. I felt free, and more independent when I was on my own, further from their oppressive dynamics. Those were tough times, I remember the process of taking off my hijab and how difficult it was to be accepted. I’m happier here, but one day I want to live abroad.”

22:45 Return to the motel, lights out

I headed to the motel to enjoy a good night’s sleep before heading out in the morning to catch a flight back to Istanbul. While in Mardin and Batman, I had the opportunity to visit two cities and interact with people from very different occupations. On one hand, I interviewed with the CDO in Mardin, discussing how ethnic minority groups, especially Syrian nationals, live in the region, as well as the aid economy. On the other hand, I visited the famous Site in Batman where the first oil refinery in Turkey is located, and now it appears as an isolated city within the city, built initially for workers, engineers, and their families, but throughout its history, provided stark contrasts both culturally and socially among different zones of Batman.

→
A photographic
investigation

Batman, May 2023







“We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.”[1] (Foucault, 2008, p.14).

The long trip through the cities of the border region in Turkey enabled the collection of ethnographic information and the personal experience of how people inhabit the encountered spaces. Although manipulating maps, territorial data, or literature to locate thought on the territory is essential, this journey allowed for fully engaging with the space and unlocking another level of understanding by involving all five senses to experience narratives and, especially, the different spatial conditions of the border. In doing so, the trip made it possible to encounter the “heterotopias” of the border, therefore giving an opportunity to reimagine the border through a different perspective.

The term heterotopia, literally meaning “the other spaces,” was originally used to define a medical irregularity, “a spatial displacement of normal tissue” or “a site in which biological material is out of place.”[2] A popular example is the orthopedic condition of “heterotopic ossification:” the presence of a bone in soft tissue where the bone normally does not exist, therefore a deviation.[3][4] This somehow inspired Foucault to draw parallels with the social world, maybe to gain insight into social and spatial practices.[5] Indeed, for Foucault, a heterotopia is “a space that challenges or subverts the hegemonic order,” and, essentially a place of deviation, “capable of containing within itself a diversity of spaces” as well as “valorizing differentness and diversity.”[6][7]

The thesis applies the notion of heterotopias as an instrument to represent the diversity of materiality and narrative in border spaces. Using the articulation of heterotopia enables confronting architectural thinking and the project of the border. Therefore, it provides an opportunity to read the border through its deviations or its different spatialities.

Foucault suggests six principles to describe heterotopia, and as a reference to this, we selected six spatial objects from the engagement with the territory, which will reveal such deviations of the border. Referring to the Turkey-Syria border as a “bone of contention” and using the method of inquiry of scanning its conditions as an “X-Ray,” the research maintains a closer connection with the spatial aspect of medical terminology. Therefore we use the term “heterotopic ossification,” instead of “heterotopia.” Additionally, the thesis does not attempt to make an in-depth analysis of each discipline but instead instrumentalizes the notion to depict the six selected spatial objects.

These objects, or heterotopic ossifications, are the material conditions where we are able to think of the other places of the border by revealing stories, components, and elements. They uncover different aspects of the border, and through these different aspects, the thesis reconstructs the story of the border. In particular, in the end, we will overlap all these stories, simply remapping the Turkey-Syria border with the elements emerging from its heterotopic spatial conditions. The outcome, therefore, will be a re-reading of the map of these six places, through a territorial-scale reconstruction of this investigation, to make it a provoking reflection

1. Foucault, “Of Other Space,” 13-22.

2. Erich Goode, “The Heterotopia,” in *The Taming of New York’s Washington Square: A Wild Civility* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 227-250, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479878574.003.0007>.

3. Stephanie Miller et al., “Heterotopic Ossification: A Comprehensive Review,” *JBMR Plus* 3, no.4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1002/jbm4.10172>.

4. Goode, “The Heterotopia,” 227.

5. Ibid

6. Ibid

7. Camillo Boano, “‘Violent spaces’: production and reproduction of security and vulnerabilities,” *The Journal of Architecture*, 16 no.1 (2011), 37-55, DOI: 10.1080/13602365.2011.547002

This chapter will display the visual depictions of each heterotopic ossification according to the chronological order in which the journey happened, therefore from west to east, starting with the kebab shop and the lake park in Hatay, to the Aleppo soap factory in Gaziantep, the tomb in Şanlıurfa, the petroleum site in Batman, and the car that was used during this field trip

Fig. 16

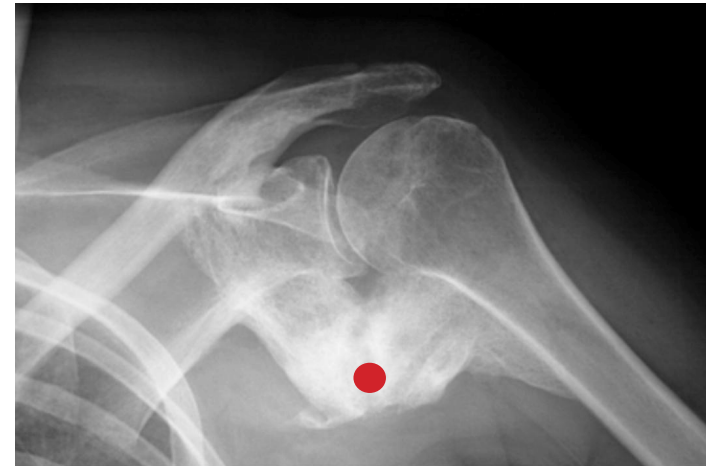


Fig. 18

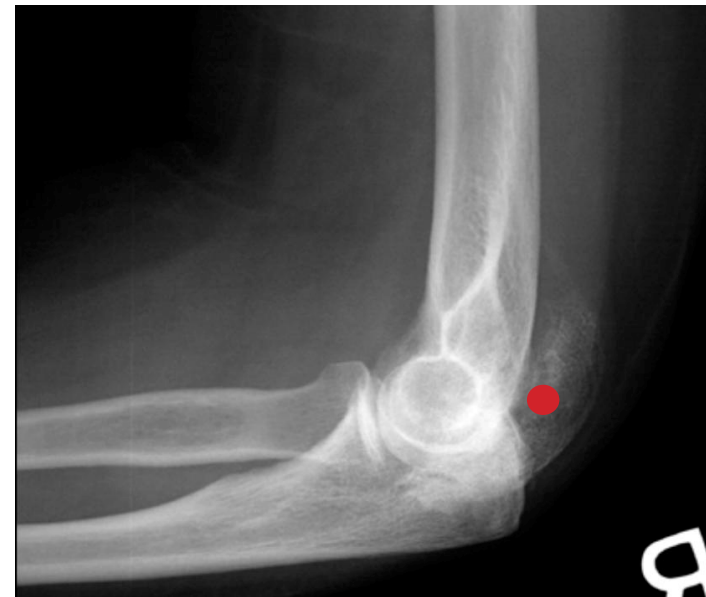


Fig. 20



Fig. 17



Fig. 19



Fig. 21

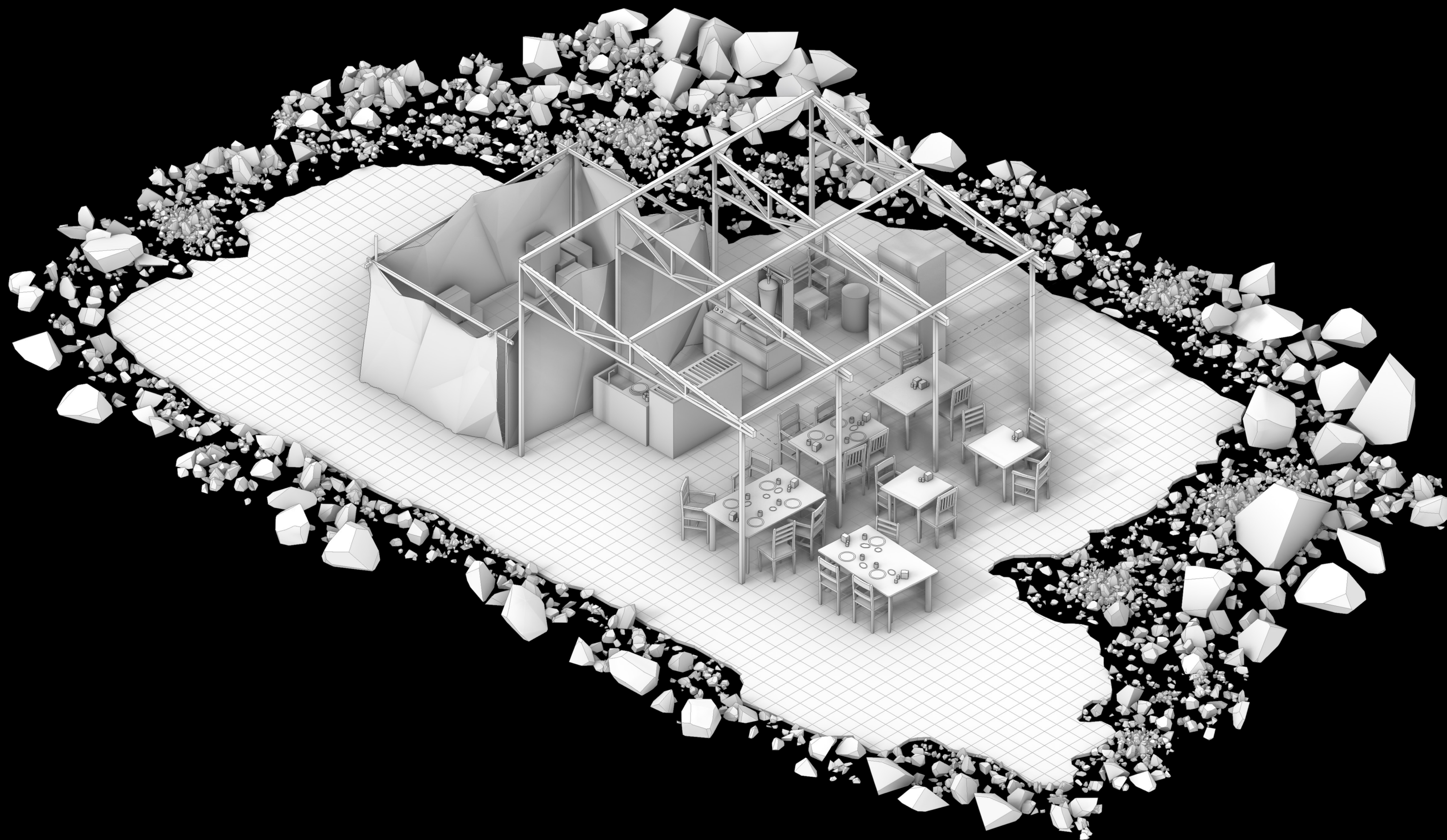


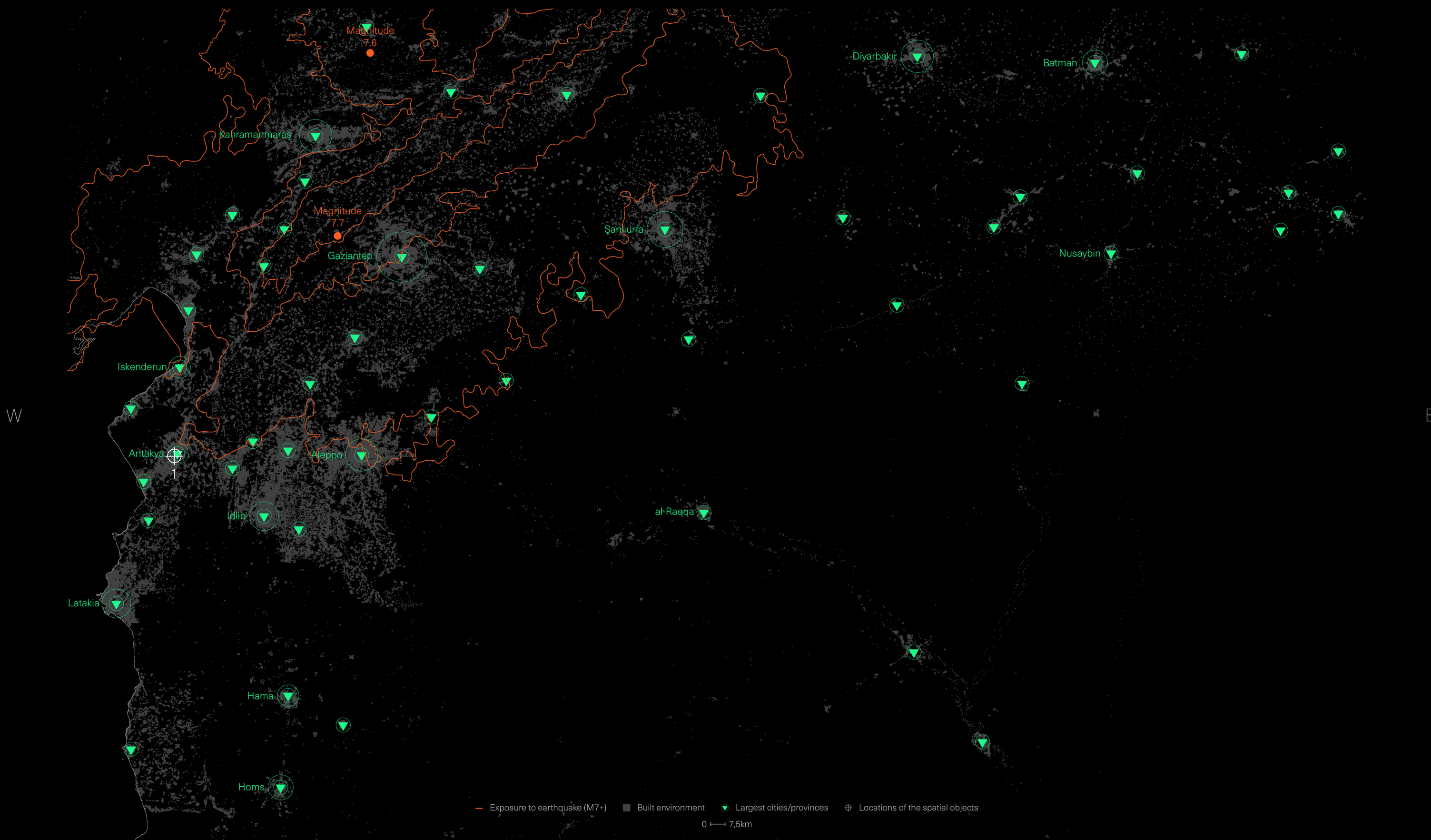
1. Fig. 16-20 are available on:
<https://radiopaedia.org/articles/heterotopic-ossification>

4.2

The inside-out kebab shop in the rubbles

The first spatial object encountered is located in the city center of the significantly damaged Hatay. It is particularly interesting as it tells the story of everyday life within the border area after the twin earthquakes hit the region in February 2023. Amongst the rubbles, this makeshift structure blurs what is inside and what is outside, as an immediate result of the destruction. The shop serves as a point of reference for all the other makeshift shops across the border, whether in Syrian or Turkish territories. The depiction reveals a story of social life in general, in which kebab plays a significant role as a greatly appreciated component of sociality.





4.3
Lake Park below the border walls

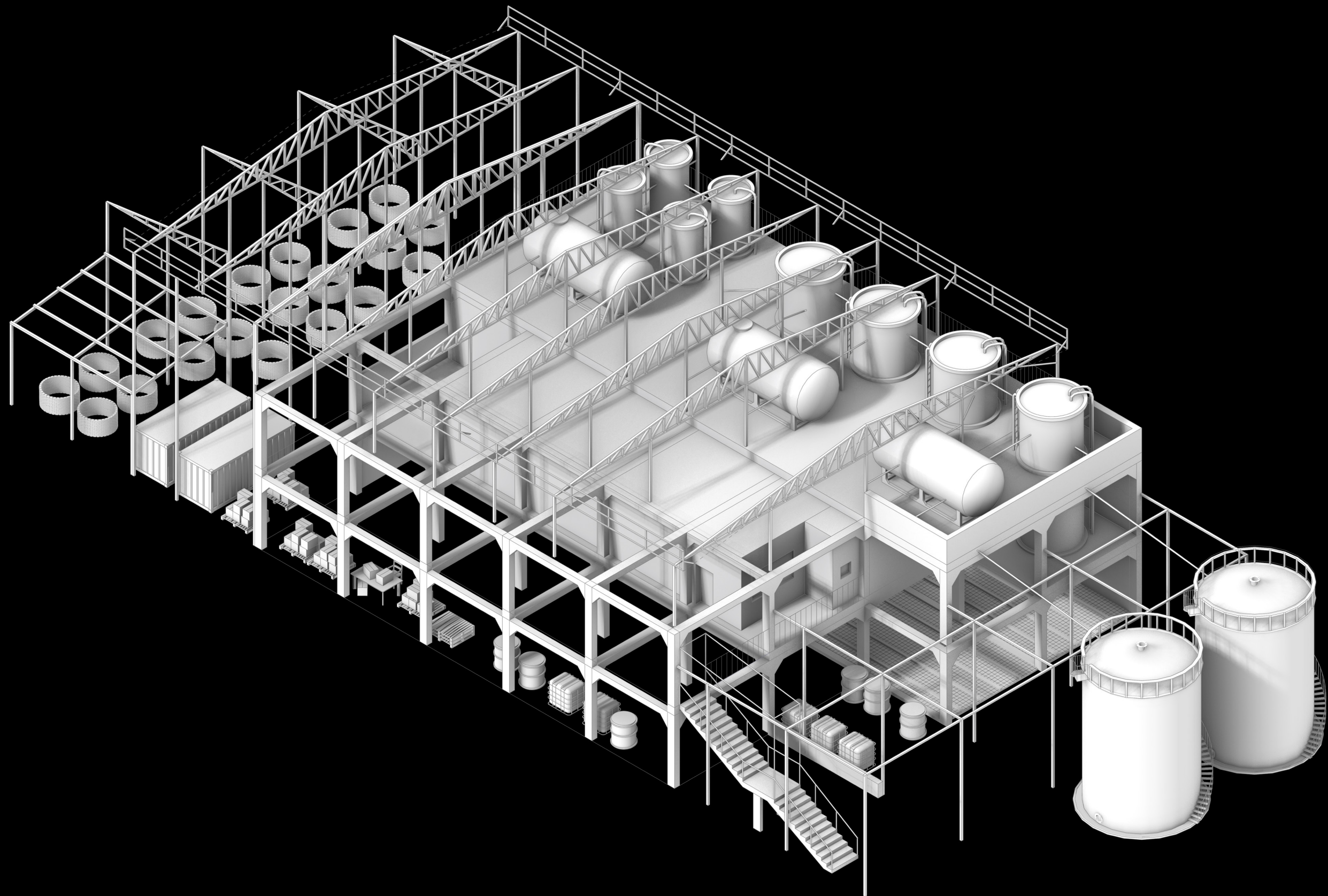
The second spatial object encountered is located in Reyhanli province of Hatay, one of the bordering areas of the city. The park is situated next to the hill that forms the division between Syria and Turkey, where the border walls, watchtowers, and patrol roads are constantly kept under surveillance by armed Turkish border guards. However, at the foot of that hill, on Turkish territory, there is a park with a lake, playgrounds, sports courts, and restaurants, giving the impression of a “backstage” of the border. Indeed, this object reveals the aspect that the border is always made by the backstages, which could be seen in different locations all along the Turkey-Syria border.

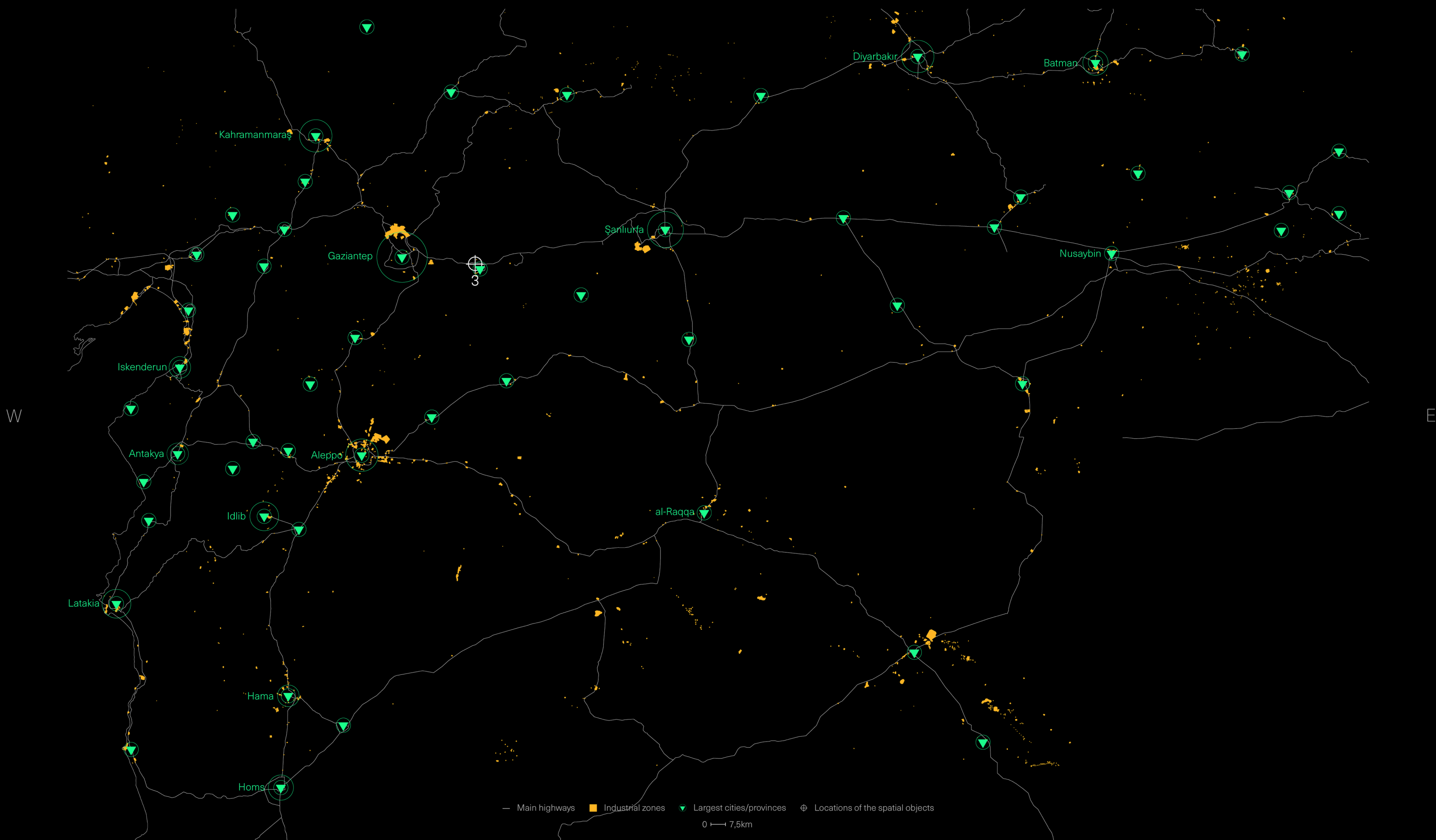


4.4

Ambivalent Aleppo soap factory

The third spatial object encountered is located in the industrial zone of Nizip, in the city of Gaziantep. The factory is run by a young Turkish man who inherited the property from his father, where he manages the mass production of the famous Aleppo soap, a centuries-old recipe for olive oil soap originating in Syria. In the interview conducted during the trip, he stated that he also works as a lawyer who aims to “send refugees off to their countries,” because he is a “Turkish nationalist.” However, the laborers encountered at the factory were actually from Syria. Therefore, the story reveals the inherent ambivalence of this place, where Aleppo soap is made in a factory run by a Turkish nationalist lawyer who aims to send refugees back to Syria but makes a living through the work done by people coming from Syria. This is another aspect that we can read the border through, especially in the industries located along the territory.

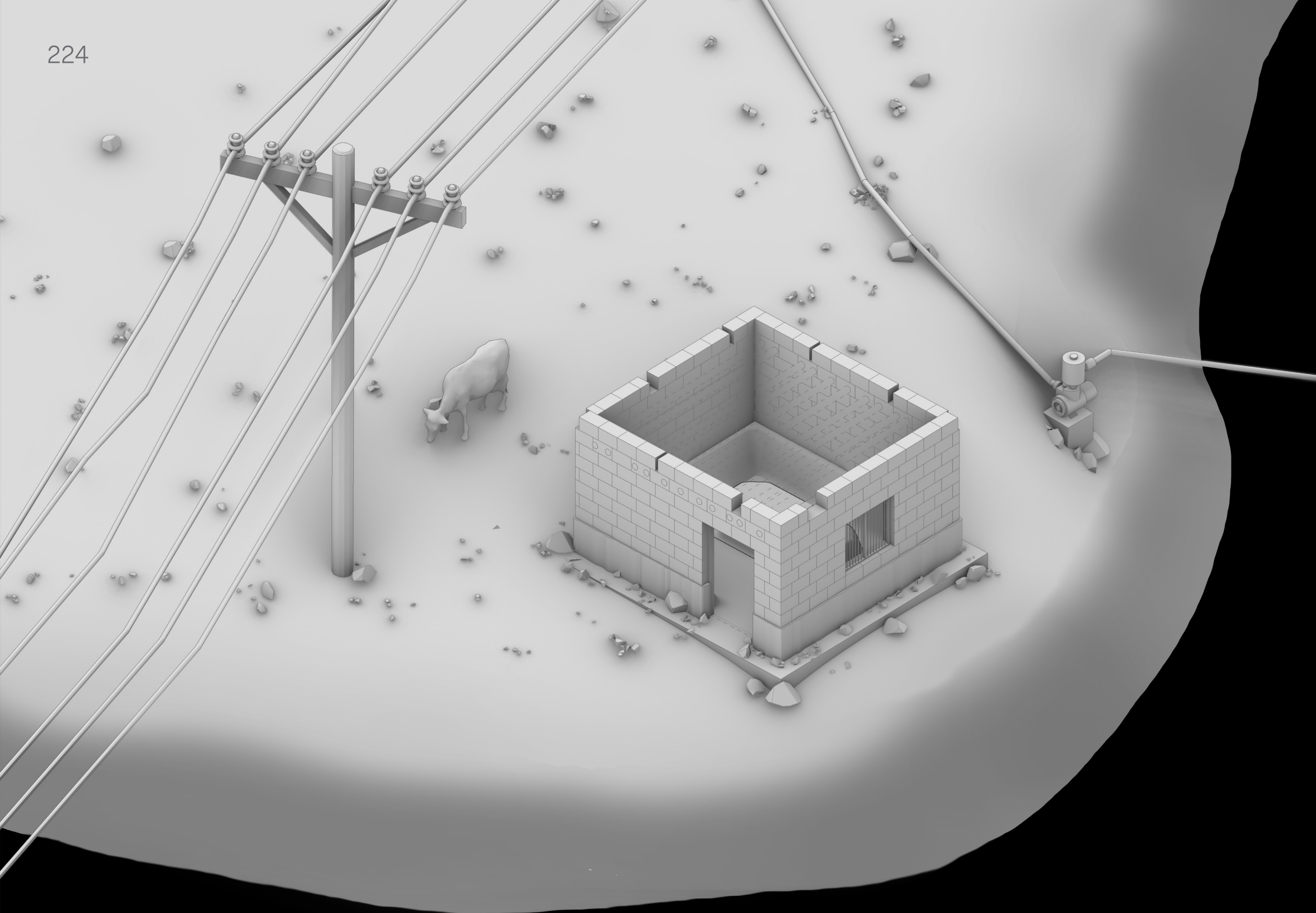


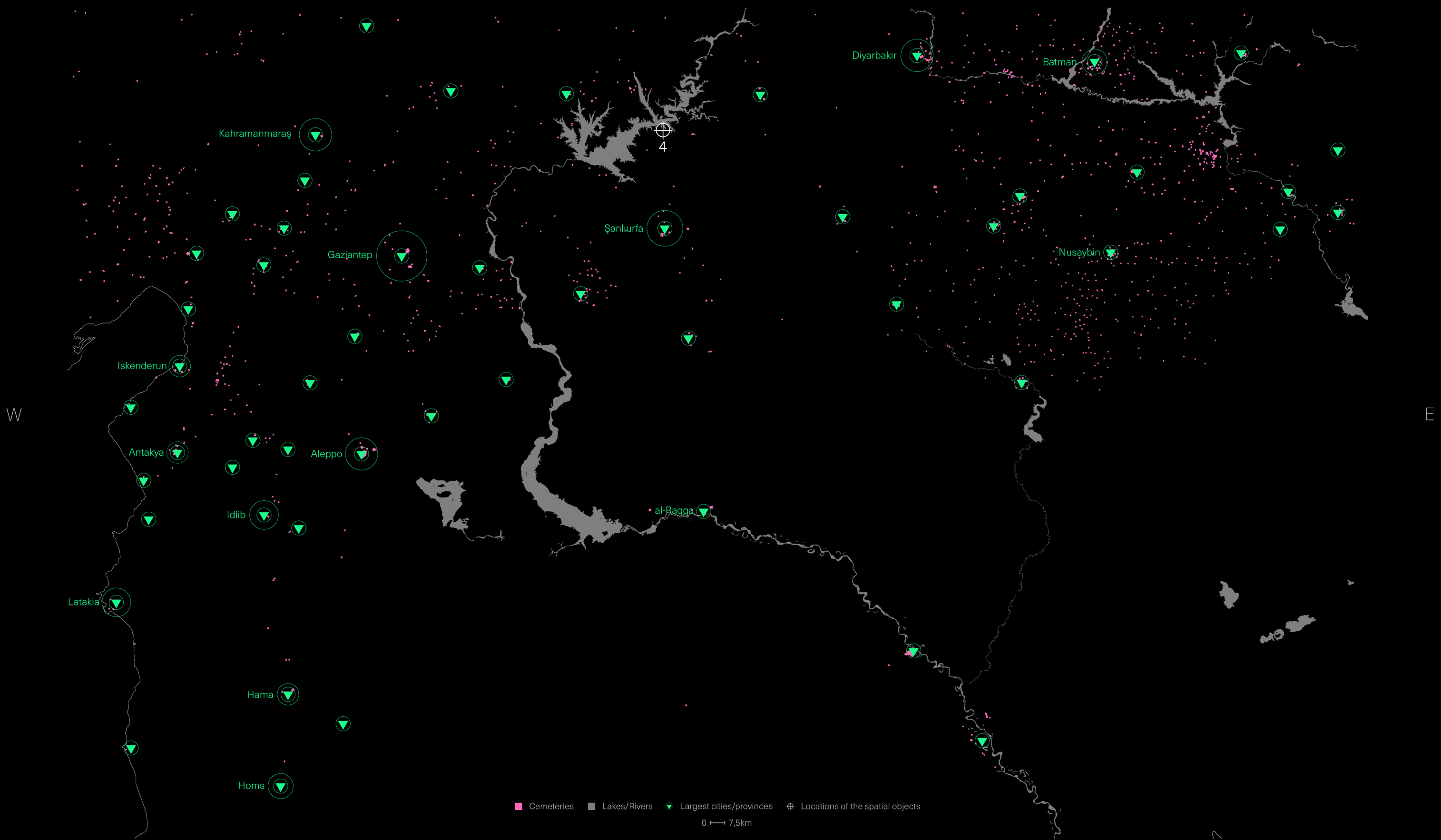


4.5

Replica tomb on the riverbank

The fourth spatial object encountered is located on the edge of the Euphrates River, in the city of Şanlıurfa. It was a building observed while exploring the remote rural villages nearby. It appeared abandoned, with a locked door and a window without glass, allowing only a peek inside to see a bump on the ground resembling a traditional grave for significant figures in Islam. According to the writings on a piece of paper left beside the “grave,” it was dedicated to Imam Sayyid Martyr Zayn al-Abidin, who died in 713, and was somehow honored with this replica tomb on the riverbank. There is little information available about the tomb, as villagers have embraced its presence, with one stating, “It’s always been here.” This story reveals aspects of the border in relation to the past and relics, particularly concerning the death rituals of people inhabiting the border territory.





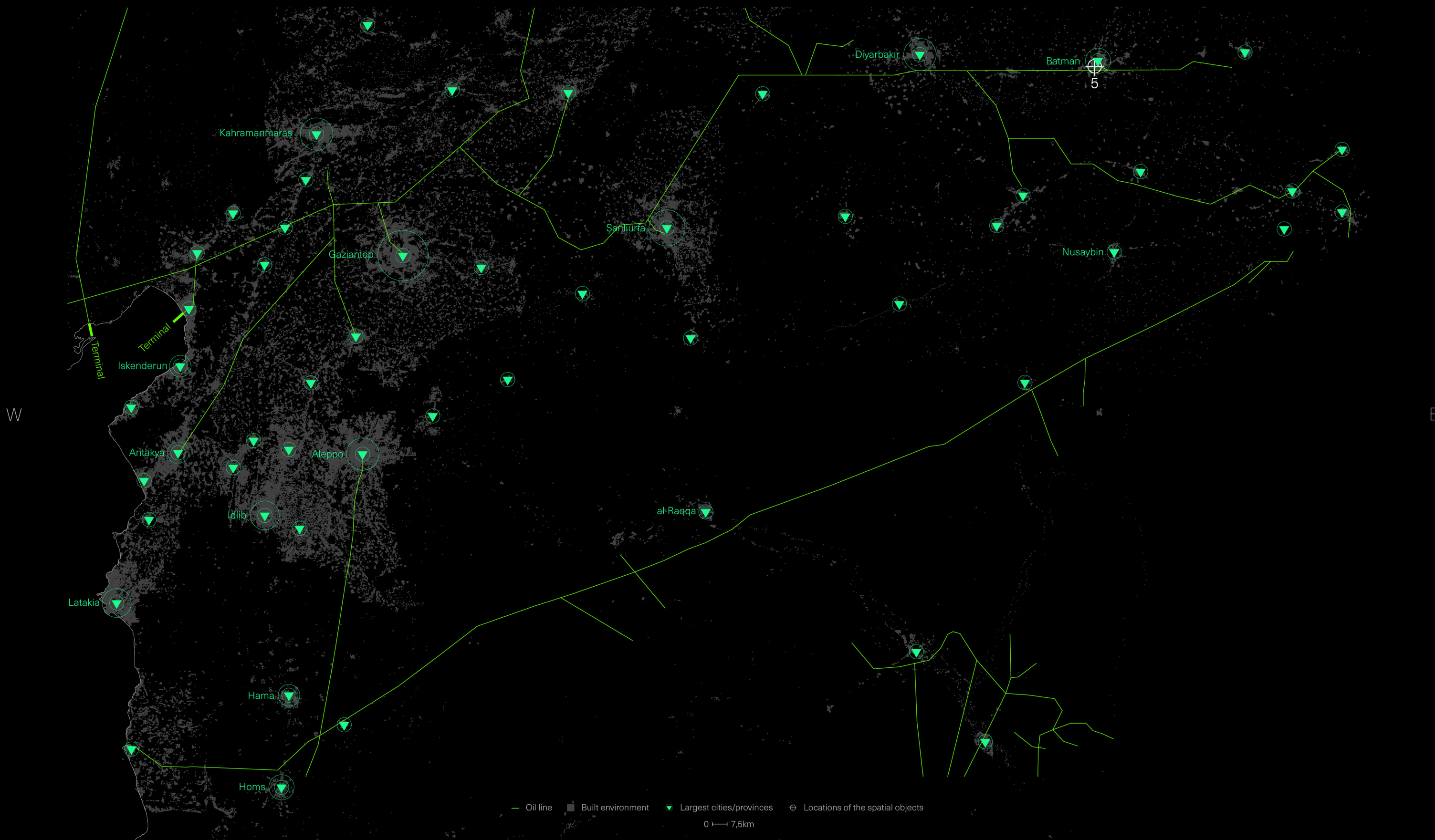
4.6

Petroleum site as a theater for modernity

The fifth spatial object encountered is located in the city of Batman. Compared to the previous objects, this one has a much larger scale as it encompasses the privatized and securitized neighborhood of “Petrol Sitesi” (Petroleum site), which consists of the crude oil refinery and its related buildings, hospitals, schools, sports clubs, suburban areas, and parks. The story reveals the kind of urbanization that is privatization, securitization, and oil-driven, which is crucial as the oil economy evidently affected the emergence of such places in the region. The juxtapositions of these elements made it possible to apply the Foucauldian notion of a “theater” in this case, as the petroleum site.[8] In order to tell the stories of these patterns of urbanization scattered along the region, the thesis goes slightly more distant from the border and therefore does not stick only with the ethnographies of the border.

8. Foucault, “Of Other Space,” 19.





W

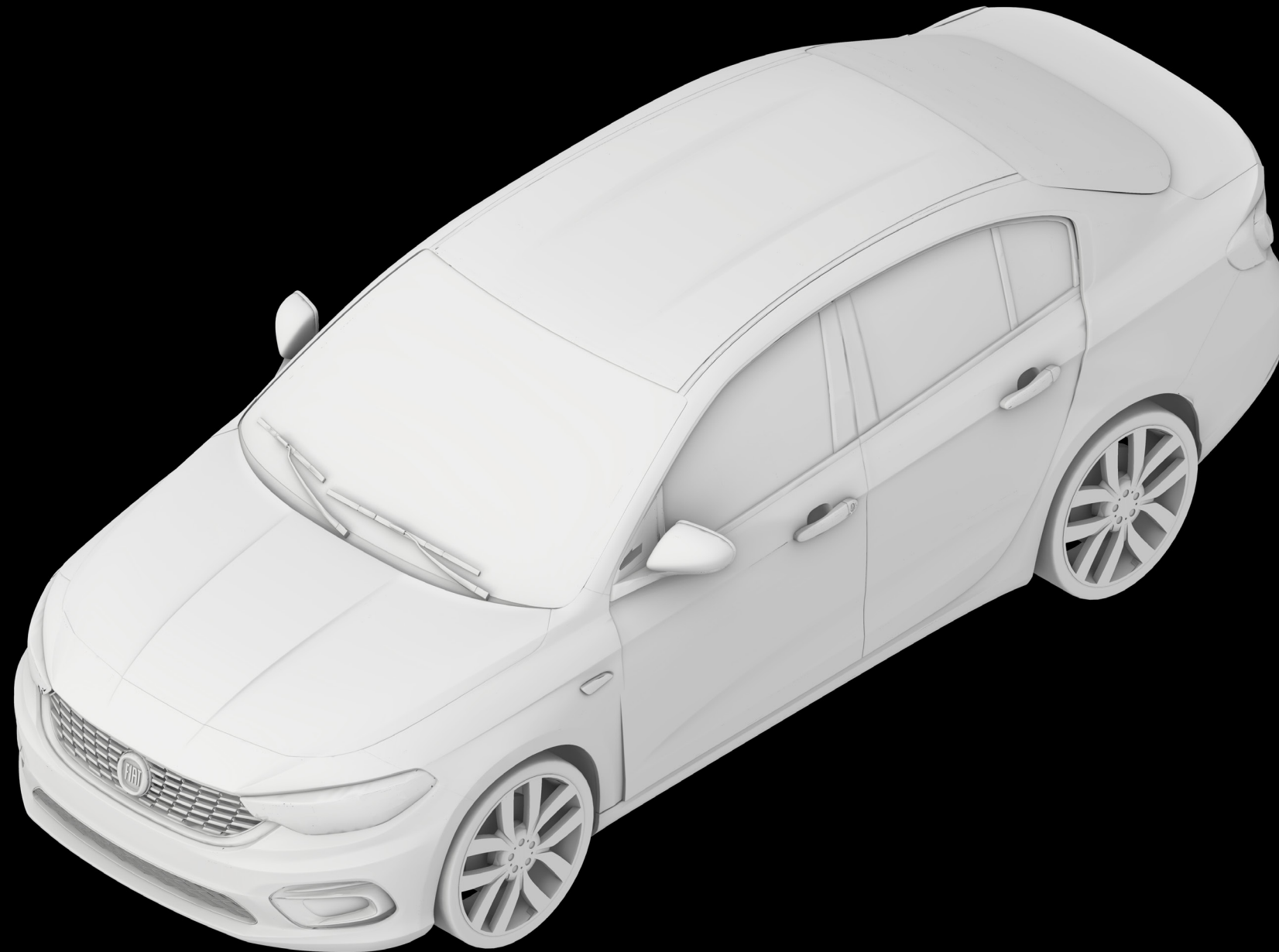
E

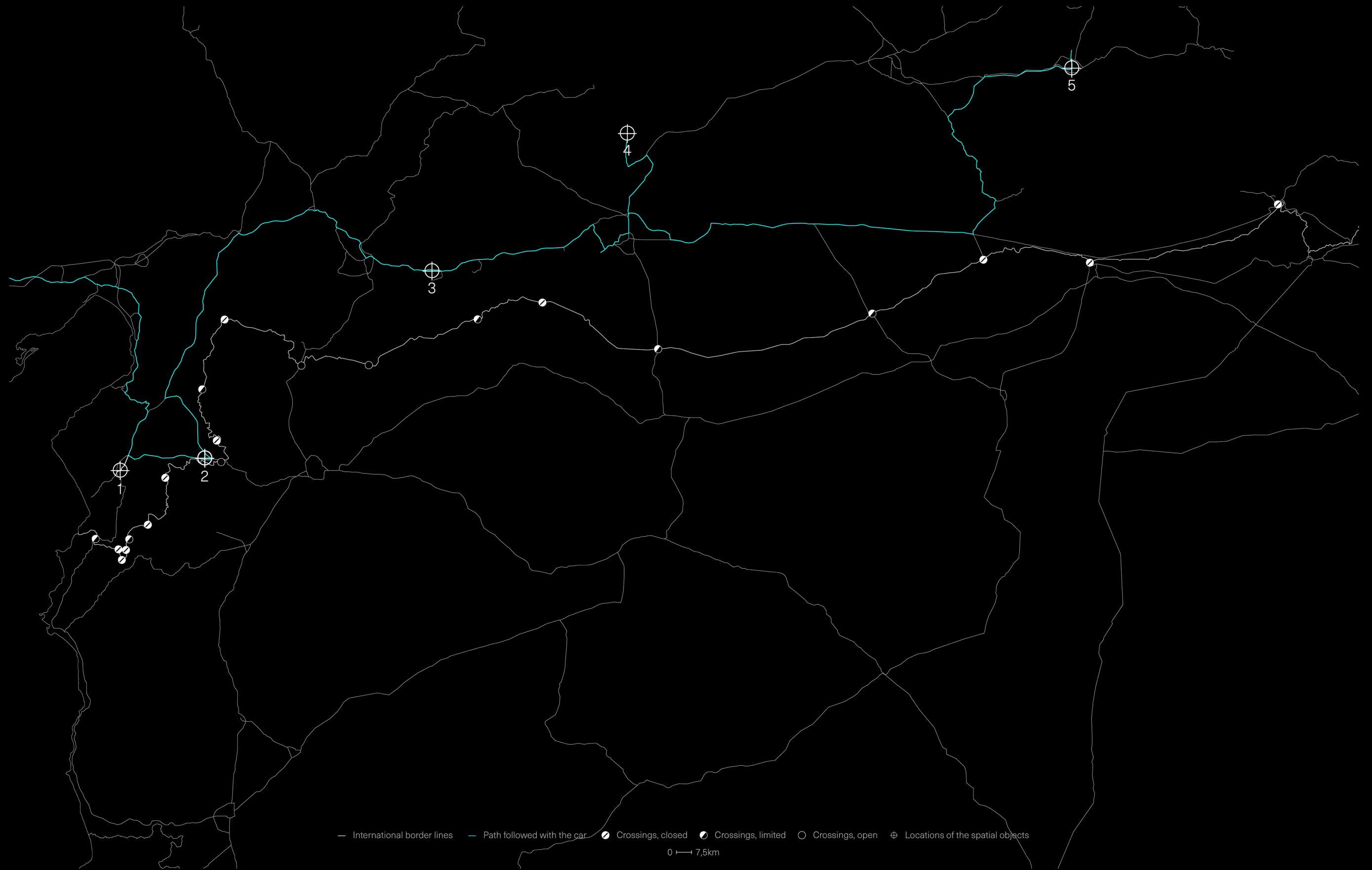
S

4.7
My car as the Foucauldian boat

The sixth spatial object is different than the previous objects encountered during the trip, as it is the actual car with which the journey was realized. The car serves as a representation of the journey, symbolizing the movements of both people and goods. Similar to Foucault’s notion of a boat being a “heterotopia par excellence,” the car is also a “floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is self-enclosed and at the same time given over to the infinity of the sea,” therefore constantly in motion.[9] It is also a great “reserve of imagination,” and without the car, mobility and the potential for crossing boundaries, “dreams dry up,” indicating that modern societies focus on surveillance, control, and the restriction of movements.[10]

9. Foucault, “Of Other Space,” 22.
10. Ibid

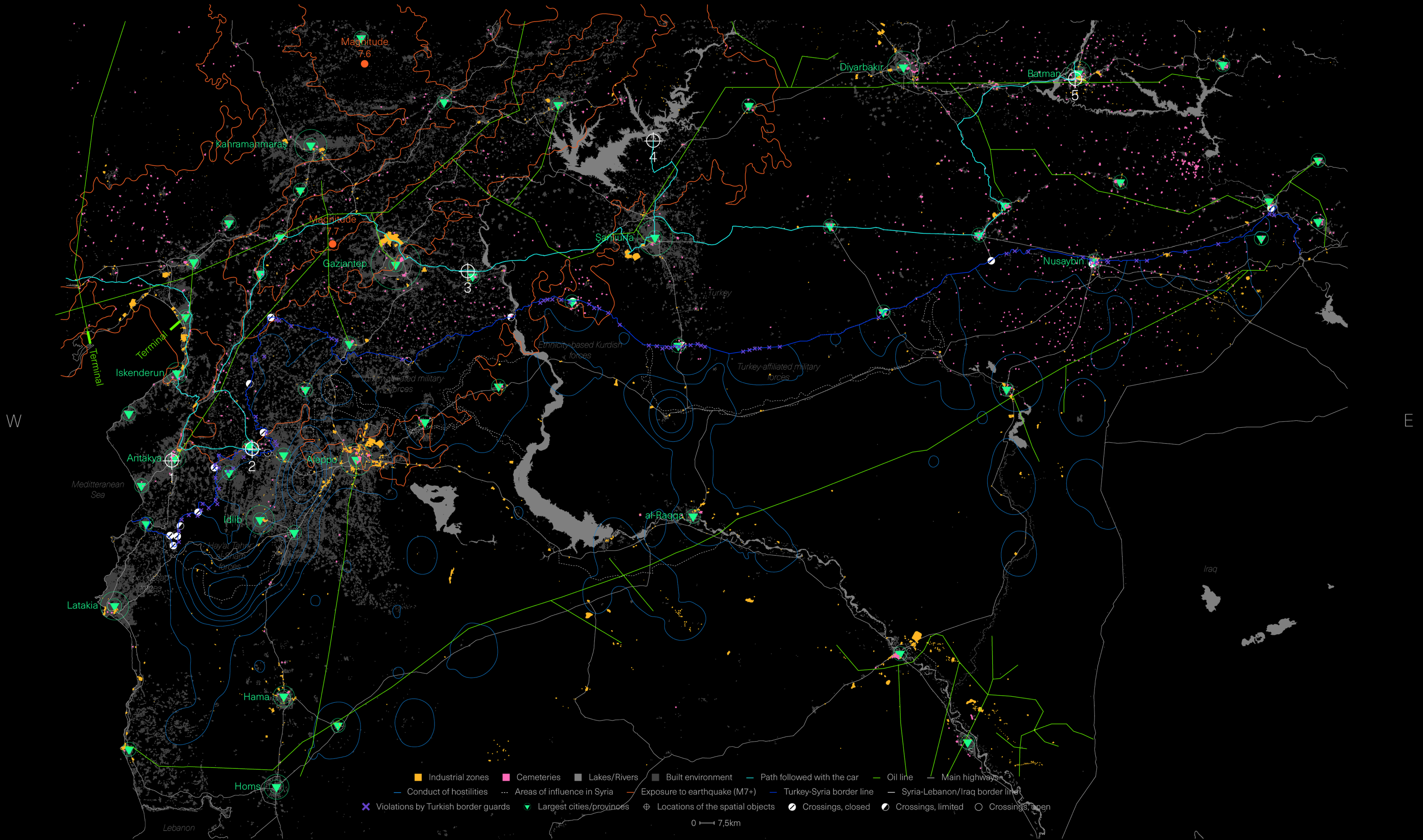




4.8**Remapping the border through its deviations**

In the end, by revealing the stories of these six spatial objects, the thesis suggests to re-read the Turkey-Syria border. This is because the territory is continuously constructed and negotiated through these different spatialities, or deviations, and therefore heterotopic ossifications.

The overlap of all these stories, with the elements emerging from its heterotopic spatial conditions, proposes a remapping of the border, which represents a territorial-scale reconstruction of this investigation, aimed at provoking reflection within the architectural design discourse of the border.



The border exists as an extension of how powers control the terrain in which it is visible, a project made through bordering continuously. As the circulations it modulates and the bodies it controls design spaces, the border becomes thicker than a bidimensional line on maps and becomes a landscape; thus, a “borderscape.”[1][2][3] Among the spatial implications of the bordering is to push back, which turns it into a site of struggle where movements confront the bordering as an act of violence. [4]

Owing to its multifaceted nature, border can appear in different spatial forms and therefore its spaces could be weaponized in different ways, which could be read through the pushback stories. The thesis introduced three examples of sites of struggle, namely: Rio Bravo on the US-Mexico border, Białowieża Forest on the Poland-Belarus border, and finally the Naked Hill on the Turkey-Syria border. Through these three distinct landscape elements, the thesis offered insight into different material consequences of violent pushbacks, which was the main spatial implication that prompted the research in the first place.

Focusing on the case of the Turkey-Syria border, the thesis took a historical approach and disclosed that the border has been a “bone of contention” ever since its demarcation on maps by France and Britain, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, until it reached its current status as a security mechanism project promoted by Turkey and the EU.[5][6] Research into the design of the weaponized Turkey-Syria borderscape revealed the aesthetics of the border as a project of securitization, which are imposed by mass media narratives in Turkey to influence public opinion and create a mental image of the phenomena that is otherwise out of sight.

The thesis proposes looking beyond the identified aesthetics and the limited understanding of conventional cartographies, and instead mobilizing architectural intelligence to confront the logic of design and the project of the Turkey-Syria border. To achieve this, the thesis scans the territory by manipulating cartographic analyses, and statistical and territorial data to re-map its spatial conditions through architectural tools, thereby revealing a sort of X-ray and reimagining of the “bone of contention.”

The research was further developed by engaging with the territory and observing how people inhabit the “bone of contention.” This was done through conducting interviews, visiting various environments, delving into historical accounts, and unfolding issues. The result is a travel diary transcribed from the author’s notebook, revealing ethnographies of the territory, complemented with a photographic investigation.

The journey allowed for fully engaging with the space and enabling another level of understanding by involving all five senses to experience narratives and, especially, the different spatial conditions of the border. In doing so, the trip made it possible to encounter the “heterotopias,” literally meaning the “other spaces,” of the border, therefore giving an opportunity to reimagine it through a different perspective.[8]

The thesis analytically used this Foucauldian notion of heterotopias as

1. Elden, "The Instability of Terrain," 55.

2. Nail, Picione and Pergola, "Borders, Movement, and Being-in-Between," 2-3.

3. Boano and Martén, "Agamben's urbanism of exception: Jerusalem's border mechanics and biopolitical strongholds," 14.

4. Mezzadra and Neilson, "*Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*," 18.

5. Balanche, Fabrice. "The Levant: Fragmentation and Remapping." 5.

6. Tokmajyan and Khaddour, "Border Nation," 2-3.

7. Tagliapietra, "Media and Securitisation: The Influence on Perception," 4-5.

8. Foucault, "Of Other Space," 13-22.

9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

1. Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 194–228

2. Henk von Houtum, "The Janus-face: On the ontology of borders and b/ordering", *Simulacrum: Beyond the Horizon*, 2010, 18.

3. Stuart Elden, "The Instability of Terrain, A moving border: Alpine cartographies of climate change" in *Columbia Books on Architecture and the City* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2019)

4. Thomas Nail, Raffaele Picione and Rocco Pergola, "Borders, Movement, and Being-in-Between," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis and Education: Subject, Action & Society* 2 (2002): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.32111/SAS.2022.2.2.1>.

5. Camillo Boano and Ricardo Martén, "Agamben's urbanism of exception: Jerusalem's border mechanics and biopolitical stronghold," *Cities* 34 (2013): 6-17.

6. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson. *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2013.), 18.

7. Balanche, Fabrice. "The Levant: Fragmentation and Remapping." In *Lines That Bind: 100 Years of Sykes-Picot*, edited by Andrew J. Tabler, p.4 Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016.

8. Armenak Tokmajyan and Kheder Khaddour, "Border Nation: The Reshaping of the Syrian-Turkish Borderlands," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, August 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/08/border-nation-the-reshaping-of-the-syrian-turkish-borderlands?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

an instrument to represent the diversity of materiality and narrative in border spaces. Using the articulation of heterotopia enabled confronting architectural thinking and the project of the border. Therefore, it provides an opportunity to read the border through its deviations or its different spatialities. Foucault suggests six principles to describe heterotopia, and as a reference to this, we selected six spatial objects from the engagement with the territory that revealed such deviations of the border.

Referring to the Turkey-Syria border as a “bone of contention” and using the method of inquiry of scanning its conditions as an “X-ray,” the research maintains a closer connection with the spatial aspect of medical terminology. Therefore we use the term “heterotopic ossification” — which originally is one of the examples of the medical irregularity that Foucault inspired the term “heterotopia” from — to stress that the border can be re-read through its deviations.

The thesis offers to mobilize a different intelligence of the territory to unpack the border project. Thinking of the border as a bone, in all its material, symbolic, and organic dimensions, and the X-ray as a method of inquiry under their surface and immediately visible elements, it is possible to reveal the different spatial conditions as the other spaces and therefore heterotopic ossifications. In doing so, we propose a territorial-scale reconstruction of this investigation, aiming to provoke reflection in the architectural design discourse of the border.

The thesis used architectural intelligence to problematize and explore the tension between architecture and its own complicity in forming the project of the border. As the field of architecture by itself cannot solve these issues, the thesis does not offer any solution, project of implementation, or surgery to the “bone of contention” and its “heterotopic ossifications,” as such endeavors require to be operated by political actors.

Finally, the thesis rejects understanding the border solely through mass media narratives, conventional cartographies, or concrete thinking obsessed with securitization. We propose looking beyond the border itself and focusing on bordering and its creators. Conventional maps are not final; we encourage not to treat them as such, and instead, reimagine how we understand the border by confronting architectural thinking and the project of the border.

“What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.”[9] (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.48)

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The research investigates the Turkey-Syria border as a project, reading it through spaces made and remade by its mechanism, the struggles it produces, and the narratives that emerge from it. As an extension of how powers control the terrain, the border is intended to be eternal, thus it is made through bordering continuously. Due to this inherent dynamism, the border becomes thicker than a bidimensional line on maps, and as the circulations it modulates and the bodies it controls design the spaces, it becomes a landscape. Among the different spatial implications of the border as a project is to pushback, which turns it into a site of struggle where movements confront the bordering as an act of violence. In the case of the Turkey-Syria border, historically being a “bone of contention” ever since its demarcation on maps following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it has reached its current status as a security mechanism project promoted by Turkey and the EU. The research is grounded in architectural thinking about the border, spatializing it to understand better what it does, and exploring the tension between architecture and its complicity in forming the border as a project. Different methodologies are used, starting with investigating three borderscapes through specific push-back stories and researching into the design of the weaponized Turkey-Syria borderscapev. This involves scanning the territory by re-mapping its spatial conditions, thus revealing a sort of X-ray and reimagining the “bone of contention.” The research was further developed with a visit to the region in May 2023, soon after the earthquakes hit, which enabled an engagement with the territory to observe how people live in the space they inhabit and a photographic investigation. The research unlocks the relation between space and the narratives of the territories that are investigated analytically using the Foucauldian notion of “heterotopic ossifications.” Deriving from the six principles of heterotopia, these are six spatial objects selected from the engagement, which are considered deviations of the “bone of contention.” The proposal is to look beyond the imposed aesthetics of the border as a security mechanism in the mass media narrative and the limited understanding of conventional cartographies, and instead to mobilize architectural intelligence to confront the logic of design and the project of the border. Thinking of the border as a bone, in all its material, symbolic, and organic dimensions, and the X-ray as a method of inquiry under their surface and immediately visible elements, it is possible to reveal the spatial conditions as “species of spaces,” or other spaces and therefore heterotopic ossifications. This allowed the territorial-scale reconstruction of this investigation, making it a provoking reflection in the architectural design discourse of the border.