

BORDERS AS ETHNICALLY CHARGED SITES: IRAQI KURDISTAN BORDER CROSSINGS, 1995-2006

Diane E. King
Department of Anthropology
University of Kentucky

ABSTRACT: In this article, I use border crossings between Syria, Turkey, and Iraq during the period from 1995 to 2006 to examine the modern state, identity, and territory at border crossing points. Borderlands represent a site where the core powers of states can display the reach, scope, face, and preferred expressions of their identities. Border crossing points between modern states that make strong ethnolinguistic and/or ethnosectarian identity assertions, as do the states on which I focus here, are often charged sites where the state may seek to impose a certain identity category on an individual, an identity that the individual may or may not claim. Kurdistan, the non-state area recognized by Kurds as their ethnic/national home, arcs across the states, and most of the people meeting at the borders are ethnically Kurdish. The state may deny hybridity, or use hybridity, especially multilingualism, for its own purposes. Ethnolinguistic and other collective identity categories in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq are assigned according to patrilineal descent, which means that singular categories are passed from one generation to the next. These categories are made much less malleable by their reliance on descent claims through one parent. In such a

milieu, ethnic identities may be a factor to a greater degree than if their state systems allowed for more ethnic flexibility and hybridity.

Introduction

In this article I use some encounters I had at border crossing points between Syria, Turkey and Iraq in the years from 1995 to 2006 to think questions of collective identity, territoriality, and boundaries in modern states. I argue that the borders of states that deny ethnolinguistic difference and hybridity can be a place of conflicting assertions about individual identity, where hybridity is denied and one-ness asserted. They are in these instances charged sites. At the same time, the state can place minorities in charge of borders, such as when the states of Turkey and Syria employed Kurdish¹ officials as their representatives. These Kurdish border officials at the border complexes of Turkey and Syria spoke the Kurdish language to travelers between the two states, smoothing the border experience and keeping everything running in some instances, and in other instances translating for the state's monolingual, Turkish-speaking representatives. Individuals, too, can use their hybridity selectively and strategically, bringing it out into the open only when it is safe and advantageous to do so. In the border zones analyzed here, Fredrik Barth's classic model of ethnic groups asserting their differences at boundaries (Barth 1998 [1969]) is complicated. Barth famously suggested that ethnicities, like territories, have boundaries, and that an encounter between members of one ethnic group with members of another group may be able to tell us more about the "cultural stuff that it encloses" than looking directly at the "stuff" of the ethnic group itself could. This article uses encounters in actual territories to think about ethnolinguistic (and ethnosectarian) identity (in this case, Kurdishness) as it becomes manifested and negotiated at border crossing sites, sites that are at the interstices of states

that place Kurds and Kurdishness at their symbolic margins. Looking at ethnic boundaries at state boundaries complicates Barth's thesis, in that state borders are shown to showcase both the faces of the ethnically-assertive state and marginality.

This article is based on a particular historical period of slightly more than a decade, from 1995 to 2006. My approach here is informed by my experiences as a traveler crossing international borders on the way to and from my main ethnographic field site, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (also called Iraqi Kurdistan). I have been traveling to the Kurdistan Region to conduct ethnographic research since 1995. This article is drawn from my experiences from 1995 to 2006 because during that period I had to travel overland to get to the Kurdistan Region, rather than having the option of flying there as I have been doing since then. In those years, I traveled to the Kurdistan Region by flying to a neighboring country from the United States by way of Europe (1995, 1996, 1997, 2002, and 2004), or by traveling from Lebanon (where I was on the faculty at American University of Beirut) through Syria and / or Turkey (2001, 2003, and 2006). I crossed or attempted to cross international borders at several different border crossing points, four of which I focus on in this article. From Turkey or Syria, I crossed into Iraq either at Habur / Ibrahim Khalil, or at Fesh Khabur. My journeys from Lebanon involved first traveling to Syria's northeast by plane, bus, and / or taxi. Most of the time, if the Turkish border with Iraq was open to American passport-holders, the Syrian border was closed, or vice-versa (this pattern lasted until about 2007, when both countries had their borders open for several years until the Syrian Civil War began in 2011). If the main Turkish border crossing point at Habur was closed, I crossed the Tigris in a small ferry, a dingy with an outboard motor, at Fesh Khabur. I also once attempted unsuccessfully to cross at Yaarabiya / Rabi'a. If the Syrian border crossings were closed, I first crossed into Turkey from Syria, and then entered Iraq through the Habur / Ibrahim Khalil crossing from Turkey.



FIGURE 1. The ferry at Fesh Khabur from the Iraqi side, 12 March 2002.
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This paper deliberately draws on passing observations at borders rather than systematic fieldwork, because the border sites I describe were highly controlled spaces in which I do not think it would have been possible to carry out more lengthy or focused research. I call the method that resulted in the data for this article “embodied” research (King 2014: 52). Such research is ethnographic, but moreover deliberately emphasizes the experience of the ethnographer in physical proximity and situations that are similar to those experienced by local people, no matter how unpleasant they may be. My crossing experiences were varied, and the border crossing points, though all in the same geographic area, are quite different from each other. For example, I found the crossing between Nusaybin, Turkey and Qamishli, Syria, to be rather unassuming, and especially in the early part of the eleven-year period, the border had a neglected feel, with comparatively little traffic and limited infrastructure.

The Habur/Ibrahim Khalil crossing, in contrast, was very busy, open 24 hours per day, and handled the vast quantities of goods being exchanged in the brisk trade in which Iraq and Turkey began engaging in the mid-1990s. During my border crossings I had negative experiences, such as being spoken to in a gruff manner and briefly detained. Twice my crossing was denied. On my way to Iraqi Kurdistan for the second time to begin a long-term field project in 1996, for example, I was first denied entry to Iraq from Turkey, and then waited weeks in a nearby city for the border to open as war between Kurdish PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Worker's Party) rebels and the Turkish state raged.² I also experienced crossings that were quick, simple, and easy, and was welcomed with a friendly disposition and a glass of tea. Despite the diversity of experiences I had at borders, I argue here that some of the common threads in my experiences can tell us something about the modern state, identity, and territory at borders.

Borders, Borderlands, and Patrilineal Identities

The border literature asserts that borders are places of hybrid identities, where people may have "non-unitary identities" (Kearney 1995: 557). For Lapid, "Processes of identity, border, and order construction are... mutually self-constituting," and "[b]orders... are in many ways inseparable from the identities they help demarcate or individuate" (2001: 7). Especially following the publication of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999), borderland studies often portray borders as zones of hybridity in which people on either side of the line may have more in common than they do with people who are more central both spatially and in terms of representing the idealized nation. Borders separate people physically and bureaucratically. "The idea of an anthropology without borders, although it has a progressive ring to it, ignores the reality of

the very real borders that confront and oppress 'our' anthropological subjects and encroach on our liberty as well," writes Scheper-Hughes (1995: 417). A border is crossed and therefore transcended as people along it assert their connectedness, which may well encompass a desire to cross the border for whatever reason or reasons.

Border crossings can reveal borderlands to be places where state sovereignty is played out in the peripheries of the state, rather than in the state's core where sovereignty might be expected to be more potent. Although they are peripheries, borderlands are not necessarily peripheral as far as the state's purposes are concerned. On the contrary, borderlands represent a site where the core powers of states can display the reach, scope, face, and preferred expressions of their identities. They are also spaces of international attention, albeit shifting and situational. In 1990 the "international community," led by the United States, suddenly developed an oppositional posture toward Saddam Hussein and his regime when he ordered his military to breach Iraq's border with Kuwait. Before that, his regime had brutalized people within Iraq in numerous ways, including using chemical weapons, and for years there was no serious opposition from that same community. What triggered the response to Saddam? Certainly the West's opposition that ultimately led to the Gulf-War was multi-causal, and centered mainly around petroleum, but the violation of a border was the main trigger of the conflict. A borderland is a zone that is distant from the core of the state's territory and adjacent to the periphery of that territory. Since states now cover the inhabitable parts of the globe, by definition a borderland is also adjacent to another state. The lands on both sides of the boundary line that constitutes an international border can be considered a borderland (Baud and Van Schendel 1997). If one state promotes a strong sense of ethnic nationhood, and it borders another state with which it has a history of conflict and in which a contrasting ethnic identity may be promoted, then

the borders can be vigorously enforced as each state asserts its sovereignty.

As Katherine Verdery notes in a response to Barth (1969 [1998]), "...the very possibility of identity choice varies with different kinds of states, and by the histories of state-making and the capacities of state-makers in one place or another" (Verdery 1994: 39). Many political and social categories in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey are governed by particular and specific principles promoted by the state, those of patriliney (also called agnation). Therefore, citizens who meet at their borders may meet as people who have received only one ethnic category and citizenship in only one state patrilineally, and yet whose identity is actually more complex than official state discourse would suggest. For example, someone carrying citizenship documents issued by the "Arab" Syrian state might be regarded when traveling abroad as belonging to "Arab" identity, but within a Syrian context may claim, and be recognized, as having a different ethno-nationalist identity, Kurdish or Armenian, for example.

In societies in which identity is passed on patrilineally, key features of identity, such as language and a sense of shared experience and history, are inculcated through the convention of patrilocal residence, in which a newly-married couple is expected to live in the husband's community, rather than the wife's. Any children born to the couple are therefore raised around their father's people, not their mother's (although they may visit their mother's community regularly and experience warm relationships in it). A "Kurdish" Syrian or an "Alawite" Syrian is so because such a category was passed to him or her by a father of the same category. These categories then become ratified by spatial practices, as people cluster together in villages or urban quarters populated mainly by others of the same category. Within those spaces, children grow up hearing and using their father's language as the language of their community, no matter what language their mother might also transmit to them. Patrilineally conferred language and identity are thus

conflated. Patrilineal and patrilocal patterns of settlement have been shown to be pervasive in the region, even appearing in the genetic record in Anatolia (Gokcumen et al. 2011). When identity claims that are passed on patrilineally are elevated to the level of the state, such as in the case of the state of Turkey promoting a “Turkish” identity or Syria an “Arab” identity, everyday relations of kinship are made in the context of the state’s claim to be a nation-state with only one primary identity. State identity documents and laws suggest unity, even though the actual populations of such states are ethnically and religiously diverse. Positions of state power may be held mainly by people belonging to one ethoreligious identity, such as the Alawites whose power in Arab Syria was seldom challenged from the 1960s until the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. (Alawites represent a specific sect within the category “Arab,” so a religious minority shrewdly ruled in the name of an ethnic majority, complicating the relationship between state and individual identity still further.) Singular identity claims by states may lead to vastly different experiences for citizens, ranging from advantages enjoyed by a person whose primary identity is aligned with that of the state, to challenges experienced by a person not fitting that description.

Border Crossings at Charged Sites: The Case of Kurdistan

Border crossing points between modern states that make strong ethnolinguistic and/or ethnosectarian identity assertions are often charged sites. “In the modern conception,” Benedict Anderson argues, “state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimetre of a legally demarcated territory” (Anderson 2006: 19). In other words, a modern state has borders that are defined, and modern states do not (or are not expected to) extend and retract tentacles of sovereignty to and through middle-men like empires did before

them. With borders conveniently circumscribing the zone of the state's self-focused attentions, the state attempts to know, categorize, and control the population. Life is lived under the gaze of the modern state's project, which "has entailed a profound alteration in, and reorganization of, people's ethical and aesthetic sensibilities, life choices, and manner of public and personal conduct - not to mention a complete transformation of legal, educational, and political institutions" (Mahmood 2012: 74).

The ideal border, from the modern state's point of view, is not crossed without permission from the state, without a chance for the state (or local strongmen who the state permits to operate) to tax whoever and whatever is crossing. However, the borders featured in this article were some of those most vigorously crossed by both legal and illegal travelers in the world. Smuggling, the covert crossing of people and goods against the will of one or more states, is big business globally, and in the area where Turkey, Syria, and Iraq meet. In the 1990s, clandestine migration flows of people across state borders increased significantly worldwide, and out-migration, or the idea of out-migrating, was a major part of daily life in Iraqi Kurdistan (King 2005). By 1998, an estimated 3 million Kurds, or approximately 10% of the total Kurdish population, lived outside of the area in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran known in the Kurdish community as Kurdistan (Fatah et al. 1998). Since approximately the turn of the century, the flow has waned significantly as Europe has become less hospitable to asylum-seekers and the quality of life has increased in most parts of the Kurdish homeland, but the idea of crossing borders to go to Europe remains a familiar one.³

At the borders between Syria, Turkey, and Iraq that are the subject of this article, some encounters between people traveling and working at the border were laden with a mixture of ideals and collective identity assertions belonging to the state and to their local community. The state sought to impose a

certain identity category on an individual, an identity that the individual might have claimed, but might not have, or that the individual might not have wished to divulge before the state. The state may have denied hybridity, but it also may have used hybridity, especially multilingualism, for its own purposes. In this diversity of approaches and experiences, however, identity claims, both those that were asserted and those that were withheld or suppressed, often came into sharper relief at a border than they might have elsewhere. Despite the variety in my set of border-crossing experiences from 1995 to 2006, they clearly demonstrate that the case of Kurdistan complicates issues of state, nation, identity, and territory.

When one is crossing from one Kurdish-majority part of one state to a Kurdish-majority area in a neighboring state, one encounters not ethno-linguistic contrast, but relative sameness.⁴ The geographic area that is the focus of this article is a border zone *par excellence*. All of the crossings I mention here, with the exception of Yaarabiya / Rabi'a, fall in the area in which ethnic Kurds constitute the majority of the population, even though they are numeric minorities in each of the individual states. This area is informally known to Kurds as "Kurdistan," the Kurdish homeland. If we imagine the world as a tic-tac-toe board, then the Kurds' nation, that nation emplaced in its claimed historic homeland Kurdistan, could be seen to be an "X" with borders running across it rather than an "O" with borders encircling it. Borders do not circumscribe this nation's historic homeland; they cut it into four (or even more) pieces.

The borders described in this article are products of events that occurred following World War I. The modern states of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq were created in the 1920s, as the Kemalists created the new country of Turkey, and the European winners of the war inscribed new states onto most of the rest of the territory formerly controlled by the Ottoman dynasty governing from Istanbul. The years before the cartographic "X" became fixed were marred with population transfers, genocide



FIGURE 2. “The Kurdish Lands,” a map created by the government of the United States (United States Central Intelligence Agency 1992). The red square emphasizes Iraqi Kurdistan, the author’s destination or intended destination. (According to the author’s ethnographic observation, Kurdish-majority areas in Syria are found in a much wider area than depicted on the map.) Public domain.

perpetrated mainly by Turks and other Muslims (including Kurds) against Armenians and other Christians, and political jockeying over territory and oil. After the Great Powers took control of most of the territories previously controlled by the Ottomans, US President Wilson promised autonomy to the Kurds and other minorities such as the Assyrians. The Treaty of Sèvres, signed in 1920, called for the creation of a Kurdish

state in Mosul Vilayet, part of British-controlled Mesopotamia. However the treaty was never ratified and a Kurdish state never created; instead their significant population had borders drawn across it, rendering Kurds minorities with a stroke of the pen. All “minorities” have such a status because they do not constitute a majority in the states where they live, but the Kurdish case is unusual as the Kurdish population is larger than those of many of the world’s states. This makes them an atypical minority, and it means that, for many Kurdish people, a sense of having been wronged by history is still acute.

Borders have been a recurring theme in the interviews I have carried out in Iraqi Kurdistan, coming up in conversation even in interviews intended to be about different topics. In 2002, I interviewed one of the oldest residents of Iraqi Kurdistan, a man named Mulla Qasem who was living in the small town of Simel at the time. He claimed that his earliest childhood memories were in 1894, which would have made him several years older, perhaps 110 or so. It was impossible to verify this claim, and he has since died, but he went on to give a lively five-hour interview in which he described life “before the borders started.” His tribe, who are today known as the Kucher, which means “nomad,” was fully nomadic. They were some of the last people in Kurdistan to live in tents all year, without spending at least the coldest parts of the winter in a hard shelter. Their migration route took them from the lower end of the Bahdinan area (just North of the Lesser Zab river) to their *zozan*, verdant pastures in the highlands above Diyarbakir. “When the borders started,” they were forced to settle when their summer pasture became part of “Turkey” and their winter pasture part of “Iraq.” “We had to choose,” he told me. “We decided on Iraq.” Other members of their tribe decided on Turkey, and are now Turkish citizens.

Iraq and Syria were quasi-sovereign under the British and French mandates, respectively, which lasted until the middle of the century before revolutions lead to a series of postcolo-

nial autocratic regimes in each. Turkey was also autocratic, but independent, without a Western European occupier. The cartographic "X" split not only the large Kurdish ethnolinguistic group, but it also brought profound change to the area, confining people spatially and socio-politically in new states, and introducing a modern sense of territoriality where a more flexible sensibility had existed under the Ottoman and Persian empires. The only border through the Kurdish-majority area that was not new in the 20th century is Iran's border with modern Turkey and Iraq, which approximated the Ottoman-Persian border and dates to 1639.

Kurds, Armenians, Turks, Arabs, Syriacs, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Daoudis, Turkomans and people of other ethnolinguistic or sectarian groups hail from the spaces delineated by the cartographic X. However, the state has been controlled at the higher echelons of governance almost exclusively by ethnic Arabs in Iraq and Syria, Turks in Turkey, and Persians in Iran. Each of these states is an "ethnocracy," containing "a political regime that facilitates expansion and control by a dominant ethnicity in contested lands" (Yiftachel 2006: 359). In each, to varying degrees and in a variety of ways during the past century, the dominant ethno-linguistic group has conflated ethno-national identity with the identity of the state. In Turkey, a civil war between state forces and the PKK claimed, according to many sources (e.g., Watts 2010: 22), over 40,000 lives from 1984 to the late 2000s. The PKK initially responded to the state's suppression of Kurdishness by promoting separatism, but in recent years it and other activist parties and organizations have been seeking greater linguistic and cultural rights within a unified Turkey (Watts 2010). In the conflict, the PKK used terrorism, and the government had a scorched earth policy resulting in the destruction of thousands of villages. An accelerated, reactionary nationalism had arisen in the 1990s (Bora 2003). As for Syria, its formal name is the Syrian *Arab* Republic. Many of the millions of non-Arab citizens of Syria were mistreated in a state

that by its very name suggests that they are not full members of the nation (although since Syria's civil war began in 2011, mistreatment in Syria has been multidirectional). Most members of the minority groups in the area are bilingual, speaking Turkish, Arabic, or Farsi as a second language (although this is changing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where the first largely-monolingual generation of Kurds in modern times has now reached young adulthood).

A shared identity expressed through language can subvert the modern state's totalizing project. Crossing can be banal, benign, or even good as people go about engaging in trade and social relationships across borders. When people on either side of a border share a common language and identity, social bridge-building can be more easily carried out. One of Gregory Bateson's most famous quotes is an elaboration on Alfred Korzybski's dictum, "the map is not the territory" (Bateson 2000 [1972]: 460-461): "We say the map is different from the territory. But what is the territory? Operationally, somebody went out with a retina or a measuring stick and made representations which were then put on paper... the mental world is only maps of maps, *ad infinitum*. All 'phenomena' are literally 'appearances.'" One way to deny the very compelling appearance of the border in one's daily life is to carry out relationships that transcend the border, as many Kurdish speakers do every day. Denying the charged atmosphere that many may experience at the border, some people cross multiple times a day. They may do so legally, as in the case of the Kurdish taxi drivers from Turkey in whose taxis I have ridden many times. They may do so illegally. In 2005, a man I know told me matter-of-factly about smuggling by donkey in the mountains between Turkey and Iraq. "The current price is ID 5,000 [approximately USD \$3.70] per donkey. There are two or three thousand people crossing per day. Two of the crossings are in the Guley [tribal] area, others in other areas." Smuggling represents a way to

carry on with economic relations that might otherwise have been interrupted by the imposition of a border.

State Denial of Commonality

The states that control the border crossing zones described here have an interest in denying commonalities that people on either side of the border may recognize in each other. Such borders are rendered marginal not only due to their distance from the state's center, but because they are located in an ethnically marginal zone. To be or to be seen to be Kurdish in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey in the 20th and 21st centuries has meant, for many people, having the experience of unpleasant social encounters ranging from subtle to more overt. "Kurdish" is for many people both an ontological and a linguistic identity. The Behdini subdialect of Kurmanji Kurdish is the main language I used to navigate my border crossings and the surrounding borderlands, and this has given me experiences that I might have had if my identity or heritage were Kurdish, which is not the case.⁵ In many instances, upon hearing me start a conversation in Kurdish, a person glowered at me, or I received what I suspected to be harsher treatment at the border or in an encounter with a representative of the government, such as at an internal checkpoint, than I otherwise might have. During the period covered by this article, Kurdish was largely banned in public places in Turkey. The Kurdish language is spoken by millions of people in an arc stretching from Beirut to Khorasan, and increasingly to the northwest as well; Istanbul is now the world's largest Kurdish city. But public use of Kurdish was risky, and the Turkish state jailed many people for its public use or publication. When I heard Kurdish spoken at borders, then, it stood out as what linguists call "marked" language. The language of the state, Turkish in Turkey, and Arabic in Iraq and Syria, was unmarked and dominant.

Prior to leaving my home in the United States to travel to Iraqi Kurdistan for the first time in 1995, I had been warned by staff members of relief and development agencies who had spent time there that while I was passing through Turkey, I should not mention the word “Kurd,” “Kurdish” or (especially) “Kurdistan” and that I should refrain from carrying anything with these words in my luggage. If state authorities found them, I was warned, I could go to jail or be banned from the country. This put me in a quandary as an ethnographer just starting to explore my chosen field site, and who would not (yet) have access to the internet in my field site across the border in Iraq. How could I carry out an initial field stint of five weeks without any reference books? I felt I needed to bring along one or two. So, I chose the ethnographies by van Bruinessen (1992) and Yalçın-Heckmann (1991). Thankfully, the Turkish border inspectors in Istanbul, at Habur, and at other internal checkpoints in Turkey did not find them at the bottom of my luggage. I also was told to avoid mentioning where I was going, but that if such mention became necessary, I was to speak only of “northern Iraq” and never use the term “Kurdistan.” With this, I dutifully complied. I was unprepared for the abrupt contrast on display after I crossed the Tigris River at Habur into Iraq and the Iraqi quadrant of Kurdistan in 1995 for the first time: the word “Kurdistan” seemed to be on everyone’s lips. People used it at once proudly and matter-of-factly, in many instances without any hint of fear. The idea of the Kurds as an ethnic “minority” seemed irrelevant, and representatives of the Iraqi government were virtually absent. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is no longer the only quadrant of Kurdistan where Kurdishness finds vigorous and varied expression. Since 2012, it has been joined by “Rojava,” the Kurdish name for the Kurdish-majority part of Syria, where Kurdish and members of other ethnic groups have assumed administrative and military control over a significant portion of Syrian territory following the advent of the Syrian

civil war in 2011. Suppression of Kurdish expression adjacent to these enclaves, however, is still the norm.

Many groups, whether tribes or larger political units, have claimed or tried to claim territory in the area of the cartographic “X” as their own. Amal Vinogradov notes that the northern portion of Iraq nearest the border zone I describe was a strategic area contested by the Ottoman and Persian empires, where tribes supplied manpower and “competing political factions took turns appeasing, organizing, and arming the tribes who were then drawn into the internecine power struggles” (1974: 209). Some of the contests were highly uneven and violent. Eastern Anatolia and the surrounding area is a zone of modern genocides stretching back over the past two centuries (Levene 1998; Travis 2010), and of periodic cataclysmic conflict prior to that. A borderland can be a place of suffering, contestations of power, assertions of sovereignty, and ironies. Although a post-Westphalian border is at its most basic a line that carries with it rules of crossing, socially it is much more than that. What it constitutes for people’s lives and futures can be elicited in narrations of the experiences that it engenders. The border crossing points I describe, and others near them, have long been places of intrigue. As David McDowall (2004: 8) argues, “a permeable frontier has afforded a refuge for those who offend the state. Kurdish leaders have been seeking sanctuary in neighboring states for hundreds of years.” In performing crossings, and in my two attempts that failed, I encountered the state, or I feared encountering the state in many cases, and I encountered an area in which the people on either side of the border were asserting both difference and similarity.

Ethnic Nationalist States and Borders

My observations and experiences as a crosser of borders while using the Kurdish language display charged and sym-

bolically marginal sites at borders. They show how state-sanctioned and unsanctioned identity categories can divide, especially at a border. A line on the land becomes a social line. As Eric Fischer noted in an early article in border studies (Fischer 1949), an international boundary with a long history is difficult to alter. As time passes, it becomes increasingly influential. A border is supposed to partition identity categories that are settled into places, and it does that to a great degree. It keeps people and goods in or out by using state violence or its threat. At the border between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Turkish Republic, for example, I observed a no-man's land planted with land mines, towers for armed guards, and fences topped with barbed wire. In the first several years of the 21st century, it became even more fortified. In some places, the border parallels the Tigris River, which serves as an additional barrier. Along the Turkish side, the government has placed nationalist statements written on bare soil in rock or brick on various hillsides. It has chosen to mark the soil itself as Turkish, which may be seen as a more nationalistic statement than one placed at remove from the soil, such as on a billboard. This is a border that would appear to be affirmed and enforced very seriously, at least at those points where such fortification appears (since it does not appear at all points along the border).

Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 48) describe a borderland as an "interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject" and argue that a borderland is a "'normal' locale of the postmodern subject." But what if the states whose borders meet largely deny hybridity? Ethnolinguistic or sectarian favoritism by the state does not mean that hybridity is absent; it only means that hybridity is not always on display even though it may be present. As each side asserts its distinctiveness, hybridity is one of the results of their assertions. Indeed, ethnically diverse states are the norm in the world. As Nye (2003: 254) argues: "Less than 10 percent of the states in today's world are ethnically homogeneous.

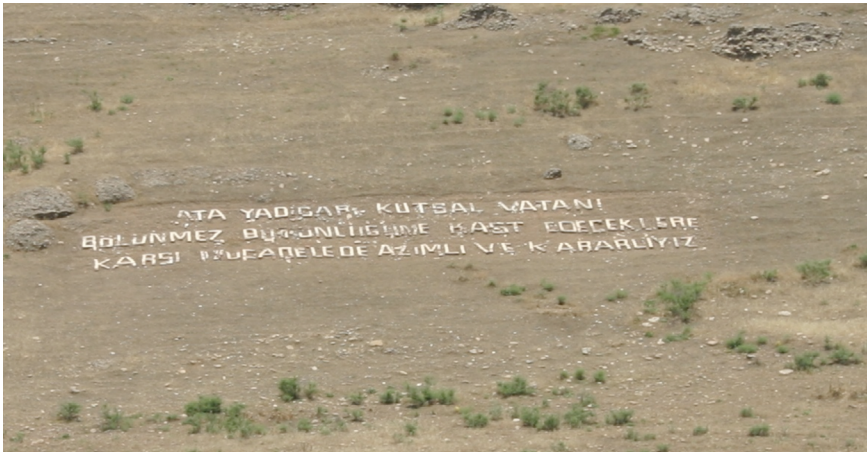


FIGURE 3. A government statement asserting that the Turkish homeland (“*vatan*”) is indivisible written onto a hillside visible from the E90 highway (Mardin Şırnak Yolu), near the town of Cizre and the Syrian border, 18 June 2004. Copyright/photo credit: Diane E. King.

Only half have one ethnic group that accounts for as much as 75 percent of their population.”⁶ The promotion of one form of ethnicity as the sanctioned face of the nation seems firmly rooted in the modern, and resistant to the postmodern. Gupta and a different co-author, Sharma, assert that the “[i]n many popular, official, and expert discourses, the national state is seen as compromised by globalization because globalization challenges the two key concepts that lie at the heart of the idea of a *national* state – territoriality and sovereignty” (Sharma and Gupta 2006: 6). Again, the old order is seen to be threatened by hybridity from a global source. Neither of these conditions, however, militated against the state making claims based on ethnicity, as Syria, Turkey, and Iraq did. But hybridity that is quashed by the state can give rise to protest and rebellion. The danger for the state that makes such exclusive claims is on display in Syria at present. In the years since my most recent trip to

the area in late 2010, it has been Balkanizing, clearly fracturing into smaller territories as the conflict that began with protests in March 2011 continues in the form of a multi-front civil war. Evidence from media reports and eyewitnesses with whom I have spoken suggests that the conflict has engendered ethnic cleansing and possibly even attempted genocide.

At the Syria-Turkey border at the towns of Qamishli and Nusaybin during the 2000s, I watched and border traffic ran smoothly and business was conducted. This border, which I crossed several times between 2003 and 2005, appeared to me to be a relatively pleasant place. I observed that many travelers were served tea as they waited for their paperwork to be processed. On the Syrian side were several civil servants dressed in the olive green uniforms of the Syrian regime. At first glance, they gave the appearance of being gruff and unhappy, the picture of an autocratic regime at one of the places where it was most on guard against its on-again-off-again adversary Turkey. However, I later came to see this as merely a veneer. To my surprise, the first time I was in the office where the border paperwork was processed, the language of the office seemed to be Kurdish, not Arabic. The men spoke to travelers in Arabic unless someone started in Kurdish, but among themselves they spoke Kurdish. This seemed deeply surprising to me, but it was clearly the case. In the course of my several crossings, I accumulated several hours' experience in that office and in its adjacent Turkish counterpart. In addition to imagining that the representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic who met travelers at the border would be Arabs, I expected hostility between the representatives of the two states whose adversarial posture was well-known. However, I saw cooperation and friendliness. I consumed many glasses of tea on the Syrian side. A small no-man's land existed that border-crossers had to walk across (often in the hot sun, seemingly made hotter by my heavy luggage), and at first I imagined that the border workers kept this no-man's land undefiled by their own crossings. At one

point, though, I saw that on the Syrian side, someone had apparently made an error in their paperwork on the Turkish side. "No problem," said the man working behind the counter on the Syrian side. Then he took the papers, walked across the no-man's land to Turkey, sorted things out, and came back to finish the process with the traveler.

Eventually I learned that of all of the personnel working on both sides of the border, only one was not ethnolinguistically Kurdish. While tea was not served on the Turkish side, it nevertheless also struck me as easygoing. I listened as business was conducted in Kurdish by default, except for what was written on the paperwork. I was amazed that the higher apparatuses of state had entrusted people belonging to an identity category that each regarded as problematic with the responsibility of controlling border traffic. The one man who was not Kurdish was ethnolinguistically Turkish. He spoke some English. He and I struck up a friendship. It was not long before I learned that he was from far away, on Turkey's Western coast, and that he hated working there. "This is a God-forsaken part of the country!" he would say. Still, he seemed to have a positive attitude toward his colleagues. Since he did not speak Arabic, they spoke to Arabic and Kurdish speakers and he dealt with the Turkish and English speakers. On my first of several visits to the border while he was working there, in late 2003, he pressed me as to my travel plans. One of my graduate students at American University of Beirut and I were on our way to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but we did not want to say where we were going for fear of triggering a negative reaction in him, one that I imagined could ultimately prevent us from reaching our destination. We wanted to make small talk and be on our way, nothing more. But he kept pressing us, so I told him we planned to visit "Cizre, and that area, you know, the really beautiful mountainous area east of here. I really love mountains!" I gushed. It was all true. The mountainous areas where the Kurds live in Turkey are beautiful, and we were indeed going

to Cizre on our way to the border. He scowled and said, "Don't go there." "What is there?" he added with a sneer. The area to which I referred was known as a heavily Kurdish area, one where the conflict between Kurdish PKK rebels and the state had been intensely fought. By his reaction, it seemed clear that he looked down on it and what it represented. It also seemed that he suspected we were going to (the Kurdistan Region of) Iraq, but wanted to conceal his suspicions that we were going to this (what I imagined he regarded as) equally despicable place and get us to provide that information ourselves. He kept pressing us, but I stuck to my answer, which I felt struck a good compromise between giving him information that was false, and protecting us from the reaction I imagined would come. Happily, our stop at his border office was a success, and within a little over an hour, during which our passports were in a back office being processed by one of his colleagues, we were on our way, having successfully resisted the pressure to divulge our final destination.

A few days later, we returned. With a deadpan look on his face, the same border official looked at our passports, then looked at us and asked, "How was Iraq?" We answered that we had had a successful trip, and went on to have a brief and matter-of-fact conversation about it. The pressure and dissimulation of our previous encounter seemed to melt away in an instant. It seemed we had made a friend, who chose not to use the power that the state had invested in him to harass us or cause us to alter our travel plans, since he could have prevented us from exiting to Syria just as other Turkish border officials had in 1996 when I was prevented from exiting Turkey at the Habur border. When I came back through in 2005, he was still there, and we chatted just like old times.

Territorialized ethnic encounters between people representing states that have expressed hostility toward each other⁷ are not themselves straightforwardly hostile, but variegated. I have indeed observed, and triggered, hostility by speaking

Kurdish in Syria and Turkey. But sometimes a “minority” is also a bridge-builder. These more pleasant encounters I experienced along the Turkey-Syria border stood in sharp contrast to the bellicose words periodically exchanged between Ankara and Damascus, and the barbed wire, guard towers, and minefields that separated the two state territories. In everyday encounters between state representatives at borders, the routines of bureaucratic interaction can be enhanced by cooperation and even friendship.

Denial of Identity at Borders

The Turkish English speaker who I came to know at the Nusaybin border complex declared unequivocally that he saw the borderlands as marginal and peripheral. Consequently, he did not want to be there. My sense was that one factor that led him to feel that way was the hybridity that he observed all around him, but could not take part in because he did not speak Kurdish. I, as an American speaking Kurdish but not Turkish, drew attention to this hybridity. I sensed that my own identity, both the identity that he may have seen as belonging to me (my American-ness, whatever that may have meant to him), and the ability to speak to his Kurdish-speaking colleagues that I had acquired, prompted his assertions that the borderland was an out-of-the-way, God-forsaken place. I do not think another traveler would have heard the same complaints from him, at least as readily as he offered them to me.

Many authors, including and following Das and Poole (2004), have affirmed Agamben’s (1998) assertion that, rather than being (merely) exercised over territories, state sovereignty is exercised over people who are allowed to live or die. Some have built on this to argue that borders play an important role in the assertion of this sovereignty. “[I]t is often at the border that exceptions to the rule of inclusion/exclusion that

necessarily define the limits of citizenship are made,” argues Ferme (2004: 90). Border crossings can serve as a heuristic prompting the question as to what identity claims are being made by individuals, members of collective identity categories, and states. I have contended in other work (e.g. King 2010; 2014; 2018) that the strong ethnic nationalism of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey is in part lent its power by the logic of patrilineal descent, which, when tied to state power and ratified through the power of state documentation, can serve to deny hybridity. A mother cannot pass on *recognized* ethnic identity to her child, even though she may pass on strong feelings of ethnic solidarity with her group, so children cannot receive more than one ethnic identity from their parents. At the level of the local community, an “Arab” person is the child of an Arab father, no matter the ethnic identity of the person’s mother, and only Arab males can pass on Arab identity to his child; a woman cannot. Ethnic singularity is promoted by this descent logic. Fathers also bequeath religious (or sectarian or consociational) membership to their offspring, and ethnicity and religion are sometimes conflated into an ethnoreligious collective identity category. Modern Iraq, Syria, and Turkey have all promoted a strongly ethnic version of nationalism that has at times led to horrific violence and is well-documented (e.g., Entessar 2010; Yildiz 2005). Modern state ideologies, coupled with patrilineal reckoning of both citizenship and ethnicity, and encircled by borders that serve to delineate the “proper” place for people of respective ethnic or ethnoreligious categories, can have inflexible outcomes for minorities such as Kurds. In some instances, people may experience the imposition of a different ethnic identity at the level of the state, such as the assertion by the Syrian state that all Syrians are Arabs, than is recognized in their neighborhood and among the people with whom they interact on a daily basis.

In a socio-political environment in which patriliney is influential at both state and community levels, when people

meet each other at borders crossings, I argue that their ethnic identities may be a factor to a greater degree than if their state systems allowed for more ethnic flexibility and hybridity. Relations across borders can be tinged with ethnic chauvinism, such as in Turkish dealings with Iraqi Kurdistan, of which Somer writes (2005: 109), "ethnicity discourse undermines cooperation, insofar as it feeds the perception of rival groups with zero-sum interests." In the beginning, modern states assigned full participation to males only (Pateman 1989), and for most Middle Eastern states, this is still the case. Although Turkey has allowed both parents to pass on citizenship since 2001, an "implicit patrilineal form" (Yazici 2012: 111) persists and promotes singular categories at the family level, which also applies to ethnic categorizations. In Iraq, Ismael notes, "The kinship structure... cemented the Iraqi social fabric" (2004: 335).⁸ In Palestine, the Palestinian National Charter recognizes Palestinian identity only in those born to Palestinian fathers, not mothers, and the United Nations has upheld this policy as well (Massad 1995: 472). In all such cases, "cementing" of identity is promoted by a one-ness in descent conceptualizations.

My experience at the Habur border while entering Turkey from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in January 2004 illustrates some of the anxieties of the modern ethnocratic state, and how they can be conjured up at a border. It stands in contrast to my more pleasant crossings at Nusaybin/Qamishli. As Donnan and Wilson write (2010: 5), citing Blake (2000: 1), "[B]orderlands are test sites for monitoring the health of the national body politic, particularly in terms of international relations: If relations between neighbouring states have deteriorated, then 'borderlands may be used as the forum in which to demonstrate political animosity.'" In recent decades animosity has often been on display between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey and between ethnolinguistic or sectarian groups in each. I close with an excerpt from my field notes that illustrates the dilemma of belonging to a "minority" at a border, the possibilities for anxiety on the part

of the state that a border crossing can elicit. (This is from the trip I made with my student to which I referred earlier.) Written shortly afterward, they reveal the frustration I felt at the time, and show the border to be an ethnically charged site, one rich with both assertions and contradictions found in those places where patrilineally organized, ethnically assertive states meet:

Field Note, 3 January 2004, on the Turkish side at Habur / Ibrahim Khalil:

At the border crossing into Turkey, our luggage was searched as usual. But unlike the many other times in the past few days, this time the searcher found something prohibited. As the border officer looked through my bag, he zeroed in on a paper I was carrying that I had presented at an academic meeting and was preparing for publication. As he flipped through the pages, he pointed to the words "Kurdistan," "PKK," and related terms, and said gruffly, "Forbidden!" [*Memnu'a*, an Arabic word that is also used in neighboring languages] each time he pointed to a word.

I thought to myself that I must have been completely stupid to enter Turkey with such a thing, but that it was too late now! My mind raced. I thought about how... I had heard that Turkey had recently lifted some of the ban on the Kurdish language, including using Kurdish in public spaces... Nothing in this border official's demeanor suggested that the Turkish state had changed its long-standing oppressive posture toward the Kurdish language; in fact, the contrary seemed very much on display.

The border officer who had searched my things was dressed in a uniform. Standing next to him was a man without a uniform and in a red jacket who spoke Kurdish. The man in the uniform spoke a little English. Using a combination of English addressed to him and Kurdish addressed to the man in the red jacket, I challenged them. During past crossings I have assumed a meek posture, because I felt that was the best way to acquire entry or exit permission... The man in the uniform was clearly the superior of the man in red, who kept giving subtle hints that suggested he agreed with me but that he was not able to speak freely. His superior kept insisting that I had violated a law or policy and that I had to face the consequences. I

was not sure what they were, but it was clear he was not going to let us be on our way... Turkey had long been in the process of seeking entry to the European Union. One of the sticking points was this very issue... freedom of expression for Kurds. In a moment of exasperation, I blurted out, "Isn't this Europe? Am I in Europe or not? If this is Europe, how can this paper be banned? If this is Europe, this is impossible!" Then the border guard said to me in English in an equally exasperated tone, "Where is Kurdistan?" Although I was tempted to point in a panoramic fashion to indicate that an informal "Kurdistan," the homeland of the Kurds, surrounded us in every direction, I... dutifully pointed to Iraq, which I imagined he hoped I would do. He seemed to accept that and then added, "No separation. Turkey is one. Iraq is one." Then he said, "Where are you from?" I said, "I am from California, which is a part of the United States. California is like Kurdistan. Iraq is like the United States," I said, referring to the Kurdistan Region's federal status within Iraq. His demeanor again turned negative. Again, he asserted that we were in violation and that he would not allow us to proceed on our way. The day was waning and we had a long journey back to Beirut ahead of us. My mind raced, thinking that we might be about to spend the night in a Turkish prison. I decided to try going on the offensive again. I turned to the man in the red jacket, saying, "Take me to the police. I want to talk to the police." He replied, with a taken-aback look on his face, "We are the police!" Then I said, "Well... what is written on my paper is not forbidden! Maybe you do not know that, but someone higher will know that and will let us go."

After several minutes of wrangling, they asked us to wait in the car. During this encounter, a Kurdish-Turkish taxi driver and his friend who was riding in the passenger seat had been waiting for us. I was not sure what we were being asked to wait for, but it seemed we were indeed being asked to wait for someone who was higher up the chain of command. We got in the car. I complained to the taxi driver and his friend about the way we had been treated. They vigorously agreed, but then added, "Yes, but this is the life that all of us Kurds live here in Turkey."

After perhaps twenty minutes, I became tired of waiting and walked back over to the man in the red jacket. I had an idea: that we could burn the papers. Surely they could let us go if the papers no longer existed (except as electronic files on the laptop I was

carrying, but no one had mentioned that possibility)? I suggested this to the man in the red jacket, who relayed it to his superior. To my surprise, he agreed right away. He slipped into the office and retrieved the papers. There were five total, but three had nothing to do with Kurds (they were papers my graduate students had written, which I had brought along to grade in case I had time), so they gave those back. The man in the red jacket took out a lighter and lit the other two on fire. My student and I, several employees of the border complex, and the taxi driver and his friend stood and watched as my papers went up in smoke there on the ground next to the immigration building. I wanted badly to snap a photograph, but I didn't dare. Writing this later, I know I will carry in my mind's eye the image of the papers burning and the man in the red jacket standing there watching with his hands in his pockets. His posture seemed to lend extra meaning to what was occurring, as though he was attempting to suppress the conflictedness I imagined he must have felt at that moment.

As we turned to leave, I wanted to communicate something conciliatory to him, so I blurted out, "No big deal; don't worry." He gave a barely discernible nod and stood there with a conflicted look on his face. As a Kurd working as an immigration officer for the Turkish government on the border of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, I imagined he often felt that way, and that sometimes his job was indeed a big deal, and something to worry about.

Later, after our party of four was safely on the open road, I dared to mention the small fact that had escaped the guards at the border: that I was the author of the papers they had burned. They had flipped through my papers methodically, poring over every word, but somehow they had failed to notice that the name on the title page was the same name that was on my passport. Everyone in the car agreed we had gotten off very easy.

Conclusion

At the borders where Syria, Turkey, and Iraq meet each other, I observed from 1995 to 2006 as individuals interacted and conducted the business of border-crossing at the meeting

points of states that make strong assertions of ethnolinguistic (and other types of) identity. Perhaps surprisingly, despite the problematic for these states represented by “Kurdistan” as an ethnolinguistic homeland spanning them, most of the border-crossing personnel employed by the state appeared to be ethnic Kurds. Many border-crossers were also Kurdish, whose identity may challenge the official identity of the state. State-sanctioned patrilineal identities like “Arab” or “Turkish,” and un-sanctioned identities like “Kurdish,” are divulged, or hidden, at borders. A state boundary, like an ethnic boundary, can be a site at which much is revealed about collective identity in or vis-à-vis the modern ethnically assertive state. This article shows that the states of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq both denied hybridity, and used it for their own purposes of both smoothing relations, and asserting state-sanction identities at border sites.

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NOTES

- 1 In some settings it is more common to emphasize language ability in Kurdish than to assert an ontological ethnic identity, a claim to *be* a Kurd (c.f. King 2014: 229 n. 1)
- 2 In 1996 I was not permitted by Turkish authorities to cross the Habur border into Iraq, but stayed for 2.5 months in nearby Diyarbakir waiting for the situation to change before giving up and returning to the United States. I describe the events that led to the closing of the border elsewhere (King 2014).
- 3 Borders are also crossed electronically in the forms of cellular phone signals, satellite television broadcasts (Hassanpour 1998), and internet use, and these electronic means of information flows are very influential in inspiring actual crossings by individuals.

- 4 The sameness is relative because Kurdish has several major dialects. However, the Kurmanji dialect, which encompasses several mutually intelligible subdialects, is the main Kurdish dialect spoken in the geographic area covered by this article. Sorani, the second-largest dialect, is spoken further south and east, and Zazaki, another major dialect, is spoken mainly to the north.
- 5 I studied Kurdish at the University of Dohuk in the late 1990s.
- 6 This is of course a problematic assertion, since ethnicity can be difficult to define in the first place, and ethnic distinctiveness can be difficult to delineate and is subject to different interpretations; but I still think Nye's overall point is of value.
- 7 For example, Turkey and Syria have been at odds over several issues since they were founded following WWI. The former Ottoman Sanjak (province) of Alexandretta was disputed territory until it became the Turkish province of Hatay in 1939 (Shields 2011), and in 1998, they nearly went to war over Syria's harboring of the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. Turkey and Iraq also have a history of tension, as do Iraq and Syria.
- 8 Iraq's current laws allow women to pass on citizenship. While the issue was debated by Iraqi lawmakers during the later years of the US occupation that ended in 2011, the law was not changed (Abdullah 2010). Many believe the right will be repealed since it came into force during occupation, and in any case full implementation has yet to occur.

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