

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kaçak Territorialization: The Syria-Turkey Border as a Palimpsest of Sovereignty

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Abstract

This essay explores the formation of the Syria-Turkey border by examining the mobility of contraband merchants and couriers. Contraband commerce can be viewed as not only a technique of mobility but a technology of sovereignty. I parse out these linkages from within the semantic domain of *kaçak* (contraband; literally “fugitive”) repurposed in the hands of contraband merchants, investigative journalists, and state officials. At important historical junctures, contraband commerce between modern Turkey and Syria came to link regimes of value and territorialization, border delineation and land dispossession, and economic informality and political treason. Analyzing the paradoxically uneven distribution of physical mobility and transborder transactions among the inhabitants of the border as a central tenet of territorialization, I suggest conceptualizing the border as a palimpsest of sovereignty. This essay contends that such an approach recuperates the historicity and dynamism of arrested mobilities and their role in the spatial production of borders, and of other contingent forms they give to sovereignty over geography and history.

Keywords: borders; contraband; fugitivity; historical ethnography; palimpsest; sovereignty; Rojava; Syria; territory; Turkey

“We’re leaving in three hours. If you still want to see the other side, this might be your best bet.” I had been waiting five months to hear those words from Hıdır’s lips.¹ I had met Hıdır back in February, in the early days of my research in the Iranian Bazaar of Antep, where Iranian pilgrims shopped for souvenirs and appliances while various contraband goods, some arriving on the same buses, found buyers among the Antep locals (Yıldız 2024a; Yıldız 2024b). Iranian pilgrims en route to the Sayyida Zainab shrine transited through Antep, giving the former intra-city bus station its new name and purpose: *ticaret* (trade). One of the seasoned merchants at the bazaar, who ran both a souvenir shop for Iranian pilgrims and a contraband tea and tobacco cart for the locals, had introduced me to Hıdır. Recently released from prison, Hıdır was

¹ All names that appear in this article, with the exception of public figures, are pseudonyms.



Figure 1. Guaranteed contraband tea, Iranian Bazaar in Antep, 2014. Photo by Author.

working as a menial laborer (*yükçü*) unloading these contraband goods for the market and reloading them for wider distribution throughout the city. In Antep as elsewhere in the “east” of Turkey, contraband commodities were so ubiquitous that the fresh delivery of contraband Ceylon tea (often a blend of Sri Lankan and Iranian tea) was news to be advertised in shop windows (Yıldız 2024c). The guarantee given for its smuggled status was indexical for its promised strong flavor, which many Antep locals agreed could not be found in domestic produce from the northwestern coast of Turkey (figure 1).

As I travelled with Hıdır to the Syria-Turkey border, our first stop was Birecik. Over five months at the Iranian Bazaar, I had watched him reclaim the social hierarchy of a contraband network on the shifting grounds of the Syrian conflict as it increasingly engulfed the Syria-Turkey border. Over multiple conversations, Hıdır recounted his family history that spanned from Mardin, Turkey, on his father’s side to Kilis and Karkamış on his mother’s. His grandfather was a *Légion Syrienne* recruit from the mountains of Mardin, who had moved to French Mandate Syria during border delineation efforts. Hıdır’s maternal kin had resettled in Karkamış, now a village on the Syria-Turkey border, after being displaced from the gardens of Kilis that the French forces had claimed as Mandate Syrian territory.

An hour after we arrived at Karkamış, another member of Hıdır’s team showed up. The *mimar*, or architect, earned this nickname by specializing in the building of hidden compartments, such as expanded gas tanks or hollowed seats, into cars and other vehicles. While fuel oil and diesel filled the expanded tanks, cigarettes and sugar were embedded into the seats, concealed beneath a thin layer of cushion, and re-fitted

into the original upholstery. On a bus fully compartmentalized by the architect, each seat could accommodate five cartons of cigarettes. “Multiply that by forty-four seats, and you get 220 cartons of cigarettes per bus,” added Hıdır. The architect identified himself as “a Turkmen of Kilis originally,” whose grandparents had relocated to Antep after losing their farmland that fell on the French side of the newly erected border between Anatolia and the Levant. Catching himself mid-sentence, as Hıdır raised an eyebrow, the *mimar* quickly switched to the details of our journey. He explained how we were to move medical supplies—gauze dressings, painkillers, and plastic splints—into blue plastic barrels and return with fuel oil.

Hıdır took over the description of our tasks ahead. The barrels, loosely tied together, would float across the Euphrates towards Al-Jarablus, where his kin—the only members of his extended family that had chosen to forego Turkish citizenship and instead stay on the Syrian side in the 1930s—would collect them. In the meantime, Hıdır, the architect, and I were to cross a section of the otherwise heavily mined border. This passageway through the literal and figurative minefield that is the Syria-Turkey border was cleared by a livestock merchant of Antep—a contemporary of Hıdır’s grandfather. Hıdır recounted, once the Turkish state officials denied the merchant access to Aleppo markets—for which his livestock were slated prior to the 1936 Eid al-Adha—the merchant ushered a hundred of his sheep and cattle across the first mined segments of the border. To this day, the passage remained clear and was known among locals as the *kuzu geçidi*, the sheep passage. Hıdır, however, preferred to call it *deli tacir geçidi*—“the mad merchant passage.”

The barrels were to be filled with fuel oil and shipped back into Turkey in trucks passing through the same cleared section. Once on the Turkish side, the plan was to transfer the merchandise to an oil tanker and distribute locally—where more than seventy-five percent of all fuel oil consumed was *kaçak* (contraband), including that used by the very police cars tasked with stopping this trade.² Besides Hıdır and the *mimar*, the rest of the team was comprised of three *yükçüs*—the manual laborers who loaded and unloaded contraband goods according to the *mimar*’s designs and Hıdır’s directives. On our way back to Turkey, after having spent fifteen hours in Al-Jarablus making sure the barrels were properly filled with fuel oil and loaded onto the black Toyota Tacoma *kamyonet* (truck), Hıdır summed up the illustrious career of *kaçak* across the Syria-Turkey border as follows: “There was *kaçak* before the crisis. There will be *kaçak* after. No one can stop it. Even where we dropped the barrels in the river, they tried to insert fishnets to stop the flow. As if these were fish!” He paused, letting out a dismissive puff, then asked rhetorically: “How are you going to stop barrels with nets? And even if they stop the fish and the barrels, how are they going to stop the Euphrates? That’s why *kaçak* will endure ... because even the state cannot draw lines on running water.”

²Conventionally translated into English as the equivalent of “smuggled good,” the semantic domain of *kaçak* in Turkish (*qaçax* in Kurdish and قاچاق in Persian) is more capacious than “smuggled” signifies. A nominalized form of the verb *kaçmak*—to flee, seek refuge—*kaçak* helps us recover the act of breaching a formal contract in order to seek refuge as a constitutive vector in the interlinked formations of bureaucracy and the economy. Taking *kaçak*’s semantic domain as a field of theorization with respect to conceptualizations of territory, this article tracks the many forms the term takes in the hands of diverse social actors maneuvering under historically specific material conditions. Under such conditions, the bureaucracy and the economy, or state and market formations, emerge as politically instituted processes (Polanyi 2001[1944]).

In *Space and the State* (2009)[1978], Lefebvre articulates the particularity of the state-territory pairing through the concept of state space (*l'espace étatique*), turning multiple conventional contrasts associated with borders and the borders' spatial (dis) closures of sovereignty on their heads: "The modern state is confronted with open spaces, or rather, spaces that have burst open on all sides," Lefebvre writes, "from apartments to buildings to the national territory by way of institutions (the school, the neighborhood, the city, the region)" (240). Pointing to the dynamic scaling of these spaces by way of institutions, Lefebvre continues, "these spaces are devastated, disintegrated, and ripped apart; at the same time, they overflow their borders [...] *Flows traverse borders with the impetuosity of rivers*" (emphasis mine, *ibid.*).

Just as Hıdır's barrels crossed the Euphrates, the state spaces of Turkey and Syria had indeed burst open. And in Hıdır's case, those spaces flowed with the impetuosity of rivers—only to be arrested by the ebbs and flows of literal and figurative droughts. If territory is "at once a historically specific form of politico-spatial organization, a key modality of modern statecraft, and a strategic dimension of modern politics," then the process of territorialization—the contingent constellation of power and space—can only unfold as a historical product of previous epochs unevenly sketched and rewritten over one another, leaving their distinct traces on the borderland and the borderland inhabitants themselves (Brenner and Elden 2009: 356).

Rather than evenly sedimenting on top of one another, however, these epochs are dynamized in the cross-border movements of various actors, including *kaçak* merchants like Hıdır.³ Tracing his *kaçak* mobilities and their co-articulation with the very formation of the Syria-Turkey border provides a novel account of territorialization as a dynamic process that imbues historical epochs of displacement and disconnection with the utility of movement and connection—what I refer to throughout as *kaçak* (fugitive) territorialization.⁴ That historical process and its attendant regime of mobility not only produced national state spaces as distinct and endowed with color-blocked power in political maps but also distributed the right to move through them differentially among different social actors. It is within the differential distribution of mobility more broadly that *kaçak* (contraband trade) emerges as a territory-making force in Hıdır's "spatial story" (De Certeau 1984[1980]: 115).

In that spatial story, once the pilgrim buses were targeted by military brigades for allegedly carrying foreign military personnel from Iran into the Syrian conflict, the vehicles that ushered contraband across the Syria-Turkey border became increasingly scarce. And as the violence in Syria escalated, the pilgrim buses, taxis, and minibuses that crossed the border greatly diminished. This attenuation of formal traffic rendered *kaçak* goods harder to embed in—and moonlight on—vehicles like pilgrim buses (Yıldız 2024a). The devolution of the Syrian revolution into a trans-

³Reinhart Koselleck (2000) argues that these "temporal layers" index a multiplicity of histories "with different durations and different origins that, however, are simultaneously present and effective" (as cited in Pankakoski 2020: 75; and in Cheney-Lippold 2024: 195). In a similar vein, Massimiliano Tomba suggests that the geological metaphor of "sedimentation" in studies of temporality obscures the "coexistence of different historical temporalities on the surface of the present" (2015: 76).

⁴On territorialization as a historical process traced through the movements of smugglers, see Schayegh (2011) and Tagliacozzo (2005). On the relationship between smuggling and border formation, see also Keshavarz and Khosravi (2022).

regional war waged on multiple fronts was not merely mirrored in the radical re-spatialization of the Turkey-Syria border; such refracted spatialization also imbued the border with new economic value by dynamizing the kinship networks that cut across it. Cross-border merchants like Hıdır, in other words, retooled their kinship networks across the border for the circulation of commodities in demand on either side, particularly when less cross-border traffic also meant less trafficking. Hıdır's ability to move hinged upon understanding the alignment between territory and sovereignty as a politically instituted claim rather than a finished product of territorial sovereignty. In his genealogical geography, many maps were etched quite literally onto the geography of the Syria-Turkey borderland as well as the very genealogy of his family: what divided his kin in the past—the formation of the border—provided the conditions for “regional connectivity” in the present (Scheele 2012).

This pieced-together spatial story is also a partial one. It sketches out but cannot fully capture much more complex and networked “economies of protection” (Dua 2019) across time and space in which a variety of actors with different relationships to and conceptions of sovereignty offer, claim, and contest mobility as a scarce resource and position fugitive cross-border trade as “a means of moving within the world of clan, kinship, and genealogy” (Dua 2019: 483).

As I recount midway through this essay, there were limits to my ethnographic research and access that turned *kaçak* into an object of study that fled me ethnographically. What is more, there were limits not only of the armed conflict and violence that structured its incompleteness, but also of hospitality. Such limits of hospitality in a cross-border trade network—and the struggles of bad guests such as myself over spaces and scales of sovereignty (Shryock 2012)—fundamentally contribute to the palimpsestic form this account takes.

As a *kaçak* subject myself in that traffic—who was reminded of my status as out-of-place and in need of invited membership or subject to prompt departure—I eventually lost my connection and access to Hıdır's network, but not to Hıdır himself. That connection to him in turn motivated the archival research that could ground historically what was fleeing me ethnographically—which turned the study of *kaçak* into both a theory of territorialization and sovereignty, and a fugitive method of turning ethnographic absences into fields of archival research.

To fully grasp how *kaçak* territorialization takes shape at the intersection of state and market formation, I examine how Hıdır and his team contend with the radical re-territorialization of sovereignty through their genealogically connected routes of mobility. Such a strategy requires moving outside of methodologically nationalist frames in the study of borders without falling into the frames of methodological capitalism. In order to use cross-border mobility, rather than the border itself, as our method, a brief discussion of territory and borders as their dynamic and form-defining edges is imperative.

Palimpsests: Historicizing the False Linearity of Territory and the True Circularity Of Sovereignty

Historical scholarship on borders has long challenged conceptions of borders in interwar Southwest Asia as “lines drawn on an empty map” (Pursley 2015a; Pursley 2015b), emphasizing their historical contingency and dynamism as sites of spatial

negotiations over territory, people, and resources (Sahlins 1991; Schayegh 2011; Tagliacozzo 2005). Building on these historical correctives to methodologically nationalist approaches to the study of borders—and by extension to modern state territory as spatial claims rather than finished products of sovereignty (Wimmer and Schiller 2002)—others have suggested approaching modern borders as methodological tools, rather than as objects of inquiry, built on securitized regimes of “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). While this more recent line of analysis has productively interrogated the false linearity of territory (Agnew 1994), its focus on machinations of global capital as the ultimate force behind the proliferation and securitization of borders has left the true circularity of territorial sovereignty uninterrogated.⁵ In other words, taking the border as method, while escaping “the territorial trap” of methodological nationalism (*ibid.*), has inadvertently produced an analytical framework best characterized as methodological capitalism—an epistemological orientation that conceives of global capital as the overriding unit of analysis and the most significant force behind social processes.⁶ Such an approach to the study of borders forecloses an analysis of the graduation of sovereignty and processes of territorialization over time under specific and dynamic material conditions (Ong 2000; Agnew 2020; van Schendel 2005). The specific and historically emergent material conditions of *kaçak* commerce across the Turkey-Syria border offer a compelling case for the development of a processual analysis of borders and bordering via their “diagnostic” fields of action: contraband trade (Moore 1987).

The spatial lives of *kaçak* goods and people, conceived of as “fugitives” of breached social contracts, chart out a more expansive and dynamic set of relations between economics and politics than conventional framings of economic informality, including those of contraband commerce, allow (Harvey 2016; cf. Bruns and Miggelbrink 2011; Andreas 2013). Unlike the terms illegal, illicit, or informal, the term *kaçak* is not negatively defined against the legal, the licit, or the formal (Yıldız 2024a; Üstündağ 2024). Precisely because *kaçak* is derived from movement, from the

⁵Following Agnew (2020), I understand territorial sovereignty as a political fiction wherein “the territory of a state represents both the exclusive zone of effective control that the state exercises and the only focus for political and cultural loyalty” (2). While my focus is on the historically sedimented and, to this day, contested claims to territorial sovereignty of what is now modern-day Syria and Turkey, including their Kurdistans, I depart from the premise, following Krasner (1999), that sovereignty itself should be approached as operating in at least four distinct and not always spatially overlapping modalities: 1) international legal sovereignty, understood as juridical equality among states under international law; 2) Westphalian sovereignty, understood as the absence of submission to external rule in a territory and the 1648 mantra of *Cuius regio, eius religio* (To whom is the region/territory, his is the religion); 3) domestic sovereignty, understood as a state’s exercise of power and monopoly over means of violence in that state’s territory; and 4) interdependence sovereignty, the capacity of a state to control intra-border movements, including and especially in the case of cross-border trade (96).

⁶Taking their cue from Appadurai’s five “-scapes” of globalization (1996: 328), Brambilla for instance calls for a shift away from territoriality to “borderscapes” as the premise of border studies in order to highlight the “processual, de-territorialized, and dispersed nature of borders and their ensuing regimes and ensembles of practice” (2015: 22, as cited in Peña 2021: 783). My contention here is that without a serious engagement with the multiple temporalities at the heart of their processual spatial production, “-scaping” borders does little to move us away from the presentism of “spatial fetishism” (Paasi 2020). Such an approach, as Tagliacozzo (2016: 6) had long cautioned scholars of borders, flattens the historically “jagged landscapes” of borders, and reduces them to derivative variations on a Westphalian original (of territorial sovereignty).

flight to seek refuge itself and its political economic management, the study of *kaçak* provides us with a window into how trade as a boundary-crossing practice straddles the historical making and remaking of both national economies and territories, while challenging the perceived presentist divide between markets and states.

Kaçak territorialization—fugitive subjects’ spatial practices of conducting trade across the terrestrial Syria-Turkey border—has continuously made and remade the border itself. Here, contraband commerce constitutes not only “a material critique of borders” (Keshavarz 2024) but a historical critique of territorial sovereignty itself.⁷ My analysis centers the border as a key spatial institution whereby the state apparatus exercises domestic sovereignty around the edges of its territory and negotiates its international juridical sovereignty with what lies beyond it extraterritorially.⁸ It is against this untold story of the extraterritorial nature of sovereignty that I aim to center *kaçak* territorialization in the study of the Turkey-Syria border. Using the analytical trope of the palimpsest, this genealogically and geographically multi-layered borderland constitutes an apt object of inquiry. Approaching the Turkey-Syria border as a palimpsest invites an actor-centric densification of politics that sidesteps the diametrical opposition conventionally drawn between state and popular sovereignty by considering a layered and cross-cutting set of relations in the making of borders.⁹ The palimpsest as an analytical trope in this essay does not simply gesture towards multiple historical epochs of state violence as the sole maker of sovereignty (Suni 2023).¹⁰ Instead, it mobilizes a dynamic conception of temporality that foregrounds the genealogical and the geographical as the material conditions of possibility for fugitive mobilities. Toward that end, I deploy the palimpsest also as a narratological device to present my analysis in reverse chronological order and thereby disaggregate the multiple sketches of sovereignty that have coalesced into the Turkey-Syria border in our ethnographic present.

Kaçak Territorialization

After nine months behind bars for taking part in a small-scale trade network that operated across the Syria-Turkey border, Hıdır, a former police officer in his late thirties, was quick to reinvent himself. In his words, as a “part-time” officer caught

⁷In an analysis of contraband goods moving through cross-border corridors maintained by Kurdish insurgency fighters across the Iran-Turkey border, Bozçalı (2024) conceives of such remaking as a practice of “countersovereignty” in direct opposition to Turkish territorial sovereignty (325). Following Schayegh (2011), this essay eschews such a diametric opposition between the state and the smuggler that in return produces a binary between state sovereignty and popular sovereignty (cf. Farooqui 2005).

⁸In *Accumulation of Capital* (2015)[1913], Rosa Luxemburg describes how extraterritorial operations of states to secure their economic interests are not an exception, but rather are integral to processes of capitalization both by war and destruction and colonization as well as reconstruction (391). Here, I suggest that *kaçak* mobility reveals that constitutive dialectic between the interior of capitalism (national economy) and its exterior (informal economy) as always already a political configuration per Luxemburg’s formation.

⁹On the contrast between Israeli state and Palestinian popular sovereignty, see Bishara (2017). On indigenous self-determination struggles and the pitfalls of reducing sovereignty to its juridical modality, see Kauanui (2017). On borders as dynamic cross-locations that emerge and transform across relations of movement, see Green (2010, 2012).

¹⁰For an alternative conception of sovereignty being palimpsestic in the context of a liberation insurgency, see Wilson (2016: 3).

collaborating with a contraband network, he was forced to become a “full-time” contraband merchant. As a former state employee convicted of aiding a “smuggling network,” Hıdır struggled to find employment. Pressed to provide for his extended family, he turned to the opportunities that opened to him through a different cross-border regime of patronage—that of his Kurdish kin, who lived on both sides of the Syria-Turkey border. Hıdır’s identities were many, blurring the lines between representing and defying sovereign authority, between Turkish nationalism and Kurdish insurgency, and between the legality and illegality of commercial activity.

Like many colleagues working at the Öncüpinar border crossing in Kilis, Hıdır got involved in cross-border commerce while overseeing customs.¹¹ In addition to preventing the illegal (*yasa dışı*) trafficking of people, drugs, and arms, he was responsible for keeping in check the informal (*kayıt dışı*—literally, “off-the-record”) economy of sugar, tea, fuel oil, and cigarette trade across the border. These inspections often meant ignoring cars with enlarged gas tanks that had been filled with Syrian oil in Aleppo, where oil cost a fraction of its price in Turkey. Buses, trucks, and taxis that connected Gaziantep and Aleppo also shuttled sugar, tea, and cigarettes according to trade quotas—two cartons of cigarettes, and two kilograms of sugar per traveler. Soon Hıdır found himself actively taking part in the very cross-border economy he was tasked with policing.

Hıdır’s dual role as a “part-time police officer” and “part-time informant (*muhbir*)” for a cross-border contraband network earned him barely enough to provide for his extended family. That balancing act ended in 2011. With fewer vehicles to inspect at the border amid conflict, Hıdır found himself pressed to find another “contraband corridor” bringing sugar, tea, tobacco, and fuel oil from Syria into Turkey (Galemba 2017). After a successful first run, a second, larger shipment was planned for delivery to the Iranian Bazaar in Antep. This time, however, things did not go according to plan. The merchandise was intercepted in a police operation, leading to the arrest of fifteen people, including Hıdır. He received a prison term of nine months for aiding illegal trade.

Hıdır never aspired to be a police officer. He signed up to work for the state to honor his father’s wish to avoid Kurdish insurgency politics, even though the state “had killed [his] brother.” Hıdır’s eldest brother was a fighter for the PKK, the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or Kurdistan’s Workers’ Party, and was killed in a Turkish military operation in Şemdinli, Şırnak, in the mid-1990s.¹² Hıdır’s father, having already lost one son to conflict, urged Hıdır to avoid politics and instead prioritize economic stability for the family. And that is precisely what Hıdır did. “The border post was my second assignment as a police officer after having served in the Gaziantep police headquarters. I had already worked as an officer for five years when two vacancies opened up at the Öncüpinar border crossing in 2009, and I put in an application.” Hıdır continued, “It was a double-pay position given that it was a

¹¹The involvement of state employment in contraband networks, as the historical record in the Levant attests, is nothing novel or exceptional. For more on the active involvement of border officials in contraband trade during the early Republican era, see, for example, Turkish Republican Archives of the Prime Ministry (hereafter, BCA), BCA 30.10, 262-764-15, 12 Dec. 1923, 4.

¹²Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK), or Kurdistan’s Workers’ Party, was a Marxist-Leninist insurgency formed in the early 1980s to fight the Turkish state for Kurdish sovereignty, and later cultural rights and autonomy of the Kurdish-majority regions. On the PKK and political economy of the region, see Ercan (2013), Darıcı (2024) Yadırgı (2017), and Yarkin (2015).

high-security assignment. Also, my extended family was closer to the border than to Gaziantep. My family and I really needed the money. I applied for the position, not thinking twice. Little did I know that I was walking into well-charted territory.”

For the first four months, everything seemed to go smoothly. Except for rush hour, when they had to inspect large vehicles notorious for contraband commerce, the workload was lighter than at his previous assignment in Gaziantep. The collaboration between the state officials who were supposed to enforce border regulations and the contraband merchants who were committed to circumventing them left Hıdır jaded after just four months.

During one rush-hour inspection, Hıdır stopped a taxi driver, a Kilis local himself. When his trunk revealed five kilograms of sugar and eight cartons of cigarettes, the driver claimed that the merchandise was not above the duty-free quotas for the four passengers onboard. Yet, the passengers themselves turned out to have four cartons of cigarettes in their suitcases. The quota math was off, but the driver was insistent, even defiant, as if he knew that he need not worry about a rookie policeman stationed at the crossing. When the driver saw that his pleading was of no use, he demanded to speak with Hıdır’s supervisor.

According to Hıdır’s account, the *komiser* (commissar) then came out to talk to the driver personally—an unusual occurrence during Hıdır’s tenure at the Öncüpınar crossing. Within fifteen minutes, the issue was resolved and the driver drove off without a fine. Puzzled, Hıdır asked about his alleged misjudgment. This marked the beginning of the end for Hıdır. Komiser Ahmet warned him to remain content with what he had as a *Kurdish* police officer and not ask too many questions. Hıdır indeed stopped asking questions of the *komiser*, or anyone else for that matter. Instead, he learned what he needed to know from the drivers he inspected. In less than a month, Hıdır discovered that Komiser Ahmet was implicated in a contraband network of his own. His network shuttled merchandise through “about twenty drivers” who crossed the border under the *komiser*’s watch for a fifteen percent commission. The network’s fleet comprised a wide range of vehicles, including taxis and minibuses as well as long-haul trucks and buses.

Hıdır, too, began building his own cross-border network, leveraging kinship ties that spanned the border. “Business for the first two months was pretty regular and good,” he recounted. “Although the situation in Syria was getting worse, and there were more and more refugees fleeing, the border traffic remained steady. As long as the *komiser* had work, and I had work, no one else cared how much contraband was flowing through.” By late 2011, however, declining traffic made it harder to time when contraband could be embedded in traffic. “There were no good, let alone best, times left. Even the *komiser*’s business was struggling,” Hıdır reported. A week after his realization that less traffic meant more trouble for his other role on the border, the bad news struck: police had seized 3,838 cartons of cigarettes and 100 kilograms of sugar in an operation that searched through the seemingly empty back of a truck in Kilis. A carelessly tucked away rope at the corner of the container back had revealed the secret compartment in the ceiling and sides of the storage area. Carton after carton of cigarettes had been fed into these hidden spaces with a rope mechanism to ensure their speedy recovery. The sugar was discovered in compartments built between the back wheels and the expanded gas tank. Because the *yükçü* juveniles and the driver occupied the lowest ranks of the network in terms of both earnings and authority, they were charged with the heaviest sentences, ranging from three to four years, as they were deemed to be “committing” an illegal cross-border operation. By

contrast, providing information and technical expertise to facilitate the trade was considered “aiding”; thus, Hıdır as the *muhbir* of the network received nine months for his role providing information on the best times and routes of operation. The welder, who had constructed the hidden compartments, shared Hıdır’s fate.

“It was all the *komiser*’s doing, I am sure of it,” Hıdır later reflected. “He just could not share the border, definitely not with a Kurdish local like myself.” It was the competitive edge of his contraband business, imbued with a perceived sense of Turkish entitlement, according to Hıdır, that led to his arrest and the dismantling of his contraband network composed primarily of borderland natives. Hıdır’s theory remains impossible to prove, but where it led him after his prison sentence is more significant. Confronted with an increasingly violent conflict in Syria and the pressing demands for contraband commodities back in Turkey and Syria, Hıdır had to reinvent himself to seize the moment. His search led him back to the Iranian Bazaar in Gaziantep, where we met. Hıdır explained, “Like everyone in Gaziantep, I knew that a lot of contraband passed through the bazaar thanks to the pilgrimage buses. But the merchants already had connections to the bus drivers and excluded all middlemen from their dealings.” Hıdır related, “With pilgrims acting as shields, so to speak, whom the border officers often allowed to pass with no or minimal inspection, the buses were the perfect vehicles for moving anything heavy in value and light in weight.”

Making inroads with the merchants of the bazaar revealed to Hıdır rather quickly that they were already well stocked with contraband goods shuttled on pilgrimage buses. In other words, unless he wanted to take on menial work, the bazaar was not going to yield any business. “If someone had said that there would be no more pilgrim buses in two months, I would have laughed.” But that is exactly what happened. Following a second abduction of a pilgrimage bus, the Iranian state banned all road travel from Iran to Syria.

This was a turning point for Hıdır, whereby the arrested mobilities he suffered generated a new pathway for mobility. The merchants had no choice but to turn to Hıdır and others with connections to Kurdish border villages like Karkamış. The sturdy horses and mules, the locally trained guides (*resan*), and the courier juveniles of these villages replaced the Iranian buses as the movers of contraband.

Not only did the route and the vehicles get reconfigured; the direction and contents of trade also adjusted to the contemporary situation. Syria, most of which was mired in violence, faced fuel and electricity shortages as well as a lack of medicine and medical supplies. Against this backdrop of war and mass displacement, and in conjunction with the emergence of Rojava as an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, a new political economy of cross-border mobility emerged at this time. The precarity of trade on such dynamic grounds meant that they were most responsive, and hence susceptible to the supply and demand of particular goods across revolutionary Syria (Dicle 2013; Graeber 2014; Üstündağ 2016). Merchants such as Hıdır stretched their grids of connectivity into Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran to secure oil and tobacco to sell in Turkey (Darıcı 2024). While taking advantage of the new opportunities, Hıdır asserted, his reinvention as a full-time contraband merchant stemmed from both economic necessity and political commitment to ease the living conditions of his relatives in Jarablus, Syria. Breaking the monopoly of hostile states over the mobility of borderland inhabitants, *kaçak* was shaped by—and in turn took part in shaping—contingent grids of connectivity that were themselves genealogically etched into the history of Hıdır’s extended family.

The creation of the border between Turkey and Syria in the early twentieth century had rendered formerly legal economic networks “contraband commerce,” imbuing them with charged economic and political meaning in the process.¹³ To recast in Marxian terms, the “tragedy” of the Syria-Turkey border could not be clearer to Hıdır as a farce in 2012. After all, his extended family’s locations were a direct result of how those newly delineated states—French Mandate Syria and the Republic of Turkey—sought to discipline their border populations politically and socioeconomically. Actors such as Hıdır, like those of his grandfather’s generation before him, turned to enduring kinship networks as well as emergent spaces and corridors of mobility to secure new means of livelihood. Hıdır imbued these networks with new economic and political functions once the Syrian conflict fundamentally altered those corridors and their possibilities of mobility.

Against the backdrop of an emergent sovereign region in Syria’s Kurdistan, negotiations of economic transactions and political action are better conceptualized not around a scalarly static production of sovereignty—nested within one another, moving up seamlessly from the level of the local to that of the state—but rather through a constant struggle of “autogestion,” as proposed by Lefebvre (2009[1979]: 135): “Each time a social group (generally the productive workers) refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival, each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, *autogestion* is occurring.”

Kaçak uses of state territory remained central to the spatial production of both state-authorized regimes of mobility and the alternative corridors that cut across them. However precarious or fleeting these corridors of mobility might be, it is no coincidence that al-Jarablus and Kobane as well as the broader Rojava region were key sites of struggle in the spatial production of the Syria-Turkey border almost a century ago under an admittedly different set of historical circumstances.

In 2012, however, a widely recognized disconnect persisted between the formal closing of the border and the flourishing of cross-border traffic in refugees, humanitarian aid, arms, and foreign fighters. The Erdoğan administration attempted to represent the border as open only in one direction—namely, that of the Syrian refugees fleeing into Turkey (Biner 2018; Dağtaş 2017; Ilcan 2018). Yet, alternative media documented, and locals along the 957-kilometer border witnessed, not only a heavy traffic of refugees from Syria into Turkey but also a traffic in arms, foreign fighters, and medical supplies from Turkey into Syria. As we were making our way back to Birecik from Al-Jarablus, Hıdır asserted, “the border had never been more open,” referring to the now fully disclosed traffic in arms and military supplies from Turkey to the self-identified Sunni revivalist brigades within the Syrian opposition.

My six-hour trip across the border with Hıdır and his partners illustrated that what had provided a corridor of mobility for the oil was more than the waters of the Euphrates. *Yükçüs*’s labor, the *mimar*’s concealed compartments, and the corridor that the local merchant had opened by blowing up his livestock in protest of his cut-off access to Aleppo in 1936 all contributed to the spatial and historical production of that mobility. Hıdır’s extensive family networks that included cousins with Syrian citizenship—which at the time still provided relative ease of movement on the Syrian side—completed the network’s circuit at its Syrian end. As Hıdır’s distant cousin

¹³BCA 30.10, 180-244-6, 5 Dec. 1931, 11.

Soresh put it to Hıdır on our trip, “The war made us not just cousins but brothers.” “How different are we from that delirious shepherd, Emrah?” asked Hıdır. That question, he added, was rhetorical.

Three days after I returned to Gaziantep, I went to check in with a merchant friend in the Iranian Bazaar of Antep. Right before I reached my friend’s store, Hıdır appeared around the corner and blurted, “I have an urgent message. Do you have a minute?” Startled, I nodded as he pulled out his phone and ushered me into the alley. “Read the text, please. It’s from my boss to you. ...” The message read:

Emrah bey, I have come to know about your study and research in the Iranian Bazaar for a while now. With the crossing into Syria episode you might have taken us to a place where you either come in with some capital and we do business together, or we ask you to confine your research to the Bazaar, and Hıdır from now until your departure from Antep in the next few months, where you can organize all you have already gathered. Maybe Hıdır too can help you in his private time for his performance for a remake of *Hududların Kanunu* too!

That reference to the 1967 Yılmaz Güney Turkish-language film, whose main protagonist scathingly critiques the dominance of land-owning clan and tribal leader (*agha*) families, was a clear indication that the boss clearly did not take any prisoners. Hıdır, while being tasked with delivering this message, was being shamed and disciplined for at least the second time. If “hospitality figure[s] as a means to establish the sovereignty of social groups of different sorts and sizes, ranging from families, villages, tribes, and states” (Shryock 2012: S24), the boss had not only marked me as a bad guest, and Hıdır a bad host—he had also brilliantly couched his subsequent denial of hospitality in an invitation to a co-venture. Everybody involved knew I did not have the capital to go into business with Hıdır’s boss. I asked Hıdır to thank him on my behalf for his generosity of spirit. I apologized for having unknowingly overstepped boundaries. Who I presumed to be an *agha*, a land-owning and capital-yielding boss and local leader (Yalçın-Heckmann 1991; van Bruinessen 1992), was asking me to leave the temporary relationship of hospitality and join that of permanent identification, where I would become “one of them.” This opened my eyes to the fugitive method of asserting sovereignty without dissolving the realm of hospitality or identification.

“You and I keep talking, though,” Hıdır consoled me. And we did. “Maybe in a few years’ time you can come back and do business with us,” he continued with his magical realism, although we never managed to do so.

The Syrian revolution-cum-civil war recharged kinship-based networks with new economic value and compelled cross-border traders like Hıdır back to historically sedimented corridors like the mad merchant passage. Yet, there had been no easy fix for the absence of Iranian pilgrims in the Iranian Bazaar. The budding hotel industry around the Bazaar that had once catered to Iranian pilgrims now hosted Syrian refugees fleeing the violence. The inflated prices of renting hotel rooms as *kaçak* “studios” to Syrians seemed to be working well for property owners around the Bazaar. This resourceful repurposing was only the latest iteration in the spatial transformation of the Iranian Bazaar that in many ways mirrored the transformation of Antep itself. *Kaçak* trade across the Turkey-Syria border played a defining, albeit unacknowledged, role in both of these spatial transformations.

Spatial Lives Of Contraband Trade in (Gazi)Antep

While sitting around at the Iranian Bazaar in April of 2012, Hıdır asked me, “What do you think stood here before the Iranians?”

I considered the two remaining walls of the cement structure under which the pilgrims’ buses parked. “An industrial plant,” I ventured. “A factory?”

“Nice try,” Hıdır said. “Given Antep’s reputation as an industrial hub, that’s a smart guess, but no,” Hıdır smiled. “That conventional narrative of factories upon factories overlooks one crucial question. How did people move in and out of this urban sprawl?” Hıdır continued, “Like the pilgrims ... on buses!”

In 1997, as Gaziantep’s population surpassed one million, making it Turkey’s fifth-most populous city, Hıdır explained, the municipal government launched a series of infrastructural projects, including ones aimed at easing the traffic. Two bus stations—one on Ali Fuat Avenue serving travelers on Turkey-wide interstate travel, and one on İnönü Avenue serving nearby villages and towns in the province—were identified as key congestion points. Under municipal governor Celal Doğan, and with corporate sponsorship from the city’s industrial zone, the new station moved this bus traffic out of the city center and alongside the industrial zone. Completed in 2000, the new station spanned 8,000 square meters, serving over seventy bus firms with a daily traffic of more than four hundred buses (figure 2).

Although Iranian buses had been stopping here for years, it was only in the early 2000s—once the new bus station opened and informal booths and mobile carts had mushroomed around the old one—that the cluster of mechanic shops and hotels received some new neighbors. While formal shops continued catering to Iranian pilgrims, the Gaziantep locals frequented the Iranian Bazaar for contraband goods, such as sugar, tea, and tobacco, oftentimes shuttled on the same buses that carried the Iranian pilgrims. As the Iranian Bazaar flourished into a full-scale shopping center, state-backed and bank-financed projects attempted to capitalize on those successes by bringing all bazaar transactions into the state’s purview. The enormity of the task did not escape the municipal official responsible for that record keeping: “To the extent possible of course,” he added, to qualify his assignment.

Prior to its emergence as a key site of developmentalist transformation, Antep was a provincial town administratively tied, from the late sixteenth century until the late 1910s, to the provincial capital Aleppo. At the onset of World War I, its population stood at fifteen thousand—an estimate made after the city was ethnically cleansed of its Armenian population (Kurt 2021). Turkish nationalist historiography frames the city’s transformation after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian genocide—indexed in the gradual change of its name from ‘Aintab to Gazi Ayıntab and finally Gaziantep—as a model success story in nation-state formation and industrialization.¹⁴

¹⁴In February of 1921, the Grand Assembly of the newly declared republic modified the name of the town ‘Aintab by adding the honorific prefix *gazi*- (“veteran”). This title was bestowed upon the city to commemorate the resistance its inhabitants had shown against the French siege between April 1920 and February 1921. Along with Maraş, renamed Kahramanmaraş (“heroic Maraş”), and Urfa, renamed Şanlıurfa (“renowned Urfa”), “veteran” ‘Aintab—or to use its Romanized and Turkified name, Gaziantep—constituted the material grounds on which the so-called Turkish War of Independence was fought against the French and the British on the southern front. It was also a symbolically charged site marking the limits of the national body politic in Anatolia. While most of the Ottoman territories in the Mashriq and the Levant were being allocated to the British and French Mandates, these districts and their city centers with their newly

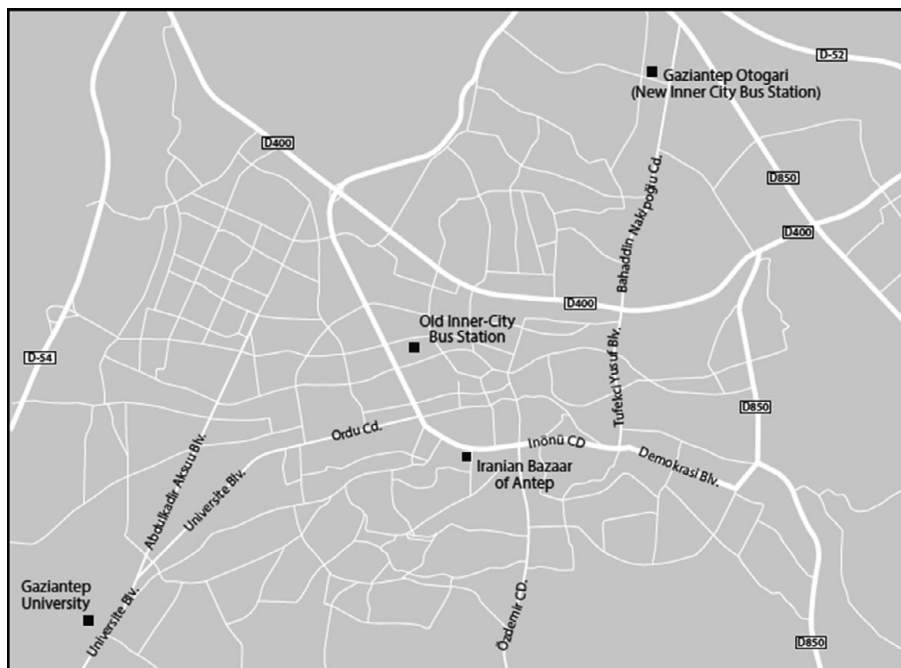


Figure 2. Map of Gaziantep. 2024. By Bill Nelson.

The republican project extended beyond the renaming of places in Anatolia in an effort to rebrand it as the Turkish homeland (Balta 2010). Name changes often functioned as the discursive scaffolding of a spatial process that reclaimed Antep from the Levant, where it was a provincial town in the shadow of Aleppo, positioning it instead as “Turkish,” Anatolia’s last outpost. As ‘Aintab became Gaziantep, it also emerged as a laboratory of large-scale industrial development, urbanization, and infrastructural investment starting as early as the mid-1920s. The opening of the second textile factory in the country, Milli Mensucat Fabrikası, in 1926, followed by the establishment of the Gaziantep Small Industrial Zone with a loan from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in 1941, further accelerated Antep’s development as *the* industrial city east of Ankara.¹⁵ Particularly from the 1950s onwards, in no small part due to the expansion of the Small Industrial Zone and the subsequent establishment of the Gaziantep Organized Industrial District (GOID) on its grounds in 1969, the city saw an exponential population increase as labor migration drew workers from the increasingly desolate and uncultivable lands that remained hostage to the newly erected border.

While GOID became Turkey’s largest industrial zone through three expansions—in 1987, 1994, and 1998—Antep’s population doubled every two decades since 1951: the city population reached 195,000 in 1960, 330,000 in 1970, and 642,000 in 1980

glorified names were slated to become the new borderlands of a post-Ottoman Turkey. Antep therefore operated, and still does to this day, as an emblem of the successful national reconstruction and subsequent industrialization of Anatolia in Turkey. See Aydın (2008), Güngör (2004), and Uzel (1952).

¹⁵ Gaziantep Organized Industrial Zone Almanac (May 2012), 2.

(Yüksel 2011: 379). By 2001, with a population of 1.2 million, (Gazi) Antep was the biggest city in the region. The GOID, meanwhile, emerged as the premier export hub of Turkey's industrial production. Covering eleven million square meters, with eight hundred factories and firms that together employed 120,000 workers, the GOID exported US\$5.8B worth of products to more than 178 countries.¹⁶ The state-led industrialization of Antep's economy was successful in "converting the commercial capital of the region into industrial capital," as one of its urban planners, Kemal Söylemezoğlu, put it in 1954 (Karadağ 2011: 400).

This process, however, did not simply transform the city's merchants into factory-owning capitalists and its farmers into workers. As state archives and the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet* attest, massive industrialization efforts to "develop" the Antep economy had some unintended consequences. High tariffs meant to protect Antep's industrial output actually fueled the contraband traffic in Syrian and Japanese textiles as well as other consumer goods into Turkey, where warehouses, such as those described by the journalists Yusuf Nadi and Mümtaz Faik, proliferated around the border.¹⁷

As Antep became a center of industry, it also grew into a hub for contraband commerce and cross-border trade. The mutual imbrication of formal industry and contraband commerce defied the very terms of the development schemes that the state officials and urban planners such as Söylemezoğlu were so fond of implementing. In an account that chronicles twenty-five days spent among the smugglers of Antep, the renowned novelist Yaşar Kemal, as an undercover investigative journalist for *Cumhuriyet*, captures the pervasiveness of contraband goods and commerce in the Gaziantep of the 1950s. He describes the unexpected ease of locating contraband merchants (Kemal 2011: 32) as follows:

...I could have simply stopped a random man on the street and pitched: "Hi, my brother. How are you, my brother? I came to Antep to buy some merchandise. Some silk from Syria. My business used to be good in the past, now things have changed for the worse. My merchandise has been confiscated and I just got out of prison. Is there anything you could do for me? Let God keep you on your feet, and not let you fall like me. I too was a smuggler with a name, a reputation back in the day. Only God doesn't fall. What do you say, brother? I am a poor smuggler, brother. Kaçakçı Hasan of Adana. Would you be able to help a brother out?" I should have just said that, and I would have been in.

Overwhelmed by the variety of people passing through Antep's contraband bazaars, Kemal was intrigued by the older women peddling textiles: "I learned only later that the number of these women peddlers [*bohçacı kadın*] surpasses one thousand in Antep. In times that are known to be quiet and away from the watchful eyes of the commercial police [*zabıta*], they stuff their sack [*bohça*] and visit home after home." Kemal highlighted the ingenuity of these unexpected traders' methods of moving contraband goods: "Their way of working would change in response to the way the police worked. This time, they have wrapped up the whole roll

¹⁶Ibid., 4.

¹⁷On the mushrooming of warehouses along the border, see Faik (1937b) and Nadi (1931). On Japanese textiles in Mandate Syria and their trade across the border with Turkey, see BCA, 30.10, 180-244-6, 5 Dec. 1931, 6; Schad (2002: 227). For an analysis of such trade as an effect of Japanese industrialists' search for new markets in the interwar period, see Shimizu (1985). For a methodologically capitalist interpretation of such "global trade" "making" the Syria-Turkey border, see Öztan (2020).

of the silk fabric around their waist, and pulled a *çarşaf* [full-body covering, or *chador*] over it. Then they go off to the homes, to the women's bathhouses, to wherever a soon-to-be-bride is present. Wherever there is a wedding, there is one woman peddler (*bohçacı kadın*)" (ibid., 40).

Antep's rapid industrialization economy only intensified the informalization of markets in the region. This informalization, coupled with an exponentially growing population, produced myriad plans to redesign the city to minimize the possibility of trafficking amid the burgeoning sociality of traffic (Mathew 2016; Schayegh 2011; Yıldız 2024a; Yıldız 2024b). Beyond providing grounds to rethink various alignments of capital accumulation and land development in urban environments and across modern state borders, the Iranian Bazaar emerges as the spatial and historical product where various social actors—mechanics and merchants, pilgrims and state officials, real estate developers and consumers of contraband goods—all play generative roles. And these roles are dynamic. For example, villager loaders (*yükçüs*) or guides (*resan*) were once again called upon to carry contraband goods across the border in the absence of pilgrimage buses. Here, an economic approach to the border formation fails to account for the myriad political economic negotiations that at the time of research involved brigades of the Nusra Front, ISIS, or the PYD—the Kurdish Liberation Movement's armed wing in Rojava, Syria's Kurdistan.

The ever-evolving cracks in the Turkey-Syria border allow for movement, even in their contemporary configurations. Arrested mobilities of contraband trade are thus better approached not as mere effects of global markets' surplus output (Öztan 2020, 2022; Tejel and Öztan 2022) but as historically dynamic arenas of fugitive and oftentimes dissident politics in the post-Ottoman and post-mandate borders of the Levant and Anatolia (Dolbee 2022; Dolbee 2023; Yıldız 2024b).

The Iranian Bazaar, too, was dynamic after the Iranian pilgrims were long gone: the two-star hotels turned into long-term "studios" for Syrian refugees, and the logistical firms and travel agencies operating between Gaziantep and Iraq moved into the Atatürk Arcade. In other words, arrested mobilities forged fugitive markets and trans-border connections anew. Borderland inhabitants with genealogical knowledge of these geographies, like Hıdır and the architect as well as the loaders of his team, led the way with those new connections, while spaces like the Iranian Bazaar served as spatial archives of those new connections. And rather than being the effects of present(ist) machinations of global capitalism, the possibilities for such connections were hidden in the fact that the Syria-Turkey border had been etched onto their family genealogies.

Fugitives of Territorial Sovereignty: From the Franco-Turkish Frontier to the Syria-Turkey Border

On 17 December 1932, nearly a decade after the founding of the Republic of Turkey and twelve years after the establishment of the French Mandate in Syria, *Cumhuriyet* published a letter of lamentation (*feryatname*) from a textile merchant in Mardin, a small border town 300 kilometers west of Antep. Addressed to the editor-in-chief, it made such a strong impression on the editorial team that the renowned journalist Yunus Nadi devoted his front-page editorial to it. The letter vividly illustrated the "worrisome" conditions of the Turkey-Syria border and their impact on livelihoods:

The other side of the border, in other words 1.7 meters away from it, is full of warehouses stocked with contraband goods. The situation has gone so far that a contraband merchant guarantees to deliver the ordered goods to

anywhere the client wants on the other side of the border and does so with a 25 percent down payment. This guarantee is better understood probably as a deal offered from the Syrian side [of the border] to our contraband merchants. By observing this level of safety, envied even in the most orderly of countries, we could easily conclude that contraband commerce has emerged as the natural form of trade across our southern borders—and a natural form without precedence anywhere at that.¹⁸

The lament was indeed a moving one. Its author was too shy to plead for help but not too shy to name what he saw as a calamity that had befallen his mercantile career—*kaçak* goods and their merchants. The merchant, Abdulrahman Veli Çelebizade, wrote from Sivas, 350 miles from home, where he was seeking employment after bankruptcy. Çelebizade remained worried not only about his family's "well-being" but also about that of the newly founded Republic of Turkey. He lamented the situation of the patriotic, tax-paying merchants caught up in the newly established and ineffective supply chains and formal procedures and driven out of business by the *kaçakçı* (contraband merchant):

Everyone knows of those who, instead of defending the law of the state, have amassed large amounts of capital through trade across the border. Even before we get to these characters, [we should also mention] the women peddlers who are responsible for the perpetuation of contraband commerce within the city of Mardin. These women buy contraband goods from the merchants. They go in and out of everyone's house. Yet any of these women being caught while selling their contraband goods is unheard of. An upright merchant and an artisan with integrity like myself, on the other hand, is ruined and driven out of business for trying to sell the cloths and fabrics I have brought from Istanbul after a thousand problems [encountered] and a thousand assurances [given by the state].

Çelebizade's letter highlighted the struggles of those in former hinterlands of the Levant—such as Mardin, Antep, and Urfa—who faced costly and impractical supply routes of staple goods due to the new border. Nostalgic for his commercial success and material wealth in Mardin, due to the advent of the Syria-Turkey border and its *kaçak* markets, Çelebizade's lament was also for "those years when [he] paid one thousand *liras*" to the Turkish Republic in taxes. Çelebizade held the "greed" of women peddlers (*bohçacı kadınlar*),¹⁹ not the newly instituted tariffs of Turkey on foreign goods, as responsible for his fall from Eden.²⁰

To hold accountable those women and the people who supplied them with contraband goods, Çelebizade had already set his eyes on a severe method of punishment: the Courts of Independence (*İstiklal Mahkemeleri*), which had been

¹⁸"A Citizen's Lament," *Cumhuriyet*, 17 Dec. 1932, Cumhuriyet digital archives, accessed Nov. 2020.

¹⁹The figure of the *bohçacı kadın*, the woman peddler, reveals the gendered anxieties of the newly founded Republic of Turkey in the 1930s, as exemplified by Çelebizade's vilification of these women. Even more remarkably, it shows that contraband networks turn the exclusions of the formal economy into unexplored means for generating economic value: by moving between the seemingly separate realms of the marketplace and the household, the *bohçacı kadın* make it possible for contraband to make its way into the very houses of consumers. On women peddlers and the relationship between gendered informality and nationalism, see Baron (2007); Davis (1986).

²⁰BCA, 30.10, 179-238-10, 8 Aug. 1933, 5-7.

established after World War I to convict “counterrevolutionary” forces.²¹ Ending his lament on a note of enthusiastic if opportunistic patriotism, Çelebizade called for the state execution of *kaçakçı* along with *asker kaçağı* (army defectors). His rhetoric that held economic treachery tantamount to political treason sheds light on the illocutionary force that the nationalist imaginary had acquired within a decade after independence.

The same nationalist imaginary extended beyond equating contraband trade with treason. In Kurdish-majority areas and border zones, subject to ongoing negotiations with the French and British Mandate regimes at the time, *kaçak* became a floating signifier co-opted by the state to assert its territorial sovereignty and defend its market integrity. While contraband trade functioned as a technique of mobility for its practitioners, its regulation and subsequent criminalization emerged as a technology of territorial sovereignty to delineate otherwise blurry borders. For four decades after World War I, the delineation of the border between Syria and Turkey remained incomplete, buttressed in a patchwork of trade regulations to cement territorial claims. The border shaped and reshaped the region into new grids of mandated and national sovereignties, while perpetuating a discourse of “artificiality” among nationalists, anti-imperialists, imperialists, and, most recently, self-proclaimed jihadists alike (Pursley 2015a; Pursley 2015b). The Ankara government and the French Mandate authorities both used border disputes to justify allocation of territory in the region in line with the infamous 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement (figure 3).

With a project of establishing a settlement in modern-day Turkey that spanned from Adana and Cilicia on the eastern Mediterranean coast to Antep, Urfa, and Mardin in the east, the French used “the blue zone” as grounds for an incursion into Anatolia. The Franklin-Bouillon Agreement of 1921 ended hostilities. The territories of the newly founded Republic of Turkey and French Mandate Syria were agreed upon in principle, with the exceptions of Alexandretta and Antioch in the west and the Nusaybin and al-Qamishli districts of Mardin and Diyarbakir in the east (Burke 1973; Khoury 1987).²² Even though the territorial integrity of Syria and Turkey were enshrined in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the border between them changed again in 1939 when the Republic of Hatay, the independent state that existed for a year in the territory of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, was ceded to Turkey.²³

After France’s loss of oil-rich Mosul, Iraq, to the British, and Cilicia, a key port at the intersection of Levantine trade routes, to Turkey, members of the Parti Colonial reckoned that the only remaining way to make Syria a profitable colony was through industrial cultivation of agriculture (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner 1971). Reports on the economic prospects of the French Mandate in Syria highlighted the urgency of taking control of the Orontes and Euphrates Valleys as well as the Jazira Plain in order

²¹BCA, 30.18.1.1, 15-59-14, 16 Sept. 1925, 1, 3. On the substance of the trope of smuggling as treason, see Faik (1937a).

²²As in the case of ‘Aintab’s historical and urban transformation into Gaziantep, the French invasion, and the local opposition to it were enshrined into the very names of the places included in the “original” blue zone of the Sykes-Picot Agreement: Adana, Maraş, Antep, Urfa, Diyarbakir, and Mardin. Khoury cites Syria’s loss of not only Aleppo’s agricultural hinterland to Turkey but also its Mediterranean port in Alexandretta in the late 1930s as the most critical impetus for the anti-Mandate and the pro-Ottoman factions in Aleppo to unite with those seeking independence in Damascus. For an astute study of the spatial refiguration of hinterlands between Mandate Syria and Republican Turkey, see Bein (2017: 42).

²³On Alexandretta and its Turkish annexation, see Watenpaugh (1996).



Figure 3. Sykes-Picot Agreement Signed by Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, 8 May 1916. (UK National Archives, MPKi/426, FO 371/2777, folio 298.)

to implement this plan.²⁴ As Seda Altuğ demonstrates in the case of the Jazira Plain, located along the northeastern edge of Syria between Turkey and Iraq, the Mandate authorities “opened up the frontier region to cultivation by implanting Christian and Kurdish refugees [displaced from Turkey] conceived as the future peasants of the region” (Altuğ 2011: 64).

Such histories of population movements and refugee resettlement doubled as evidence in scholarly discourse that explained away time and time again Syria’s political volatility in the post-Ottoman, post-Mandate, and postcolonial periods as the predictable outcome of its territorial “artificiality” (Esman and Rabinovich 1988; Owen 2002; Raymond 1980; Seale 1965; Zisser 2006). This narrative was echoed not only by Orientalist scholars but also by Syrian nationalists. The counterhegemonic

²⁴See the reports of Père Poidebard, MAE, E-Levant Syrie-Liban, vol. 299; Père Poidebard, *Notes sur la Haute Djezireh*, 1926, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (hereafter CADN), Cabinet Politique, Fonds Beyrouth, box 571, Rapport du Père Poidebard du 6.01.1928 sur la Situation des Réfugiés en Haute Jézireh en Octobre 1927.

historical discourse of Syrian Arab nationalists embraced the “artificiality” of Syria with one qualification: in Ghassan Salama’s words, most Syrians—nationalist or not—viewed French Mandate Syria as “always less” (*du toujours moins*) than the historical territory of Greater Syria (1999: 59).

The French schemes to turn the Jazira Plain into an industrial agricultural hub peopled with Christian and Kurdish refugees alarmed both Syrian nationalists and Turkish elites. Wary of the possible formation of “an enclave of undesirables”—particularly, Armenians and Kurdish political refugees, to the immediate south of Turkey’s border in Jazira—Turkish officials pressed the Mandate authorities to control their side of the border. When Turkish authorities condemned the French for sheltering Kurdish rebels and allegedly colonizing the frontier with “malicious elements,” the Mandate authorities dismissed Turkish anxieties as exaggerated. A letter dated 27 January 1925 demonstrates the tenor of this dispute: “Since the beginning of the armistice, the biggest problem that the Mandate power is trying to resolve is the refugee problem. We have received 96,450 refugees since then and they are all impoverished people. France has made great economic sacrifices for them. Just for the sake of relieving pressure on the north of Syria, we have settled two-thirds of these poor people in inner Syria. The rest reside in Aleppo and in the Sanjak of Alexandretta and their settlements were realized calmly and in deference to the Muslim population.”²⁵

While the resettlement of refugees constituted a bone of contention between the Turkish and French authorities, political alliance with the Kurdish notables constituted another. Contrary to what one might assume, both Turkish and French regimes forged alliances with these notables. In 1923, a joint Turkish-Kurdish force led by Hadjo Agha, the Hevêrkan tribal leader, ambushed the French occupation forces in Bayandur. As a result, twenty-one French soldiers, most of them Senegalese recruits of the *Légion Syrienne*,²⁶ were killed. As mandate officials sought to rebuild its forces, the recruitment of Hidir’s grandfather into the *Légion* was a direct result of this defeat.

Once Hadjo Agha bowed to French rule in 1926, he confessed that Turkish military and state officials had encouraged him and some Arab tribal leaders to foment unrest in Jazira.²⁷ Before his confessions, the fatal ambush of the French forces, known as the “Bayandur Incident,” demonstrated to Mandate officials that neither their alliance with local Kurdish populations nor the Mandate itself was secure. Following the ambush, and overwhelmed by the Druze revolt in southern Syria, the Mandate authorities suspended their incursion into Anatolia. Having faced fierce resistance in Urfa, Antep, and Maraş, they abandoned claims to Cilicia and the blue zone of the Sykes-Picot map altogether, retreating to the Khabur River.

After the Convention of Good and Neighborly Relations between France and Turkey in 1926, Mandate officers stepped up their reconnaissance tours to negotiate with the Kurdish and Arab tribal leaders (Thomas 2002). As noted by the Mandate officer Père Antoine Poidebard, commercial concessions proved to be the most

²⁵MAE, *Série Syrie-Liban*, vol. 177, *Relation Turquie-Française*. See Van Bruinessen (1992: 101–4) and Altuğ (2011: 59–60).

²⁶*Légion Syrienne* refers to the French troops recruited exclusively from West Africa. Troops were primarily Senegalese, but the *légion* also counted non-Muslim and non-Arab Syrians among its ranks. It was renamed *Troupes Auxiliaires*, and then *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* in 1930.

²⁷CADN, Fonds Ankara, Ambassade, no. 104, *Compte Rendu* no. 2539 du Général Billotte, représentant Haut Commissaire à M. l’Envoyé extraordinaire à Damas. Alep, 21 Sept. 1926, 1–3.

effective method of recruitment for Kurdish refugees in Jabal al-Tur: “Some of them come to make trade in the frontier posts. A lot of them are originally from Mardin and the neighboring mountain, Jabal Tur. The young men of the Jabal are arriving with their families to join the Légion Syrienne which has already recruited a small number of Assyrio-Chaldeans at Hassatche.”²⁸

These concessions, however, also galvanized the Turkish authorities, who proposed a no man’s land of one hundred meters on either side of the border to arrest the mobility of native inhabitants. These negotiations led to greater loss of land for the locals. The land on the Syrian side was the most fertile. Without access to it, locals could no longer engage in agricultural cultivation or raise livestock.²⁹ Trade across the newly established border became the only possible way to secure a livelihood, while the territorial bargaining resulted in continuous land dispossession for the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional communities faced with a line of separation. The *mimar*’s family was among those whose lands fell prey to these negotiations.

Well into the 1930s and 1940s the Turkish state archives attest to the new republic’s sporadic efforts to curb cross-border mobility without providing viable alternatives for livelihood. Locals, deprived of their land, had no option but cross-border commerce to sustain themselves. A case in point is a complaint letter that a group of grape farmers³⁰ filed with the Kilis Chamber of Commerce, and the subsequent report that the chamber forwarded to the central authorities in October of 1933. The letter chronicles how their grapes, renowned in the region for *rakı* and wine production, were treated as second-rate produce within Turkey.

The farmers’ difficulties were compounded by the costly shipment of their produce from the border region into central Anatolia. To address these difficulties, the farmers presented two proposals: “Either give us a fair price and include subsidies for the transportation of our produce to central Anatolia or give us permission to export our produce to Syria.” While similar complaints about pistachio cultivation and the raising of livestock comprise the backbone of these archives, state-level responses—if given at all—either misconstrued the facts (such as the prices offered to farmers) or downplayed the grievances of the local populations.³¹ Instead, officials portrayed such grievances as proof of effective suppression of Kurdish insurgents across the border. Despite official restrictions, both cross-border trade and transhumance persisted in the region well into the 1950s. While the incarceration of locals for minor offenses, such as possession of contraband rolling papers known as Arabian paper (*Arap kağıdı*), became routine, cross-border commerce was dubbed the “natural form of subsistence” in the region (Tejel 2009: 67–8).

²⁸CADN, Syrie-Liban, Cabinet Politique, box 569, “Situation des Réfugiés en Haute Djézireh,” Octobre 1927, Père Poidebard, no 327/K2.

²⁹CADN, no. 257/4 attachment, 224/27. 1926. The three annotations from right to left read: “The part of Karkamış overlooking the railway station and the Euphrates Bridge has been left to the Turks”; “An overlooked mistake in an earlier copy of the text that made it into the Ankara Accord allowed the Turks to create an enclave around Çobanbey (3,500 meters from the railway station of the same name)”; “Turks have claimed a number of Kilis’s villages to the south and southeast of the city that, they claim, belong to Turks of Kilis. The villagers who inhabit these lands are fully vested and being highly compromised by the Turks. They must remain ours. On the other hand, it too is possible to return a part of the wineries, olive orchards, and gardens located in the southeast of the city. These lands [terrains] could constitute an object of exchange.”

³⁰BCA 30.10.155-90-10. 12 Oct. 1933, 2.

³¹BCA 30.10.265-787-8. 16 Nov. 1933.

It was only in 1955 and through a large-scale international program that laid mines along the border that the Franco-Turkish frontier was transformed into a Syria-Turkey boundary. Initiated by the Menderes government in 1954 and executed by the NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency between 1955 and 1959, the program laid 616,000 mines along a 600-kilometer segment of the 957-kilometer border. This 350-meter-wide minefield led to yet another wave of land dispossession, lands that were vital for agricultural cultivation and livestock grazing. The mines also resulted in around 10,000 deaths and 20,000 injuries, as people continued crossing the minefield that the Syria-Turkey border had become.

In December 2011, seven months into the Syrian revolution, the Erdoğan administration declared its intention to clear this minefield, a project funded and backed politically by the United Nations. The project also involved building massive housing projects to resuscitate the land for agricultural cultivation.³² The transformation of the revolution into a regional conflict shortly thereafter, however, not only suspended this initiative but also brought about a “modular cement wall” that sealed 873 kilometers of the 957-kilometer border.³³ Here too, just like water, *kaçak* found its way through.

Conclusion

On 15 June 2018, I received a message on my phone that read, “Greetings from Qamishli, Rojava!³⁴ How are you doing, doctor?” When I looked up the country code, it turned out to be Iraqi. “Who is this?” I responded. “The biggest enemy of fishnets over the Euphrates!” wrote my correspondent. “Hıdır?! How are you? What are you doing in Qamishli?” I texted back. Hıdır replied that after Turkey’s second military excursion into Syria, dubbed “Operation Olive Branch,” that targeted the Afrin canton of the self-declared confederacy under Kurdish-majority People’s Protection Units (YPG), he decided to relocate to Kobane. “I have been in Kobane since April,” he continued as I sought words in response. “Don’t worry, the mad merchant passage is gone, the new wall and all ... but there is no shortage of madness in this landscape! We now work via Iraq, and all is good,” Hıdır added. When I asked if his family had followed suit, he ignored the question. “I need to tell you all about this new route we are working through now: via Qamishli into Duhok [Iraqi Kurdistan].” Knowing that my only option was to follow his lead, I asked how long he planned on staying there. “Until my Turkish passport runs out and I acquire some land in Iraq,” he responded. “Like water, we too will find our way, right?!” Hıdır asked rhetorically.

For the next six months, despite my best efforts, I did not hear back from Hıdır. The last news I received of him came from the *mimar*, who had returned to the

³²“Türkiye’nin doğu sınırlarında mayınların temizlenmesi ve sınır denetim kapasitesinin artırarak sosyo-ekonomik gelişimin sağlanması projesi—Aşama II [The project for leading to socio-economic development by clearing the mines on Turkey’s eastern borders and increasing border inspection capacity—Stage II], Jan 2016. At: <https://www.undp.org/tr/turkiye/projects/turkiyenin-dogu-sinirlarinda-mayinlarin-temizlenmesi-ve-sinir-denetim-kapasitesini-artirarak-sosyo-ekonomik-gelisimin-saglanması>.

³³“Suriye sınır hattı tamamen kapatıldı [The Syrian border line has been completely sealed],” *Milliyet*, 10 Mar. 2024. At: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/suriye-sinir-hatti-tamamen-kapatildi-7091923>.

³⁴Qamishli is the provincial capital of the province of Al-Jazira, Syria, and lies at the intersection of the borders of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

mechanic shop at the Iranian Bazaar. He relayed to me that Hıdır was rumored to have reinvented himself as a livestock merchant in Duhok, working across Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistans. Hıdır had indeed found his way.

At important historical junctures, contraband commerce between what is now modern Turkey and Syria came to link regimes of value and territorialization, border delineation and land dispossession, and cross-border trade and political treason. These linkages from within the expansive semantic domain of *kaçak*—repurposed in the hands of diplomats, military officers, and investigative journalists as well as contraband merchants themselves—help us provincialize the recent conventional trope of methodological capitalism in the study of borders by attending not only to the graduation of sovereignty but also that of territory as incomplete and contingent processes (Ong 2000). Approaching the border as a palimpsest of sovereignty recuperates the historicity and dynamism of arrested mobilities as well as their political-economic and social formations across Anatolia and the Levant. Further, attending to fugitives of sovereignty allows us to analyze the paradoxically uneven distribution and selective securitization of physical mobility among the inhabitants of the borderlands as a central tenet of territorialization and its attendant border formation.

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