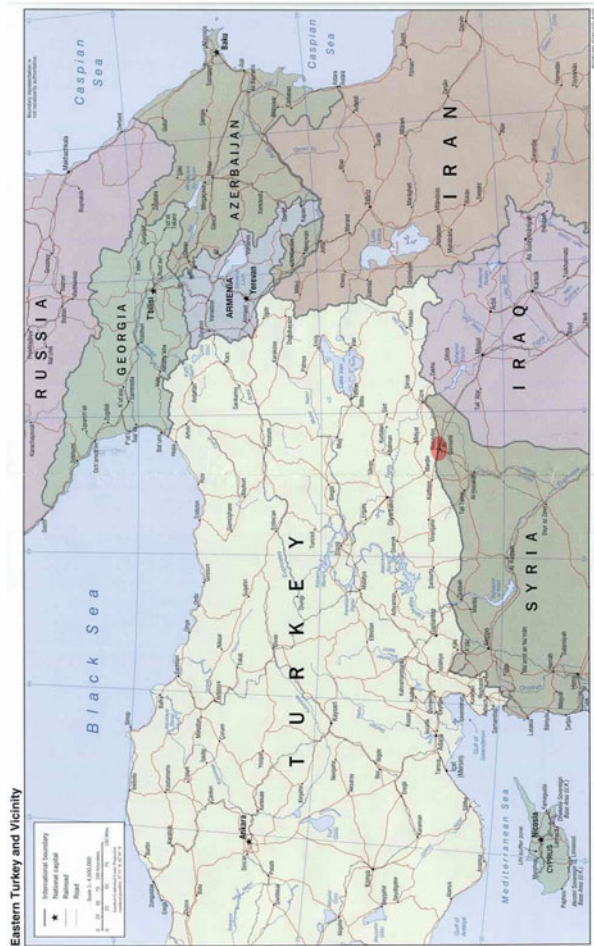


# The Wall



The map showing Eastern Turkey and Vicinity where the fieldwork site is marked with a red spot. (Map: Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin):

[http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle\\_east\\_and\\_asia/turkey\\_east\\_pol\\_2002.jpg](http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/turkey_east_pol_2002.jpg)

Ramazan Aras

# The Wall

The Making and Unmaking of the Turkish-Syrian  
Border

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## PREFACE

This book undertakes an anthropological analysis into the life stories, testimonies, and other oral accounts imparting the process of separation and ruptured social, cultural, religious, and economic structures and autochthonous bonds as a result of the constructed political borders of nation-states newly founded on inherited territories of the Ottoman Empire. Subsisting generations of local peoples and religious communities from the Ottoman Empire were residing within a geography of an established accommodation of diverse religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and economic arrangements. However, with the emergence of many nation-state projects after the fall of Empire, the series of geopolitical, socio-cultural, and economic events exposed vast communities to deep-rooted traumas and social pathologies. In this process, arbitrarily determined and constructed political borders began to inflict deep separations and ruptures at the border regions.

The histories of determination and construction of Turkish political borders like political borders of many other nation-states founded after World War I and World War II document how these territorial borders troubled social, cultural, religious, ethnic, and economic fabrics of communities who have been partitioned and troubled by these geopolitical interventions. With a particular focus on the case of the Turkish-Syrian border, this book addresses the importance of investigation and analysis of political border in order to understand partitioned communities who

have been surrounded by political border on their own lands. By providing a thick ethnography of political borders, this research focuses on the evolution of Turkish-Syrian border from the early years of the Republic to the present.

During my childhood in Kerboran (Dargeçit), Mardin, and in the later periods, I listened to many life stories of border people and narratives of smuggling within the family settings. Under the influence of these kinds of life stories, the question of political borders began to pervade my thoughts; my interest, however, was mainly concretized after having started to work at the Department of Anthropology at Mardin Artuklu University in July of 2010. As an oral historian, sociologist, and socio-cultural anthropologist, I prioritized to work on other urgent crises (displacement and migration of Assyrian/Syriac Christians, political violence, politics of fear of the state and suffering in the context of the Kurdish question in Turkey, etc.) in the region and thus postponed the question of political borders that actually had always lingered in my mind. However, in the fall of 2010, my experience and observations in my first visit of my aunt Naïma (died in 2016) who was living in the border village of Beyandûr in the border province of Qamişlo (Syria) on the other side of the Turkish border crystalized my decision to commence in a project on the Turkish-Syrian political border. The story of nearly 90-year-old Naïma was just the tip of iceberg concerning the high cost of the political border that the local community have been paying for decades. During my three-day visit with my mother, questions were just popping up in my mind while talking to my cousins, their neighbors, and walking at the downtown Qamişlo. I listened many stories of escape from Turkey and how people took refuge in Syrian side. I learned about the lives of stateless Kurds who were neither citizen of Turkey nor citizen of Syria. I heard stories of severe deaths of ordinary people who were trying to cross the border. Overall, I was informed about not only suffering and struggle of border people residing in both sides of the border but also ambiguities, resilience, adaptations, and opportunities of border mechanism which was thickening throughout decades. In sum, my short visit for my relatives residing in the Kurdish region of northern Syria not only triggered the research process but also enabled me to recognize how actually the phenomenon of political borders and its various catastrophic consequences at both subjective and collective levels have been ignored by social scientists in Turkey.

The worsening political conditions in the region—the eruption of Syrian Civil War, the conflicts between the PKK and the Turkish forces—forced me to limit my research area with Nisêbîn (Nusaybin) border region although I was interested in doing a comparative research in Kurdish communities residing in both sides of the border. However, the border town of Nisêbîn with its nearly 90,000 population had numerous border stories to offer. Based on life stories and testimonies of former smugglers, their family members, mothers, widows, and many other border people, this book documents a genealogical exploration and an anthropological analysis of state-sponsored border making practices and policies. Besides revealing the social, economic, and political history of Turkish-Syrian border, the collected life stories, testimonies, and transmitted narratives of the past and present generations document significant data regarding the memory, identity, sense of belonging, and daily lives of local Kurdish people in a particular location in the border city of Nisêbîn in the Mardin Province and some surrounding border villages in the Kurdish region. This work not only critically analyses the making of the Turkish-Syrian border through an exploration of the statist discourses, the state border practices, and its diverse apparatuses, but further analyses the unmaking border practices along the Turkish-Syrian border in light of local people's counter perceptions, discourses, life stories, narratives, and daily practices which can be interpreted as certain forms of local defiance to imposition, resilience, and incorporating strategies in everyday life. This book reveals local people's diversifying perceptions of place, memories, border and state security apparatuses which can be interpreted as a legacy of the Ottoman past.

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Early version of this book and one chapter have appeared in Turkish before. The large part of the book titled *Mayın ve Kaçakçı: Türkiye-Suriye Sınırını İnşa ve Bozma Pratikleri* [Landmine and Smuggler: The Making and Unmaking Practices of Turkish-Syrian Border] was published by Çizgi Kitabevi in 2015. I am thankful to the following who read the Turkish version which was actually shorter and offered valuable comments and criticisms: Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal, Sıtkı Karadeniz, Yunus Cengiz, Arzu Öztürkmen, Ayşe Aras, Ali Bedir, Ferhat Tekin, and Cumhuri Ölmez.

Chapter 2 is a revised and extended version of “Türkiye’de Sınır ve Sınır Bölgeleri Çalışmaları: Eleştirel Bir Değerlendirme (Border and Borderland Studies in Turkey: A Critical Evaluation,” in *Journal of Mukaddime of Mardin Artuklu University* vol. 5, no. 2, 2014, which has been used here with permission. Besides, Chapter 5 is an extended version of the paper not published but presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, in November 2017 in Washington, DC.

While writing the final version of this book at Ibn Haldun University, in Istanbul, some friends, colleagues, and students supported me. I wish to thank Talal Asad for his enlightening comments and guidance on the issue of security walls during our conversation in his house in November 2017, in New York. I want to thank Erik Ringmar for his valuable comments and criticisms on the completed version of the manuscript. I would like to thank my graduate research assistants Hibatuallah Bensaid, Hüseyin Dağ, and Ruhul Amin at the Department of Sociology at Ibn Haldun University for their assistance and contributions.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| AA       | Anadolu Ajansı (Anadolu News Agency)  |
| AK Party | Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)  |
| BDP      | Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (Peace and Democracy Party)  |
| FETÖ     | Fethulahçı Terör Örgütü (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization)   |
| ISIS     | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria   |
| JİTEM    | Jandarma İstihbarat Terörle Mücadele (Gendarmerie Intelligence Against Terror)                          |
| KDP      | Partiya Demokrata Kurdistan (Kurdistan Democratic Party)  |
| MIT      | Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (The Turkish Intelligence Service)   |
| OHAL     | Olağan Üstü Hal (The State of Emergency)  |
| ÖSO      | Özgür Suriye Ordusu (Free Syrian Army)  |
| PKK      | Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (Kurdish Workers' Party)   |
| SETA     | Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı (Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research) |
| TOKİ     | T.C. Başbakanlık Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı (The Housing Development Administration of Turkey)      |
| TTB      | Türk Tabipler Birliği (Association of Turkish Medical Doctors)  |
| UNHCR    | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees   |
| YPG      | Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)   |