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Border Securitization Cycles: Periodizing Turkey's Management of Its Iranian Border (1920–2020)

Abstract

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 sent a shockwave whose effects were felt far beyond national borders. In Turkey, this event contributed to a renewed physical and discursive securitization of the border with Iran. This article argues that such policies and discourses are part of a long-term process of border securitization that has been underway for at least a century. This article identifies a periodization scheme for this securitization process and proposes the existence of different border securitization cycles within this process. Historical developments in Turkey are provided as a means of identifying, comparing, and contrasting these cycles at the Turkish-Iranian border. This article thus contributes to critical security and border studies by showing how borders can become the objects of securitization in and of themselves.

Keywords: Turkish-Iranian border, borderland, securitization, periodization

1. Introduction

The border between Turkey and Iran is usually considered remarkably stable, especially when compared to territorial turmoil at the larger regional scale. A correlation is often made between its longevity and its stability. Indeed, unlike other borders of the region, the Turkish-Iranian one has existed, more or less in its current course, for centuries. The Qasr-e Shirin (tur. *Kasr-ı Şirin*) Treaty, signed between the Ottoman and the Safavid empires in 1639, put an end to a series of wars between the two empires during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to this treaty, the cities of Kars and Bayezid [Doğubayazıt] fell into Ottoman territory, whereas Iğdır and the twin peaks of Ararat fell into the Safavid zone. Given the territorial marks decided by the two empires to better define the frontier zone, mainstream narratives view 1639 as the birth date for the border between Turkey and Iran. Also deeply anchored in the narrative is the belief that this delimitation remained more or less unchanged from 1639 until today.[1] In this respect, the Turkish-Iranian border is said to stand as the oldest border in the region, even one of the oldest borders in the world. The perception of an unchanged border is rooted both in the literature on Turkish-Iranian

1 Olson 1998, 15–6. This assumption is based on the fact that the first and second treaties of Erzurum signed in 1823 and 1837, respectively, did not alter the approximate borders agreed upon in the treaty of Qasr-e Shirin.

relations and in Turkish national historiographical discourse. It helps to portray the bilateral relationship in a positive light by acting as testimony to a long-standing good relationship between the two countries.[2]

Yet, while the Qasr-e Shirin treaty has stood as a symbol of border stability, this treaty was only one step in the evolution of a boundary that took 400 years to reach maturity, a historical process addressed very clearly by Sabri Ateş.[3] Qasr-e Shirin defined some landmarks but was far from presenting a distinct, demarcated border between two states in line with the Westphalian border model. Cities were assigned to respective imperial powers, but villages and lands remained disputed in this peripheral area.[4] As a result, as Ateş demonstrates in his history, the current border between Turkey and Iran is the result of a very long process of boundary-making and negotiations over territorial demarcation.[5] Several territorial adjustments were made until the last border agreement was signed and implemented between 1932 and 1934.[6] Besides the boundary itself, this long process also saw changes in the role of political actors defining the border on the ground. We can mention, for example, the evolving role of Kurdish tribes to maintain territorial security on the fringes of empire, or the role of foreign commissioners from Britain and Russia participating to this delimitation process.

Calling into question the myth of Qasr-e Shirin by pointing out the fact of the border's evolution allows us to refine our understanding of the correlation between longevity and stability. If the notion of stability is understood as the absence of variation from the initial state, the stability of the Turkish-Iranian border might therefore be nuanced. Yet the underpinnings of the longevity-stability discourse can be probed further. The narrative of border stability perpetuated by both Turkish and Iran historiography carries the assumption that national territory is well protected.[7] It suggests that the 'inside' and the 'outside' are both well-defined and distinct. In other words, a constant and stable border is held to be synonymous with a secure, safe, and homogeneous territory. This assumed link between border stability and national security stems from the definition of the nation-state and the delimitation of state sovereignty. In that way, the myth of Qasr-e Shirin, a vestige of decidedly imperial relations, is also nurtured paradoxically by the concept of the territorial nation-state. The presupposed association between society and territorial nation-state, however, represent a 'territo-

2 For instance, Turkish President Süleyman Demirel in 1997 declared that 'relations between Turkey and Iran had been good ever since the Treaty of Kasr-i Shirin in 1639' (Olson 1998, 66).
3 Ateş 2019.
4 Bournoutian 2015.
5 Ateş 2013.
6 According to this agreement, signed in 1932 in Tehran between the Turkish and Iranian ministers of foreign affairs, Turkey gained control of the Lesser Ararat, while Iran gained the territory of Qotur near the Urmiah lake. On this border agreement, see below, and also the contribution of Ceylan to this special issue.
7 Sinkaya 2019, 6.

rial trap' in the study of borderland territories.[8] Moreover, the correlation between border stability and the security of citizens is not self-evident.

In 2017 the Turkish government initiated the building of a wall on its border with Iran, which is still in progress.[9] In light of the narrative of longevity and stability, we can investigate this recent drive to build a wall on a border depicted as stable for centuries. How can we explain this most recent securitization process along the old Turkish-Iranian border? Indeed, the erection of this wall on the border stands only as the visible tip of a larger iceberg that has formed over decades. Instead of focusing only on the border securitization process during the last decade since the building of the wall started, it is necessary to look at this process in a broader perspective beginning from the creation of the Turkish Republic.[10] New modes of inclusion and exclusion have occurred since the creation of the modern Turkish-Iranian border. In this sense, my aim in this article is to identify a periodization scheme for this securitization process and propose the existence of the phenomenon of different *border securitization cycles*.

The notion of 'cycle' enables us to understand repeated processes of militarization in this borderland area. These dynamics of repetition stands against the illusion that borders have been globally more securitized only since the beginning of the twenty-first century to rein in terrorist attacks or to better curb illegal migration flaws. In the case of the borderland between Turkey and Iran, there is a longstanding tradition of mistrust from the state regarding its own capacity to control this territory. Distinguishing different securitization cycles provides a better insight into this borderland securitization process. 'Borderland' is understood here as a large territory around the administrative borderline between Turkey and Iran. It encompasses the provinces of Iğdır, Ağrı, Van, and Hakkâri. Beyond their physical proximity to the borderline, one can consider these provinces as belonging to a region that is generally called 'Eastern Turkey' and can be understood, in Jordi Tejel's words, as areas of dissidence.[11]

This article, then, seeks to explain the timing of securitization processes along the border between Turkey and Iran. It outlines the factors that have made this border acquire a higher degree of securitization. To provide a context for these empirical findings, this article first discusses the potential for interaction between the fields of border studies and security studies. The concept of 'securitized borderland' will then help us to distinguish different cycles of securitization along the Turkish-Iranian borderland, from the perspective of Turkey.[12] In light of this case study, the article will

8 Agnew 1994.

9 Once finished, this wall, made out of concrete blocks and comprising different segments, should measure more than 270 kilometres of a 560-kilometre-long border.

10 With this choice of chronology, I acknowledge the difficulty of fully avoiding the 'territorial trap.'

11 Tejel Gorgas 2009, 14.

12 Although not used in this article, the author conducted fieldwork research in the region of Van between 2020 and 2023. Her research focuses solely on the Turkish side of the border, and for this reason, the perspective of the Iranian state is not taken into account in this

finally offer some remarks about the features of those border securitization cycles and the possible existence of border securitization cycles in other contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

This article is located at the crossroads between security studies and border studies. Scholars in both fields have critically analyzed their objects of study, questioning previous static approaches to both concepts, 'border' and 'security.' The latter came under increasing scrutiny from within its traditional academic home in international relations. Because 'security' is hard to define as a research object, the limits of this subfield remain blurred as well. As early as the 1950s, Arnold Wolfer highlighted this challenge: '[…] the term 'security' covers a range of goals so wide that highly divergent policies can be interpreted as policies of security.'[13] In spite of the difficulty of finding an ontological consensus on security, we can acknowledge that scholars until the 1980s tended to assimilate this notion to state or national security. This narrow and limited conception of security could be blamed on a global lack of conceptual literature on the topic,[14] but it could also be related to the dominant paradigms of realism and neo-realism in international-relations theories during the Cold War.[15] This mainstream paradigm began to be called into question with the end of a bipolar world. 'Security' transformed from a neglected and underdeveloped concept to a new research field aiming to embed a more complex definition in a more reflective approach.

Arguing for the necessity of reshaping the concept of security, Barry Buzan proposed a constructivist method to understand the term not merely as the domain of the military sector, but as a specific type of politics that makes reference to an existential threat.[16] Buzan's new 'sectorization' of security – which includes the economic, political, environmental, and societal spheres – promotes the concept of 'securitization' to highlight how an issue can *become securitized* through discourse and become the extraordinary political domain of the executive. The concept of securitization was further developed by the Copenhagen School, which defines it as a speech act: An issue is described in discourse as an existential threat, which implies the need for an emergency answer; with the acceptance of the intended audience, the issue becomes depoliticized and enters the realm of extraordinary politics, outside of regular political life.[17] Bypassing the traditional association between security and state survival, the Copenhagen School thus sought to provide a critical perspective to security studies.

article. For a critical border studies approach to Turkish borders with Syria and Greece, see: Koca 2020.

13 Wolfers 1952, 484.

14 Buzan 1991.

15 For the emblematic approach to neo-realism, see: Waltz 1979.

16 Buzan 1997.

17 Buzan, Waever, and Wilde 1998. The 'Copenhagen School' refers to the research agenda of the Center for Peace and Conflict Research in Copenhagen generally and the work of Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan in particular.

Like Wolfer's early warning about the ambiguity underlying the concept of national security, a new generation of scholars has also come to question the Copenhagen School's securitization theory and its ability to overcome a state-centric approach to security.[18] Some have, for example, emphasized the role of different types of audience in the reception of securitization discourse[19] or the importance of a sociological approach in understanding the role of security actors in the implementation of security policies.[20] This post-Copenhagen movement itself became critical toward critical security studies, either finding fault with its downplay of classical security threats or criticizing its use of society rather than community as its object of analysis.[21] Finally, in the last decade, some authors have stressed the advantage of combining different approaches to consider security outside of international relations theory.[22]

Parallel to the developments in critical security studies, critical border studies also seek to escape the national territorial trap and to understand borders as dynamic processes. Postmodern approaches have resulted in a large scope of studies exploring the relations between borders and the hierarchy of territorial identity.[23] Nevertheless, few scholars have made direct connections between (critical) security studies and (critical) border studies. Other matters, including terrorism or climate change, have been analyzed in light of securitization theory, but few works connect securitization directly to the border as an institution. This connection is generally made in migration studies – hence the abundance of literature about the perception of migration as an existential threat. In this framework borders are said to be securitized because of the migration phenomenon.[24] In such works, border securitization is therefore understood both as the process of guarding borders with fences or advanced technologies of surveillance and as the priority given to the filter function of these 'smart borders.'[25]

I argue, however, that borders can become objects of securitization in and of themselves. For one, the securitization of issues such as illegal migration transfers to the securitization of borders themselves as sites of territorial anxiety. Discursively, borders simultaneously become instruments of protection against threats from the 'outside' while representing territorial zones of danger precisely because of their contact with this 'outside.'[26] Following this line of thought, what we call the 'border securitization process' encompasses both the material response to issues that have been securitized through physically securing the border and a discursive process through which borderlands become securitized and made into territories that require an emergency

18 Balzacq 2005; Stritzel 2007.
19 Salter 2008.
20 Bigo and Guild 2005.
21 Booth 2004; Knudsen 2001.
22 cf. Bourbeau 2015; McCluskey, Rampton, and Charalambous 2021.
23 Newman and Paasi 1998. For a great insight of border studies evolution before and after the 1980s see Kolossov 2005, 608–10.
24 Lemaire 2019; Prokkola 2020; Vigneau 2019.
25 Rosière and Jones 2012; Schofield 2015.
26 Altuğ and White 2009; Newman and Paasi 1998, 201.

answer to deal with – justifying, for example, a higher degree of militarization. We can use this double-sided aspect of the border securitization process to observe the management by Turkey of its Iranian borderland. Furthermore, the concept of 'borderlands' moves away from a linear view of the border, enabling greater focus on cross-border interactions.[27] In this article, therefore, we speak of a borderland securitization process that forms a 'securitized borderland.'[28] We understand 'securitization' as the political process by which the Turkish state reinforces in discourse the idea of an existential threat at its border with Iran, while implementing in practice a higher degree of control and militarization in the borderland. It is the contention of this article that this border securitization has evolved across periodic cycles over the last century of the Turkish Republic's existence.

3. The First Cycle of Borderland Securitization, 1920–1932

In the Middle East, the 1920s are known as a period of territorial restructuring, a product of political regime changes in the region. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution triggered the formation of three nation-states, namely Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, later incorporated into the Soviet Union. Farther south, new borders were drawn around Iraq, which was administrated as a British mandate from 1920 until 1932. To the west, an agreement signed in 1921 between Turkey and France determined a new border between Turkey and French-mandate Syria. The settlement of the imperial state of Iran in 1925 and the fall of the Ottoman Empire between 1920–1923 governed this process along their mutual border. Regarding the dismantling of the latter, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) planned to settle new borders and spheres of influence in Turkish territory at the time, including both an extension of Armenian territory and the creation of a Kurdish State. In so doing, it anchored a sense of mistrust in the new Turkish administration headed by Mustafa Kemal Paşa [Atatürk] toward both its neighboring southern territories and the victorious Western powers who were its primary architects. Atatürk led Turkey's 'War of Liberation' (*Kurtuluş Savaşı*) in order to prevent a large shrinkage of the remaining territories of the Ottoman Empire. Based on the National Pact (*Misak-ı Millî*), a new conception of Turkish territorial boundaries was proclaimed and used by the resistance movement as the outline of new legitimate Turkish territory.[29] The decade of 1920 was therefore a great period of territorial bounding at a regional scale.

If this new territorial configuration led to a multiplication of borders, they were not simply and suddenly negotiated from abroad through a secret agreement, as was the case with Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, but rather resulted in part from previous

27 Schofield 2015, 138.
28 Deleixhe, Dembinska, and Iglesias 2019.
29 Balistreri 2022. İçduygu and Kaygusuz (2004, 31–2) speak of a 'nationalization of the National Pact' between 1919 and 1923, a process which provided a basis for modern territorial Turkish citizenship.

zonal negotiations that had taken place even before World War One.[30] Moreover, the process of territorial restructuring not only entailed the creation of new borders, but also derived in large part from the new symbolic meaning attached to these borders, i.e., as limits of sovereign nation states. In this regard, the Turkish-Iranian border offers an insightful example of such a change in the meaning of the border institution. Indeed, the border as a line had existed before the new territorial structure set up during the 1920s, and before World War One. Yet during this period, the same border area changed in its functions and governance: What was now at stake was to define a 'community inside,' namely to define citizenship through territorial demarcation. By this process, borders acquired a new mythic significance as marking the desired unity of society. With the end of empires, borders became a symbol of national integrity and represented 'the honor of the nation.'[31]

Regarding the Turkish-Iranian border, one can qualify the period from 1920–1932 as the first period of border securitization, mainly because of two dynamics considered as threats against a newly conceived national security.[32] The first dynamic emerged from the genocide against the Ottoman Armenians, which occurred before the Treaty of Sèvres but impacted the borderland on the Turkish side in the long run;[33] the second is the Kurdish Ararat Rebellion between 1926–1930.

Justified in the Turkish nationalist historiography by Armenian communities' support for Russian troops attacking the east regions of the Ottoman Empire, the great majority of the Ottoman Armenian population around the Turkish-Iranian borderland was massacred or deported in 1915 and 1916, events which left behind a deep regional trauma. When analyzing the borderland securitization process, 1920 appears to be a turning point because it crystalized the idea that Armenians, as non-Muslim people, would be a threat to national security. Therefore, all non-Muslim groups – namely Greeks, Jews and Armenians – would not be admitted in the new national territory.[34] The Treaty of Sèvres became 'a point of reference for the Turkish nationalists to leave non-Muslims outside the boundaries of 'proper membership,' if not

30 Schofield 2018.

31 Çelik 2019, 162.

32 This conception of what defines national security was formulated by the Turkish nationalist government.

33 If the 1920s were a decade of boundary changes with the gradual collapse of the Ottoman empire, a rising Turkish nationalist movement, led by the Committee of Union and Progress, was already active in the territory that is today Turkey in the decades before the 1920s.

34 To be more specific, the Treaty of Berlin signed after the Turkish-Russian war between 1877–1878 also played a role to play in the securitization of the Armenian question. In a way, this treaty promoted a new regional order in Anatolia and in the Caucasus, with ethnicity made to be the sovereign criterion and the 'homogeneous' nation-state as the ideal form. On the other hand, the weakening of the empire reinforced the Armenian revendications for a larger autonomy. Ottoman government, now considering the Armenian question in terms of security, armed some Kurdish tribes in order to curb potential Armenian secessionist aspirations.

official equal citizenship. Accordingly, in all diplomatic negotiations and regulations, the Turkish nationalist government counted the Armenians as simply non-existent.'[35] It contributed to the erasure of parts of the historical heritage at the borderland scale and to the securitization of this community at a national scale, because of its potential secessionist or irredentist demands.[36]

From the same perspective, some of the Kurdish communities in the Turkish-Iranian border region, first used as a protective force against Armenians by the empire, increasingly became viewed as potential threat to national security after the creation of the Turkish Republic. The rise of Kurdish nationalism, potentially supported by foreign states, was regarded as a great threat to the territorial integrity of the Turkish Republic.[37] On 22 April 1926, Turkey and Iran signed an agreement recognizing the sovereignty of the other state on its respective side of the border and promising non-intervention in each other's internal affairs.[38] That year, near the Iranian border, the Ararat Rebellion (*Ağrı İsyanı*) led by İhsan Nuri Paşa, sprang up in opposition to the Turkification policies of the new republic, which included indiscriminate exile.[39] Rebels proclaimed an independent Kurdish republic and the nomination of a temporary government, along with a flag, a journal, and a national anthem. This revolt was harshly repressed by the Turkish army between 1926 and 1930 through several military interventions.[40] As a result of the rebellion, the Turkish government asked Iran to change the border demarcation so that Turkey would integrate the Lesser Ararat, used by insurgents to enter or retreat to the other side of the border and would now enable the Turkish military to conduct cross-border operations. The aim of Turkey was to secure control over this mountainous borderland territory. During the period of the Ararat Rebellion, Turkish military and diplomatic corps were suspicious toward Iran and its inclination to condone the use by Kurdish rebels of the Iranian territory to retreat during clashes. They threatened to bomb Iran's territory if this support toward Kurds rebels did not stop.[41] The Tehran Agreement, signed on 23 January

35 İçduygu and Kaygusuz 2004, 37.

36 Armenian revolutionary movements arose at the end of the nineteenth century; an attempt was made to curb them using the newly formed *Hamidiye* cavalry in the Ottoman army. At that time, land disputes occurred between Kurdish and Armenian tribes.

37 In Tejel's words: 'Nevertheless, the 'East' became the 'fortress' of the new Turkish state. As a borderline, the Eastern provinces had to be fully integrated into the state framework in order to face external threats, namely the establishment of an 'enemy' Armenian state as well as a Kurdish state 'at the orders' of foreign powers (i.e., Great Britain, due to its presence in Iraq as a Mandatory power). These concerns led the Kemalists to try to 'win' the Eastern provinces of Anatolia, and at the same time it led to the emergence of a security-based vision of the 'Eastern' provinces' (Tejel Gorgas 2009, 4).

38 Abdulla-Ali 2013, 306–12. On 15 June 1928, an additional protocol was signed to add provisions on border security and bilateral trade.

39 We recall here that these Turkification dynamics existed before in the Ottoman Empire (Ülker 2005). Likewise rebellious Kurdish movements existed before and after 1926–1930.

40 Çetinsaya 1999; Olson 2000, 80–9; Oztig and Okur 2022, 14–5.

41 Olson 1998, 23.

1932, effected the change in border delineation: Ankara gained the Lesser Ararat in exchange for territories in the province of Van (Qotur). This agreement was followed by an additional agreement on border security, signed on 14 March 1932.

The Ararat Rebellion represented only one of a series of Kurdish nationalist uprisings during the first decade of the Turkish Republic, all of which reactivated the central administration's fear of territorial loss. This rebellion led to a high militarization of the borderland, to the point of changing the delineation of the border itself. Another aspect of this first period of borderland securitization is the relocation of a part of the population. In 1927, according to the 'Law Concerning the Relocation of Some Individuals from the Eastern Zone to the Western Provinces,' 1,400 people from Bayazıt province were transferred to western provinces.[42] The Resettlement Law (*İskân Kanunu*) of 1934 provided an extensive framework for this homogenization policies.

The cycle of borderland securitization in the 1920s and early 1930s demonstrates that 'the process of bordering therefore appears inextricably entangled with – and must be thought alongside – the integration of political communities.'[43] The difficulties regarding the integration of Armenian and Kurdish communities in this borderland during this period reinforce historical traumas and sparked regional conflicts. Furthermore, Armenian activities around Van in 1915 and the Ararat Rebellion between 1926–1930 emerged as both territorial and political threat to Turkish national security. As a consequence, the central Turkish administration maintained a sense of distrust regarding this borderland, contributing both to the securitization of Armenian and Kurdish communities as well as the securitization of the borderland itself.

4. The Second Cycle of Borderland Securitization, 1967–2000

During the next three decades, the process of borderland securitization was not absent, but maybe more discreet or latent. It is also important to recall that the border, as an institution of the nation-state, became a reality only gradually. Though the Turkish Republic officially took form as a nation-state in 1923, on the ground and especially in the peripheral areas, territorialization was a more gradual process which took several years, perhaps decades. In spite of being clearly demarcated as lines on the ground, the permeability of some Turkish borders remained the subject of permanent negotiations between state and non-state actors during those unstable times. Such bargaining is visible through different phenomena, such as the circulation of rumors or smuggling. Jordi Tejel, for example, has shown how the circulation of rumors along the Syrian-Turkish border between 1925–1945 impacted both the daily life of borderlanders and decisions made by local administrators and consular officials. In light of potential autonomous zones rumored to be supported by French mandate officials, Armenians and Kurds settled along the border were considered by Turkey to

42 Ülker 2007. More generally from 1927 to 1952 several areas of eastern Turkey were ruled by emergency decrees and martial law.

43 Deleixhe, Dembinska, and Iglesias 2019, 642.

be a national threat. More generally, Tejel argues for the dual effect of rumors on border securitization: 'Whether true or false, rumors contributed to bring the state to the Turkish-Syrian borderland and accelerate the bordering processes, including the increasing monitoring of the common border and the creation of order through the construction of difference.'[44] This bordering process was also present in the borderland with Iran, and rumors regarding the potential support furnished by Iran to Kurdish rebels might have acted for the Turkish side as an accelerator of this process. Smuggling, in large part a result of economic interdependencies existing before border securitization, represented another aspect of the gap between the nationalist territorial project and the borderland reality. What was simply cross-border trade between local populations began to be label as 'smuggling' or as tactics to avoid new taxes imposed by administrative authorities.[45] In an attempt to control this smuggling trade, state authorities increased a form of repression and surveillance of the population. In 1943 in the Özalp district of Van, 33 villagers accused of smuggling were executed without trial to serve as an example of state power on the borderland against those who would continue illicit cross-border trade.[46]

Therefore, the process of borderland securitization continued after 1932, but became less explicit because of the absence of direct armed contestation over Turkification and Kurdish separatism. Similarly, political resistance among Turkey's Kurds against the institutions of the new republic did not disappear, but emerged in a different form. The anthropologist Adnan Çelik has focused part of his work on infra-political forms of agency among Kurdish people in Turkey and in their relation with state authorities.[47] According to Çelik, the three main expressions of this resistance were smuggling, banditry, and underground education provided by madrasas.[48] Through those activities, Kurds in Turkey perpetuated a form of discreet political resistance, which appeared to contradict – or at least temper – the idea of decades of silence regarding the Kurdish political contestation in Turkey. Indeed, the period between the 1940s and 1970s is often described as particularly calm regarding the Kurdish nationalist contestation. Hamit Bozarslan called this period 'the decades of silence' to underline the contrast with the previous period of open revolts.[49]

The 1970s, meanwhile, were marked by the resurgence of open confrontation between state authorities and Kurdish movements. This confrontation rekindled the idea of an 'Eastern Turkey' toward which the Turkish State should remain suspicious,

44 Tejel 2020, 14.
45 Öztan 2020.
46 Gündoğan 2011, 401.
47 Çelik 2019; Çelik 2022.
48 Madrasas, or Koranic schools, were widely used institutions of learning under the late Ottoman Empire. They were banned by the Turkish Republic in 1924. Some were secretly maintained after that. Furthermore, the use of Kurdish was restricted. For a more detailed explanation of the role of madrasas in the Kurdish resistance to the Turkish State, see: Çelik 2022.
49 Bozarslan 2003.

particularly because of Kurdish dissident movements. As emphasized by Tejel, the construction of the 'East' as a politicized space has persisted in state discourse as well as in Kurdish activist circles, anchoring a non-physical border separating West from East within Turkey, where both sides of the border is portrayed as possessing a homogeneity that did not really exist.[50] In fact, this second period of borderland securitization began around 1967, the date of a series of demonstrations called the Rallies from the East, the *Doğu Mitingleri*. These demonstrations occurred in the cities of this 'Eastern Turkey' as well as in Ankara, where Kurdish people asked for better living conditions. They were led by a 'young Kurdish generation who had the opportunity to receive education in institutions located in the region's urban areas, such as the Village Institutes (*Köy Enstitüleri*) and Teachers' School (*Oğretmen Okulları*) or in the country's largest cities, Ankara and Istanbul' and who wish to reclaim their Kurdish identity.[51] As explained by Azat Zana Gündoğan, those demonstrations rejected the different modes of assimilation and Turkification that had been carried out since the 1930s against the Kurdish people, namely the use of forced displacement and the state's establishment of regional surveillance and bureaucratization processes meant to assert power. Nevertheless, the claim for better recognition of Kurdishness was not put explicitly in the slogans, which instead focused on social and economic equality for the eastern part of Turkey.

The development of different stages of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey following the Rallies from the East has been periodized by Mesut Yeğen.[52] According to Yeğen, the period of Kurdish demonstrations asking for social equality and associated with leftist parties was followed by the creation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*, PKK) in 1978. The PKK was a proponent of an armed struggle to create an independent socialist Kurdistan, by employing the concepts of class struggle and the right of peoples to self-determination. After the military coup of 1980, the PKK remained the only organization that represented Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, according to Yeğen. From 1984 to 1999, the guerrilla war between the PKK and the Turkish state heightened the militarization of the borderland. Various military operations continued until the PKK abandoned its desire to create an independent Kurdish State during the 1990' and the capture of the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in Kenya in 1999.

As a result, from the rallies of 1967 until the capture of Öcalan in 1999, the Turkish-Iranian borderland underwent a higher securitization process, which took different forms. Beyond military interventions, a state of emergency was declared in eastern Turkey in 1987, not only in Van, but also in Hakkâri, Siirt, Mardin, Diyarbakır, Bingöl, Elâzığ, and Tunceli. The 'Governorate of the State of Emergency Zone' (*Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği*) guided the development of the 'village guard system.' According to this system, the state relied on local citizens to obtain surveillance reports regarding the activities of the local population. During this state of emergency, people were

50 Tejel Gorgas 2009, 3–6.
51 Gündoğan 2011, 391.
52 Yeğen 2021.

strongly urged to become village guards or to follow resettlement orders. Thousands of villagers were deported and forcibly resettled, which created a significant internal and international migration movement that not only shifted demographics in Turkey but also led to the development of the Kurdish diaspora.[53]

Çelik points out that internal political and cultural divisions existed within the Kurdish community, too often thought of as unified. In this sense, it is interesting to mention the role of some Kurdish tribes themselves in the village guard system. Çelik mentions, for example, the role of the Xiyan tribe, which had already participated in the oppression against Armenians in the beginning of the twentieth century, in the village guard system to curb the PKK.[54] This reveals the longstanding tradition of cooperation between state and local Kurdish tribes to maintain territorial security.[55] In addition to the village guard system, publications were shut down, and some Kurdish-language media and music were censored. Another aspect of this state of emergency were the restrictions on freedom of movement from one locality to another and the multiplication of checkpoints in this borderland area. This militarization of 'Eastern Turkey' – and thus of the Turkish-Iranian borderland – represents a direct form of the borderland securitization process. Besides this militarization, the region was securitized in discourse as well. From this perspective, we can consider maps as a form of political speech act. They can indeed be seen as socially constructed expressions of space that reflect geopolitical agendas.[56] Even if nations remain 'imagined,' nation-states can use maps as a political tool to prove their unity. Therefore, the map relates border, nation, and state together and contributes to the legitimation of territorial state authority, according to the traditional meaning of sovereignty. From a nationalist perspective, a map can be reduced to a logo conforming to the borders of the nation-state. In Turkey, the 'map-as-logo' emerged only during the 1990s.[57] At that time, it represents a kind of 'banal nationalism,' which created a 'mirror effect' with the use of idealized national maps of 'Kurdistan' by Kurdish nationalist groups.[58]

The guerrilla war motivated the signing of several security agreements between Turkey and Iran to manage the common border. In 1984, the two parties signed a security protocol aimed at preventing the activity of any groups threatening security of the other.[59] Ten years later, Iran officially gave Turkey permission to bomb the PKK bases located in Iranian territory according to another security agreement which also stipulated that PKK members must be prevented from passing from northern Iraq to Iran.

53 Bezwan 2021. This internal forced migration was also impacted in 1991 by the Gulf War and the arrival of thousands of Kurdish refugees in Turkey.
54 Çelik 2020.
55 Atmaca 2017.
56 Culcasi 2006.
57 Batuman 2010.
58 O'Shea 2004.
59 Sinkaya 2019, 11. This security agreement was signed the 28 November 1984 and requiring 'each country to prohibit any activity on its territory aimed against the other's security' (Olson 1998, 31).

Border security sub-commission meetings were also organized between local Turkish and Iranian governors to curb the PKK activities.[60] However, this second period of borderland securitization is not necessarily associated with a strict policy of border closure. The guerrilla war with the PKK and the latter's use of the border to retreat and to bandy arms and resources triggered a tighter control of the Iranian border by Turkish authorities. Yet, 1971 also saw the opening of the first train line to connect the two countries and develop bilateral commerce. Therefore, this period was characterized by the process of sorting different cross-border flows. A dual dynamic emerged, where tighter control coexisted with the development of trade and cross-border flow, which were boosted by the outbreak of the war between Iran and Iraq.[61]

The dual nature of the border during this second cycle of securitization echoed that of other borders. Broadly speaking, the ambivalent impact of economic globalization on borders is recognized in the border-studies literature: 'Instead of acting as military barriers that indiscriminately stop all flows, borders in a globalized world are expected to be 'smart,' that is to selectively police certain transnational flows while allowing others to move along uninterrupted.'[62]

5. The Third Cycle of Borderland Securitization, 2015–Today

Two main external factors led to a higher securitization process along the Turkish-Iranian border from 2015 on: the impact of the Syrian crisis in Turkey, combined with the incentives given by the European Union to encourage good border governance further enhanced by what is perceived from the European Union as a 'migration crisis.'[63]

The year 2015 saw a political U-turn in the Turkish state's management of its southern borders and its foreign policy regarding Syria. Previous to this turnaround, Turkey prioritized the support of rebel groups aiming to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and initiated a peace process with the PKK at home. The goal of this process was not only to put an end to the years of guerrilla war on Turkish territory, but also to avoid the instrumentalization of the PKK by the Syrian regime. Yet the more the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD), affiliated to the PKK, and its armed branch the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) gained momentum in northern Syria territories, the further the Turkish State started to feel insecure regarding its borders. Ankara began to consider this 'in-between border space'[64] where Kurdish armed factions acquired expanding political and territorial

60 Olson 1998, 42–71.
61 Trade between the Turkey and Iran rose from less than 1 billion dollars in 1980 to 2.5 billion in 1985 (Olson 1998, 29). For countervailing trends in Turkish-Iranian relations during this period, see: Calabrese 1998.
62 Deleixhe, Dembinska, and Iglesias 2019, 642.
63 Karamanidou 2015.
64 Meier 2020.

autonomy as a major threat, especially taking into account the affiliation between the YPG and the PKK. This perception is moreover exacerbated by the international aid furnished to those factions in the context of the Syrian war and the fight against the Islamic State. In June 2015, the YPG took Tal Abyad, located near the former border crossing at Akçakale. For Ankara, this move triggered a stop to the peace process with the PKK, and the armed conflict between the PKK and Turkish armed forces in southern and eastern Turkey was reignited. The same year also witnessed the beginning of the construction of a wall along the border between Turkey and Syria. A few months later, Ankara launched cross-border military operations in northern Syria.

With the operations 'Euphrates Shield' (*Fırat Kalkanı Harekâtı*) in 2016, 'Olive Branch' (*Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı*) in 2018, and 'Peace Spring' (*Barış Pınarı Harekâtı*) in 2019, the Turkish armed forces secured a high degree of control over the northern, western, and north-central territories along the Syrian border, including the district of Afrin. While the PKK uses borderland territories to bandy people and arms, the Turkish state aims to create a protective buffer zone along the border. Turkish armed forces and some Syrian militias would control those buffer zones, but Turkey also aims to hold sway over the political life on those areas. In discourses, Turkish authorities regularly insist on the Syrian refugee returns in Syria, which would be facilitated by those secure buffer zones.[65] This rhetoric is useful toward the domestic audience, by promoting the idea of a departure of Syrians from Turkey, as well as toward international audience, by legitimating cross-border interventions in this area in keeping with humanitarian goals.[66] Simultaneously, the wall built on the border is supposed to stop illegal flaws, including refugees as well as material intended for PKK activities. Consequently, there is a conflation of the securitization of refugees and the securitization of PKK activities. In this framework, Turkish authorities often showcase all the surveillance technologies implemented to control all type of illegal flaws through the border.[67]

After having acknowledge that since 2015 the Turkish-Syrian border has been highly securitized both in discourse and practice, we should question its impact on the Turkish-Iranian borderland securitization process. We may assume that the protection of the Syrian border inspired Turkish authorities to pursue similar policies along its Iraqi and Iranian borders. Regarding the Turkish-Iranian border, Ankara began the construction of a wall in 2017 on the northern and mountainous part of the border, along the provinces of Iğdır and Ağrı. In addition to those first segments, the construction of the wall was extended from spring 2021 to other parts of the border, along the provinces of Van and Hakkâri. This wall erection is accompanied

65 According to a speech delivered to the Turkish Grand National Assembly on 1 October 2022, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that more than half a million Syrian refugees in Turkey had returned to 'areas we have established in the north' of Syria since 2016. *Middle East Monitor* 2022.

66 Şahin Mencütek 2021.

67 Fidan 2019. The *Anadolu Ajansı* regularly publishes articles about technologies intended to better control Turkish borders.

by technological measures including the implementation of optical control towers, the construction of a road behind the wall to organize patrols and the use of thermal cameras to detect movements at night. As for the wall on the Syrian border, the Turkish government use the wall on the Iranian one to putt forward the efficiency of Turkish defense industry.[68]

In discourse, the Syrian border tends to be assimilated to the Iraqi and Iranian borders with the use of the expression 'southern and eastern border of Turkey' (*güney ve doğu sınırı*). For instance, the Turkish ministry of Interior Suleyman Söylü declared in October 2022 that 1,100 kilometers of wall were achieved on the south and eastern border of Turkey.[69] Turkey counts 2,949 kilometers of land borders, including 1,849 kilometers with Syria (911), Iraq (378) and Iran (560). By the end of 2021, 1,079 of those 1,849 kilometers were covered by a security wall.[70] In official speeches, the need to defend this south and eastern border is justified by smuggling, terrorism and illegal migration, which is similar to the guidelines of many other borders at a global scale. What is interesting here is the timing of the Turkish-Iranian border securitization: if the building of the wall on the Turkish-Iranian border started in 2017, two years after the wall on the Syrian border, its existence has also been legitimized in official discourses by the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the fear in Turkey of a new 'migrant wave.'[71] The current border securitization process, therefore, tends to be discursively assimilated to the securitization of migration movements more generally.[72] Nevertheless, this assimilation conceals the initial purpose of the fence in 2017: the process of borderland securitization that began in 2015 with the return of the armed conflict between Turkish government and the PKK.[73] New military operations against the PKK occurred on the Turkish side of the Turkish-Iranian borderland, yet no cross-border military operations took place – unlike both Syrian and Iraqi territories.[74] Those military operations on the ground should be put in the

68 Thermal cameras are produced by Aselsan and drones for surveillance by Turkish Aerospace Industries.

69 Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu said, 'Our border walls have reached a length of 1,100 kilometers, both in the south and in the east' (Ilıkan and Bilgin 2022).

70 Şener 2021.

71 According to the United Nation Refugee Agency, Turkey in September 2022 was hosting the world's largest refugee population for the eighth consecutive year, with just over four million refugees and asylum-seekers under temporary and international protection, including more than 3,737,000 from Syria and more than 7,640 from Afghanistan.

72 During a visit to Hangedik military base on 15 August 2021, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar declared that 'neither terrorists nor illegal immigrants can enter our country while we are here' (*Daily Sabah* 2021).

73 For instance, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu declared that Mount Tendürek was 'cleared of terrorist activities for the first time in ten years' (Usul 2023).

74 We may assume that border securitization did not lead to cross-border operations in the Iranian case, either because the autonomy of armed Kurdish groups on the Iranian side is less important to Turkey than compared to Iraq or Syria, and/or because Tehran would not permit such cross-border military intervention.

national political context of the failed coup of 2016, which triggered the proclamation of a new state of emergency, a general dynamic of constitutional change, and the presidentialization of the regime. Given such a context, it was natural that any issue whatsoever could potentially undergo a process of securitization.

While the third cycle of borderland securitization resulted from the intertwined phenomena of armed conflict between the Turkish military and the PKK and the evolution of the Syrian civil war, the acceleration of securitization was also the result of less visible dynamics initiated by the European Union. With the so-called 'migration crisis' of 2015, the EU reinforced the conflation of the migration securitization and border securitization processes, leading to a higher degree of externalization of the EU border policy guidelines toward non-members. From this perspective, the border policy of the EU aims to harmonize border control practices and increase extra-territorial control of borders in non-EU neighboring states.[75] This dynamic has existed since the 1990s but was reinforced after 2015, when the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), which coordinates border management in line with the EU fundamental rights charter and the concept of Integrated Border Management (IBM), was undergoing a restructuring. The concept of IBM includes a set of border control and surveillance norms.[76] In the context of the Syrian war and the arrival of higher migration flows, the EU anchored Turkey's role as buffer state. The Union reinforced its financial and technical support dedicated to the IBM in Turkey. This externalization contributed to the status of Turkey as a collector of rents: According to a deal concluded between Ankara and Brussels in March 2016, by enforcing a tighter control of its borders and migration flows, especially from Syria, Turkey would receive funds from the EU. Regarding the wall on the Turkish-Iranian border, the Union financed, for example, the establishment of the optical towers along the wall. According to a declaration of the Turkish Interior Ministry in October 2022 during a monitor of the wall construction alongside with Oliver Varhelyi, the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, this funding amounts to 108 million euros. Such aid is also indirectly provided through the Instruments for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA).[77] In this way, the European Union has quietly supported Turkey in securing its southern and south-eastern borders.

6. Conclusion: Reflections on Border Securitization Cycles

This periodization of securitization for the Turkish-Iranian borderland in three parts encourages us to identify differences and similitudes between them, as well as to question potential intermediate stages within a cycle.

The first (1920–1932), second (1967–2000) and third (2015–today) cycles differ in their duration. They naturally are inscribed in particular contexts at the international

75 Bruns 2019.
76 Léonard 2010, 234.
77 We can distinguish the first IPA I for the period 2007–2013; IPA II for the period 2014–2020; and the ongoing IPA III for the 2021–2027 period.

scale. Developments in international relations, such as the Bolshevik revolution, the end of the bipolar world with the fall of the Soviet Union, or increasing globalisation, play a role in the evolving definition of borders, as well as the understanding of what is considered as a major threat to national security. As a consequence, the management of the Turkish-Iranian border by Turkey in the long run must be apprehended in the light of the international context.[78] From a national perspective, border securitization cycles must not conceal the political role of the Turkish army, including the different coups, in the territorial and border policy. Perhaps, the main difference between the cycles, meanwhile, lies in the use of technology in the securitization process of the borderland. The place of surveillance technologies is particularly characteristic of the third cycle and coincides with a general technologization of security.[79] Those technologies integrated in the border wall settlement serve also the 'boundary spectacle,'[80] namely a policy of visibility toward an internal audience aimed at reinforcing the state's ability to control its territory. It seems important here to recall that this visibility function of border stands for a global trend and is not specific to the Turkish-Iranian borderland.

In spite of those contextual differences, we can observe similarities between those cycles. The three cycles are characterized by the intensity of Turkish state securitization regarding its Iranian borderland. This means a higher degree of militarization on the border as well as in the borderland which materialize in military operations, states of emergency, or more financial and human resources allocated to the border securitization. The mountains of the Lesser Ararat and Mount Tendürek remained symbolic points of securitization throughout the three different cycles: They were part of the negotiation of the border agreement signed in 1932, the place of meeting between the Iranian and Turkish interior ministers to bargain the territorial fight against the PKK in May 1994,[81] as well as the place where the Turkish Interior Minister choose to spend the new year to congratulate the *Mehmetçiks* who stand guard at the border.[82] One can notice the reoccurrence of the use of local population to control the territory, such as village guards. Finally, there is a similarity between the first and second cycle in the mistrust from Turkish authorities toward Iranian diplomatic and military corps likely to help Kurdish rebels by letting them retreat in the Iranian territory. Those similarities encourage us to further inquire about the very definition of border securitization cycles.

Cycles' main characteristic lies in the repetition and the reference to the previous securitization period. It seems to create a sort of 'border securitization ground' that is politically fertile in the attempt to legitimize further securitization processes. It urges us to delimitate the beginning and the end of a cycle. In order to do so, we

78 On the construction of walls as a global trend, see Pusterla and Piccin 2012; Vallet 2014. On the wall at the Turkish-Syrian border see: Aras 2020.
79 Perret and Burgess 2022, 47–8.
80 Schofield 2020.
81 Olson 1998, 42.
82 Usul 2023.

may distinguish different intermediate stages within a cycle. The first one would be the securitization of a particular stake specific to the border through the spread of a discursive framework of the securitized issue. In a second step, the level of securitization increases until making the stake an existential threat to national security. In this regard one can note the convenience of associating the border issue with 'terrorism' to legitimize extraordinary and expensive resources to tackle the essential threat at the border. The next step would be the higher degree of militarization of the borderland. A fourth step would consist of a normalization of this borderland militarization, which can create the appearance of desecuritization; or a decrease of the militarization which would represent a real desecuritization. Then, after some time, another stake specific to the border might be securitize and trigger the launch of another cycle. The in-between periods might therefore be analyzed by either a process of desecuritization, or as less visible forms of securitization and contestation.

In any case, borderland securitization cycles must be put in the perspective of other periodizations such as Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, the evolution of the relation between Turkey and Iran, or the perpetuation of collective traumatic memory at a local scale. Since the birth of the Turkish Republic, this borderland securitization process has not been linear, with stages of acceleration and deceleration. The three cycles of securitization appear as Turkish state attempts to make its sovereignty known, in period during which the Westphalian border is challenged.

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