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**International Boundaries and Borderlands in the Middle East: Balancing Context, Exceptionalism and Representation**

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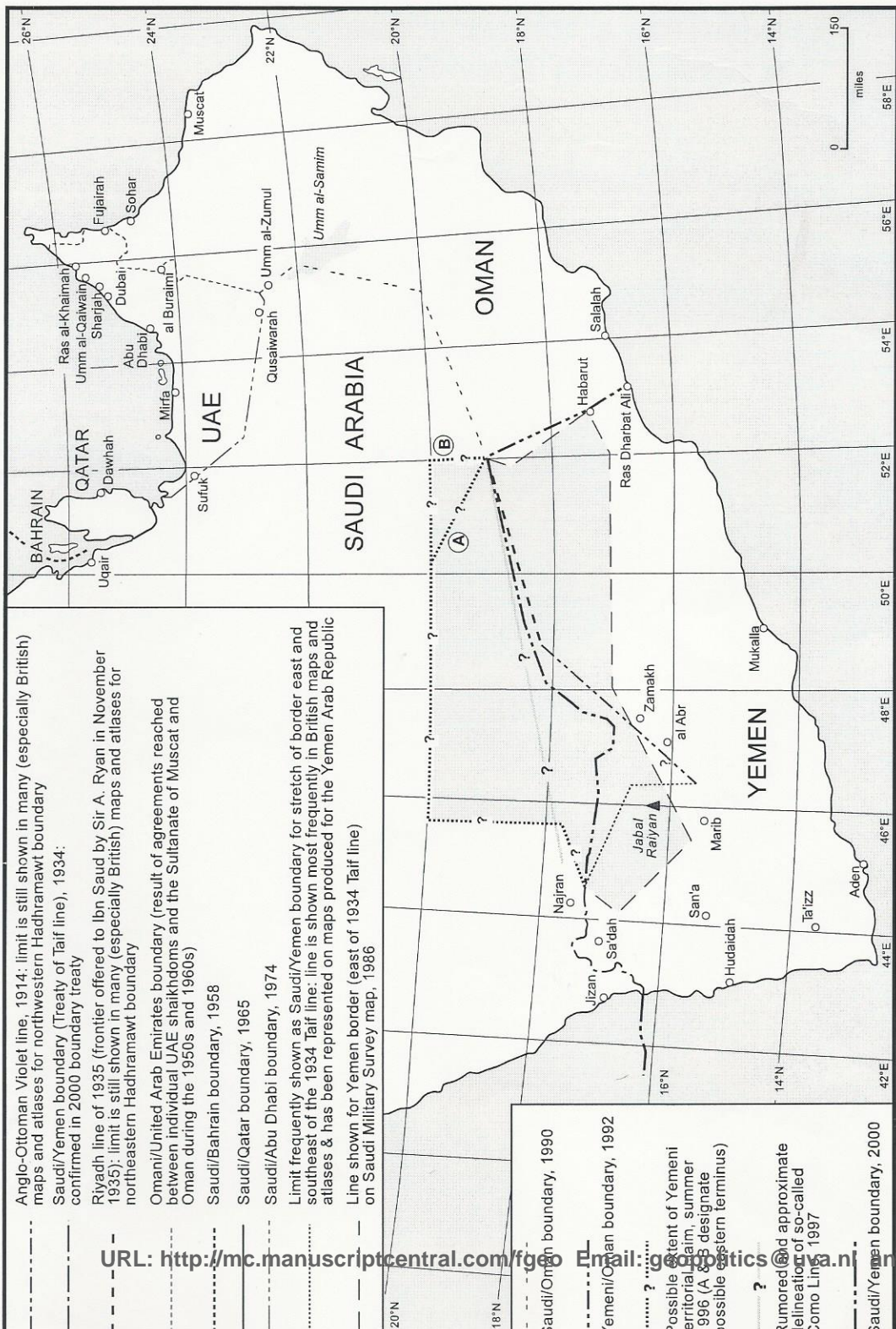
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Figure 1: A hole in the wall – Israel’s security wall near Bethlehem, September 2005 (source: Richard Schofield)

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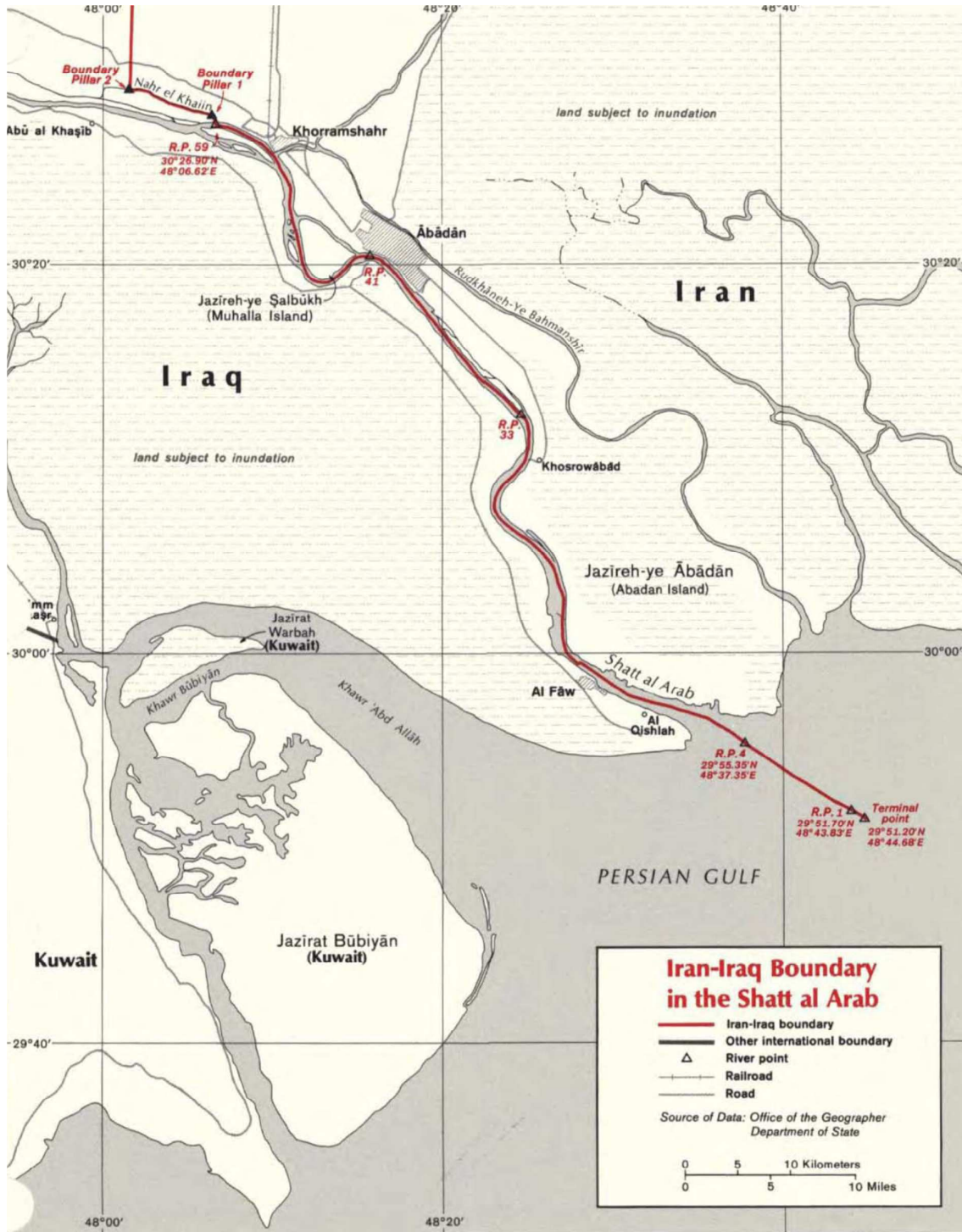
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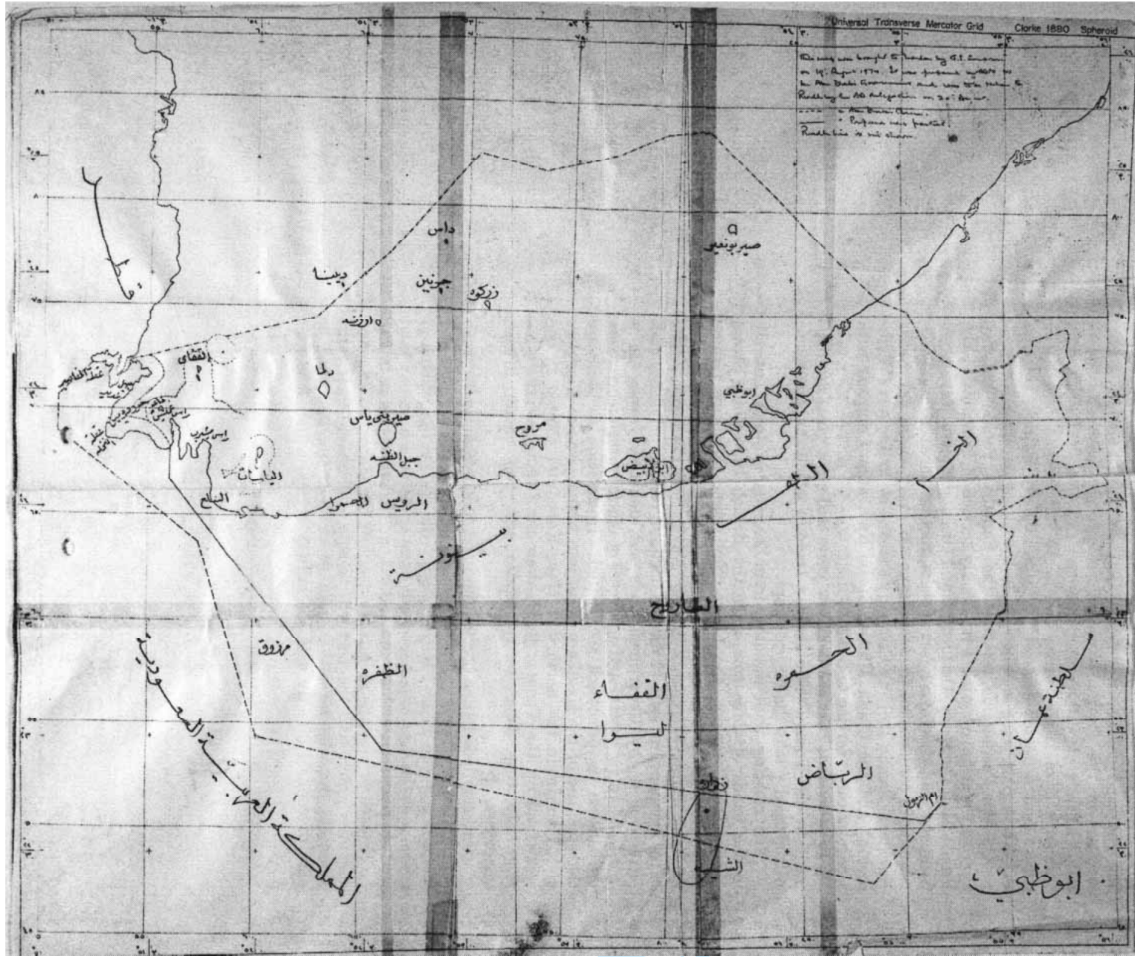
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3 Captions and annotations  
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5 **International Boundaries and Borderlands in the Middle East: Balancing**  
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7 **Context, Exceptionalism and Representation**  
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9  
10 Figure 1: A hole in the wall – Israel’s security wall near Bethlehem, September 2005 (source: Richard  
11 Schofield) – mentioned on p: 8 of draft m/s

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13 Figure 2: The Saudi-Yemeni borderlands and the agreement of June 2000 (source: Richard Schofield)  
14 – mentioned on p: 18 of draft m/s

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16 Figure 3a: Laying down the Perso-Ottoman boundary in stone: Hubbard’s ‘confidence’ (source:  
17 reproduced with kind permission from G.E. Hubbard, *From the Gulf to Ararat: Imperial Boundary*  
18 *Making in the Late Ottoman Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris 2016) – mentioned on p: 18 of draft m/s

19  
20 Figure 3b: Laying down the Perso-Ottoman boundary in stone: Hubbard’s ‘doubt’ (reproduced with  
21 kind permission from G.E. Hubbard, *From the Gulf to Ararat: Imperial Boundary Making in the Late*  
22 *Ottoman Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris 2016) – mentioned on p: 18 of draft m/s

23  
24 Figure 3c: Laying down the Perso-Ottoman boundary in stone: Hubbard’s ‘confusion’ (reproduced  
25 with kind permission from G.E. Hubbard, *From the Gulf to Ararat: Imperial Boundary Making in the*  
26 *Late Ottoman Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris 2016) – mentioned on p: 18 of draft m/s

27  
28 Figure 4: The Iran-Iraq boundary after the June 1975 river boundary protocol (source: reproduced  
29 with kind permission from U.S. Department of State International Boundary Study 164: *Iran-Iraq*  
30 *Boundary*) – mentioned on p: 20 of draft m/s

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32 Figure 5: Sketch map anticipating the bizarre 1974 Saudi-Abu Dhabi (UAE) boundary agreement  
33 (source: reproduced with kind permission from R. Schofield (ed.) *Arabian Boundaries, 1966-1975*  
34 (Cambridge: Cambridge Archive Editions [Cambridge University Press], 2009), 15, p. 234 – mentioned  
35 on p: 23 of draft m/s  
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## International Boundaries and Borderlands in the Middle East: Balancing Context, Exceptionalism and Representation

### Abstract

Renewed academic interest in the Middle Eastern border is inevitable with the marked increase in fortified territorial limits across the region and the appearance of new borderland spatialities in the sovereign margins of the war-torn Iraqi, Syrian and Yemeni states. If the consequent spectacle of displaced populations confronting state power at the international boundary seems a defining image, this article concentrates on two other dominant, less publicised but still relevant border representations from the recent past: territorial definition and its deterministic association with conflict in the northern Gulf and the resource-driven finalisation of the peninsula's territorial framework. This follows consideration of the significance of the borderland in the region. The author reflects back here on a long record of research into these issues and argues that all of these contexts must be acknowledged in any balanced appraisal of the Middle Eastern border. The article comments on the challenge of extending regional approaches to the study of borders and – on the centenary of the infamous 1916 Sykes-Picot treaty - acknowledges that the Middle East region's experience of international boundaries continues to be depicted as exceptional. Unsurprisingly, it will conclude that there is no one typical Middle Eastern border.

## APPRAISING MIDDLE EASTERN BORDERS AND BORDERLANDS

State borders and borderlands in the Middle East have recently been preoccupying the international community, featuring prominently in popular Western media depictions and attracting increasing levels of scrutiny from academia. At least visually, the current confrontation between vulnerable, displaced populations and state power at fortified state limits (De Genova's 'border spectacle'<sup>1</sup>) might well appear to define the international boundary in popular terms – an encounter experienced by migrants and refugees both in the region and further afield.

Broadening our spatial focus to borderlands, the crucial backcloth in the staging of such dramas has, of course, been the successive collapse in the sovereign reach of the Iraqi and Syrian states over the last one and a half decades and the appearance of autonomous political actors in (and across) their margins. Often referred to as stateless spaces in their better known (and earlier established) African context, a developing concentration on what Goodhand (2008) has termed the 'places in between' within regional conflict systems explains security studies increasing concerns with Middle Eastern borderlands.<sup>2</sup> Such profound change in border status and borderland security has also coincided with the centenary of the infamous Anglo-French arrangements struck during the First World War to foreshadow the new framework of mandated state territories that would come into being to replace the Ottoman Middle East at the turn of the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> This has occasioned many to ponder whether the Sykes-Picot 'territorial system' has had its day and whether things might not have been done differently in the first instance.<sup>4</sup> Certainly the possibility that the borders of the Middle East have changed or are changing is out there.

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6 This all seemingly provides fertile grounds for a reenergised academic  
7 engagement with Middle Eastern territorial questions, reflected in no small  
8 way by the appearance of this special issue of *Geopolitics* but also, already,  
9 by other special issues of journals that hadn't displayed a huge interest in  
10 such themes in recent decades.<sup>5</sup> Extending a more critical approach to the  
11 study of borders and territoriality chimes with claims that since the Arab  
12 Spring and its tumultuous aftermath "Middle Eastern studies has been  
13 undergoing a quiet revolution [with] a heightened level of reflection on  
14 theoretical models, concepts and methodologies".<sup>6</sup> In this brave new  
15 world, authoritarianism and protest movements have been debated more  
16 freely, while updated critiques of nationalism have allowed human  
17 mobilities and transnationalism to be interrogated from fresh angles.  
18 Importantly, too, Middle Eastern studies seems to be breaking out of what  
19 some have perceived to be a regional straightjacket in the fields of political  
20 economy and history, as research is increasingly framed internationally and  
21 globally.<sup>7</sup> Can the same be done for coverage of territorial questions?  
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39 With its declaredly critical focus on socio-spatial process and its commitment  
40 to ethics and social justice, geography's vogue border studies approach  
41 seeks to identify the production of borders at various levels and scales –  
42 from the individual body to inter-state level.<sup>8</sup> Given such proclivities, it will  
43 naturally be drawn to how intensifying fence and wall construction along  
44 borders within the region imposes concentrated restraints on human  
45 mobility – and on the itinerant processes of walling, bordering and othering.  
46 Here, it won't be short of case-study material with more such constructions  
47 having gone up in the Middle East than any other region in recent times.<sup>9</sup>  
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3 But, in the words of seasoned international boundary observer Michel  
4 Foucher during June 2017, “aren’t borders about more than just fences and  
5 migration?”<sup>10</sup> To which this author would reply yes, pointedly so for the  
6 region under review here. The spectacle of vulnerable human groups  
7 meeting state authority at international boundary fences, like the pertaining  
8 notion that the inherited colonial framework has reached its sell-by date, is a  
9 dominant contemporary image but is just that. The same goes for those  
10 seemingly widening and insecure borderland spaces. These are only the  
11 latest of many valid and varied Middle Eastern border representations and  
12 contexts of recent times and many others (despite being typically identified  
13 with earlier points of time) remain relevant to varying degrees across the  
14 region. Here we are talking about: an association between disputed  
15 territorial definition and conflict (northern Gulf); the resource driven  
16 finalisation of the political map on land and sea (Arabia and the waters of  
17 the Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean) and; the adoption of territorial  
18 disputes as symbols of inter-state and sub-regional rivalry (island  
19 sovereignty disputes).

20 Just as these contexts are still with us, the appearance of border fences is  
21 not particularly new and the inadequacies of the colonial territorial  
22 framework have long been apparent. The main argument of this article,  
23 therefore, is that we shouldn’t be falling into the trap of thinking there is a  
24 typical Middle Eastern boundary or borderland, however tempting it may be  
25 for the application of vogue methodological and theoretical academic  
26 approaches. As within any other region, there is considerable variety in the  
27 type, scale and intensity of territorial challenges that are being confronted.  
28 All of these contexts and processes need to be understood as complex and  
29 dynamic and as existing alongside one another– even if some (like  
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3 continuing questions over state sovereignty, delimitation and demarcation)  
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5 appear rather old-hat and mundane. The author reflects back here on  
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7 researching Middle Eastern borders and borderlands extensively over the  
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9 last three decades, with a concentration on his main areas of expertise -  
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11 Iraq, Iran, Arabia and the Persian Gulf.  
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14 In tackling the issues and arguments just noted, this article adopts the  
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16 following structure. Firstly, we summarise how ideas have moved in  
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18 geography and the social sciences to cover boundaries and borderlands and  
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20 the challenge of applying these at the regional level. Secondly, we  
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22 selectively review claims made over the years and decades by scholars that  
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24 suggest the Middle Eastern (or, indeed, the Arabian) border should be  
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26 regarded as exceptional, simultaneously charting the Anglophone  
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28 geographical tradition of covering the international boundary in the region.  
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30 Having commented upon the exaggerated attention that has been placed  
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32 upon the 1916 Sykes-Picot treaty on its centenary, we then turn our  
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34 attention to borderlands in the third section of this article.  
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38 While not many borderlands can be deemed to have existed in a traditional  
39  
40 sense, there is a need to better appreciate how the margins of the state  
41  
42 have functioned at their various levels of operation - materially and  
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44 historically. Our case-study here is the region's classic historical borderland,  
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46 the Perso-Ottoman frontier zone. In a fourth and final main section,  
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48 successive representations of international boundaries are explored in an  
49  
50 Arabian context from the 1980s forwards – here we respectively treat  
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52 territorial definition and its deterministic association with conflict in the  
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54 northern Gulf, the resource-driven finalisation of the Arabian territorial  
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56 framework and then putting up border fences. Such a progression from  
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3 destabilising international boundary disputes, through finalising their status  
4 and alignment to marking them down on the ground may seem quite linear  
5 and logical for such a youthful political region, where many states only got  
6 their independence from Britain as recently as 1971. Yet the point here and a  
7 central message of the article as a whole is that these representations can't  
8 simply be signed off to specific time periods. Though they vary in intensity,  
9 they continue to be valid and present across the region and need to be fully  
10 acknowledged in any balanced appraisal of the Middle Eastern border.  
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## 20 21 22 23 THE CHALLENGE OF EXTENDING STUDIES TO A REGIONAL CONTEXT

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25 Whichever region is being considered, there will always be a notable  
26 concentration on those individual territorial limits or disputes that are in the  
27 news – particularly within the context of conflict, as they temporarily  
28 become of interest to a wider constituency than geography or regional  
29 studies. The tendency towards individual coverage is reinforced by a long-  
30 observed 'unique case' syndrome within academic study that needs to be  
31 confronted when attempting to place borders and borderlands into  
32 comparative context. Political geographers have always commented that  
33 there is much to be gained from examining the evolution of individual  
34 international boundaries in the surrounding human and physical contexts of  
35 their borderlands, by writing their biography as such<sup>11</sup> – here, seemingly  
36 taking their cue, at least in part, from Stephen Jones' famous old caution:  
37 'each boundary is almost unique and therefore many generalisations are of  
38 doubtful validity'.<sup>12</sup>  
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55 Such is the diversity of border-related concerns and territorial issues across  
56 the Middle East, that they are usually subjected to suitably multidisciplinary  
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3 (generally historical, geographical and legal) treatments within edited multi-  
4 author collections.<sup>13</sup> There are almost certainly more single-author  
5 overviews of sub-regional territorial concerns out there than for the Middle  
6 East and North Africa as a whole – one thinks here of our main focus here -  
7 the Arabian Peninsula/Persian Gulf region - where so much has been written  
8 about international boundaries and territorial disputes in the last few  
9 decades that a recent historiographic survey devotes a whole section to  
10 ‘boundaries and legal matters’.<sup>14</sup> On the face of it, the Arabian Peninsula has  
11 much that ties it together in territorial terms - regional geopolitics that were  
12 characterised historically by a resource-poor, arid environment and sparse  
13 but mobile population levels, then its subjection to Britain’s desert-boundary  
14 drawing as its protégé statelets were given a size and shape in the  
15 developing context of its huge hydrocarbons endowment.<sup>15</sup> Research into  
16 Arabian boundary-making has, of course, been facilitated greatly by the  
17 easily accessible British governmental primary record at Kew (The National  
18 Archives) and St.Pancras (India Office Records at the British Library).<sup>16</sup>

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20 This special issue of *Geopolitics* seeks, on the face of it, to begin extending  
21 the critical concerns of geography’s vogue prism of border studies to the  
22 regional application of the Middle East. As has been established, the  
23 collapse of the sovereign reach of the state, the resultant human suffering  
24 and displacement, combined with increased securitisation and fortification  
25 of inter-state limits provides much to mull over. Border studies has been  
26 much lauded for its perceptive critiques of the bounding and bordering  
27 process (including, most recently, Amilhat-Szary’s notion of *borderity*)<sup>17</sup> and  
28 its theorisation of the spatial workings and manifestations of power.<sup>18</sup> It has  
29 prided itself in developing explicitly non-state-centric approaches –  
30 addressing the long-harboured criticism that geography traditionally

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3 concerned itself only with the international scale in covering boundaries and  
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5 territory.<sup>19</sup>  
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8 Exploring how distinct spaces are produced and reproduced by the  
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10 enforcement, observation and negotiation of borders at various levels (and  
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12 also how the reverse obtains in revealing how space management produces  
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14 new operative borders) has been a significant concern.<sup>20</sup> In this vein, recent  
15  
16 research of emergent borders of identity and allegiance in a conflictual  
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18 urban context has continued the rich tradition of studying the spatial and  
19  
20 societal divisions of the major cities of the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>21</sup> Moving  
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22 slightly further south, it should not surprise that the most written about  
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24 Middle Eastern territorial dispute has been singled out for critical treatment.  
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26 There have been various studies of the various spatial impacts and the large-  
27  
28 scale and localised meanings of Israel's security wall (*see Figure 1*)<sup>22</sup>, while the  
29  
30 continued expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian territory is  
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32 reflected in a deepening geographical engagement with settler colonial  
33  
34 studies.<sup>23</sup>  
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37 If these efforts square with contemporary geography's re-energised missive  
38  
39 to "gauge how borders are confronted, experienced and negotiated",<sup>24</sup>  
40  
41 then border studies sometimes seems to have moved too far away from  
42  
43 geography's traditional scalar concern with international boundaries.<sup>25</sup>  
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45 After all, the reality by which the world is fundamentally compartmentalised  
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47 into sovereign state territorial units is not going to change any time soon.<sup>26</sup>  
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49 This position has been acknowledged with some prominent recent efforts  
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51 to rehabilitate the legitimacy of the international boundary within  
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53 geography – Megoran's imaginative call for more border biographies comes  
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55 to mind here, as does Reece Jones resourceful inventory of state practices  
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3 at the contemporary securitised border.<sup>27</sup> Others have called for an overall  
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5 rebalancing of contemporary border studies, when recognising it as a  
6  
7 commendably energised if slightly unwieldy field of study.<sup>28</sup>  
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10 This rebalancing of geography's current territorial concerns might usefully  
11  
12 extend to a generally ignored maritime dimension but also, in this author's  
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14 opinion, to reengaging more substantively with international boundary  
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16 disputes. Disputes over territorial definition and an international boundary's  
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18 provenance, alignment and status remain a huge area of preoccupation in  
19  
20 the Middle East and North Africa. Kelly has observed that deterministic  
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22 concerns such as relative state positioning remain a live issue in inter-state  
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24 disputes and domestic political discourses<sup>29</sup>. Given that this is observable in  
25  
26 the region, we might also pause to consider what contemporary geopolitics  
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28 and border studies have recently had to offer in critiquing boundary and  
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30 territorial disputes. In many ways, this comes across as restating the  
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32 obvious.  
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35 In demonstrating that the analysis of any regional crisis must begin by  
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37 acknowledging the essential messiness of the local, Toal has offered a  
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39 blueprint for what the critical geopolitics of any territorial dispute might  
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41 look like. This covers its legal and historical aspects, characterises its  
42  
43 variegated dynamics at the regional and international levels but also reveals  
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45 the workings of power through identifying vested interests and agency.<sup>30</sup>  
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48 In related vein, Brunet-Jailly has recently tried to breathe life into the old  
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50 boundary dispute classification originally developed by veteran boundary  
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52 geographer Victor Prescott in the mid-1960s which distinguishes between  
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54 territorial, positional, functional and resource dimensions as their primary  
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56 drivers.<sup>31</sup> This may all seem rather basic but surely goes to underline that  
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3 contemporary border studies has gone a little too far in eschewing  
4 traditional (and what it sees as outmoded) geographical territorial concerns.  
5 It is in the same spirit of rebalancing our coverage that this author has called  
6 for more explicitly multidisciplinary approaches that “link the contemporary  
7 legal and technical status of disputes more closely with their historical and  
8 political drivers... within the context of their own complex geographies.”<sup>32</sup>  
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### 19 THE EXCEPTIONAL MIDDLE EASTERN BORDER?

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21 As with other trappings and trimmings of the Middle Eastern state system,  
22 the theme of regional exceptionalism has always been around when  
23 discussing international boundaries. Within regional and political studies  
24 more broadly, academics have been long been arguing for the development  
25 of comparative and theoretical frameworks that relegate a distinct  
26 treatment for the Middle East that is essentially orientalist in its tone and  
27 origins.<sup>33</sup> In geography, the related notion that a unique Middle Eastern city  
28 could ever have existed has been pretty much dismissed for the best part of  
29 four decades now.<sup>34</sup> Where boundaries and territory are concerned,  
30 regional exceptionalism has been made principally for two reasons. Firstly,  
31 Islamic notions of sovereignty were communal rather than territorial,  
32 supposedly rendering the European state model with its fixed borders  
33 unsuitable for (and alien to) traditional modes of social and spatial  
34 organisation<sup>35</sup>. Secondly, nomadism was prevalent in many of the more arid  
35 areas of the Middle East - here tribal territories expanded and contracted  
36 with the availability of resources as, if you like, an early form of mobile  
37 borders was witnessed. Traditional Arabian geopolitics, for instance,  
38 dictated that mobility was the key to survival – the scarcer resources were,  
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3 the further people had to travel to gather them, reflected in the size of  
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5 respective *dirah* (tribal grazing grounds).<sup>36</sup>  
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8 Much political use has been made out of the first observation. Erasing the  
9  
10 colonial boundaries that truncate the region from Morocco to Muscat so as  
11  
12 to integrate the region's community of believers within a putative singular  
13  
14 state has been an important tenet of Arab nationalism.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, some of  
15  
16 the Arab world's most charismatic political personalities have engaged  
17  
18 colourfully with the language of regional exceptionalism in highlighting the  
19  
20 alien provenance of fixed territorial borders – though some, as we'll  
21  
22 witness, haven't always been very consistent here. For instance, in  
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24 commenting that Iraq's borders stop at Kuwait City and Kuwait's at  
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26 Baghdad during a relatively passive phase in their long running boundary  
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28 dispute during the early 1980s, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was  
29  
30 borrowing from an analogy made by Ibn Saud in the early 1920s.<sup>38</sup>  
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33 With respect to the second observation here, there may have been a  
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35 tendency to simplify, even caricature nomadic mobilities. Britain's former  
36  
37 Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Sir Rupert Hay would liken the Arabian  
38  
39 desert to an area of high seas, over which nomads and their camels roamed  
40  
41 at will.<sup>39</sup> As Braudel would comment, such reductionist views only held up  
42  
43 when you were looking in from the outside – whereas, from the inside,  
44  
45 desert societies would soon reveal their “complicated organisations,  
46  
47 hierarchies, customs and astonishing legal structures”.<sup>40</sup> Portraying Hay's  
48  
49 views as typical of Britain's traditional geographical coverage with its  
50  
51 explicit colonial connections would, however, be slightly disingenuous. Sure  
52  
53 enough, the sizeable literature on traditional territorial organisation and  
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55 boundary-drawing that was originally contributed by travellers, explorers,  
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3 diplomats and those serving on imperial commissions helped perpetuate  
4 many of the arguments for seeing the Middle East as broadly exceptional.  
5 These views often found their expression through the Royal Geographical  
6 Society and its publications. While certain commentaries could come across  
7 as slightly orientalist in tone when portraying the inhospitability,  
8 remoteness and sickliness of far-flung borderland localities,<sup>41</sup> there can be  
9 little doubting the great value of such a legacy in establishing the bases of  
10 colonial territorialities. For instance, the ruminations of famous travellers  
11 like Thesiger and independently-minded diplomats such as Ingrams would  
12 inform Britain's understanding of the social and spatial organisation of  
13 southern Arabia.<sup>42</sup> Not before time, greater recognition is also being lent to  
14 the reflections of this most traditional group of commentators on the  
15 boundary-making process – sometimes they were far more considered, dare  
16 one say critical, than is often assumed. Just take a look at Hubbard's  
17 imaginative captioning (“confidence, doubt and confusion”) of a sequence  
18 of photographs grappling with the challenge of reconciling a Perso-Ottoman  
19 boundary delimitation to features on the ground on the eve of the First  
20 World War (see Figure 2a-c).<sup>43</sup>

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22 To generalise somewhat, the perception that international boundaries in the  
23 region were exceptional would fade with decolonisation as the same broad  
24 problems of adjusting to the colonial territorial framework was faced by the  
25 postcolonial state across the globe. There seemed much in Drysdale and  
26 Blake's observation that “[t]he political spheres they [international  
27 boundaries] define have acquired a seeming permanence, and the state  
28 constitutes as basic, legitimate and universal a unit of political geographic  
29 organisation in the Middle East and North Africa as elsewhere”.<sup>44</sup> It was  
30 noteworthy that this clear, anti-exceptionalist statement was emanating  
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3 (certainly where Blake was concerned) from the influential Middle East  
4 regional geography school established at Durham in the post-WW2 years. It  
5 remains the case that there is no equivalent region or continent-wide  
6 commitment in the Middle East to retaining the territorial limits inherited  
7 from the colonial period that is in place for Latin America and Africa with the  
8 institutionalised acceptance of the legal principle of *uti possidetis juris*. Yet,  
9 even one of the most radical proponents of territorial revisionism in the  
10 Arab World – Libya’s Gaddafi – ultimately proved a pragmatic statist. Having  
11 called during the 1970s and 1980s for the establishment of state mergers on  
12 a variety of anti-colonial premises, the Libyan state would allow for its  
13 maritime boundaries with Tunisia and Malta to be adjudicated at the  
14 International Court of Justice in The Hague. It would do the same with its  
15 land boundary with Chad early in the next decade – pushing once again for a  
16 maximal territorial state definition.<sup>45</sup>

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33 Yet, there is always a danger of generalising across the Middle East –  
34 highlighted by another British Geographer, John Wilkinson, at the turn of  
35 the 1990s. He would postulate that “[n]ot one of the states of the Arabian  
36 Peninsula recognised by the international community... could put up a  
37 watertight case to the International Court at the Hague to retain the  
38 territory it actually occupies”<sup>46</sup>. Wilkinson was representative, if you like, of  
39 a third but smaller geographic tradition - regional Arabists who had spent  
40 much of their careers in the region and whose research had a more obvious  
41 ethnographic bent. Making the case for sub-regional exceptionalism, he  
42 pointed to the tendency for even recently-signed Arabian boundary treaty  
43 texts to remain largely secret and the failure of state signatories to process  
44 such agreements in the manner the international legal community has come  
45 to expect. Wilkinson’s comment coincided with Iraq’s invasion (and  
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3 attempted annexation) of Kuwait and the significant regional insecurities it  
4 fostered. By the end of the 1990s, the Arabian states had done much to  
5 redress this position – entrenching territorial definition in the pragmatic  
6 context of accelerated resource development<sup>47</sup>. As for the resolution of the  
7 Kuwait crisis, the argument would be made quite openly that it was  
8 exceptional circumstances that were demanding exceptional measures, so  
9 the UN Secretary-General himself made arrangements for the finalisation of  
10 this international boundary on the ground, whose inviolability was  
11 guaranteed by the Security Council.<sup>48</sup>

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22 Let's now fast-forward to the current (post-2011 Arab Spring) context of  
23 perceived territorial change in the region, of newly-emergent state and non-  
24 state spatialities that has sharply refocused attention on the Middle Eastern  
25 border and its relationship with human mobility. To a degree, the  
26 impression is being given that the international community is ultimately  
27 prepared to sanction more change to the existing territorial framework here  
28 than it is elsewhere – most obviously when compared to the West's  
29 unflinching stance over Ukrainian territorial integrity following the Russian  
30 annexation of Crimea early in 2014. The case for making a change to the  
31 territorial framework of the eastern Mediterranean has been reinforced by  
32 uncritical representations of the 1916 Sykes-Picot correspondence on its  
33 centenary.

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48 Thankfully, even from popular sources, there has been a discernible  
49 backlash against such representations with *Time* magazine carrying the  
50 following headline in May 2016 - "Sykes-Picot: the centenary of a deal that  
51 did not shape the Middle East"<sup>49</sup>. It should never be forgotten that Britain,  
52 from the start, was aware of the potential problems it was creating with the  
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3 various and often contradictory components of its wartime territorial deals  
4 – the ‘Sykes-Picot system’, if you like. Take, for instance, the comments of its  
5 Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour on the eve of his retirement during  
6 August 1919: “in short... the Powers have made no statement of fact which  
7 is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which, at least in the  
8 letter, they have not always intended to violate”.<sup>50</sup> Here he was reflecting  
9 on Britain’s slim prospects of reconciling the 1915-16 Husain-McMahon  
10 correspondence, promising an independent Hashimite Arabian kingdom in  
11 return for coming in against the Ottomans during WW1, the Sykes-Picot  
12 exchange of letters and the November 1917 declaration of sympathy with  
13 Zionist aspirations for an independent homeland in Palestine that would be  
14 named after him<sup>51</sup>.

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29 Yet the Sykes –Picot treaty itself had a demonstrably limited effect –  
30 designating broad spheres of influence whose limits rarely coincided with  
31 the international boundaries that would emerge, often from further Anglo-  
32 French deliberations, over the next decade. While the Bolshevik revolution  
33 of 1917 would render the notion of a French-controlled buffer wedge of  
34 territory to separate imperial Russia and Britain redundant, it should be  
35 underlined that the basic shape and size of the state that would include  
36 Mosul within Iraq had been recommended by the influential De Bunsen  
37 Committee as early as the summer of 1915 for reasons of imperial strategy  
38 (protecting Mesopotamia from the north) and political economy (capturing  
39 its oil resources)<sup>52</sup>. In fact, Sykes-Picot had little effect on the precise  
40 territorial definition of the Iraqi state – something that this author has rather  
41 argued was “... the product of a series of discrete regional episodes in which  
42 Britain was centrally involved, before and after an independent  
43 Mesopotamian state had ever been imagined”<sup>53</sup>.

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3 The largely arbitrary nature of the Sykes-Picot carve-up has long been  
4 highlighted too. The detail of boundaries ultimately laid down generally  
5 took account of indicators where available – a mixture of locally-observed  
6 separations and old Ottoman administrative divisions. While no one could  
7 seriously proclaim the territorial framework that emerged in the early 1920s  
8 as a model outcome, it is not clear that there was necessarily a better basis  
9 out there for dividing the Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean into the states  
10 that emerged from it.<sup>54</sup> There had been calls from plenty of influential  
11 people following the conclusion of Sykes-Picot that the political map be  
12 redrawn or at least finessed where possible to prioritise emergent regional  
13 realities over the old, imperial strategic mind-set. In the same statement  
14 before the House that has already been referred to, Balfour had challenged  
15 Britain and France during August 1919 “... to make such international  
16 arrangements, economic and territorial, as will enable each region to  
17 develop itself to the best advantage without giving occasion for jealousies  
18 or disputes”.<sup>55</sup> US President Woodrow Wilson had urged a more ‘scientific  
19 basis’ for future regional settlement at the Versailles Peace Conference.,  
20 though the interesting ideas the commission he despatched to the Eastern  
21 Mediterranean came up were effectively still-born once Britain and France  
22 withdrew support.<sup>56</sup>

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So London and Paris would arrive at their own arrangements for defining  
the margins of their new proteges and none of these were more vague than  
the delimitation originally laid down to separate the mandates of Iraq and  
Syria – the line so famously discarded by ISIS in recent times when  
territorialising its trans-boundary borderland state. For a December 1920  
Anglo-French Convention supposedly laid down a boundary between Iraq  
and Syria running for hundreds of miles in less than six lines of treaty text.

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3 When asked about the most suitable location for this territorial limit two  
4 years earlier, Iraq's imperial architects-in-chief, Gertrude Bell and Arnold  
5 Wilson quipped that, while you might patrol existing caravan routes to mark  
6 some sort of divide, no government would ordinarily be interested in  
7 extending effective control over uncultivated and unpopulated desert  
8 areas<sup>57</sup>. Maybe this international boundary was more artificial than most  
9 therefore and that might explain why Sykes-Picot has come in for the  
10 treatment it has.  
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## 22 BORDERLANDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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24 The point that boundaries as lines are a statist and legal abstract and that  
25 borderlands are the reality on the ground with width was made by Friedrich  
26 Ratzel as early as the mid-1890s. This basic premise was developed more  
27 fully by two more British geographers, Minghi and House, from the 1960s, as  
28 they tried to foster a borderland studies approach that looked at  
29 transactions and flows across international boundaries in routine everyday  
30 settings.<sup>58</sup> At the turn of the 1990s, the American historian Martinez then  
31 forwarded a four-stage evolutionary typology for borderlands, whereby  
32 their effective, operative width would increase as relations between  
33 neighbouring states improved in a context of cooperation – a schema that  
34 seemed more plausible in a pre-globalisation context.<sup>59</sup> Some of the more  
35 recent geographic literature has concentrated on emergent complexity with  
36 the identification of *borderscapes* constituted by the layered human  
37 identities and power structures found within international borderlands.  
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55 Importantly, however, borderlands have taken on a wider meaning beyond  
56 the usual disciplinary parameters and the assumption that their effective  
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3 width increases in a cooperative context of increasing inter-state  
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5 cooperation has now been questioned. While *conflict borderlands* might  
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7 now be understood by many as the physical and societal spaces that  
8  
9 straddle the international boundaries of states experiencing armed conflict  
10  
11 (including civil war, insurgency and other forms of inter and intra state  
12  
13 violence), the main thing to take away here is that their scope and extension  
14  
15 is generally seen to increase and widen in a conflictual context. ISIS's  
16  
17 recent rise in the Iraqi-Syrian borderlands needs to be viewed in such a light  
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19 and, indeed, represents something of an oddity in spatial and territorial  
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21 terms.<sup>60</sup>  
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24 Recent representation of Sykes-Picot suggests that maybe we don't know  
25  
26 quite as much as we should about the history of boundaries and borderlands  
27  
28 in the Middle East. This tallies nicely with recent observations from  
29  
30 historians that we have been too fixed on representation and insufficiently  
31  
32 preoccupied with borderland materialities – that is there is more to say  
33  
34 about their social and spatial structures and how power has been projected  
35  
36 and resisted in state margins.<sup>61</sup> Since the Perso-Ottoman frontier zone  
37  
38 (comprising Iran's contemporary western borderlands with Turkey and Iran)  
39  
40 constitutes the most obvious material example of a historical borderland in  
41  
42 the Middle East we'll say a few words about it here. We will refer in a later  
43  
44 section to the 'paper borderlands' created by the overlapping territorial  
45  
46 claims of Saudi Arabia and Yemen in southern Arabia before 2000. For they  
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48 could be viewed as having broadly defined a borderlands legally – if largely  
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50 on paper only (*see Figure 3*).  
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54 The Perso-Ottoman borderlands constituted a classic frontier zone going  
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56 back to the sixteenth century. Temporality is key here. Taking a broad  
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3 sweep, the loose territorial parameters of this indeterminate zone moved  
4 east then west as surrounding central authority was never extended on a  
5 permanent or convincing basis, while its remoteness and unfamiliarity  
6 provided for localised political autonomy and a relative freedom of socio-  
7 economic movement.<sup>62</sup> This did not mean, however, that for significant  
8 periods of time – often decades within the centuries under discussion,  
9 fortified limits did not exist as hard borders within these borderlands.<sup>63</sup>  
10  
11 Nonetheless, historically, there was something in that old deterministic role  
12 claimed for major mountain ranges, with Hubbard’s assessment that the  
13 Zagros would: “sooner or later... invariably resume its original role as a  
14 divider of nations”.<sup>64</sup>  
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17  
18 Of course, that didn’t stop Britain and Russia from trying to narrow this  
19 frontier into a mappable line from the early 1840s. Such misplaced,  
20 grandiose ambition ultimately resulted in a distinctly mid-nineteenth century  
21 project (in approach and conception) not being discharged until the onset of  
22 the First World War, late in 1914. In reckoning that it could establish a basis  
23 for observing the basis of a boundary with its observation of a *status quo*  
24 line in 1843, never mind to suggest that this should be observed on a  
25 permanent basis looking forward by ‘freezing such a moment in time’<sup>65</sup>,  
26 Britain was reducing the complex and dynamic local organisation of the  
27 borderlands. So the most obviously prioritised nineteenth century European  
28 effort to instil territorial order in the Middle East soon became relegated to  
29 mapping an indeterminate zone.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, the exercise was used by the  
30 Ottomans to extend authority to the borderlands for the first time and by  
31 Persia to get the best deal they could secure through European involvement  
32 at a time when they were unlikely to achieve as much through bilateral  
33 means.<sup>67</sup> As for the effect on the borderland populations themselves, “one  
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GEOPOLITICS      International Boundaries and Borderlands in the Middle East

consequence... was to progressively instil a more developed territorial consciousness or defensiveness..., whereby territorial definition itself would become an important component of identity and rivalry”.<sup>68</sup>

## RECENT REPRESENTATIONS OF ARABIAN BOUNDARY DYNAMICS

### *Territorial instability and conflict in the northern Gulf*

While few observers would point to Iraq’s long-running boundary disputes with Iran and Kuwait in the northern Gulf as causes of Saddam Hussein’s decisions to invade Iran in September 1980 and Kuwait a decade later during August 1990, they were significant contributory factors. As its principal territorial architect, Britain had long believed that the constellation of state territory in the northern Gulf posed a genuine prospect of conflict<sup>69</sup>. Iran and Iraq, with the Persians and Ottomans before them, had never managed to develop workable arrangements for the Shatt al-Arab ever since that river was first nominated as an international boundary in 1847. Meanwhile, a vague and ambiguous Iraq-Kuwait boundary delimitation remained essentially unchanged in legal terms from its Anglo-Ottoman origins of 1913 right through to the Iraqi invasion. Extended academic treatments of the evolution of these border questions – and their background role in conflict – appeared throughout the 1980s and 1990s, including by this author, based on the relevant British primary records<sup>70</sup>.

While the case has been made for linkage in the manner by which Iraq’s disputes in the northern Gulf operate, the treaty history of each is quite distinct. A momentous package of Iran-Iraq agreements of 1975 introduced a *thalweg* delimitation for the Shatt al-Arab running along the mid-point of the main navigable channel (see *Figure 4*). Together, they arguably

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comprised the most sophisticated legal regime ever agreed for a river boundary, containing every conceivable safeguard against future dispute over alignment and status<sup>71</sup>. Yet, within just over half a decade the signatories were at war, highlighting that a problematic boundary solved in law had not been a regional problem removed. The UN Secretary-General's resolution of the Iraq-Kuwait boundary dispute– supposedly just the demarcation of an existing delimitation but, in reality, quite a bit more than that – took the best part of three years following Iraq's invasion of, then removal from Kuwait<sup>72</sup>.

Right up until 1975 at least, a classic spatial imaginary could be deemed to exist whereby several British politicians and diplomats (including former Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax) believed that Iraq's limited access to Gulf waters constituted a strategic time-bomb. From the 1930s, its ministers and diplomats had been largely persuaded that a triangular operation of disputes between Iraq and its neighbours posed a serious threat to regional stability and, increasingly from 1970, the threat of physical conflict. Its rules held that whenever Iran maintained the upper hand in the conduct of the Shatt dispute (or materially improved its position there), Iraq would look south to Kuwait to compensate<sup>73</sup>. After acceding to Iran's long-standing positional demand that the navigation channel of the Shatt al-Arab river be shared in 1975, some argued that Iraq might turn its gaze fully on Kuwait to address its 'access problem'. Intriguingly, Britain's Ambassador in Baghdad "wonder[ed]... whether an Iraqi takeover of Kuwait ... would or should lead to war". And he went further: "Indeed in terms of Western interests... is the continued independence of Kuwait really a matter of such great moment?"<sup>74</sup> The degree to which these possibilities were being

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3 contemplated genuinely surprised. We all know what happened 15 years  
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5 later.  
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8 And this old imaginary hasn't been fully extinguished! The adoption of the  
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10 Shatt dispute as a symbol of inter-state (and indeed, Arab-Persian) rivalry  
11  
12 has been notable since the Iraqi revolution of July 1958<sup>75</sup>. The precise  
13  
14 location of the navigation channel along the Shatt in its southern reaches  
15  
16 remains a bone of contention today between Iran and Iraq and is continuing  
17  
18 to delay a final peace settlement of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. The Iraq-  
19  
20 Kuwait border question still features periodically in contemporary Iraqi,  
21  
22 even Basrawi politics, as the UN Secretary-General's treatment of two  
23  
24 decades back is bemoaned and denigrated by law-makers, politicians and  
25  
26 clerics. For example, during the summer months of 2011, Iraqi Shi'ite leader  
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28 Muqtada al Sadr led sizeable protests in Basra against Kuwait's proposed  
29  
30 development of a new super-port on the eastern shores on Bubiyan Island<sup>76</sup>.  
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32 Some of the old colonial spatial imaginaries have been adopted in  
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34 contemporary political discourse, far from unusual in postcolonial politics  
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36 and a reminder that, however much we wish it could be, determinism  
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38 cannot be wished away.  
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#### 40 41 *Finalising the Arabian territorial framework*

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43 The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait provided a severe jolt to what is still a very  
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45 youthful state system along the western Gulf littoral. It is as well to  
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47 underline that here we have the world's greatest concentration of  
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49 microstates and hydrocarbons, all within the geographical context of the  
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51 semi-enclosed sea that is the Persian Gulf. There were still sizeable gaps in  
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53 the Arabian territorial framework moving into the 1990s<sup>77</sup> and addressing  
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55 these would soon become the pragmatic focus of Arabian states. A mixture  
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3 of security concerns and material incentives would drive the substantial  
4 progress made in the 1990s towards finalising and regulating the Arabian  
5 political map. To accommodate accelerated levels of oil exploration in the  
6 flat market conditions in the early 1990s, the states of the region generally  
7 sought to better define their state margins. International boundaries were  
8 delimited by new treaty settlements (and one inter-GCC dispute  
9 [Bahrain/Qatar] even went to the Hague for judicial settlement), the details  
10 of old ones were released and important positions of principle, policy and  
11 intent were arrived at institutionally by the GCC that worked for the  
12 maintenance, entrenchment and (where appropriate) completion of the  
13 Arabian territorial framework<sup>78</sup>. The results were that most Arabian states  
14 were a lot more confident of their basic territorial definition than they had  
15 been at the beginning of the decade.  
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30 It was against such a dynamic that the Saudi-Yemeni boundary agreement of  
31 June 2000 was concluded, albeit somewhat surprisingly at the time. This  
32 had been and remains a loaded question as, rather incongruously, a high  
33 tech and elaborate border fence separates the Rub al Khali in Saudi Arabia  
34 from a war-torn, disintegrated Yemeni state in the south. But, of all its  
35 territorial limits, Saudi Arabia has always been most concerned with its  
36 southern borders<sup>79</sup>. Meanwhile, the traditional mismatch between a  
37 cultural affinity to Yemeni nationhood and a much more restricted  
38 allegiance to various Yemeni states and governments – north, south or  
39 unified, has historically bedevilled efforts by Sana'a to negotiate territorial  
40 limits with its northern neighbour<sup>80</sup>. The agreement of 2000 introduced a  
41 boundary line but in far less detailed terms than one might have expected<sup>81</sup>.  
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60 This had everything to do with a political window of opportunity suddenly  
opening up for the conclusion of a settlement before the technical teams

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3 responsible for its conclusion had really thrashed out its exact parameters. It  
4  
5 became a question of joining the dots thereafter to lay down a line on the  
6  
7 ground that would later be marked by marble and gold by Saudi Arabia to  
8  
9 constitute the current border fence<sup>82</sup>.  
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11  
12 The territorial framework remains to evolve most obviously out in Gulf  
13  
14 waters but also in some important land sections. The political map seems  
15  
16 most confused where Arabian land borders meet the south-western waters  
17  
18 of the Gulf in the vicinity of the Saudi sovereign land corridor that separates  
19  
20 Qatar to the north and Abu Dhabi (UAE) to the east<sup>83</sup>. The bizarre 1974  
21  
22 treaty that supposedly defines and regulates the Saudi-UAE boundary  
23  
24 specifies: that all of the rights to a transboundary oilfield (30% of which lies  
25  
26 in the UAE (Zarrara) and 70% of which lies in Saudi Arabia (Shaiba) belong to  
27  
28 Saudi Arabia; that the kingdom is allowed to erect installations as it wishes  
29  
30 on islands that don't even belong to it and, finally; introduces a delimitation  
31  
32 that doesn't square with the coordinates specified in the agreement (see  
33  
34 *Figure 5*). We also are left with a befuddling maritime political geography. In  
35  
36 fact, as it stands, the Qatar-Saudi land delimitation continues offshore to  
37  
38 constitute the Qatar-Abu Dhabi offshore delimitation<sup>84</sup>. In time-honoured  
39  
40 fashion, the border is now symbolising a growing inter-state rivalry between  
41  
42 Abu Dhabi and Riyadh and the two sides were even involved in a minor naval  
43  
44 skirmish off Khor al Udaid in March 2010.  
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#### 47 *Fencing Arabia*

48  
49 The increasing number of border fences running through the Arabian  
50  
51 Peninsula – as with everywhere else – is usually justified by security  
52  
53 narratives, serving as a powerful and tangible message that the state is  
54  
55 protecting its public from outside threats. Equally, it might be viewed as an  
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3 acknowledgement that many Arabian states, still less than a half-century  
4 old, have only just territorialised or are still doing so. Marking the  
5 boundaries of a state's newly-evolved and agreed territorial definition is a  
6 well-established modernist aspiration, after all. This harks back to de  
7 Vattel's famous admonition of 1758: "[t]o remove every subject of discord,  
8 every occasion for quarrel, one should mark with clarity and precision the  
9 limits of territories".  
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18 Arabian border fencing and walling has several aspects to it. Fortification of  
19 the Iraq-Kuwait boundary post- UN ruling was explicitly justified as  
20 exceptional but Saudi Arabia's border defence systems to the north and  
21 south now supposedly guard against the chaos of collapsed state authority  
22 spreading into the kingdom from Iraq and Yemen. Meanwhile those erected  
23 by the UAE during the noughties with Oman and by the latter with Yemen  
24 also had a lot to do with marking new state territorialisation. The  
25 structures placed along the 2000 Saudi-Yemen delimitation soon made  
26 themselves felt on local, established patterns of human circulation at both  
27 ends of the borderlands and this was long before Yemen's current malaise.  
28 Tribes of the Yemeni *mashriq* used to benefit from social services in the  
29 south-western Saudi city of Najran, for instance, while some members of the  
30 traditionally mobile Mahra tribal confederation in the Yemeni north-east  
31 also used to boast of holding Omani, Saudi and UAE passports.<sup>85</sup> The  
32 walls and fences dividing the cities of Buraimi/Al Ain and Habarut  
33 (Oman/Yemen) owe much, as commented, to territorialisation in its classic,  
34 modernistic state-building sense – but also to a more localised one of  
35 protecting and projecting economic interests.<sup>86</sup>  
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## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Unsurprisingly, there can be no one typical Middle Eastern boundary or borderland, even if some haunting images of human suffering appear to characterise them in a contemporary context of the collapsed reach of the sovereign state in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen and a growing region-wide propensity for central authority to wall or fence inter-state limits. Reflecting back on researching Middle Eastern territorial questions, a case could be made for arguing that it is perceived regional (including human) security contexts that affect how we view borders at various spatial levels and represent them. While certain representations are more readily associated with particular regions in specific temporal contexts – territorial definition as a factor in conflict (the northern Gulf, 1980-1990) and (in)security and the drive for resources fuelling territorialisation (Arabia in the 1990s) – they haven't disappeared. Though its significance is currently subsumed by more pressing territorial concerns, Iraq's access question has been politicised at both the state and local level. Meanwhile, the Arabian political map remains to be finalised on land and offshore in Gulf waters. Concomitantly, governments continue to utilise territorial and boundary questions as political symbols of regional and inter-state rivalries. If the Lower Gulf islands dispute has displaced the Shatt al-Arab's traditional role in the former regard, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have adopted their rather bizarrely defined boundary in the latter capacity.

The emergence of new power spatialities in the marginal areas of the fragmented states of Iraq and Syria has, to an extent, highlighted the fact that we don't always know a great deal about the historical materialities of borderlands. There is clear scope for increased research into the way these

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3 areas operate – contemporaneously and historically – and recent strides  
4 made in the elucidation, for instance, of the concepts of *borderscapes* and  
5 *border biographies* offer room for encouragement here. Despite the current  
6 questioning of the Sykes-Picot system of colonially-defined territories, it  
7 would be something of a surprise if the territorial framework was  
8 significantly redrawn – at least formally.

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16 Nevertheless new states have recently emerged. The 2008-9 Abyei case at  
17 the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague began the difficult process  
18 of drawing boundaries for South Sudan. Interestingly, the tribunal decided  
19 that there was insufficient evidence to confirm a former, vaguely-worded  
20 and uncertainly located provincial boundary as a new international one. It  
21 looked instead at other human indicators such as oral history and burial  
22 mounds in reaching its decision on where this should run<sup>87</sup>. Though there  
23 will be huge challenges area in introducing an operative and viable  
24 borderlands on the ground, this move of international law is broadly  
25 encouraging, reminding us that there always existed the possibility of  
26 defining international boundaries in the Middle East that were more identity  
27 and allegiance based. When estimating the boundaries of Kuwait in 1908,  
28 the Government of India's resident Gulf historian J.G. Lorimer, commented  
29 that these were "... fluctuating and... are, at any given time, the limits of the  
30 tribes which then, either voluntarily or under compulsion, owe allegiance to  
31 the Shaikh of Kuwait".<sup>88</sup> This was ultimately not the route chosen for  
32 drawing the Arabian territorial framework but greater recognition of human  
33 movement, needs and vulnerabilities will hopefully be more prominent in  
34 the future fine-tuning and management of Middle Eastern borders.

## NOTES

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<sup>3</sup> Predictably, there have been a good number of recent books issued that look back to the Middle East during the First World War in this very context, including, for instance: J. Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon and Schuster 2011); K. Ulrichsen, *The First World War and the Middle East* (London: Hurst 2014); E. Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (New York: Basic Books 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Such concerns were addressed fully and imaginatively in the lavish 2-part *al Jazeera World* documentary, 'Sykes-Picot: Lines in the Sand', that was broadcast extensively during May-June 2016: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_eEB27fj8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_eEB27fj8s).

<sup>5</sup> For example, *International Affairs* has just devoted a special issue to 'Contentious Borders: the Middle East and North Africa post-2011': 93, 4 (July 2017). This includes a concluding paper by W. Zartman entitled: "State, borders and sovereignty in the Middle East: unsteady but unchanging", pp. 938-948.

<sup>6</sup> BRISMES call for papers, July 2017 for BRISMES 2018 annual conference on *New approaches to studying the Middle East*, King's College London.

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<sup>13</sup> For example: G. Blake and R. Schofield (eds.), *Boundaries and State Territory in the Middle East and North Africa* (Wisbech: Menas Press 1987); C. Schofield and R. Schofield (eds.) *The Middle East and North Africa: World Boundaries Volume Two* (London: Routledge 1994); I. Brandell (ed.), *State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris 2006).

<sup>14</sup> J. Peterson, 'The Arabian Peninsula in Modern Times: a Historiographical Survey of Recent Publications', *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 4/2 (2014), pp. 244-274.

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<sup>33</sup> N.H. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris 1995).

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<sup>40</sup> F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London: Fontana 1981 [4<sup>th</sup> impression of original 1966 work]), p: 176.

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