
Current examinations of traditional boundaries, those which separate one state from another, point to the fact that even if the state’s sovereign power might be waning (Brown 2010) we still need to go back to the fundamentals and examine how ‘conventional’ borders are constituted. This is what Asher Kaufman’s *Contested Frontiers in the Syria-Lebanon-Israel Region* seeks to achieve.

Kaufman presents a multi-layered evaluation of a relatively small border area encompassing about 100 square kilometres, where Israel, Syria and Lebanon meet. The main purpose of the book is to gauge the way in which border regions are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed according to cultural ideals, political aspiration and social needs. The research is founded upon ample source material ranging from archival documents, historical maps and diplomatic correspondence to literature and poems. In addition, it also includes in-depth interviews with border settlements’ residents and UN officials involved in the efforts to resolve some of the regional disputes.

Kaufman is interested in the influence of colonial legacies on the current state of affairs in the Middle East, mainly in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and inter-Arab state politics discussed here through the relations between Syria and Lebanon. Consequently, the work is divided into three sections that are organized according to thematic concepts reviewed in chronological order. The first discusses the efforts to delimit on the map and demarcate on the ground the tri-border region starting with the involvement of the European colonial superpowers (Britain and France) in the middle of the 19th century and particularly after the end of the First World War. Kaufman then moves on to describe the formation of Lebanon, Syria and Israel as independent polities in the end of the 1940s and reviews the relations between them in the years that followed. He concludes with the UN efforts to establish consensual agreements between all three on the location of the international border throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

The book provides an insightful glimpse into the political economy of map-making as it
became entangled with the interests of France and Britain, and the construction of the nation states of Lebanon, Syria and, eventually, Israel. The divergent interests of the European superpowers in regard to the region, as well as the contrasting goals of each national project, yielded an abundance of maps creating a cartographic kaleidoscope where each side interpreted the border according to its own needs. These inconsistencies lead to multiple border anomalies that were felt on the ground as a blurring of the divisions between the three polities that shared the area in an already volatile situation.

The actual conflicts that occurred are extensively discussed in the second section of the book where Kaufman gauges the area’s properties as a frontier, pointing to the way in which the tri-border region has become a zone of interaction and contact rather than a simple line on the map. He devotes a considerable portion of the book to reviewing the various confrontations that have arisen from numerous disputes regarding the usage of water resources, location of settlements, paving of roads, and cultivation of agricultural land. However, he stresses that the tri-border region functions as more than a simple battleground. It is also a lively arena of commerce and transaction where borderland communities regularly overlook formal political boundaries in favour of ethnic kinship, business entrepreneurship and other forms of cooperation.

Kaufman is attentive to the drives and goals that guided the subjects of his research and refrains from succumbing to one distinct narrative; he’s empathetic to the voices and stances he collects, thus presenting us with a polyphonic, yet lucid, overview of the tri-border region as a whole. Kaufman provides a lively snapshot of a space that “at times functioned as a ‘hard’, impregnable border, and at times as a porous frontier subject to settlement, exchange, expansion and cross-border raids” (p.75).

Beyond a conceptual distinction between border and frontier, the book contributes a refreshing insight on the division between the notions of frontier and periphery. As Kaufman cogently contends and demonstrates, Israel regarded the tri-border region as a frontier that had to be settled in order to be included in its national territory. Lebanon, on the other hand, viewed it as part of its margins, a periphery far from Beirut’s political centre. In fact, the latter was more interested in guarding its territorial integrity against Syria, which never accepted the notion of an independent
Lebanon and constantly encroached onto the territory, exploiting the ill-defined demarcation of the border between the two states.

In the aftermath of the June 1967 war and the occupation of the Golan Heights by Israel, the situation in the tri-border region changed dramatically. Palestinian militias initiated armed sorties and rocket fire from the tri-border region, turning the area into the centre of armed activities against Israel. The latter’s invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, which was related to these border skirmishes, also propagated the involvement of the Shia militia Hezbollah, which like the Palestinians turned the struggle against the Israeli occupation into the cornerstone of its organized undertakings. Thus, for Lebanon the tri-border region, which was once considered as a peripheral area, was now rescaled into a frontline against Israel.

The distinction between frontier and periphery, which Kaufman frequently returns to, is both thought-provoking and significant. However, it also exposes some of the less developed aspects of his work. For example, he mentions the Israeli town of Kiryat Shemonah, which had been a frequent target of Palestinian and Hezbollah rockets throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s. These attacks, as well as Israel’s response, wrought a considerable number of civilian fatalities on both sides. As Kaufman shows, the aggressive Israeli tactic of military invasions into Lebanon was due in part to the desire to boost the morale of Kiryat Shemonah’s residents. The latter, he explains, were “mostly Jewish immigrants from Arab countries who unwittingly found themselves at the frontline of this Israeli-Palestinian confrontation” (p.115).

Here, a more careful analysis of the way in which Israeli space was perceived and conceived might have been pertinent. As Kaufman mentions, the legacy of the British survey of Palestine was inherited by Israeli planners who embarked “on a major cartographic venture to erase the presence of some 400 depopulated Palestinian villages from maps and insert new Jewish settlements that sprang up as mushrooms after the rain” (p.49). Yet these settlements did not simply ‘spring up’ but were part of the very scheme Kaufman depicts, which was bent on repopulating areas depleted by the Palestinian exodus of 1948, strengthening Israel’s border regions and solving the question of where and how to settle the large waves of Jewish immigration into the state (see Yiftachel 2010). Kiryat Shemonah, which was established on the ruins of the abandoned village Al-Khalisa, was part
of these grander endeavours.

Furthermore, scholarly works that deal with the reshaping of Israeli space show that towns, such as Kiryat Shemonah, that were inhabited by Jews of Arab descent also provided a cheap labour force for the nearby agricultural settlements mostly populated by Jews of European descent. Therefore, the town’s residents were indeed ‘unwittingly’ stranded, but to leave things at that is problematic both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, such a statement overlooks the way in which the town became part of Israel’s periphery while settlements adjacent to it were regarded as part of the Zionist vanguard in the frontier (see Tzfadia and Yacobi 2011). Theoretically, it glosses over the fact that frontier and periphery are not binary concepts but, rather, can simultaneously materialize in the same space, within the same polity, albeit for different populations.

Kaufman is generally attentive to the fluid qualities of these concepts. His analysis convincingly shows how the tri-border region’s importance to Israel, Syria and Lebanon caused each to imagine the area as a ‘genuine’ part of its territory and to construct historical narratives that incorporated it into each state’s national identity. However, when discussing the relation between frontier and periphery, there is also room to discuss the ways in which both materialise as a set of practices that hinge on racial, ethnic and socioeconomic differences thus holding the potential to unfold within any given polity and not just at its edges.

Another aspect that could merit some attention is the question of the 1948 war, Palestinian space and the tri-border region. Kaufman argues that in contrast to India and Pakistan “the formation of state boundaries in the Middle East was relatively peaceful. Populations were not forced to leave…and all in all, both elites and the new borderland peoples adapted to the new geopolitical reality” (p.225). Perhaps when compared in absolute numbers to India and Pakistan the population movement in Palestine seems minute, but when one takes into account that during the war about 700,000 out of 1.2 million Palestinians were displaced and became stateless, the statement becomes more questionable.

Furthermore, while Kaufman provides compelling accounts of villages within Palestine before the 1948 war, such as Al-Khalisa (p.89), relatively small portions of the work are dedicated to a critical evaluation of the war’s effect on Palestinian space in the tri-border region. The
The aforementioned remark on Jewish settlements that sprang up while Palestinian villages were depopulated as well as references to the “forced exile” (p.226) of Palestinians are only made occasionally, and are usually described in a nostalgic tone that is not very illuminating.

More consideration could also have been given to the ways in which the cartographic endeavours to delimit the body politic, which developed during colonial rule, blended in to the mechanisms of the states that followed the European superpowers. Kaufman provides many insights on the specific ways in which the tri-border region was mapped and elaborates on the manner in which this mapping interacted with lived realities on the ground. However, broader theoretical issues regarding the role of the map in the construction of the frontier, how and with what consequences it was deployed in colonial societies (Blomley 2003; Sparke 2008), and the part it played in the formation of the modern state (Branch 2011) remain underdeveloped.

Nevertheless, Kaufman does provide helpful insights regarding the concept of sovereignty. One example is the discussion in the final section of the book dedicated to the dispute over the Shebaa farms between Israel and Lebanon. Beyond the empirical contribution of presenting a case that until now has not been thoroughly examined, there is also an important theoretical contribution here. Briefly, Kaufman shows how Hezbollah manipulated one of the historic anomalies of the tri-border region in order to “transform the domestic discourse in Lebanon about the country’s sovereignty” (p.189) by playing a “dual game of defence and defiance of the country’s sovereignty most effectively”(p.191). This argument correlates with Sara Fregonese’s (2012) analysis of Hezbollah’s impact on Lebanon’s space, and enables a more nuanced reading of the notion of sovereignty as a ‘hybridic’ form of cooperation and not just a struggle between a ‘non-state’ actor and the polity that is challenged by its action.

The book stops before the current events, when Syria is in ruins and Hezbollah has become Assad’s saviour with effective control of the border. In fact, Kaufman admits that the last part of his book was originally designed as a proposal for future negotiations but due to the dramatic change in the balance of powers that followed the civil war in Syria it should now be read, like the other parts of his work, as historiography (p.11). Indeed, the research raises interesting questions regarding the way in which analysis of current conflicts might be rendered obsolete even before publication.
Nonetheless, I believe that here lies one important contribution of the book, which directly
relates to Kaufman’s motivation for conducting the research in the first place. Simply put, he
manages to prove that the ‘conventional’ border still matters—its importance as a political site
lingers on. The fact that the state of regional geopolitical affairs has undergone a serious change
does not diminish the book’s overall importance. It is a valuable and judicious source of information
and analysis to anyone who is interested in border studies in general and the Middle East in
particular. More scholars will probably re-examine the dramatic vicissitudes that have transpired in
the tri-border region in the near future. Kaufman’s exhaustive research will serve as an important
resource for all of them.

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