PERIPHERAL VISION
Views from the Borderlands

X-BORDER
LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK

WAR AND PEACE IN THE SUDAN-ETHIOPIA BORDERLANDS

Since November 2020, when conflict broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front , attention has focused on the tri-border region between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan where the consequences of the conflict have been most felt.

The unsettled or poorly defined nature of borders in this region is often perceived as a driver of conflict, as in the 1998 – 2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea border war (and subsequent military mobilizations), or the ongoing frictions between Addis Ababa and Khartoum over the disputed Fashagga region, officially controlled by Sudan. In Fashagga, an economically profitable relationship between Ethiopian farmers and Sudanese landowners has been disrupted by the Sudanese military's nationalistic attempts to assert sovereignty over the territory, in response to expansive and permanent Ethiopian farming settlements. Bilateral confrontations of this nature exacerbate contradictions between strictly defined and demarcated national borders and more fluid cross-border societal relations.

Recent research by the Rift Valley Institute on the border between Sudan in Blue Nile State and Ethiopia in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, has explored largely unsuccessful attempts by national governments in Khartoum and Addis Ababa to formally demarcate borders in the region and, by extension, control the movement of people and goods across their borderlands. But, for at least the last decade, borderlands between Sudan and Ethiopia have not been drivers of conflict in the region. A 'soft' or fluid understanding of borders by local communities—and for a time by national governments—has enabled productive, cross-border relations at the local level.

Image source: Rift Valley Institute, 2021.

The Rift Valley Institute's report, 'From Dust to Dollar: Gold mining and trade in the Sudan-Ethiopia borderland', uses these activities as a lens to examine how various attempts by the governments of Sudan and Ethiopia to increase control over mining and trade in their borderland regions have largely failed. Where cross-border trade has increased, this has taken place largely away from official pathways—formal trade between the two countries across the border remains small.

Centralized decision-making under different authoritarian regimes in Khartoum and Addis Ababa has generally prioritized controlling the flow of resources, rather than respecting local distributive logic and supply needs. This has resulted in local people circumventing border trade policies formulated by central governments on both sides. Labelling these activities as smuggling, and the items in question as contraband, ignores local logics of cross-border trade and inadequately describes the informal processes in question.

In Sudan, gold has become an increasingly important export, particularly since the secession of South Sudan in 2011 resulted in the rapid decline in Sudan's profits from the oil industry, thus necessitating urgent economic diversification. Gold was seen as potentially a quick fix to the country's entrenched economic problems, although its potential to fill the gap left by declining oil exports was always doubtful.

In Blue Nile State specifically, mining began to re-emerge as a significant economic activity in the early 2000s, especially given interest in iron and chromium in the Ingessana hills, which form a large area in the central part of the state. Control over these resources became a primary objective of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) in its war against the government, now temporarily resolved via the Juba Peace Agreement, which brought some of the main players in the Sudanese rebel landscape into the transitional government.

The expansion of the gold mining industry in Blue Nile State, which has attracted miners from across Sudan, and some from outside the country, has drawn this borderland into a transnational industry, which ultimately sees gold from Blue Nile exported and traded in the Gulf states. New technologies have been introduced—from metal detectors to stone crushers and mercury (used for washing the ore)—which have changed the character and productivity of the industry in the borderland.

The increased commercialization of the mining industry is also clearly evident in Blue Nile State. Gold mining has shifted from being part of a long-term, family- and community-based livelihood strategy to a short-term entrepreneurial

> " *The expansion of the gold mining industry in Blue Nile State has drawn this borderland into a transnational industry.* "

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pursuit. [Mining is increasingly dominated by the private sector, with the military now a leading player](#)—this reflects the long-standing dominance of military power in Sudan, including in private or parastatal companies. The growth of the industry is also connected to the long-term militarization of the state due to the war against the SPLM.

Sudanese originally from Blue Nile State fled into Ethiopia during Khartoum's conflict with the SPLM-N (2011-2020) and became involved in the mining industry there. With the 2020 Juba peace agreement in place, many refugees may want to return —the links solidified through their years in Ethiopia are likely to further contribute to the general permeability of the border in this region.

While border demarcation (coupled with militarization) has been the primary tool promoted to tackle problems, particularly insecurity, it has generally been ineffective and ultimately aborted. These strategies have done little to address the fundamental issue that the border is the result of a colonial geopolitical deal between Britain and the Abyssinian Empire in the early twentieth century that ignored existing social relations and land ownership.

While the Blue Nile–Benishangul-Gumuz borderland is not free from conflict, it provides an example of relatively stable cross-border relations that have been limited by regime-instigated civil wars and border restrictions imposed by central governments. Lessons from this borderland, and RVI's research, could be applied more widely, including in other contested regions between Sudan and Ethiopia.

International border lines are only one aspect of social, economic, and political life in the areas they cross. These lines are far from irrelevant, since border regimes actively interfere in the free exchange of people, goods, and ideas. But they are just one part of the multifaceted dynamics of boundary making and boundary crossing in these regions.

Map: Tri-border area between Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia.
Source: Adapted from webvectormaps.com with data supplied by RVI.

BORDER CROSSINGS, ROADS, AND REGIONAL POLITICS IN IRAQ

By Harith Hasan

In November 2020, the Arar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia was reopened after being closed for three decades following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The reopening signalled that the Saudis, encouraged by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Khadhimi's opening to the Arab world, sought to reengage with Iraq. Khadhimi enjoys a personal friendship with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and visited Riyadh with much fanfare in March 2021. The two countries intend to expand their cooperation, including Saudi investment in Iraq.

However, in a sign that Iraq's border policies are intimately tied to rivalries among the country's neighbours, the reengagement with Saudi Arabia has faced opposition at home—primarily by groups and paramilitaries allied with Iran. This competition has helped to undermine Iraq's ability to benefit from joint projects, with damaging consequences for the population.

"We cannot trust Saudi Arabia easily," stated Qais al-Khazaali, the leader of the Iranian-allied Asaib Ahl al-Haq party and paramilitary group, who insisted that the Saudis had to apologize for allegedly sending jihadis to Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003. Several Shia groups also criticized a proposed Saudi project to invest in ranching and livestock in the Iraqi borderland region of Muthanna Governorate. They view the project as a threat to Iraq's groundwater and say it could be an attempt to take over Iraqi territory under the pretext of investment. Iraqi authorities as well as advocates for openness highlight the advantages of the move, especially for the population of southern Iraq. Muthanna is Iraq's poorest governorate and could benefit from revived trade with and investment by Saudi Arabia. The Agriculture Ministry has reported that Iraqi farmers have begun to export their vegetables to the Saudi market through the Arar crossing. If this continues, it will help local producers and transporters.

Border crossings and cross-border connections have become essential components in the growing regional contest for influence in Iraq. This rivalry, primarily between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, has been driven chiefly by commercial and geopolitical motivations. Commercially, after years of war and instability, Iraq was unable to build a strong industrial sector or fully revive its agricultural sector, making the country dependent on imports. This created an incentive for other countries to compete over the Iraqi market and its approximately forty million consumers.

Map: Iraq's key border crossings with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey.'
Source: Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center.

Geopolitically, Iraq has become a place through which the same three neighbours—Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey—have tried to maximize their regional influence. Iraq's internal divisions and weak state institutions have facilitated such ambitions. Opening border crossings, increasing trade, and expanding land and air connections are instruments of leverage in this rivalry.

For example, Iran has pushed to open more border crossings with Iraq and connect the two countries through new railway lines. Currently, there are six formal and five informal border crossings (the latter opened by militias and

smugglers) along the 1,458-kilometer Iraq-Iran border. Last year, the Iranian government demanded the opening of four additional border crossings with the Kurdistan Region, as part of its ambition to increase the value of its annual exports to Iraq from $13 billion to $20 billion. The request has not yet been approved by the Iraqi authorities. At the same time, the Iranian and Iraqi governments agreed to construct the Shalmja railway to accelerate the movement of goods and people between the two countries, through the southern Iraqi city of Basra. The railway will eventually facilitate the transfer of goods from China to the Mediterranean, according to Iranian First Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri.

Indeed, linking Iraq to China's Belt and Road Initiative and turning it into a node connecting Asia, Europe, and the Mediterranean have become important goals for Iran's Iraqi allies and part of their political narrative to counter U.S. influence or growing Saudi interest in Iraq. The recent $400 billion deal between China and Iran has led some of these groups to reinforce their message over the advantages of connecting Iraq to the East rather than the West.

Turkey and Iran, the second and third major exporters to Iraq after China, have an interest in sustaining their share in the Iraqi market. Baghdad's recent ban on imports of goods, including eggs and poultry, harmed Turkish and Iranian producers, leading Ankara and Tehran to pressure the Iraqi government to ease the measure. Iraqi officials have said that the ban helped to rejuvenate Iraq's struggling egg industry. However, they also admitted that foreign producers are circumventing restrictions illegally. In Turkey's case, the Iraqi side of the main border crossing is controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government, which often refrains from implementing Baghdad's decisions.

Turkey is also seeking a direct connection with Baghdad-controlled areas of Iraq, without passing through the Kurdistan Region. In 2017, the Turks and the Iraqi government revived the idea when they both opposed the Kurdistan independence referendum. Among the issues discussed was a proposal to open a new border gate at Ovakoy to facilitate bilateral trade. However, the plan was put on hold because of Kurdish opposition, although Turkey is still exploring ways to expand its economic and geopolitical influence in northern Iraq. One proposal is the construction of a railway connecting Mosul to Intab in southern Turkey.

Most of these projects have faced difficulties that were exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, competition between the three neighbouring countries, which has also polarized Iraqi domestic politics, means that opening new border crossings and establishing road and railway connections is increasingly a political decision. Rampant corruption, the dysfunctional nature of the state, and the influence of nonstate actors will continue to raise doubts about Iraq's ability to take advantage of such opportunities.

Border areas would benefit economically from the opening of new border crossings and expanded links with neighbouring countries, which would decrease the pressures on Iraq's urban centres that every year absorb tens of thousands of migrants from peripheral regions. At the same time, if the cross-border trade perpetuates Iraq's import-oriented economy, the expansion of border crossings will only prolong the deprivation that local farmers and producers are facing.

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HOW ANTI-COUP PROTESTS AFFECT CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN MYANMAR'S NORTH-EASTERN BORDERLANDS

By Seng

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar woke to the news that its military forces, known as the Tatmadaw, had re-taken power in a coup d'état after a decade of democratic government. The coup followed weeks of tensions between the military and the civilian government, as the former laid claims of fraud in the 2020 election. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, many elected lawmakers were arrested. Mass demonstrations and nationwide uprisings were organised, with doctors, teachers and civil servants engaging in a civil disobedience movement.

As protest movements began to spread from urban areas in majority ethnic Bamar lowlands to the borders, ethnic communities called for greater changes beyond the restoration of democracy, voicing long-held political grievances

around the country's political system, demanding representative political institutions and future federal arrangements. One such ethnic-majority area, Kachin State in the country's northeast, is a useful case study for understanding how national protest movements in reaction to the 2021 coup have connected with much broader historical struggles waged for decades by ethnic communities in Myanmar's borderlands. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), with an estimated strength of 20,000 combatants, is one of the most powerful ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) in Myanmar. Established in 1961, the KIA has waged war against the Tatmadaw in resource-rich Kachin State for decades.

Following the coup, mass protest campaigns in the Kachin State capital of Myitkyina were met with the same violent crackdowns by security forces as those in Yangon and other parts of the country. The KIA stepped in to warn the regime against the use of excessive force on protesters. Growing political tensions gave way to an escalation in conflict, with KIA offensives against key Tatmadaw command posts as well as military-run mining sites and transport infrastructure in Kachin State. Meanwhile, violent crackdowns in majority ethnic Bamar regions led to growing calls by broad segments of civil society for EAOs to join opposition movements and engage the Tatmadaw militarily. As the KIA continued to launch offensives against the Tatmadaw, aiming to re-take territory it had lost following the collapse of a long-standing ceasefire, its actions were increasingly celebrated by protesters.

Calls for joint armed forces between Bamar and ethnic groups have continued to grow, with the KIA becoming an active participant in discussions with ousted lawmakers and government actors in exile. Coordination bodies have been established to ensure the representation of Kachin interests in political discussions around future governance scenarios in a peaceful Myanmar. At the same time, security forces' crackdowns on protests and civilian opposition have become more violent. Large groups of young protesters primarily in urban areas around Yangon and Mandalay posit that armed insurrection is inevitable and seek combat training in EAO-controlled territories in the borderlands.

Like many EAOs, the KIA is now in a position of having support from many ethnic Bamar populations which for decades cast EAOs as rebel groups at the source of Myanmar's many conflicts. The shift in public perception, and gradual alignment of EAO objectives for autonomy and protesters' desires for an end to Tatmadaw supremacy, have opened up new spaces for discussion around historical ethnic grievances. This has also caused a shift in the broader political economy of Myanmar's conflict landscape. EAOs actively engaged against the Tatmadaw now occupy powerful positions within national-level protest politics and state-building debates, while the political capital that some ceasefire-signatory groups had built over years of formal peace dialogue with the Tatmadaw is waning. This is particularly the case for smaller EAOs that today have limited fighting capacity.

Escalating conflict in the northeast has put pressure on armed group revenue-raising activities, including the lucrative extraction, transportation, and cross-border trade of natural resources. Amid the foreign currency crunch brought about by the banking crisis and international sanctions, the Tatmadaw, through proxy militia groups, and the KIA are fighting for control over jade, amber and rare earth mines in Western Kachin State. This is cause for concern in neighbouring China, whose government has thus far refrained from interfering in what it claims are Myanmar's 'internal affairs'. Undoubtedly, China's priority will be conflict management in the area, whereby active fighting is reduced, and the security situation stabilized, without actually addressing conflict drivers or seeking a sustainable resolution. Popular opposition to the Tatmadaw makes it unlikely that China will unilaterally back the military regime. Chinese actors are likely most concerned about the potential involvement of Western actors in the border areas, as well as safeguarding the billion-dollar investments they have made in energy and infrastructure projects there.

With strong popular support in the nationwide protest movement, and its legitimacy bolstered through its consultation with ousted civilian leadership, the KIA is in a position not only to influence the direction of national political discussions, but also to reinforce and expand its territorial control in the northeast. This includes parts of neighbouring Shan State that is home to large ethnic Kachin populations, which have long been contested by the Tatmadaw and local militia. In this new conflict landscape in North-Eastern Myanmar, as the KIA continues to assert itself against the Tatmadaw to achieve its long-held ambitions, it is certain that local communities will bear the burden of increased violence.

The crisis wrought by the coup overlays the Covid-19 pandemic, with political turmoil amplifying looming economic and humanitarian crises. The United Nations predicts that, as a result, up to half of Myanmar's population risks sliding into poverty and experiencing food and fuel shortages this year. Conflict-affected areas, including Kachin State, already face significant vulnerability with many communities regularly displaced by fighting, large illicit economies operated by myriad armed actors, and weak public service and support infrastructure across contested territories. As the KIA seeks to expand its territory and consolidate its influence in the northeast, it will have a stronger say in the management of regional governance and mitigating the effects of national crises on the ground.

These developments are being replicated in different ways across many EAO-controlled territories as the political fallout from the coup re-shapes Myanmar's conflict landscape. Historical conflicts are being reignited and altered, ushering in a new chapter in Myanmar's seven decades of civil conflict, and clear solutions remain as elusive as ever.

Map: Kachin State in Myanmar, with its state capital Myitkyina.
Source: Adapted from OpenStreetMap (openstreetmap.org).

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