

PERIPHERAL VISION

Views from the Borderlands

SEMI-ANNUAL BULLETIN
SPRING 2020



THE STAKES IN THE SYRIAN-TURKISH BORDER ZONE

Kheder Khaddour

In March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire in Idlib Governorate. This followed a fierce military campaign waged by the Syrian regime and its armed forces aimed at regaining control over large parts of Syria's northwest.

Under the terms of the deal, Turkey will be allowed to keep a foothold in Idlib. In practical terms this means it will have de facto control over the local economy. The Turks have already invested heavily in the area, and have deployed large numbers of troops in Idlib. The end result is likely to be the creation of a border zone between Turkey and Syria after the Turkish military connects the different areas it has come to control in northern Syria.

So far, Turkish military operations have created four such border zones, each named for the military operation in which Turkey seized territory. The Euphrates Shield operation in 2016 and 2017 led to Turkish control over northern Aleppo Governorate. In 2018, Turkey took northwestern Aleppo Governorate through its Olive Branch operation. In 2019, it used its Peace Spring operation to occupy areas east of the Euphrates River. Finally, in 2020 the Turkish army launched an operation in Idlib called Spring Shield.

The dynamics of Syria's civil war changed fundamentally following the Russian intervention in September 2015. Serious efforts to replace the Assad regime in Damascus came to an end, and the rebels, including hardline Islamist groups, were pushed northwards into areas near the Turkish border. Today, tens of thousands of armed men are concentrated near the border with Turkey.

In addition, there are about 3.6 million Syrians currently residing in Turkey. About 1.5 million of them live in cities near or on the southern border, including Gaziantep, Kilis, Hatay and Urfa. About 2 million more Syrians live just over the border in Syria itself. Syrians, many in partnership with Turks, have registered some 3,000 trading companies in Turkey to distribute their products in these four Syrian border zones, and from there all across Syria. Turkey's control over the zones, therefore, will heavily influence the local economy.

The main border crossings between Syria and Turkey are Bab al-Salameh, which crosses from Idlib Governorate into Turkey's Hatay Province, and Bab al-Hawa, which crosses from northern Aleppo into Kilis and Gaziantep Provinces. These crossings are lifelines for those areas in northern Syria that are outside the control of the Assad regime, and remain major conduits for people and goods.

While a third of the Syrian population today is somehow tied to Turkey economically and administratively, the Syrians still operate within Syria's economic landscape. In military terms, the war in Syria is reaching its end. According to the agreement reached in March, the Assad regime will control the M4 and M5 international highways, which connect the key cities of Aleppo, Damascus, and Latakia to each other and to Syria's east. However, Damascus' control will not extend to the border with Turkey.

Consequently, the Turkish-controlled zone in northern Syria will be neither a part of Syria nor of Turkey. Rather, it will function as a buffer between the two, while playing an important economic function. On the Turkish side, in provinces such as Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay, many Turks have deep economic ties with Syrians on the other side of the border. This buffer zone will therefore bring major economic benefits to both sides—the Turks and the Syrians living in the border are creating an area where it is safe to conduct commercial activities.

In this way, the Syrian regime will have succeeded in changing the nature of the situation in Syria from a domestic uprising into one that involves a border conflict with Turkey. In turn, Turkey's involvement in the Syrian border economy will mean its greater involvement in Syrian affairs. Therefore, the border has allowed the Syrian regime and Turkey to advance their respective political agendas. For the Assad regime it has focused attention away from the uprising against Assad rule, thereby effectively transcending it. It has also allowed Turkey to play a greater role in Syria, fulfilling Turkish regional ambitions while also generating economic activity ensuring that internally displaced Syrian refugees remain inside Syria.

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Image: A Syrian boy walks past a graffiti in the northern city of Azaz in the rebel-held region of Aleppo province, near the border with Turkey. Photo by NAZEER AL-KHATIB/AFP via Getty Images.



Map: Turkish-controlled areas along the Syria/Turkey border

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PERIPHERAL VISION IS PUBLISHED TWICE A YEAR AS A TIMELY UPDATE OF DYNAMICS ON THE GROUND, WHILE ALSO HIGHLIGHTING THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE X-BORDER LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK'S ACTIVITIES

LOCALIZING AID IN BANGLADESH'S CROSS-BORDER ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

Jessica Olney

Significant steps towards international justice for the Rohingya community were taken in late 2019. In November the International Criminal Court (ICC) identified the possibility that Myanmar committed forcible cross-border deportation of the Rohingya in recent waves of violence since 2016, a crime against humanity according to Art. 7(1)(d) of the Rome Statute. Then, in December the International Court of Justice heard the case brought by The Gambia, with the court announcing four provisional measures against the Myanmar government in its preliminary ruling in January.

Refugees in Bangladesh await sustainable solutions through the ICC, ICJ and other international justice mechanisms. Yet while recent progress brings hope, international accountability is expected to take years, and will likely be insufficient to resolve the domestic political factors at the root of the crisis. Refugees as well as host communities are asking for humanitarian assistance to be delivered in a way that engenders their own sense of agency and resilience. To achieve this, there is growing focus on addressing the Rohingya crisis through localized rather than international action.

Since the early days of the current humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar, advocates have called for greater *localization* of aid: a transfer of responsibilities from international to national and local responders. This movement is not specific to Bangladesh; the Grand Bargain agreement was ratified by over 60 leading international NGOs at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Its purpose is to improve the efficacy and effectiveness of aid worldwide; localization is one of a set of strategies seen as contributing to these goals.¹

Localization proponents envision the future of aid as more locally driven in order to place more control and decision-making power into the hands of local and crisis-affected populations and NGOs, who may possess more intimate knowledge than international organizations of the context in which an emergency has taken place. They see localization as a tool for improving the outcomes and cost effectiveness of humanitarian and development assistance in an era of increasing global fragility. Furthermore, localization advocates believe in the potential to overcome entrenched power imbalances between global North and South by transferring responsibility away from institutions headquartered in donor countries and toward recipients.

Bangladesh is well positioned to lead on the localization agenda, owing to a strong domestic base of development experts. But the Grand Bargain is still relatively new, and there are few examples of how a localized aid agenda can be effectively harnessed to respond to a cross-border crisis. The efficacy of the localization agenda in Bangladesh is dependent on the extent to which Rohingya and host community voices are prioritized.

A network of localization activists from Cox's Bazar-based civil society organizations (CSOs) have been calling for international NGOs working in Cox's Bazar to uphold their commitment to the Grand Bargain's principles, through efforts to prioritize locals during recruitment, and for more funding to be allocated to local organizations. They also call for greater inclusion and support of host community members, who were the first responders to the refugee crisis in Cox's Bazar. Local CSOs have been working since the 1990s to provide basic humanitarian services to Rohingya refugees.

Yet despite support from many local CSOs, elements within the host community have raised concerns about the potential for the localization effort to increase self-determination amongst refugees. They worry that this could open the door to their long-term assimilation. Bangladeshi citizens are greatly outnumbered by refugees, and cross-border criminal activity involving both Rohingya and locals, particularly drug smuggling and human trafficking, remains conspicuous. These concerns, along with negative perceptions and stereotypes about refugees, fuel fears about their long-term tenure in Bangladesh.

Beyond local tensions, however, is the question of what role Rohingya would play in the aid localization efforts. Rohingya themselves are legally prohibited from registering or receiving financial support for community-based organizations (CBOs) under Bangladesh law. By this measure, Bangladesh's localization experiment is more likely to empower Bangladeshi CSOs than the refugees themselves. There are important cultural and language differences between Bangladeshis and the Rohingya—only 16 per cent of refugee households have someone who speaks Bangla—and there are risks that local political tensions will further marginalize refugee concerns. Limiting Rohingya participation in aid localization threatens to impede the Grand Bargain's promise of a power shift that places the participation of affected populations front and center.

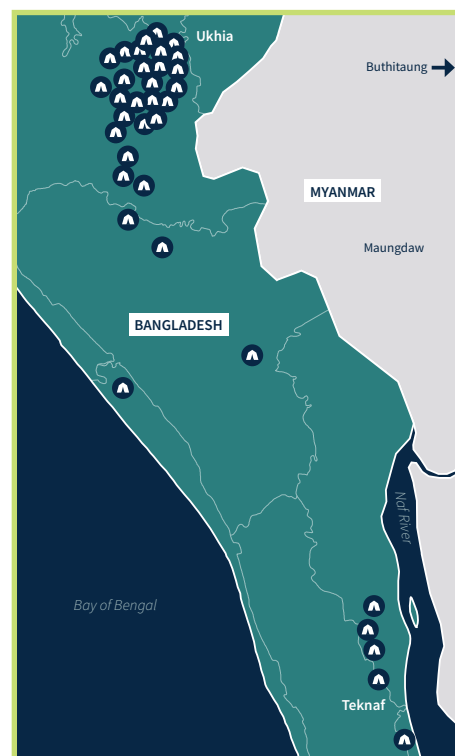
Despite these restrictions, some camp residents have begun building a nascent civil society. These new groups implement community service activities, engage with humanitarian agencies, and participate in social media advocacy about Rohingya issues as members encounter questions around acceptance by community members and authorities. Yet there is still limited awareness and understanding of CBOs among humanitarian and government responders, impeding their collective capacity to receive and distribute support among the refugee community.

Rohingya CBOs have also been considering how to respond to COVID-19 within the crowded camps, where a large outbreak of the virus could easily overwhelm humanitarian services. This reinforces the need for refugee civil society groups to engage with the mainstream humanitarian response. Yet the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought an abrupt halt to the localization discussion.

Continues on next page



Image: Humanitarian aid distribution in the crowded Rohingya refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: Jessica Olney



Map: Rohingya refugee camps along the Bangladesh/Myanmar border

Since March humanitarian activities have been severely curtailed in an effort to minimize the potential for the virus to spread to the camps. Unfortunately, by mid-May the first refugees tested positive for COVID-19, and humanitarian actors will struggle to prevent a widespread outbreak amongst the crowded and squalid conditions.

Adding to the dire situation is the ongoing internet shutdown in the camps that has left its residents without access to information about COVID-19 and created an environment where fear and misinformation permeate; many refugees believe contracting the Coronavirus means an automatic death sentence.²

For now, the refugees' ability to prepare for and prevent the virus' spread is heavily impeded, yet Rohingya members of camp-based community organizations still strive to raise awareness and distribute soap, masks and other items to fellow community members. Face-to-face meetings remain people's main way to communicate, making lockdown orders more difficult to follow.

COVID-19 brings new weight to the localization argument as communities around the world strive to minimize its spread within their own surroundings. Yet camp residents have limited agency over their own lives and little recourse to uphold such a major call to civic action. With progress towards aid localization in Cox's Bazar now at a standstill, and the retreat of much of the formal humanitarian support, Rohingya CBOs are trying to respond and raise awareness despite lacking resources, information, and relationships with government and humanitarian actors. The COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity for greater support to be rendered to refugee groups already active in their community. This is an important step in helping Rohingya regain control over their lives in the midst of ongoing crises.

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1. Grand Bargain (Official Website): <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>; Grand Bargain signatories as of March 2020: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-official-website/grand-bargain-signatories>
2. International Organisation for Migration and ACAPS, Flying News about the Corona Virus. March 2020.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CONTESTED BORDERS

The X-Border Local Research Network is adapting to address COVID-19, the largest pandemic to affect the world in over a century. While countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa are experiencing the impact and epidemiology of the virus differently, common challenges are emerging. Alongside the deteriorating public health crisis has been an alarming trend towards the exacerbation of conditions which drive conflict in fragile border regions.

The virus is impacting states with already limited capacity to respond. Civil war and contested territorial control in the borderlands of Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan has meant authorities have struggled to implement containment and health protocols. Non-state groups have stepped up to offer services in some areas, but the response have been uneven, and coordination has been difficult across conflict lines. Calls by the United Nations for a global ceasefire have mostly fallen on deaf ears, having a direct impact on the ability of health workers to respond to the pandemic.

Displaced communities and refugees have felt the effect of border closures and movement restrictions. News in May of the first positive COVID-19 cases in the Cox's Bazar Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh, and in IDP camps in Bentiu and Juba in South Sudan, come with the added concern that the virus could spread rapidly amongst the squalid and overcrowded conditions.

Alongside the direct impacts on communities are the secondary hardships inflicted by stilted economies, disrupted markets and crackdowns on irregular trade. Slowdowns in the global trade and closed borders have sparked protests in trading towns along the Tunisia and Libya border. While formal trade in the mild stimulant khat in Somalia has been disrupted by the closure of borders across the Horn of Africa, resulting in its sale and use being pushed underground. These impacts can disproportionately affect women who lose access to livelihood opportunities afforded by informal economies.

An emerging reality is that these effects are being most acutely felt in areas where corruption, weak institutions and inequality are already rampant—further entrenching the structural violence that fuels conflict. These social, political and economic impacts on fragile borderlands risk being lost within the enormous global response to the pandemic.

The long-term impacts of the pandemic on conflict-affected borderlands remain unclear. Major shocks or crises typically exacerbate ongoing trends rather than define a specific new trajectory, and so it is likely that no consistent single direction of change will emerge. Policy responses to the pandemic, and the impact of huge economic disruption, will increase the likelihood of major shifts as new operating conditions alter border regimes, reconfigure political relationships, and encourage leaders to act in ways that would previously have been unthinkable. Increased violence is a likely consequence in many locations as conflict actors, from governments to non-state armed groups and criminal networks, seek to gain from the crisis by consolidating military strength and establishing their legitimacy with local populations.

Yet new opportunities to broker ceasefires or push for dialogue may also emerge as public health concerns generate common ground for shared action and longstanding stalemates are broken. The scope to support such opportunities for peacebuilding will depend on the provision of accurate and timely information from the local level.

The consortium and its local partners are working to detail how the pandemic is impacting and exacerbating conflicts in border regions. An upcoming special issue of *Peripheral Vision* will focus on COVID-19.

For more analysis see:

- [Living Off The Books \[Tunisia/MENA\]](#)
- [Khat and COVID-19: Somalia's Cross-Border Economy In The Time Of Coronavirus](#)
- [South Sudan's Food Imports In The Time Of COVID-19](#)
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CROSS-BORDER BARGAINING IN SOUTH SUDAN'S NEW TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT

The agreement to establish South Sudan's Transitional Government of National Unity (ToGNU) declared on 22 February 2020 owes much to continuities in managing cross-border conflict dynamics with Sudan. Field Marshall Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, as chair of Sudan's Sovereign Council, picked up where ousted former President Bashir left off, as mediator between South Sudan's government and its armed opposition. Khartoum has a key stake in South Sudan's political settlement, to safeguard continuing oil production and transit fees from its pipeline, access to its urban markets and cheap labour force across the border, and to ensure Juba's cooperation in peace talks with its own armed rebels the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N).

NEGOTIATING PEACE

The political economy of managing cross-border conflicts has been a critical element to both Juba and Khartoum's on-going political transitions and peace processes over the last eighteen months. The latest example of this was Khartoum's role in helping South Sudan's President Kiir negotiate the appointment his five TGoNU vice-Presidents. Under the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) provisions, the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA)—a group of nine opposition militias and political parties—was given the opportunity to present a vice-Presidential candidate.

With the SSOA unable to agree on their pick it fell to President Kiir and Field Marshall al-Burhan to propose a candidate. Together they proposed General Hussein Abdel Bagi Ayii Akol, who comes from a well-established family of political-military entrepreneurs active in the Sudan-South borderlands since the 1950s. They reasoned that Hussein, and the wider Abdel Bagi family—well-integrated into the political fabric of South Darfur and Khartoum—would be mutually beneficial in ensuring close-ties between the two governments in general, and sound management of their borderland regions in particular.

INVENTION OF THE BORDERLAND

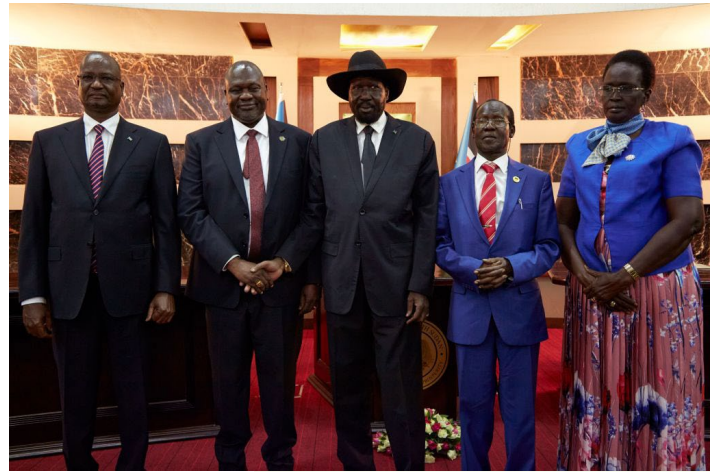
The Abdel Bagi family have long played the role of trusted interlocutors between southern / South Sudan, and Khartoum. Following South Sudan's 2011 independence Hussein's father, Abdel Bagi Ayii Akol—an Arabic-speaking Muslim convert from Aweil—became an influential power-broker for Khartoum in the Bahr el-Ghazal region, which now forms the border with Sudan. Abdel Bagi acted as a counterinsurgent for the Khartoum government during the First Sudanese Civil War against the Anya Nya rebels; and also in the 1980s and 90s, fighting the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), which later signed the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with Khartoum and led South Sudan into independence in 2011.

During the CPA period and first years of independence the Abdel Bagi family remained a powerful fixture in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, despite the rise to power of Paul Malong, state governor (2008-14) and subsequently SPLA/army Chief of Staff. During South Sudan's recent civil war, the Abdel Bagi family fought on both sides before eventually forming their own militia—the South Sudan Patriotic Movement/Army (SSPM/A)—back in their home borderland area.

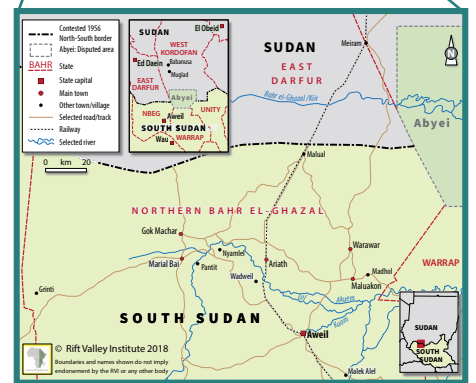
CONSOLIDATING POWER

Hussein's appointment to the vice-presidency typifies the complicated balance of South Sudanese and regional power interests that underpin R-ARCSS and the agreement to establish the TGoNU. His nomination brings increased regional representation to the vice presidency, and strengthens the new government's military power in northern Bahr el Ghazal through Vice-President Hussein and his brother Agany (a SSPM/A militia commander) longstanding friendships and connections within the South Sudanese military apparatus. The family's networks will continue to influence the pool of militarised labour in the borderlands, bringing young recruits for the SPLA's successor, the South Sudan Peoples Defence Forces (SSPDF)

Hussein's cross-border political and military influence will further consolidate President Kiir's control over the borderlands with Sudan, and provide a bulwark against their respective local and national rival Paul Malong, who is not yet part of R-ARCSS and TGoNU. Malong, who is seen as a potential presidential aspirant, has seen his power weaken as supportive militias active in the Bahr el-Ghazal and Sudan borderlands were chased out of the area in August 2019 by forces loyal to President Kiir. In contrast to Malong's fortunes Hussein is now Vice President, and Agany's and his South Sudan Patriotic Army (SSPA)—based across the Sudanese border near Meiram since 2016—have been co-opted in President Kiir's latest military reshuffle. The Abdel Bagi family again finds itself in the ascendant, and is well-placed to help manage the delicate relations between Juba and Khartoum whilst benefitting from its strengthened control over the cross-border economy.



South Sudanese President Salva Kiir (3rd-L) shakes hands with First Vice President Dr Riek Machar (2nd-L) as Third Vice President Taban Deng Gai (L), Second Vice President James Wani Igga (2nd-R) and Fourth Vice President Rebecca Garang attend their swearing-in ceremony at the State House in Juba, on February 22, 2020 (Photo by ALEX MCBRIDE/AFP via Getty Images)



Map: Northern Bahr El-Ghazal state along the Sudan/ South Sudan border

The **X-Border Local Research Network** – a component of the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) X-Border Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCPET) program – is a partnership between The Asia Foundation, the Carnegie Middle East Center and the Rift Valley Institute. With support from UK aid from the UK government, the three organizations work with local research partners to improve our understanding of political, economic and social dynamics in conflict-affected borderlands, and the flows of people, goods and ideas that connect them. The project supports more effective policymaking and development programming, leveraging research to advocate for peaceful change. The views in *Peripheral Vision* do not necessarily represent those of the partner organizations or the UK government.

