

REGIMES OF MOBILITY

*Borders and State Formation in the
Middle East, 1918–1946*

**Edited by Jordi Tejel and
Ramazan Hakkı Öztan**

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REVISITING *MILLÎ*: BORDERS AND THE MAKING OF THE TURKISH NATION STATE

Alexander E. Balistreri

Nineteen twenty-one was Turkey's year of the border. A flurry of diplomatic activity on the part of the nationalist government in Ankara that year defined two long segments of the post-war country's territory: its north-eastern border with the Caucasus, running from the Black Sea to Nakhichevan, and its southern border with Syria, running between the Mediterranean and the Tigris. The northeastern border was settled in two 1921 treaties, the Treaty of Moscow in March and the Treaty of Kars in October. The southern border was delineated in two 1921 agreements, the London Agreement in March and the Ankara Agreement in October. Though the subsequent Treaty of Lausanne (1923) has overshadowed discussion of these agreements, it would hardly be an exaggeration to point to 1921 as the year the Turkish nation state took concrete shape. Articles, speeches and parliamentary debates that year refer incessantly to the inviolability of its 'national border' (*hudud-ı milliye* or *millî hudut*). Yet in reality, these 'inviolable borders' were both pragmatic and open to change. Referring to the region around Aleppo, Mustafa Kemal Paşa (Atatürk) spoke of his 'active determination of the border which we *today* call the national border' at the end of the war.¹ In other words, Turkey's national borders could be actively determined and their

¹ 'Bugün *hudûd-ı milliye dediğimiz hududu fiilen tespî*'. Gazi Mustafa Kemal, *Nutuk* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2011) [hereafter: *Nutuk*], p. 620. Emphasis mine.

definition could change throughout history. The mismatch between the supposed inviolability of national borders and their actual flexibility was both a product of conflicts over how to define the nation state as well as the inherent challenge of defining a nation on the basis of political borders.

Bringing the Nation State Back In

By examining the border-making processes of 1921 here, I propose two arguments, one empirical and one methodological. Empirically, I highlight the simultaneity of border-making on both sides of the country. The chronological coincidence of these processes, for example, is striking: the London Agreement and Moscow Treaty were discussed on the same day in the Turkish parliament (17 March 1921), and the final international agreements that formed the basis for Turkey's northeastern and southern borders were also introduced to deputies on the same day (24 October 1921). Moreover, the negotiations surrounding these two borders, conducted bilaterally with separate countries who were themselves in a state of hostility toward one another, were closely interrelated: not only did Turkish negotiators hope to play off sides to gain more territorial concessions, but the techniques of compromise and pressure used during border discussions helped the slapdash diplomatic corps of the new government in Ankara learn for future negotiations.

The second, methodological argument of this chapter relates to the way historians approach borders in the modern era. When analysing the transition between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish nation state, many historians have attempted to avoid the excesses of methodological nationalism and, in so doing, implicitly downplayed the actual establishment of the nation state between 1920 and 1923. This happens in various ways: Ottoman historians focusing on the early modern era tend to locate the transition to modern statehood far *before* the 1920s, while historians of twentieth-century Turkey and the Middle East find strong continuities across the first decades of the century and locate the break to true nation statehood many years *after* the 1920s. In both cases, the borders drawn around Turkey between 1918 and 1923 are often disregarded as arbitrary, artificial or altogether porous. Keith David Watenpaugh, for example, argues that historians' focus on the First World War as a turning point potentially 'reifies the Franklin-Bouillon Line between Republican Turkey and French Mandate Syria – the path of which

merely traces a ceasefire line determined by a railroad bed – into a relevant cultural and ideological boundary'.²

In light of a dominant historiographical paradigm that shuns the nation state, this chapter's focus on nation state boundaries demands justification. It is possible to study a nation state border without reifying it – to highlight the importance of nation state borders as 'ideological boundaries' without resorting to methodological nationalism. Historians can view nation state borders not as an inevitable or desirable historical outcome, but rather examine each border as the product of its own historical context and of human agency. The drawing of Turkish 'national borders' in 1921 was not a 'mere tracing of a ceasefire line' without any effect; rather, the actual process of negotiating national borders had the immediate effect of forcing Turkish officials and lawmakers to define the nation itself and, by extension, the entire scope of their political activity horizon. New borders swept officials up in diplomacy and compelled new borderlanders to consider loyalties and identities.³ Studying nation state borders is valuable because it helps us understand the worldview of Turkish nationalist leaders, the way they imagined and internalised the map of their country as well as their role in it. In other words, it helps us understand territory, in Charles S. Maier's words, as both 'decision space' and 'identity space', while highlighting the accelerated effort to join the two in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴ At the same time, detailed scrutiny of the nation-state border process reveals the incompleteness of these efforts. Nation state borders remained the rough fringes of imagined territories. This chapter thus highlights the awkwardness of nation state borders – awkward in the sense that their very existence was trumpeted as a triumph of nationalism even as they were the result of significant concessions of territory claimed by nationalists.

² Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 182.

³ On the political effects of border-drawing in the early 1920s, see Chapter Two of this volume, by Orçun Can Okan. For the longer term cultural and symbolic effects of drawing these borders, see Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 5, 14.

⁴ Charles S. Maier, *Once Within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2016), p. 3.

Scholars of Turkey widely share the view that early ‘Kemalist nationalism was above all territorial’ in nature – that is, that it eschewed irredentism among Turkic groups outside of the Ottoman core and that it defined the Turkish nation as those Muslims living within Turkey’s borders.⁵ ‘The indivisibility of the Turkish state and its nation and the irreversibility of its borders,’ writes Ayşe Kadioğlu, ‘constitute the cornerstone of Turkish national identity.’⁶ This strong association of borders with identity differentiates nation state territoriality from imperial territoriality. Nevertheless, policies like irredentism and assimilation blur the difference between late-imperial and nation state boundaries. As was the case in other ‘rump states’ whittled down from the polyethnic empires, Turkish nationalism tended at first to be civic and assimilationist rather than ethnic and exclusionary,⁷ though it did not rule out irredentism either. In this respect, the vague characterisation of Turkey’s new borders as *millî* (national) served nationalist leaders well. In the early 1920s, the definition of *millet* (nation) was in flux – its definition encompassed religious, ethnic, political and territorial elements whose emphasis could be adjusted as the situation called for.⁸ The strong territorial

⁵ Ali Kazancıgil, ‘The Ottoman-Turkish state and Kemalism’, in Ali Kazancıgil and Ergun Özbudun (eds), *Atatürk: Founder of a Modern State* (London: C. Hurst, 1981), p. 51. See also Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 3rd. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 352; Behlül Özkan, *From the Abode of Islam to the Turkish Vatan: The Making of a National Homeland in Turkey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 60, 90; Frank Tachau, ‘The Search for National Identity among the Turks’, *Die Welt des Islams*, N.S. Vol. 3 (1962–63), pp. 165–76.

⁶ Ayşe Kadioğlu, ‘The Twin Motives of Turkish Nationalism’, in Ayşe Kadioğlu and E. Fuat Keyman (eds), *Symbiotic Antagonisms: Competing Nationalisms in Turkey* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011), p. 48.

⁷ Karen Barkey, ‘Thinking About Consequences of Empire’, in Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen (eds), *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), p. 107.

⁸ M. Aşım Karaömerlioğlu, ‘The Role of Religion and Geography in Turkish Nationalism: The Case of Nurettin Topçu’, in P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, Thalia Dragonas, and Çağlar Keyder (eds), *Spatial Conceptions of the Nation: Modernizing Geographies in Greece and Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 98–100; Erik Jan Zürcher, ‘The vocabulary of Muslim nationalism’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, Vol. 137 (January 1999), pp. 81–92.

element introduced after the war added instability to the concept of *millet*; to ask whether the nation defined the borders or the borders defined the nation led only down the road of infinite regression. One thing was clear: in 1920 and 1921 the definition of the nation was for most nationalists not a strictly ethnic one. Mustafa Kemal, in speeches to parliament in 1920, defined the national borders as encompassing either one *millet* or ‘sibling *millets*’ composed of multiple Muslim elements, including Turks, Kurds and Circassians.⁹ The Turkish nationalist leader was even more explicit in a speech to parliament in 1921:

What is our national border [*hudud-ı millîmiz (sic)*]? Is it strictly necessary that places inhabited by Turks and by Kurds, struggling alongside us [to determine] our fate, be included in our national border? No, no. That would be too broad . . . Our national border is that national border which enables us to live happily and independently, and whichever border we can draw to best optimise our interests will be our national border. [There is] after all [no] clearly delineated boundary.¹⁰

The fact that nationalist leaders did not use ‘national borders’ as the equivalent of ethnic borders is further demonstrated by the contemporary translation of the French term *frontière ethnographique* not as *hudud-ı millîye* but rather as *hudud-ı ırkiye*. Nationalist leaders’ preference for ethno-national, rather than strictly ethnographic, borders would have far-reaching consequences.

One central element of the Turkish nationalist narrative that can be more properly understood by focusing on the specifics of the border-making process of the early 1920s is the *Misak-ı Millî*, or National Pact. The *Misak-ı Millî*, adopted by the nationalists of the last Ottoman chamber of deputies in 1920, is a statement of the aims of the nationalist movement. It pledges to defend the core territories of the Ottoman Empire, protect the rights of Muslims and followers of other religions, and develop the country through economic independence. As a declaration in line with contemporary global

⁹ *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Zabıt Ceridesi* [hereafter: TBMMZC] (24 April 1920), pp. 16–17; TBMMZC (1 May 1920), p. 165.

¹⁰ *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Gizli Celse Zabıtları* [hereafter: TBMMGCZ] (16 October 1921), p. 355.

calls to self-determination, the pact defends the right of Muslims living around the borders of the country to conduct plebiscites on whether to join the Ottoman-Turkish state. Since its passage, the *Misak-ı Millî* has been invoked as the quintessential founding document of modern Turkey. The treaties and agreements of 1921 examined in this chapter mention or quote it explicitly. In the Turkish popular mind, the *Misak-ı Millî* is understood to be a definitive statement of borders for the coming nation state. These ‘*Misak-ı Millî* borders’ are thought to reflect maximalist, irredentist claims and thus thought to unequivocally include, for example, Mosul, Aleppo or Western Thrace within the boundaries of modern Turkey. Criticising such widespread assumption of clear borders, some scholars have questioned the extent to which the *Misak-ı Millî* defines a border at all; one leftist historian infamously called the idea of the *Misak-ı Millî*, as used in Turkish state discourse, as ‘not much more than a legend’.¹¹ Others have defended it, meanwhile, as ‘a charter carefully prepared through the meticulous efforts of several ministries, the general staff, and commissions of the Ottoman Empire’.¹²

In fact, the *Misak-ı Millî* represents not a self-evident, uncontested manifesto but the negotiated outcome of fundamental discussions between the pragmatically orientated leadership of the nationalist movement, which preferred an ethno-national basis for the nation state and a clear statement of borders, and other Turkish-Muslim nationalists, some of whom pursued more utopian goals of retaining extensive imperial territory. Nationalist factions serving on the *Misak-ı Millî* commission, debated, for example, whether greater Syria should be envisioned as part of a future, possibly federated, state together with Anatolia.¹³ While the commission rejected this as an explicit aim, the text of the *Misak-ı Millî* appeased the more imperially minded nationalists by remaining deliberately vague about where the border of the

¹¹ Mete Tunçay, ‘*Misak-ı Millî* nin 1. Maddesi Üstüne’, *Birikim*, Vols. 18–19 (Ağustos-Eylül 1976), p. 16.

¹² Enes Demir, *Yeni Belgeler Işığında Vazgeçilmeyen Topraklar: Misak-ı Millî* (İstanbul: Post Yayın Dağıtım, 2017), p. 143.

¹³ Rızâ Nür, *Türk Tarihi*, Cild 1 (İstanbul: Matba‘a-i ‘âmirî, 1924), p. 196. On the history of this idea in the last years of the Ottoman Empire, see: Alp Yenen, ‘Envisioning Turco-Arab Co-Existence between Empire and Nationalism’, *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2021), pp. 72–112.

future nation state would be. The pact's first article refers to the ceasefire line of 30 October 1918 as if it were a kind of potential border, but continues by claiming that

all of the territories, *whether inside or outside this ceasefire line*, which are inhabited by a majority of Ottoman Muslims united in religion, culture, and aim, [and] filled with a feeling of mutual respect and solidarity . . . constitute a *de facto* and *de jure* whole whose division is unacceptable for any reason.¹⁴

The phrase 'inside or outside this ceasefire line' has caused consternation in Turkish historiography, since many subsequently published versions of the *Misak-ı Milli* omit the words 'or outside'.¹⁵ Indeed, it was Mustafa Kemal himself who opposed including this defence of territory beyond the ceasefire line in the *Misak-ı Milli*, arguing that its inclusion was a 'fundamental deviation from our principles on the border'.¹⁶ The Turkish nationalist leader argued that the priority should be a clearly articulated, defensible border; territory could then be expanded beyond this border in the future as conditions allowed. There is also a contradiction between the pledge to defend all Ottoman territory outside the ceasefire line as indivisible and the promise to provide populations living on such territories with the possibility of a plebiscite; this unresolved contradiction in the text of the *Misak-ı Milli* is arguably the result of the same dispute between pragmatic and utopian nationalist factions. As this chapter demonstrates, the heated debates over 'compromises' on Turkey's northeastern and southern borders that took place in 1921 can thus be understood as an extension of the original discussion of the *Misak-ı Milli*, itself revolving around the central question of how Turkey's future territory should be conceived: as a new country, or as a way of rescuing the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁴ The text of the *Misak-ı Milli* as made public by the Ottoman parliament is in *Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi* (17 February 1920), pp. 144–45. The italics are mine.

¹⁵ Tevfik Bıyıklıoğlu, *Atatürk Anadolu'da (1919–1921)* (İstanbul: Yeni Gün Haber Ajansı Basın ve Yayıncılık, 2000), pp. 136–37; Nejat Kaymaz, 'Misak-ı Milli Üzerinde Yapılan Tartışmalar Hakkında', *VIII. Türk Tarih Kongresi*, III. Cilt (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1977), 1957; Özkan, p. 87.

¹⁶ ' . . . sınır hakkındaki prensiplerimizle esash bir fark . . . ' Telegram of Mustafa Kemal to Rauf Bey [Orbay] (7 February 1920), in *Atatürk'ün Bütün Eserleri*, Cilt 6 (28 Aralık 1919–1 Mart 1920) (İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2015), p. 171.

Moscow, Kars and the Enemies of One's Enemies

One of the regions which was promised a plebiscite in the *Misak-ı Milli* was the *Elviye-i Selâse*, or the 'Three Districts' of Kars, Ardahan and Batum (Batumi). In fact, it was the recent history of this region that likely inspired nationalists' call for plebiscites around the entire empire: as early as 1918 the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had allowed the Ottoman government to arrange a plebiscite for the *Elviye-i Selâse* on the issue of joining the Ottoman Empire. Even as it did so, however, the Ottoman government simultaneously waged war against Georgia and Armenia, forcing both to give up even more territory in the Treaty of Batum. That treaty's border – including the territories of Akhaltsikhe (Ahıska), Iğdır, Borchalo and Nakhichevan – represented the outermost extent of concrete Ottoman claims after the First World War but remained a mostly theoretical one, since the territories it encompassed were never incorporated into Ottoman civilian rule. The ceasefire conditions and British occupation in late 1918 forced the Ottoman government and army back behind the empire's pre-war borders, giving up its gains from both the Treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Batum.

By the spring of 1920, conditions re-emerged for a new Turkish advance into the Caucasus. Compared to 1918, however, the geopolitical situation had changed considerably – and Turkish officials' view of the border along with it. The *Misak-ı Milli* of January that year was a watered-down version of Ottoman claims at the end of the war; it recognised only Kars, Ardahan and Batum as regions potentially within a national border and avoided mention of Akhaltsikhe, Iğdır and other 'Turkish-majority' areas in the southwest Caucasus that had been occupied in 1918. Turkish leaders were aware of the pending Bolshevisation of the South Caucasus. While they opposed an outright Bolshevik annexation of the region, they welcomed Bolshevik influence there and had no intention of alienating the Bolsheviks by occupying extensive territories in the Caucasus. At the same time, Kâzım Karabekir Paşa, commander of Turkish forces in the east, developed a strategy for the advancing Turkish army: take territory up to the Brest-Litovsk border and see how far the Red Army and Georgian Menshevik Army had come before deciding whether to advance beyond this boundary, especially into Armenia.¹⁷ At the

¹⁷ Kâzım Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2008), p. 745.

same time, Karabekir began describing this strategic border, drawn arbitrarily in the nineteenth century, as a national one. He wrote:

Our borders should follow the basic principle of ethnicity and religion – and this is an utmost necessity. From this perspective, the borders of the military operation on our eastern front . . . are to terminate at the borders of Georgia, thereby ending the enslavement of the fellow members of our ethnicity and replacing it with peace and security.¹⁸

In the late summer of 1920 the Ankara government began negotiations with Soviet Russia in Moscow regarding the recognition of Turkey and the acquisition of Russian aid. Turkey's delegation to Moscow led by Foreign Minister Bekir Sami Bey (Kunduh) aimed to have Soviet Russia recognise the borders it had described in the *Misak-ı Milli*. Russia's foreign minister Georgiy Chicherin, negotiating for the Russians, rejected the *Misak-ı Milli*'s conjunctural definition of Turkey's borders and said that the Bolsheviks' interpretation of self-determination meant they would only recognise a Turkey within its ethnographic boundaries (*budud-ı irkiye*). This posed a problem for Turkey, because while Chicherin and Karabekir's standard for tracing boundaries around ethnicities was seemingly the same, each promoted different ethnicities and defined them differently. At issue were provinces such as Van and Bitlis, areas that had been occupied by Russia during the war and which the Russians now believed should belong to an Armenian state.¹⁹ On the topic of Turkish sovereignty in Kars, Ardahan and the hinterland of Batum, the Turkish delegation was not willing to negotiate. On other borderland territories, however, the delegation was open to discussion; they would accept Russian mediation regarding the territories of the Armenian Republic disputed between Turkey and Armenia, and they would negotiate with the South Caucasian governments regarding the status of the city and port of Batum.²⁰ Russia budged somewhat, claiming in a letter to Mustafa Kemal that they

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 697, 801–2.

¹⁹ TBMMGCZ (16 October 1920), p. 170; Kâmuran Gürün, *Türk-Sovyet İlişkileri (1920–1953)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1991), p. 37; Yusuf Kemal Tengirşen[n]k, *Vatan Hizmetinde* (İstanbul: Bahar Matbaası, 1967) [hereafter: Tengirşenk], pp. 167–70.

²⁰ TBMMGCZ (16 October 1920), pp. 170–71; Tengirşenk, pp. 188–89.

would respect the *Misak-ı Milli*, but deliberately ignored the scope of the territory that it claimed could be subject to referendum. In line with the Russian interpretation of ethnographic boundaries, self-determination was to be implemented in any areas that were not ‘indisputably Turkish’, including (in the geographic terms used by Chicherin) Armenia, Kurdistan, Lazistan, the hinterland of Batum, Eastern Thrace and any areas in which Turks and Arabs lived together. Syria and the Arab lands to the south were to be completely independent, without recourse to a plebiscite.²¹

While discussions between Turkey and Russia continued in 1920 and 1921, all observers expected that the Caucasus would be divided between the Bolsheviks and the nationalist Turks. Yet when the Sovietisation of the Caucasus stalled, the Ankara government had to take its neighbours into consideration: the Republics of Georgia and Armenia. War broke out between the Republic of Armenia and the Ankara government in the late summer of 1920, with Armenia seeking to secure the borders it had been promised at Sèvres and Turkey attempting to regain Kars, which it had lost with the British occupation. Turkish forces advanced easily, even seizing territory beyond the Brest-Litovsk border when it took Aleksandropol’ (Gyumri, Gümrü) in November.²² Throughout 1920 Turkish leaders pursued their advance into Kars and Armenian territory with a cautious eye on Soviet Russia, which also claimed influence in the region and with whom the Ankara government sought good relations. So when the Armenian Republic sued for peace in November, Turkey aimed to definitively debilitate the Armenian army but advanced mild political conditions, including plebiscites in disputed border regions, free commerce across borders and a return of all displaced persons to their homes.²³ The resulting Treaty of Aleksandropol’ between Turkey and Armenia in December 1920 traced a border very similar to today’s. Although the Sovietisation of Armenia prevented the treaty from coming into force, the latter did serve as a basis for discussion on the border between Turkey and

²¹ Gürün, pp. 51–52.

²² A detailed account of the Turkish–Armenian war of 1920 and its geopolitical context is given in Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia, Vol. IV: Between Crescent and Sickle: Partition and Sovietization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Chapters 5–6.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 275–78.

Russia.²⁴ Less intensive diplomatic relations were initiated with Georgia in September 1920.²⁵ Here, Turkey and Georgia were able to secure non-intervention in each other's disputes with Armenia and Russia. Georgia did not resist when Turkish troops in early 1921 pushed into Ardahan and Batum.²⁶

In late February 1921 Turkish and Russian diplomats began meeting for a second round of talks in Moscow. Turkish diplomats, who had complained to the Russian government about Chicherin's intransigence on the issue of the Turkish border, were now given assurances that Soviet Russia's commissar of nationalities, Iosif Stalin, would take matters into his own hands to ensure a speedy resolution. Delegation member Ali Fuat Paşa (Cebeşoy), believing that Turkey's military successes and its impending rapprochement with France made the Russians pursue a more pro-Turkish policy, argued that 'the official news that Stalin would actively participate in the Moscow conference could be nothing other than a subtle hint that . . . Chicherin's incompetent policy against Turkey was going to be corrected'.²⁷ Turkish delegates to the conference considered Stalin, an ethnic Georgian, to be fiercely anti-Armenian.²⁸ Indeed, Stalin's entry into the discussion meant the issue of the border could be resolved at lightning speed, and without Chicherin's idealism. Stalin dispensed with diplomatic formalities, meeting personally with Turkish negotiators behind closed doors. In less than two weeks, they had agreed on the allocation of territories as they stand today. The border that emerged was the one proposed personally by Stalin.²⁹ The district of Batum,

²⁴ For the text of the Treaty of Aleksandropol' and an analysis, see Gotthard Jaeschke, 'Der türkisch-armenische Friedensvertrag von Gümrü (Alexandropol)', *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 2 (1953), pp. 25–47.

²⁵ Karabekir, p. 983; Tengirşenk, pp. 185–86; Serpil Sürmeli, *Türk-Gürcü İlişkileri (1918–1921)* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 2001), p. 569.

²⁶ Karabekir, pp. 1,024, 1,028, G.İ. Kvinitadze, *Moi vospominaniya v godi nezavisimosti Gruzii, 1917–1921* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1985), pp. 330–31; Sürmeli, pp. 644–48, 664–65.

²⁷ Ali Fuat Cebeşoy, *Moskova Hatıraları* (İstanbul: Vatan Neşriyatı, 1955), pp. 114–22, quotation from p. 121; Gürün, pp. 65–66; Tengirşenk, pp. 221–24, 238–39.

²⁸ Rıza Nur, *Hayat ve Hatıratım*, Vol. 3 (İstanbul: İşaret Yayınları, 1992), p. 151; Karabekir, pp. 1,060–61.

²⁹ Memoirs of Saffet Arıkan as related to Knox Helm, counsellor at the British embassy in Ankara, in: TNA, FO 371/59241 (23 March 1946). For a version of how Lenin and Stalin decided on this border in local Adjaran lore, see: Pelkmans, p. 20.

along with the city and its port, would go to Georgia, while İğdır would go to Turkey. Turkish negotiators told Stalin they would be willing to cede Batum if Soviet Russia recognised the *Misak-ı Milli*.³⁰ Smaller territorial adjustments were carried out in the districts of Artvin and Kars. A final treaty was signed a week after that, on 16 March 1921.³¹ Article 1 was a victory for Turkey, with Russia recognising Turkey's definition as 'those territories included in the National Pact of 28 January 1920'.³²

The Treaty of Moscow is highly unusual in at least one major respect: Russia and Turkey defined the northeastern Turkish border without the involvement of those states (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) actually sharing this border. That Soviet Russia already exerted de facto hegemony in the South Caucasus is made clear, however, by the Treaty of Moscow's Article XV, which compelled Turkey to sign similar agreements with the Caucasian republics and Russia to mediate if necessary to obtain this result. Turkish officials met with delegates from Soviet Russia and the newly Sovietised South Caucasian Republics in the fall of 1921 to carry out this task. Though the Ankara government feared that the South Caucasian republics would use the opportunity to demand changes to the border delimited at Moscow – for example with the Georgians demanding Artvin – the presence of a Soviet Russian delegation imposed a general silence on the Soviet Caucasian delegates, and the border that had been foreseen in Moscow was duly approved in the Treaty of Kars (13 October 1921).³³ The discussions of the border at the Kars

³⁰ Tengirşenk, p. 221.

³¹ In fact, the treaty was signed on 18 March, while the official date was given as 16 March in order to coincide with the one-year anniversary of Istanbul's occupation by the Allies. Tengirşenk, p. 230.

³² For the full text of the treaty in Russian and Turkish, see: Ministerstvo Inostrannikh Del SSSR, *Dokumenti Vneshney Politiki SSSR*, Tom 3 (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1959), pp. 597–604; Tengirşenk, pp. 293–302. On Russia's acceptance of the *Misak-ı Milli*, see Tengirşenk, pp. 238–39.

³³ For the Turkish assessment of negotiations at Kars, and for the treaty text in Turkish, see: Karabekir, pp. 1, 110–32. For the text of the treaty in Russian, see: Ministerstvo Inostrannikh Del SSSR, *Dokumenti Vneshney Politiki SSSR*, Tom 4 (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1960), pp. 420–29. For a Soviet assessment of the negotiations, see: S.V. Kharmandaryan, 'Karskaya [sic] Konferenstiya 1921 g. i ee predistoriya', *Banber Hayastani Arkhivneri* 3 (1963), pp. 177–208.

Conference merely revolved around a few disputed sites, including the ruins of the ancient Armenian capital of Ani, which the Turkish delegation briefly considered handing to Armenia as a gesture of goodwill.

London, Ankara, and the Arbitrariness of the Border

In theory, the *Misak-ı Milli* had also promised Arab-majority areas to the south of Anatolia the possibility of plebiscites on joining a future Turkish state. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that Turkish nationalist deputies, resigned to the loss of the Arab-majority lands, had much real interest in pressing for such a referendum. ‘We have no aim other than to live freely and independently within our national borders,’ Mustafa Kemal told deputies in the Turkish parliament in 1921.

We have already paid the price we owed for the defeat suffered by the alliance to which we belonged during the World War; we paid it by handing over the administration and right of self-determination over our expansive territory, including Syria and Iraq, to the people who live there, thereby foregoing our sovereign rights.³⁴

The determination of Turkey’s border with France’s mandate in Syria was a result – just like in the country’s northeast – of highly personal diplomacy set against a backdrop of armed struggle. The initial definition of the border by both sides varied widely. The Treaty of Sèvres, signed by the Allies and the Ottoman government in August 1920, included much of present-day southern Turkey, including the cities of Antep, Maraş and Urfa, as well as the Gulf of Alexandretta (İskenderun) within the French mandate. Turkish nationalists, meanwhile, insisted on retaining all territories held by the Ottoman army upon the signing of the ceasefire on 30 October 1918. Turkish nationalists defined this ceasefire line as the country’s legitimate political border throughout 1919, with Mustafa Kemal explicitly describing it as starting south of the Gulf of Alexandretta near Antakya and passing north of Aleppo to Jarablus on the Euphrates. From there, the border would curve sharply southward to include Deyr-i Zor and the regions of Mosul, Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah. Like Karabekir in the north, Mustafa Kemal also equated this strategic border

³⁴ TBMMZC (19 September 1921), 261.

with an ethno-national one: 'Just as this is the border being defended in arms by our army, it simultaneously delineates the areas of our homeland that are populated by Turkish and Kurdish elements. In the area to its south are our fellow Muslims who speak Arabic'.³⁵

As Turkish national forces battled French troops and their Armenian allies for control of the region, high-level members of the French government expressed their willingness to reach a compromise with the Turkish nationalists on the border issue. French High Commissioner François Georges-Picot had suggested to Mustafa Kemal as early as December 1919 that France would be willing to withdraw from Cilicia, Antep, Urfa and Maraş in exchange for economic concessions from Turkey.³⁶ After repeated, unsuccessful attempts to sit down at the negotiating table, the first concrete results on Turkey's southern border came at the Conference of London in February and March 1921.³⁷ While the official agenda did not include a revision of Turkey's southern border, Foreign Minister Bekir Sami, as Ankara's representative, did declare Turkey's 'minimum' demand for territory in the *Misak-ı Milli* and demanded a border separating Turkey from an 'Arab majority' in the south as well as a border 'on the basis of the principles of nationality' in the northeast.³⁸ Bekir Sami also met secretly with French Prime Minister Aristide Briand and signed a bilateral agreement to regulate political, military and economic matters and to determine the Turkish-Syrian border. This agreement, which Bekir Sami apparently signed on his own initiative,³⁹ resembled Picot's proposal. It gave significant economic

³⁵ Speech of 28 December 1919, in *Atatürk'ün Bütün Eserleri*, Cilt 6, p. 30.

³⁶ Bige Yavuz, '1921 Tarihli Türk-Fransız Anlaşması'nın Hazırlık Aşamaları', *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* 8:23 (Mart 1992), p. 275; Stanford J. Shaw, *From Empire to Republic: The Turkish War of National Liberation*, Vol. 3, Part 2 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2000), pp. 1,386–87; Karabekir, pp. 438–39.

³⁷ Summaries of the proceedings at the London Conference can be found in Shaw, III:1, pp. 1,223–47 and, from the Ottoman perspective, Erkin Akan, 'Osmanlı Arşiv Belgelerine Göre Londra Konferansı (21 Şubat 1921–12 Mart 1921)', *Çanakkale Araştırmaları Türk Yılığ* 16:24 (Bahar 2018), pp. 245–67.

³⁸ Shaw, III:1, p. 1,230.

³⁹ This was admitted by Bekir Sami in front of Turkish parliament. TBMMGCZ (12 May 1921), p. 74.

concessions to France but revised the border in Turkey's favour. The new border, a line between the Gulf of Alexandretta and Cizre, would include Cilicia, Antep, Urfa and Maraş in Turkey but exclude Antakya, which would receive special administrative status to protect Turkish cultural rights there.⁴⁰

The London Agreement caused an uproar when the Turkish parliament first heard of it on 17 March 1921. All who spoke that day denounced the agreement as a violation of the Turkish national cause. Deputies did not comment on the specifics of the agreement, though it was likely the broad economic concessions in Article G that caused the most consternation. Deputies were also angered that the delegation led by Bekir Sami had made these concessions in the form of an international agreement without prior authorisation and without the approval of parliament. One deputy spouted: 'I don't care if it's a ceasefire agreement, or a treaty, or whatever – to my mind it's a sheet of paper without a shred of value, and those of us with a conscience must use that paper to slap the faces of the delegates we sent [to London]'.⁴¹ The mood in parliament was extremely anti-West. Some deputies questioned the backbone and political skill of the Turkish nationalist delegates in London, angered that they would concede anything to the 'devils at the green table' when their task had been a simple one: to just insist on the *Misak-ı Milli*. 'It seems that our colleagues were swept up by all the tall buildings and feasts of London,' quipped one.⁴²

It remains to be explained why Bekir Sami, who had insisted so doggedly on the *Misak-ı Milli* against the Russians in the summer of 1920 would supposedly fail to defend it against the French in early 1921, or why someone who was hesitant to come to an agreement with the Russians and Britain on controversial topics without consulting the parliament⁴³ would now

⁴⁰ A reproduction of the London Agreement is found in Yavuz, pp. 294–96. A translation of the London Agreement into Turkish can be found in: BCA, 930.2, 1.7.1 (9 March 1921); I thank Ramazan Hakkı Öztan for this reference.

⁴¹ TBMMGCZ (17 March 1921), p. 5. For their part, critics of Briand's policy also lambasted the outcome at London as 'humiliating' and 'rash', a 'border considered unacceptable by everyone'. Roger de Gontaut-Biron and L. Le Révérend, *D'Angora à Lausanne: Les étapes d'une déchéance* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1924), pp. 14–15, 31, 69.

⁴² TBMMGCZ (17 March 1921), pp. 7–8.

⁴³ Tengirşenk, 164; Shaw, III:1, p. 1,240.

sign significant secret agreements with France (and Italy) of his own accord. Mustafa Kemal would himself later call Bekir Sami's behaviour 'inexplicable', only pointing out that Bekir Sami sought peace 'at all costs' and believed the entente could be convinced to come to an agreement with Turkey without requiring a compromise of principles.⁴⁴ Yet in the spring of 1921, Mustafa Kemal seemed to take a different approach. When Bekir Sami returned from London, he and Mustafa Kemal remained on strikingly cordial terms. Rather than excoriate Bekir Sami for his 'failure' to defend Turkish independence in Europe, Mustafa Kemal praised his 'important work in London, Paris and Italy' in front of the parliament. And while Mustafa Kemal quietly asked him to resign as foreign minister, he continued to believe that Bekir Sami could serve as a means of drawing certain elements in the West into an agreement with the Turkish nationalists.⁴⁵ This adds to the impression that Mustafa Kemal and his immediate circle were more willing to compromise with Western governments on the border than most deputies, who continued to vociferously denounce the agreement when its details were revealed in May.⁴⁶

After the Turkish parliament and Ankara government rejected the London Agreement, Prime Minister Fevzi Paşa (Çakmak) made it known to France that it considered the border traced in the agreement an 'unjustified attack' on the *Misak-ı Milli* and on 'the principle of nationality'. Ankara considered, but refrained from, sending a delegation headed by the interior minister to Beirut to demand İskenderun and Antakya for Turkey.⁴⁷ Instead, the government's new proposal for the border – which Fevzi argued was designed 'in order to approximate as closely as possible the ethnographic and geographic border and to balance the interests of the two parties, while simultaneously taking

⁴⁴ *Nutuk*, pp. 515–18.

⁴⁵ TBMMGCZ (12 May 1921), 73; telegram of Mustafa Kemal to Bekir Sami (19 May 1921), in *Nutuk*, 516; Shaw, III:1, p. 1,251.

⁴⁶ This interpretation runs counter to that of Stanford J. Shaw, who, copying the later interpretation of the *Nutuk* describes Bekir Sami as a quitter, even as Mustafa Kemal sought to push on militarily at all costs. Shaw, III:1, pp. 1,249, 1,252. Rıza Nur, however, suspected – as I do – that Mustafa Kemal may have personally authorised Bekir Sami's moves in London; Rıza Nur, p. 171. Solitary voices of support for Bekir Sami and for a compromise for peace came from Vehbi Efendi (Çelik) and Zekâi Bey (Apaydın).

⁴⁷ Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, p. 40.

historical considerations into account' – included the railway and much of present-day northeastern Syria in Turkey but left İskenderun, Antakya and Aleppo in the French mandate.⁴⁸

Economy Minister Yusuf Kemal Bey (Tengirşenk), on his way back to Ankara from leading negotiations in Moscow, was informed that he had been elected on 16 May 1921 to replace Bekir Sami as foreign minister. By coincidence, in İnebolu, he encountered Henry Franklin-Bouillon, a Turkophilic plenipotentiary sent by the French government, en route to Ankara as well. The Ankara government informed Yusuf Kemal that, as the new foreign minister, he was to help Mustafa Kemal and Fevzi negotiate an agreement with Franklin-Bouillon to end the war underway between Turkey and France in the south.⁴⁹ Negotiations now took place privately, not at a conference – i.e. outside of the oversight of parliament. Yusuf Kemal merely reported to the Turkish parliament in June 1921 that he, 'together with an esteemed French gentleman who had come to Ankara, were in private talks to look for solutions to end the state of war between the two nations'.⁵⁰

Discussions in June 1921 revolved around establishing the principles of an agreement. After Franklin-Bouillon returned from a trip to consult with his superiors in Adana, official negotiations continued in earnest in mid-September. On the Turkish side, Yusuf Kemal and Fethi Bey (Okyar) both noted that the question of the border – and the related question of minority rights – threatened to upend talks in early October.⁵¹ As in Moscow, the Turkish delegation insisted on not diverging from the *Misak-ı Milli*. While the French demanded special recognition of minority rights in the areas evacuated by the French army, Yusuf Kemal insisted that Article 5 of the *Misak-ı Milli*, which guaranteed the rights of minorities in Turkey if the rights of

⁴⁸ Letter of Fevzi to Briand (no date [mid-May 1921]), reproduced in Yavuz, p. 298; counter proposal in *ibid.*, p. 303.

⁴⁹ Tengirşenk, pp. 246–47. Franklin-Bouillon was the target of criticism by hardline French observers, who accused him of being 'a novice in the psychology of the Oriental' and for kowtowing to the Turks. Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, pp. 17, 51.

⁵⁰ TBMMZC (27 June 1921), p. 61.

⁵¹ Ali Fethi Okyar and Kansu Şarman (eds), *Büyük Günlerin Adamı: Fethi Okyar'ın Hayatından Kareler (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2016)*, p. 52; Tengirşenk, pp. 251–52; TBMMGCZ (16 October 1921), pp. 352–53.

Muslims be equally protected in neighbouring countries, should be taken as the basis for an agreement with the French. Here, as in Moscow, Turkish insistence on the *Misak-ı Milli* won the day. The exact wording of the Pact's Article 5, minus the stipulation that neighbouring Muslims' right be guaranteed, was repeated in Article 6 of the final Turkish-French agreement.⁵²

The issue of the border would be more difficult to resolve to the benefit of Ankara, particularly as, unlike in the case of Turkey's northeast border, the *Misak-ı Milli* did not clearly specify what boundary the Turkish nationalists claimed. The French had assumed that the platform of the Baghdad Railway would be taken as the basis for a new border, since this was the proposal that had been discussed since the London Conference in March 1921. This, after all, was already seen as a concession by the French, who had for years assumed the 'natural border' of Turkey would follow the Taurus mountain range to the north.⁵³ Turkish claims that Briand had promised in a newspaper interview the establishment of a commission to determine a border based on nationality (*hududun milliyetler esası üzerine çizilmesi*) were emphatically rejected by Franklin-Bouillon.⁵⁴ But in the absence of a clear national border, Fethi and Yusuf Kemal made one final maximalist claim, arguing that Turkey's natural border stretched from the Mediterranean along the Orontes (Asi) River to its southward bend. From there, it would follow a straight line – hardly the hallmark of a 'natural border'! – to the Euphrates, and along the latter river until the old province of Mosul, which would likewise belong to Turkey.⁵⁵ In the end, it was the French interpretation that won out – while the Turkish delegation was able to pry economic concessions from the French, the border in the Ankara Agreement remained the same as that defined in London.

⁵² For the text of the Ankara Agreement, see: *League of Nations Treaty Series*, Vol. 54, No. 1284 (1926–27), pp. 177–93.

⁵³ Stefanos Yerasimos, *Milliyetler ve Sınırlar: Balkanlar, Kafkasya ve Ortadoğu*, trans. Şirin Tekeli (İstanbul: İletişim, 2009 [1994]), pp. 139–40; Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, pp. 68–69.

⁵⁴ TBMMGCZ 91 (12 Ekim 1337), p. 295. French hardliners argued that an ethnographic boundary would have included Antep, Maraş and Urfa in the mandate, as a majority of the population there was 'Syrian'; see: Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, pp. 52, 67–68.

⁵⁵ Tengirşenk, p. 253.

Batum, İskenderun and the Awkwardness of Nationalism

The border drawn in 1921, both in the north and the south, thus represented a significant compromise on the principles outlined in the *Misak-ı Millî*. In the north, the Treaty of Moscow ceded Batum without offering the population of the region the possibility of a plebiscite; in the south, the Ankara Agreement ceded İskenderun, which was considered by Turkish nationalists to be Turkish in character and which had been held by Turkish forces at the end of the war. How could these borders be justified, when nationalist leaders, just months earlier, had associated territorial compromises with the death of the Turkish nation state? ‘There is no doubt’, Mustafa Kemal had written Bekir Sami in November 1920

that . . . to give up even a tiny part of the territory contained in the border established in the *Misak-ı Millî*, the border being avidly defended . . . by the nation, would mean the demise of the sacred cause that we are resolutely defending against an entire world of enemies, and thus the very dissolution of the national resistance . . .⁵⁶

The nationalists charged with drawing the borders of their nation state, constrained by state capacity and geopolitics, thus faced the awkward situation of justifying the compromises of Moscow and Ankara. In both cases, reactions to the border emerged in similar ways, with the parliament vociferously decrying the agreements’ violations of the *Misak-ı Millî* and the government defending concessions on the border as a matter of national necessity.

The Treaty of Moscow, for example, came as a major disappointment to deputies when it was introduced to them on 17 March 1921.⁵⁷ As late as 21 February of that year the government had assured parliament that it could not fathom ‘even approaching’ an agreement which ceded Batum to Georgia and continued insisting on a plebiscite for the region.⁵⁸ When the treaty came in March, because the Turkish parliament was so convinced of Turkey’s resolve and ability to carry out the principles of the *Misak-ı Millî*,

⁵⁶ Telegram of Mustafa Kemal to Bekir Sami (8 November 1920), in Tengirşenk, p. 192.

⁵⁷ Karabekir, p. 1,047

⁵⁸ TBMMGCZ (21 February 1921), p. 450.

some deputies could not comprehend the treaty and reassured themselves vocally that Batum had been included in the new border. This was the impression that the government itself, nervous about deputies' reactions to the new border, tried to foster by, for example, emphasising that Turkish troops had occupied ethnically Turkish parts of Georgian territory, even though this occupation had no bearing on the border whatsoever. Several deputies blamed the government for a grave error in allowing Batum to be handed over, while others called it a violation of the *Misak-ı Milli* and threatened not to ratify the final treaty.⁵⁹ When the Treaty of Moscow was presented for ratification in July, the five deputies from Batum lodged a fervent protest against their district being severed from the 'motherland'. Nevertheless, most deputies accepted the importance of establishing relations with Russia, even at this cost. The final vote was 201 deputies in favour, one abstention and five in opposition.⁶⁰

The Ankara Agreement, too, triggered a week of serious and almost daily criticism from deputies when it was discussed in mid-October 1921. Questioning the efficacy of tracing the border along a railway bed, one deputy exclaimed, 'This border is no border!' (*Bu hudut, hudut değildir*),⁶¹ a phrase which became a kind of refrain through the rest of the week. Already angered by having to cede Batum, nationalist deputies now directed their criticism against the very leader of the nationalist movement, Mustafa Kemal. One exchange in parliament on 16 October 1921 is remarkable in this regard. İsmail Safa Bey, deputy from Adana, told him that if there was a Turkish majority in İskenderun, the district must be included within the national boundary. 'That is a different issue,' replied Mustafa Kemal. The border delineated in the Ankara Agreement 'does not contradict our *Misak-ı Milli*. Our *Misak-ı Milli* does not include a definite, clearly determined boundary. Whatever boundary we determine with our strength and our power will be the country's border. It has no [other] meaning'. İsmail Safa responded with incredulity, saying deputies understood the *Misak-ı Milli* to be a promise that Turkish-majority districts adjacent to the homeland would be included in it,

⁵⁹ TBMMZC (24 March 1921), pp. 205–10.

⁶⁰ TBMMZC (21 July 1921), pp. 325–33.

⁶¹ Hulusi Bey [Kutluoğlu], TBMMGCZ (12 October 1921), p. 291.

while ambiguous cases were to be resolved by plebiscite. This was the obvious, and correct, interpretation of the *Misak-ı Millî*, of course, but İsmail Safa could not offer a practical alternative. Implicitly recognising the awkwardness of nationalism, İsmail Safa said there was ‘no ceasefire line that does not constitute a violation [of the *Misak-ı Millî*], and will never be’. After a terse exchange with other deputies, Mustafa Kemal continued. ‘It is quite unfortunate, isn’t it, that having a Turkish majority in places like [İskenderun] is not a sufficient condition for them to be included in the *Misak-ı Millî*. The border in the Ankara Agreement, Mustafa Kemal argued, was the best that Turkey could achieve. ‘I don’t find it that important that one line in an agreement has left [this region] south of the border,’ he admitted. ‘Greater success in securing autonomy or independence could not be obtained.’⁶²

To defend against maximalist demands, Yusuf Kemal drew on other arguments from the government’s arsenal. The border, he reassured deputies, was drawn out of necessity, not to ‘please the French’. Still, it had the benefit of ensuring Turkey’s independence. He argued:

Thus if we examine the issue from the perspective of the basic principle of the *Misak-ı Millî*, that is to say, our independence and freedom within our national borders, then we are not acting in violation of our *Misak-ı Millî*. But from the perspective of territory, we are unable to achieve our aims in their entirety.⁶³

Because it was classified as an agreement, and not a treaty, the text hammered out in Ankara did not require ratification by parliament, as the Treaty of Moscow had. Nevertheless, the government did ask deputies for authorisation to sign the agreement, which they gave, to much commotion, on 18 October.

For both the northeastern and southern borders, the government always justified the compromises on the *Misak-ı Millî* with appeals to the immediate national security needs of the day. One example was the case of Batum,

⁶² TBMMGCZ (16 October 1921), pp. 355–56. Mustafa Kemal had already made similar arguments about defending Eastern Thrace while dealing with Western Thrace pragmatically; see: Özkan, p. 86.

⁶³ TBMMGCZ (15 October 1921), p. 328.

whose cession was explained in loops by the deputy foreign minister Muhtar Bey. On 10 March 1921, Muhtar announced that Turkey would not carry out plebiscites in Ardahan and Artvin because Georgia had been ‘convinced that there was no need to implement this method of realising our national claims’. Yet he continued to promise a plebiscite in Batum, then occupied by the Turkish army: ‘We are going to secure – or rather, in a manner of speaking – to legitimise our occupation there by appealing to a referendum’.⁶⁴ Two weeks later, when confronted about the cession of Batum in the Treaty of Moscow, a cornered Muhtar could only say, ‘The *Misak-ı Milli* was accepted as the basis [for discussion]. But there are a few modifications that the *Misak-ı Milli* underwent due to the political situation’.⁶⁵ This ‘political situation’ was the threat of the loss of Russian material support for the nationalist cause, which depended on coming to a speedy agreement. The fear of having to station significant numbers of troops to defend a contested Batum against the Russians may have also played a role.⁶⁶ The government pleaded equal urgency in reaching a deal with the French.⁶⁷ Turkey, Yusuf Kemal argued, needed to come to terms with the French to focus on the war against the Greeks in western Anatolia. Any border would have been a disappointment, he and the government argued; the loss of territory in the Ankara Agreement was bitter but not the worst possible outcome. Mustafa Kemal detailed to deputies how he and the Turkish delegation had earnestly demanded more territory, but that the French, willing to pull back the economic clauses of the London Agreement, would not budge on the border issue. Finally, since the Ankara Agreement was not technically a peace treaty, reassured the government, its stipulations remained open to later modification.⁶⁸

For the northeastern and southern borders of Turkey, the first years after delimitation were a critical period in which the borders drawn on paper

⁶⁴ Deputy Foreign Minister Muhtar Bey (10 March 1921). At the same time, Bekir Sami continued to tout a plebiscite for the northeast border region at negotiations in London. Akan, p. 257.

⁶⁵ TBMMZC (24 March 1921), pp. 205–10.

⁶⁶ Rıza Nur, pp. 164–65.

⁶⁷ TBMMGCZ (12 May 1921), p. 73.

⁶⁸ TBMMGCZ (12 October 1921), pp. 294–95; TBMMGCZ (18 October 1921), pp. 363–64.

became border regimes on the ground, and in which the more fluid borders of empires crystallised into nation state borders. In this respect, while nationalists' initial reactions to the border were similar, the years immediately following their establishment saw a divergence in trajectories in two ways. The first revolved around the undefined status of the line defined by the Ankara Agreement. The 1921 Ankara Agreement had been vague about defining the line dividing French and Turkish troops as the border between two sovereign entities, so the negotiations in the years following the agreement were carried out with a sense of gravity: more than a demarcation line between two armies, the negotiations after 1921 were to establish state boundaries. The Treaties of Moscow and Kars in 1921, meanwhile, had been treaties of friendship, not only delimiting the border but also providing for mutual border protections and specific provisions for borderlanders' mobility. In the case of the Syrian–Turkish border, the two countries had to wait until 1926 for a friendship treaty that would specify the same level of detail on border practices and until 1929 for the entire border between them to be delimited. As Turkey and France's relative strength vacillated, so did each side's willingness to concede on various aspects of delimitation, and each segment of the border, agreed upon in different agreements and protocols, represents the relative balance of power at that particular moment.⁶⁹

The two borders also differed in their stability following delimitation. After some tension surrounding the timetable of Turkish troop withdrawal from Aleksandropol' and Batum,⁷⁰ the northeast border remained unchanged. Discussions between Turkey and the Soviet Union generally revolved around the regulation of everyday cross-border mobility. Here, the Soviet Union was more

⁶⁹ Seda Altuğ and Benjamin Thomas White, 'Frontières et pouvoir d'État: La frontière turco-syrienne dans les années 1920 et 1930', *Vingtième siècle, revue d'histoire*, Vol. 103 (Juillet–Septembre 2009), pp. 91–104. On the negotiations over delimiting the Turkish–Syrian border, see: Shoëila Mameli-Ghaderi, 'Le tracé de la frontière entre la Syrie et la Turquie (1921–1929)', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporain*, Vol. 207 (Juillet–Septembre 2002), pp. 125–38; Yücel Güçlü, 'The Controversy over the Delimitation of the Turco-Syrian Frontier in the Period between the Two World Wars', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (July 2006), pp. 641–57.

⁷⁰ Paul Dumont, 'L'axe Moscou-Ankara: Les relations turco-soviétiques de 1919 à 1922', *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Juillet–Septembre 1977), pp. 180–81.

dissatisfied with the border, seriously restricting border crossings in the 1930s as well as intimating that it would demand the territories of Kars and Ardahan after the Second World War.⁷¹ Turkey's southern border with Syria, meanwhile, continued to be the subject of negotiation and revision for decades. Both sides complained about the border. French observers wrote in 1924 that 'the Syrian border remains precarious, subject to all sorts of challenges, poorly defended, and poorly surveilled'.⁷² Even in 1931, years after Turkish and French negotiators had hammered out a border, the Turkish interior minister continued to call the country's southern border 'complex and unnatural'.⁷³ Dissatisfaction fuelled irredentism. French hardliners called for renewed French 'adventures' north of the border to extend French territory and defend its mandate in Syria.⁷⁴ For Turkey, the issue of İskenderun and Antakya remained open; the Turkish government was able to take advantage of a change in status of the Syrian mandate to successfully press for the cession of this region – now known as Hatay province – into Turkey between 1936 and 1939.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The process of delineating Turkey's northeastern and southern borders in 1921, although they appear to be separate, were closely interconnected.

⁷¹ On cross-border mobility in this region during the 1920s and 1930s, see Étienne Forestier-Peyrat, "Dans les forêts d'Adjarie . . .": Franchir la frontière turco-soviétique, 1922–1937', *Diasporas*, Vols. 23–24 (2014), pp. 164–84; Pelkmans, pp. 22–29.

⁷² Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, p. 34. In 1925, one observer defined the delineation of the Syrian–Turkish border as the major issue continuing to plague French administration of the mandate; see: H. Charles Woods, 'The French in Syria', *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 118, No. 706 (October 1925), p. 498.

⁷³ Quoted in Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Great Depression and the Making of Turkish–Syrian Border, 1921–1939', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studie*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (May 2020), p. 311.

⁷⁴ Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, pp. 193–94.

⁷⁵ A diplomatic history of Turkey's annexation of Hatay is Sarah D. Shields, *Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a Turkish state perspective on the Hatay question, see Yücel Güçlü, *The Question of the Sanak of Alexandretta: A Study in Turkish-French-Syrian Relations* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2001); for the Syrian perspective, see Emma Lundgren Jörum, *Beyond Syria's Border: A History of Territorial Disputes in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 89–111.

One argument I have advanced in this chapter posits the simultaneity of these border-making processes. These borders were not simply two distinct ‘fronts’ of the National Struggle (*Millî Mücadele*), as they have sometimes been portrayed. Instead, their courses were negotiated and debated by the same actors, with developments on one border acting reciprocally on developments on the other.

One way this becomes particularly obvious is at the level of biography. Turkey’s two primary negotiators in 1921, Bekir Sami and Yusuf Kemal, were the central figures in both borders. Bekir Sami, as foreign minister of the Ankara government, had led its first official delegation to Moscow in the summer of 1920, intending to hammer out a preliminary treaty with Soviet Russia. Perhaps inspired by his family’s background of antagonism towards Russia,⁷⁶ Bekir Sami was skeptical of the direction of negotiations with the Soviets, finding their demands in 1920 to be akin to those of the (Western) ‘imperialists’.⁷⁷ The Soviets, for their part, viewed Bekir Sami as a ‘reactionary’ and were happy to see his replacement as foreign minister by Yusuf Kemal in 1921.⁷⁸ Bekir Sami was decidedly more predisposed towards the French. He had made the acquaintance of Picot in Beirut and convinced the latter to travel to Sivas to meet with the Turkish nationalists in late 1919 – the meeting in which Picot had offered concessions on the border.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Yusuf Kemal, as minister of economics, had taken the long journey to Moscow together with Bekir Sami in the summer of 1920, later leading his own delegation there in order to finalise the Treaty of Moscow. This success in 1921 cemented Yusuf Kemal’s credentials as anti-imperialist, a reputation that must have encouraged the Ankara government to use him to stand up to the French after the apparent debacle with Bekir Sami in London.

⁷⁶ Bekir Sami was born in Ossetia as the son of the general Musa Kundukhov, who organised a mass emigration of Muslims from the region and fought against the Russian Empire in 1877–78.

⁷⁷ Gürün, p. 37; Dumont, p. 179.

⁷⁸ Report of İbrahim Əbilov to Narkomindel ASSR (3 February 1922), in *Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Arxivi*, f. 28 op. 1-s d. 68, l. 101. Rıza Nur’s portrayal of Yusuf Kemal suggests the latter was Bekir Sami’s complete opposite: allegedly a ‘proud communist’, Yusuf Kemal also ‘did not know how to write French’. Rıza Nur, pp. 92–93, 267.

⁷⁹ Sina Akşin, ‘Franco-Turkish Relations at the End of 1919’, in Sina Akşin (ed.), *Essays in Ottoman Turkish Political History* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2000), pp. 60–61.

A second way in which the border processes can be viewed as simultaneous is through the lens of geopolitics. Negotiations over the two borders were not conducted in hermetically sealed conditions. France and Soviet Russia were mutually hostile, and both shared the concern that Turkey would switch decisively to one side or the other. In early 1921, ‘intense propaganda’ surrounding the Turco-French agreement in London swirled around Moscow and gave the Soviets cause to doubt Turkish sincerity about their anti-imperialist intentions.⁸⁰ Rıza Nur Bey, one of Turkey’s negotiators in Moscow, observed Russian reactions to Bekir Sami’s rapprochement with the French in March 1921 and criticised the latter for jeopardising aid from the Russians, whom he called ‘Turkey’s sole hope’.⁸¹ But Russian worries continued even after the Turkish government rejected the London agreement and Bekir Sami resigned. As the Turkish government prepared to sign an agreement with the French in October 1921, the Soviet ambassador asked for an audience with Mustafa Kemal and asked about rumours that the agreement required Turkey to break off its alliance with Russia and support a return of the Caucasus to the imperialist West. These were rumours that Mustafa Kemal categorically denied.⁸² The French, too, were eager not to push Turkey into the arms of the Soviets and followed negotiations between the two keenly.⁸³ At home, French hardliners shrieked about the need to extend Syrian territory northwards to prevent Turkey from becoming a tool of the Bolsheviks and interfering in French and British interests in the Middle East.⁸⁴ Franklin-Bouillon, in the first day of negotiations with Yusuf Kemal, demanded to see a copy of the Moscow Treaty and asked whether there were any ‘secret amendments’ that would fix the Turks against the West. A proud Yusuf Kemal assured him that it was an open treaty and could point to specific concessions Turkey had won from the Soviets as an example of what they might achieve with France.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Tengirşenk, pp. 151, 227.

⁸¹ Rıza Nur, p. 94.

⁸² TBMMGCZ (16 October 1337), p. 356. On Russian fears about Turkish rapprochement with the French after the Moscow Treaty, see also Dumont, p. 181.

⁸³ Shaw, III:1, p. 1,250.

⁸⁴ Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, pp. 195–96. For documentation of similar concerns on the part of the British in 1921, see Shaw, III:1, p. 1,204.

⁸⁵ Tengirşenk, p. 250.

Ankara, too, was well aware of the rivalry between Russia and France and attempted to use this geopolitical situation to its advantage when pushing for territorial concessions. Though Turkish foreign policy and public opinion were predisposed to cooperation with Russia and frowned upon cooperation with Western European powers, Turkish officials' ultimate goal was nevertheless not to get pinned down to one side or the other.⁸⁶ Turkey's first priority in 1921 was simply to secure military and financial aid from Soviet Russia. The Ankara government's rejection of the London Agreement, signed just a week before the Moscow Treaty, was inspired by the fear that it would put such aid in jeopardy.⁸⁷ The signing of the Moscow Treaty then enabled the government to quickly refocus on its goal of establishing suitable relations with western Allies. This timing explains why the government was suddenly enthusiastic about coming to a border agreement with the French in the summer of 1921 – an agreement very similar to the one it had just rejected. Fevzi, the Turkish prime minister, reminded a disgruntled parliament in May of the 'necessity to come to an agreement with the French as soon as possible, an agreement which carries urgency for us'.⁸⁸ The urgency of coming to an agreement with at least one Western European power after the Moscow Treaty explains in part the Turkish government's willingness to compromise to a considerable degree on issues like the national border. Yusuf Kemal writes: 'After the treaty with the Soviets, we desperately needed to open up towards Europe by means of France, so we were forced to accept [the border] by necessity'.⁸⁹ At the same time, as Turkish officials were well aware, the war-fatigued and Soviet-phobic French administration was in a position in 1921 particularly susceptible to territorial concessions.⁹⁰

The other argument I have advanced in this chapter is that we can arrive at a better understanding of the nature of the early Turkish nation state, in

⁸⁶ TBMMZC (19 September 1921), p. 262; TBMMGCZ (12 May 1921), p. 72. On Ankara's use of Russia to achieve its diplomatic goals in the West, see Samuel J. Hirst, 'Transnational Anti-Imperialism and the National Forces: Soviet Diplomacy and Turkey, 1920–23', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2013), pp. 223–24.

⁸⁷ Shaw, III:1, p. 1,249.

⁸⁸ TBMMGCZ (12 May 1921), p. 72.

⁸⁹ Tengirşenk, p. 253.

⁹⁰ Mameli-Ghaderi, pp. 126, 137; Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, p. 14.

particular its concept of ‘the national’ (*millî*), through an analysis of its border-making process. Based on the discussion in this chapter, this argument can be expanded in three ways.

First, the process of delineating nation state borders can pose a serious threat to the legitimacy of nascent nation state governments. This arises from the inevitable contradiction between the maximalist territorial demands put forward by nationalists and the necessity of compromise when drawing a border in an ethnically mixed and geographically open space without resorting to endless war. In the case of the Turkish borders, the more pragmatically orientated cabinet, particularly Mustafa Kemal, faced serious difficulties presenting its border policy to an ebullient parliament, threatening a breach between the branches of government at a time when Turkish fortunes vacillated in their war against the Greeks. Discontent with the government’s handling of the London Agreement even led to the resignation of Bekir Sami as foreign minister, the resignation of the parliament president and a reshuffling of the cabinet in May 1921.⁹¹ Parliament used the topic of border concessions to assert their authority by painting themselves as ‘truer’ nationalists than the government, which was seeking greater powers at the time. Deputies challenged the nationalist credentials of cabinet members during discussions of the border, rhetorically asking them: ‘Isn’t your signature on the *Misak-ı Milli*?’⁹² As government officials attempted, sometimes awkwardly, to justify territorial concessions, deputies threatened to reject agreements and responded with machismo, opposing giving up ‘even an inch’ of the territory of the *Misak-ı Milli* and claiming that ‘death is preferable to living in servitude’.⁹³

Second, this tension between nationalist discourse and the necessity of pragmatism on the border can force nation state founders to debate the new state’s fundamental mission or ideological foundations. In the case of nationalist Turkey, this meant wrangling over the meaning of the *Misak-ı Milli*, taken by nationalists as the ‘mission statement’ of their movement. The Ankara government was partially successful in imposing its interpretation of the *Misak-ı Milli* in the Moscow and Kars Treaties (Article 1) and

⁹¹ Shaw III:2, p. 1,406

⁹² TBMMGCZ (16 October 1921), p. 342.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 338; see also TBMMGCZ (12 May 1921), p. 75.

the Ankara Agreement (Article 6). Nevertheless, the vagueness of the border in the *Misak-ı Milli* allowed for continued discussion in Ankara on what the bounds of the nation should be. While the government interpreted the *Misak-ı Milli* as a policy aim, several parliamentarians saw the *Misak-ı Milli* as a policy minimum. For many who thought about Turkey's border in 1921, the 'national border' was essentially an Ottoman border without religious minorities; others rejected the establishment of national borders altogether as an unconscionable division of the Islamic *ümmet*. Similar logic continued to undergird decades of conservative criticism of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, which eventually resulted in British control over Mosul Province.

Finally, far from being a disadvantage for nationalists, ambiguity or insecurity surrounding national borders can serve as a means for a nation state to consolidate power. In both Turkey's northeastern and southern borders, the ambiguities of the border, unregulated mobility and acts of violence justified continued state action and the strengthening of the state apparatus. Seda Altuğ and Benjamin Thomas White have fittingly called the Turkish–Syrian border 'above all, an ideal that motivated the intensification of state authority'.⁹⁴ Inherent in the principle of national borders was the idea of their flexibility. Thus, nationalists like Mustafa Kemal or Yusuf Kemal, who in 1921 pushed pragmatic compromises on border delineation, did not believe that such compromises would necessarily constrain state action. Ankara could, for example, provoke national liberation movements in neighbouring countries if it was in the interest of the nation state, as Mustafa Kemal wrote to Karabekir as the *Misak-ı Milli* was being discussed in early 1920:

Like in Syria or Iraq, in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus, too, there are nations striving to bring about their own national existence and independence. To

⁹⁴ Altuğ and White, p. 103. Altuğ and White in this article contrast France's imperial approach to the Turkish–Syrian border with Turkey's nationalist approach. This distinction is highly relevant when it comes to each state's policy towards borderland demographics. Nevertheless, as I argue here, this difference in perspective should not be understood as a Turkish preference for a fixed boundary and a French acceptance of an ever-expanding 'frontier'. As I have tried to show, even though the identity of borderlanders became more relevant for nation states, ambiguity in the definition of national borders also allowed nation states like Turkey to demand border expansion, just as imperial states could.

direct their forces against the enemies who are plaguing Turkey would never be a violation of the nation's decision to liberate [*tablis*] our interests within our national borders. On the contrary, [such activity] would be part of the efforts to carry out this national resolution.⁹⁵

Aside from the fact that a perceived disconnect between the nation and national borders could legitimise intervention across the border, the ambiguity of the border also left open the possibility of outright irredentism, seen in the case of Hatay in the 1930s or Soviet claims in the northeast after the Second World War. Ambiguity meant that such action could be legitimised in perpetuity. The 'sentiments' of borderlanders 'left out' by a national border were a never-ending source of rumours that could be generated or harnessed to direct diplomatic negotiations or state-building policies.⁹⁶ Mustafa Kemal attempted to mollify angry deputies in 1921 in this way, arguing that the border being decided then could easily be changed in the future if the military strength of the Turkish nation state increased.⁹⁷ This was understood by Yusuf Kemal, too, as he negotiated with the French in mid-1921. He wrote:

I did not hold back from repeatedly telling Franklin-Bouillon that the border drawn by the Agreement was considered by Turkey to be one imposed by force, that we will never forget the Turkish territories and people left south of the border, that these were hallowed lands bound to return to Turkey one day, and that Turkish children would consider this to be their sacred duty.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Karabekir, pp. 528–29.

⁹⁶ Jordi Tejel, 'States of Rumors: Politics of Information Along the Turkish–Syrian Border, 1925–1945', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (Feb 2020), DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2020.1719866.

⁹⁷ TBMMGCZ (18 October 1921), p. 366.

⁹⁸ Tengirşenk, p. 253.