

Infrastructuring Nature

Case Study

The Turkish –
Iranian Border
in Van
Province

GERDA HENKEL
STIFTUNG

 Border Violence
Monitoring Network



ORTAKÇA
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List of Abbreviations

Border Violence Monitoring Network	BVMN
Directorate General of Migration Management	DGMM
European Economic Community	EEC
European Union	EU
Housing Development Administration of Turkey	TOKI
Human Rights Association of Turkey	TİHV
Integrated Border Management	IBM
International Centre for Migration Policy Development	ICMPD
International Organisation for Migration	IOM
Information and Communication Technology	ICT
Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance	IPA
Justice and Development Party	AKP
Kurdistan Workers' Party	PKK
Law on Foreigners and International Protection	LFIP
North-Atlantic Treaty Organization	NATO
National Coordination and Joint Risk Analysis Centre	NACORAC
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	UNHCR
United Nations Development Programme	UNPD

1. Introduction

This report contributes to the case study on the weaponisation of the natural environment at the Turkish–Iranian border in the province of Van in Eastern Turkey. People fleeing wars, conflict and oppression have been crossing this boundary since the 1980s in search of refuge or a better life with the assistance of facilitators from local, predominantly Kurdish communities on either side of the border.¹ Yet the Van borderland is a paradigmatic inhospitable landscape.² Characterised by steep mountains, extreme weather conditions, and populated by an array of wild animals, such as bears, wolves and wild boar, it is especially difficult to navigate, in particular for people attempting to cross while evading state regimes of control. Its inhospitality, however, is not without ambivalence: while risky and often deadly to cross, its topography also makes it difficult to control, thus somewhat favouring unauthorised movements through it.³

Controlling the Van border has increasingly become a core concern for both Turkish national authorities and the European Union (hereafter EU). For the EU, the Eastern Turkish border became a location for border externalisation because of its centrality in migration routes towards Europe, in particular since 2011, the acceleration of displacement of populations in the Eastern Mediterranean, which rendered Turkey a key actor in policing forced displacements in the region.⁴ It thus drove the fortification of this border, and more broadly, the expansion of control regimes and infrastructures at Turkish external borders in the context of the country's EU candidacy.

¹ Augustová, K., Ilbiz, E. and Carrapico, H. (2024) Complex harms of migration externalisation: EU policy 'creep' processes into domestic counterterrorism at the Turkey–Iran border, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 27(1), pp. 25–45; Augustová, K. and Suber, D.L. (2023) The Kurdish kaçakçı on the Iran–Turkey border: corruption and survival as EU sponsored counter-smuggling effects, *Trends in Organized Crime* 26, 1:48–63; Bozçalı, F. (2024) Corridors of countersovereignty: Insurgency, smuggling, and post-nation-state politics in Turkey's Kurdish highlands, *Anthropological Theory* 24(3) 325–343

² Infrastructuring Nature as Border Technique, <https://infranature.org/>

³ Biner, Ö. (2018) Crossing the mountain and negotiating the border: Human smuggling in eastern Turkey, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 59, pp. 89–108; Deniz, O. & Nargül, S. (2025) Turkey–Iran Border and Irregular Migration from a Geographical Perspective, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2025.2488508

⁴ Augustová et al 2024; Aksel, D. B. and İçduygu, A. (2019) Borders and the mobility of migrants in Turkey, CEASEVAL Working Paper, https://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/iesg/professuren/geographie/Publikationen/CEASEVAL/ceaseval_wp.php.en; Dalkiran, M. (2023) New Approaches to Conditionality in EU–Turkey Relations: Assessing the Role of Irregular Migration, *Oasis*, 39, pp.123–143. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18601/16577558.n39.08>; Müftüler-Bac, M. (2021): Externalization of migration governance, Turkey's migration regime, and the protection of the European Union's external borders, *Turkish Studies*, 23(2) pp.290–316, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2021.1943661



Map 1: The province of Van (in red). Map design: Clara Zinecker. Sources: Esri, Survey of India, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community.

Beyond the agendas of other individual or supranational states, however, the militarisation of the Van border and the weaponisation of the natural landscape are equally rooted in domestic dynamics. Being home to a predominantly Kurdish population, the Van borderland has been subject to parallel processes of militarisation and securitisation aimed at policing political and socio-economic activities, such as cross-border illicit trade of the local Kurdish communities.⁵ In order to understand the present-day context, it is crucial to center the fact that the various types of cross-border activity in these regions have their origins in established socio-economic structures and relations that predate the imposition of the modern nation-state borders that divided Kurdish territories across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Thus, in recent decades, the Van border saw the proliferation of material structures, technologies of surveillance and practices of border control aimed at curtailing crossings

⁵ Augustová et al 2024; Augustová, K. (2021) Impacts of EU-Turkey Cooperation on Migration Along the Iran-Turkey Border, IPC-Mercator Analysis, <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/en/publications?cat=All%20Publications&year=2021>

of forcibly displaced populations.⁶ The natural environment that makes crossings risky and arduous has been rendered even more hostile by the proliferation of surveillance and control infrastructures such as walls, ditches, observation towers and technological surveillance systems. The Van border thus constitutes a significant paradigm of interaction between the natural landscape and human-made regimes and infrastructures aimed at controlling the movement of displaced populations. The intensified surveillance and barriers have made the conditions of crossing far more dependent on those with the expertise and resources to facilitate it, encouraging a greater role of people smuggling as a source of income where other economic prospects have dwindled.

Despite its centrality for the architecture of the externalised EU border regime, the Van border, and Turkey's Eastern borders more broadly, have been relatively under-researched. A few studies conducted by Turkish academics in the 1990s and 2000s have focused mainly on unauthorised migration and 'smuggling'.⁷ Between the 1990s and the 2000s, conducting academic studies on Kurdish regions was associated with terrorism; therefore, neither individuals could easily write on the subject nor would the state grant permission. Consequently, the scarcity of studies during this period is a valid and understandable reality. It is only in recent years, following the intensification of forced displacement from Afghanistan, in the wake of the US military withdrawal and the Taliban's coming to power, and in the context of the more general changes and interests in the country regarding migration, that the region has received increased research attention from English-speaking academia.⁸

This report thus adds to a growing body of literature by exploring the EU-Turkish border regime in the Van province through the lens of the Infrastructuring Nature project. The collaborative project, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, investigates how nature is

⁶ Augustová et al 2024; Sağlam, O. (2025) The 204-kilometer security wall built on the Van-Iran border has been completed. Anadolu Agency, 25 September <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/van-iran-sinirinda-insa-edilen-guvenlik-duvarinin-204-kilometresi-tamamlandi/3697513>

⁷ İçduygu, A. and Toktas, S. (2002) How Do Smuggling and Trafficking Operate via Irregular Border Crossings in the Middle East? *International Migration*, 40(6), pp. 25-54; İçduygu, A. (2003) *Irregular Migration in Turkey*, International Organisation for Migration Research Series No. 12, <https://share.google/NRYVMt5shVnRON6yn>

⁸ See for example Augustová et al 2024; Augustová and Suber 2023; Bozçalı, 2024 *Corridors*; Bozçalı, F. (2020) Probabilistic borderwork: oil smuggling, nonillegality, and techno-legal politics in the Kurdish borderlands of Turkey. *American Ethnologist*, 47(1) pp. 72–85; Bozçalı, F. (2024) Proving injustice: Smuggler killings, impunity work, and vernacular counterforensics in Turkey's Kurdish borderlands, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 126 (4):567–580 DOI: 10.1111/aman.28015; Ollier, J. (2025): Turkey's Walled Borders: A Multiscalar Approach, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2025.2457610

incorporated by regimes of border control and how, in turn, nature influences these regimes. *Infrastructuring Nature* aims to understand how the interaction between nature and border enforcement produces inhospitable landscapes that become integral to regimes of control and shape the experiences of those attempting to cross them.⁹

The report is structured in the following manner. Following a presentation of the methodological strategies of the report (Section 2), the report first considers the European and domestic policy contexts shaping the transformation of governing Turkish borders. Section 3 first provides an overview of the dynamics of EU accession and border externalisation, which have shaped border and migration management in Turkey, especially over the past fifteen years. It further explores the domestic political dynamics, in particular Turkey's governance of Kurdish populations and political life, which have, in parallel with EU border governance policies, led to the militarisation of the Van borderscape. Drawing on both dynamics, the section further explores the transformation of the governance of Turkish external borders through new policies, funding and infrastructures.

Section 4 turns to the Van borderscape. After describing the topography and climate of the borderland, it explores how it has shaped, along with national politics and security policies, the lives and livelihoods of local communities. The natural environment, socioeconomic deprivation and political oppression at the borderland have had an impact on the journeys of people on the move through this border, as facilitation is both a source of local income and necessary in helping people on the move negotiate a harsh natural landscape. In Section 5, we explore in detail the EU-funded and domestic interventions to the natural landscape aimed at curtailing movement and analyse the logics of their interaction with more-than-human elements of the borderscape in curtailing movement. Further, we account for the impact of human-made infrastructures of control and surveillance on the natural environment itself.

Drawing on interviews with people on the move, Section 6 discusses how the weaponisation of the landscape impacts on their journeys across the Van border. We

⁹ *Infrastructuring Nature as Border Technique*, <https://infranature.org/about/>

explore how people on the move engage with natural elements, as well as the physical obstacles and control practices that weaponise the natural environment. We further account for the multiple forms of violence and harm people experience during their crossings, including practices of pushbacks. Reflecting on the duality of domestic and EU dynamics in the militarisation and transformation of the border landscape, Section 7 explores its effects on the policing and oppression of Kurdish borderland communities. This is followed by the Conclusion section, which tries to draw out the main findings from the study and to point towards future possible areas of further research.

2. Methodology

The report draws on primary and secondary data gathered through a range of methods, including desk research, analysis of visual materials, field observations and interviews. The research has been conducted as a collaborative effort between members of the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) team and the partner organisation Ortakça in Van. BVMN coordination and the work on this research project have been conducted in English. Some members of the BVMN team are competent Turkish speakers with a very basic working knowledge of Kurdish Kurmanji. The Ortakça team was made up of speakers of Turkish, Kurdish, Farsi and English. The working language for the coordination of the research and writing of the report has been English.

Furthermore, in keeping broadly with the lexical guide of BVMN's work, the report mainly makes use of the term 'people on the move' over 'migrants', 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', in particular in the original analytical sections. The language used by participants or coming from official documents from the EU, for instance, has not been altered to adapt to the conscious choice of use of the 'people on the move' term.

2.1 Desk research

Information for the sections on EU and domestic policies on border management was gathered through academic literature, reports and media coverage in both English and

Turkish. To understand the development of material and technical interventions at the Turkish borders and in particular the Turkish–Iranian border in the Van province, we drew on official EU and Turkish documents, research literature and media sources.

We further analysed satellite imagery in platforms such as Google Earth and Google Earth Pro in order to understand the presence of border control infrastructures in the landscape and their evolution over time. One limitation in this respect was the limited availability of recent satellite imagery for parts of the Van border, given that most large-scale infrastructures emerged after 2021. Images and videos available online were useful in understanding the features of control infrastructures.

2.2 Field visits

A field visit to Van was conducted in May 2025 with one member of BVMN and a member of another partner organisation. The visit took in meetings with local actors such as the Van Bar Association Migration and Asylum Commission, human rights and migration lawyer Mahmut Kaçan, members of the Human Rights Association of Turkey (TİHV), as well as informal sittings with Afghan women engaged in cultural activities at the office of the partner organisation, Ortakça. All meetings were conducted in accompaniment with the Ortakça partners, as was a trip to the cemetery of the unidentified and to some borderland areas, where local villagers gave direct accounts of their experience of the border regime in its current form, as well as their more general experience of the region under the watch of the Turkish military.

A second field visit was conducted by Ortakça partners in November 2025. The purpose of this visit was to conduct interviews with inhabitants of border villages as well as collect visual material from border areas.

2.3 Interviews

2.3.1 Interviews with people on the move

The interviews with people on the move were conducted by a female researcher from Van with extensive past experience in social research and migrant support work in a civil society setting. Within the scope of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted in Van with seven Afghan women and three men (10 participants in total), which allowed for observation of both their border-crossing experiences and how these experiences permeated their everyday lives. The field site was not only a space for data collection but also revealed how people continue to live with their past “migration” experiences. This report provides information on how participants expressed their emotions during the interviews, their tone of voice, changes in mood, moments of silence, and the significance of the spaces in which the interviews took place.

Table 1: Interviews with People on the Move

Participant	Gender	Year of crossing
Participant 1 (P1)	Female	2022/3, 2024
Participant 2 (P2)	Female	2019
Participant 3 (P3)	Female	2019
Participant 4 (P4)	Male	2022/3
Participant 5 (P5)	Female	2019
Participant 6 (P6)	Male	2023
Participant 7 (P7)	Male	2023
Participant 8 (P8)	Female	2016/17
Participant 9 (P9)	Female	2020
Participant 10 (P10)	Male	2023

The interviews were conducted using an in-depth qualitative method with 10 participants, whose ages ranged from 20 to 43. Access to participants was made possible both by the trust established through prior acquaintance and by the snowball sampling method. Before starting the interviews, verbal consent was obtained from all participants for audio recording and note-taking. Most interviews were conducted in central Van, while one was carried out in the Edremit district. Locations varied between participants’ homes and

cafés, depending on their needs for safety and privacy. Most participants were married. Also, their migration experiences covered two periods: those who crossed before the construction of the border wall and those who crossed afterwards.

Being a female researcher directly influenced the dynamics of the field process. Access to female participants was easier, whereas interviews with men were more distant and often limited in depth. Additionally, being a woman researcher created constraints in terms of accessing certain locations or times. The selection of interview locations was made considering both participants' and the researcher's safety. Four interviews with women were conducted at home, and three in cafés. Women interviewed at home were generally more flexible in sharing information. However, some preferred to meet outside if a man was present at home, and location choice was adjusted accordingly.

Some women who consented to audio recording were more hesitant to discuss certain topics, especially those concerning "bodily experiences" at the border, menstrual cycles, hygiene issues, and intimate aspects of the body. Women often waited until the audio recording ended to share these experiences. They were expressed quietly, with embarrassment, hesitation, and sometimes apology, and were recorded in notes after the interview. During interviews at home or outside, mountains visible from the windows (or often referenced even when not visible) became spatial sites of memory. Women whose homes faced the mountains frequently turned their heads toward them while narrating, highlighting how the "memory of the border" is continuously reproduced through space, even if the mountains themselves are not visible, as stories are inseparable from these spatial markers.

Interviews with male participants were conducted on a more distant footing. Meetings were frequently postponed or canceled due to work commitments, which meant interviews often had to take place in the evening and outdoors. Their narratives were more limited compared to women, and additional questions were needed to expand the discussion. The gender difference between participant and researcher was likely what contributed to this limitation.

2.3.2 Interviews and conversations with local residents in the borderlands

In addition to the interviews with people on the move, seven interviews were conducted by a male researcher from Van with inhabitants of border villages. The interviews were conducted in three Kurdish villages located along the Turkish–Iranian border, with male participants aged between 26 and 66. The research took place within a strong traditional social framework where gender roles remain clearly defined. During the interviews, women generally preferred to let men speak first, and after the men had finished, they often said, “*We have nothing more to add.*”

Table 2: *Participants from border villages*

Participant	Gender
Participant 1 (PV1)	M
Participant 2 (PV2)	M
Participant 3 (PV3)	M
Participant 4 (PV4)	M
Participant 5 (PV5)	M
Participant 6 (PV6)	M
Participant 7 (PV7)	M

This pattern reflects the deeply rooted gender norms that continue to shape everyday life in the region. In these communities, men are the primary actors in both border trade and livestock farming, which have long been the main sources of livelihood. Because of this, men were able to provide more detailed and experience-based insights into how the border wall, changing economic conditions, and new security measures have affected village life. Therefore, the fact that all participants in the study were men was not the result of a deliberate sampling choice, but rather a direct outcome of the social structure itself.

2.3.3 Other interviews and conversations

In addition to the interviews with people on the move and local Kurdish residents, two interviews were conducted with Van lawyer Mahmut Kaçan, who specialises in the area of migration law and has been a critical reference for studies on the situation in the province and regarding Turkey's migration management regime, as well as one group interview with members of the Van Bar Association Migration and Asylum Commission. We further had conversations with key informants who had knowledge of EU-related issues covered in this report. All parties were keen to share information and support research dedicated to highlighting the rights abuses that have been a systemic feature of the EU - Turkey border regime.

2.4 Limitations of the research

Interviews were conducted by members of the Ortakça team in Farsi / Dari and in Kurdish Kurmanji. These were later translated into Turkish, analysed and then translated to English for final common assessment, discussion and integration into the wider report. With English having been the main language for coordination, planning, discussion of the data, and writing, there have been challenges both in terms of maintaining a clear and inclusive environment in the coordination process and further limitations in terms of the need to translate primary data via two languages. Secondary source materials were also sourced from English and Turkish, especially, again requiring translation and bringing the risk of a loss of nuance at the very least in this process.

This report will be translated into Turkish, as it is the primary language of the local context in Van, Turkey. Regarding the use of the term 'people on the move', this also presents a challenge as it is not a term for which there is a similar equivalent in Turkish, and seeking a translatable equivalent without that being rooted in a more general movement-based process tied to the specific context has the risk of superficiality and imposition from outside.

Regarding the range of languages the report will appear in, due to the limits of capacity, further translations are not currently in planning. The choice of a Turkish translation prioritises speakers of that language over others – moreover, in the particular field of border and migration studies and human rights – and the hope is that this is the right language to pursue as it aims to make the report more accessible to the widest range of people in the dominant local language, in particular to activists, researchers and policymakers. However, there are obvious exclusions at work with this, in terms of not pursuing Kurdish Kurmanji, Farsi, and Dari translations. Within a more established context of language dominance in Turkey, a pattern is reproduced by conducting much of the research in Turkish and choosing to pursue a Turkish translation only for the research. While this is a pragmatic decision that has been taken collectively by all parties, it nonetheless reproduces a structure of Turkish-language research concerning Kurdish communities whose traditional language is Kurdish Kurmanji, and in many cases is still the sole language of the community.

Gendered aspects of the research have been reflexively addressed already in earlier sections of the methodology. It is important, however, to again underline the contingent and varyingly limited aspects of how gender shaped the research, especially in terms of the fieldwork. The researchers can only stand by the research having been conducted in the context of such openings and closures of possible relationship and exchange in the process of knowledge production. Furthermore, with regard to other sections that make reference to other actors, such as smuggling networks, there is an implicit assumption in the speech of the participants and the writing content that these are predominantly or entirely male groups, likewise the local unemployed or underemployed profile of local actors who are described as being the ideal type for smuggling groups to recruit. This assumption became more explicit to us in the analysis section of the research and would ideally have been something we were more cognisant of in the overall process and would have at least questioned in the field research stage.

In terms of the visual analysis conducted for this research, one of the limitations was the lack of recent satellite imagery consistently available for the whole border region of Van.

This would have been helpful in terms of analysing the timelines of emergence of recent structures, particularly in the districts of Çaldıran, Özalp and Saray. This gap was partially addressed through the analysis of other visual and non-visual resources, including photographs available online, photos taken during fieldwork and media articles.

3. The policy context of governing Turkish borders

With Turkey positioned as a main buffer zone within the EU's externalised border regime, enforcement and containment have expanded far more quickly than rights protections or oversight, and the EU has largely avoided any public scrutiny of the abuses that have followed. These developments build on older limits in Turkey's asylum system as well as newer control practices shaped by EU cooperation and regional displacement.

Because Turkey has retained the geographical limitation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and did not lift it when acceding to the 1967 Protocol, only people fleeing events in Europe can receive full "refugee" status under Turkish law, while non-Europeans are placed under temporary or conditional protection regimes instead. The great majority of Turkey's "refugee population" does not have refugee status in the country. At the same time, responsibility for registration and status determination, which once lay with UNHCR, was transferred to Turkey's Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) after 2018, a point especially impactful for those who seek or manage to arrive in or pass through the Van region in particular.¹⁰

In parallel, Turkey has expanded its enforcement and detention infrastructure with strong EU financial and technical backing. A nationwide network of over 30 Removal Centres now plays a central role in migration governance, as well as other de facto repurposed Temporary Accommodation Centers, but these facilities have been widely criticised for poor conditions and limited access to legal safeguards.¹¹ Since around 2019, amidst a still

¹⁰ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (2025) AIDA Country Report on Türkiye: Update in 2024, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/AIDA-TR_2024update.pdf; Human Rights Watch (2022) No One Asked Me Why I Left Afghanistan; Amnesty International (2022) "They don't treat us like humans": Unlawful returns of Afghans from Turkey and Iran, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asall/5897/2022/en/>

¹¹ ECRE 2025; Lighthouse Reports (2024) Turkey's EU-funded Deportation Machine, Lighthouse Reports, <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/turkeys-eu-funded-deportation-machine/>; Çağdaş Hukukçular Derneği (2025) Harran Barınma Merkezi Ziyareti Raporu – Aralık 2025, Çağdaş Hukukçular Derneği, <https://cagdashukukcular.org/harran-barinma-merkezi-ziyareti-raporu/>

deepening economic crisis, intense new controls have been introduced and deportations and so-called “voluntary” returns have increased, with migration being portrayed as the root of greater social and economic problems in the country.

In the following section, we explore in more depth EU-Turkish relations that have shaped the management of borders and migration in Turkey.

3.1 The European Union and Turkish asylum, migration and border governance

Turkey’s relationship with the EU and the political West has been shaped by Cold War alignments and various cycles of engagement and setback. Turkey joined the Council of Europe in 1949, became a member of the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, and made an application to associate with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959, which was followed by the Ankara Association Agreement of 1963, aimed at furthering the goal of eventual membership.¹² Having submitted an EEC membership application in 1987, Turkey was granted EU candidate status at the Helsinki summit in 1999, with EU support by that time driven by post-Cold War security concerns. Despite ongoing disputes like the Cyprus conflict and war and systemic rights abuses against its Kurdish population, negotiations began in 2005 under the EU’s conditionality framework.¹³

In essence, Turkey’s membership process exemplified the policy of conditionality, whereby candidate countries have to fulfil a number of criteria to accede to the Union.¹⁴ In return for the possibility of accession, Turkey was to strengthen its democratic institutions, rule of law and adherence to human rights frameworks, align its legal frameworks with the EU *acquis* and strengthen civil society¹⁵ – areas that were, for a period, to provide an opening of peaceful means to work towards a just resolution to the so-called Kurdish

¹² Olisah CI, Okafor CO. and Zachariah JO. (2022) Turkey and Non-Membership of the European Union: Issues, Prospects, and Challenges, *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 11(7) pp. 107-115; Lippert, B. (2021) Turkey as a Special and (Almost) Dead Case of EU Enlargement Policy in Reiners, W. and Turhan, E. (eds) *EU-Turkey Relations: Theories, Institutions, and Policies*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; Oğuzlu, T. (2015) NATO in Turkish foreign policy: the rise of a reluctant ally? *European Leadership Network*, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/nato-in-turkish-foreign-policy-the-rise-of-a-reluctant-ally/>

¹³ Lippert 2021; Kirişçi, K. (2009) Harmonisation of Migration Policy and Turkey’s Security Challenges, EDAM Discussion Paper Series, <https://share.google/qZ7ZDyxp8VPD2rSMW>; Çetin, E. (2022) The EU-Turkey Relations under the Shadow of the Contested Politics of Migration, *International Journal of Political Studies*, 8(3), pp. 53-68

¹⁴ Lippert 2021; Dalkiran 2021

¹⁵ *ibid*

Question. To support the membership process, Turkey has received funds under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and technical know-how from the EU Commission.¹⁶

The influence of the EU on Turkey's governance of its borders is commonly analysed through the theoretical frame of border externalisation. Border externalisation is defined as the transfer of border management legal norms and modes beyond its external borders.¹⁷ The approach taken here towards EU externalisation policy and practice is to view it as a continuity of colonial and imperial practice, where border technologies, funding, and diplomatic leverage are deployed not only at the edge of the Schengen zone but also further beyond the frontiers of the EU.¹⁸ This continues to construct a far-reaching apparatus of control central to global systems of exploitation, oppression and inequality, and should be analysed as such. Outsourcing border controls to non-member countries such as Turkey was an accompanying mode to the creation of an internal security area within the territory of the EU.¹⁹ In addition to a country of origin of migrants to the EU, Turkey was regarded as a transit space and a country of asylum for populations displaced by regional conflicts, political instability and repressive regimes as early as the 1990s.²⁰ It was thus designated as a key actor responsible for regulating mobility and preventing unauthorized migration movements towards the EU.²¹ Despite tensions in EU-Turkey relations, asylum and migration became increasingly 'the subject of governance' in the context of EU membership talks.²²

The country's accession process provided the framework through which the governance of asylum and borders were gradually europeanised and EU border control externalised

¹⁶ Lippert 2021

¹⁷ Üstübcü, A. (2019) The impact of externalized migration governance on Turkey: technocratic migration governance and the production of differentiated legal status, *Comparative Migration Studies* 7:46, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40878-019-0159-x>; Augustová et al 2024;

¹⁸ Waila, H. (2021) *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism and Rise of Racist Nationalism*, Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books; TNI (2023) *Repackaging Imperialism*; The EU – IOM border regime in the Balkans, <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/repackaging-imperialism>; Transnational Institute (2018) *The Rise of Border Imperialism*, <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-rise-of-border-imperialism> (<https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-rise-of-border-imperialism>); The migrant genocide: Toward a Third World analysis of European class struggle (2025). *Monthly Review / MR Online*, <https://mronline.org/2025/06/18/the-migrant-genocide-toward-a-third-world-analysis-of-european-class-struggle/>; Allan, S. (2025) 'Moving borders with history: new ways of thinking about border externalisation', *Statewatch*, <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2025/moving-borders-with-history-new-ways-of-thinking-about-border-externalisation/>.

¹⁹ Augustová et al 2024; Panebianco, S. (2020) 'The EU and migration in the Mediterranean: EU borders' control by proxy'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48(6): 1398–1416.

²⁰ Kirişçi 2009; İçduygu, A. (2011) *Europe, Turkey, and International Migration: An Uneasy Negotiation*, Presentation at the Migration Working Group European University Institute (EUI), <https://www.eui.eu/search?q=Europe%2C%20Turkey%2C%20and%20International%20Migration%3A%20An%20Uneasy%20Negotiation%2C#gsc.tab=0&gsc.q=Europe%2C%20Turkey%2C%20and%20International%20Migration%3A%20An%20Uneasy%20Negotiation%2C&gsc.page=1>; İçduygu and Toktas 2002

²¹ Çetin 2022; Üstübcü 2019; İçduygu 2011; Karadağ, S. (2019) 'Extraterritoriality of European borders to Turkey: an implementation perspective of counteractive strategies'. *Comparative Migration Studies* 7(1): 1-16.

²² Dalkiran 2023: 7

to Turkey. Under Chapter 24 of the accession negotiation process, Turkey was to align its laws and policies to the EU legal frameworks on asylum and migration and adopt EU modalities of border management, envisaged to lead to the full implementation of the Schengen Acquis.²³ In practice, the process was supported with technical know-how and pre-accession financial assistance provided by the EU, resulting in the adoption of national strategies on asylum, migration and border management in the 2000s.²⁴ Externalisation accelerated in the following decade. In 2013, the EU and Turkey signed a Readmission Agreement while the EU adopted a Roadmap towards a Visa-Free Regime with Turkey.²⁵ The Visa Liberalisation Dialogue was to result in Turkish citizens gaining visa-free travel in the Schengen area.²⁶ In return for visa-free travel, the Turkish authorities were to reform the country's visa policies, reinforce checks at the external borders and green border surveillance, reinforce border control and surveillance capabilities, ensure compliance with international and EU human rights law and strengthen cooperation with Frontex and neighbouring EU member states.²⁷

A further core area was the harmonisation of international protection and asylum law with the EU acquis. Turkey ratified the Geneva Convention in 1962, and later its Additional Protocol on the Legal Status of Refugees of 1967, but maintained the geographical limitation excluding non-Europeans from applying for full asylum.²⁸ Between the 1960s and 1980s, Turkey offered only temporary protection while the UNHCR facilitated resettlement to third countries.²⁹ In the 1990s, conflicts in Iraq, Bosnia, and elsewhere led Turkey to enact the 1994 Asylum Regulation, introducing tighter procedures, temporary protection, and increased reliance on the Ministry of Interior and UNHCR for resettlement.³⁰ The introduction of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2014 was intended to align Turkey's policies with EU standards, providing legal pathways for asylum,

²³ Kirişçi 2009; Dalkiran 2023; Karadağ 2019; Council of the European Union (2001);2001/235/EC: Council Decision of 8 March 2001 on the principles, priorities, intermediate objectives and conditions contained in the Accession Partnership with the Republic of Turkey, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32001D0235>

²⁴ Ollier, 2025; Kirişçi 2009; Dalkiran 2023

²⁵ Gokalp Aras, E. N. and Sahin Mencutek, Z. (2019) Border Management and Migration Controls – Turkey Report, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3402839>; Dalkiran 2023; Üstübcü, 2019

²⁶ Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019; Müftüler-Bac 2021

²⁷ European Commission (2013) Roadmap Towards a Visa-Free Regime with Turkey, <https://www.ikv.org.tr/ikv.asp?id=40&ing=en> ; Dalkiran 2023; Ollier 2025; Müftüler-Bac 2021

²⁸ Aksel and İçduygu 2019; Müftüler-Bac 2021

²⁹ Müftüler-Bac 2021

³⁰ *ibid*

family reunification, and prohibiting refoulement.³¹ LFIP is widely interpreted as an example of the Europeanisation of Turkish asylum and migration policy, even though the geographical limitation has remained in place to the present.³²

The increased displacement of populations in the region, mainly because of conflict and repression in Syria, rendered Turkey's role in policing EU-bound movements even more crucial. Turkey emerged as the world's largest host country for refugees, sheltering over 3.5 million Syrians, along with more than one million refugees from other countries, particularly Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.³³ In the wake of the 2015 'summer of migration',³⁴ controlling onward movement towards the EU became an increasingly critical issue for EU policy and border externalisation efforts intensified.³⁵ Under the 2015 Joint Action Plan, announced in October of that year, the EU agreed to mobilise significant financial support for humanitarian assistance and the reception of displaced Syrian populations in Turkey.³⁶ In return, Turkey would continue the reform of its legislative and policy frameworks to 'manage' Syrian populations and provide social and educational support to facilitate their (temporary) settlement.³⁷ Further financial support was included in the provisions of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement in exchange for accepting the return of all new irregular migrants crossing the Greek islands to Turkey as of 16 March 2016.³⁸ In parallel, Turkey would accelerate the implementation of border control measures agreed under the 2013 Roadmap.³⁹

In essence, the post-2015 period entailed an accelerated outsourcing of EU border control to Turkey.⁴⁰ This continuing dynamic has been presented equally as a response to subsequent population displacement, such as those triggered by the coming to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021.⁴¹ While talks on Turkey's accession and visa liberalisation have largely stagnated, border management and migration control have

³¹ Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019; Müftüler-Bac 2021

³² Aksel and İçduygu 2019; Müftüler-Bac 2021; Üstübcü 2019

³³ Müftüler-Bac 2021; Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019; Dalkiran 2023

³⁴ Kasperek, B. and Speer, M. (2015) Of Hope: Hungary and the long summer of migration, <https://bordermonitoring.eu/ungarn/2015/09/of-hope-en/>

³⁵ Aksel and İçduygu 2019; Müftüler-Bac 2021; Dalkiran 2023

³⁶ European Commission (2015) EU-Turkey joint action plan, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_15_5860; Ollier 2025; Müftüler-Bac 2021

³⁷ European Commission 2015; Müftüler-Bac 2021

³⁸ European Council (2016) EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>;

Dalkiran 2023; Üstübcü, 2019

³⁹ Ibid; Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019

⁴⁰ Augustová et al 2024; Müftüler-Bac 2021; Ollier 2025

⁴¹ Augustová et al 2024

remained core areas in EU-Turkish relations, and the EU has continued to provide funding for refugee reception and border management.⁴² Moreover, while the EU has continued to criticise Turkey on its human rights record, particularly in Kurdish majority regions such as Van, this has not inhibited the externalisation of EU border controls.⁴³

Nonetheless, the reinforcement of border management policies, practices and infrastructures is not solely informed by EU policy dynamics. Externalised policies always intersect with national, regional and local sociopolitical contexts as well as with existing practices of border control, and can be instrumentalised to serve domestic interests and national ideologies.⁴⁴ Similarly, conditionality should not be interpreted as a one-way imposition of conditions by the EU, but take into account the interest and demands of the Turkish state, in what Dalkiran (2023) terms 'reverse conditionality'.⁴⁵ Turkey's increasingly strategic role since 2013 has enabled it to gain bargaining power with the EU. This dynamic has been evident in the domain of asylum and migration policy, particularly in the context of increased displacements in the region, resulting in what Müftüler-Bac (2021) describes as a 'transactional' character in EU-Turkish relations. Thus, externalised modes of border governance have intersected with existing Turkish security interests, policy frameworks and nationalist ideologies, which do not solely concern controlling an external buffer zone from people aiming to reach Europe.⁴⁶

3.2 Domestic Interests and Policy

In avoiding an EU-centric understanding of the governance of Turkish borders, researchers have pointed out the multilayered political and security imperatives and nationalist ideologies that have shaped domestic policy.⁴⁷ While the influence of EU

⁴² Aksel and İçduygu 2019; Augustová 2024; Kirişçi 2009; E.g. European Commission (2011) Socioeconomic Development through Demining and Increasing the Border Surveillance Capacity at the Eastern Borders of Turkey, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ippa_en; European Commission (2021) Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the individual measure to support migration and border management in Turkey – Annex, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-implementing-decision-financing-individual-measure-support-migration-and-border_en, annex; InProve EEIG (2022) Technical Assistance for the Evaluation of 2014, 2015 and 2016 Turkey Annual Programmes – Border Management, <https://ippa.gov.tr/mali-isbirligi-yayinlari/>

⁴³ Augustová (2021) The Border Landscape in Eastern Turkey After the Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan, IPC-Mercator Analysis, <https://share.google/IwCLBzCwOAI7cpnPH>

⁴⁴ Augustová et al 2024; Frowd, P.M. (2021) 'Borderwork Creep in West Africa's Sahel'. *Geopolitics* 27(5): 1331-1351.

⁴⁵ Dalkiran 2023

⁴⁶ Augustová et al 2024; Léonard, S. & Kaunert, C. (2022) De-centring the Securitisation of Asylum and Migration in the European Union: Securitisation, Vulnerability and the Role of Turkey, *Geopolitics*, 27:3, 729-751, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2021.1929183

⁴⁷ Augustová 2021; Müftüler-Bac 2021; Dalkiran 2023

policies towards Turkey explains to a large extent the securitarian turn of the last decade, domestic sociopolitical dynamics are an equally important influence on migration and border policies and practices.

While the influence of the EU on Turkish asylum, migration and border policies is evident, there are many instances whereby legal frameworks and policies in Turkey diverged from the preferences of the EU. Examples include Turkish visa policies, the maintenance of the geographical limitation clause of the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol, and early reactions to Syrian refugees.⁴⁸ Divergence from EU policy agendas has been explained on the basis of the Turkish state's own interests in filtering the entry of migrants into its territory, maintaining control of migrant populations internally, shaping relations with states in the region and, increasingly in the last decade, leveraging its relations with the EU.⁴⁹ Following the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, for example, Turkish officials have made statements about opening the country's borders to the EU.⁵⁰ The Turkish government's decision to open the land border with Greece in February 2020 was, at a surface level, at odds with the role of Turkey in preventing unauthorised movements towards the EU, although President Erdogan had, since 2016, regularly threatened to "open the gates" to Europe. According to different interpretations, the move served a number of aims, among them to put pressure on the EU and NATO to support Turkish military action in the predominantly Kurdish regions of northern Syria, diverting attention from Turkish casualties in Syria, while also addressing power dynamics in EU-Turkey relations.⁵¹

Initial responses to the displacement of Syrian refugees to Turkey under the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) were characterised by a relatively open-door policy, allowing both entry and settlement.⁵² Syrians were largely portrayed as 'guests' and 'brothers', with narratives of a common Muslim identity underpinning policies of humanitarian reception, even though without formal protection.⁵³ These representations

⁴⁸ Kirişçi 2009; Dalkiran 2023; Üstübcü 2019

⁴⁹ Çetin 2022; Kirişçi 2009; Léonard and Kaunert 2021

⁵⁰ Çetin 2022; Léonard and Kaunert 2021

⁵¹ Léonard and Kaunert 2021; İşleyen, B. and Karadağ, S. (2023) Engineered migration at the Greek-Turkish border: A spectacle of violence and humanitarian space, *Security Dialogue*, 54(5), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/09670106231194911>

⁵² Aksel and İçduygu 2019; Cevik, H. (2025) From Open Doors to Closed Minds: The Transformation of Perceptions Toward Syrian Refugees in Turkey, *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, doi:10.1017/rep.2024.35; Üstübcü 2019; Çetin 2022

⁵³ Aksel and İçduygu 2019; Cevik 2025; Çoban, M. (2024) An Analysis of the Religious Solidarity Discourses Regarding the Syrian Refugees in Turkey, *Religions*, 15, 1216. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101216>

also served at reproducing identity narratives constructing contemporary Turkey as a continuation of the Ottoman Empire through conceptions of Muslim unity, as well as positioning AKP as a protector of Muslim refugees.⁵⁴

This concurrently played into the gradual creation of a more hostile environment towards these new arrivals, particularly among segments of the population who interpreted their presence as serving strategic demographic and electoral objectives linked to the AKP's consolidation of support, and in the process reinforcing Sunni-Islamist identity politics in ways perceived to challenge Turkey's secular and Kemalist foundations.⁵⁵ The early responses to Syrian displacements illustrate that, like in other nation-states, the governance of borders and displaced populations in Turkey is shaped by competing domestic articulations of nationalism and national sovereignty, ones which characterise ongoing faultlines in sociopolitical life in the country. Following this line of thought, this period also reflects shifting configurations of identity, nationalism, secularism, and xenophobia in Turkey, with non-Turkish populations such as Syrians, Afghans, and other migrants increasingly occupying the lowest positions in social and economic hierarchies, while at the same time, rising anti-migration politics, as elsewhere, has not been countered with conviction by the political left or rights-based movements.⁵⁶

While transformations such as introducing technocratic and bureaucratic modalities of managing borders described in the following section were driven by processes of accession and Europeanisation, they were also influenced by nationalist narratives of protecting the border, in particular against groups excluded from an ethnically and religiously defined national identity.⁵⁷ Thus, the transformation of the border became an opportunity to reassert national sovereignty and nationalist ideologies rooted in the formation of the Turkish Republic.⁵⁸ The phrase 'border is honour' encapsulates the construction of border reinforcement and protection as maintaining national sovereignty

⁵⁴ Cevik 2025; Çoban 2024

⁵⁵ İcduygu, A. & Simsek, D. (2016) 'Syrian refugees in Turkey: Towards integration policies', *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 15(3), pp. 59–69; Özcan, N.A. (2018) 'Domestic politics and the refugee issue in Turkey: Democratic erosion and the politics of inclusion and exclusion', *Mediterranean Politics*, 23(4), pp. 600–619.

⁵⁶ Uzun, B., Erdal, C. and Aksoy, Ö.A. (2026) *Yeni Genç Türklere: Yeni nesil milliyetçilik* [New Young Turks: New Generation Nationalism]. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları; Roure, P. (2025) 'Racism in Turkey: Context, Questions and Stakes – Interview with Helen Mackreath', K24; Akdeniz, E. (2024) 'Yeni türde ırkçılık örgütleniyor' ['A New Form of Racism Is Organising'], Ercüment Akdeniz website; Benlisoy, F. (2014) "'Suriyeli Sorunu' Yok, 'İrkçilik Sorunu' Var...; ['There Is No 'Syrian Problem', There Is a Racism Problem']", *Yeşil Gazete*, 16 August 2014, *Yeşil Gazete* website.

⁵⁷ Cevik 2025; Ollier 2025; Bozçalı 2024 Proving Injustice

⁵⁸ Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019; Ollier 2025

and identity.⁵⁹ As Ollier and Cevik have noted, it also served as a strategy for AKP to fend criticisms of its initial open door policy towards Syrian refugees in a period of deteriorating economic conditions by emphasizing the state's capacity of policing Turkey's borders.⁶⁰ Thus, policies on borders and migration in the context of EU-Turkey relations are also driven by domestic political agendas.⁶¹

One domain where EU border externalisation, domestic security agendas, and bordering practices have intersected, with particular significance for the Turkish-Iranian border in Van, is the Turkish state's treatment of Kurdish populations, the Kurdish freedom movement, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The Kurds, the largest "nation without a state" in the world, had their historical lands divided across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, following the formation of these modern nation-states along the lines drawn up by the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, although the division between the Ottoman and Persian Empires' territories of historical Kurdistan dates back to 1639.⁶² Kurdish people in Turkey have been historically subject to assimilationist politics that have cast them as either "prospective citizens" or "pseudo citizens" of the Republic, within a history of systematic oppression, open and covert state violence, economic marginalisation and exploitation.⁶³ Since 1984, the PKK has engaged in armed resistance against the Turkish state, although it is now engaged in a tentative and obtuse Peace Process and just recently announced its disarmament and withdrawal from Turkey.⁶⁴ The reaction of the Turkish state to Kurdish autonomist actions has encompassed political suppression with aggressive counter-terrorism policies, particularly in regions such as Van.⁶⁵ While policing Kurdish communities in Turkish borderlands since the establishment of the Turkish Republic has always been violent, since 1984, patterns of state violence have intensified. In addition to

⁵⁹ Ollier 2025; Tekin, F. (2025): Turkey-Iraq Borderland in the Context of Border Habitus and Cross-Border Tribal Social Capital, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, DOI:10.1080/08865655.2025.2457606; for example, [ntv.com.gr](https://www.ntv.com.tr/Turkey/karakoldu-kalekol-oldu) (2011) The police station became a 'kalekol' <https://www.ntv.com.tr/Turkey/karakoldu-kalekol-oldu>, [Gr0NR0fdOkWX4CfH9qRS6O](https://www.ntv.com.tr/Turkey/karakoldu-kalekol-oldu)

⁶⁰ Ollier 2025; Cevik 2025

⁶¹ Augustová 2024; Karadağ 2019; Léonard and Kaunert 2021

⁶² Deniz and Nargül 2025; Dahlman, C.T. and Moradi, S. (2018): *Partition and National Fragmentation of Kurdistan, Scaling Identities: Nationalism and Territoriality*, (edited by Herb, G.H. and Kaplan, D.H.), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

⁶³ Genç, D. (2015) An Analysis of Turkey's Bordering Processes: Why and Against Whom?, *Turkish Studies*, 16(4), pp. 527-553, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2015.1081069; Bozçalı 2024 Proving; Adamson, F. B. (2022) Migration Governance in Civil War: The Case of the Kurdish Conflict, *European Journal of International Security*, 8(4), pp. 513 - 530; Yeğen, M. (2009) "Prospective-Turks" or "Pseudo-Citizens:" Kurds in Turkey', *Middle East Journal*, 63(4), pp. 597-615. DOI: 10.3751/63.4.14.

⁶⁴ Bozçalı 2020; Tekin 2025; Reuters (2025) Kurdish PKK militants announce withdrawal from Turkey as part of disarmament, 26 October, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/kurdish-pkk-militants-announce-withdrawal-turkey-part-disarmament-2025-10-26/>

⁶⁵ Bozçalı 2024, Proving; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Augustová et al 2024; Biner, Ö. (2018) Crossing the mountain and negotiating the border: Human smuggling in eastern Turkey, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 59, pp. 89 - 108

monitoring more intensely the mountainous border areas where PKK militants were active,⁶⁶ the Turkish authorities, declaring constant states of emergency and with the additional employment of paramilitaries, engaged in extrajudicial killings, massacres of local populations, village evacuations, curfews, forced internal displacement and torture and disappearances.⁶⁷ Further, security authorities have targeted law-breaking practices such as the smuggling of goods and drugs.⁶⁸ The presence of Kurdish populations in Iran, Iraq and Syria has been perceived by the Turkish state as a threat and source of 'terrorist' and rule-breaking activities, rendering borders and border areas subject to militarised policing.⁶⁹

Thus, the policing of local Kurdish populations and the control of unauthorized crossings have become intertwined. Migration movements of ethnically Kurdish groups displaced by oppression in neighbouring countries, such as from Iraq in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly during Operation Anfal (1987–89), were met with more hostile responses than groups perceived as ethnically close, such as Turkish minority groups displaced from Bulgaria during the same period.⁷⁰ Unauthorised border crossings from neighbouring countries with Kurdish populations were considered as potential 'border infiltration by PKK terrorists' by the Turkish authorities, linked to the alleged presence of training camps in Iraq, Iran and Syria.⁷¹ Müftüler-Bac (2021) identified the outbreak of attacks in 2015 as a further factor behind the national authorities' intensification of border security at the Turkish-Syrian border in particular.⁷² The Turkish state thus often prioritised security concerns over migration control, which have had an impact on the implementation of EU border policies.⁷³ While, for example, the EU preferred the transfer of border control responsibilities to a civilian force, the Turkish authorities objected to such a move, and responsibility for green border control has remained primarily with the Turkish Armed Forces to this day.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ Bozçalı 2024, Corridors

⁶⁷ Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2020; Bozçalı 2024 Proving; Biner 2018; Özcan, O. (2021) Curfew 'until further notice': waiting and spatialisation of sovereignty in a Kurdish bordertown in Turkey, *Social Anthropology*, 29(3) pp. 816–830

⁶⁸ Bozçalı 2024 Proving; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors

⁶⁹ Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2024 Proving; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors

⁷⁰ Cevik 2025

⁷¹ Genç, 2015

⁷² Müftüler-Bac 2021

⁷³ Augustová et al 2024

⁷⁴ Augustová et al 2024; Genç, 2015

Against this backdrop, EU externalization policies do not simply impose a new layer of border control from outside. Instead, they intersect with existing forms of surveillance, militarisation and criminalization. In this particularly complex geographic area of violence and impunity, EU border externalization is absorbed into a local logic of territorial suspicion, peripheral, over-policed and seen as ungovernable border zones.

3.3. The transformation of the Turkish external borders

The transformation of the Turkish external borders was thus rooted in a multilayered context of EU border externalisation, accession processes and domestic interests and security concerns. While the increased migratory movements from Syria that began in 2011 and the Taliban's coming to power in Afghanistan in 2021 provided additional incentives, the expansion of Turkish border management capabilities dates back to the 2000s and is embedded in the incorporation of norms and practices of the EU's concept of Integrated Border Management (IBM).⁷⁵ IBM refers to strategies, policies and measures adopted by the EU in order to regulate cross-border mobility, simultaneously facilitating authorised border crossings while preventing movement deemed undesirable through border control and surveillance.⁷⁶ While IBM incorporated a wide range of border domains, practices and infrastructures, we focus here on interventions strengthening the surveillance of the green border with the aim of preventing unauthorised movements, and in particular on those that impact on the weaponisation of the natural environment.

Early efforts to harmonise Turkish border management with the IBM strategy, with EU financial assistance and expertise, led to the adoption of the National Action Plan on Integrated Border Management in 2006 and projects providing training for border guards.⁷⁷ Since 2007, actions aimed at reinforcing border management capacity and infrastructures have been largely financed through the three successive IPA programmes (IPA I 2007–2013, IPA II 2014–2020, IPA III 2021–2027).⁷⁸ EU programmes encompassed the full

⁷⁵ Kirişci 2009; Ollier 2025; Genç 2015;

⁷⁶ European Commission (2025) Effective management of external borders, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/effective-management-external-borders_en; Ollier 2025

⁷⁷ Kirişci 2009; Karadağ 2019; European Parliament (2016) Turkey: How the pre-accession funds have been spent, managed, controlled and the monitoring system? [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/fr/document/IPOL_STU\(2016\)572699](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/fr/document/IPOL_STU(2016)572699)

⁷⁸ European Commission (2025) Turkey - financial assistance under IPA, <https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre->

range of IBM domains. A core area, for example, was the development and implementation of national IBM strategies, the establishment of agencies – such as National Coordination and Joint Risk Analysis Centre (NACORAC) – and the development of organisational capacities to coordinate and implement border management through training, expertise-sharing and cross-border cooperation.⁷⁹ Other measures aimed at strengthening infrastructures and capacity for the management of legal entry through Border Crossing Points and visa regimes.⁸⁰ Actions aimed at the prevention of unauthorised migration included the expansion of infrastructures and capacity for detention and deportation, for example, through the construction of detention facilities and deportation centres.⁸¹ Most projects were implemented by the Turkish national authorities, although some were coordinated or implemented by organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and UNHCR.⁸² ICMPD, in particular, has been particularly active in implementing border management projects since 2018, the year when Turkey joined the organisation.⁸³ While

[accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en](#)

⁷⁹ European Commission (2007) TR 07 02 15 Action Plan on Integrated Border Management-Phase 1 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; International Organisation for Migration (2009) Strengthening Integrated Border Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey (2009 – 2011); <https://hungary.iom.int/strengthening-integrated-border-management-western-balkans-and-turkey-2009-2011>; European Commission (2008) TR080210 Action Plan on Integrated Border Management –Phase 2 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; European Commission (2013) IPA 2013/023-651.02/ TR/IPA Migration and Border Management https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; European Commission (2014) IPA2014/031874.08/TR/ Home Affairs, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; European Commission (2019) IPA/2019/042-258 & IPA/2019/042-259/3/Türkiye/ Home Affairs part I https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; European Commission (2020) IPA2020/042-385/7/Türkiye/Home affairs https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; InProVE EEIG 2022; European Commission (2016) Turkey 2016 Report https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/pub/2016_progress_report_en.pdf

⁸⁰ European Commission 2008; European Commission 2013; European Commission (2015) TURKEY Home Affairs Action Document 2015 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; European Commission (2021) Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the individual measure to support migration and border management in Turkey – Annex, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-implementing-decision-financing-individual-measure-support-migration-and-border_en

⁸¹ European Commission (2007) TR 07 02 16 Support to Turkey's Capacity in Combating Illegal Migration and Establishment of Removal Centres for Illegal Migrants https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; European Commission (2010) TR2010 / 0324.01 Establishment of Reception and Removal Centres – Phase II https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_e; European Commission (2019) IPA/2019/042-258 & IPA/2019/042-259/4/Türkiye/ Home Affairs part II, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_e; European Commission (2024) Annex – Action Document for Migration and border management support in Türkiye, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-implementing-decision-1712024-financing-individual-measure-favour-migration-and-border_en; European Commission 2014; European Commission 2015

⁸² IOM 2009; European Commission 2014; European Commission 2020

⁸³ HareAct (2018) Turkey has joined the ICMPD – What does this mean? <https://hareact.bordermonitoring.eu/2018/05/24/Turkey-has-joined-the-icmpd-what-does-this-mean>; European Commission 2019 Part I; ICMPD (n.d.) Technical Assistance for Improving Administrative Capacity of Border Management at Local Level <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/technical-assistance-for-improving-administrative-capacity-of-border-management-at-local-level-ibm-loc-cap>; ICMPD (n.d.) Supporting the Institutional Capacity of the National Coordination and Joint Risk Analysis Centre, <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/supporting-the-institutional-capacity-of-the-national-coordination-and-joint-risk-analysis-centre-nacorac>; ICMPD (n.d.) ENGAGE: Enhancing the Border Management Capacity of the Presidency of Migration Management Project, <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/enhancing-the-border-management-capacity-of-the-presidency-of-migration-management-project-engage>; ICMPD (n.d.) EU4IBMTR: Drafting of a National IBM Strategy and Updating of the National Action Plan to Implement Türkiye's IBM Strategy <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/drafting-of-a-national-ibm-strategy-and-updating-of-the-national-action-plan-to-implement-tuerkiye-s-ibm-strategy-eu4ibmtr>

IPA programmes supplemented by national budgets financed most projects, some actions were supported by funding from several countries, including the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Denmark and Japan.⁸⁴

A key area of EU-supported measures targeted the surveillance and ‘protection’ of Turkey’s green and maritime borders. From the IPA I cycle onwards, several projects focused on expanding Turkey’s surveillance arsenal and border control equipment. EU projects placed a lot of emphasis on providing Turkey with technological means of surveillance, such as mobile thermovision equipment and automated border surveillance systems comprising cameras, radars, sensors and communication devices.⁸⁵ Stationary border surveillance systems were constructed at the western border with Greece, Syria, as well as in the Eastern borders with Iran, and in the future Iraq.⁸⁶ By 2022, it was reported that 65% of the Eastern Border with Iran was covered by surveillance technologies, such as masts and sensors.⁸⁷ Turkish authorities were also supplied with mobile surveillance means, such as vehicles and vessels with thermovision equipment.⁸⁸ Another core element was training personnel in their use and in implementing IBM-aligned border management practices.⁸⁹

Under IPA III, the EU continued funding of technological infrastructures at Eastern borders.⁹⁰ The 2022/2023 and 2024 Individual Measures included funding for the construction of further fixed surveillance systems for the Turkish–Iranian and Turkish–Iraqi border, a lighting system and providing the Turkish authorities with further mobile surveillance systems.⁹¹ The new funding programmes suggest that the European Commission has now identified the Turkey–Iraq border as one needing reinforcement with surveillance and control infrastructures, as the militarisation of the Turkish–Iranian

⁸⁴ European Commission (2022) Action Document «Support to Türkiye’s Efforts to Strengthen Border Management at the Eastern and South Eastern Border», https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-implementing-decision-financing-individual-measure-support-border-management-turkiye-2022_en; ICMPD (n.d.) SYNCRON: Strengthening National Coordination and Cooperation Mechanisms in the Field of Border Management <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/strengthening-national-coordination-and-cooperation-mechanisms-in-the-field-of-border-management-synron>; IOM 2009; InProvE EEIG 2022; Whatdotheyknow (2025) Projects & Funding ICMPD TRANSPARENCY 2020 – 2025 https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/projects_funding_icmpd_transpare

⁸⁵ European Commission 2008; European Commission 2011; European Commission 2013; European Commission 2015; European Commission 2019 Part 1; European Commission 2019 Part 2; European Commission 2024

⁸⁶ European Commission (2020) Turkey 2020 Report, https://www.ab.gov.tr/siteimages/trkiye_raporstrateji_belgesi_2020/turkey_report_2020.pdf

⁸⁷ InProvE EEIG 2022

⁸⁸ Ibid; European Commission (2018) Turkey 2018 Report <https://www.ab.gov.tr/siteimages/kapbtblolar/20180417-turkey-report.pdf>

⁸⁹ Akseil and İçduygu 2019; Karadag 2019; European Commission 2013; European Commission 2015; InProvE EEIG 2022; European Commission (2008) TR080213 Training of Border Police https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en

⁹⁰ European Commission 2022

⁹¹ European Commission 2022; European Commission 2024

border is expected to divert crossings there.⁹² These projects, which have so far been implemented mainly in the province of Van, are coordinated by ICMPD and expected to be completed in 2028.⁹³

The technological reinforcement of the border was combined with large-scale interventions driven by national security and counter-terrorism towards the PKK and other groups designated as terrorists.⁹⁴ In 2009, the Turkish authorities embarked on a programme of construction and upgrading of border outposts (*Karakol*) at the Eastern and South-Eastern borders.⁹⁵ In 2015, a national border protection plan, Project on Urgent Border Physical Protection System (*Acil Sınır Fiziki Güvenlik Sistemi Projesi*), outlined a programme of border reinforcement entailing the construction of physical infrastructures such as walls, ditches, watchtowers and patrol roads at the Syrian and Iranian borders.⁹⁶ A three-meter-high, two-metre-wide modular concrete wall, topped with barbed wire and with a length of 828 km, was first built at the Syrian-Turkish border and was accompanied by the construction of 120 watchtowers and patrol roads.⁹⁷ Subsequently, similar infrastructures were built to reinforce the Eastern border.⁹⁸ At the Eastern border, wall construction started in 2017 in the Ağrı province, reportedly costing 200 million lira, and continued to the province of Van from 2021 onwards.⁹⁹ In parallel, 43 km of walls were constructed at the Turkish-Iranian border in the province of Hakkari by 2020.¹⁰⁰ The construction of another wall at the border with Iraq in the same province was completed

⁹² ibid

⁹³ ICMPD (n.d.) SAFE: Supporting Türkiye's Efforts to Strengthen Border Management at the Eastern and South Eastern Land Borders <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/supporting-tuerkiye-s-efforts-to-strengthen-border-management-at-the-eastern-and-south-eastern-land-borders-safe>

⁹⁴ Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2024 Proving; European Commission (2016) IPA/2016/039-354 & 039-355/06/TR/ Home Affairs, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; Armstrong, W. (2021) Analysis: Turkey builds Syria, Iran border walls in tough new era for migrants, BBC Monitoring, 13 July, <https://monitoring.stage.bbc.co.uk/product/c202qktf>; Şentek, Z and Arsu, S. (2018) No Way Out The European Union is funding military equipment used by Turkey to stop refugees from fleeing the Syrian Civil War and entering the EU, The Black Sea, 23 March <https://theblacksea.eu/investigations/billions-for-borders/no-way-out/>

⁹⁵ Yeni Şafak (2012) Iranian border safer with 'Kalekol', 16 October, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/iran-siniri-kalekollarla-daha-guvenli-41624/>; Bozçalı 2024 Proving; Ministry of the Interior (2012) ANSWER TO THE WRITTEN QUESTION NO. 7/25652 SUBMITTED BY VAN MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT NAZMİ GÜR <https://cdn.tbmm.gov.tr/KKBSPublicFile/D24/Y3/T7/WebOnergeMetni/2d8a7a2f-4f42-472e-94d7-63096aa7746c.pdf>; Human Rights Association (2014) IHD Commission Report on the Construction of New Police Stations (Kalekol) and Base Areas, 16 September, <https://www.ihd.org.tr/yeni-karakol-kalekol-ve-us-bolgeleri-yapimlarina-iliskin-ihd-komisyon-raporu>

⁹⁶ European Commission 2014; Müftüler-Bac 2021;

⁹⁷ Armstrong 2021; CNN Turk (2018) Modular concrete wall and wire on the land border, 11 December <https://www.cnn.com/video/Turkey/kara-sinirina-moduler-beton-duvar-ve-tel-845995>; Müftüler-Bac 2021

⁹⁸ European Commission 2022; European Commission 2024

⁹⁹ Ministry of the Interior (2021) After Ağrı, Another Wall to Van, 10 May, <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/agridan-sonra-bir-duvar-da-vana>; Demirören Haber Ajansı (2023) The 84-kilometer border wall in Ağrı is being monitored with 80 thermal and 79 night vision cameras, 27 May, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LH0jShxhdcQ>; CNN Turk 2018; Daily Sabah (2023) Türkiye tightens Iranian border to curb illegal migration, 17 August <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/Turkey-tightens-iranian-border-to-curb-illegal-migration/news> İHA (2023) The Saray phase of the wall built on the Van-Iran border has been completed, 15 December

¹⁰⁰ Dündar, B. (2021) Modular security wall with sensors on Iranian border, TRT Haber, 20 December <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/Turkey/iran-sinirina-sensorlu-moduler-guvenlik-duvari-540384.html>; Yeni Şafak (2021) A 43-kilometer concrete wall was built along the Iranian border, 30 August, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/van-haberleri-iran-sinirina-43-kilometre-beton-duvar-oruldu-3689941>

in 2025.¹⁰¹ While formally the EU does not support the construction of walls as a means to prevent border crossings, in Turkey, unlike in some of its member states, it did not politically oppose their construction.¹⁰²

4. The Van Borderscape

4.1. The natural landscape of the Van border

The Turkish–Iranian border in Van province has a length of 295 kilometres, and it is known for its mountainous geography.¹⁰³ The border runs along steep mountains, with altitudes ranging between 2,500 to over 3,000 metres.¹⁰⁴ Altitudes are particularly high in the district of Başkale in the south of Van province.¹⁰⁵ The borderline itself follows the mountain watershed line, the highest point of mountain ranges.¹⁰⁶ While there are high altitude mountain passages, there are few valleys formed by rivers to provide easy to cross corridors between Turkey and Iran.¹⁰⁷ The Kotur valley, where the Kapıköy border crossing point is located, is the main such crossing in the Van province.¹⁰⁸ Beyond the mountain ranges that mark the Turkish–Iranian boundary in Van lie mountain slopes and plateaus.¹⁰⁹ Forests and shrubs are largely absent, and the main type of vegetation is grass, leading to the use of these areas mainly as pastureland.¹¹⁰

The border areas of Van are known for their harsh continental climate.¹¹¹ Temperatures in winter and spring months can fall below freezing levels. Snowfall is frequent, and the borderland tends to be covered with snow for six months a year, during the winter and

¹⁰¹ Harmancı, S. and Karadeniz, S. (2025) A 2,152-meter security wall has been constructed along the Iraqi border in Hakkari, Anadolu Agency, December 3, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/hakkaride-irak-sinirina-2-bin-152-metre-guvenlik-duvari-insa-edildi/3760665#>; European Commission 2022; European Commission 2024

¹⁰² Şentek and Arsu 2018

¹⁰³ Deniz and Nargül 2025; Benghellab, K., Davies, T. and Isakjee, A. (2025) Four seasons of border violence: The co-option of the seasons into the management of migration, *Geoforum*, Vol. 160, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2025.104207>; ECRE (2025) Asylum Procedure in Türkiye <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/asylum-procedure/>

¹⁰⁴ Deniz and Nargül 2025; topographic-map.com (2025) Van topographic map, <https://en-in.topographic-map.com/map-hcwrtp/van/>

¹⁰⁵ Deniz and Nargül 2025

¹⁰⁶ Deniz, O. and Doğu, A. F. (2008) Türkiye–İran Sınırı: Sınırın Coğrafi Durumu ve Sınır Köylerimizin Sosyo–Ekonomik Yapıları [Turkish–Iran Border: Geographical Condition of the Border and Socio Economic Structure of Our Border Villages], *Doğu Coğrafya Dergisi*, <https://avesis.yyu.edu.tr/yayin/05e36ccc-e96c-4c71-ae23-4b2c49982b4a/turkiye-iran-siniri-sinirin-co-grafi-durumu-ve-sinirkoylerimiz-sosyo-ekonomik-yapilari>

¹⁰⁷ Deniz and Doğu 2008

¹⁰⁸ Deniz and Doğu 2008

¹⁰⁹ Deniz and Doğu 2008

¹¹⁰ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Aygün, T. (2020) Transhumance activities in small ruminant husbandry in Van province of Eastern Anatolia in Turkey, *Proceedings of the XI International Scientific Agricultural Symposium “Agrosym 2020”*, <https://share.google/zhZp4wOfrsYla8QgT>

¹¹¹ Deniz and Nargül 2025; Deniz and Doğu; Benghellab et al 2025

spring months.¹¹² Summers are dry and hot, often characterised by droughts.¹¹³ Water can be a scarce resource in the summer, partly due to the scarcity of water sources such as lakes, rivers and streams in the areas near the border.¹¹⁴ While rivers in the Van region are few, another natural element people on the move may have to negotiate when exiting the province is Lake Van. One route towards inland Turkey is crossing Lake Van towards the province of Bitlis.¹¹⁵



Image 1: Landscapes in Van. Photos taken in May 2025.

¹¹² Deniz and Nargül 2025; Deniz and Doğu 2008

¹¹³ Deniz and Nargül 2025; Deniz and Doğu 2008; Benghellab et al 2025

¹¹⁴ Deniz and Doğu; Benghellab et al 2025

¹¹⁵ Kent, S. (2020) Lake Van: An overlooked and deadly migration route to Turkey and Europe, The New Humanitarian, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/10/20/turkey-afghanistan-migrants-refugees-asylum>



Image 2: Landscapes in Van. Photos taken in May 2025.

4.2 Social relations in the Van borderscape

The natural features of the landscape, together with historical and contemporary sociopolitical dynamics, shape the lives of local communities. Historically, the region of Van has been host to a large Kurdish population.¹¹⁶ Kurdish communities have lived in the region since long before modern-day borders between Turkey and Iran were consolidated. So too, especially have Armenians, which must be underlined and accommodated into negotiating claims to the historical lands of Kurdistan, as has been emphasised by Kurdish rights activists and political actors.¹¹⁷ Communities of these regions spread across the boundaries of the Ottoman empire and Safavid state (subsequently Iran). They often had a nomadic lifestyle, which facilitated their engagement with animal husbandry, and engaged in trading activities across territorial boundaries.¹¹⁸ These cross-border mobilities and ties were less problematic for the fluid

¹¹⁶ Genç 2015; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Deniz and Nargül 2025

¹¹⁷ Bozçalı 2020; Tekin 2025; Deniz and Nargül 2025

¹¹⁸ Deniz and Nargül 2025; Augustová and Suber 2023

pre-20th century borders but became a challenge to the fixed borders and border regimes developed in the 20th century. The geopolitical border in Van was consolidated with a treaty in 1937, which demarcated the Turkish-Iranian border, simultaneously subjecting communities on either side of the border to control regimes.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, kinship and trade relations endured.¹²⁰

In areas in proximity to the Turkish-Iranian political border, the local population is settled mainly in villages.¹²¹ The primary formal economic activity is livestock farming, suited to the availability of pastureland at mountain slopes and plateaus.¹²² Agriculture is another common economic activity in the region, but more limited due to the climate and topography.¹²³ According to M.Kaçan, agriculture is not sufficient for covering the economic needs of the border regions' inhabitants:

Ninety percent of the local population are not able to deal with agriculture. They don't have land. Mostly they feed animals...

Socioeconomic deprivation in the border areas of the Van region is pronounced, both due to economic neglect by the state and the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, which has disrupted local economic activities.¹²⁴ Unemployment is high, particularly among young people, and internal migration towards urban centres is common.¹²⁵

In these conditions, informal cross-border trade is a significant activity to ensure local livelihoods.¹²⁶ Illicit cross-border economies include the trade, or smuggling, of goods such as petrol, tea and sugar, electronics, textiles, agricultural chemicals, as well as drugs. Local groups of kaçakçı ('smugglers') bring such products from Iran, where they are cheaper, using their knowledge of the landscape, such as mountain passages, and kinship ties to Kurdish communities in Iran.¹²⁷ The border for local communities was thus not just an area of control, but also of economic activity and opportunity.¹²⁸ While illegal from the perspective of the state, smuggling is deeply embedded in local community life

¹¹⁹ Deniz and Nargül 2025

¹²⁰ Bozçalı 2020; Tekin 2025

¹²¹ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Aygün 2020

¹²² Deniz and Doğu 2008; Aygün 2020

¹²³ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Aygün 2020

¹²⁴ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Deniz and Nargül 2025; Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2020; Bozçalı 2024; Biner 2018

¹²⁵ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Interview with Mahmut Kaçan

¹²⁶ Bozçalı 2020; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Genç 2015; Augustová et al 2024; Deniz and Doğu 2008; Interview with M. Kaçan

¹²⁷ Augustová et al 2024

¹²⁸ Biner 2018

and necessary for its economic survival.¹²⁹ Rather than considering it criminal, local communities tend to regard smuggling as an ordinary economic activity.¹³⁰ In a sense, they are a continuation of trade activities before the drawing of 20th-century borders, which rendered them illegal from the perspective of nation-states.¹³¹ As Bozçalı argues, illicit cross-border activities are also seen as an assertion of local Kurdish identities and a form of resistance against the Turkish state.¹³²

For the Turkish state and institutions, informal cross-border trade is an activity to be controlled. Evasion of taxes is one reason, but it intersects with security concerns regarding Kurdish political activities.¹³³ Profits from illicit trade are thought to finance PKK activities through donations and 'taxes' paid by smuggling networks.¹³⁴ Even though Bozçalı points to more nuanced and changing relations between PKK militants and smugglers, often based on toleration and distance between the two groups, the Turkish state tends to conflate smuggling practices with terrorism.¹³⁵ This has led to violent patterns of local border policing, with many locals having been shot and killed while engaging in cross-border trade, including during the 2011 Roboski massacre.¹³⁶

4.3 Van as a migrant crossing route

The character of the Turkish-Iranian border as a route towards Europe adds another layer to the natural environment and local social relations. The Van border has been a crossing route for people, predominantly from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, fleeing conflict, political oppression and economic hardship since the 1980s.¹³⁷ The natural features of the border, including high mountains, 'hidden' passages and caves and adverse weather, create a degree of invisibility which favours unauthorised crossings but also render them

¹²⁹ Bozçalı 2020; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Augustová et al 2024; Augustová and Suber 2023; Deniz and Doğu 2008; Biner 2018

¹³⁰ İçduygu and Toktas 2002; Deniz and Doğu 2008

¹³¹ Augustová and Suber 2023

¹³² Bozçalı 2020; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors

¹³³ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Deniz and Nargül 2025

¹³⁴ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors

¹³⁵ Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Bozçalı 2024 Proving Injustice; Augustová and Suber 2023

¹³⁶ Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Bozçalı 2024 Proving Injustice; Augustová 2021 Border Landscape; Augustová and Suber 2023

¹³⁷ Augustová, K., Farrand-Carrapico, H. and Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2023) Push and back: The ripple effect of EU border externalisation from Croatia to Iran, *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 41, 5: 847–865; Augustová and Suber 2023; Deniz and Nargül 2025; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; İçduygu and Toktas 2002; Özcan 2021

strenuous and risky.¹³⁸ Deaths, injuries and harm were common even before the weaponisation of the border we explore in subsequent sections.¹³⁹ It should also be noted that many people on the move cross other borders, such as the Iran–Afghanistan border, before reaching Van, which also takes an enormous physical and mental toll.¹⁴⁰

Like the trade of goods and drugs, the facilitation of cross-border movement of people has been deeply embedded in the region, mirroring the need for crossing this border towards Europe and the increasingly hostile border control regime.¹⁴¹ Local *kaçakçı* facilitate border crossings and assist border crossers in evading state controls in exchange for money.¹⁴² They guide people through the dangerous territory of the mountains, provide shelter during the journey, and facilitate their onward movement towards the inland of the Van province and the city of Van, and further inland in Turkey.¹⁴³ From there, most people on the move attempt to secure transportation to other areas of Turkey, sometimes through crossing Lake Van. Facilitation practices have intensified since 2011, reflecting displacement from Afghanistan and the reinforcement of controls at this border.¹⁴⁴

The facilitation of crossings, like goods, is an illegal activity yet publicly known, deeply embedded in the locality and necessary for its economic survival.¹⁴⁵ According to some accounts, facilitation of crossings is seen as a less risky activity than smuggling goods.¹⁴⁶ Yet, as M. Kaçan noted, it can have ‘lethal consequences for local civilians’ who are caught in patterns of cooperation and contestation between smuggling networks and the military.¹⁴⁷

Yet, they are often at least informally tolerated by state actors, for example, through bribes paid by facilitators to border guards.¹⁴⁸ It should be noted that the capacity of facilitators to help people breach the wall relies, according to M. Kaçan’s interview, on that

¹³⁸ Biner 2018; Deniz and Nargül 2025; Benghella et al 2025

¹³⁹ Deniz and Doğu 2008

¹⁴⁰ Deniz and Nargül 2025; Interviews with people on the move

¹⁴¹ Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Augustová and Suber 2023; Deniz and Doğu 2008; Biner 2018

¹⁴² Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Augustová and Suber 2023; Biner 2018

¹⁴³ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Biner 2018; Augustová and Suber 2023; İçduygu and Toktas 2002

¹⁴⁴ Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Augustová and Suber 2023

¹⁴⁵ Biner 2018; Deniz and Doğu 2008; Interview with Mahmut Kaçan

¹⁴⁶ Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; Augustová and Suber 2023; Deniz and Doğu 2008; Deniz and Nargül 2025; Interview with M. Kaçan

¹⁴⁷ Interview with M. Kaçan

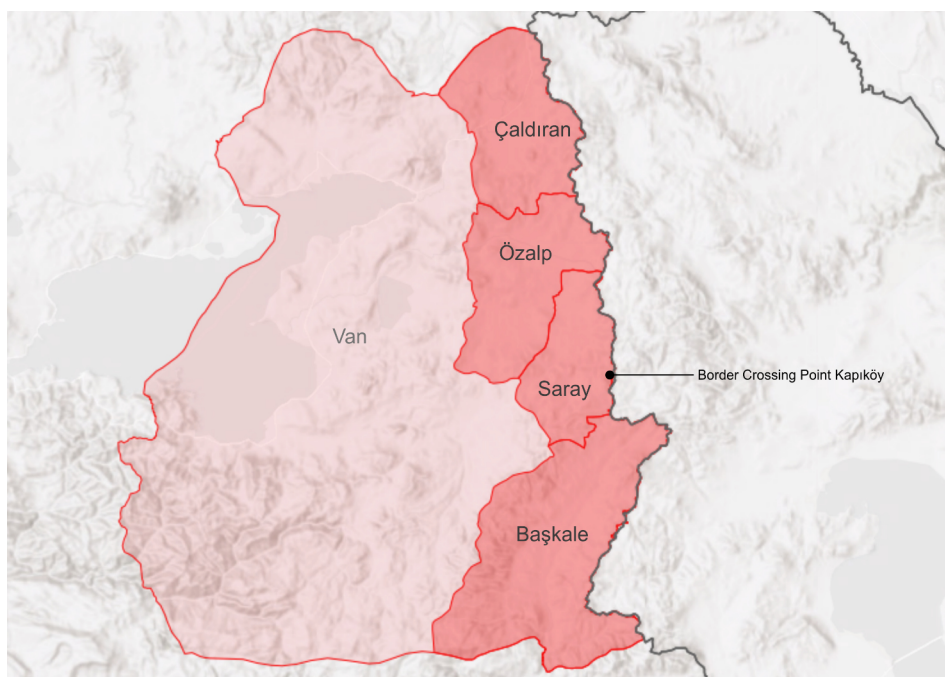
¹⁴⁸ Biner 2018; Augustová and Suber 2023; Interview with M. Kaçan

given network's means of influence with the border authorities, generally in organisational structures that far extend individual interactions between smugglers and soldiers respectively.

5. Weaponising the natural borderscape

5.1 The militarisation of the Van border and border infrastructures

The geographical features and climate of the Van border have historically made it difficult to control.¹⁴⁹ Equally, the presence of multiple competing actors such as PKK militants, smugglers and state security forces, rendered the Van borderland an area of contestation in terms of control.¹⁵⁰ Over the last fifteen years, domestic security imperatives and EU border management policies aimed at migration control have driven the militarisation of the Van border. The natural landscape of the Van border districts (Map 2) was thus gradually weaponised through infrastructures such as military outposts, observation towers, surveillance systems, ditches and walls.



Map 2: The border districts of Van province, where most border infrastructures are located. Map: Clara Zinecker. Sources: ESRI, Garmin International Inc, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), USGS.

¹⁴⁹ Deniz and Nargül 2025; European Commission 2015 Home Affairs

¹⁵⁰ Bozçalı 2024, Corridors



Image 3 : A border outpost in the Çaldıran district. Photo: November 2025.

While a lot of attention has been paid to developments at the Turkish borders since 2011, the reinforcement of the Turkish–Iranian border in Van was an earlier trend. Since the late 2000s, the Turkish authorities started the construction of new border outposts (Image 3), which were named kalekol,¹⁵¹ and observation towers near the borderline.¹⁵² In total, 43 border outposts were constructed by 2014 (see images 4 and 5 below) in the Van province by TOKİ (Housing Development Administration of Turkey).¹⁵³ Their observation towers are equipped with surveillance technologies such as thermal cameras.¹⁵⁴ Other observation towers were constructed near the borderline in the same period (Images 6 and 7 below). New roads, electricity and water networks accompanied the construction of the border outposts.

¹⁵¹ The word kalekol is a composite of the words kale (castle) and karakol (station). Bozçalı 2024, Corridors

¹⁵² Etkihaber (2012) Turkish soldiers are protecting the border with Kalekol, 17 October <https://www.etkihaber.com/mehmetcik-siniri-kale-kollarla-koruyor-166845h.htm>; Ministry of the Interior 2012; Yeni Şafak 2012; Bozçalı 2024 Proving

¹⁵³ Etkihaber 2012; Doğu Türk (2012) Borders are protected by Kalekol, 18 October <https://www.doguturk.com/sinirlar-kalekollarla-korunuyor>;

¹⁵⁴ Etkihaber 2012; Yeni Şafak 2012; Doğu Türk 2012; Anadolu Agency (2012) Defending the homeland above the clouds, October 29, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/pg/foto-galeri/bulutlarin-uzerinde-vatan-savunmasi-/0/169562#>; Yeniçağ (2026) Border Eagles are not letting a bird fly by: 24/7 technological shield on the Iranian border, 30 January, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com/iran-sinirinda-724-teknoloji-kalkani-997032h.htm>



Images 4 and 5: Satellite images showing the construction of a border outpost near the village of Toprakseven in the Çaldıran district between 2010 (top) and 2015 (bottom). Source: Google Earth Pro. Images © 2026 Airbus © 2025 MaxarTechnologies.



Images 6 and 7: Satellite images showing the construction of an observation tower in 2015 near the village of Mahmutabat, Başkale District. Source: Google Earth Pro. Map data © 2025 MaxarTechnologies.

The aim of the expansion of border outposts was to enhance security against Kurdish insurgency in the region and to police activities such as smuggling of goods and drugs.¹⁵⁵ As a military leader boasted in 2012, wrongly in retrospect, ‘citizens have given up smuggling and turned to agriculture and animal husbandry’.¹⁵⁶ The new facilities became entangled with controlling migration since one of the aims was to prevent ‘illegal crossings’.¹⁵⁷ Cross-border movements are also seen by the Turkish state as potential security threats because of their connection to Kurdish communities and PKK activities, but migration control was at the same time becoming a central aim in managing the Van border in the context of EU policy.¹⁵⁸

In parallel, the EU started to identify the Eastern Turkish border, including Van, as a sensitive externalised border that needed to be reinforced to prevent unauthorised movements towards its territory. As early as 2011, an EU document described the region as ‘a big problem in terms of being the illegal crossing route’.¹⁵⁹ In a later IPA document, the Eastern border is described as ‘of great importance’, being ‘one of the main entries for irregular migrants’, particularly from Afghanistan.¹⁶⁰ Consistent with the logic of IBM, the EU privileged the expansion of technologies of surveillance at the Eastern Border, as well as measures that facilitated technological and human border policing.

The first major EU-funded project implemented in the region did not involve the deployment of technologies but facilitating the conditions for it. The removal of mines from the border areas was seen as necessary for Turkey to conform to its obligations under the Ottawa Treaty, ratified in 2003, and was included in the accession process. For the EU, however, it was also associated with creating conditions for effective border management.¹⁶¹ Mines, installed previously for security reasons, were seen as ‘a very serious threat for *border management*’ [emphasis added by authors], preventing the establishment of ‘good functioning border surveillance systems’ and posing threats for

¹⁵⁵ Bozçalı 2024 proving; Etkihaber 2012; Yeni Şafak 2012; Ministry of the Interior 2012

¹⁵⁶ Doğu Türk 2012

¹⁵⁷ Ibid; Etkihaber 2012; Beyaz Gazete (2012) The police station is gone, the ‘Fortress’ station has arrived, 18 October <https://beyazgazete.com/video/anahaber/bugun-tv-9/2012/10/18/karakol-gitti-kale-kol-geldi-334684.html>

¹⁵⁸ Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2024 Corridors; European Commission 2016 – Home Affairs

¹⁵⁹ European Commission 2011

¹⁶⁰ European Commission 2016 – Home Affairs

¹⁶¹ Council of the European Union (2006) Decision of 23 January 2006 on the principles, priorities and conditions contained in the Accession Partnership with Turkey, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32006D0035>

security personnel.¹⁶² The project, implemented jointly with UNPD, was significantly delayed, leading to its continuation under IPA II and III.¹⁶³

In 2015, the European Commission launched the first phase of the action *Increasing Border Surveillance Capacity at Turkey's Eastern Borders*, funded under IPA II, followed by a second phase in 2016.¹⁶⁴ The action entailed providing the Turkish forces with an array of technologies such as stationary and mobile surveillance systems with thermal cameras, radars, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) equipment, and wireless sensor networks.¹⁶⁵ The construction of a stationary automated surveillance system in Van started around 2019 in the Çaldıran district, and has been expanding southwards to the Başkale district. An evaluation of two components of this action suggested many delays due to unfavourable weather conditions, difficulties in construction due to the mountainous terrain, the lack of existing electricity and ICT networks in remote border areas, the impact of delays in demining of the border and later the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁶⁶ The expansion of stationary surveillance systems continues to be funded by IPA III, and ICMPD is responsible for the implementation of recent projects.¹⁶⁷

The automated border surveillance system in the area comprises electro-optic towers mounted with day and thermovision cameras and radars, smaller pylons along the wall mounted with cameras, and underground seismic sensors.¹⁶⁸ Electro-optic towers are located near the wall and at some locations next to observation towers (Image 8).¹⁶⁹

¹⁶² European Commission 2011, p. 5, 6

¹⁶³ European Commission (2019) COMMISSION IMPLEMENTING DECISION of 29.11.2019 amending Commission Implementing Decision C(2016)8474 of 13.12.2016 on the Annual Action Programme for Turkey for the year 2016, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/Turkey-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en; InProVE EEIG 2022; European Court of Auditors (2018) EU pre-accession assistance to Turkey :Only limited results so far <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/Turkey-7-2018/en/#:-text=Conclusions%20and%20recommendations,-58&text=58-,We%20concluded%20that%20the%20IPA%20objectives%20were%20well%20designed%20by.funds%20and%20backsliding%20on%20reforms.>

¹⁶⁴ European Commission 2015; European Commission 2016 – Home Affairs

¹⁶⁵ Revised down to 70 in European Commission 2019 Part I

¹⁶⁶ InProVE EEIG 2022

¹⁶⁷ European Commission 2022; ICMPD (n.d.) SAFE

¹⁶⁸ Demirören Haber Ajansı 2023; TRT Haber (2024) The Van-Iran border is protected by high-level measures, 06 November, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrsP6b8XYXU>; Getty Images (2023) Innovative methods utilized in combating irregular migration on Türkiye-Iran border, 17 August, <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/video/turkish-security-forces-stationed-along-the-Turkey-iran-news-footage/1620645511>

¹⁶⁹ See also Varol, M and Bilgin, O. (2023) The Van-Iran border is protected by high-level measures, Anadolu Agency 11 November <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/van-iran-siniri-ust-duzey-onlemlerle-korunuyor/3385386>; Getty Images 2023; IHA (2025) The 182-kilometer wall built on the Van-Iran border has been completed, 07 February <https://www.aha.com.tr/video-van-iran-sinirinda-insa-edilen-duvarin-182-kilometresi-tamamlandi>



Image 8: An observation tower and electro-optic tower next to each other, Özalp district. Photo taken in November 2025.

According to government sources, the cameras on the electro-optic towers have a range of up to 10 km, while the radar system¹⁷⁰ reaches up to 40 km.¹⁷¹ The 2022 instrument refers to additional cameras that might be added to the existing pylon structures 'to increase the field of view and range'.¹⁷² According to a 2024 media report, 320 kilometers of electricity cables were laid and 2,696 electricity poles erected to support the equipment of the electro-optic masts.¹⁷³ Lighting systems accompanied the construction of surveillance structures.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ The purpose of radar systems is to detect objects and individuals at a distance. Alves Ribeiro, V.H. Reynoso-Meza, G. dos Santos Coelho, L. (2021) Multiobjective optimization design procedures for data-driven unmanned aerial vehicles automatic target recognition systems in Koubaa, A. and Taher Azar, A (eds) Unmanned Aerial Systems: Theoretical Foundation and Applications, London, Academic Press, pp. 231-256

¹⁷¹ Ministry of the Interior 2023

¹⁷² European Commission 2022, p. 10; European Commission 2024

¹⁷³ Kazandıoğlu, Y. and Yavruturk, M. O. (2024) The fight against irregular migration continues at the border in Van, Anadolu Agency, 24 September, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/vanda-sinir-hattinda-duzensiz-gocle-mucadele-suruyor/3339428>

¹⁷⁴ European Commission 2022; ICMPD (n.d.) SAFE; Demirören Haber Ajansı 2023; CNN Turk 2018

The construction of stationary surveillance towers as well as lighting systems is supported by IPA III funds, and recent projects are managed by ICMPD.¹⁷⁵ Turkish company Aselsan was the contractor for most of the technological components of the system, such as the electro-optic masts, Şahingöz thermal cameras, and the ACAR Land Surveillance Radar System.¹⁷⁶ The fixed structures are supported by EU-funded mobile equipment such as vehicles mounted with surveillance equipment.¹⁷⁷ Beyond technological measures targeting the borderline, Coast Guard units were set up in Lake Van to prevent unauthorized movements from Van to other Turkish provinces and funding the training of Land Forces personnel, including in the use of surveillance technologies.¹⁷⁸

While national authorities also contributed to technological infrastructures, they emphasised the construction of physical infrastructures, particularly ditches and walls, which were funded primarily by the national budget. The construction of ditches in government discourses and media reports was associated with the construction of walls in the area since 2021, although satellite imagery suggests it emerged earlier at places in the Çaldıran and Saray districts (Images 9 and 10 below), likely in the context of *Urgent Border Physical Protection System* policies.¹⁷⁹ Ditches are four metres wide and four meters deep, and as visible in news reports, with razor wire on one or both sides¹⁸⁰ at some places running in double or triple rows (Image 11 below).¹⁸¹ In 2023, it was reported that 346 km of ditches had been dug in the Van province.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁵ European Commission 2022; European Commission 2024; ICMPD (n.d.) SAFE: Supporting Türkiye's Efforts to Strengthen Border Management at the Eastern and South Eastern Land Borders <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/supporting-tuerkiye-s-efforts-to-strengthen-border-management-at-the-eastern-and-south-eastern-land-borders-safe>

¹⁷⁶ InProVE EEIG 2022; Ministry of the Interior 2023;

¹⁷⁷ European Commission 2015 Home affairs; European Commission 2016 - Home Affairs

¹⁷⁸ European Commission 2015 Home affairs; European Commission 2016 Home Affairs; European Commission 2022; Varol, M (2021) The 20-kilometer section of the security wall on the Van-Iran border has been completed, Anadolu Agency, 7 October <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/van-iran-sinirindaki-guvenlik-duvarinin-20-kilometrelik-kismi-tamamlandi/2385246>; Bilgin, O. and Kazandioğlu, Y. (2021) Turkey launches new Coast Guard Command unit on Lake Van against illegal migration, Anadolu Agency, 22 August <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/Turkey/Turkey-launches-new-coast-guard-command-unit-on-lake-van-against-illegal-migration/2342235#:~:text=The%20Turkish%20Coast%20Guard%20Boat%20Command%2C%20which,to%20ensure%20security%20on%20the%20lake%2C%20will>

¹⁷⁹ ANF NEWS (2017) Local people protest the wall construction on Turkey-Iran border, 12 November, <https://english.anf-news.com/news/local-people-protest-the-wall-construction-on-turkey-iran-border-23163>

¹⁸⁰ Bianet (2021) Van Governor: Wall will be built along the entire Iranian border, 27 July, <https://bianet.org/haber/van-valisi-iran-sinirinin-tamamina-duvar-orulecek-247772>; Demirören Haber Ajansı 2023 145 kilometers; Varol and Bilgin 2024; Ministry of the Interior 2023; Getty Images 2023; Varol 2021

¹⁸¹ Varol and Bilgin 2024; Ministry of the Interior 2023; TRT Haber 2024; Getty Images 2023

¹⁸² Ministry of the Interior 2023



Image 9 : Ditches in the Çaldıran (2020) district visible before the construction of the wall. Source: Google Earth Pro. Map data ©2025 CNES/Airbus, © 2025 MaxarTechnologies.

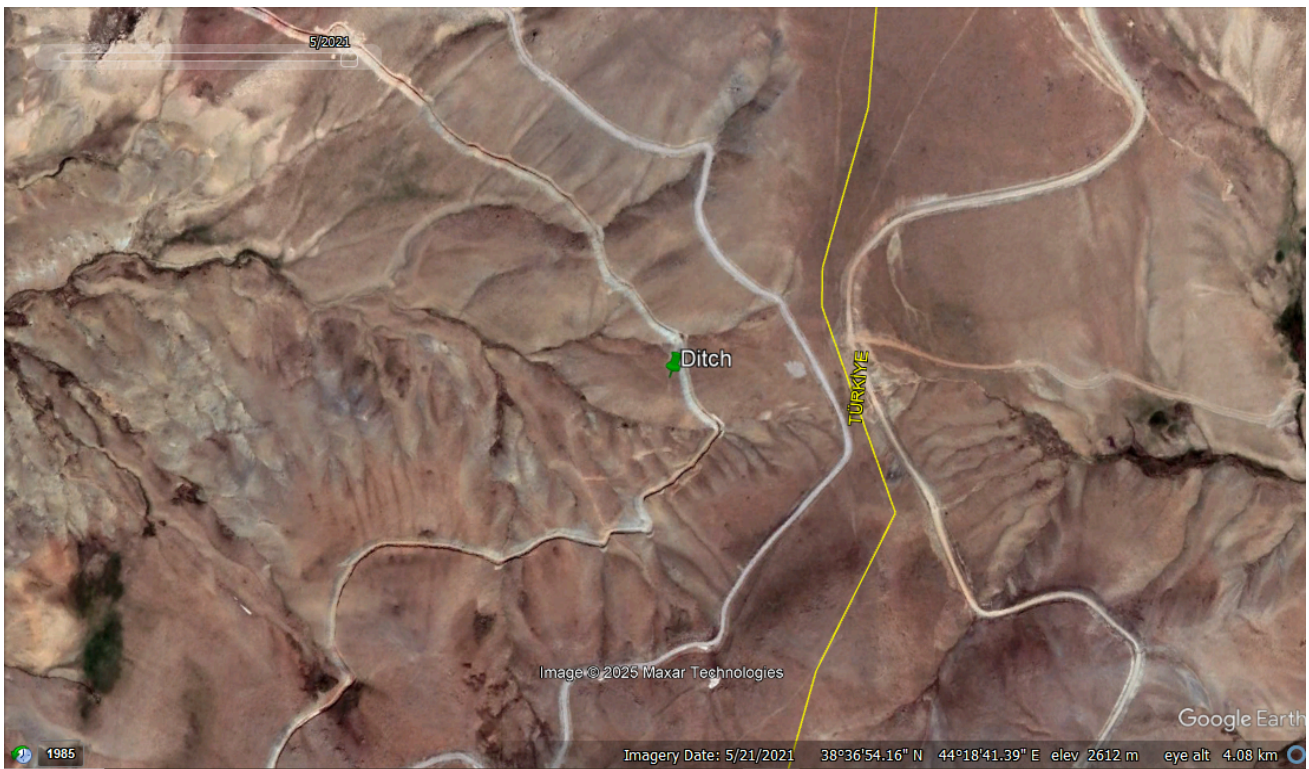


Image 10 : Ditches in Saray (2021) district visible before the construction of the wall. Source: Google Earth Pro. Map data ©2025 CNES/Airbus, © 2025 MaxarTechnologies.



Image 11: Satellite image showing four rows of ditches after the wall in Saray district. Source: Google Earth Pro. Map data ©2026 Airbus.



Image 12: Photograph of the wall in the Çaldıran district - November 2025.



Image 13: Photograph of the wall in the Saray district – November 2025.

Mirroring infrastructures developed at the Syrian border, the national authorities started the construction of a wall in 2021, accompanied by patrol roads.¹⁸³ The construction of walls along Van's 295 km border with Iran was formally announced in 2021, starting in the district of Çaldıran.¹⁸⁴ Wall sections were then expanded southwards to the provinces of Özalp, Saray, and Başkale, where the construction of the wall is still ongoing (Images 12 and 13).¹⁸⁵ In September 2025, media reported that construction of 204 km of walls had been completed.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Sharma, S. (2017) Iran welcomes Turkish border wall to block Kurdish militants, 15 May <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-welcomes-turkish-border-wall-block-kurdish-militants>; The New Arab (2018) Turkey to complete Iran border wall by spring 2019, 11 January <https://www.newarab.com/news/Turkey-complete-iran-border-wall-spring-2019>; CNN Turk; AIDA 2025

¹⁸⁴ Ministry of the Interior 2021; Varol 2021; Daily Sabah 2023

¹⁸⁵ Milliyet 2022; Daily Sabah 2023; Sağlam 2025; İHA (2023) The Saray phase of the wall built on the Van-Iran border has been completed, 15 December <https://www.ihacom.tr/video-van-iran-sinirinda-insa-edilen-duvarin-saray-etabi-tamamlandi?p=97>

¹⁸⁶ Sağlam 2025

The construction of the wall ran parallel with the clearance of minefields, mainly in the Çaldıran district.¹⁸⁷ One of the constructors in the Van area was Akçadağ.¹⁸⁸ The wall-building project was coordinated by TOKİ.¹⁸⁹ The wall consists of 3-meter-high and 2.80metre-wide concrete blocks, pre-produced and transported to the border for installation.¹⁹⁰ It is topped by razor wire.¹⁹¹ It is not continuous, at least at present: reflecting the mountainous terrain, there is no wall in some sections of the border.¹⁹² According to official statements, the wall is at a distance of 5 to 15 metres from the borderline.¹⁹³ In some locations, the wall takes on unusual shapes to accommodate existing structures such as electro-optic and observation towers (Images 14 - 17).



Images 14 - 17: The wall surrounding an existing surveillance pylon (top) and an observation tower (bottom). Source: © 2025 CNES/Airbus © 2025 MaxarTechnologies.

¹⁸⁷ Milliyet 2022; Ministry of the Interior 2023

¹⁸⁸ Akçadağ (n.d.) Van Province Emergency Border Physical Security System Construction, <https://akcadag.com.tr/proje/van-ili-ozalp-ilcesi-hudut-hattina-2-etap-acil-sinir-fiziki-guvenlik-sistemi-yapim-inaati/>

¹⁸⁹ Ministry of the Interior 2021

¹⁹⁰ Ministry of the Interior 2021; Milliyet 2022; Demirören Haber Ajansı (2023) 145 kilometers of the concrete wall on the Van-Iran border has been completed, 11 October, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jibGcLlp18c>

¹⁹¹ Demirören Haber Ajansı 2023 145 kilometers; Getty Images 2023

¹⁹² Demirören Haber Ajansı 2023 The 84-kilometer

¹⁹³ Ministry of the Interior 2021

New roads, reportedly of 220 km length, were constructed alongside the wall to facilitate patrolling by the Turkish forces.¹⁹⁴

Despite the emphasis on physical obstacles to movement, according to some accounts, the Turkish authorities have started to invest more in surveillance technologies for controlling the Van border, such as drones, fibre-optic acoustic sensors, and ‘tunnel/cavity detection devices’, which, according to one media report, appear to have been funded from national budgets.¹⁹⁵ Drones in particular feature heavily in media coverage, demonstrating the post-2020 control borderscape in Van.¹⁹⁶ In addition, the policing of the border was reinforced with security personnel, both through transfers from other areas of Turkey and recruitment.¹⁹⁷

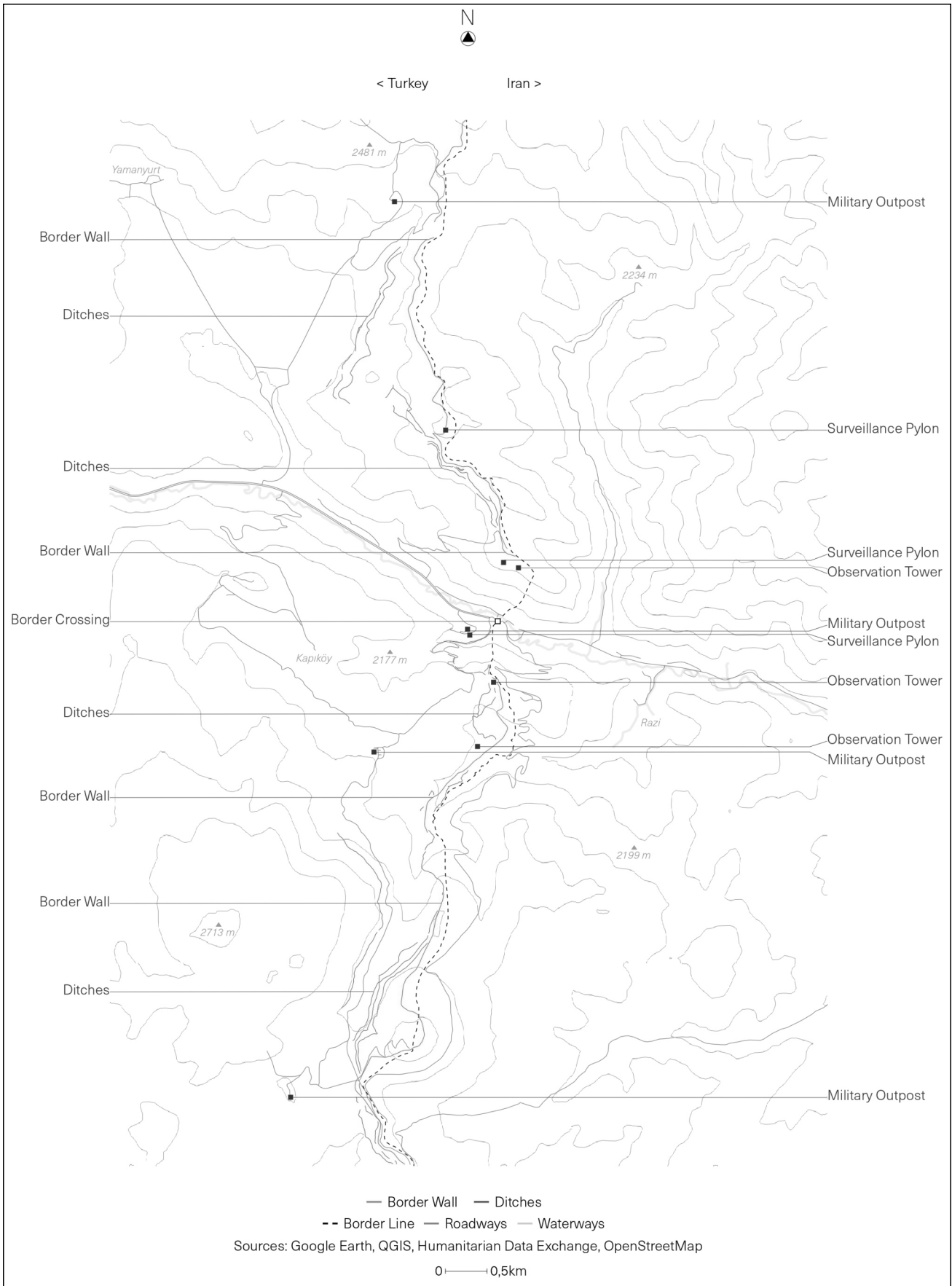
In short, the intervention driven by the EU and domestic logics created a complex layer of infrastructures, both physical and digital. *Map 3 below* visualises the different elements weaponising the natural landscape of the Van border following different but complementary logics of inhibiting movement and reinforcing surveillance and detection capabilities. While the map shows the static position of various human-made artificial barriers and surveillance structures, the reader should remember that the areas are also under constant patrol by border guards as well.

¹⁹⁴ Kazandioğlu and Yavruturk 2024

¹⁹⁵ Hancıoğlu, H. & Büyükkakçali, O. (2023) Measures Taken at Turkey's Land Borders, <https://www.border-security-report.com/measures-taken-at-turkeys-land-borders/>; European Commission 2022 Action document; Varol and Bilgin 2024; Altunışık 2024; Getty Images 2023; TRT Haber 2024; Eurovizyon (2024) The Van-Iran border is protected by high-level measures, 06 November <https://www.eurovizyon.co.uk/van-iran-siniri-ust-duzey-onlemlerle-korunuyor/>;

¹⁹⁶ Ministry of the Interior (2023) 170 Kilometers of Security Wall Built on the Van-Iran Border Completed, 15 December <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/van-iran-sinirina-orulen-guvenlik-duvarinin-170-kilometresi-tamamlandi>; Altunışık, M. (2024) Double-layered measures on the Van-Iran border! 9 November <https://haberglobal.com.tr/gundem/van-iran-sinirina-cift-katmanli-onlem-393704>; Yeniçağ 2026

¹⁹⁷ Bianet 2021; Varol, M. (2021) Van's border with Iran will be safer with modular walls and technological facilities, Anadolu Agency 27 July, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/vanin-iran-siniri-moduler-duvar-ve-teknolojik-imkanlarla-daha-guvenli-olacak-/2315578>; Milliyet (2022) A 40-kilometer wall was built on Van's border with Iran, 12 May, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/vanin-iran-sinirinda-40-kilometrelik-duvar-oruldu-6753368>; European Commission 2022; Augustová 2021 Border Landscape



Map 3: Visual representation of infrastructures at the Turkish-Iranian border in Van.

5.2 The logics of physical and technological interventions to the landscape

The infrastructures that emerged at the Van border since the late 2000s reflect a logic of deterrence of unwanted movements. Structures such as walls, ditches and barbed wire are designed to physically prevent entry or obstruct movement,¹⁹⁸ while technologies of surveillance and control serve the same aim through different means – increasing capacity to monitor the borderland and detecting unauthorised movement.¹⁹⁹ Both material and digital infrastructures convey the political message of deterrence, of a controlled border that prevents unauthorised crossings and unwanted migration, even if in reality their effectiveness is contested.²⁰⁰

While serving the same aim, material and digital structures use different techniques and modes of engaging with the natural environment. First, the walls, ditches and barbed wire in Van are designed to inhibit and slow down movement, both at the border and towards the inland of Van and the rest of Turkey.²⁰¹ Walls at the Van border are built on mountain masses or at their foot, thus adding another physical obstacle to the natural one border crossers have to negotiate. Ditches, located after the mountain ranges and the wall in double or triple rows, slow down border crossers as they require energy to climb down and out of them. Being several kilometres long, they are difficult to circumvent without increasing the length of a journey and thus the possibility of detection. Barbed wire fences near the ditches add another harm-inducing obstacle that border crossers must negotiate.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Jones, R (2012) *Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India, and Israel*, London: Zed Books; Chambers, S.N. and G. Soto. (2025) "The geography of intent: The bodily implications of border surveillance technologies." *Political Geography* 120; Vallet, E. (2019) *Border Walls and the Illusion of Deterrence*, in Jones, R, (ed) *Open Borders: in Defense of Free Movement*, Athens: University of Georgia Press; Pleše, I. (2023) *Fences, Walls and Wires at State Borders*, <https://erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-ograde-zidovi-i-zice-na-drzavnim-granicama-p?locale=en>; Euromed Rights (2024) *Digital technologies for migration control at the southern Spanish border*, <https://euromedrights.org/publication/new-report-an-analysis-of-digital-surveillance-technologies-for-migration-control-at-the-spanish-southern-border/>

¹⁹⁹ Euromed Rights and Statewatch (2023) *Europe's Techno-borders*, <https://www.statewatch.org/publications/reports-and-books/europe-s-techno-borders/>; Koca, B.T. (2020): *Bordering processes through the use of technology: the Turkish case*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2020.1796272; Jones, R, and C. Johnson (2016) *Border Militarization and the Rearticulation of Sovereignty*, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41 (2): 187–200.

²⁰⁰ Andersson, R. (2016) *Hardwiring the frontier? The politics of security technology in Europe's fight against illegal migration*. *Security Dialogue*, 47 (1). pp. 22–39; Valet 2019; Jones and Johnson 2016; Molnar, P. (2021) *Smart borders kill: New frontiers of violence and erosion of rights at the world's borders*, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/smart-borders-kill-new-frontiers-of-violence-and-erosion-of-rights-at-the-worlds-borders/#:-text=As%20writer%20Harsha%20Walia%20argues,here%20because%20you%20were%20there.%E2%80%9D>

²⁰¹ Deniz and Nargül 2025; Hancıoğlu and Büyükkakçali 2023

²⁰² See for example Townshed, M (2023) *Refugees seriously injured on razor-wire fence UK helped build to keep asylum seekers out of EU*, *The Guardian*, 27 May, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/27/refugees-hurt-dangerous-fence-uk-built-keep-asylum-seekers-out-of-eu-poland-belarus>; Pleše 2023

Human-made obstacles thus 'team up' with more-than-human environmental features²⁰³ to weaponise an already forbidding natural landscape by adding an obstacle course people on the move have to negotiate. Climate conditions at the border, whether the cold and snow of winter or the heat of the summer, render this negotiation even more arduous. The borderscape is thus rendered more inhospitable. The emphasis on inhibiting movement and making the borderscape less hospitable is also underpinned by other interventions in the area, such as the destruction of abandoned properties where people on the move could take shelter.²⁰⁴ Aggressively policing local communities that provide shelter and material support to border crossers²⁰⁵ equally feeds into the logic of making the local borderscape less hospitable.

Interventions creating digital borders aim equally at preventing movement but through different rationalities. The European Commission has been critical of the effectiveness of the physical obstacles constructed by the Turkish authorities. For example, walls and ditches were not considered sufficient for migration control because of 'the land structure and the negative weather conditions'.²⁰⁶ According to an informant, ditches were seen by EU authorities as counterproductive in that they could allow for hiding people and weapons.²⁰⁷ In contrast to physical obstacles such as walls, ditches and barbed wire designed to physically inhibit movement, the technological interventions favoured by the EU aim at increasing capacity to detect it.²⁰⁸ Stationary surveillance systems, drones and unmanned ground vehicles serve in the surveillance of remote areas that are difficult to access, thus reducing the need for surveillance by human agents.²⁰⁹ They provide security actors with data and information to allow for timely detection, even before the people on the move arrive at the border, facilitating interventions to prevent entry or to apprehend border crossers.²¹⁰

²⁰³ Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2022). Whitescapes: A posthumanist political ecology of Alpine migrant(im)mobility. *Political Geography*, 92.

²⁰⁴ Ministry of the Interior 2023; Varol and Bilgin 2024

²⁰⁵ Bozcali 2024 Corridors; interviews with people on the move

²⁰⁶ European Commission 2016 - Home Affairs

²⁰⁷ Interview with S., 21/10/2025

²⁰⁸ See Andersson 2016; Chambers and Soto 2025

²⁰⁹ Loukinas, P. (2022) Drones for Border Surveillance: Multipurpose Use, Uncertainty and Challenges at EU Borders, *Geopolitics*, 27(1) pp 89-112; Burt, P. and Frew, J. (2020) Crossing a line: The use of drones to control borders, *Drone Wars UK*, <https://dronewars.net/2020/12/26/crossing-a-line-how-the-use-of-drones-to-secure-borders-threatens-everyones-rights/>; Chambers and Soto 2025; Jones and Johnson 2016; Daily Sabah 2023;

²¹⁰ Andersson 2016; Euromed Rights and Statewatch 2023

Surveillance technologies thus engage with and weaponise the environment to prevent movement in a different manner than physical obstacles. They are designed to remove qualities in the natural landscape that favour unauthorised movement and make the landscape of the border easier for the authorities to access, survey and control. Official documents suggest that the European Commission took into account the topography and climate of the Van borderscape. Wireless sensors, for example, were proposed for better controlling 'hidden passages' in the mountainous areas of the border.²¹¹ The technological interventions at the Van border reflected a rationality present in the border-industrial complex: technological systems are combined to overcome the obstacles natural landscapes pose for border surveillance and control.²¹²

Accompanying measures such as demining, the construction of patrol roads near the wall and the installation of lighting systems serve the same logic of accessibility and removing obstacles, such as mines or darkness, to surveillance and control.²¹³ Increasing human presence in the area also reflects the rationality of rendering the border more controllable. The construction of *kalekol* near the border aimed at enhancing the capacity for surveillance both through technology but also through increasing human presence in border areas. The new outposts were built within a few kilometres of the borderline to allow proximity to the areas the authorities needed to control. This function often emerges from government narratives promoted in media coverage, which regularly stress, for example, the altitude of different border outposts but also the safety and comfort of them for soldiers. In a similar manner, the extensive construction of new roads and helipads facilitates the transfer and access of military personnel.

These measures, therefore, rendered hard-to-control border terrain more governable by installing human and technological presence in remote, inhospitable mountainous landscape. In a sense, while the landscape is weaponised to become more inhospitable for people on the move, the interventions also render it more hospitable to the agents of border surveillance and control. The same logic underpins the emphasis placed by the EU

²¹¹ European Commission 2015 Home Affairs p. 6

²¹² Mira Technologies (2025) Smarter Borders: How Technology and Strategy Must Work Together, <https://miratechnologies.at/smarter-borders-how-technology-and-strategy-must-work-together/>

²¹³ For example, European Commission 2022 action document; European Commission 2024

on the demining of the border since the aim was to render border areas safer for security actors.

Lastly, one adjacent rationale that legitimises the weaponisation of the environment is humanitarian. EU documents, particularly those related to IPA III – refer to humanitarian rationales of preventing fatalities, illustrating the mix of securitisation and humanitarianism in the EU border regime.²¹⁴ For instance, the 2022/2023 Individual Measure states that surveillance technologies ‘reduce the loss of human lives at the borders with Iran and Iraq, in winter in particular [...]’.²¹⁵ In this sense, EU rationales infuse surveillance technologies with a humanitarian logic of saving lives, which is purported to protect people on the move from a hostile natural landscape. That being said, as is illustrated in later sections, the borderlands have arguably become more dangerous for both people on the move and local residents.

5.3 The impact of border intervention on the environment

Across the world, as with Turkey–Iran, border walls and security infrastructures fragment habitats, bypass environmental protections, and isolate animal populations from the ecosystems they depend on, often undermining decades of conservation efforts in the process. Research shows that these barriers impede animal movement, degrade landscapes across multiple ecoregions, and weaken international conservation efforts. This reflects a broader trend in which securitisation increasingly overrides ecological and environmental priorities.²¹⁶

Research and media reporting on the effects of new border infrastructures on the Van borderscape is very limited. At the local level, environmental advocates have argued that the border wall and trenches are greatly damaging to the wider ecosystems of the area. According to Ali Kalçık, President of the Van Environmental Association, the barriers

²¹⁴ E.g. Andersson 2016; Cuttitta P (2018) Delocalization, humanitarianism, and human rights: The Mediterranean border between exclusion and inclusion. *Antipode* 50(3): 783–803; Pallister–Wilkins P (2020) Hotspots and the geographies of humanitarianism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38(6): 991–1008.

²¹⁵ European Commission 2022

²¹⁶ Sennett, J. & Chambers, M. (2025) International border fences and walls negatively affect wildlife: A review. *Biological Conservation*, 302, 110976. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0006320724005226> Peters, R., et al. (2018) ‘Nature divided, scientists united: U.S.–Mexico border wall threatens biodiversity and binational conservation’, *BioScience*, 68(10), pp. 740–747. https://www.academia.edu/126248844/Nature_Divided_Scientists_United_US_Mexico_Border_Wall_Threatens_Biodiversity_and_Binational_Conservation

interrupt the movement of wild animals and reduce available habitat, affecting species ranging from insects to larger mammals.²¹⁷ He also notes that the wall alters wind patterns and interferes with bird migration routes. In another incident reported in the media, 143 sheep died after falling into ditches in 2023.²¹⁸

Nonetheless, most available literature and sources discuss the environmental impacts of the border infrastructure on Iranian territory. The key environmental effects discussed concern the blocking of a natural water exchange between rivers, the major disruption to animal migration routes, and the further severe impact on wetlands and on biodiversity.²¹⁹ However, insights from this research may well be relevant to the Van border. For instance, Jafarizadeh and Hamze (2024)²²⁰ discuss how these ecological changes feed back into human systems, with rural residents losing access to traditional livelihood resources as a result of the decline in water, pasture and biodiversity, in turn feeding into increased unemployment or economic dependency, social deprivation and rural-urban migration.

While we were unable to locate official discourses on the relation between the weaponisation of the Van border at the domestic level, some EU official documents suggest that the effect of the border infrastructures on the environment is largely ignored. Instead, recent European Commission documents attempt to legitimize the weaponisation of the landscape in Van by presenting them as eco-friendly and respectful to the environment. For example, the 2022 and 2024 instruments stress that the lighting system to be constructed along the wall and surveillance systems will be powered by solar energy.²²¹ In essence, the EU's approach is suggestive of greenwashing.

²¹⁷ Artı Gerçek (2023) The wall and trenches on the Van border are causing the deaths of migrants, August 4, <https://artigercek.com/guncel/van-sinirindaki-duvar-ve-hendekler-gocmenlerin-olumune-sebep-oluyor-260375h>

²¹⁸ Artı Gerçek 2023

²¹⁹ Kaleji, V. (2024) 'The Border Wall between Turkey and Iran: Security at the Cost of the Environment?' <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/722-the-border-wall-between-turkey-and-iran-security-at-the-cost-of-the-environment?html>; Jafarizadeh, O., Hamze, F. (2024). 'Investigating the consequences of the construction of the Turkish border wall on the activities of the border residents of the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Human Geography Research*, 56(3), pp. 247-262. doi: 10.22059/jhgr.2023.360377.1008605 - https://jhgr.ut.ac.ir/article_93867_222892d36ea8eb83eb3c7c6ef8165db9.pdf?lang=en

²²⁰ Jafarizadeh and Hamze 2024

²²¹ European Union 2022; European Union 2024

6. Living in the weaponised natural borderscape: experiences of local communities

The weaponisation of the natural environment also had significant impacts on communities along the Van borderline. On the one hand, it disrupted the economic activities of border communities by limiting access to land and border trade, leading to disenfranchisement, despondency and new forms of displacement. On the other, it fed into patterns of policing of border communities because of the reinforcement of border surveillance and control.

6.1 Collapse of the Border Economy and the Transformation of Livelihoods

Even before the construction of the wall and introduction of surveillance technologies, local inhabitants raised concerns about the effects the alteration of the natural landscape would have on their lives. They identified the wall as a potential threat to their livelihoods, especially to the cross-border trade that local economies have been dependent on.²²² In the post-wall period, villagers' narratives indicate that nearly all livelihood channels have been simultaneously blocked, pastures have been lost, smuggling of goods has been further obstructed, the village economy has collapsed, and border villages are increasingly inhabited by an elderly population.

The proliferation of security infrastructures and policing has had a dramatic impact on cross-border trade. Reflecting fears expressed in earlier years, all respondents reported a significant decline in cross-border trade, with 'smuggling' activities, once a core source of income in border villages, significantly affecting their livelihoods.

Back in the day, our livelihood used to be quite good. We'd sometimes get things from across the border—tea, sugar, or fuel, for example. They cut that off for a while, but after the wall went up, it stopped completely. (PVI)

²²² Evrensel (2017) 'Building a wall on the border means poverty and migration', June 18, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/323964/sinira-duvar-orulmesi-yoksulluk-ve-goc-demektir>; ANF NEWS 2017

Everyone earned a little something from border trade, from smuggling. We used to bring in fuel, tea, and sugar. After the wall was built, all of that ended. (PV2)

They called it smuggling, but everyone knew about it. The state even turned a blind eye, because that's how the villagers survived. Now nothing is left. There's wire, cameras, walls everywhere. The path used to be known—now even taking a step is a crime. (PV7)

Unlike earlier decades when smuggling was periodically overlooked and served as an economic buffer, the wall and surveillance infrastructures have eliminated this flexibility. Livestock rearing and agriculture, the other economic activities that border livelihoods relied on, were equally affected. With the construction of the wall and other security infrastructures, villagers lost access to the pastures, which provided grazing areas for animals and where villagers grew feed for them:

[...] in some areas, in some villages, the wall even passed through our lands. We can't get close to the border anymore. Our animals can't go near it. Our farmers can't get close. They can't even cut their grass properly. Some of our registered lands have been taken away. (PV1)

Now we only have our own field and a few animals, but even that's not enough. Because we can't get close to the pastures. If we go toward the area where the wall is, soldiers come—sometimes they even send drones. (PV2)

The wall came, the border closed, and livestock disappeared. We can't go to the pastures, we can't find grass. There is no income left. (PV3)

Even grazing animals became difficult. The soldiers say, "It's a border zone," and we can't get close. (PV4)

In essence, the weaponisation of the landscape through border control infrastructures 'colonised' the natural environment, displacing traditional agricultural activities. The transformation of the borderscape into a 'forbidden zone' (Interviews 3, 7), a highly surveilled 'security zone' (Interview 2), restricted villagers' access to their pastures, undermining their livelihoods. It re-established spatial sovereignty by embedding the security regime into everyday life. While the removal of access is an effect of the recent weaponisation of the borderscape, it can also be seen as a contemporary continuation of 1990s policies such as expanding minefields, implementing "restricted zones," and increasing military operation areas along the border. The decline of villagers' spatial

sovereignty exposes the asymmetric nature of state–villager relations, which is part of the state’s security–focused approach to the Kurdish issue.

Beyond livestock rearing, the loss of access to pastureland signified the loss of registered lands that border communities had used for generations.

We had pastures from my grandfather’s time, now they have become ‘forbidden zones.’ Even our registered land became a security area. (PV3)

Some of our registered lands were seized. (PV1)

The wall is not exactly on the border—it was built inside the villagers’ land. (PV4)

Even the registered lands are now inside the restricted zone. They said ‘security area,’ but our livelihood was on those lands. (PV7)

This used to be our picnic area, they took that too. There was a shrine; we can’t go there either. (PV6)

The loss of land access represents not only economic contraction but also the undermining of land rights and community identities. For border villages, pastures are not merely grazing areas essential for the sustainability of life and village economies but also a component of community identity, local history and tradition. The weaponisation of the borderscape thus disrupted the relation of border communities with the natural environment. For villagers, it signifies the destabilization of a land–based way of life and the erosion of its symbolic meaning.

The destruction of livelihoods and the socio-economic well-being of the border villages increased the cost of living and poverty and pushed locals into internal migration for employment. Participants also emphasized that young people migrated to western Turkey in search of work, villages became populated mainly by the elderly, and the future became uncertain.

Now there’s no work in the village; everyone gets by on debt. The fields aren’t productive anymore either. Most people sold their animals. (PV4)

With the wall, that door closed. No one goes anymore. When smuggling ended, the village economy died too. There’s no money in circulation. ...There’s no life left here... Smuggling stopped, livestock declined, and there’s no work left in the village. The young people went west; the ones who stayed just sit around [...] (PV5)

Many people have left. Out of a 300-household village, only about 170 households remain. And at my age, where could I go, tell me? (PV7)

The wall didn't just close the border; it closed the hope of the youth. (PV3)

The village lost its youth. No one wants to marry or settle here anymore. (PV5)

[...] many people left, especially the young ones. Two of my brothers moved to Van [city]. The ones left here are old. The youth say, "There's no future here. (PV6)

The weaponisation of the natural landscape with the wall and other security infrastructures has thus intensified existing issues of unemployment and internal, particularly among young people, an insight also shared by M. Kaçan.²²³ Internal migration accelerated since the 1990s due to village evacuations and security policies and now by the effects of the further securitisation of the borderscape. Further, participants conveyed that weaponisation of the borderscape has also made the village uninhabitable for young people, accelerating depopulation and demographic transformation. The acceleration of the migration of young people is represented by participants as the loss of hope and future, transforming the village into "a community of the elderly" and collapsing of the border villages' social fabric.

For those young people who remain, one of the only economic opportunities they can still pursue is to become involved in the facilitation of people's movement. According to M. Kaçan, this type of smuggling has expanded relative to the disappearance of other types of illicit cross-border activity. As it is seen to involve a relatively smaller risk of loss of 'capital' compared to smuggling goods and is treated by the authorities with what he described as relative 'impunity', as well as having relatively lucrative potential, it is an attractive option for those with little else in terms of immediate or sustainable economic prospects.

6.2 The intensification of policing border communities

The reinforced surveillance and control infrastructures and practices at the Van border have also resulted in a heightened security environment for locals. While participants believed that the stated aim of preventing crossings was not achieved by the wall or other

²²³ Deniz and Doğu 2008; Interview with Mahmut Kaçan

new border infrastructures, the intensified security had, in fact, negative effects on their lives.

They said the wall was to stop migrants from coming, but they still come, and we can't make a living anymore. (PV2)

Migrants still cross, but villagers are restricted. Under the pretext of security, people lost their freedom. Now everything's forbidden, but there's no peace. (PV5)

Villagers' narratives suggest that practices of border surveillance and control render the local population the target of the security regime. Border controls result in the aggressive policing of local people, including, for example, interrogations about the presence of people on the move:

We get disturbed in the village because when migrants come, the soldiers come too. They say, "Did they enter your house?" or "Did they go into someone else's house?" (PV1)

Honestly, after they built the wall, it got worse. Every day so many migrants come; our peace is gone. They built the wall, but now when we go near the border, the soldiers chase us away—they even chase the women. The soldiers come into the village and interrogate us. They ask, "Did you see them? Did you help them?" And we get scared. (PV2)

When they [people on the move] come, the soldiers come too. They say things like, "They entered your village, they entered a house." (PV3)

[...] if we give a piece of bread, they pressure us for that too." (PV4)

When migrants come, the soldiers come... They ask, 'Did you take them into your house?' When we take them in, we get a heavy penalty... We have been devastated because of this. (PV7)

The pressure on local populations strongly indicates that the state uses border infrastructures and practices aimed at preventing migratory movement also as an internal control mechanism over the Kurdish population. This situation aligns with what can be described as an internal security border. In other words, it becomes a mechanism for regulating ethnic and political conflict within the country.²²⁴ The PKK's use of the border zone in the past as a logistical route has led the state to perceive all border villages today as potential risk spaces. As a result, the wall has assumed a function that criminalizes not only migrants' movements but also the movement of villagers. The villagers' accounts

²²⁴ Ministry of the Interior 2021; Jedinia, M. (2017) Will Proposed Wall Along Turkish-Iranian Border Keep Out Kurdish Separatists?, VOA News, May 14, <https://www.voanews.com/a/proposed-wall-along-turkish-iran-border-kurdish-separatists/3851192.html>

thus confirm research insights that the new border infrastructures would affect local populations by adding further layers of security practices.²²⁵

One incident relayed by M. Kaçan, from a case in which he represented the victims, involved the shooting of two local young men, who had crossed illicitly to a neighbouring village on the Iranian side in order to deliver wedding invitations. On their way back, they were crossing through an area that had monopoly control from one smuggling group, who, he stated, had been instructing soldiers as to what to do in the case of any other movements in the area not related to their own organisation. The two young men were detected on their return crossing, and the soldiers fired on them, injuring one and killing the other.

The increase in military pressure further strains the relationship between villagers and the state, deepening social unrest and insecurity rather than enhancing safety. The intensification of this security regime is directly related to the historical experience of the Kurdish population in the region. Since the 1980s, this border zone has been a central site of the PKK–state conflict, and each new security policy has further militarized the area, placing border villagers in a constant cycle of suspicion, surveillance, and pressure.²²⁶

6.3 Attitudes towards people on the move

In this heightened security environment, villagers' attitudes towards people on the move come across as ambivalent. Although only one respondent expressed an explicitly negative attitude ('bad people, they just jump over and come', Interview 1), some responses suggest resentment at continuing crossings despite the securitisation of the border:

Are they building a path for them? Why do they let them pass? (PV6)

Even last year, they came in droves. This summer too. In April, I saw twenty people myself. Thousands came. But I can't understand how they're getting through. Not even a bird could fly over that place. It's four meters deep, there's a wall, there's wire, but they still get through—I just don't get it. (PV4)

²²⁵ Augustova et al 2024; Augustova and Suber 2023

²²⁶ Ozcan 2021

Nonetheless, nearly all respondents expressed a sense of humanitarian responsibility to help migrants who are freezing, injured, or hungry, consistent with previous reporting.²²⁷

When you see them on the road—they're human after all—you feel sorry for them, you give them bread, you give them something to eat. (PV1)

In winter, many of them used to come; they would be stuck out there in the snow. We had no choice but to go and bring them in. Isn't that right? (he turns and asks a few other villagers nearby). We would bring them, give them tea. (PV2)

, give them water, and then they go. Once there was a sick one; he stayed in a house here, and then they left (the migrants). (PV3)

If someone's hungry, we give them a piece of bread. And they even give us trouble for that. So, we stay away, to be honest. When someone's freezing in the snow, what are we supposed to do? We have to give them something to eat, to wear, to keep them warm. But even that—we can't do anymore (PV4).

In winter, the migrants freeze. Sometimes we're forced to do our duty as humans. If they freeze to death, we have to take them in. But when we do, we get punished—it's a big trouble. Because of that, we've suffered a lot. They walk across the border freely, and the ones who suffer are us—the villagers, the border villages. (PV7)

The villagers' responses illustrate again the centrality of the natural environment in border crossings in Van. Cold and snow repeatedly come up as elements that humanitarian responses focus on. Humanitarianism dictates that people on the move must be protected against them. Yet, villagers are acutely aware of the contradictions between the humanitarian values of the village and the state's security bureaucracy. Practices of helping migrants are seen by the state as a potential crime, which creates both a moral and legal dilemma for villagers. Villagers who help migrants are perceived as "suspects," "potential collaborators," or "aiding elements" and live with the fear of punishment. In the context of the Kurdish issue, given the state's historical approach of equating Kurdish border villages with security risks, the criminalization of encounters with migrants can be seen as a contemporary extension of this long-standing policy.

²²⁷ Yesil Gazete (2020) The human tragedy continues along the border: Those who walk towards hope, 22 December, <https://yesilgazete.org/sinir-boyunda-insanlik-drami-berdevam-umuda-yuruyenler/>;

7. The effects of the weaponised landscape and the experiences of people on the move

7.1 Negotiating the natural environment and infrastructures of control and surveillance

Most people on the move interviewed described the experience of crossing the Turkey-Iran border as especially difficult, especially in comparison to borders they crossed earlier in their journeys. Natural features and human interventions, weaponising the natural landscape, both contributed to the difficulty of the crossing.

Participants' accounts recount how specific features of the landscape and climate rendered their crossing particularly difficult, in particular the mountainous terrain, uneven, rocky ground and extreme cold.

The weather conditions were harsh; we slipped and fell down, for instance. It was unclear whether we would live or die. (P1)

The weather was very cold, our feet were numb, we were freezing, and it was difficult to move. (P3)

It was very difficult because I arrived in winter; the roads were treacherous and the cold affected us greatly. (P6)

The weather was very cold, and it was winter.... Walking in the mountains was difficult for us. We fell to the ground. Everything was covered in snow. (P7)

The road was more difficult, the natural conditions were harsh, there were pits and mountainous areas. It wasn't winter, but the mountains were snowy and cold, like winter. The mountains were steep and we walked carefully, but we still fell. (P8)

Everywhere was rock and mountain, so of course we struggled.... We were freezing along the road at the border. We couldn't feel our bodies. We were struggling to walk. I don't know. It was very difficult. How else can that difficulty be described? We often slipped and fell. (P10)

The experiences of people we interviewed attest that the Van border is a hostile environment to cross because of its topography and climate. Features such as the steepness and unevenness of the ground require considerable physical energy to negotiate. Weather conditions further complicated the border crossers' journey, since

walking became more difficult and treacherous through the snow and ice. Most participants crossed in winter months, highlighting the seasonality of border crossings and possibly an attempt to evade detection due to the perception of fewer patrols during wintertime.²²⁸ Experiencing freezing temperatures was mentioned by nearly all participants as a factor that made the crossing especially difficult, on occasion – as discussed in the next section—leading to severe injury (P4). The participants' accounts echo perspectives in existing research²²⁹ and confirm yet again how the natural environment is transformed into a hostile landscape when people are forced into unauthorised crossings by contemporary border regimes.

A further natural element that recurs in the participants' accounts is wildlife. There are repeated references to hearing or seeing animals and birds of prey.

I thought lions or wolves would eat us. Because there were few of us, I was sure they would eat us. I said we wouldn't survive. (P2)

We saw a huge snake and then many snakes—everyone panicked and ran. (P3)

There were wild animals on the road, and we were afraid they would attack us. (P4)

We heard wolves howling, and we were scared. (P7)

The shepherd warned us about wild animals and told us to be careful. We were very scared. (P8)

Moving through the mountains was already terrifying. Predatory animals could have come [...] (P10)

Close encounters with wildlife were rare among participants, but their very presence was perceived as a deadly threat. While their lives and safety were not directly threatened by animals or birds, it was perceived as a risk and caused fear and anxiety among border crossers. While the presence of animals at the Van border is mentioned in research, the participants' testimonies suggest the significance of encountering animal life in the experience of crossing a border. In the case of Van, it appears to be another natural element that increases the psychological burden of a crossing.

While the geographical and climate features of the Van border render crossings risky and arduous in themselves, the weaponisation of the borderscape through infrastructures

²²⁸ Benghellab et al 2025

²²⁹ Deniz and Nargül 2025; Augustová et al 2024

and practices of surveillance and control adds further layers of hostility to crossings. The physical obstacles, including the wall, ditches and barbed wire, emerge in several accounts.

The journey was very difficult and exhausting. Our clothes were wet, there was no heater. It was very, very difficult for us. There was a five-metre wall, and we were jumping over it. (P1)

They [smugglers] said, 'After the fences, move downwards; there will be a ditch there. Jump into the ditch, and the smugglers will come and take you.' We arrived, saw the ditch, but couldn't jump in because my husband said that if we went into the ditch and no one came, there would be no one to pull us back up. So, we waited without going into the ditch. (P2)

There were barbed wire fences when crossing the border. There were barbed wires on the road and sometimes river-like, deep pools of water, close to 3–4 metres deep [refers to ditches]. Also, the mountains, cold and darkness were very challenging. (P3)

We had to jump over the wall. Some people were injured. (P4)

When we reached the border, we obviously had to climb over a 5–6 metre wall. We leaned against the wall with a ladder that the smugglers had brought and jumped down from the wall. Many people were injured while jumping from the wall. (P6)

Back then there were no walls; only barbed wire had been cut and there were ditches. As we advanced through the mountains, we often fell into these ditches. (P8)

I didn't see a wall but there was barbed wire; we crawled under at points. There were deep pits and ditches; nearly all of us fell into them. We passed under the wire, sometimes skirted beside a wall. Mostly, we crawled and walked through rocks. (P9)

The winter and snow made us cold, and the road seemed endless. The ditches were very deep and difficult to climb out of without support. There were walls about five metres high, and our feet were injured from jumping over them, so I limped all day. (P10)

The quotes illustrate how the natural environment and the weaponisation of the border 'team up' to render crossings more arduous. Human-made infrastructures such as walls, ditches and barbed wire add to the obstacles presented by the natural landscape. Similarly to the rough terrain, ditches, a recurrent theme, slow down movement by forcing people to climb in and out of them. The chain of contact between different smugglers also involves gap periods in which people are left by themselves to wait for the next person to

arrive and help them continue their journey, requiring enormous faith in the reliability of those they have entrusted themselves to. Climbing the wall is described as both difficult and risky, leading to injuries. Beyond the physical demands these obstacles impose on the journey, the participants' accounts also reveal their mental impact, causing fear and anxiety, often fear of death.

In contrast to the physical obstacles, surveillance technologies are less present in the participants' accounts. In two testimonies, they are mentioned in tandem with the presence of soldiers controlling the border. In contrast to technology, the physical presence of soldiers, one form of the weaponisation of the Van landscape, is a far more visible mechanism of detection in the participants' accounts.

There were cameras on the Turkish side. The soldiers saw us and followed us. They caught 15 people, but we were far ahead and they couldn't catch us. (P1)

Yes, the soldiers spotted us. They fired into the air. We didn't see them, but they had spotted us. I knew there were cameras, maybe that's how they spotted us. Then everyone scattered. (P7)

The soldiers spotting us and the group scattering had made us anxious. Some had turned back towards Iran... My strongest images and sounds related to the border are: the shouts of soldiers, people scattering everywhere, the sounds of people falling in the dark, the barbed wire, and the cold air. (P3)

[...] we were afraid that the soldiers would see us, shoot at us, use violence against us, deport us. (P5)

There were soldiers in the distance. The smuggler said, "If you make a sound, they'll shoot you." At one point, we heard a dog barking. We all lay down on the ground. I told my children, "Be quiet." The soldiers passed us without noticing. (P9)

While surveillance technologies made less of an impression on the participants, the actions of human agents of surveillance and control feature in many testimonies. Shootings, including by security forces in Iran, were widely reported by participants, confirming other sources recording such incidents.²³⁰ Apart from a real possibility of detection, such encounters are described in terms of the fear and stress they cause, adding another layer to the risks of the weaponized landscape. Interestingly, one

²³⁰ Amnesty International 2022; CNN (2022) Turkish forces kill a child after shooting at a vehicle carrying migrants, July 5, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/05/middleeast/turkey-iran-border-security-forces-kill-child-intl>

participant referred to an encounter with soldiers who, rather than hindering, helped the group:

When we approached the barbed wire on the Turkish side, we met Turkish soldiers, and they didn't say anything to us either. In fact, they told us to lift the wires, go under them, and walk towards a police station ahead. We walked towards the police station, and they shone a light in our faces. A soldier hugged and kissed my child and said something I didn't understand. (P9)

This statement illustrates the possibility of diversions from the practices of control that weaponise borderscapes. The ostensibly humane reaction of the soldiers, in this encounter, helped the group overcome infrastructures of control. Although the only example related to soldiers, it alludes to the possibilities of circumventing regimes of control. The participants' accounts often illustrate how physical obstacles and surveillance and control practices designed to arrest movement are negotiated and bypassed.

Do you know the ladder? We leaned the ladder against the wall, then jumped down from the wall. The smugglers brought the ladder. (P1)

We jumped into the ditches and then climbed out holding each other's hands. The smugglers had cut part of the wires and brought a ladder. (P4)

The ditches were the hardest part for me; they were about two to three metres deep. It was difficult to move in the ditch, so we tried to support each other. If we didn't pull someone up, they would stay in the ditch, so we had to grab someone's hand and pull them up. (P6)

The ditch was deep, and it was difficult to climb out without support; we were helping each other climb... Smugglers had placed ladders against the wall. We climbed them one by one. Some families climbed and jumped. (P7)

Sometimes we helped each other. We helped each other, especially to get over the ditches and pits. We crossed the wall using a ladder brought by the smuggler, but we were very scared we would get hurt when jumping over it. (P10)

The testimonies of participants demonstrate how strategies adopted by people on the move counter the aim of infrastructures to prevent movement. One of the strategies conveyed by participants was mutual help. For example, when encountering ditches, people would pull each other out. While interviewees were generally distrustful of smugglers, their assistance, such as the supply of ladders to climb the wall or cutting barbed wire, was crucial to them in overcoming physical obstacles. In a similar vein, M.

Kaçan noted that one of the features of the border infrastructure in its current form is that it greatly increases reliance on smuggling networks.²³¹ These insights yet again demonstrate that while official narratives stress the deterrent and preventative effects of infrastructures weaponising the natural landscape, they cannot entirely prevent unauthorised border crossings. Elsewhere, participants' accounts suggest that infrastructures sometimes work against themselves. Echoing the EU Commission's assessment, as shared by our informant in Section 5.2, two participants (2 and 5) suggest that ditches were used as hiding places to avoid detection by security forces.

While the agency and resistance of people on the move (and facilitators) often succeed in overcoming multiple layers of infrastructures and practices weaponising the landscape against movement, this should not obscure their harmful effects. The next section explores the many forms of violence produced by the weaponised natural landscape.

7.2 The effects of crossing the weaponised natural border

Deaths

None of the participants reported members of their group dying during the crossing. One participant, however, relayed the death of his mother due to health complications after a crossing:

On our first entry to Türkiye, my mother passed away about a month later. It was 2–3 years ago. We buried her in Iran. She had gotten very cold in the mountains and died from the cold. (P1)

Other participants recounted witnessing the aftermath of deaths during crossings:

When we reached the border, when we crossed the Turkish wall and came to this side, there were bodies, the bodies of young people. That image is still in my mind; there were so many corpses. My brother was scared and cried. (P1)

It was very cold, and we saw people who had frozen to death on the road. Wolves had eaten their bodies. We moved away quickly so they wouldn't attack us. (P4)

²³¹ Interview with M. Kaçan

The participants' statements recount experiences of seeing dead bodies along their journey, at the same time illustrating the link between border deaths and the natural environment – the cold and animals eating bodies. Deaths from the cold during crossing the Van border are widely reported in research, NGO reports and media.²³² In February 2020, 13 people were found frozen to death while crossing the border on foot.²³³ 49 deaths from hypothermia were reported between 2018 and 2021.²³⁴ Many bodies are discovered after the snow melts:

When the spring comes and snow starts to melt, many bodies, bones have been found on the border line. Every year. (M. Kaçan)

Other causes of death include road accidents and gunfire by soldiers and police.²³⁵ In one case, a man drowned after falling into a flooded ditch, illustrating how infrastructures weaponising the border can directly cause deaths.²³⁶ While many deaths occur in border areas primarily because of the freezing conditions in mountainous areas, they are also recorded as people on the move move inland. Over 70 people, for example, died in two shipwrecks in 2019 and 2020 while crossing Lake Van.²³⁷ As in many other borders, deaths are likely underreported, and disappearances are also recorded.²³⁸

²³² Deniz and Nargül 2025; Evrensel (2024) 'A humanitarian tragedy unfolds every year on the Van-Iran border', 5 December https://www.evrensel.net/haber/536052/van-iran-sinirinda-her-yil-insanlik-drami-yasaniyor?fbclid=IwY2xjawNXJ3FlHRuA2FlbOlXMAABHizg3Wrrs70Eu9Ovg17yEhiAviJD04WdlWBuz7VY-pRmG6UI8diTTces5e6J_aem_jSh76lUgi28WTsWoF50NGQ

²³³ Rudow (2020) 13 migrants freeze to death on Turkey-Iran border, 2nd February <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/09022020>

²³⁴ Bianet (2022) Two refugees from Afghanistan freeze to death on Turkey-Iran border, 17 January. <https://bianet.org/haber/two-refugees-from-afghanistan-freeze-to-death-on-turkey-iran-border-256312>

²³⁵ Ibid. See also: InfoMigrants (2019) 17 migrants killed in southeastern turkey bus crash, 19 June, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/18274/17-migrants-killed-in-southeastern-turkey-bus-crash#:~:text=At%20least%2017%20people%20have,took%20place%20in%20Van%20province>; Kent S. (2020) Lake Van: An overlooked and deadly migration route to Turkey and Europe, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/10/20/turkey-afghanistan-migrants-refugees-asylum>; Aljazeera (2021) At least 12 killed as bus carrying migrants crashes in Turkey, July 11, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/11/at-least-12-killed-as-bus-carrying-migrants-crashes-in-turkey>; Sariyuçe, I., Gezer, Y. & Alkhalidi, C. (2022) Turkish forces kill a child after shooting at a vehicle carrying migrants. CNN, July 5, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/05/middleeast/turkey-iran-border-security-forces-kill-child-intl>

²³⁶ Artigercek 2023

²³⁷ BBC (2019) Migrant crisis: Seven die as boat sinks in Turkey's Lake Van, December 26, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-50915304> ; Kent 2020

²³⁸ M. MacGregor (2020) "Missing migrants: A family's lonely search for a lost brother", October 5, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/40359/missing-migrants-a-family-s-lonely-search-for-a-lost-brother>

According to information obtained from the Van Bar Association Refugee and Migrant Commission, no clear data can be obtained about the number of deaths and disappearances in the borderlands.

*The governorate ('valilik') is the only one with information about the number of bodies authorities find and they do not share this information. Previously, when we didn't have the trusteeship ('kayyum') and there was Kurdish political representation, there was more possibility to cooperate with the state institutions. Now they are totally closed and unsympathetic.*²³⁹

While official statistics are difficult to find, other sources suggest that the Van border was particularly deadly even before the more recent weaponisation of the natural landscape. Evidence suggests that border deaths continue to be recorded, and local civil society holds that new infrastructures, such as the wall, displace crossings to riskier routes, increasing the likelihood of deaths.²⁴⁰

A further issue related to border deaths is the difficulty of identifying bodies. MK explained that there is a process for the identification of bodies whereby they are sent to a forensic laboratory and morgue, all taking place within the Van region. Unidentified bodies are buried in a special section of a cemetery in Van ('kimsesiz mezarlığı' – cemetery of unclaimed people), where their graves are marked with a number painted on a concrete slab, reinforcing how death at the border is largely normalized and erased (See images 18 and 19 below).

²³⁹ Interview with the Van Bar Association

²⁴⁰ ECRE 2025; Serhat News (2026) The Van border has become a death trap for migrants. Available at: <https://www.serhatnews.com.tr/van-siniri-gocmenler-icin-olum-hattina-donustu>; Dikici Y (2025). The price of border policies in Van: Migrants freezing to death, December 12, <https://www.bolgegazetesivan.com/vanda-sinir-politikalarinin-bedeli-donarak-olen-gocmenler>. Interview with Mahmut Kaca.



Image 18 and 19: Graves of unidentified people on the move in Van city. Photos taken in May 2025.

Injuries, physical and psychological harm

Injuries sustained or witnessed by the participants during the journey were widely reported. In one account, the effect of the freezing weather led to amputation of toes due to frostbite:

We were freezing, and as a result, I lost some of my toes... My sister and I had frostbite on our feet and had to have tissue removed in Van. It was very hard. (P4)

Fractures and other injuries of limbs were widely reported by participants:

Some [people] fell down the mountain and were injured. For example, two young Pakistanis were in a really bad way. One had a broken leg. They told me they had been stuck on the border side for two months and that was why they couldn't cross. He said his leg had been broken when he fell on the mountain. (P3)

During the crossing, the soldiers saw us and started shouting. The group quickly dispersed. It was terrifying. Some fell, were injured, some had broken hands or feet. (P3)

We had to jump over the wall. Some people were injured. But we couldn't feel our bodies anymore from the cold. (P4)

Many people were injured while jumping from the wall. Some had broken legs, including mine. There were elderly people among us, and they were also injured. They had cuts on their feet on the way, but we bandaged them up and continued on our way. (P6)

In my opinion, it was difficult for families with children to jump over the wall because most of them were getting injured. (P7)

Our knees and feet were covered in sores. My niece's chest was covered in sores. (P9)

There were walls about five metres high, and our feet were injured from jumping over them, so I limped all day. I'm not sure, but I think one person even broke their leg. (P10)

The above quotations illustrate how the natural environment and the infrastructures weaponising it team up to cause harm. Some injuries sustained by the respondents were related to the landscape, such as falling on the rough terrain of the border. However, most link injuries to having to climb and jump over the wall, illustrating how an infrastructure weaponising the environment adds to the harms experienced during illicit border crossings. In another account, injuries were sustained while fleeing soldiers, the human

component of border control. The participants' insights reflect external perspectives on the effects of the wall and other infrastructures at the Van border.²⁴¹

In addition to physical injuries, many participants experienced multiple forms of harm, both physical and mental, because of the many hardships encountered during their journey.

We were very cold, so we gathered long grass and wrapped ourselves in it to keep warm.... On top of that, we were very hungry. We were very thirsty. We were all hungry, but we had no other choice.... Hunger, thirst, violence... everything was difficult. (P5)

We fell down frequently on the road, and we were gasping for breath. My children and I fell into a stream, and we were soaking wet. We were freezing. We hadn't eaten or drunk anything properly for days, so we had no energy left. (P5)

Hunger exhausted us. Because they didn't give us any food on the road, we were generally starving. (P6)

By the time we reached the border, our bodies had gone numb from the cold, we were freezing, we kept falling to the ground...We stayed in the village that night. We were hungry and very thirsty. We were very scared. The smugglers only gave us dry bread; we were hungry and thirsty. Most of us fell ill there, but we continued regardless (P7)

We spent one night in a tent at the border; it was very cold and we were given neither heaters nor blankets. We were given only sour yoghurt and bread to eat; no water or other food was provided. We were hungry and cold. We ate yoghurt once every 24 hours. (P8)

There were times when we burned animal dung to keep warm. The thirst was unbearable.... There was very little food; they usually gave us a piece of dry bread a day, and that was at night. Our shoes were torn, and our socks stuck to our feet. (P9)

It was very hard for the children. We were all hungry, we had no energy and we were cold. It was forbidden to light fires or make noise. Our bodies felt numb. (P10)

We were starving and thirsty at the border. We were especially thirsty. We were climbing mountains, and hunger was tormenting our children. The road was difficult. We were climbing the mountain. My tongue and palate were so dry that I thought we were going to die. (P2)

The place where we were confined at the border was very difficult for us. It was a barn and the conditions were terrible. There was nothing: no water, no food, no toilets... We drank the water from the toilets; then they cut off the

²⁴¹ Artigercek 2023

water and started selling it. They were selling water to people at a very high price. Women were kept separate from men. They were selling bread and water; it was very expensive. My children were very hungry; I had to buy two boiled eggs, but they were very expensive. (P5)

When we stayed at the shelter, they gave us a piece of bread and a few olives. So, I wasn't getting as much food as I could have done, which meant we were generally hungry anyway. The hardest thing was constantly wandering around the mountains and getting tired because of it. (P6)

The experience of hunger, thirst and cold appears as a recurring theme in almost all participants' narratives. They demonstrate the range of harm people on the move experience during journeys. While some are directly linked to nature, like the experience of cold, others are combined with the violence characterising journeys through violent weaponised landscapes. Experiencing extreme cold, for example, is due to the region's climate, but also with avoiding detection by crossing during seasons patrolling is thought to be less intense and not lighting fires (P5). The scarcity of food and water for example, can be linked to the control exerted by non-state actors but also to the logistics of unauthorised crossings: in order to move fast and remain undetected by human or technological surveillance, people on the move tend to travel light.²⁴² Many of the risks faced and injuries sustained also reflect that most people crossed at night (P4, P8, P10).

The hardships people on the move experienced, however, are not only bodily. The physical demands of the crossing, including negotiating natural conditions and human-made obstacles, as well as experiences of acute bodily discomfort, also affect people's mental health:

We were exhausted; there was no water, our throats were dry. When I felt stressed, I couldn't breathe. There were moments when I literally could not breathe. (P5)

Sometimes we were so thirsty that I thought about committing suicide, but then I remembered my children and changed my mind. (P9)

²⁴² See for example: Sharma, E.M. (2024) Birthing at European Union Borders: A qualitative multi-method study of perinatal Afghan women's experiences on the move through Serbia. PhD Thesis. London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Available at: https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4674760/8/2024_PHP_PhD_Sharma_E.pdf

The above quotations are illustrative of the extreme mental hardships border crossings in weaponised borderscapes can force upon people on the move. Psychosomatic responses and even thoughts of suicide are the result of the multiple fears and anxieties experienced during the journey. The negotiation of the challenges posed by the natural environment, material obstacles, and practices of control, such as being shot at by soldiers, take their toll on the psychological well-being of participants.

7.3 Gender and vulnerabilities in crossing the Van borderscape

Statements of participants emphasised the gendered aspects of the border-crossing experience, as well as its various contingencies related to the vulnerabilities a person has. Women, children, and people with disabilities faced specific difficulties in crossing the weaponised border.

The weaponisation of the borderscape increases risk and harm for women in ways that differ from the experiences of men. These insights highlight how border crossings and the weaponisation of the natural landscape have gendered harms and dimensions which are often obscured in research²⁴³ and sidelined in media and political discourse. Responses of women participants highlighted the physical demands of crossing a difficult terrain such as Van, as well as particular conditions that make the crossing especially difficult for women, such as pregnancy and menstruation:

It was also very difficult for women to run uphill; we had difficulty attending to our personal needs. (P3)

I had my period during the journey, and there were no sanitary pads; I bled, and my clothes were covered in blood. I've been experiencing heavy bleeding ever since. I'm ashamed to say this, please forgive me. (P5)

And I'm ashamed to say, I got my period on the road because I hadn't taken precautions. I was so embarrassed, I was covered in blood. (P9)

The journey was very difficult because I was pregnant. My feet were swollen and I was in constant pain. I fell on my stomach once and experienced constant pain; this continued throughout my pregnancy. (P8)

²⁴³ Kofman 2019; Freedman, J. (2016) Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee "crisis", *Reproductive Health Matters*, 24(47) pp.18-26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rhm.2016.05.003>

While crossing the Van border, as illustrated in previous sections, is exceptionally difficult because of the teaming up of natural landscape and the infrastructures that weaponise it, women can experience specific hardships.²⁴⁴ Being pregnant, as Respondent 8 shared, made the crossing more painful and increased harm (“I fell onto my stomach”); menstruating during the crossing created additional harms because of the lack of privacy and hygiene, but also, as the quotations above show, gendered feelings of shame.²⁴⁵ Some women who allowed audio recording were more hesitant to discuss certain topics, especially those concerning “bodily experiences” at the border, menstrual cycles, hygiene issues, and intimate aspects of the body. These were expressed quietly, with embarrassment, hesitation, and sometimes apology, and were recorded in notes after the interview. Women often waited until the audio recording ended to share these experiences, showing reluctance in communicating aspects of their womanhood. Another gendered dimension of the journey expressed by many women was concerning their additional worries for the safety of their children.

The difficulties of being a woman and a mother were overwhelming. I was constantly worried that something might happen to my children. (P5)

Women find themselves in positions where they are anxious for the safety of both themselves and their children.²⁴⁶ In P9’s account, women are seen as responsible for disciplinary control of the children. The threat “If you cry, we will leave you here” shows that on the migration route, this role is reinforced by the authority of smugglers. Men, conversely, articulated their concerns in a masculine protector role:

I had two younger siblings, and I was very worried that I wouldn't be able to protect them. (P7)

I was having a hard time because of my family and children. We were responsible for each other. If I had been alone, I might have been more comfortable. (P4)

²⁴⁴ Baklacioğlu, N.O. (2017) ‘Gendering Migration Across Euro-Mediterranean Borders: Syrian refugee women on the way to Europe’, *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 4(2), pp. 75–101. Kofman, E. (2019) ‘Gendered Mobilities and Vulnerabilities: refugee journeys to and in Europe’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(12), pp. 2185–2199. Zuccarelli, G., Riggiozzi, P., Owen, D. & Cintra, N. (2025) ‘Vulnerabilities in displacement: Can humanitarianism protect women?’, *Migration Studies*, 13 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnaf016>

²⁴⁵ Hirani, S. A. A. (2024) ‘Barriers to Women’s Menstrual Hygiene Practices during Recurrent Disasters and Displacement: A Qualitative Study’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 21(2), pp. 153. Sharma 2024; Sherally, J., Dnestrianschii, F., Alshamari, Z., Beshir, E., Jafari, H., Jafari, M., Mohamed, K., Mohammadyasin, S., van den Muijsenbergh, M., van den Akker, T., Le Mat, M., & Duijs, S. E. (2025) ‘Impact of Displacement on Refugee Women’s Sexual and Reproductive Health: A Participatory Study Using Photovoice’, *BJOG*, 132(13), pp. 2204–2216.

²⁴⁶ Sharma 2024

I was trying to protect my wife. I was afraid something would happen to her. Because I had heard of a family whose wife had been abducted. I was very worried. (P10)

Another participant raised the fear of sexual assault or other violence during the journey, saying she was *'very scared. I was afraid they might rape us'* (P2). Although not raised by other female respondents, women border crossers are aware of the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence during journeys.²⁴⁷ Because the border crossing takes place in an environment that is physically and symbolically male-dominated, women remain in a constant state of risk awareness.²⁴⁸ Weaponised borderscapes that render journeys riskier, thus exposing women to gendered harms, including sexual violence.²⁴⁹

Participants also brought up the difficulties faced by people who might have what policy and academic literature often define as *'vulnerabilities'*.²⁵⁰

It was more difficult for women, children and elderly people to move quickly and overcome obstacles... The wall was the hardest and riskiest part for me. Because I am disabled, there were steps on the ladder and I was trying to climb them but I couldn't. Everyone was moving forward but I couldn't. I cried a lot there, I felt really bad at the time. ... My daughter couldn't walk. My children were small and had started to fall ill. They had fevers, and I couldn't do anything for them. I cut up onions and put them in their socks to bring down their fevers. I cut up the lining of my shirt, warmed it up, and placed it on their backs and chests. Their chests had grown cold. (P1)

There were elderly people, children and people with health problems. The young people moved faster, while the elderly and those with children lagged behind. The young people tried to help them. Some people with children or health problems struggled at the border. (P3)

There were elderly people, disabled people, and people with broken legs in the group. They were transporting some people on horses. [...] The elderly had to walk slowly. Those with only one leg moved with a stick. Some families gave their children sleeping pills so they wouldn't cry. One baby was motionless, and I asked the mother if the baby was okay. She said they had given him sleeping syrup. They said that if the baby cried, we would be caught.

(P5)

²⁴⁷ Baklacioğlu 2017; Sydney, C. (2025) Horror and hope in migration: voices of women on the move. Available at: <https://mixedmigration.org/horror-and-hope-in-migration-voices-of-women-on-the-move> Mehta, R. (2025) 'Circularity of violence and institutionalisation: understanding women's (im)mobility across borders', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 9(2), pp. 234-251. <https://doi.org/10.1332/23986808Y2024D000000058>; Bianet (2023) No action taken despite allegation of rape in repatriation center in Iğdır, 28 March, <https://bianet.org/haber/no-action-taken-despite-allegation-of-rape-in-repatriation-center-in-igdir-276461>

²⁴⁸ Baklacioğlu 2017; Maisonave, A. C. & Morales, E. (2023) 'Crossing Political and Gender Borders: A Feminist Analysis of Migration', *Frontera norte*, 34. <https://doi.org/10.33679/rfn.v11i.2318>

²⁴⁹ Baklacioğlu 2017

²⁵⁰ Kofman 2019

There were families with children and elderly people in the group. I don't know if there were any pregnant women. Families with children had a very difficult journey. They were carrying their children because they were tired. [...] They were crying a lot. The smugglers were constantly getting angry. (P7)

Families with children had to carry their younger children, while the 10-year-olds walked like us [...]. They were crying, and the smugglers often got angry and shouted at them. They wanted to give them syrup to make them sleep, but the families didn't allow it. (P10)

Respondents conveyed additional difficulties faced by persons with disabilities, children and the elderly.²⁵¹ People that are less physically able to 'move fast', a necessary practice in order to evade the state infrastructures and practices of control during border crossings, are sometimes seen as a hindrance.²⁵² However, like in Section 6.1, many testimonies suggest that group members support each other during crossing. Children, more vulnerable to the harsh conditions of the border, engender both responsibilities and risks. Their crying, for instance, could make the whole group less 'invisible' during the crossing; giving children sleep-inducing substances to avoid this risk is a practice recorded in other crossings.²⁵³ These perspectives show how crossings are shaped by intersecting identities that limit the ability to move and that are often predicated on physical ability. Inability to conform to the physical demands of crossings needs to be negotiated and addressed. The research thus reiterates the masculine, ableist dimensions of border regimes that produce risky crossings, which are sometimes obscured in academic analysis.²⁵⁴

7.4 Pushbacks

Multiple sources indicate that there are two parallel return systems operating in the Van region: formal deportations and informal pushbacks.²⁵⁵ This occurs in a context of the near complete breakdown of the protection application system and a soar in detention and deportation rates, all under opaque, arbitrary and unlawful conditions that are

²⁵¹ Fiske, L. and Giotis, C. (2021) 'Refugees, Gender and Disability: Examining intersections through refugee journeys', in Piper, N. and Mora, C. (Ed.) *Gender and Migration Handbook*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 441-456.

²⁵² Sharma 2024

²⁵³ Sharma 2024

²⁵⁴ Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2022) *Humanitarian Borders: Unequal Mobility and Saving Lives*. London: Verso.

²⁵⁵ Amnesty International 2022

largely closed off to lawyers and rights groups. Formal air deportations are carried out regularly from Van Airport with the cooperation of Afghani state-owned Ariana Airlines, under the guise of “voluntary returns” that have been repeatedly shown to occur under conditions of coercion.

Informally, on the other hand, pushbacks remain a systemic practice at the Iran–Turkey border.²⁵⁶ People apprehended by gendarmerie or border guards are routinely detained in military outposts, denied access to lawyers or asylum procedures, and pushed back across the border at night – a practice that continues despite legal prohibitions.²⁵⁷

According to MK, this practice is still ongoing:

They gather them directly in different military outposts at the border area, and during the nighttime, they push them back to Iran.

MK emphasizes that pushbacks are carried out under a chain of command, not as isolated acts by individual soldiers.

They are in a command chain... They do that under a chain of command.

The pushbacks also expose people on the move to violence by the Iranian authorities and by non-state armed groups operating in the Iranian border region.²⁵⁸ Iran does not formally accept such returns, thus they reportedly take place away from the detection of Iranian border authorities. Those that have been pushed back are left exposed in the Iranian borderlands. Some might have access to another chance at crossing via their agreement with smugglers, others might be left to fend for themselves.

During pushbacks, people are routinely subjected to physical violence, theft, and the threat or use of lethal force by border authorities. M. Kaçan described how “[t]hey are beaten very harshly: Some soldiers fire on them and some are killed like that.” The firing of live ammunition into the air or at groups attempting to cross borders, resulting in serious injuries and deaths, including of children, has been documented in other reports, while other abuses include beatings with batons, rifle butts and metal rods, and the

²⁵⁶ ECRE 2025

²⁵⁷ ECRE 2025

²⁵⁸ ECRE 2025; Amnesty International 2022

confiscation of money and phones.²⁵⁹ Additionally, people who are pushed back risk being left stranded in the mountains between Iran and Turkey.²⁶⁰

Although pushbacks at the Turkish border have been recorded before, this timeline corresponds to the deployment of stationary and mobile surveillance systems at this border.²⁶¹ While it is difficult to establish a direct link between the weaponisation of the landscape in Van and the practice of pushbacks, the expansion of surveillance technologies and reinforcement of border policing with personnel increases capacities for detection and apprehension. They can thus facilitate practices of pushbacks, similarly to patterns observed at other borders.²⁶²

8. Conclusion

With its mountainous terrain and extreme climate, the Van region and wider terrain have always entailed an inhospitable landscape for people in transit. Yet, communities have lived and travelled in this harsh landscape for centuries, and the Van border has been a crossing point for people on the move since at least the 1980s. In conclusion, in this report, we observe that in the course of the last two decades, this landscape has turned even more hostile for people on the move through its weaponisation with infrastructures aimed at controlling the border.

The weaponisation of natural landscape has occurred through two conjoined dynamics. On one hand, the EU has externalised border controls to Turkey in its longstanding aim to curtail unwanted movements in its territory. Turkey's candidacy to EU membership acted as a mechanism for the transfer of EU policies and policy aims of border management to the Turkish context, reshaping the governance of its external borders. Yet, while a lot of analysis has stressed the influence of externalisation dynamics, we find – and we cannot stress enough! – that domestic policies and interests have been equally significant in

²⁵⁹ Amnesty International 2022; Interview with M. Kaçan

²⁶⁰ ECRE 2025

²⁶¹ European Commission 2022

²⁶² Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) (2024) Surveillance Technologies at European Borders: Evros, <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/surveillance-technologies-at-european-borders-evros>; Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) (2024) Surveillance Technologies at European Borders: Bulgaria, <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/surveillance-technologies-at-european-borders-bulgaria>

weaponising the Van landscape against people on the move. Concerned with security and suppressing Kurdish social, political and military activities in the Van borderland, the Turkish state engaged in the militarisation of the Van border through both infrastructural and interventions and aggressive policing of the local populations. In this sense, we reiterate the work of other researchers studying Europe's border regime who argue that analyses of border securitisation cannot rely solely on the EU-centric frameworks of externalisation.²⁶³

On the ground, these dynamics have been translated into a heavily infrastructuralized landscape that weaponises hostile natural elements against people on the move.²⁶⁴ A national programme of construction of physical obstacles such as walls and ditches surrounded by barbed wire aimed at inhibiting and slowing down movement through the borderscape. The construction and upgrading of military border outposts fed into surveillance and control capacities, both technological and human. The dual aim of these infrastructures, policing migratory movement and policing local populations, was enhanced by infrastructures financed by the EU in its aim to fortify Turkey's external borders, in particular stationary and mobile technological surveillance systems. These physical and digital interventions engage with the natural environment in different ways. On one hand, they render it more inhospitable for people trying to cross it either by creating physical obstacles or increasing capacities for human and digital surveillance. On the other hand, they make the natural environment less inhospitable for the actors and practices of control and thus more governable.

Participants' narratives show that the weaponised Van borderscape consists of physical, technological, and human components forming a multilayered structure. By using physical barriers (walls, trenches, barbed wire), technological monitoring systems (surveillance systems, drones), and border policing measures (warning shots, "scattering" tactics) together, authorities attempt to render the border impermeable at both material and psychological levels. These human-made elements 'teamed up' with

²⁶³ Augustová et al 2024; Müftüler-Bac 2021

²⁶⁴ Infrastructuring Nature as Border Technique, <https://infranature.org/about/>

the more-than-human elements: the mountainous, rough terrain and the extreme weather conditions that characterise this borderscape.

The weaponisation of the landscape did not prevent unauthorised crossings nor deter people on the move, contrary to pronouncements of the national authorities and the wishes of the EU. It did, however, make the Van landscape more hostile, producing conditions that result in even riskier, violent and harm-inducing crossings. People on the move recounted the many forms of violence and harm they experienced: deaths due to crossing a landscape in conditions of extreme cold; threats to their lives from shootings; physical injuries caused by climbing up and down walls and ditches; hunger, thirst and bodily discomfort experienced during their crossings; psychological and mental stress caused by physical hardships and encounters with security forces. The research also highlights how weaponisation of the borderscape affects even more groups that experience one or more vulnerabilities – women, children, people with disabilities or those less physically able to face the demands that the obstacle course of infrastructures places on their crossings.

Yet, the accounts of the participants also reveal how, against the purpose of these infrastructures of arresting their movement, people on the move develop strategies to overcome the weaponisation of the landscape, such as helping each other to overcome walls and ditches, sometimes with the assistance of local facilitators. While relations between smuggling networks and people on the move at the Van border are often characterised by distrust and sometimes by violence, the role of smugglers should be seen in a nuanced manner: the survival of border crossers often depends on the assistance they receive from them, which is typically paid, whether in the form of ladders to scale the wall, transport, or information.

Another key aspect of this report is that it confirms the ongoing trend of routine pushbacks as a feature of how the Iran-Turkey border is governed. Building on earlier reporting that has identified this practice, in particular but not confined to reports from the early 2020s, the material discussed here shows that these practices continue in the present and remain structurally embedded in border enforcement. Pushbacks, carried

out without individual assessment or access to legal procedures, persist as part of a system focused on preventing movement rather than ensuring protection, placing people on the move further at risk and doubling down on the hostility of their journey.

Pushbacks at the Iran–Turkey border should be understood as part of a broader pattern across the EU’s externalised border regime. Similar practices have been documented in the Aegean, the Central Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, and along other EU frontier zones, where forced returns and collective expulsions have become normalised despite their illegality under international law. In this sense, what happens in Van is not an exception but one expression of a wider system in which (illegal) deterrence is prioritised over protection. The persistence of pushbacks in Turkey, under the support and broad policy harmonisation guidelines of the EU, reflects how responsibility for rights violations is displaced outward.

Furthermore, the findings of this study also illustrate how domestic security regimes combine with the weaponisation of the landscape against migratory movement to impact the lives of local communities. The infrastructures built along the Turkey–Iran border have resulted in the multilayered transformation of the daily lives of Kurdish communities living in border villages. Participants’ narratives reveal how the wall and other infrastructures have affected local livelihoods by undermining two key sources of income. Animal husbandry has been significantly impacted by the difficulties of accessing pastureland because of the construction of the wall and the intensification of border security. Smuggling of goods was similarly affected by the intensification of border policing. The undermining of local livelihoods, in turn, led to the depopulation of villages and internal migration in search of employment, particularly among young people. A further consequence of the weaponisation was the intensification of the policing of local communities. Both dynamics feed back to longstanding patterns of socioeconomic deprivation and political oppression of Kurdish communities in the region.

Future research

The study relies on a variety of channels of research on the weaponisation of the natural environment and helps open up a range of areas for further investigation. Some remarks and suggestions are shared here along the themes of ecology and environment, the impact of externalisation, and a more in-depth engagement with the experiences of those most impacted by the border regime.

In terms of ecology and environment, the research has shown how the hostile infrastructure of the Iran–Turkey border has negative effects not only on the immediately impacted areas but also on the wider, interconnected ecology and the livelihoods that depend on it. Future research could add significantly to this by further investigating the still under-researched environmental impacts on the Turkish side, in particular since the construction of large-scale infrastructures is both recent and ongoing, as well as through more comparative work on the Iranian context. Similarly, comparative studies of the Van border with other land borders from an ecological perspective would help address a clear gap in the literature.

These themes could also be examined comparatively on a broader scale across geographically distant contexts, in order to identify more general patterns and trends. The wider *Infrastructuring Nature* project seeks to continue this kind of global research, and the case studies of Bosnia–Croatia, Croatia–Slovenia, and Belarus–Poland, when read alongside the present work, contribute to this broader effort.

At a time of deepening ecological crisis and the rapid – and profitable – spread of border infrastructures worldwide, these issues are urgent, as security-driven interventions are reshaping already fragile environments and feeding into the normalisation of a siege mentality in the Global North. These processes deepen colonial dynamics of who is controlled, displaced, and exposed to harm. In this study, the experiences of people on the move and local Kurdish residents clearly have commonalities in terms of their experience of the brunt of the border regime.

Future research should therefore continue to pay closer attention to what happens “from below”, committing more to engage with the lived experiences of people on the move *and* of local residents affected by border infrastructures. This could extend beyond their experiences of violence and survival strategies into more fully integrating their own political views, interpretations, and analyses of the border regime. At the same time, these perspectives need to be handled carefully, as partial and situated forms of knowledge, so that those most impacted are not overburdened, romanticized, or put at risk. Treated in this way, they can ultimately strengthen critical analysis and accountability on the part of those conducting research and provide a more holistic basis for producing knowledge to counter the border regime.