

Infrastructuring Nature

The Turkish —
Iranian Border
in Van
Province

Summary Report

GERDA HENKEL
STIFTUNG



Border Violence
Monitoring Network



ORTAKÇA
ASSOCIATION

Border Violence Monitoring Network Team (BVMN): Lena Karamanidou, Saher Ahmed, Lisa Koerber, Roisin Trelfa

Ortakça Research Team: Elnaz Aydođdu, Samet Aydeniz, Eylem Demir, Nevzat Ađçakaya, Őeyma Tunçdemir

Editing and executive summary: Roisin Trelfa, Marlene Auer, Despina Psara, Anilda Koteci

Design and visuals: Clara Zinecker, Anilda Koteci, Despina Psara

Border infrastructures map: Mustafa

For media requests, including interviews, please email press@borderviolence.eu or research@borderviolence.eu

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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. Significant numbers of people fleeing wars, conflict and oppression have been crossing this boundary since the 1980s in search of refuge or a better life, generally with the assistance of facilitators from local, predominantly Kurdish communities on either side of the border.¹ The Van borderland is a paradigmatic inhospitable landscape, characterised by steep mountains and extreme weather conditions, making crossing an especially arduous and risky endeavour.² At the same time, its topography makes it relatively difficult to control, to some degree 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 – the transfer of border management legal norms and modes beyond its external borders – since the 2000s, because of its centrality in migration routes towards Europe.⁴ Simultaneously, the militarisation of the Van border and the weaponisation of the natural landscape was driven by domestic security priorities of policing the Kurdish communities inhabiting this area and countering Kurdish political organisation and insurgency. Thus, in recent decades, the Van border saw the proliferation of material structures such as military outposts, ditches and walls, and new technologies of surveillance such as stationary automated surveillance systems and portable thermovision cameras. These have rendered the natural environment more hostile and crossings riskier.⁵

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. This report 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, which investigates how nature is incorporated by regimes of border control and how, in turn, nature influences these regimes.⁶

1 Bozçalı, F. (2024) Corridors of countersovereignty: Insurgency, smuggling, and post-nation-state politics in Turkey's Kurdish highlands, *Anthropological Theory* 24(3) 325–343

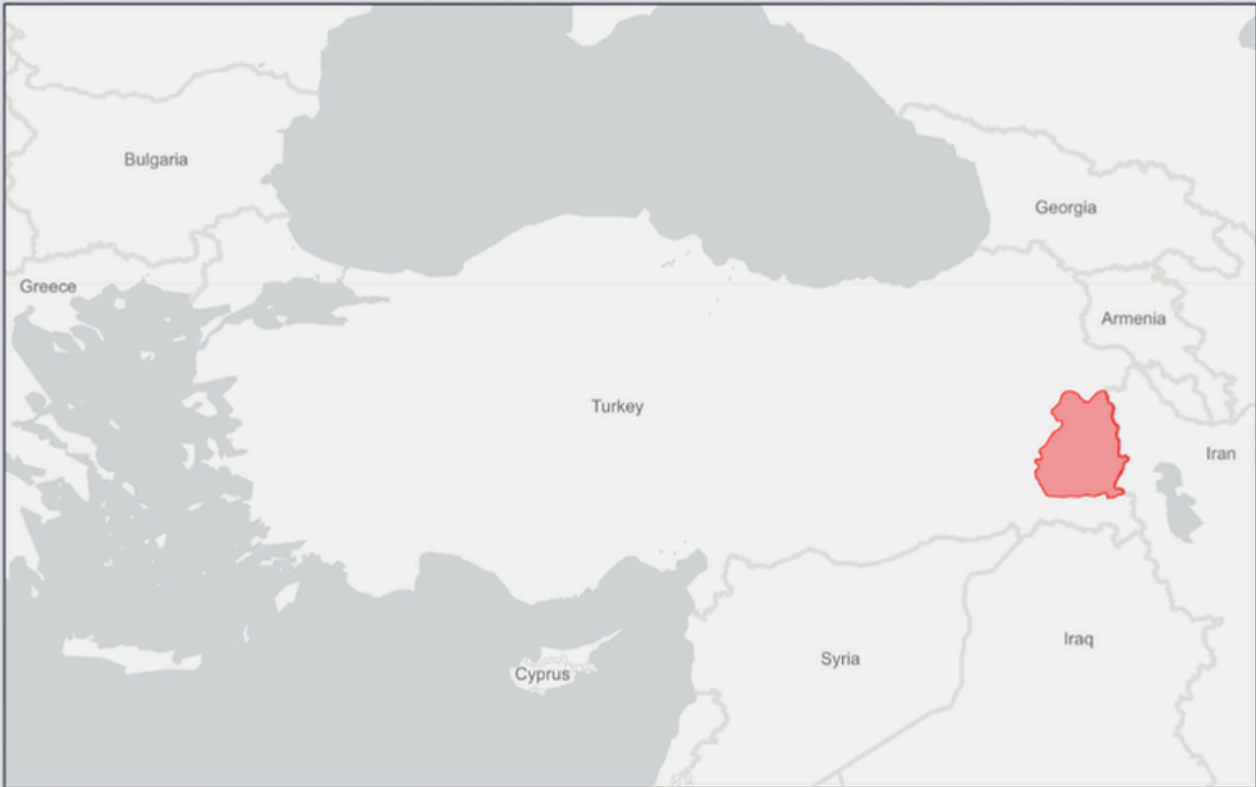
2 Infrastructuring Nature as Border Technique, <https://infranature.org/>; Deniz, O. & Nargül, S. (2025): Turkey-Iran Border and Irregular Migration from a Geographical Perspective, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2025.2488508

3 Biner, Ö. (2018) Crossing the mountain and negotiating the border: Human smuggling in eastern Turkey, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 59, pp. 89–108;

4 Augustová et al 2024; Dalkiran, M. (2023) New Approaches to Conditionality in EU-Turkey Relations: Assessing the Role of Irregular Migration, *Oasis*, 39, pp.123–143

5 Augustová et al 2024; Deniz and Nargül 2025

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



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.

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. To understand the political and policy context and the development of material and technical interventions at Turkish borders and in particular the Turkish-Iranian border in the Van province, we drew on official EU and Turkish documents, research literature and reports, 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.

A field visit to Van was conducted in May 2025 with one member of BVMN and a member of another partner organisation, and included meetings with local associations and visits to border areas. A second field visit was conducted by the Van-based partners Ortakça in November 2025 to conduct interviews with inhabitants of border villages as well as collect visual material from border areas. Ten in-depth interviews with people on the move and seven interviews with inhabitants of border villages were conducted in Van by local researchers between July and November 2025.

The Policy Context

The governance of the Turkish external borders has been shaped by the dual influence of EU border externalisation policies and Turkish domestic dynamics of security. Turkey's accession process, particularly since 2005 when negotiations began, provided the framework through which the governance of asylum and borders were gradually europeanised and EU border control externalised to Turkey. 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.⁷

Border externalisation accelerated in the 2010s, when 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. In 2013, the EU and Turkey signed a Readmission Agreement and adopted a Roadmap towards a Visa-Free Regime with Turkey.⁸ 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, strengthen border control and surveillance capabilities and ensure greater compliance with international and EU human rights law.

⁷ Dalkiran 2023 ; Karadağ, S. (2019) 'Extraterritoriality of European borders to Turkey: an implementation perspective of counteractive strategies'. *Comparative Migration Studies* 7(1): 1-16.

⁸ 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

The introduction of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2014 was intended to align Turkey's policies with EU standards, even though the geographical limitation to the Geneva Convention and its 1967 Additional Protocol on the Legal Status of Refugees of 1967, excluding non-Europeans from applying for asylum, has remained in place to the present.⁹

Further, the EU mobilised sizable financial support for the reception of displaced Syrian populations in Turkey under the 2015 Joint Action Plan and the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.¹⁰ In return, Turkey would accelerate the implementation of border control measures agreed under the 2013 Roadmap.¹¹ While talks on Turkey's accession and visa liberalisation have largely stagnated, border management and migration control have remained core areas in EU-Turkish relations, and the EU has continued to provide funding for border management.¹²

Nonetheless, the reinforcement of border management policies, practices and infrastructures is not solely informed by EU policy dynamics but also domestic sociopolitical interests and security concerns.¹³ The transformation of border governance became an opportunity to reassert national sovereignty and fend criticisms of its initial open-door policy towards Syrian refugees in a period of deteriorating domestic economic conditions by emphasizing the state's capacity of policing Turkey's borders.¹⁴ Further, border governance, especially at the country's Eastern borders, was heavily influenced by the Turkish state's treatment of Kurdish populations, the Kurdish freedom movement, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Since 1984, the PKK has engaged in armed resistance against the Turkish state, which responded with political suppression and aggressive counter-terrorism policies, particularly in regions such as Van.¹⁵

In addition to monitoring more intensely the mountainous border areas where PKK militants were active, the Turkish authorities engaged in extrajudicial killings, massacres of local populations, village evacuations, curfews, forced internal displacement, torture and disappearances.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

The transformation of the Turkish external borders has thus been rooted in a multilayered context of EU border externalisation, accession processes and domestic interests and security concerns. Since 2007, EU funding has reinforced border management capacity and infrastructures through the three successive IPA programmes (IPA I 2007-2013, IPA II 2014-2020, IPA III 2021-2027).¹⁸ EU programmes have supported multiple surveillance and control infrastructures and capabilities such as detention facilities and deportation centres, surveillance systems and equipment and the training of border security personnel.¹⁹

9 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; 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.ph

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

11 Ibid; Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019

12 Aksel and İçduygu 2019; InProvE EEIG (2022) Technical Assistance for the Evaluation of 2014, 2015 and 2016 Turkey Annual Programmes - Border Management, <https://ipa.gov.tr/mali-isbirligi-yayinlari/>

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

14 Ollier, J. (2025): Turkey's Walled Borders: A Multiscalar Approach, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2025.2457610; 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

15 Bozçalı 2024; Augustová et al 2024;

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

17 Genç, D. (2015) An Analysis of Turkey's Bordering Processes: Why and Against Whom?, *Turkish Studies*, 16(4), pp. 527-553

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

While the EU privileged the financial support of organisational capacity, the Turkish state prioritised large-scale physical infrastructures such as the construction of walls, ditches, military outposts, watchtowers and patrol roads at the Syrian and Iranian borders. These were driven by national security considerations and counter-terrorism policies towards the PKK and other groups designated as terrorists, but at the same time, they reinforced capacities and infrastructures aimed at controlling migratory movements.²¹

The Van borderscape

Van's landscapes are characterized by high mountains, wide treeless pasturelands and harsh continental climate with cold winters and dry summers. By its nature, the Van borderscape has provided a certain invisibility to people fleeing Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan and trying to move further west. Deaths were common on this treacherous terrain even before border policing became as violent as it is today. Lake Van - Turkey's largest lake at 3,755 km² - is another characteristic of this borderscape and part of the migrant crossing route.

Historically, the region has been home to a large Kurdish population, whose presence in the region dates back long before the border between Turkey and Iran was consolidated.²² Cross-border movement due to trade relations and kinship has endured despite the introduction of border control regimes in 1937.²³ Today, socioeconomic deprivation in the region is pronounced due to neglect by the state and the ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, which has disrupted economic activities.²⁴ In these conditions, informal cross-border trade, performed by local groups of kaçakçı ('smugglers'), is a significant activity to sustain people's livelihoods.²⁵ This illicit trade includes products that are cheaper in Iran, for instance petrol, tea and sugar, electronics, textiles and agricultural chemicals, as well as drugs.²⁶

While for local communities, smuggling is crucial for survival, the Turkish state and its institutions seek to control it. The Turkish state tends to conflate smuggling with terrorism, thus using the fight against smuggling in the Van region as a means to control the PKK.²⁷ As a consequence of violent border policing, local people have been killed while engaging in cross-border trade.²⁸

19 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 (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; 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

20 Müftüler-Bac 2021

21 Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2024; Müftüler-Bac 2021

22 Genç 2015; Bozçalı 2024; Deniz and Nargül 2025

23 Deniz and Nargül 2025

24 Deniz and Nargül 2025; Augustová et al 2024; Bozçalı 2024; Biner 2018

25 Bozçalı 2024; Genç 2015; Augustová et al 2024; Interview with M. Kaçan

26 Augustová et al 2024

27 Bozçalı 2024; 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

28 Bozçalı 2024; Augustová and Suber 2023

Like the trade of goods and drugs, the facilitation of cross-border movement of people has been deeply embedded in the region, reflecting the need to cross this border towards Europe and the increasingly hostile border control regime that eliminates other options for transit.²⁹ Local kaçakçı facilitate border crossings and assist border crossers in evading state controls in exchange for money.³⁰ Like with the smuggling of goods, facilitating the border crossing of people is deeply embedded within local communities and important to sustain their livelihoods. Both activities require profound knowledge of the landscapes, relationships on either side of the border, as well as a certain cooperation with authorities who, at least informally, tolerate the crossings in exchange for bribes.³¹

Weaponising the natural borderscape

The geographical features, climate and the presence of multiple competing actors mean that control of the Van borderland remains contested.³² The intersection of domestic security imperatives and EU border management policies have driven the militarisation of the Van border, weaponising the natural landscape with digital and physical infrastructures such as such as military outposts, observation towers, surveillance systems, ditches and walls. Border outposts and observation towers have been constructed in the region since the late 2000s, with the aim of enhancing security against Kurdish insurgency in the region and policing the smuggling of goods and drugs.³³ From 2011 onwards, the EU identified the Eastern Turkish border as needing reinforcement to prevent unauthorised migration and began the expansion of surveillance technologies in the region, as well as measures to facilitate technological and human border policing.³⁴

EU-funded projects in the region have included the removal of mines from border areas to facilitate safe conditions for border policing infrastructure;³⁵ supplying Turkish forces with surveillance equipment;³⁶ the construction of a stationary automated surveillance system;³⁷ and implementing and training border police, as well as coast guard units deployed at Lake Van.³⁸ National authorities' main investments around border security in the Van province since 2015 have been channeled towards physical obstacles to movement, with an emphasis on the construction of ditches and walls in the borderlands. In 2023, it was reported that 346 km of ditches had been dug in the Van province.³⁹ Satellite imagery shows up to four rows of ditches in some locations. The construction of walls started in 2021, and by 2025, it covered 204 km of Van's 295 km border with Iran.⁴⁰

29 Augustová et al 2024; Augustová and Suber 2023; Deniz and Doğu 2008; Biner 2018

30 Bozçalı 2024; Augustová and Suber 2023; Biner 2018

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

32 Deniz and Nargül 2025; Bozçalı 2024

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

34 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-ipa_en

35 European Commission 2011

36 European Commission 2016

37 European Commission 2016

38 Aksel and İçduygu 2019; European Commission 2016; European Commission 2022

39 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>

40 Ministry of the Interior (2021) After Ağrı, Another Wall to Van, 10 May, <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/agridan-sonra-bir-duvar-da-vana>

Both the material and digital infrastructures that have emerged at the Van border convey a political message of deterrence to unauthorised crossings, but use different techniques and modes of engaging with the natural environment. Material structures are deliberately combined with naturally occurring environmental features to physically prevent border crossings. This serves to weaponise and make even more inhospitable an already dangerous natural landscape. Rather than aiming to physically deter movement, technological interventions favoured by the EU aim at increasing the capacity to detect it.⁴¹To do so requires removing qualities in the natural landscape that favour unauthorised movement and making it easier for the authorities to access, surveil and control.⁴²Measures such as demining, the construction of patrol roads and the installation of lighting systems serve the same logic of accessibility and rendering the remote, inhospitable landscape more controllable. Both material and digital infrastructures weaponise the landscape to become more forbidding to people on the move, and more accessible to agents of border surveillance and control.



An observation tower, electro-optic tower, and section of the wall, Özalp district. Photo taken in November 2025.

41 See 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

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

43 European Commission 2022



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

While EU documents legitimize the weaponisation of the environment through surveillance technologies by invoking humanitarian rationales of saving lives,⁴³ such measures have arguably made borderlands more dangerous for both people on the move and local residents.

Research and media reporting on the specific environmental effects of new border infrastructures in the Van region are limited. Local environmental advocates have argued that the border structures are damaging to the wider ecosystems of the area.⁴⁴ Most available literature discusses the environmental impacts, such as impacts on river flows, wetlands and biodiversity on Iranian territory.⁴⁵ Ecological changes impact human systems, causing rural residents to lose access to traditional livelihood resources as a result of the decline in water, pasture and biodiversity, which can have economic and social consequences. EU official documents suggest that the effects of the border infrastructure on the environment are largely ignored, or even attempt to legitimize the weaponisation of the environment by presenting them as eco-friendly.⁴⁶ The EU's approach is thus suggestive of greenwashing.

44 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>

45 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-environment2.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 https://jhgr.ut.ac.ir/article_93867_222892d36ea8eb83eb3c7c6ef8165db9.pdf?lang=en

46 European Union 2022

Living in the weaponised natural borderscape: experiences of local communities

The weaponisation of the natural environment for border security and surveillance purposes has had a significant impact on communities along the Van borderline. The proliferation of security infrastructures and policing has disrupted the economic activities of border communities, leading to disenfranchisement, despondency and new forms of displacement. The limiting of cross-border trade, including 'smuggling activities', has denied border villages a core source of income, significantly impacting livelihoods and leading to the collapse of village economies.⁴⁷

“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.”

Livestock rearing and agriculture, the other economic activities that border livelihoods relied on, have been equally affected. The construction of the walls and security infrastructures have meant villagers lost access to pastures traditionally used as grazing areas for animals and for growing animal feed.

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.

“We had pastures from my grandfather's time, now they have become 'forbidden zones.' Even our registered land became a security area.”

Beyond the economic impact on villagers, the loss of land access represents an undermining of land rights and community identities. The weaponisation of the borderscape thus disrupts the relation of border communities with the natural environment, destabilizing a land-based way of life and eroding its symbolic meaning.

The destruction of the livelihoods of border populations has increased poverty and pushed locals - mainly young people - into internal migration for employment.⁴⁸ Participants conveyed that the weaponisation of the borderscape has made the village uninhabitable for young people, with the acceleration of migration of young people representing a loss of hope and future, and collapsing the border villages' social fabric.

⁴⁷ Evrensel (2017) 'Building a wall on the border means poverty and migration', June 18, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/323964/sinira-duvar-orulmesi-yoksulluk-vegoc-demektir>; ANF NEWS 2017

⁴⁸ Interview with Mahmut Kaçan

[...] 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.”

Reinforced surveillance and control infrastructures and practices at the Van border have also resulted in a heightened security environment for locals. Security forces use the presence of migrants to assert pressure on locals through aggressive policing and interrogations.

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...

These practices serve additionally as an internal control mechanism over the local Kurdish population, and can be understood as an extension of the historical ethnic and political conflict in the region, which has seen Kurdish people’s movement criminalized, villages militarized and their lives subjected to a constant cycle of suspicion, surveillance and pressure.⁴⁹ All respondents, however, expressed a sense of humanitarian responsibility to help migrants who are freezing, injured or hungry.

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.

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

Interviews with people who have crossed the Turkey-Iran border attest to the difficulty of the journey. Natural features and human interventions which weaponise the natural landscape both contribute to the difficulty of the crossing. Participants’ accounts recount how the mountainous terrain, uneven, rocky ground and extreme cold made the crossing particularly difficult and dangerous.

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.”

The weaponisation of the borderscape through human-made border infrastructures increases the hostility of the crossings. Several accounts attest to infrastructures posing physical obstacles to their journey, with walls, ditches and barbed wire causing injuries among border crossers. Accounts also reveal their mental impact, causing fear and anxiety, often fear of death. Surveillance technologies are less frequently mentioned, but the physical presence of soldiers on patrol were perceived as a more significant threat to detection.

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.

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.

Participants' accounts illustrate how people on the move bypass border infrastructures and surveillance systems. In many cases, smugglers provided ladders or cut wire fences, and many testimonies mentioned people helping each other, for example, to climb out of ditches. While interviewees were distrustful of smugglers, their assistance was obviously crucial in overcoming physical obstacles.

Participants experienced multiple forms of violence and trauma during their crossing. While none reported members of their group dying during the crossing, several recounted encountering dead bodies.

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.

Deaths from the cold are one of the main causes of death at the Van border, reflecting the hostile conditions of the natural environment.⁵⁰ Other causes of death include road accidents, gunfire by soldiers and police, drowning by falling into a flooded ditch, and further inland in shipwrecks in Lake Van.⁵¹ While the Van border was already deadly before recent surveillance and border developments, new infrastructures have displaced crossings to riskier routes, increasing the likelihood of deaths.⁵² A further issue is the difficulty of identifying bodies, with unidentified bodies buried in a special section of a cemetery in Van.

Injuries sustained or witnessed by the participants during the journey were widely reported. Accounts report the amputation of toes due to frostbite, fractures, broken bones and injuries to their limbs, with elderly people and children impacted in particular. Participants reported additional hardships during their journey, such as experiencing extreme hunger and thirst, which, when combined with the cold and the arduous journey, led to exhaustion and illness.

50 Deniz and Nargül 2025; 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>

51 Arti Gerçek 2023; 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. & Alkhalidj, C. (2022)

52 ECRE 2025; Dikici 2025; Interview with Mahmut Kaca.



Graves of unidentified people on the move in Van city. Photos taken in May 2025.

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. Many people were injured while jumping from the wall. Some had broken legs, including mine. We were very thirsty. We were all hungry, but we had no other choice.... Hunger, thirst, violence... everything was difficult.

While injuries and harm done to border crossers are to an extent caused by the landscape and weather conditions, they are exacerbated by the need to negotiate human-made infrastructures such as walls and ditches and avoid detection when crossing. The physical demands of the crossing and multiple threats to safety cause acute mental distress, with some respondents reporting experiencing suicidal thoughts during the crossing.

The research also highlights that women border crossers experience additional or differing risks and harms compared to men. While women in interviews for this study were hesitant to discuss certain topics due to perceived feelings of shame, they reported a lack of access to menstrual hygiene products, additional difficulties and risks in crossing due to pregnancy, and concern for the safety of their children.

“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. 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...”

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

In addition, while women respondents did not report experiencing sexual violence during the journey, many were aware of its threat and likelihood in such a physically and symbolically male-dominated environment. Men, conversely, articulated concerns from the perspective of a more masculine protector role.

Participants also discussed difficulties faced by children, the elderly and disabled people. These include increased vulnerability to illness due to weather conditions, inability to overcome physical obstacles and navigate challenging terrain, inability to move at the fast pace required to evade detection, and having to sedate children and babies to prevent them from crying and risking detection. Many testimonies mentioned supporting each other through these difficulties.

“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.”

“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.”

These perspectives show how crossings are shaped by intersecting identities that limit the ability to move, thus reiterating the masculine, ableist dimensions of border regimes that produce risky crossings.

Another form of violence that people on the move experience, pushbacks, appears to have intensified as a result of the weaponisation of the landscape. Informal pushbacks have been a systemic practice at the Iran-Turkey border: people apprehended by border guards are detained in military outposts, denied access to lawyers or asylum procedures and pushed back across the border at night.⁵³

During pushbacks, people are routinely subjected to physical violence, theft, and the threat or use of lethal force by border authorities, such as the firing of live ammunition into the air or at groups attempting to cross borders. Serious injuries and deaths, including of children, have been documented.⁵⁴ 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 increases capacities for detection and apprehension, which can facilitate practices of pushbacks.⁵⁵

⁵³ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (2025) AIDA Country Report on Türkiye: Update on 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/>

⁵⁴ Amnesty International 2022; Interview with M. Kaçan

Conclusion

Border control and surveillance infrastructures have rendered the already harsh natural environment of the Van border more hostile for people on the move and a site of disruption for local Kurdish communities. The hardening of the Van borderscape reflects two converging drivers. On the one hand, the EU has externalised its border control to Turkey using its accession candidacy as a mechanism to transfer European border management policies and fund surveillance infrastructure. On the other hand, Turkey's own domestic security interests, in particular, toward the suppression of Kurdish social, political and military activity, have driven militarisation of the borderland. 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.

Specifically, on the ground, 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. It produced a multilayered structure of physical, technological and human components that 'teamed up' with more-than-human elements like the rough terrain and extreme weather conditions. This weaponisation did not prevent unauthorised crossings nor did it 'deter' people on the move, contrary to pronouncements of national authorities and the wishes of the EU. It did, however, produce conditions that result in even riskier, violent and harm-inducing crossings: deaths due to extreme cold, threats from shootings, physical injuries, hunger, thirst, and psychological stress, with disproportionate impact on women, children, and people with disabilities. Against the purpose of these infrastructures, people on the move develop strategies to overcome the weaponisation of the landscape, often with the paid assistance of local facilitators whose role should be seen in a nuanced manner. The report also confirms the ongoing trend of routine pushbacks, carried out without individual assessment or access to legal procedures, something that is part of a broader pattern across the EU's externalised border regime in which deterrence is prioritised over protection.

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 wall and other infrastructures have undermined two key sources of income, including animal husbandry (through difficulties accessing pastureland) and the smuggling of goods (through 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. The intensification of policing local communities feeds back to the longstanding patterns of socioeconomic deprivation and political oppression of the Kurdish communities in the region.

Overall, the experiences of people on the move and the local Kurdish residents clearly have commonalities in terms of their experience of the brunt of the border regime, and future research should continue to pay close attention to what happens "from below". It should engage more holistically with the lived experiences, political views and analyses of those most impacted.



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