

Syria

Administering a borderland at war: Bab al-Hawa in Syria

Abdulkader Kurabi and Jerome Drevon

Abdulkader Kurabi is a researcher and news editor from north-west Syria. He is a graduate from al-Azhar University in Egypt and the University of Damascus and he is currently completing a degree in Istanbul University. He has covered the Syrian conflict for several Arab newspapers from Istanbul as well as Syria.

Jerome Drevon is a researcher at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies of Geneva. He is interested in the comparative organisational construction of non-state armed groups, especially in Egypt and Syria.

Borders and borderlands can be pivotal to the resilience of armed insurgencies – as supply routes, as safe zones for refugees, and as hubs for local war economies. They can be used to sustain the war effort and provide vital resources for armed groups and civilians alike. Armed conflicts transform borderlands from peripheral regions into focal points for war efforts, particularly for local groups vying to secure power and resources. Soon after the start of Syrian war, armed opposition groups allied with local residents in the north-west of the country began to 'liberate' large and predominantly rural areas from the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The liberation in 2012 of Bab al-Hawa, a key international border-crossing between Syria and Turkey, marked a turning point for the war in the region.

Bab al-Hawa is strategically significant. The surrounding borderlands have long epitomised hostile relations between Syria and Turkey: from disputes over demarcation following decolonisation, to opposing Cold War alliances – Turkey with NATO and the West, and Syria with the Soviet Union – to disagreement over water access or the status of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, an armed opposition group. A rapprochement between the two countries in the 2000s, which resulted in a free trade agreement and a free visa policy, broke down after the 2011 Syrian uprising. Turkey cut ties with the Syrian regime and lent support to the armed opposition.

The liberation of Bab al-Hawa removed the official administration on the Syrian side of the border, replacing it with loosely organised armed opposition forces. Based on interviews conducted by the authors in Turkey and Syria, this article looks at how the renewed institutionalisation of border control came about. Establishing a controlled, secure space in the absence of formal state institutions required the formalisation of the trans-border flow of people and goods, the unification of armed groups, and the re-establishment of an internationally recognised border. This has been contingent to a large extent on the evolution of the Syrian armed insurgency. Early efforts

struggled to accommodate the divergent interests of the multiple Syrian armed opposition groups active in the area. Change came when larger and more powerful armed groups gained military ascendancy, facilitating the establishment of a functioning border administration. The borderland's institutionalisation has paralleled its increased strategic importance, but at some long-term cost to local civilian populations as the influence of local civil society has waned while the link between military and political power has endured.

“Based on interviews conducted by the authors in Turkey and Syria, this article looks at how the renewed institutionalisation of border control came about.”

An unsettling liberation

The liberation of the border crossing and surrounding areas unsettled the borderland, empowering an array of non-state armed groups. The Syrian military were forced to withdraw from Bab al-Hawa in July 2012 under military pressure from local Syrian armed opposition groups led by *Liwa Dir'a al-Thawra* (the Brigade of the Protection of the Revolution), *Kata'ib al-Faruq* (the Faruq Brigades), and *Majliss Shura al-Mujahideen* (the Advisory Council of the Mujahideen). The first two groups were mainstream opposition armed groups that were particularly strong at the beginning of the uprising. They later divided and joined other movements. The third group was a more radical Salafist jihadist group created by the prominent Absi family, which later joined Islamic State.

Illustration (opposite): Bab Al-Hawa border crossing between Syria and Turkey.
© Jon Sack

TURKEY

OĞULPINAR

CILVEGÖZÜ

DEMILITARISED ZONE

BAB AL-HAWA

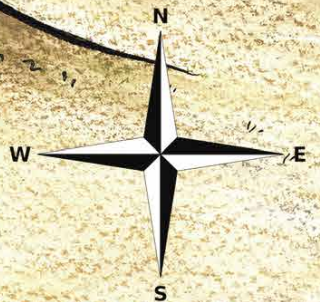
ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDINGS WHERE ARMED GROUPS INITIALLY SET UP THEIR HEADQUARTERS

LOCATION OF SUICIDE BOMBINGS IN 2013 AND 2014

HOSPITAL

LOCATIONS WHERE REFUGEE CAMPS WERE INITIALLY SET UP BEFORE BEING MOVED OUT

SYRIA



Map 1: Idlib and Aleppo Governorates, Syria bordering Turkey.



Map 2: Regional location of the border between Syria and Turkey.



There was no sign of organised management of the border for the next two years. Movement of goods and people continued but was unsupervised, which was destabilising for the local economy and civil society. The security vacuum was filled by loosely structured armed factions. While *Majliss Shura al-Mujahideen* remained for three months, others such as *Ahrar al-Sham* (the Free Men of the Levant: AS), and *Jaysh al-Islam* (the Army of Islam) established longer-term military bases. Groups also exploited new economic opportunities arising from the chaos in these early days: larger armed opposition groups set up checkpoints to administer the cross-border flows of people and goods, collecting illicit duties on an arbitrary basis; while smaller groups (including families and gangs) engaged in other activities such as smuggling people and goods (from medicine to weapons).

The state of the border was also dependent on Turkey's reactions to evolving events: after initially closing the border for a few weeks, the Turkish authorities decided to allow the export of basic goods to Syria without customs regulations and the entry of Syrian private citizens in order to provide relief to the local population. Over time, they reduced the flow of incoming refugees as security deteriorated.

The liberation of the border crossing altered the local political economy of the borderland in different ways. Two refugee camps were set up as internal refugees started to converge on the area. A hospital was also established in Bab al-Hawa in 2013 under the auspices of the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM – an international coalition of humanitarian, non-governmental and medical organisations). Recognising its importance to the area, armed factions largely respected and protected the hospital. The hospital was eventually isolated from the border crossing's buildings and an independent road was created to provide a direct access. Local communities also benefited from growing job opportunities in existing and new institutions; for example, the expertise of former border control employees was required for the development and implementation of new customs regulations.

“ Some local communities sought greater returns in recognition of their proximity to the border and their contribution to its liberation.”

Some local communities in the surrounding areas of Sarmada, al-Dana and Atmeh sought greater returns in recognition of their proximity to the border and their contribution to its liberation. These included higher financial returns, increased representation in the local administration, better job opportunities and additional support for local councils. Dissatisfaction with armed groups from outside the region was particularly prominent. Members of the al-Shanabira tribe from Hama, for example, set up a roadblock controlling traffic at the local refugee camp. Smugglers also traded goods looted from factories in the Syrian borderlands and trafficked people across the border.

The creation of a civilian administration

Bab al-Hawa border crossing is the main commercial point of entry for northern Syria, and any unpredictable closure has ramifications for the region. The eventual creation of a civilian administration at Bab al-Hawa was an important step in mitigating the impact of competing armed groups in the region, and facilitating trans-border traffic and humanitarian access. It was primarily driven by the needs of Syrian civilians affected by the war, as well as to secure Turkish interests.

A representative of AS claimed in a personal interview that the group initiated a process to establish a functioning border administration, though acknowledged that it had lacked the strategic vision, material means or experience to fully oversee an international border crossing. It made attempts in mid-2013 to recruit regime defectors with relevant technical capacity in immigration, passport control and customs services.

Early efforts to regularise the border administration ultimately failed. The presence of multiple armed opposition groups with competing interests and diverging political goals undermined consensus and blocked progress. Many armed groups benefited from the prevailing disorder, exploiting it to extract illicit taxes. Others feared that increased revenues from better border regulation could in fact increase competition and violence among them and so harm the unity of the Syrian opposition as a whole, and some were concerned it would set a precedent for armed actors in other liberated areas to legitimise the imposition of local taxes from the population. Other groups simply saw more military and economic advantage in focusing their efforts on liberating areas still under regime control.

The evolution of the armed opposition to the Syrian regime ultimately changed the situation in the borderlands. In November 2013, prominent Islamist factions positioned at the border – AS, *Suqur al-Sham*, *Jaysh al-Islam* and *Liwa al-Haq* – joined with others to form the Islamic Front. Their unity was decisive in facilitating broader cooperation with other new alliances, notably the *Hazm* Movement and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (alliances that formed around the same time, partially grew out of the Faruq Brigades, and consisted of groups fighting loosely under the banner of the Free Syrian Army) and in June 2014 an agreement was signed to form a civil administration.

An executive board was established to manage the civil administration headed by Nashat al-Bardisi (Abu Haitham), a consensual figure whom all the groups could accept, alongside representatives from other significant armed groups. Its responsibilities covered most pre-2011 portfolios, including legal affairs, health, human resources, public relations, financial governance and technical affairs. Defectors from the Syrian regime who had formerly worked in customs, immigration, passport control, police and border management were recruited to set up the new administration. The Turkish government – recognising the need to reduce security tensions while maintaining economic gains – was also a key driver in the process, pressuring armed opposition groups to establish a civilian administration with technical expertise to organise the flow of goods and people.

After two months' preparation, the new administration began its work in August 2014 in coordination with local councils and the chamber of commerce. Its main objectives were to facilitate communication with local officials, ease trade, provide humanitarian relief, regulate cross-border transit and preserve security. Infrastructure damaged during the liberation of Bab al-Hawa was restored, stolen computers and data were retrieved, and new software established to read security codes and scan passports. New laws and regulations were introduced for immigration, transit authorisation and customs, police and technical support, with reforms overseen by regime defectors and technocrats. The administration launched a website to deliver services to Syrian citizens, including demands for medical treatment in Turkey or transit travel requests through Turkey. Staff needed to have both the right professional qualifications and the approval of armed groups.

Institutionalisation of Bab al-Hawa had an immediate effect on security: the unification of large armed groups in north-west Syria meant smaller factions could be expelled. Armed groups not directly associated with the administration were ordered to remove their military bases. Refugee camps were similarly transferred outside the border-crossing area and disarmed. This stabilised security and directly benefited local communities, who no longer had to pay bribes or negotiate with multiple armed groups. Revenue was allocated for refurbishing looted infrastructure and for the salaries of local and factional employees. Some of the budget was also spent on the law court in the nearby town of Binnish and on providing basic services in neighbouring regions. The remainder was divided between the armed groups that remained in charge of the border.

“ Some, including AS, quickly saw opportunities for economic and political gains for their own group from securing control of administering customs.”

Military versus civilian priorities

Armed opposition groups continued to disagree on how the border crossing would operate and who was in charge. Some, including AS, quickly saw opportunities for economic and political gains for their own group from securing control of administering customs. Relinquishing control over the area would indeed have been costly. Interviews with customs officials suggested that financial returns increased from approximately \$205,000 before the formation of the civil administration to a value of between \$600,000 and \$1.5 million. Others aspired to create an autonomous civilian administration that would ultimately be independent from armed groups and linked to the development of opposition civilian governance nationally, such as by supporting the local councils that had spread throughout the areas liberated after the 2011 uprising. These groups also believed that revenue from the border crossing could contribute to the reconstruction of those areas most deeply affected by the war.

Although the local population directly benefited from institutionalisation of the border crossing, the new environment also constrained the role of civil society over time. While locals initially had some success in independently promoting their interests, the presence of increasingly unified and powerful insurgent groups combined with Turkey's renewed importance saw their influence curtailed. These two factors ultimately shaped the evolution of the borderland.

Major armed opposition groups ensured their influence in the civil administration through the nomination of civilian technocrats affiliated to them to sensitive positions. The administration strived to assert its independence and separate civil and military issues but failed to successfully resist the pressure exerted by the groups. Despite armed groups' declared support for the independence of the Bab al-Hawa administration, security and military commanders obstructed its work. The administration sought to hire qualified defectors from the regime but many armed groups insisted that only individuals accountable to them could be hired. Lack of transparency, absence of trust between the groups stationed at the border, and their attempts to exploit internal divisions to their advantage impeded the work of the local administration of Bab al-Hawa.

Meanwhile, the evolution of the military landscape continued to dictate political outcomes in the region. In late 2014, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, a Salafist jihadist group that emerged from the Islamic State in Iraq before declaring allegiance to *al-Qaeda*, clashed with the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and the *Hazm* Movement in the north of the country, forcing these alliances to dissolve in early 2015. Then, in March 2015, *Suqur al-Sham* merged into AS (the Islamic Front alliance being by this time more or less defunct). Together these developments effectively allowed AS to control the administration of the border, providing it with a substantial source of income.

Under AS control, some of the border administration's budget was still used to deliver basic services to local areas. AS leaders claim that the remainder was spent on military operations and ammunition, but there was little oversight in place. In an interview, Kinan Nahhas (Abu Azzam al-Ansari), a senior civilian manager of the border crossing and head of AS's political bureau, reflected on his experience in Bab al-Hawa. He had sought a professional civilian institution working for the Syrian revolution, with financial returns serving the revolution and the areas affected by the war. But he lamented the heavy handedness of security checkpoints in the border crossing, managed by military men from his own group. He criticised their misunderstanding of the concept of statehood and their obsession with the short-term interests of their group, which explained their handling of security issues and excessive micro-management of border flows.

Exclusive control over the border became a major strategic objective for armed groups in competition with AS. As the front lines of the war stabilised and the armed opposition found it harder to liberate new geographic areas, the priorities of the insurgency were altered. The political and economic importance of Bab al-Hawa was reinforced as resources for the armed opposition in liberated areas receded, the spoils from liberating new areas dried up, and foreign support diminished.



Men stand outside a taxi on the Syrian side of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing between Turkey and Syria in January 2013. © Joël Carillet/iStock

The region subsequently became a prominent political asset to be used in regional and international negotiations.

AS's monopoly lasted until July 2017, when the region was taken by *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (the Levant Liberation Committee: HTS), a grouping formed in January that year and led by *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*, the former *Jabhat al-Nusra*. Under pressure from Turkey, HTS did not make substantial changes to the border crossing and its administration. Given international reticence about dealing with a group once affiliated to *al-Qaeda*, HTS leaders have preferred to reap the political and financial benefits stemming from control without imposing unnecessary change.

Conclusion: stabilisation for whom?

The transformation of the borderland between north-west Syria and Turkey has paralleled the evolution of the armed conflict in Syria. Regardless of the consensus around the need to stabilise the border, the presence of numerous armed groups has impeded substantial reforms. The establishment of the administration was significantly facilitated by the unification of large armed groups in north-west Syria into more powerful coalitions that were subsequently able to subsume or expel smaller factions and so dominate the battlefield. Military pre-eminence dictated the evolution of the border administration as well as governance in the borderland region more broadly.

The establishment of a functioning administration at Bab al-Hawa was a significant achievement that helped bring stability to the border and the surrounding borderlands. Local communities directly benefited from improved security, the development of new institutions providing services to local populations and refugees, and more abundant economic resources.

The unification of the armed insurgency in the borderland facilitated the institutionalisation of Bab al-Hawa. Armed groups' initiatives to unite or the willingness of some factions to eliminate their competitors gradually reduced the number of armed groups in the area. The successive monopolies of AS and HTS transformed the area by imposing a single authority on the Syrian side of the border. Yet, opposition armed groups had no real strategic vision and continued to oppose the development of an independent border crossing not directly under their authority. Civilian gains decreased over time as the civil administration was not able to resist pressure by increasingly powerful armed groups. The control of a strategic asset by a small number of actors has limited the empowerment of local communities as they gradually lost channels to secure their interests.

“ Bab al-Hawa has gradually transformed into a political as much as an economic resource to be exploited and leveraged regionally and internationally.”

Bab al-Hawa has gradually transformed into a political as much as an economic resource to be exploited and leveraged regionally and internationally. But the monopoly control by only one group (first AS and then HTS) has also reduced the role of local civil society, which can no longer exploit internal divisions to further their interests. Internal and international insurrectionary dynamics have ultimately prevailed over local developments. Control over the border has been used by prominent armed groups to broker favourable outcomes in negotiations over the future of the region.