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### Following Turkish Border Practices

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*Beste İşleyen*

### Introduction

My ongoing research focusses on everyday policing of irregular migration in Turkey at European Union (EU) borders. Started in 2015 when border crossings from Turkey into the EU reached a peak, this project was driven by an empirical puzzle, which informed the methodological choices that I have made at later stages of research. Despite the rich scholarship on the topic of irregular migration and asylum in Turkey, particularly within the context of Turkey–EU relations, the daily governance of Turkish borders was and is still largely underexplored. This constitutes an empirical gap in our knowledge about the mundane and concrete ways in which borders are governed in Turkey to manage unauthorized border crossings from its territories into the EU. To address this void in the literature, I adopted a practice approach by primarily engaging with those debates which examine border security “as practice” (Côté-Boucher, Infantino, and Salter 2014). Having given way to novel and empirically grounded research in critical security studies, the practice approach has provided me with the conceptual toolbox to ‘zoom into’ border security instead of staying at the level of policy and discourse, which previous works on Turkey, irregular migration and borders have largely been limited to.

Having identified my research object and key concepts based on the practice approach, I was confronted with the inevitable question of where to start with data collection. A practice-oriented research on border security requires an inductive approach and fieldwork research as it is through participant observation and in-depth interviews with security professionals that border practices can be best studied. Yet, as I have explained above, at the time when I started with the project there was little academic knowledge on everyday practices of border security in Turkey. This represented a challenge, which I tried to overcome by firstly mapping the field of border security through the analysis of written documents. The main objective was to discern who and what to look at, and where to look. Prior to the fieldwork journey, I spent a couple of months going through the Turkish national legislation, policy documents, official statements and interviews and the media, collected information on the websites of relevant ministries and state departments with the official mandate to govern borders and migration and gathered statistical information from state agencies on human mobility dynamics and their management at Turkey’s western borders. The timing of the research played a key role at this particular stage of devising my research design. The rise in the number of irregular border crossings in the summer of 2015 and the first months of 2016 resulted in a proliferation of official documents produced by the Turkish state and state institutions in the form of statements, orders, circulars and regulations to address the situation on the ground. This helped me identify – in very general terms – the key actors/institutions and sites of focus

while I sought to avoid predetermined and clear-cut empirical boundaries before the fieldwork research that would follow. This mapping exercise went beyond the national level to incorporate discourses, policies and institutions of the EU. This is due to the fact that Turkey is a candidate country aiming for full EU membership, and migration and border governance is a key area of legal, institutional and policy-oriented reforms towards Turkey's adoption of the EU *acquis*. I therefore also analyzed documents produced by either party or jointly on matters relating to Turkey–EU cooperation in irregular migration for the last two decades. What became clear in this mapping exercise was that the field of Turkish border security was expanding in terms of actors, institutions, technologies and instruments.

The next step was to concretize fieldwork plans and gain access to the field. Throughout the project, I made several fieldwork trips to Turkey where I was able to conduct around 50 formal interviews with state actors and had many formal and informal exchanges with non-state actors who were and are active on the ground. In line with the research object, my fieldwork was limited to Turkey's western borders; namely, the land border with Bulgaria and the land and sea borders with Greece. My fieldwork experience affirms the importance of researcher identity in terms of both access and empirical findings, particularly the notion of 'honour' as a novel way of framing humanitarian border policing by Turkish officials (İşleyen, 2018b). I was born and raised in Turkey, which presents several advantages for my researcher identity, one of which is unquestionably language skills. Turkish border officials rarely speak a language other than Turkish, and my being a native speaker was crucial, not only to gain access to the field but also to enable the interviewees to engage in extensive narratives which a non-Turkish speaking researcher, dependent on an interpreter, might not easily have achieved because of the more formal nature of exchanges created by language barriers.

Another advantage of my researcher identity was my knowledge of Turkish national sensitivities when it comes to questions about state borders and territorial integrity. Borders in Turkey are still heavily militarized, and although those with the EU display a more civilian form of border management, a large segment of Turkish society associates borders with territorial indivisibility, national independence and strong statehood. Such a militarized understanding of national borders has historical roots in the territorial partition of the Ottoman Empire, whereby Europe was, and is still, believed to pursue a hostile agenda to divide Turkey (Aydın-Düzgüt 2018). Aware of the dominant discourse surrounding the understanding of Turkish state borders, I had some crucial questions to address: what is the best way to communicate my research with my (potential) respondents without risking to antagonize them and thus blocking my access to the field? How will I prepare the ground for relaxed, open and thorough responses while also keeping my necessary distance as researcher? My strategy has so far been to explain to each interviewee, clearly and honestly, the scope and objectives of my research. I explicitly stated that I am interested in daily practices of managing irregular migration towards the EU rather than an exploration of the logics, techniques and technologies of border security tied to a classical geopolitics of war and survival. This strategy worked out well to gain trust and paved the way for "thick descriptions of events and processes" through qualitative interviews as primary sources of data collection (Howarth 2005: 338).

Participant observation during fieldwork offered unique opportunities for *following practices* at multiple sites. I was given permission to observe the control of entries and departures at border crossing points in Edirne, including passport checks by the police and the inspection of vehicles by customs officers while I was able to ask questions and request further elaboration on certain moments of addressing the flows. My fieldwork stay in Turkey

witnessed the development of novel ways of carrying out border security. As a response to human mobility dynamics in 2015 and 2016, Turkey has experimented with a set of practices that were either there – yet used for purposes other than irregular migration management – or invented and put into effect in order to manage this particular population movement. Two of these practices were the introduction of checkpoints and the travel document to administer non-citizen circulation within the country based on pre-emptive risk perceptions (İşleyen, 2018a). Public and media information on the two practices was extremely restricted, and I realized their importance in irregular migration control through my physical presence on site. In addition to asking my interviewees to describe the reasoning behind the checkpoints and the travel document, I was formally allowed to follow checkpoint practices deployed at the entry and across the border cities of Edirne and İzmir. The objective was to understand the risk perceptions underpinning the stopping and checking of particular vehicles and people rather than others. These moments of direct engagement proved “the importance and uniqueness of fieldwork research” (Côté-Boucher, Infantino, & Salter 2014: 197) for gathering empirical material which would not have been accessible – at least to such a degree – through other means of data collection, such as document and policy analysis and interviews.

The methodological significance of my fieldwork expands to include a reconsideration of and further reflections on conceptual choices. The empirical data that I gathered through qualitative interviews and participation observation pushed my conceptual boundaries as to whom to count as border security actors in Turkey’s management of irregular migration heading towards the EU. While the practice approach argues for a deterritorialized understanding of border security, context matters in the particular assemblage of actors, practices and sites, thereby reaffirming the novelty of fieldwork research. In following Turkish border practices, I found that this security field was much broader than I was initially planning to study, and this invited me to think over my conceptual framework, which carried with it key implications also for my research design. When setting up my first interviews, my target group were those border officials responsible for controlling flows at the sovereign dividing lines. In the light of my findings on checkpoints and the travel document, the conceptual boundaries relating to border security actors widened to include the national police and the gendarmerie, who are away from territorial borders. In fact, emerging practices of border security in Turkey have gradually transformed the traditional duties of these state actors around specific risk perceptions and risk technologies of irregular migration governance. New border actors entered the stage of Turkish border security.

This empirical observation indicated the need for utilizing additional conceptual tools to analyze those practices which do not correspond to territorial logics. The outcome has been engagement with debates in political geography, which offer fruitful and original avenues for researching the dispersed and deterritorialized ways in which borders materialize by not only allowing mobility to happen in selective ways through categorization and hierarchization, but also through the production of new spaces of containment, selection and filtering. In that way, I have joined existing academic attempts to link the practice approach in critical security studies to the scholarly field of political geography, particularly the strand of critical border studies. The revisiting of my conceptual toolbox has not required a re-examination of my primary research puzzle – since it was already very broad – but has guided me to ask a couple of fresh questions exploring the dislocation of the border and related appearance of new spaces of governance with impacts for larger spatial configurations beyond the national level (İşleyen 2018a).

Actual research is rarely a smooth and linear process but is instead characterized by interruptions, failures and errors, which every researcher needs to acknowledge. These not only

oblige the researcher to make important decisions and adjustments. But they might also lead to unexpected moments of observation and reflection, as I experienced with the practice of checkpoints during my fieldwork (İşleyen 2018a). Regardless of precautionary action as discussed above by reference to national sensibilities, there were external factors impacting access to research materials and the field. One specific incident is the failed military coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016. The events unfolding thereafter, such as the arrest of thousands of civil servants convicted of being involved and/or assisting the coup attempt, had the immediate effect of the cancellation or postponement of my confirmed interview appointments with state officials as well as delays in getting replies to my inquires. Though my access to the field and materials eased after a couple of weeks, the experience challenges an understanding of empirical research based on fieldwork as a straightforward and unproblematic practice.

## Conclusion

Following border practices is not an easy undertaking. This is especially the case when border issues are extremely politically sensitive in the country of study and public availability of data is highly limited. Similar to the meticulous labour invested in each fieldwork experience, my research on Turkish border practices in the governance of irregular migration involved many steps that were carefully crafted yet have not been immune to modifications and even failures through the execution of the fieldwork. My physical presence on the ground was preceded by the discerning of the security field spread over several months, a plethora of email exchanges, the careful setting up of interviews and making arrangements for travel. No matter how accurately a researcher plans everything, the field has its own specificities and dynamism, which considerably shape the project in terms of content, scope and duration. Long hours of waiting in ministries for interviewees to arrive at their offices and several days spent at a border post to gain trust and receive the green light for field access are no exceptions in fieldwork. These painstaking efforts, perseverance and hard labour are integral to ‘following security practices’ and definitely worth the effort to unpack what would otherwise have remained largely invisible.

## Suggested reading

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