

## **Kurds as “Borderlanders” since the Lausanne Treaty: Opportunities and Constraints**

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### **Abstract**

As a result of the successive military victories of Mustafa Kemal and his followers in Anatolia and the Bilad al-Sham, Britain and France had to give up their imperial designs in Anatolia, dismiss the validity of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, and search for a political compromise with an independent Turkey. By October 1921, Turkey and France signed the Ankara Agreement, whereby both sides agreed that the boundary between Turkey and Syria would follow in large part the tracks of the Baghdad railway. In 1923, the more favourable treaty of Lausanne replaced that of Sèvres. Even though Turkey was unable to regain the ex-Ottoman province of Mosul, the Ankara government secured significant economic advantages. Furthermore, after the crushing of a Kurdish-led rebellion in Eastern Anatolia in 1925, the Kemalist reform movement launched an ambitious modernization programme seeking to transform the Turkish society. Meanwhile, in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine French and British colonial powers exploited social, ethnic and religious cleavages in order to weaken local resistance—mainly Arab and Kurdish—and consolidate the authority of their respective High Commissioners. Subsequent boundary treaties came to bring a diplomatic closure to an otherwise contested geographical space.

Taken as a whole, however, this top-down historical narrative fails to grasp the complexity and fluidity of the interwar context in the Middle East. Adopting a borderland perspective, the paper showcases that for many Kurds inhabiting the borderlands laying between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq this was a period where the indeterminacy of borders and thus the nationality of borderlanders offered opportunities to play states off against the others. Seemingly, because boundaries were not physical barriers, itinerancy rather than fixity became an important feature in these borderlands. Finally, borderlanders were not just passive observers of diplomatic negotiations on boundaries; through their practices—violence, cross-border mobility—they also contribute to shape new borders and ultimately new nation-states in the region.

### **Bio**

Jordi Tejel is a Research Professor in contemporary History at the University of Neuchâtel. His main research interests are nationalism, minorities, borders, and state formation processes in the Middle East. Since 2017, he is leading a research project (BORDER) funded by the European Research Council (ERC) on the borderlands of the interwar Middle East. His books and edited volumes include *Syria's Kurds. History, Politics and Society* (Routledge, 2009), *Writing the History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges* (World Scientific Press, 2012), *La question kurde: Passé et présent* (L'Harmattan, 2014), and *Les Kurdes en 100 questions* (Tallandier, 2018). He has published in journals such as *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, *Iranian Studies*, *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Middle East Studies*, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, and *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. He is currently preparing a monograph on the Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi borderlands in the interwar period.