

PERIPHERAL VISION

Views from the Borderlands

SEMI-ANNUAL BULLETIN
FALL 2019



BORDERLAND ECONOMIES AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN SUDAN AND SOUTH SUDAN

Major political changes have taken place in Sudan and South Sudan in the past 12 months. While these have resulted in political transformations at the centre (particularly in Sudan), the events have been greatly influenced by cross-border and trans-national dynamics, and in South Sudan by the economies of neighbouring states.

SUDAN'S TRANSITION: POWER AND THE PERIPHERIES

When President Omar al-Bashir was removed by Sudan's military April 2019, after sustained street protests, it seemed that the country's generals would simply recreate Bashir's regime with an alternative leadership. This solution would require them to concede a limited amount of power to the civilian opposition, which had forced their hand in removing the president through a sustained protest movement.

To an extent this is what has happened.¹ However, a third and distinct political force—the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—with its origin in the country's peripheries, has emerged, headed by the Darfuri militia-leader, Mohammed Hamdan Daglo 'Himeidti'. Himeidti's RSF, which made its name fighting rebels in Darfur and South Kordofan as proxies for the Sudan government, has now become the major power-broker in the political transition.

Himeidti's power comes from two sources: First, the RSF is the most effective, motivated and well-paid fighting force in the country, and during the transition became the major security actor in Khartoum. Unlike the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), its members were prepared to carry out serious violence against protestors, including the break-up of the protest camp outside the military headquarters in June, which saw the deaths of at least 100 civilians.

Second, through its control of the cross-border transnational economy, particularly gold mining—the subject of a new X-border project—and people smuggling, Himeidti has become extremely wealthy, which has enabled him to mobilise and control his paramilitary force. It has also enabled him to become a serious regional security actor—in Yemen and, latterly, Libya—with further financial rewards.

Himeidti's new-found power is testament to the resources of Sudan's cross-border and trans-national externalised political economy, which have enabled a Darfuri militia leader to reach the pinnacle of power in Khartoum—a position normally reserved for Sudan's traditional Nile valley elites. While Sudan's peripheries are usually seen as marginalised, violent and poverty-stricken places, they are also sources of wealth and power, which Himeidti has skillfully exploited.

SOUTH SUDAN'S X-BORDER PEACE

The same cross-border transnational political economy provides the structural incentives for South Sudan's 'revitalized' peace deal (R-ARCSS) signed in September 2018 between the government of Salva Kiir, and the umbrella opposition movement—the SPLA-IO—led by former vice president, Riek Machar. The fiscal benefits that underpin the formal political deal, which itself remains unstable and with key elements unimplemented, reflect the substantive involvement of South Sudan's neighbours in its economy, Sudan and Uganda in particular.

For Khartoum, the motivation to broker the South Sudan peace was its desire to see the restart of oil exports (via Sudan) from the country's borderland states, which would help address its crippling economic crisis. This economic crisis remains an important factor determining the shape of Sudan's post-Bashir future. Both Sudan and Uganda have been affected by the chronic conflict in South Sudan, with the Ugandan economy in particular relying on exporting its labour and grain surpluses into South Sudan, where the population has shifted to purchasing most of their food in a cash-driven economy.

These transnational macro-economic relationships have a direct effect on dynamics and developments unfolding in the peripheral borderland regions. The results are the emergence of an insecure population, forming a ready-made low-wage labour force, including as [militarised labour recruited in to government militias](#).² The control of these precarious populations, for both economic and political purposes, lies at the heart of the machinations of Juba elites over their latest power-sharing arrangement.

The work carried out through the X-Border Local Research Network by RVI in the South Sudan borderlands with Sudan, particularly the former Northern Bahr al-Ghazal region, shows how the [transition from a subsistence to market-oriented economy](#) has fuelled a militarised political economy—a captive and repressive market—that has enriched a few, but impoverished the many.³ The borderlands between South Sudan and Sudan, far from being inconsequential, marginalised places, lie at the centre of a regional economic system that includes the cross-border movement of oil, grain and labour and will influence the shape of the political settlement in Juba and Khartoum.



Sudan's deputy head of the Transitional Military Council, General Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, shakes hands with protest leader Ahmed Rabie after signing the constitutional declaration in Khartoum on August 4, 2019. Source: Getty Images



1. For more information on Sudan's political transition, see: Magdi el-Gizouli, Alden Young, Margie Buchanan-Smith and Naomi Pendle, 'Sudan's Spring: Causes and Consequences', Rift Valley Institute: London, May 2019. Available from www.riftvalley.net
2. Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, 'Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labor in South Sudan's Borderlands', Rift Valley Institute: London, June 2019. Available from www.riftvalley.net
3. Edward Thomas, 'Moving Towards Markets: Cash Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan', Rift Valley Institute: London, June 2019. Available from www.riftvalley.net

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- Algeria's marginalised periphery
- Prioritising the border in the Afghanistan peace process
- Tribal relations amongst Yemen's civil war

PERIPHERAL VISION PROVIDES INSIGHT AND COMMENTARY FROM THE X-BORDER LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK.
SEE PG3 FOR MORE INFO.



WHY AFGHANISTAN'S BORDERS ARE CENTRAL TO LASTING PEACE

In *Games Without Rules*, author Tamim Ansary argues that national politics have long had little relevance for rural Afghans. The central state still barely extends beyond the main roads and towns, and rural communities continue to rely primarily on local customs and leadership for governance, justice and security.¹ Bringing rural Afghanistan under centralized rule has been the defining challenge of Afghanistan's modern history, argues Ansary. He debunks the colonial myth of an 'unconquerable' Afghanistan: it was invaded many times by Persians, Greeks, Turks, the British Empire or the Soviet Union. For invading powers and national rulers alike, the real stumbling block was not conquering Afghanistan but governing it.

Afghan kings ruled by forging alliances with local strongmen. However, even the influence of tribal leaders waned quickly as one left the towns for the mountains or the desert. Ansary describes rural Afghanistan as a universe of 'village-republics', self-reliant social units where daily life remained unaltered by events in the capital. The wars of the past decades have changed this. National and global politics have left deep scars in the social fabric of rural Afghanistan: bombs and mines turned fertile valleys into deserts; millions left their villages for the cities, Pakistan or Iran. But to a large extent, these wars illustrated once again the resistance of rural Afghanistan to central rule.

Afghanistan's borderlands are an extreme illustration of that governance challenge. Border residents tend to have stronger economic, political and cultural ties with the people living across the border than with Kabul. And yet these areas play a central role in the national security and economy. Border security is inseparable from the larger war effort, as [insurgents take advantage of porous borders](#) and tribal connections to seek refuge in neighbouring countries.² The borders are also vital to the Afghan economy. Customs duties are the most important single source of government revenue. Despite [significant improvements in customs collection](#) since 2015, considerable leakage persists because of insecurity, entrenched corruption and insufficient processing points along thousands of miles of permeable borders.³ Security dynamics and cross-border trade are interrelated in complex ways.

In border regions, a vast share of the local population makes a living from legal trade, smuggling or activities that belong in a grey area in between. [A recent study](#) commissioned by The Asia Foundation under the X-Border Local Research Network looked into livelihoods and trade in the districts of Spin Boldak in Kandahar province and Muhammd Dara in Nangarhar province. These are the districts where Wesh/Chaman and Torkham, two of the busiest official crossing points between Afghanistan and Pakistan, are located.⁴ A representative survey in these two districts found that two thirds of respondents had crossed the border at least once in the past year, and nearly one in five was conducting business with Pakistan residents other than family members. A large majority reported that their community (71 percent) or their household (56 percent) depended on such trade for their economic welfare; 47 percent reported depending on it for their own professional occupation.

From the perspective of local residents, the border is an artificial line that divides families but also provides economic opportunity. Although they acknowledge the linkages between porous borders and insecurity, they do not see lax controls as a threat to their own safety. Instead, they regard restrictions to cross-border movement—such as the temporary closing of border crossings by Pakistani authorities—as a direct threat to their livelihoods.⁵

Despite recent setbacks in the talks with the Taliban, there is still hope that efforts will continue to reach an agreement among Afghans on a political process to end the war. If these efforts are successful, key governance issues that have been put aside by the war are likely to reclaim their place in the public debate. What role for the central state in border regions? How to protect border areas against insurgents opposed to the peace process, and improve customs duties collection, without hurting local livelihoods and fueling local grievances?

Fully securing Afghan borders is not achievable. They will likely remain porous in the best of times. However, research indicates that even a temporary tightening of border controls at key crossing sites has significant impacts on the livelihoods of local residents. Efforts at improving the rule of law in borderlands will need to take this into account and be accompanied by efforts to durably improve development and livelihoods opportunities, lest they feed into a new cycle of frustration toward Kabul and the peace process.

SPIN BOLDAK



1. Tamim Ansary (2012). *Games Without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan*. Public Affairs, New York.
2. Borhan Osman and Fazal Muzhary (2017). *Jihadi Commuters: How the Taliban Cross the Durand Line*. Afghan Analysts Network, Kabul. Available from: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/jihadi-commuters-how-the-taliban-cross-the-durand-line/>
3. Bill Byrd and M. Khalid Payenda (2017). *Afghan Government Revenue Continues to Grow: A Bright Spot in a Weak Economy*. Afghan Analysts Network. Available from: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghan-government-revenue-continues-to-grow-a-bright-spot-in-a-weak-economy/>
4. Torkham links Kabul to Peshawar via the Khyber Pass. Wesh/Chaman connects Kandahar to Quetta.
5. Since 2016, Pakistani authorities enforce stricter controls at official border crossings. Incoming Afghans must present a passport and visa. In addition, Pakistan is fencing the frontier: as of January 2019, approximately 900 km had been completed. Pakistan has on occasion shut down border crossings for days or weeks at a stretch.

Header image: A portion of the border fence being constructed by Pakistan in North Waziristan. Source: Reuters

“ Fully securing Afghan borders is not achievable. They will likely remain porous in the best of times. ”

DISTANCE AND MARGINALIZATION: SPATIAL DISPARITIES IN RURAL ALGERIA

In February 2019, millions of Algerians began taking to the streets to protest against the decision of the ailing 82-year-old then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to run for a fifth term after two decades in office. While Bouteflika agreed to step down, since then people from all over the country have continued to demonstrate [peacefully](#) to ask for an [overhaul](#) of the political system.

While many causes justified the protests against Bouteflika and the system, those from Algeria's geographical periphery would have been particularly affected by a continuation of the status quo. Regional inequalities are great and populations from the interior and border areas have been suffering because of them.

Communities living in marginalized areas, such as those near the border with Tunisia, are watching the situation closely. In the last decade, the Algerian authorities have made significant progress in advancing social and human development. Yet despite the [National Policy For Spatial Planning And Sustainable Development](#) (2000–2015), geographical imbalances in development remain a significant challenge.

A majority of Algeria's wilayas, or provinces—namely 36 out of 48—are situated in the north, between the coast and the high plateau. Over 70 per cent of the population lives in the north, while the remaining twelve wilayas located in the south, which together make up 89 percent of the country's area, are populated by less than 13 percent of the population.

This uneven geographical distribution is due mainly to the concentration of economic activities in urban areas. In 2015, no less than some [719,000 companies](#), out of 1.6 million in Algeria, were situated in the coastal cities. In other words, 46 per cent of companies in Algeria are clustered in an area that does not exceed four percent of the national territory.

In some border regions, the lack of economic opportunities, and high [unemployment](#), means that local communities are left with no alternative but to engage in cross-border smuggling. The eastern towns of M'Daourouche and Al-Ouenza are a case in point. Despite impressive Roman ruins in M'Daourouche that could act as the cornerstone of a local tourism industry and iron ore which feeds the large steel plant of ArcelorMittal Annaba, the communities do not benefit from the economic potential provided by either of these sites.

That is why many people engage in smuggling with Tunisia. Most are youths in search of a means of securing their livelihood, though even working people, including civil servants, engage in smuggling to supplement their low salaries. Other border regions such as Tébessa, Bil al-Ater, Sefsaf, and Oum Ali are also well-known as smuggling regions.

While the border regions may be far from the center of activities in Algeria, political or economic, their populations' concerns of are at the heart of what Algerians are protesting against. By stepping down, Bouteflika may have given his critics a temporary victory, but there remains much to be done to bring greater development to Algeria's marginalized regions.

Under the X-Border project, CMEC resident scholar [Dalia Ghanem](#) conducted fieldwork along the Algeria-Tunisia border. She traveled about 600 km from Algiers to reach the eastern towns of El-Ouenza and M'Daourouche and conducted ethnographic interviews with local inhabitants, officials as well as smugglers, where she witnessed firsthand the rising geographical disparities that are affecting these border areas.



1. See: Dalia Ghanem, 'A Protest Made in Algeria', Carnegie Middle East Center: Beirut, April 2019; and Dalia Ghanem, 'Bouteflika out': Why Algerians are demanding change', Carnegie Middle East Center: Beirut, March 2019. Essay can be accessed via www.carnegie-mec.org
2. Développement des Territoires en algérie : des disparités criantes. [Territorial development in Algeria: glaring disparities], March 9, 2015.

ABOUT PERIPHERAL VISION: POLITICAL TRANSITIONS AT THE MARGINS

In Asia, the Middle East and Africa, conflict and instability endure in contested border regions where local tensions connect with regional and global dynamics. While reports commonly cover conflict as it takes place in capitals and major cities, we risk overlooking the effects that dynamics at a nation's borders might have on domestic politics, or the effects of political ruptures on restive peripheries.

PERIPHERAL VISION: *Views from the Borderlands* sheds light on how political, security and socio-economic developments affect the people living in contested borderlands and, reversely, how border dynamics shape change and transition at the national level. Published by the **X-Border Local Research Network**—a partnership between The Asia Foundation, the Carnegie Middle East Center, the Rift Valley Institute, and their local partners—it draws on recent research and analysis produced by the project to interpret current events from the perspective of border regions.

In this premier issue, we apply a border lens to some of the major political transitions underway in recent months. We take a look at dynamics surrounding developments in Sudan, South Sudan, and Algeria, and their importance amongst a new wave of transformation across northern Africa, a region reeling from a decade of political turmoil. We also feature a field dispatch from the border governorate of Mahra in Yemen, where tribal relations contend with war dynamics and the increasing intervention of foreign powers. And finally, we discuss the importance of Afghanistan's borders in the shadows of a peace deal between the United States and the Taliban.

PERIPHERAL VISION is published twice a year, as a timely update of dynamics on the ground, while also highlighting the latest news from the **X-Border Local Research Network's** activities.



RECENT PUBLICATIONS

THE ASIA FOUNDATION

- ▶ [Trade and Livelihoods in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands](#)
- ▶ [Trade in the Sulu Archipelago: informal economies amidst maritime security challenges](#)

RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

- ▶ [Mobility, Trust and Exchange: Somalia and Yemen's Cross-border Maritime Economy](#)
- ▶ [Moving towards markets: cash, commodification and conflict in South Sudan](#)
- ▶ [Monetized livelihoods and militarized labour in South Sudan's borderlands: cross-border trade, movement and survival in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal](#)

CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER

- ▶ [On Marib: "Marib, Yemen: Rising Above the Conflict"](#)
- ▶ [The regional implications of Bukamal/Qaim border region in Iraq: "Much More Than a Border"](#)
- ▶ [The erosion of the Iraqi central government's control over its borders: "Boundary Disputes"](#)
- ▶ [Aswan, an Egyptian Border Region in Waiting Mode](#)



“WILL TRIBAL CUSTOMS SAVE YEMEN’S MAHRA GOVERNORATE?”

Since November 2017, tensions have risen in Yemen’s border governorate of Mahra. On the one side are the military forces of Saudi Arabia and the local authorities that they support; on the other, Oman-backed border tribes opposed to the Saudi military deployment.

The Saudis have deployed to Mahra for several reasons. They regard the territory as a passage for weapons being sent by Iran, through Oman, to Houthi forces in Yemen. They also each have other interests. Saudi Arabia appears to want to build a pipeline from the kingdom to the Arabian Sea, in order to export its oil and circumvent the Strait of Hormuz, which is vulnerable to attack from Iran.

The tensions have led to clashes in some parts of the governorate. However, it is remarkable that despite increasing militarization among the parties, the violence has been relatively contained until now, with only four people killed. Regardless, the situation appears to be escalating.

For the time being, Saudi Arabia is controlling Mahra, using its military forces, certain tribal elites, and the local authorities, including a governor who was appointed at the request of the Saudis. The tribes opposed to the Saudis, in turn, are using their tribal connections to mobilize the Mahri community against the Saudi-led forces by organizing protests and marches, while also benefiting from the support of Oman. In effect, Mahra Governorate has become the location of a proxy struggle among nearby countries.

Given the weakness of Yemen’s central government, the tribes in Mahra, whether pro-Saudi or anti-Saudi, remain an important factor in the standoff. The Mahri community is spread across the borders of Yemen, Oman, and Saudi Arabia (and even beyond), so that Oman and Saudi Arabia have used the communities in their own territory to widen their influence over the governorate in Yemen.

Both neighbours have invested in Mahra as part of this competition for influence, altering its previously marginalized status and implementing dozens of development projects to improve their image in the governorate. Moreover, there is increasing recruitment among local tribes, and many tribesmen now receive salaries and remuneration from the contending states. Also, because of its proximity to the border community in a relatively peaceful part of Yemen, several markets have opened in Mahra, especially near the border zone. This has pushed many Yemenis to move to Mahra in search of a better livelihood.

The future will be shaped significantly by tribal traditions and relations. To some extent all the Mahri tribes adhere to similar tribal customs, which will help to overcome divisions—this has helped them in the past when the communities have found themselves buffeted by regional tensions. It may also be a rare hopeful light in a governorate that has suddenly taken on an uneasy proxy role in Yemen’s ongoing civil war.

Under the X-Border project, Carnegie Middle East Center (CMEC)’s Yemen scholar [Ahmed Nagi](#) conducted fieldwork to further examine the social, cultural, economic, and security dynamics along the Yemen-Oman border. He visited several governorates, including Marib, Mahra and the island of Socotra. He published the first of a series of photo essays on his recent trip to Yemen—in [this case on the city and governorate of Marib](#).¹



1. Ahmed Nagi, 'Marib, Yemen: Rising Above the Conflict', Carnegie Middle East Center: Beirut, July 2019. Essay can be accessed via www.carnegie-mec.org

Header image: Entrance to the city of Ghaydah, capital of al Mahra governorate, Yemen. Source: Ahmed Nagi

“ *The future will be shaped significantly by tribal traditions and relations.* ”

The **X-Border Local Research Network** is a partnership between The Asia Foundation, the Carnegie Middle East Center and the Rift Valley Institute. With support from UK aid from the UK government, the three organizations work with local research partners to improve our understanding of political, economic and social dynamics in conflict-affected borderlands, and the flows of people, goods and ideas that connect them. The project supports more effective policymaking and development programming, leveraging research to advocate for peaceful change.



Rift Valley Institute
Taasisi ya Bonde Kuu
معهد الاخوة العظيم
Machadka Dooxada Rift
የገንጠብ ገበያ ጥናት ተቋም
Instituto do Vale do Rift
东非大裂谷研究院
Institut de la Vallée du Rift

