



## **SPECIAL SECTION DISPLACED CONFLICT**

### **Introduction**

#### **Layers of Spatial Rupture among Syrians in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Syria**

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■ **ABSTRACT:** How is conflict reshaped by and through the displacement of millions of people into neighboring countries? Does conflict follow displaced people and how does this spatial rupture reconfigure conflict itself? Based on ethnographies of Syrians in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Syria, this introduction to a special section on displaced conflict argues that displacement, generating a spatial rupture between people and the state, layers conflict by embedding state level competitions over power in intimate relationships. Moreover, displacement inscribes the altered stakes of everyday social life into state level politics. In displacement, the Syrian conflict re-emerges as a layer of decision about, for instance, where and how to bury the deceased, just as shifting forms of solidarity between Syrians and Lebanese becomes one layer of what the conflict is all about. As such, comprehending the conflict and the transformations it instigates in people's lifeworlds requires attention to the layering induced by spatial rupture.

■ **KEYWORDS:** conflict, displacement, layer, rupture, Syria

Taking Syria as a starting point, this special section re-examines the intersections of political and human movements and unfolds the intricate ways in which conflict follows people into displacement and is reconfigured in the process. Through ethnographies of Syrians displaced to Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and inside Syria, the articles unravel the ways in which revolutionary subjectivities, sectarian imaginaries, intimacies of political reasoning, and authoritarian power relations survive and are transformed through the spatial ruptures between people and state that conflict generates. The contributions show that with over half of its population displaced since the start of the 2011 uprising, Syria represents a poignant case to generate new anthropological insights into the complexities of political and human movements in the midst and aftermaths of mass political violence.

Exploring the nexus between conflict and displacement, the articles in this special section make a strong case for analyzing conflict through the shifting layers of spatial rupture. We argue



that as novel forms of distance between people and state emerge, conflict comes to inhabit different layers of people's lifeworlds. Through this layering, the meaning of the conflict is renegotiated: from marriage dynamics to migratory decisions, from individual to family choices, the conflict plays a key role in the everyday lives of people displaced by it and, as it plays out in these mundane arenas, the stakes in the conflict itself are reconfigured.

## Thinking through Syria

After four decades of authoritarian rule at the hands of the Baath party and the Assad family, thousands of Syrians went to the streets to demand change in March 2011. In a country where political dissent is punished by long-term imprisonment, torture, and forced disappearance, many were surprised by this popular movement, including Syrians themselves (Pearlman 2016; see also Atassi 2012). The Assad regime met the initially peaceful protests with high levels of violence, which prompted some of the protestors to take weapons, and this led to an armed conflict within Syria. In July 2011, the Free Syrian Army was founded by army defectors and civilians with the explicit aim to protect protestors. In the following months and years, different armed factions from Kurdish groups (e.g., YPG) to groups identifying themselves in various and incompatible ways as Islamic (e.g., Ahrar Al-Sham, Jaesh Al-Islam, al-Nosra, Daesh/ISIS) have taken part in battles.

The Syrian 'conflict', which has been described in multiple and sometimes antithetical ways by its actors and commentators—being called a revolution (*thawra*), an uprising (*intifada*), a war (*harb*), a civil war (*harb ahlieh*), or a conspiracy (*mua'mara*)—quickly turned to a proxy war with the intervention of foreign militias (from Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq) and armies (Russian, Turkish, American). This conflict has divided Syrians themselves around political and confessional identities. Some have defined themselves as revolutionaries (Al-Khalili 2023; Ferreri *this issue*; Proudfoot 2019) others as neutral or 'middle-ground' (Aubin-Boltanski and Kallas 2022; Holst 2020), and others as supporting the Assad government/regime (Baeza and Pinto 2016; Bandak 2014). In this introduction we use the term 'conflict' (*syrā'a*) to describe the Syrian situation, for it seems to be the term that best encompasses the variety of viewpoints expressed by the contributors' interlocutors; ranging from revolutionary over pro-YPG to neutral. Moreover, the term 'conflict' has the benefit of stressing the contentious situation at stake in Syria.

As the conflict has driven over five million Syrians into displacement in bordering countries, the question of how Syrian politics travels with Syrians and inflects their lives in displacement is pertinent to issues of refugee conditions, as well as to questions of the afterlives of contentious politics. Moreover, political activity among Syrians displaced to neighboring countries is directly relevant to political developments inside Syria. In displacement, various groups align themselves with neighboring states to continue their efforts toward changes at home, while sender states attempt to control their populations abroad (see Betts and Jones 2016; Salehyan 2009). The Syrian opposition has, for instance, set up shop right across the border in neighboring Turkey, while the Syrian regime has used its considerable influence and connections with regional allies in Iran and Lebanon to continue to exert influence on its populace both at home and abroad (see Abi-Yaghi and Calabrese 2018; Frangieh 2014).

In a region such as the Middle East, where borders are notoriously both an inheritance from colonial imposition and continuously spurious, investigating political configurations and transformations as cross-border phenomena seems pertinent in times of peace as well as war. Violent conflict, however, makes for a particularly poignant moment in which to undertake such an investigation, as conflict intensifies both political and human movement across borders (see

Chatty 2018). Moreover, the conflict in Syria allows us to investigate these questions because it has brought political actions and perspectives out into the open; during the uprising as well as in its aftermath, Syrians have publicly voiced their opinions through marches and comments on both social and traditional media. In addition, the radical character of events in Syria and of changes in individual lives forces Syrians to reflect on political developments. Syrians do not necessarily take a stand, but they do have to adjust their lives and, in the process, take political contestation into account (see Schielke 2017). Political reflections are therefore pushed to the fore and can be accessed more easily because our interlocutors articulate them more readily—even if such reflections and activities are inconclusive (see Armbrust 2017; Haugbolle and Bandak 2017).

Adopting an anthropological analysis of mass displacement in the midst and in the aftermaths of conflict, this special section offers insights into the subtle and crude ways in which contentious political events in Syria lodge themselves into family life, friendships, and everyday communal life among the displaced. Simultaneously, this anthropological positioning, which entails long-term participant observation and thus in-depth knowledge of everyday life, allows us to unfold the myriad ways in which mundane life in refuge reconfigures political activity and organization directed at the personal, the communal, and the national level. Investigating displacements of contentious Syrian politics, we look beyond the territorial nation-state to grasp the ways in which specific relations of power are produced and transformed across borders.

The special section thus asks whether and how state power is confined by national borders or necessarily stronger within them than outside them (e.g., Betts and Jones 2016; Quirk and Vigneswaran 2015). In answer to these questions, the contributions excavate the ways in which the conflict spatially disrupts the relationship between state and people (whether these people are displaced to neighboring countries or continue to live inside Syria) and in turn reconfigure politics. The articles show that the home state can be displaced (out of reach and missing in action) for people still inside the country during conflict (Kastrinou et al. *this issue*), just as it can live on as a key factor in local politics in neighboring countries (Ferreri *this issue*) or as a strong image of provision and order for those displaced outside of national borders (Holst *this issue*). However, the fact of a spatial rupture in whatever form also pushes the conflict into different layers of life. What we add to the fields of political anthropology and the anthropology of forced migrations is thus a look at the ways in which a spatial distance between state and people (whether through displacement of people across international borders or displacement of state institutions so as to render them out of reach for people within national borders) allow conflicts to play out more forcefully in layers of life that are not strictly political and how in the process stakes in the conflict are reconfigured.

The long-term and in-depth engagements with displaced Syrians in various locations that inform the articles highlight the multifaceted ways in which people and politics move and transform through displacement.

## Spatial Ruptures in the Aftermath of Mass Political Violence

Processes of change have long been of key interest in political anthropology, in particular in the French Marxist tradition (see Copans 1975; Fassin 2008).<sup>1</sup> Dynamics of change have also been the focus of the Manchester school, which “makes process the centre of their methodological innovations, developing the concept of situational analysis, which concentrated on events or moments of rupture” (Holbraad et al. 2019, 3).

Moreover, events and ruptures have become quite central to anthropological thinking in recent years (see Holbraad et al 2019). In post-Soviet literature special attention has been given to sudden and largely unexpected change (see Nazpary 2002; Pedersen and Højer 2008; Yurchak 2006). Likewise, there has been a surge of anthropological writing on the Arab revolutions of the early 2010s and the ongoing conflicts that have emerged in their wake (in Yemen, Libya, Syria) constituting a new subfield—the “anthropology of revolution” (e.g., Abu Lughod 2012; Armbrust 2019; Cherstich et al. 2020; Elyachar and Winegar 2012; Ghannam 2012, 2014; Haugbolle and Bandak 2017; Schielke 2012, 2015).

Yet, revolutions have widely been understood as *moments* of rupture and as temporal events rather than as spatial phenomena or processes.<sup>2</sup> In this context ‘revolutions’ seems to rather designate a clear break or before/after in history (Koselleck 1985): they open historical eras and constitute clear ruptures in the course of history (Arendt 1965). Whether ruptures are seen as something highly desired (a positive change), as unwelcome disruption (negative dissolution) or as both, they constitute a breaking point as well as a reconstitution (Holbraad et. al. 2019). Here ruptures and revolutions are understood as ‘events’ in the Pauline tradition (Badiou 2003; Humphrey 2008) making the analytical focus rest on *temporal* shifts. In addition, in the anthropological literature, displacement in the aftermath of political turmoil is often treated as a temporal and historical phenomenon, despite some notable exceptions (e.g., Bryant 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2012) and the nexus between revolution and displacement is widely overlooked by ethnographies of either migration or revolution, although it is the topic of a few excellent studies (e.g., Kublitz 2016; Peteet 1991; Wilson 2016).

Looking at displacement in the aftermath of political turmoil in the Syrian context, this special section contributes to political anthropology and anthropology of forced migrations by analyzing the ways in which forced displacement in the aftermath of mass political violence can be conceptualized as a spatial rupture—a disruption in and of space—that has transformational effects on politics itself. The articles assembled show that the displacement of people runs parallel to displacements of the home state as the state reorganizes to encounter and accommodate the demands of active conflict and populations mobilizing from abroad (see Ferreri *this issue*; Kastrinou et al. *this issue*). Such displacements in turn bring about ruptures in the relations between people and state that reposition both in relation to each other.

The articles in this special section contribute to such insights by showing that spatial ruptures, which vary depending on the particular character of the border that comes between people and state, also displace politics itself from the national to the intimate and from the collective to the personal. As the state becomes distant or close in novel ways, politics take new shapes and forms appearing in new domains and at new scales. Politics can therefore be located in or oriented toward marriage arrangements, friendships, burial rites, gender, and social norms. In this vein, Veronica Ferreri argues in her article that the porous border between Lebanon and Syria allows the Syrian state to interfere with Syrian political activity in Lebanon. This shifts the focus of politics from anti-regime activity to friendships and social interaction with the Lebanese host community. By contrast, Lana Askari’s contribution demonstrates that the lesser significance of the Iraqi border for the Syrian regime transforms politics to an issue of personal striving for and work toward a “return” to Syria among her Syrian Kurdish interlocutors.

Anthropologists have of course long argued for an understanding of the political as part of the everyday. Since such an understanding of the political gives it the very wide definition of “the rules, norms and symbolic as well as material conditions that govern life,” a clear distinction between the social and the political cannot be upheld (e.g., Fassin 2008; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Spencer 2007; Winegar 2012). However, when we study the political as it unfolds within the territory of sovereign nation-states, state institutions almost invariably play a key part in analyses

(see Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Gupta 1995; Mitchell 1991). What the study of politics in displacement allows us to access is politics that is, to a large extent, removed from the state apparatus. Politics is then no longer unavoidably centered on encounters or interactions between self-perceived citizens and those perceived as agents of the state. Instead, spatial rupture pushes politics much more squarely into the intimate and personal relations of everyday life. What is key to this point is that the state still exists (as a set of institutions and as imaginary) and that it is still a focus of people's attention. However, as the state is mainly encountered through media or in mediated form, relations between state and people take different shapes. What the special section shows then is not a view of politics in the total absence of a state (as in the politics of pre-state tribal societies for instance), but politics in the context of spatial ruptures between state and people.

We argue that this transformation through spatial rupture is an accentuation of the ways in which politics is always (also) an issue of personal and social relations. In addition, the contributions to this special section show that spatial rupture also pushes politics into personal and social configurations that are specific to the condition of displacement. We unfold this point and its implications for the reconfigurations of politics and political selves in the next section.

### Layerings of Conflict and the Shifting Effects of Displacement

Following politics and conflict into their everyday and intimate forms necessitates a discussion of the nature of the relationship between politics that unfold at various scales (or levels) of social life. While it is certainly true that conflict and the narratives propagated by the key contestants in them are renegotiated, challenged, or reinforced at the scale of everyday life (Schröder and Schmidt 2001), we argue that conflicts are also internally diverse in the sense that at different scales their stakes—what the conflict is all about—vary. This is not a reference to the ways in which various people engage in violent conflict for differing reasons—personal social mobility (Hage 2003; Vigh 2010) or ideological fervor (Peteet 2005; Proudfoot 2019). This rather speaks to the ways in which a singular political issue can become imbued with many meanings as it travels through the halls of government, schools, public places like cafes, and private homes (e.g., Gallagher 2012; Holst *this issue*; Natanel 2013). Whereas others have looked at the ways in which political action gains meaning through and takes on various afterlives in intimate relations (see Amarasuriya et al. 2020; Wilson 2019; Winegar 2012), the contributions to this special section show that as a conflict plays out at various scales of political and social life in displacement; it is the conflict itself that takes on various forms of neighborhood relations, friendship, or family decisions.

Proposing a conceptualization of such diverging forms as *layers* of the conflict, we draw on but simultaneously want to move beyond the concept of scales, which has been productively proliferating within anthropology in past years (e.g., Eriksen 2016; Højer et al. 2017; O'Connor 2020). To argue that conflict plays out on various scales of social and political life entails a perspective on society that differentiates between the “politics proper” (Tuğal 2009: 428) of government offices and local level institutions, as well as makes a distinction between these institutional levels and various forms of everyday life. This perspective sees scale as a matter of size and level.

Thinking with and through scale therefore simultaneously entails a notion of qualitative difference. Differentiating between politics at the state level and in the everyday involves a sense that these are qualitatively different phenomena (e.g., Shryock 2012; Tuğal 2009). In a bid to think change through the concept of scale, Lars Højer et al. (2017) introduce the notion of

‘escalation’ as a concept to grasp how a change in scale (as an indication of level or quantity) will also produce a qualitative change in the situation or phenomenon. To exemplify their point, they analyze the so-called Danish cartoon crisis in which a daily newspaper published cartoons of the prophet Mohammad in the midst of anti-Muslim debate in parliament and society. They argue that the event transformed itself into a different issue as it shifted scale from debate within Muslim communities to debate in Danish media and among politicians and then again to action by foreign ambassadors in Denmark—and as the sheer number of news articles on the issue exploded.

Here we draw on this conceptualization of escalation to highlight how *scalation*, whether *e-* or *de-*, changes the conflict itself, its stakes, and issues. However, we argue that rather than seeing these different forms primarily as a “change of change” itself (Højer et al. 2017: 3)—that is, a change in the qualitative measurement used to grasp a quantitative change—it is productive to see them as layers of the conflict that co-exist and mutually inflect one another. In her contribution, Ferreri argues that, as Syrian revolutionaries are displaced to Lebanon, solidarity brings Lebanese and Syrians together in revolutionary activity. As this kind of active solidarity is halted by Lebanese authorities, political solidarity is disrupted by hesitant fearfulness but then re-emerges as caring relationships. Moreover, the contribution by Maria Kastrinou, Salam Said, Rawad Jarboub, and Steven Emery shows that when the conflict radically reorients regime priorities and displaces the state from local neighborhoods inside Syria (Jaramana and Golan), everyday life is transformed as the roles and functions of state institutions fall to other actors. This in turn transforms people’s relationship to the state and therefore the significance of said state as well as their perspectives on the conflict.

Thinking with these insights, we highlight how various layers of the conflict are both constitutive and mutually incorporating. This refers to the ways in which the Syrian conflict (and the reactions to it by various political actors in Lebanon) is present as a significant undercurrent of the everyday social interactions between Lebanese and Syrians so as to make it a layer of Syrian-Lebanese relationships. Simultaneously, the everyday neighborhood activities of Syrians in Jaramana and Golan become layers of what the state is as well as what the stakes in the conflict are. While scale indicates separate levels or quantities, *layer* thus speaks to the ways in which various scales are concomitantly present in given social configurations.

Hence, although layering is a part of politics in all circumstances, we argue that layering is a particularly apt concept through which to investigate politics in contexts of spatial rupture. First, spatial rupture calls for a focus on layering as it displaces people from the state and the state from people and therefore necessitates a move away from a singular focus on interactions between state representatives and people to examine the broader role of the state in people’s lives (and vice versa). Second, spatial rupture between people and state pushes politics into different layers in various parts of social life, just as it brings certain layers to the fore while relegating others to the corner.

The contributions to this special section show that such pushes and shifts come about through varying processes. In some cases, interlocutors engage in, what one might refer to as, “formulation” (Lifton 1991: 367) in reference to a process of creative re-imagining (see Hirsch 2019) in which events are dealt with in a way that re-establish still existing lifeworlds as significant. For instance, Holst in her contribution argues that as the Syrian state recedes somewhat from people’s lives in displacement in Turkey and Lebanon, the conflict is formulated in terms of family decisions and roles, rather than in reference to the political future of Syria and Syrians more broadly. This entails that the conflict embeds itself in layers of family life and the meaning of the conflict, also at the level of contests over state power, emerges as an issue of family above all else.

In other cases, conflict embeds itself in different layers of social life as an effect of its impact on structural conditions in neighboring countries as well as on opportunities for shaping one's own life. For instance, Askari's contribution outlines how the changing luck on the battlefield transplants itself into the lives of those displaced who hope to return home and leads to an ongoing balancing act of holding open a variety of futures. As one aspect of this balancing act, the question of where and how to bury the dead becomes layered with the shifting alliances between various actors in the Syrian conflict.

Such reconfigurations of the conflict through layering reposition people politically, alter political selves, and transform the issues at stake for people even in the contest over state power. Politics in displacement therefore encompasses far more than mobilization toward conflict as it plays out as competition over state power in one's home country. In displacement, politics emerges as local organizing, ways of relating to host state populations, negotiations over the implications of certain social roles, and decisions about burials or marriages. As these layers of the conflict emerge or come more clearly into light in displacement, what the conflict for power in Syria is all about, what the displaced Syrians we encounter in this special section believe they and others are fighting for inside Syria, simultaneously undergoes various changes and reconsiderations.

Ultimately, thinking of politics in displacement and displaced politics through the concepts of spatial rupture and layers should not remain specific to the Syrian context but is of wider analytical and theoretical interest as it can help to fruitfully grasp the aftermaths of political turmoil elsewhere.

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## NOTES

1. It has, however, been famously argued that anthropology is a discipline that has traditionally focused on continuity rather than rupture (Robbins 2007), using analytical language and conceptual frameworks that privilege continuity and stability over fracture and change (Robbins 2007; see Humphrey 2008; Worlsey 1991).
2. Although there have been readings of Tahrir square as a heterotopic space (see Ghannam 2016; Mittermaier 2014).

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