



Beyond Syria's war economy: Trade, migration and state formation across Eurasia

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Abstract

This article aims to challenge the methodological nationalism implicit in some writing on the Syrian conflict, by putting post-2011 transformations of Syrian commerce and mobilities in the context of wider Eurasian networks, histories, and geographies. The transformations of Syrian commerce and mobility which have occurred since 2011 are often studied under the rubrics of the war economy and forced migration. But the effect of these frames, which focus on the spectacular and immediate, is often to isolate these phenomena from the wider geographical contexts and histories of circulation which have also shaped them. This article seeks to bring these contexts into focus by exploring the activities, mobilities and networks of transnational Syrian traders who have traveled to and resided in the Chinese city of Yiwu over the past two decades. While these individuals are relatively few in number, they are significant because they enable us to see how Eurasian connections continue to shape border and mobility regimes and projects of state formation in the region.

Keywords

Eurasia, migration, state formation, Syria, trade, war economy

Introduction: questioning the scale of the war economy

Much recent social scientific scholarship on the Syrian conflict has analyzed its effects under the rubric of the war economy (Abboud, 2016; Gobat & Kostial, 2016; Tokmajyan, 2016; Turkmani, 2015; Turkmani, Ali, Kaldor, & Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2015; Yazigi, 2014). At some level, this category makes intuitive sense, given the severity of the suffering that armed conflict and upheaval have visited on so many in the region. Yet its focus on the spectacular and immediate also risks restricting our understanding of historical and geographical contexts within which conflict-related forms of mobility and economy have emerged. The war economy is studied as an exceptional state of affairs that is largely confined within the borders of the Syrian polity. Scholars have documented the emergence of illicit and predatory economic practices within Syria, as sieges, checkpoints, looting, and kidnapping have provided certain social actors who control the means of coercion with opportunities for enrichment. While these economic transformations are undoubtedly significant, the paradigm of the war economy locates them

within the framework of a Syrian theater and its disintegrating state. This reproduces the assumptions of methodological nationalism, obscuring the ways in which commercial transformations and activities in Syria are also embedded in wider Asian and Eurasian contexts. The frame of the “war economy”—as Green (2014) and Low (2014) have argued of the category of “the Middle East”—cuts the region off from the wider geography of which it is a part. The related focus on forced migration (Bahcekapili & Buket, 2015; El-Abed, 2014; David, Taylor, & Murphy, 2014; Hanafi, 2014; Parkinson & Behrouzan, 2015; Tumen, 2016) similarly makes it harder to recognize the ways in which patterns of Syrian mobility post 2011 have also been shaped by less spectacular events and histories of circulation.

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This article seeks to challenge such geographical and historical scales by exploring the activities, mobilities, and networks of Syrian traders who over the past two decades (1998-2018) have visited or resided in the city of Yiwu in China's southeastern Zhejiang province. Over this period, Yiwu has become an important wholesale hub supplying low-grade commodities to international traders. Its Futian market houses some 70,000 booths which serve as wholesale outlets for Chinese manufacturers of small household items, ranging from toothbrushes and stationery to tools and kitchenware. Along with the nearby Huangyuan clothes market which houses around 5,000 outlets, Futian makes Yiwu a significant node in the global trade in low-grade commodities: around 1700 containers are estimated to leave the city each day. These two mega-markets also make the city a hub where diverse trading networks intermingle, with several thousand merchants, principally from central and south Asia, Russia, the Arab world, and Africa, resident in the city, and many more visiting on wholesale provisioning trips (Marsden, 2015, 2016a, 2017). The city is therefore home to several thousand resident foreign merchants and agents, who have settled and established export and logistical offices, and also attracts visiting merchants who typically spend 2–3 weeks in the city per visit, provisioning themselves with goods which they then ship to wholesale markets in their home countries. Amid the many nationalities who visit and reside in Yiwu, the city has since 2011 become a destination for several hundred young Syrian men fleeing the conflict in their homeland. Many of these men work in export offices, helping to supply markets in Syria with Chinese-manufactured commodities. Several have made short return trips to Syria since 2011, to see family, resolve commercial issues, or broaden their customer base. Thus, while the numbers are small compared with those who have traveled to Europe, they and the goods in which they deal constitute an active arena of circulation between West and East Asia and the formerly Soviet *ecumene*.

To grasp conceptually the significance of the trading networks and patterns of mobility described in this article, I locate Syria as a part of West Asia, within a broader Eurasian “arena of connectivity” (Green, 2014). I follow here the argument of Green (2014) that geographies are “conceptual categories that scholars can adopt, adapt or abandon” and that geographical models are “analytic categories designed to allow the tracing of . . . connectivity.” In proposing Eurasia as a pertinent arena of circulation, this article builds on the now established critique of the “Middle East” as a category that reproduces outdated geographies of the Cold War and obscures the region's formative connections to other dynamic zones of connectivity (Alavi, 2015; Ghazal, 2014; Ho, 2004; Limbert, 2014; Low, 2014; Tagliacozzo, 2009; Willis, 2009). However, it also extends this critique in a new direction, noting that the vast majority of such efforts to reconceptualize the region have often taken a maritime bent, locating the “Middle East” within

Mediterranean and Indian Ocean arenas of circulation (see Anderson, 2019). The interactions that I identify here—between Syria, the post-Soviet *ecumene*, and East Asia—are not adequately illuminated by spatial models that take their inspiration from maritime circuits of exchange or those that locate Syria primarily in a Mediterranean arena (see, for example, Green, 2014). Nor have these connections been made visible by studies of the “post-Soviet *ecumene*” per se, as these have rarely incorporated the “Middle East” despite the fact that Soviet and Russian patronage and influence have been a significant dynamic in this region since the 1950s. Instead, I propose locating Syria in West Asia and thus as part of an expansive Eurasian arena of connectivity.

Beyond Syria's war economy and forced migration: the imprint of merchant networks across Eurasia

By “Eurasia,” I refer to the continental landmass including Russia, West Asia incorporating the Levant, and East Asia. Such a maximally inclusive concept of Eurasia (see Hann, 2016) can bring into focus the Russian–Syrian histories and relationships which affect how actors are positioned in the current field of China–Levant trade. The transnational field in which the Syrian migrants I describe move was established by earlier waves of Syrian merchants whose trajectories and biographies connect Russia, Syria, and China. The first wave arrived in Yiwu at the turn of the millennium. It is hard to overstate the significance of the Russian market for establishing a Syrian mercantile presence in China in this period. Like others from across Asia and Africa, Syrian merchants started provisioning themselves in Yiwu at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, with some opening permanent export offices in the city. Before 2005, the main trading partners for several of these offices were in Russia rather than Syria. Russia had long been an important market for Syrian exporters. A payment agreement between the USSR and Syria signed in 1973 had enabled Syrian government debt to be settled through private exports and had boosted trade between the two. It had led many Syrian entrepreneurs to migrate to Moscow in the 1980s; by the early 1990s, there was already a significant community of Syrian merchants in Moscow, organizing the importation of Syrian goods into the USSR under the bilateral payments agreement. Some had also fled to Russia out of fear that they might fall under suspicion during the Asad regime's crackdown on Islamist opposition in 1979–1982. Still others, of Circassian background, had migrated from Syria to Russian cities in the Caucasus—Sochi, Nalchik, and Kras—in the early 1990s during the Circassian national return movement after the fall of the USSR.

According to official figures, the end of the Soviet Union brought about a collapse in exports to the former Soviet bloc. But many Syrian merchants talked of the 1990s

as a period of dynamic commercial opportunities where large profits were made exporting to Russia which at that stage lacked commercial relations with the West. After the Russian market for Syrian imports peaked in the mid-1990s, some Syrian merchants moved back to Syria; others sought to open new markets in the central Asian ex-Soviet republics; and others moved to China in the early 2000s, where they opened export offices in Yiwu and Guangzhou, supplying markets in the Russia, the Caucasus, and central Asia with cheaper commodities, often through networks of Syrian and other Arab merchants resident in those locales. Cosmetics were a particularly important small commodity supplied to the Russian market via Yiwu in this way; but clothes, fashion accessories, and household goods such as nargile pipes were also shipped in significant quantities.

When Bashar al-Asad became President in 2000, he embarked on a program of economic reform, establishing a series of free trade agreements with neighboring countries. These enabled Syria to act as a regional conduit and forwarding market for Chinese imports. The Syrian merchants in China who were able to dominate this import trade were invariably those who had already established themselves in the country, thanks to the Russian market and their networks and history there. Ahmad Salteen is an example. Hailing from a village in Idlib province, where his father worked as a farmer, he had moved to Moscow in 1992 to join his brothers who had emigrated to Russia in the 1980s. He helped them manage a trading office before opening his own business importing cosmetics and perfumes from the United Kingdom and France, clothes from Italy and Turkey, and food products from Sudan. He acquired Russian citizenship and made good money in the 1990s. But by the end of that decade, the Russian market had become weaker and in 2001 he opened an office in Yiwu to cater for the Russian demand for cheaper goods. He settled in Yiwu a few years later, continuing to supply his networks of Syrian and Yemeni merchants in Moscow with a range of goods, notably cosmetics and fashion accessories. He recalled that “in 2001, there were three Syrian offices [in Yiwu]. By 2006, there were around fifty—all selling to Russia.” Many sold to networks of Syrian importers who had been based in Moscow since the 1990s. Mustafa Salam is another example; hailing from a merchant family which had been established in Aleppo’s famous Suwaiqa wholesale market for several generations, he began visiting Yiwu in 2001 to make bulk purchases of toys and household decorations. While his family enjoyed connections with Syrian officials which enabled them to bypass import restrictions and to provision the Suwaiqa market, his most important customers were Syrian importers in Moscow. After a handful of trips to Yiwu, he settled and opened an export office supplying the Russian market with bulk shipments of artificial flowers and Christmas decorations.

Through the 2000s, the Futian market in Yiwu expanded to cater to the growing demand for low-grade Chinese

commodities across Asia and Africa. As the Syrian government progressively relaxed many of its restrictions on imported consumer goods in the mid 2000s, Yiwu, as an outlet for cheap commodities, became an important destination for Syrians wishing to try their hand at import. Many had no trading background or connections to Russia. This can be seen as the second wave of Syrian merchants visiting Yiwu and was characterized by a dramatic increase in the number of Syrian export offices based in Yiwu, with estimates putting the number at 350 by 2011. Many who purchased goods in this period, lacking a merchant capital and family background, were able to enter international trade because of Chinese credit. Manufacturers of low-grade commodities from across China offered credit to the foreign-owned export offices in Yiwu, which passed this on to their visiting clients. Because of their role as credit brokers, export offices tended to work with clients from their own region or extended social networks, which gave them a better chance of applying sanctions in case of default. This in turn encouraged members of Syrian trading networks rooted in particular locales within Syria to establish offices in Yiwu to access the credit from Chinese manufacturers. This enabled a wave of new traders to enter the market. Muhammad Tinji is an example. His father had worked as a civil servant in the military police; he had trained as an accountant in the 1990s and worked for several years as a manager for textile enterprises in Aleppo. Aware of the opportunities presented by the emerging market in imported Chinese consumer goods, he traveled to Yiwu and Guangzhou in 2008 and placed orders for fashion jewelry and massage chairs through a Syrian export office in Yiwu.

With the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Yiwu saw a third wave of Syrians—mainly men in their teens and twenties—settling in the city as individuals sought to avoid being drawn in to an increasingly brutal conflict. Most were seeking to escape military service. Salteen estimated that in the period between 2011 and 2017, numbers in Yiwu increased to two to two—and—a-half thousand Syrians: “each office takes on relatives and so on, so that they can get residence—for example, Abdallah here [a thirteen-year-old pouring coffee in his office], so that they can escape the fighting and the army.” While some who settled in Yiwu in this period were wealthy and established merchants seeking to avoid the risk of kidnapping and extortion, many were younger men arriving on student visas or as sponsored employees who worked in the restaurants and trading offices established by the first and second waves of merchants. As restaurants were often owned by trading offices, it was possible for an employee to start as a waiter and then move to office work, eventually accompanying clients around the Futian market. Some of these then sought to establish themselves as commercial agents or even merchants in their own right.

Many of this third wave, then, were escaping the prospect of being drafted into “the army” (al—jaysh), but were also pursuing economic and social opportunity which were open to them because of their connection to existing business networks. Their mobility was not only determined by spectacular events—such as war and conflict—but was more complex, and shaped by channels, networks and forms of livelihood forged before the outbreak of the war. The notion of “forced migration” sits uneasily with their own self-understandings and conceptions of their mobility. In China, they did not enjoy the status of refugees nor did they conceive of themselves in this way. Nuhad was a 32-year-old man who hailed from an established trading and industrial family that for several generations had been based in a wholesale market in the center of Aleppo. He started visiting China in 2008 to provision the family wholesale office in Aleppo. He spoke proudly of the dozens of containers of commodities that he and his brother had shipped each month from Yiwu to Aleppo and which had helped Aleppo earn the nickname “little China” within the region. Then, in 2012, after Aleppo became embroiled in the worsening conflict and he faced being drafted into military service, Nuhad moved to Yiwu where he now managed a restaurant and mobile phone accessories shop belonging to his older brother. When I spoke to him, he insisted on distinguishing the mobility of the refugee, which he saw as leading to a state of passivity and worklessness, to the dynamism of his own body. He presented his physical movements, as he labored in the shop, as proof of his entrepreneurial initiative and self-reliance, a capacity to venture forth and make his way.

The Eurasian determinants of Syrian mobilities

“There are no poor Syrians in Yiwu,” Nuhad said, drawing a sharp contrast between his own situation, in moving to Yiwu, and that of “refugees” who had moved to Europe because they lacked the resources to achieve any other status elsewhere. China did not provide a refugee settlement program and required foreign residents to pay for their annually renewable work permit. Syrians who moved to Yiwu after 2011 were able to do so because they belonged to existing business networks which possessed the resources and knowledge required by individuals wishing to settle there. How then should we understand that factors that governed access to these business networks? Region of origin and class background within Syria could play a part. Some, like Nuhad, belonged to the Sunni merchant classes which dominated markets in Aleppo or Damascus, the main centers of commerce and industry in Syria, and were therefore easily able to establish a presence in Yiwu’s markets. Yet, it is also true that many of the Syrians who had visited or settled in Yiwu over the last 20 years belonged to the first generation of their family to engage in commerce or international

import. Their ability to access Yiwu’s business networks depended on other factors than class or region positions within Syria. These, I argue, only come into view when we widen our analytical lens beyond Aleppo, Damascus, or Syria and consider instead the trajectories and positionings of individuals within wider Eurasian arenas of connectivity.

Eurasian geopolitical projects

The office owner Ahmad Salteen and importer Muhammad Tinji, described above, were among those who hailed not from merchant lineages but from less wealthy farming and civil servant backgrounds. They were able to enter international trade and accumulate capital because of the position that Syria came to occupy within wider Eurasian geopolitical projects. One of the most important of these was the Soviet patronage of Syrian commerce and higher education mobility and its post-Soviet legacy. The 1973 payments agreement between Syria and the USSR was designed to maintain Syria as a military client of the Soviet Union, but it also guaranteed an export market for Syria’s private manufacturers, boosting Aleppo’s economy in particular. After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Syrian merchants continued to connect importers in post-Soviet Russia and central Asia to the wider world through the 1990s, as these importers initially lacked wider experience of trading and raising finance across international borders. The niche this created for Syrian merchant networks through the 1990s provided Ahmad Salteen with an entry into international commerce. The Soviet patronage of Syrian higher education students nourished these connections. Hamdan, a Syrian-born industrialist in his early 50s now based between Moscow and Yiwu, had been sent from Aleppo by the Syrian state in 1989 as part of a student mission to study petrochemical engineering in Irkutsk. While he hailed from a scholarly rather than a merchant background, he saw the opportunities of Russia’s post-Soviet demand for consumer commodities, and after graduating, he moved to Moscow and opened a trading office and then a cosmetics factory, before opening a second factory in Yiwu a decade later. Other Syrian-born industrialists now based in Yiwu had similar trajectories, moving from low-ranking civil servant backgrounds in Syria to independent manufacturing enterprises via Russia’s wholesale markets.

The importer Muhammad Tinji credited his move from a relatively modest family background (his father was a middle-ranking functionary) to a wealthier stratum of private entrepreneurs to the Futian market in Yiwu, telling me in 2016, “it is where I made all my money!” He achieved this social mobility within the Chinese state’s project of a Sino-centric Eurasia connected by Chinese commodities and infrastructure, which was envisaged by Chinese authorities. The local authorities in Chinese authorities developed Yiwu as a gateway in this vision of Eurasia, extending the

Futian market through the 2000s. The government financial stimulus plan in 2008 which injected credit into the light industry sector (Tong, 2010; Zhang, 2015) and the extension of value-added tax (VAT) rebates to low-cost goods (Schüller & Schüler-Zhou, 2009) were a critical moment in this development. They made credit accessible and cheap enough to attract new entrants and traders with relatively little capital such as Muhammad Tinji into international import. With as little as US\$10,000 capital, they were able to make a downpayment on a container of consumer goods worth US\$40,000 or more, taking the rest on credit. Elias is another example; hailing from a peasant family in a rural area of northern Syria, he had attended university in Lattakia while eking out a small independent income during the summer with a stall in Beirut's flea markets. By 2007, he had gathered enough money to make a downpayment on a container load of fashion accessories. As more and more new entrants were drawn into the market, he himself moved to Yiwu, opening a trading office and providing brokerage and logistical services.

Families across Eurasia

Not all of those who traveled to Yiwu from Syria after 2011 depended on inherited family wealth or wealth acquired while sojourning and trading in Russia. Some of the young men were able to move to Yiwu by drawing on trans-Asian networks of kinship and quasi-kinship intimacy in which they were positioned as subordinates. In some cases, their mobility scaled up what had previously been local relations of intimacy, so that the forms of obligation, dependence and loyalty that had been cultivated on a face-to-face basis now underpinned larger scale circulations of people, labor and commodities (see Achilli, 2018). The higher stakes produced by these enlarged Eurasian scales of circulation could lead these men who moved across Asia to experience particularly keenly the ambivalence of kinship and intimacy relations—namely, the mixing of relations of solidarity and exploitation which had enabled and were enabled by their new-found mobility (see Achilli, 2018; Monsutti, 2005). Thus, while family and quasi-kin networks enabled young men to move eastwards across Asia, they could also be experienced as constricting their social mobility, by consigning them to low-wage positions in China.

Ghayth is an example. He arrived in Yiwu toward the end of 2015 at the age of 21. He hailed from a poor neighborhood in the east of Aleppo and had worked as a shop assistant near Aleppo's central bazaar since leaving school at the age of 12 years. When the conflict reached Aleppo in 2012, he remained working for his employer, a man named Mahmoud, who was some 10 years older and who belonged to a wealthier merchant family. While Ghayth's family remained in their neighborhood in the rebel-held east, he based himself with his employer in the government-held west. He had regularly slept on the floor

of one of Mahmoud's stores in the west. He indicated that he had been partly incorporated into Mahmoud's family during the conflict and that he regarded him as "more than a brother" who had even gone to the extent of having him celebrate Eid among his own family. Ghayth was useful to his employer because of his ability and willingness to move naturally around the rebel-held east. He ran considerable risks for Mahmoud, making perilous journeys across front lines in Aleppo to empty a warehouse in the east and bring the goods to the government-controlled area in the west. He also continued to stock Mahmoud's store in the city of al-Bab in Daesh-controlled territory, negotiating a series of checkpoints and crossings operated by both the Free Syrian Army and Daesh.

When the Syrian army caught him and beat him up for evading military service, his "older brother" Mahmoud decided Ghayth should leave the country. He found him a position in a trading office in Yiwu. He took his passport and arranged a visa through his contact in the Yiwu, before presenting Ghayth with a fait accompli. "He didn't ask me first," Ghayth said, "he opened a project for me, he sent me"—literally, he "traveled" me (saffarni). Ghayth spent a week in November 2015 bidding farewell to his mother in the east of Aleppo, then left Syria through rebel-held territory into Turkey, and flew to China. Once there, he remained working in the trading office where Mahmoud had placed him, on relatively low pay, for a year and a half, supplementing his income by working part-time in a supermarket. When I asked him why he had agreed to go to Yiwu, he said that he could have traveled to Europe, where he had relatives and where there was the prospect of citizenship. But he envisaged a future partnership, in which the knowledge he was acquiring of Chinese and of the Yiwu market would help Mahmoud and provide a basis for his own commercial future.

Ghayth was a subordinate bound to Mahmoud by relations of quasi-kinship and patriarchal connectivity. He described him as "more than a brother"; he took considerable risks on his behalf and traveled at his behest. This echoes a type of relation that Joseph (1993, 1994, 1999) analyzing working class family and neighborhood dynamics in Lebanon has described as patriarchal connectivity. In these relations, power relations are naturalized as subordinates see themselves as extensions of others and vice versa, anticipating their needs and reactions and inviting their intervention and direction. The way that Ghayth described his relationship to Mahmoud conformed to this model of patriarchal connectivity: he attributed his migration to the initiative of his former employer, who created his future by "opening a project" for him. Other young Syrian men residing in Yiwu, in their late teens and early twenties, described similar forms of permeability and connectivity operating on a transnational scale. Several accounted for their presence in Yiwu by referring to a mother or senior relative who had "traveled" them.

In referring to his patron as having traveled him, Ghayth indicated that he felt indebted to him and intended to continue contributing labor to the partnership in the future. The quasi-kinship relations in which Ghayth had been positioned as a junior dependent and as an extension of his senior continued for a while to operate in Yiwu and shape how he saw his future. A year later, however, Ghayth reported that he had left the office position that his patron had found for him after a quarrel about low pay: "The office was only paying me 3000 RMB a month. And before that, 2500 RMB before I asked for a raise. Not enough!" He was seeking without only a modicum of success to carve out a role as an independent export agent:

I have not yet got to the same level [of income]. But I have a couple of customers, people I was put in touch with by someone who has known me since I was a child, who has a customs clearance company in Turkey.

Having left the employment provided through his migration network, he was using a student visa to remain in the country; to renew this permit, he had to travel every year to Sudan, the only country to which a person could then travel on a Syrian passport without a visa.

Thus, one of the effects of the Syrian conflict was to expand relations of intimacy to a transnational scale. Yet the heightened stakes produced by the geographical scaling up could also ratchet up the tensions inherent in such ambivalent relations. Individuals wrestled with these tensions, resolving them in different ways. Some, like Ghayth, sought to fashion networks beyond the family, until they were in a position to withdraw from the relationships on which they had first depended. Others reaffirmed their commitment to an ideology of patriarchal connectivity (Joseph, 1999), evoking notions of emotional closeness and interpersonal "permeability" to moralize relations of deference to senior males. Saif, a 34 year who moved to Yiwu in 2015 from a lower-middle class area of Damascus, is an example of the latter. His father worked as a carpenter in Damascus, and he himself had moved to China under the sponsorship of his older brother who had been resident in Yiwu since 2003. His other brother had an exclusive franchise to supply cosmetics containers and packaging from Yiwu for a cosmetics brand in Syria and had taken on Saif as a warehouse supervisor.

Saif stressed the bonds of patriarchal connectivity that defined his relations to both his father in Damascus and to his older brother in Yiwu:

my father can tell me not to do something, from Syria, until today, and I obey. He told me recently that I should stop using a moped. I obeyed . . . I feel here like it is not work. Because it is with my brother. My brother taught me everything. I obey him completely here, I say "you're the boss . . ." I must feel for (bash'ur fi) my brother here [i.e. sense his needs], know when he wants me not to bother him. He has big responsibilities, the whole family.

He said that similar dynamics defined his relations with his wife in Damascus:

My wife is living with her own family now, in my absence. She calls me from Syria to ask if she can go out, to let me know, ask me, can I go round and see such-and-such. I give permission. But if it is not a good person she is going to see, I won't let her.

Unlike his brother, Saif did not yet have enough resources to bring his wife and two children to live in Yiwu, as he wished. Yet he aspired to commercial autonomy and the independence of his own family unit. To accumulate resources, he had embarked on a small-scale trading initiative of his own. Every month, he shipped small quantities of end-of-line women's fashion accessories to his in-laws in Damascus. Like Ghayth, Saif traveled to Yiwu from Syria by drawing networks of familial intimacy in which he was positioned as a subordinate laborer. The Eurasian scale of his family network enabled his mobility, but also ratcheted up the stakes of his subordination, separating him from his wife and making him dependent on his brother for his ability to remain in Yiwu. He responded to this situation differently from Ghayth, evoking the ideal of the patriarchally connective family, to make sense of his own trans-Asian mobility and to come to terms with the new forms of subordination and autonomy that it involved.

The Eurasian contexts of trade and state formation

I have argued that the mobility of the third wave of Syrians visiting Yiwu (after 2011) was not solely determined by their class background and region of origin within Syria, but depended on the relation of individuals to existing trans-Asian networks and to wider Eurasian histories of circulation. Thus, to understand the pattern of Syrian conflict mobilities that have arisen since 2011, we need to consider a range of geographical models including those which locate Syria in West Asia and as part of a broader Eurasian arena of connectivity. I now turn to the patterns of trade and state formation that have arisen in the Levant since 2011 and make a similar argument: the region has seen the emergence of a variety of zones of sovereignty since 2011, including a neo-Ottoman project in the north of Syria under the overlordship of the Turkish state; Russian and Hizbullah zones of influence along the Mediterranean coast connecting ports in Lattakia, Tartus and Beirut; and a would-be Islamist caliphate between Syria and Iraq. This patchwork of emerging sovereignties has been constituted as a range of state-like actors have asserted their control of cross-border trade and circulations of people. These forms of circulation connect the region to other parts of Eurasia, notably Russia, central Asia, and China. Rather than describing an isolated "Syrian war economy" that has emerged within the crumbling polity as state order has broken down, I describe a patchwork of sovereignties that have emerged by

regulating flows that connect the region to a broader Eurasian arena of connectivity.

Regional and transregional trading routes and hubs

In 2016 and 2017, Ghayth and Saif arranged the shipment of goods into Syria via very different routes. Ghayth supplied household goods and toys to opposition-controlled areas in the north and east of Syria, through the Turkish port of Mersin, while Saif shipped fashion accessories and cosmetics to regime-held Damascus through the Syrian regime port of Lattakia. These reflected the two sets of international trade routes by which Chinese commodities entered Syria. The one via Lattakia was often run by Hizbullah which also moved goods into Beirut and which controlled movement through much of this coastal area. The other which ran through Turkey enabled goods to be moved into opposition-controlled areas and trading hubs in the north of Syria. The Mersin route was attractive because it accessed a stateless area in the north of Syria and therefore avoided any customs regime. Ahmad Salteen, who used this route for the majority of his exports to Syria in 2017, said, “via the Turkish route [into northern Syria] there are no customs; you pay [the Turkish authorities] \$2000 to transit [through Mersin and Turkey into Sarmada].” However, as the regime port of Lattakieh was often under the de facto control of non-state actors Hizbullah, it was also possible for merchants to access Damascus while avoiding the official customs regime. Salteen said,

the Lattakieh route, the official price is \$50,000 to \$80,000 taxes per container. There is a smuggling route, controlled by Hizbullah, who are strong in the ports. You pay them \$15,000 [per container].

Dealing with Hizbullah was not only cheaper, it was also necessary for certain kinds of goods. Salteen said,

it is forbidden to import toys, fashion accessories, cosmetics, perfumes into Syria—because they are not essential goods. They are not forbidden for security reasons, but because of the dollar. The state doesn’t want dollars to leave the country. But they all go in, the black way . . .

These transnational routes had led to the formation of new trading hubs within Syria. The towns of Sarmada, on the Turkish-Syrian border, and Manbij, between Idlib and Aleppo, became thriving centers during the conflict for commodities transiting in through Turkey. The new supply routes which ran through these hubs, and through Lattakia, also led out of Syria, to destinations in Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. Salteen, who mainly shipped goods to opposition areas around Idlib, said during the summer of 2017 that he also paid Hizbullah to smuggle goods through the regime’s port of Lattakia and then into Lebanon

you pay Hizbullah [controlling Lattakieh port] \$15,000 to go either to Lebanon or to Syria. You can import legally into Beirut for some things—for women’s jewellery, the tariffs are low. Sometimes we move jewellery by plane, in bags. It is very profitable. But for shoes, the tariffs are high into Lebanon. The Hizbullah, the Hizb, smuggle, the black way, to Lebanon. The Syrians let them. The Lebanese government can’t do anything, if they say anything, they will probably be kicked out of power—the Hizb is strong! I have a customer in Beirut who takes shoes that way. A container worth \$20,000 coming through the Lattakieh smuggling route would cost \$40,000 going through Beirut’s port.

Ghayth said in the summer of 2016 that Iraq was another destination for goods transiting in through Mersin:

a merchant in Bab [a city east of Aleppo, under Daesh control in 2016] orders from China. The shipment goes to Mersin, by boat, then a Turkish truck to border; it is unloaded, goes through the crossing into Turkey; there is a Syrian truck the other side. It is taken to Bab. Spare parts, hardware, electrical items—lamps, lights—and engines. It goes to Iraq too. There is no border, no customs: people profit a lot. Anything you want—bring it in!

Crossborder trade and zones of sovereignty

These transnational routes were co-constituted with the zones of sovereignty that had emerged and shifted in course of the conflict: the Free Syrian Army’s territories in the north west of Syria, Hizbullah’s domain in the port of Lattakia, and the areas of the Euphrates valley controlled by Daesh. Under conditions of open sovereignty (Grant 2011), where front lines were constantly liable to move, traders had to reckon with a good deal of uncertainty. Salteen said, “routes change all the time, according to which group is controlling which area.” In summer 2017, one of the three crossings from Turkey, the Sarmada gate, was being kept open by Turkey as it fed into territory controlled by the Free Syrian Army, which was supported by the Turkish state. Turkish border authorities had closed two of the other crossings in 2013 when a rival group, Jabhat al-Nusra, had taken control of the territory on the Syrian side. Another Syrian merchant in Yiwu who operated this route said,

sometimes they [the Turkish authorities] close the border and the goods get stuck—for up to one month sometimes, just waiting in Turkey at the border. Because there is fighting, or there are elections and it is a sensitive time.

These shifting transnational routes reflected ongoing processes of state formation and retrenchment state and state-like actors asserted themselves precisely by regulating the flows of commodities and people that connected the region to broader circulations within Eurasia. The Russian military and diplomatic intervention since 2015 has sought

to manage flows of fighters and their families between the Caucasus, central Asia, and the Levant,¹ in part by negotiating settlements with armed groups controlling border crossings in the south and north of the country. In the late summer of 2017, Salteen and his colleagues in Yiwu were exchanging information about which border points were being closed as Russia concluded deals with opposition groups. Merchants, naturally enough, understood attempts to manage border crossings as the constitute of state orders. While some merchants saw the cheap Turkish route into the north of Syria as evidence of the (temporary) absence of a state, others understood themselves to be engaging with regimes-information which chose to levy low or no taxes or bribes, comparing them favorably to the Syrian regime in Damascus. Ghayth said in 2016 that

at the crossing between Mersin and Syria, the Free Syrian Army charge 200 dollars. They don't take any bribes. [Daesh charge] none to take goods into Bab and through to Mosul. They don't search goods—they let it all in. Once they searched and found alcohol. They burned it all . . . The [Syrian] regime charges one million renminbi customs clearance per container.

He also reported that Daesh territory was the “safest region” in which to trade (*akthar mintaqā fiha aman*). Even some merchants supportive of the Syrian regime noted in 2016 that Daesh maintains a “kind of government” (*mitl hukumeh*) and a harsh rule of law which could be beneficial to the conduct of trade. Rather than simply creating chaos and lawlessness, the conflict was seen by some merchants operating these routes as a new—albeit precarious and shifting—configuration of governance regimes. While recognizing the difficulties and uncertainties involved, those who coordinated the shipment of goods across enemy lines in Syria described the landscape not as one of chaos but as a patchwork of sovereignties. They understood themselves to be dealing with a new configuration of governance regimes. Ali, a regime-aligned merchant in his 30s who imported toys and batteries from Yiwu, and distributed them across the country from Damascus, said “in the first two years of the troubles, things were very difficult and uncertain. But then we could trade, once it became clear which group controlled which area.”

Historians, anthropologists and economists have long recognized the close relationship between trade and state formation. In many accounts, control of trade is an important source of state funds. Thus, some scholars have argued that commerce enabled the formation of ancient polities in Eurasia (Polanyi, Arensberg, & Pearson, 1965; Sanders, 1968), as control of tolls from long-distance trade led to the emergence of a warrior-aristocracy capable of centralizing power. An important body of scholarship by anthropologists and historians has also explored the critical roles that trade has played in the formation of modern political orders. Again, these analyses point out the importance of traders as sources of funding for political elites and their projects. In

Afghanistan, traders helped to build state forms through their financing of warlords (Giustozzi, 2009) and other political institutions (Ghani, 1978; Hanifi, 2011; Marsden, 2016b); the networks of trust forged by merchants are also seen as a vital resource in contemporary projects of state building (Thompson, 2011).

A second body of scholarship has documented the way in which trade brings into being bureaucratic and coercive agencies charged with its administrative oversight and protection. (Engels, 2010; Fried, 1967; Friedman and Rowlands, 1977; Johnson, 1973; Kipp & Schortman, 1989; Rathje, 1971; Webb, 1975). The establishment of markets extended the reach of state power in a variety of settings, such as the British imperial state in West Africa (Iliasu, 1975). Similarly, the surveillance of cross-border traders was an important means by which the imperial state instantiated and extended its geographical presence (Chalfin, 2001; see also Clark, 1988). Merchants themselves have participated in constructing political orders by performing quasi-state functions, such as supervising, taxing, and protecting cross-border commerce, thus playing a critical role in the formation of state structures and boundaries (Marsden, 2016b). Anthropologists have highlighted a variety of mechanisms of administrative interaction and evasion through which traders can be implicated in the processes of state formation. They have shown that the conduct of cross-border trade can reproduce state orders even in cases where regulations are routinely infringed. Chalfin (2001) has argued that, in West Africa, smugglers involved in illicit cross-border trade still participate in the construction of international borders. Such trade, far from undermining state order, in fact can serve as a site where the state comes into being as a discursive entity and lived experience. The informal cross-border economy is thus one site where traders “engage with and instantiate the state” (Chalfin, 2001).

These perspectives, however, have tended to be absent in the recent scholarship on Syria's economic transformations, where the paradigm of the “war economy” has dominated. Thus, much recent work has documented the emergence of checkpoint and siege economies, accompanied by other forms of exploitation and depredation such as kidnapping and looting. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which Syria's economic transformations have been connected to the emergence of new (albeit often temporary) forms of order, which is the way that some of the merchants quoted here have described them. My argument is that the emergence of these temporary and precarious forms of order is intimately connected to wider regional and transregional circulations and that these ongoing dynamics of state formation only come into view when Syria is located as part of a wider Eurasian arena. Rather than describing a pathological disintegration of state order within an isolated Syrian theater, and analyzing the way that local economies of violence have emerged in the vacuum, I have described a proliferation of new zones of sovereignty and argued that these have emerged in large part through attempts to manage transnational circuits that

connect the region to other parts of Eurasia. These zones emerged as would-be state actors—the Free Syrian Army, Russian military forces, Hizbullah and Daesh—presided over zones of trade and circulation within and beyond the Levant region. These fledgling zones of sovereignty, precarious and exposed to the vagaries of conflict, were mutually constituted, for example, with transregional routes operated by Syrian merchants based in China, who shipped goods between Yiwu and Mosul (Iraq), and Yiwu and Gaziantep (Turkey), via northern Syria and between Yiwu and Beirut, via Syria's coastal port of Lattakia. Only by paying attention to these regional and transregional circuits can we account for the emergence of new trading hubs such as the towns of Sarmada and Manbij in northern Syria and the new configurations of power such as Hezbollah's control of Syria's coastal ports and the Daesh regime in the Euphrates basin. The new zones of sovereignty that emerged in Syria were imbricated in wider processes of moving goods cheaply within the Levant region and the broader Eurasian arena of which it has remained a part.

Conclusion

By locating Syria in “West Asia,” and by extension in a wider Eurasian arena of connectivity, this article has challenged the methodological nationalism which is implicit in much analysis of Syria's “war economy.” It has put the transformations of Syrian commerce and mobilities which have occurred since 2011 in the context of wider Eurasian histories and geographies, notably the networks forged by Syrian merchants who over the past 30 years have traveled and worked between Southeastern China, Russia, and Syria. The article situated these networks within two Eurasian geopolitical projects, namely, Soviet patronage and its aftermath, which enabled Syrians to acquire commercial capital and political capital in Russia, and the Chinese vision of Sino-centric Eurasia, which by directing credit at new market entrants enabled the formation of new business networks and family networks connecting east and west Asia. The connections that Syrian merchants fashioned in these contexts have continued to shape post-2011 border and mobility regimes and projects of state formation in the region.

The first half of the article focused on mobilities, suggesting that these Eurasian geographies, networks, and histories have shaped the differential capacity of individuals to move across international borders since 2011. The second half focused on trade routes, suggesting that the cross-border trade corridors which these merchants have operated and refashioned since 2011 have shaped and given substance to nascent projects of state formation in the region. While the “war economy” literature focuses on the local and national scales of Syria's economic transformations, analyzing siege and checkpoint economies within the framework of a fragmenting nation state, this article adopted a transnational scale, arguing that proliferating zones of sovereignty have emerged over the past 5 years as

state-like actors have sought to manage the transnational circuits that connect the region to other parts of Eurasia. In summary, the article has drawn attention to the diverse ways in which Syria's post-2011 economic transformations and “conflict mobilities” are embedded in wider Eurasian networks, histories, and geographies whose significance is often obscured by current scholarly approaches.

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Note

1. See <https://news.rambler.ru/middleeast/40,388,538-kto-ukral-chestnoe-slovo-kadyrova/> (downloaded 30 October 2018); “Putin has a new secret weapon in Syria: Chechens,” *Foreign policy.com*, 4 May 2017: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/04/putin-has-a-new-secret-weapon-in-syria-chechens/> (downloaded 30 October 2018)

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