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Rania Ghosn

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Territorialities of a Transnational Oil Flow

AUTHOR

Rania GHOSN, University of Michigan (Etats-Unis)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the territoriality of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline), a cross-border pipeline that carries Aramco crude from the wells of its sister concession in eastern Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean. Through the case study of Tapline, I argue that territorial organization is a necessary force of production for international concessionary enterprises. Given that the flow of oil depended on the continuity of the Aramco operation, the pipeline company was committed to negotiating the interests the sister-oil concession and those of the producing state. As the northern boundaries of the sister Aramco concession corresponded with that of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Tapline's convention agreement with Saudi Arabia extended infrastructural provisions in relation to the Kingdom's aspirations to settle its tribal population and secure its northern boundary. The pipeline's large-scale technological system materialized thus a territory with its qualities and frictions opening in its turn a space that could be incorporated into forms of political rationalities.

KEYWORDS

boundary, state, concession, energy, infrastructure

INTRODUCTION

This paper asserts the territorial imperative of oil flows through the historic case study of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline). Operating between 1950 and 1975, Tapline a subsidiary of four American oil companies, carried part of its sister company's crude from the Aramco wells in eastern Saudi Arabia across 1100 miles, through Jordan and Syria to a port on the Mediterranean in South Lebanon. The operation of the pipeline required convention agreements between the owner company and the governments of the sovereign entities it crossed. The Saudi-Tapline convention was distinctive inasmuch as it exempted the Company from any income tax or royalties during the first fifteen years, the time needed to amortize its capital. The company undertook however to pay for "all reasonable and necessary expenses" incurred by the government at the ports and pumping stations for protection, administration, customs, health and municipal works and obligated itself to establish schools and hospitals in the area of the pipeline stations.

THE INTERTWINED TERRITORIAL PROJECTS OF THE STATE AND CONCESSIONARY CAPITAL

Territoriality is a rendering of space as a political and economic category: owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered, and controlled.¹ It is central to the governing of a land, whether be it the political authority of the state or the economic exploitation of a concession.

¹ Stuart Elden, "Governmentality, Calculation, Territory," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 (2007): 1-19.

The state is territorial in that its rule is defined as exclusive authority over a fixed geographical space with delimited boundaries. Territory is the space whose borders need to be defended against external threat and within which internal order needs to be maintained.² Only possible for a tightly defined spatial unit, the concept of 'security' is closely associated with the maintenance and survival of the state over its territory. As William Connolly (1995) argues, the linkage between "terror" and "territory" is thus more than merely coincidental. Territory is formed both from the Latin *terra*—land or terrain—as is generally recognized; but also from the notion of *territorium*, a place from which people are warned. *Terrere* is to frighten away, and thus on this argument "territory" and "terror" share common roots.³

The concession is territorial in that it refers to spatial units allocated for the extraction of wealth in the form of raw materials. Indeed, the management of socio-ecological relations has historically been mediated and enabled through the consolidation of power over space. The long-run concessionary contract is thus primarily a holding device, an attempt from transnational companies to create stable political conditions in the face of possible change.⁴ Throughout the twentieth century, the concessionary oil system has been centered on access to large swaths of land in Third World countries - as Arabia, Amazonia, and the Sahara. Differently from earlier colonial company concessions, the agreement with an independent state is granted by a central political authority. The monopoly of the transnational oil industry has thus required the state to concede sovereignty over its resources in exchange for a royalty fee.

Territory is often as well the ground for such economic and political projects to overlap over a geographic expanse. Boundaries inscribe both the concessionary and state projects in space: they are instruments for the stabilization of power relations and the creation of states of domination. As the locational logic of oil is geologic rather than geographic, the industry has often operated in areas previously unconnected to networks of communication, transport, and labour. These "extractive-frontiers" were isolated from the power of the central authority. Their sparse population inhabited an exceedingly difficult and remote terrain and was organized into self-sufficient social-political units. The expansion of concessionary capital into "frontier natures," such as Amazonia, the Canadian North, and the Sahara, produced an extensive geographic body. Such surveys and maps extended political authority by representing the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics. Highlighting the interrelation of geological representations and political power, Braun examines how the geological survey of Canada in 1878 was not only necessary for nature's material transformation in circuits of capital but also "brought the state directly into contact with its territory – and more precisely with the qualities of this territory."⁵ Furthermore, the concessionary large-technological system of roads, company towns, and security posts presented the young state with the possibility to "develop" its peripheral territory, extend its security apparatus, and in the process reinforce its boundary. Whether the Ford rubber concession in the Amazon Valley, Lever palm oil concession in the Congo, the United Fruit Company's plantations in various Central American countries, or the oil concessions in the Arab Middle East, the production of raw materials in such previously undeveloped areas required the provision

² John Agnew, "Sovereignty Regimes: Territoriality and State Authority in Contemporary World Politics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95.2 (2005): 437–461.

³ Stuart Elden, "Terror and Territory," *Antipode* 39.5 (2007): 821–845.

⁴ Gabriela Valdivia, "Governing Relations between People and Things: Citizenship, Territory, and the Political Economy of Petroleum in Ecuador," *Political Geography* 27 (2008): 456–477.

⁵ Bruce Braun, "Producing Vertical Territory: Geology and Governmentality in Late Victorian Canada," *Ecumene* 7.1 (2000): 7–46, 12.

of a physical infrastructure and progressively of basic housing and health services for workers. Furthermore, the operation of a vital industry in remote locations required the deployment of a security apparatus to protect the undertaking. The company itself did not always undertake the functions of rule-making, rule-enforcement, and rule-adjudication but reimbursed the local political authority for the cost of the maintenance of law and order. In return for a security fee, the state reinforced its military and administrative presence in remote and border areas.

NORTHERN ARABIA: SECURITY, POPULATION, AND RESOURCES

The geographic deployment of the pipeline was at the confluence of political and economic interests in northern Arabian, as defined in the four maps below. A map from the U.S. O'keefe Report, entitled "The Security Needs of Saudi Arabia," and three maps from the oil company handbook, respectively entitled "The Middle East Oil Facilities," "The Aramco Concession Area," and a "Tribal Map of the Arabian Peninsula," illustrate the territories at stake in Tapline's operation. (Figure 1)

"The Middle East Oil Facilities" represents the region as a homogenous green background in which state boundaries recede in favour of the bold pipelines. It highlights the desire for a continuous zone of operation in which oil flows *in spite* of geographies and boundaries. However, and differently from what the first map suggests, the pipeline operation did not imply that Tapline would annihilate political borders. In a vertically integrated industry such as the oil industry, in which production and transport are owned by the same company, the pipeline operation primarily depended on the perpetuation of the Aramco concession. The reinforcement of the Aramco concession, and hence of the boundaries of the Saudi Kingdom, was thus significant to Tapline's operation. The second map, "The Aramco Concession Area," illustrates that the kingdom's northern boundary corresponded to that of the Aramco concession. Indeed, in much of Aramco's discourse, the territories of oil production and of Saudi Arabia were represented with overlapping projects. For example, the title of the Oil Company's handbook, "Aramco and its World: Arabia and the Middle East," captures in its parallel semantic structure such conflation of the oil concession with the national territory of Saudi Arabia. For both the concessionary company and the sovereign state, land –or more precisely its underground resources– was the new source of wealth and required an enduring superficial order that reflects and inscribes the subsurface interest. The demarcation and reinforcement of the northern boundary was to replace a shifting and negotiated territorial order across al-Badia, whereby the Arabian boundary could politically fix the company's territorial interests and exercise power over the inhabitants of the territory. The third map, entitled "Saudi Arabia Location of Principal Tribes," roughly depicts the tribal zones of influence, or *dira*, in a representation of a geographically detached Saudi Arabia. The map visualizes a project of rule that seeks to contain within the boundaries of the state tribes that had previously moved into Iraq in search of water. In this process of the territorialization of the population, the security of the border became equated with the "Bedouin Problem," which solution required governing the "Saudi population" within the Northern Frontier Province. Furthermore, as advanced by the map entitled "The Security Needs of Saudi Arabia," the northern boundary represented the double security challenge of guarding the frontier against possible Hashemite threats from Iraq and Jordan.

Figure 1 The Four Maps that Frame the Interests of the State and the Oil Company.



DRAWING THE ARABIAN BOUNDARY

The rationalization of the space of Arabia was a prerequisite to operationalize the environment both into a commodity and an object of rule. The first geological operation was to survey and map the surface. Prior to digging wells into their vertical territory, and wherever topographic information was not available, Aramco geologists surveyed the large sand stretches of the Arabian concession in search of 'indicators' of the subsurface structure. Through aerial reconnaissance and detailed ground surveys, Aramco and the United States Geological Survey have thus contributed to the systemic mapping of Northern Arabia. (Figure 2 Mapping Arabia. From: Saudi Aramco World/SAWDIA. Figure 3 Landscape and Population Photographs from Reconnaissance Trips.) Along with mapping the terrain, the company called for a comprehensive compilation of Bedouin tribes in the zone of operations.

Figure 2 Mapping Arabia. From: Saudi Aramco World/SAWDIA.



Figure 3 Landscape and Population Photographs from Reconnaissance Trips. 1945.



INSCRIBING THE ARABIAN BOUNDARY

Early on it became clear to the officers of Aramco that the SAG had no boundaries. No boundaries in the sense that they had been agreed upon by treaty, surveyed on the ground, and marked visibly by monuments or the like. The boundaries of Saudi Arabia were, of course, the boundaries of our concession and obviously we did not want to drill oil wells in somebody else's land and have our efforts wasted... We had a commonality of interest in seeing that Saudi Arabia's boundaries were where they should be: ARAMCO wanted to know the outlines of its concession... when the British on behalf of some of the States of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia agreed that one indication of where one country stopped and another started would be where the tribes who held allegiance to one Government, or the other, considered their boundaries to be – each tribe had its *Dirah*, its tribal range, and granted these sometimes overlapped somewhat- one of the things we trained Americans did was make some studies to find out what tribes occupied certain areas, who they were, what their claims were based on, and where these places were that they told us belonged to them... They hired lawyers and we worked with the lawyers on such things as geography, ethnography, maps, and things like that.

Interview with William Mulligan, 1985, Interviewer Andre Noor.⁶

⁶ Mulligan Collection, Box 8.0, Folder 4.0. Special Collection. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

Despite the existence of a treaty and a survey, there was no fully agreed upon boundary between Saudi Arabia and Iraq in the post World War II period.⁷ The area extending along the Kingdom's northern frontiers with Jordan and Iraq is physically isolated from the centre of the Arabian Peninsula by the Great Nafud and geographically part of al-Badia, the steppe semi-arid and arid landmass that extends across the present-day national borders of Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Aramco geologists and Tapline engineers learned early on that northern Arabia was not an uninhabited wasteland, but grazing lands that had long been partitioned into *diras*. The Bedouin concept of territory was expressed by the term *dira*, the area throughout which a tribal group migrated in search of water and fresh pasture. A *dira* was not a strictly bounded and exclusively occupied territory but rather a customary one. Only the permanent wells and oasis communities were specifically claimed by the clan sections, others were to come freely once agreement was made between the sheikhs. Tribes extracted resources either by violence, whether by raiding other tribes or by imposing *khuwa*, a tax to ensure the protection of weaker tribes or a toll levied on caravans or travellers across the desert. *Diras* were therefore in flux. They changed in size and political jurisdiction in relation to the tribe's influence and to its loyalties to groups external to the *dira*.⁸

At the turn of the twentieth century, King Ibn Saud initiated a series of territorial conquests to unify the different tribes under his authority. The 1920s border treaties between what would become Saudi Arabia, Transjordan, and Iraq, used the limits of tribal ranges as the major criterion for boundary definition. States defined their territory by specifying which tribes were 'local nationals' and ensuring their allegiance to the central government. The cartographic delineation of Arabia did not consecrate the northern border as a material reality for the local tribes, which continued to cross it in search of water and pasture.

The discovery of oil highlighted the imperative for a fixed territorial order within which the Aramco Concession could be developed. As Arabian political boundaries were in relation to the territorialities of the tribes who held allegiances to one government or another, one of the tasks of Tapline was to survey the tribes, their geographies, and water resources while extending some facilities toward the settlement within the Kingdom's boundaries of tribes that had seasonally moved into Iraq in search of water. Furthermore, the physical infrastructure of Tapline however, its routing, fees, and services, provided however a possibility to physically inscribe the boundary. In the process, the pipeline project became inextricably bound up with the maintenance of Saudi rule and the security of the kingdom. The tribal mode of spatial organization was to be subordinated to a central authority with its apparatuses of security and administration. In 1951, a new unit for the Northern Frontiers Provinces (*al-hudud ash-shamaliyah*) was established as an intermediate administrative unit to resolve all Tapline matters, settle disputes and insure police protection. So tied was the formation of the Northern Frontiers Province to Tapline's operation that the 127,000 square km province was initially referred to as the "Tapline Protectorate."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Anthony B. Toth, "Lost Battles of the Bedouin and the Rise of Modern States in Northern Arabia," in *Nomadic Society in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Dawn Chatty (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam, eds., *The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Figure 4 Territorial Technologies of Tapline.



CONCLUSION

The paper contributes to research on transportation space in a world in which flows of information, capital, labour, resources, and commodities are taking place in larger quantities and at greater speeds. It argues that the development of transnational flows and global (private) infrastructures has neither annihilated nor depoliticized the territory but rather has operated through the territorial. The case study of the Tapline asserts the territorialities of oil flows. First, that the space of flow materially and discursively inscribe space at different scales. Second, that flows does not operate in a tabula-rasa; they displaces previous modes and geographies of circulation. Third, that the flow constructs boundaries and geographies of control and exclusivity. Redrawing flows, an infrastructure re-produces territorial configurations and harnesses social processes in a new geography of places and relations. Its deployment organizes space, exercises power over a geography, and materializes a territory through which different actors subsequently negotiate their stakes and interests. From this perspective, the flow of oil is achieved via a reinforcement of territorialities, which is a constitutive dimension and stake of contestation.

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AUTHOR

Rania Ghosn

Assistant Professor - University of Michigan College of Architecture and Urban Planning
rghosn@umich.com