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Borders in Time and Space: At What Stage do Borders become Sacrosanct?

Borders are the product of social and political decision making. The demarcation of borders between States are either negotiated bilaterally between neighbouring spatial entities, or are imposed upon the landscape by a victorious, or stronger, political entity, often as a result of military conquest. History is replete with examples of borders being superimposed upon a landscape where no border previously existed, thus changing the nature of local and regional power relations. But these artificial constructs become imprinted on the cartographic and political images of future generations in a relatively short period of time, regardless of what they may be taught as part of history. Children and young adults are normally socialised into perceiving the political landscape within which they grow up as constituting the “natural” geopolitical order and, as such, are prepared to defend any incursion beyond the border, and to demand the maintenance of what they perceive to be the geopolitical status quo. This can take place within one to two short generations of the borders being demarcated. Post World War I Central and eastern Europe is full of borders which, once demarcated, maintained their position through a long period of political change, down to the break up of the Soviet Union. While the function of the borders may have changed over time (from open to closed to sealed and back again) as a result of political change, their geographical location has remained much the same.

The Green Line border separating Israel and the West Bank is a good example of the way in which borders become sacrosanct in such a short space of time. Delineated for the first time in the aftermath of Israel’s war of independence (the Palestinian Naqba) in 1948, the Green Line has remained, until today, the border separating Israel from the West Bank, even though Israel has occupied and controlled this later territory since the Six Day War in 1967 – a period of over fifty years, almost three times as long as the period separating the 1948 and 1967 Wars. Despite the major geopolitical changes which have taken place in and around the Green Line border since 1967 (the construction of roads, settlements, the growth of both Israeli and Palestinian populations etc;), this remains the perceived “default” boundary for the implementation of a Two State solution. The Green Line border was far from perfect at the time of its demarcation and has become even less perfect during the intervening period. The creation of the Separation barrier / Wall between Israel and the West Bank deviates only slightly from the Green Line but is not recognised as being the basis for any future border. Most people who have grown up in the last fifty years are largely unaware of where the Green Line is, but all are convinced that it is the only border which can be implemented as part of a future peace agreement (which, at the moment of writing, is little more than a pipe dream).

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part develops the theme of the spatial temporality of borders and the ways in which they become geopolitically sacrosanct in a relatively short period of time. The second part focuses on the Green Line case study, tracing the development of the Green Line over time, and the way it is imprinted upon the minds of new generations of children through the teaching of history, geography and political science narratives – as well as the use of maps in school atlases. The concept of the Green Line is also used by politicians and diplomats, regardless of its artificiality, to promote specific political objectives, thus leaving this transient border imprinted upon the minds of all observers of the Israel-Palestine arena, and making it even more difficult to negotiate over a future border which would be more appropriate for both peoples.

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