

# Shifting Grounds: The Social Origins of Territorial Conflict

Burak KADERCAN

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Looking back over recent years, wars rooted in territorial disputes have increasingly shaped international politics, from the 2020 Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict and the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War to Israel's 2023 incursion into Gaza and the 2025 Thailand-Cambodia border conflict. Furthermore, United States (US) President Donald Trump's statements about Greenland, Panama, and Canada have cast doubt on the existing borders and sovereignty of neighboring countries. Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping has kept Taiwan at the forefront of China's foreign policy agenda. Taken together, these developments demonstrate that the notion that territorial issues have ceased to generate conflict is untenable, and that territorial disputes will remain central to the international agenda.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop, Burak Kadercan's *Shifting Grounds: The Social Origins of Territorial Conflict* offers a timely and highly relevant analysis.

Kadercan is a self-declared constructivist and, consistent with this orientation, defines territory as an intersubjective concept. Building on the seminal constructivist definition of anarchy, he contends that "territory is what states and societies make of it" (p. 2). This constructivist understanding of territory forms the foundation of his broader project. At the same time, he engages deeply with the literature on political geography, framing his approach as a "middle ground" (p. 231) between International Relations (IR) and political geography. By doing so, he aims to refrain from the "territorial trap"<sup>2</sup> and to take "territory and territoriality more seriously than mainstream IR" (p. 41). The result is a comprehensive interdisciplinary study that not only demonstrates how territorial ideas shape the ways societies wage war, but also how wars in turn transform territorial ideas.

The book consists of eight chapters. The introductory chapter shows that the meaning of territory is far from constant, varying across societies in different places and periods. This

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1 Quantitative studies support the idea that territorial disputes are the root cause of wars (Nioutsikos, Travlos and Daskalopoulou 2024).

2 The term "territorial trap" was first coined by Agnew (1994) to problematize the conventional understanding of territorial state.

is illustrated through the cases of “Germany-as-territory” and “Turkey-as-territory”, which provide historical and contemporary empirical evidence. Chapter 2 formulates the central research questions: how territorial ideas shape the ways states wage war, and how wars themselves reshape territorial ideas (p. 25). To address these questions, Kadercan analyzes four systemic wars: the Thirty Years’ Wars, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the First World War, and the Second World War. Each systemic war resulted in a change in territorial order. For instance, the Thirty Years’ Wars created a mosaic order, whereas the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars caused a monolithic order. Chapter 3 defines key concepts such as territory, territorialization, state, and territorial order, and introduces four distinct types of territorialities: mosaic, monolithic, virulent, and amorphous. According to the author, territorial orders shape how societies wage war, but wars, especially systemic ones, also have “substantial and long-lasting impacts on territorial ideas” (p. 60). Chapters 4-6 detail these types: mosaic orders (fixed borders, heterogeneous space-society nexus) make war frequent but less severe; monolithic orders (fixed borders, homogeneous nexus) make war rarer but more destructive; amorphous orders (fluid frontiers, heterogeneous nexus) allow opportunistic and continuous expansion; and virulent orders (fluid frontiers, homogeneous nexus) produce radical and violent wars. Finally, Chapter 7 argues that systemic wars act as catalysts for fundamental change in territorial orders (p. 176), while the conclusion highlights the broader implications for IR theory and the future of world politics.

The book is commendable in many respects with its interdisciplinary scope and rich case studies, but three points deserve closer attention. Firstly, Kadercan problematizes the territorial assumptions that had shaped IR discipline for decades and employs the *long durée* approach to reveal the emergence and transformation of territorial orders within their social and historical contexts. Through this lens, readers can escape the “territorial trap” that has long circumscribed our understanding of international politics. Secondly, by analyzing territorial processes in depth, he shows that systemic wars shaped the transformation of territorial ideas and practices through different mechanisms in the West and the non-West. The author then demonstrates that the ways we think about and act upon territorial orders lie at the very heart of the colonial and racist origins of both the theory and practice of international relations. Ultimately, he reveals that “racism is geographical” (p. 256). Thirdly, because territory is one of the principal causes of war, and the ways in which states and societies wage war are ideational, understanding the intersubjective nature of territory is essential for explaining the causes, dynamics, and potential consequences of wars. In this respect, Kadercan makes an important contribution.

Burak Kadercan first began this project as a dissertation at the University of Chicago, where he expected to work with John Mearsheimer and become a neorealist, but he ultimately devoted much of his career to critiquing neorealism (p. ix). This book stands out as one of the finest contributions of that intellectual trajectory. However, in analyzing the transition from one territorial order to another, Kadercan attributes primary causality to systemic wars, which situates him a quasi-realist. For sure, no concept belongs exclusively to a single paradigm and there are path-breaking constructivist studies that focus on international structure and anarchy.

However, when state elites are treated as the principal agents of reterritorialization, and when it is acknowledged that “territorial ideas can be imposed by outside actors” (p. 61), the text aligns closely with realist assumptions, a position that would likely be recognized by scholars such as Mearsheimer. Consider Germany after 1945, which Kadercan highlights as a case. He observes that “under the close supervision of the Allied Powers, the inhabitants of West Germany reimagined their territory as a peaceful land” (p. 9). In this case, territory is what great powers impose upon it. Also, even though he emphasizes that social forces such as the Reformation and nationalism are essential, he could further enrich his analysis by demonstrating how social classes, such as the aristocracy, merchants or bourgeoisie, contribute to the intersubjective understanding of territorial orders (Altay 2024), rather than relying solely on state elites, whose primary aim one might assume to be survival. Kadercan presents a rich set of case studies, ranging from the Thirty Years’ War and the Ottoman Empire to the First World War and the Islamic State. However, one may question which territorial order has shaped the actions of the United States, past and present, the poster child of offensive realism. This gap is particularly significant because the United States, as the global hegemon, plays a central role in shaping territorial orders, while Trump, during his presidency, increasingly made racial and hierarchical statements, especially concerning territories in the non-Western world.

Burak Kadercan’s *Shifting Grounds: The Social Origins of Territorial Conflict* is methodologically clear, theoretically rigorous, and empirically rich. It offers a thought-provoking and illuminating account that invites readers to reconsider the past, present, and future meanings of territory and territorial orders. The book deserves a place both on the syllabus and on the desk of anyone interested in international politics and the study of war.

## References

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## AI Disclosure Statement

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