The Middle East knows many oddities in terms of borderlands. From the no man's land between Egypt and Sudan to “safe zones” that regional powers may set up on segments of Syrian borderlands. Since WWII, the UN interventions contributed to the shaping of “intermediate borderlands” following a rationale of interposition between foes. More recently, the breakdown of the Iraqi, Syrian, Libyan and Yemenite States open doors to State’s re/definition following the rise of the organization of the Islamic State. In this context of heavy changes and strong power challenges in the Middle East, it may sounds timely to explore the current types of in-between border areas that appeared, persisted or changed.

Three types of areas can be identified:

1) The demilitarized areas that usually are located along a border between two States at war and patrolled by UN troops. The case of Cyprus or the Golan Heights are well known.

2) Restricted areas/safe areas, usually near a sensitive border, defined either by the State itself or by external powers set up to secure areas for different military/humanitarian/political purposes. It is the case of occupied borderlands like Israel did in South of Lebanon (1978-2000). It was also the case of safe areas under international protection, like the North of Iraq in 1991 (no fly zone).

3) No man's land between the two border posts are another in-between areas. Originally used to describe frontiers and undefined land in times of Empires with blurred boundaries, it came to describe in early XXth century a piece of land between two enemies trench systems which each sides fear and would not try to seize. More largely and commonly, this was describing a disputed territory over which there was a legal disagreement. Nowadays, a new type of no man’s land is emerging: the waiting area for bordercrossers and migrants. These spaces are related to a larger border network that is spreading within national territories (Makaremi, 2008).

Each of those categories of in-between borders raises three types of questions usually linked to any border studies research: How can one define political sovereignty over such territories and so who are the main actors/competitors in such environment? As a consequence, how do identities can be define in such blurred areas? And finally, what is happening there in terms of living conditions, rights, treatment, procedure and control by the force who patrol the area and how is it perceived by people living or crossing these areas?

In proposing an exploration of those types of in-between borders from several point of views, this panel intends to read beyond the political strategies and decipher meaningful dynamics at stake in the current reshaping of the Middle East. In so doing, it intends to discuss conceptual tools to describe the double dimensions of empirical and symbolical reality at stake there with notions like heterotopia (“non-lieu”), networked borders (Popescu, 2012) or borderities (Amilhat-Szary & Giraud, 2015).
Papers presented

Philippe Bourmaud (University of Lyon 2)
The sanitary cordon in the Middle East, between strategic design and international experience (1838-2015)

Matthieu Cimino (CERI/Sciences Po)
Heterotopia of the Syrian Conflict: A Comparative Study of ‘Waiting Areas’ at the Turkish- and Jordanian-Syrian Borders (2011-2016)

Véronique Bontemps (CNRS)
« This is not an ordinary border » The waiting zone (istemha) of Jericho during the crossing of the Allenby Bridge

Daniel Meier (Université Joseph-Fourier, Grenoble)
UN buffer zones in the Golan, South Lebanon and Cyprus: naturalizing the status quo of no man's land?

Plans ahead for publication

This initial meeting around the key question of buffer zones/no man's land is part of a general reflections started by several researchers of this panel in doing fieldwork in the Middle East. Those areas appeared as being able to forge a general reflection at the scale of the Middle East. It is therefore envisioned to set up a publication process of those papers into a theme or special issue of a journal. Contacts are ongoing with the British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies and Journal of Borderlands Studies.