Birding Beyond Borders: Middle Eastern Birdwatching Deconstructs Border Stereotypes and Builds Identity

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Despite significant research studying the effects of the natural realm on human coexistence across many broad regions, there is little published on the relationship between nature and politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Birds and birdwatching present an alternative realm to explore how the peripheral nature and naturality specifically of borders allow for information exchange between extraordinarily diverse groups, thus yielding a potential new trajectory of reconciliation for the MENA region and its human populations. Using cultural media analysis of a Vice News YouTube segment, I analyze the cohesive effects of birds in Middle Eastern border areas, particularly Golan Heights. To further demonstrate the potential for connecting and identity-forming ability of birds to specific peoples and places, I discuss avian migration patterns of birds in Golan Heights, explore historical and cultural significance of birds in Tehran, and navigate a personal Jewish narrative titled "Birding in the Dark". Birds and the natural realm have the potential to teach humans, especially in the border-stereotyped MENA region, how to coexist.

The legacies of early and mid-twentieth century Middle Eastern state-building featured the seizure of territory during opportunities of state weakness, causing an influx of borders to be drawn and redrawn. A paralleled rise in separatism created an inseparable connection between the Middle East and border instability. The ensuing portrayal of borders by media sources characterizes borderlines in the Middle East as strictly delineated by brutality; however, the seemingly indifferent nature of a birder group in the Vice News Golan Heights video toward the Syrian-Israeli conflict shows that borders, through birders, have the capacity to be more arbitrary and flexible than originally projected.

Avian migration patterns further dismantle the perception of impassable and demarcated borderline areas. The Golan Heights area and the Syria-Israel border make up an important migration corridor for migrating birds.

These birds are allowed to travel without perception or constriction of man-made constructs. People cannot migrate as freely, in part because of lack of flight but more so because of the restrictions we have imposed on ourselves. In order to facilitate more unrestricted migration and allow for a greater exchange of cultural and personal identities, we must take inspiration from avian freedom. Aside from inspiring freedom through migration, birds also have a long and deep history in parts of the Middle East that can help bridge connections, maintain cultural identity, and shape personal and spiritual sentiments.

We should not be focused on whether borders are correctly positioned, who "controls" them, or whether or not they should exist but should instead be analyzing them as potential harbingers of cultural exchange and connection; it is through the world of birds that this can take place. As the Middle East begins to pursue non-violent methods of easing the symptoms of historically pervasive separatism, harnessing the connective power of birds and natural settings will become of increasing importance - one might even say it is a situation of borderline precedence.
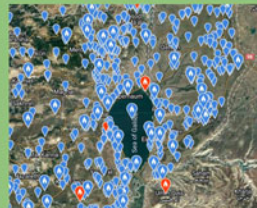
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Background:

- Early and mid-twentieth century Middle Eastern state-building featured the seizure of territory during opportunities of state weakness, causing an influx of borders to be drawn and redrawn.
- A paralleled rise in separatism created an inseparable connection between the Middle East and border instability.

Methods:

Analysis of four main sources:
1. Vice News media clip from YouTube
2. Ebird White Stork (لقلق أبيض) migration data
3. Jonathan Rosen's "Birding in the Dark " narrative
4. "Birds, Love and Liberation in Tehran 2012: An Attempt to Understand Human Relationships with Birds" by Soheila Shahshahani

Thesis:

Birds tell us that borderlines are not impermeable geographic markers of division but are instead fluid points of cultural overlap, helping to build and solidify identities of place, history, and future hopes. Birds provide inspiration for freedom through migration and flight while also implanting emotional and historical sentiments that more easily bridge differences.

Results/Conclusions:

- **Birders in the Vice News clip** converse at the Golan Heights borderline between Syria and Israel without violently emphasizing the war and political proceedings that created the boundary. Borders, through birding, can be used as potential pathways for peace and areas of reconciliation.

- **Nature conservation activities and centers** have the potential to consolidate friendship and mutual trust between diverse communities.

- **Inspiration from avian migration and flight** (such as the White Stork) promotes and instills ideas of freedom from weighty human conflict.

- **Birds serve as reminders of cultural memories and emotions**, which are important in establishing a sense of self throughout times of unrest and also creating newfound connections between diverse backgrounds. Birds can be found throughout Middle Eastern culture in dreams, religion, songs, folk tales, poems, and symbolism.

- **As the Middle East** begins to pursue non-violent methods of easing the symptoms of historically pervasive separatism, harnessing the connective power of birds and natural settings will become of increasing importance