



NEAR EAST
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Event Brief

The Material and Symbolic Power of Borders
Dr. Merrill Hopper
University of Newcastle

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Global Security Seminar Series Spring Term 2026

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The Material and Symbolic Power of Borders

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Overview

The Near East Institute launched its Spring Term Global Security Seminar Series with a guest lecture by Dr. Merrill Hopper, exploring the material and symbolic dimensions of borders. The session brought together postgraduate students and researchers to examine how borders shape identity, movement, and perceptions of belonging beyond their formal territorial definitions.

Key Arguments

Dr. Hopper argued that borders extend beyond maps and checkpoints, manifesting in everyday objects such as walls, gates, road signs, and flags. Using Belfast's peace walls as a case study, she demonstrated that these objects carry symbolic and affective weight, subtly influencing who is included or "othered" in a given space. A central insight was that the performance of borders — how they are enacted in daily life — can be as consequential as their physical presence, embedding difference and division into the landscape in ways that are both persistent and politically meaningful.

Discussion Highlights

1. How everyday objects such as signs or flags can function as symbolic walls shaping belonging.
2. The significance of border performance versus physical barriers in influencing identity and territoriality.
3. Broader implications for contested and post-conflict environments, linking theory to practice and policy considerations.



Policy Relevance

The themes explored resonate with current debates in Cyprus, where borders remain both materially and symbolically significant. Recent imagery of high-level EU officials staged near physical barriers, combined with ongoing stalemates over opening new crossing points and discussions around Schengen process implications, highlight the layered political, social, and mobility challenges posed by borders. This session underscores the importance of understanding these dynamics when designing policies that navigate contested spaces and foster inclusion.