



# Violent Borders: An Interview with Reece Jones

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*Award-winning political geographer Reece Jones discusses the militarisation of borders by states and the detrimental consequences of this practice.*

**Q. There's a common narrative that nation-states are defined by their borders. What are borders and are they a natural part of the human world as some have claimed?**

There is no such thing as a natural border. Borders are human ideas for dividing land, resources, and people and excluding other people from accessing those places. Most borders begin as a line drawn on a map that is later inscribed into the landscape through border markers, checkpoints, security patrols, and walls. In the past, physical features of the landscape like mountain ranges could act as barriers to movement, limiting the ability of an army to invade a particular area or providing a refuge for people fleeing the state. However, a physical impediment to movement is not the same thing as a natural border.

The term nation-state is also a human idea, not a historical or present fact. States are political entities that control a territory through a bureaucracy that governs. States gave a monopoly on the ability make rules and enforce them with violence. Nations are groups of people that believe they have a shared connection to each other and a particular territory. The idea that each state contains one nation of people is a myth used to claim authority over a territory. Both borders and the idea of a nation-state are mechanism for projecting power over land, resources, and people, not natural phenomenon that have always existed.

**Q. Historically, how have the ways nations-states control their borders changed and what has caused these shifts?**

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The purpose of borders has shifted several times over the history of the state. Prior to the modern era, the borders of states were not drawn on maps (because the technology did not exist), so most edges were not sharp lines but rather frontiers where one state's authority unevenly ended and another began. There was not a system of mutual recognition of sovereignty and consequently control ebbed and flowed. The earliest purpose of a wall or barrier, such as walled cities in medieval Europe, was as a military defensive line that was where one group of people fought off an invasion by another group.

The modern state system is based on mutual recognition of sovereignty of territorial states with border drawn on maps. That system slowly emerged over the past three hundred years and culminated with the creation of the United Nations as a clearinghouse for official sovereignty claims. In that era, the purpose of borders shifted to lines to define the different economic, political, and cultural systems of states. Neighbouring states no longer worried about an invasion across the border and consequently border walls were exceedingly rare. During this era, wealth differences grew substantially between different states. Over the past forty years, as globalisation has connected the world through transportation and communication networks, the purpose of borders has shifted again to become the locations to control the movement of people, particularly the poor. This is why border security and the construction of walls have increased dramatically in the supposedly borderless world of globalisation.

### **Q. Why is the EU the “world’s deadliest border” and who carries responsibility for this?**

The borders of the European Union are by far the most deadly with roughly two-thirds of all migration related deaths occurring there or en route to the EU. The

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high death rate is a combination of an extremely dangerous border in the Mediterranean Sea coupled with increased enforcement that forces people to use smugglers and to take ever more risky migration routes. Many of deaths occur when unseaworthy ships sink in the Mediterranean but they also occur in the lawless areas of Libya and on the dangerous crossing of the Sahara Desert. The death rate is increased by the active disruption of aid ships in the Mediterranean who could provide safe passage for people on the move but instead are criminalised for saving lives.

**Q. The US-Mexico border is described in your book as a militarised zone and you document how, over time, the practice of border enforcement has blurred the distinction between policing and militarization. Is Trump's approach to border security radically different from what has come before or is it simply a continuation of previous trends?**

The US-Mexico border has been militarised and securitised over decades. The Trump administration's policies are more severe and extreme, but are a continuation of policies put in place by each of the presidents that proceeded him. The deterrence strategy and the first significant fencing on the border and were begun during the Clinton Administration. During the Bush Administration the Department of Homeland Security was created, substantial amounts of money were used to hire thousands of additional Border Patrol agents, and the Secure Fence Act authorising over 1000 km of fencing on the border was passed. Most of the existing border wall was actually built during the Obama administration, which also continued to fund agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The military regularly conducted training missions with the Border Patrol at the border during the Obama years. The current administration has gone farther by implementing a family separation policy,

reducing the refugee quota substantially, metering asylum claims at checkpoints, and firing tear gas at people in Mexico, but do not represent a sharp break with previous policies.

**Q. Outside of Europe and the US, how have these border security approaches been employed by other states? Have we seen a globalisation of securitised, hardened borders?**

The United States and the countries of the European Union are not alone in building border walls. My colleague [Elisabeth Vallet](#) of the University of Quebec at Montreal has [found](#) that in the 1990s there were about 15 border walls around the world, while today there are 70. The increase in border security around the world is also correlated with dramatic increases in the number of migrant deaths as people are funnelled to ever more dangerous places to cross borders. The Associated Press found that 56,800 people died or went missing crossing a border from 2014-2018. That is 14,000 people per year.

**Q. From economic, human and environmental perspectives, are these approaches to borders and migration sustainable for states?**

The conclusion of [Violent Borders](#) points to three general principles for addressing these issues: open borders to migration, global worker protections, and global environmental regulations. My [new book](#) [Open Borders: In Defense of Free Movement](#) expands on this by considering the argument for open borders. The book brings together theorists of open borders with activists who work on the ground create a world of free movement. Although at the present moment few politicians support the idea of open borders, there are strong economic and moral arguments in favour of allowing free movement.

The premise is that the right to move is a fundamental human right and that if a country wants to limit that right, there needs to be a significant overriding concern that justifies the restriction. Advocates of open borders suggest that none of the current justifications for limiting movement rise to the necessary level. The book outlines the damage that hardened borders do and considers what a world of free movement might look like.

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Image credit: [Guila van Pelt/Flickr](#).

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## About the Interviewee

**Reece Jones** is a Professor of Geography and Environment at the University of Hawai'i who studies the relationship between states, borders, and people on the move. He is the author of two books: *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (2016, Verso) and *Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India and Israel* (2012, Zed) and four edited books: *Open Borders* (2019), *the Handbook on Critical Geographies of Migration* (2019), *Borders and Mobility in South Asia and Beyond* (2018), and *Placing the Border in Everyday Life* (2014). He is currently working on a new book about race and the border in the United States. He is the editor-in-chief of the journal *Geopolitics* and the co-editor of the *Routledge Geopolitics Book Series* with Klaus Dodds. His research on border security and violence has been featured in dozens of media outlets around the world including the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Time Magazine*, and the *Economist*.

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