



THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW®

JAMES L. GELVIN

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PREFACE

I am a historian by training and trade. Although I began my career as a specialist in early-twentieth-century Syria, the onrush of events in the Middle East and the insatiable appetite of the general public for information that might help it better understand the region encouraged me to shift my focus to what is called “contemporary history”—a phrase that seems more a contradiction in terms than an established subfield of history. Hence my book, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, also published by Oxford University Press.

One of the greatest practitioners of my trade, Fernand Braudel, once wrote that anyone who tries to understand current affairs by focusing only on today and the immediate past “will continually have his eye caught by anything that moves quickly or glitters.” However (he continued), a knowledge of history enables us “to know whether what one is witnessing is the rise of a new movement, the tail end of an old one, an echo from the very distant past, or a monotonously recurring phenomenon.”¹ History matters: it is embedded in the present (or, as novelist William Faulkner put it, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”²). And so I wrote this book to apply what I have learned over the years to ongoing events.

I am grateful for the encouragement and hard work of my editor at Oxford University Press, Nancy Toff, and her assistants, Elda Granata and Elizabeth Vaziri. I am also grateful

to those who reviewed the manuscript for this book, whose criticisms and suggestions made it all the better. Finally, I am grateful to my students at UCLA who, on multiple occasions, patiently sat through seminars and lectures concerning many of the issues raised in this book while I honed my arguments and put them in a comprehensible form.

Earlier renditions of parts of this book first appeared on the online websites History News Network and The Conversation. I have also drawn from my print publications, including *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and "The Arab World at the Intersection of the Transnational and National," in David W. Lesch and Mark Haas (eds.), *The Arab Spring: Hope and Reality of the Uprisings*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012).

THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

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Map 1 The Middle East

1

BEFORE THE DELUGE

THE MIDDLE EAST, 1945–2011

What is the Middle East?

“Middle East” is one of several terms that refer to the territory of southwest Asia and North Africa. Other terms for the same region include Greater Middle East, Near East, and Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Although now commonplace, the term “Middle East” is of recent vintage. It was coined in the first years of the twentieth century. At the time, it referred only to the area surrounding the Persian Gulf. In 1920, the British Royal Geographic Society recommended its use to refer to the area stretching from the Turkish Straits in the west to the frontier of India in the east. Nevertheless, it did not displace “Near East” in British and US policy circles until World War II. But even after the term passed into general usage, the boundaries of the region remained imprecise and a bit arbitrary. Is Sudan, an Arab state bordering Egypt in the south, part of the Middle East? What about Armenia?

In this book, “Middle East” refers to the territory that stretches from Morocco in the west to Iran in the east. It includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt (but not Sudan—boundaries have to be drawn somewhere) in North Africa, and Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, and Yemen (but not Armenia—again, for the

same reason) in southwest Asia. It also includes Turkey, which straddles Europe and southwest Asia.

Who lives in the Middle East?

According to the United Nations Population Division, as of 2015 there were approximately 510 million people living in the Middle East.¹ This statistic must, however, be treated with some skepticism. For example, Lebanon has not conducted a census since 1932. Doing so might invalidate the agreed-upon formula for proportional representation among the various religious groups living there. Because of conscription in Egypt, parents do not always register the births of their sons. And although the United Nations puts the population of Qatar at more than two million, that statistic fails to take into account that more than 90 percent of the people living in Qatar are temporary guest workers. There are fewer than 300,000 Qatari citizens.

Whatever the number of inhabitants of the region, however, those who live there represent a broad array of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. The three largest ethnic groups are Arabs, Turks, and Iranians. Arabs make up the overwhelming majority (as of 2015, there were more than 345 million Arabs in the Middle East). Most Arabs, Turks, and Iranians live in the Arab world, Turkey, and Iran, respectively. But Arabs, Turks, and Iranians live outside those areas as well. Arab populations live in both Turkey and Iran, ethnically Turkish tribes live in Iran, and Iranian refugees live in both Iraq and Turkey.

Other ethnic groups in the region include Kurds and Berbers. Kurds live mainly in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Clocking in at about thirty-five million, they represent the world's largest stateless nation. Most Berbers live in North Africa. Because the term "Berber" can refer both to those who descend from the inhabitants of the region who lived there before the Arab conquest in the eighth century as well as to those whose native language is Tamazight (Berber), estimates of the number of Berbers vary widely.

The Middle East is also linguistically diverse. The native language of most Arabs and Turks is, of course, Arabic and Turkish, but Farsi (also known as Persian) is the native language of only about half the population of Iran. Other ethnic groups in the region have their own native languages, such as Kurdish, Tamazight, and Armenian. And in Israel Hebrew (as well as Arabic) is the official language.

A majority of the inhabitants of the Middle East are Muslim. There are two main branches of Islam—Sunni Islam and Shi'i Islam. The split in the Islamic community took place after the death of Muhammad, when his followers disagreed about who should lead the community. Over time, each branch developed different rituals, traditions, and beliefs. Understanding that there is a divide between Sunnis and Shi'is is important for understanding some of the political rivalries in the region. It is important to note, however, that the rivalries that pit members of the two communities against each other concern political issues, such as which group should govern. They rarely concern religious issues per se. Where sects contend against each other, religion merely acts as an identifier of the political community to which one belongs. Therefore, understanding how each community's rituals, traditions, and beliefs differ from the other's is not at all important for understanding the New Middle East.

Most Arabs and Turks are Sunnis, although Shi'is make up a significant minority in Lebanon, Yemen, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. They make up a majority in two other Arab countries, Bahrain and Iraq. Most Iranians are Shi'is, and Iran is the world's largest Shi'i country.

There are numerous other religious groups in the region as well. Christians of various stripes—Orthodox, Catholics, Maronites (mainly in Lebanon), Copts (mainly in Egypt)—live throughout the Middle East. After the establishment of the State of Israel, most of the members of the Arab world's once flourishing Jewish communities quit their homelands voluntarily or because they were coerced to do so by their

governments. The largest number decamped to Israel. A similar exodus of Iranian Jews took place after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Then there are a myriad of other religious groups as well, including Zaydis in Yemen, Alawites in Syria and Turkey, Alevis in Turkey, Yazidis in Iraq and Syria, Ibadis in Oman and North Africa, and Druze in Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Again, the fact that these groups are present in the region is, at times, an important element in our story.

What is the Middle East state system?

The year 2016 marked the hundredth anniversary of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and there were countless op-eds and commentaries commemorating (bemoaning?) it. This agreement was a plan hatched during World War I by two officials, Sir Mark Sykes of the British War Office and François Georges-Picot, the French consul in Beirut, to divide up the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the war. The Ottoman Empire, which ruled much of the Asiatic Arab world as well as Anatolia (the site of present-day Turkey) and Egypt, had entered the war on the side of the Central Powers, which Britain, France, and their allies were fighting.

Ever since, Sykes-Picot has come to symbolize the artificial nature of state boundaries in the Middle East. According to most of the op-eds and commentaries, because these boundaries were drawn by far-off diplomats, who had no regard for the wishes of the populations of the region or for the religious and ethnic bonds that united and divided them, we have instability in the region today.

Or at least that is the story. The reality is quite different. The boundaries Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot drew up would have been no more or less artificial than any other boundaries that separate states—had they actually gone into effect. They did not. The British, whose military actually occupied the territory covered by the agreement, were dissatisfied with the boundaries, and the French were powerless to

complain. In other words, by the end of World War I the agreement was already a dead letter.

How, then, did states in the territory covered by the agreement (which, by the way, included only a tiny fraction of the territory of the Middle East) get their boundaries? In the Asiatic Arab territories, a number of states had their boundaries set through the mandates system, which the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations, instituted there. The system allotted Britain and France temporary control over territory in the region. The two powers took it upon themselves to combine or divide territories into proto-states in accordance with their imperial interests. Thus, Britain created Iraq and Trans-Jordan (later the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, or simply Jordan) after the war. Israel and Palestine came even later. France did the same for Lebanon and Syria.

Those states, like most others in the Middle East, gained their independence during two waves. The first wave took place during the period between World War I and World War II. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey achieved independence then, and Egypt became somewhat independent (Iran and Oman—the latter known then as Muscat and Oman—were already independent states). The British granted independence to its mandate, Iraq, mainly because it was a drain on the imperial treasury. They almost did the same for Egypt, which they had been occupying since 1882. After a widespread rebellion convinced them that Egypt would be ungovernable unless changes were made, they granted Egypt “conditional independence” in 1922. It took Egyptians almost thirty-five years to eliminate the British role there entirely and change conditional independence into full independence.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey achieved independence on the battlefield. In the former case, Abdulaziz ibn Saud, a warlord from north/central Arabia, led an army composed of warriors from a mix of tribes that conquered much of the Arabian Peninsula. When the dust had settled, he established a dynasty that has ruled Saudi Arabia to this day. In Anatolia, Turkish

nationalists fought a grueling four-year war that drove out foreigners who had been occupying the peninsula since the end of World War I. The result was the contemporary Republic of Turkey.

The second wave of state construction took place during the Period of Decolonization, which began after World War II and lasted through the first half of the 1970s. The Period of Decolonization marked the end of formal British, French, and Portuguese colonial empires. During this period, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Syria gained their independence from France (Spain also abandoned most of the territory it controlled in Morocco). Much of the Gulf (the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait), along with Israel and Jordan, gained theirs from Britain.

None of these places had been colonies, *per se*. There had been only one real colony in the Middle East—the British colony of Aden. After independence, Aden became, first, part of South Yemen, then part of Yemen (established in 1990 when North Yemen merged with South Yemen). Instead of colonies, the British and French empires in the Middle East consisted mainly of mandates and protectorates (proto-states in which local rulers set domestic policy and kept order while Britain and France handled their dealings with the rest of the world). There was also the occasional occupation (Egypt) or the wholesale integration of territory into the mother country (as in the case of Algeria, which the French considered as much a part of France as Paris until its independence in 1962). Libya, which the Italians had integrated into Italy in like fashion, also became an independent state during this period. Captured by the Allies from the Italians during World War II, Libya became a ward of the United Nations, which granted it independence three years after the organization's founding.

Some states in the region—Turkey, Israel, Algeria—won their independence through armed struggle. Others—most of the mandates, for example—won it through negotiation. And some—Saudi Arabia, Yemen—went through painful periods

before the state-building process was over. Then there is the unique case of Palestine. Palestinians engaged in armed struggle with Israel for forty-five years before joining their opponent in direct negotiations. Short bursts of negotiation, separated by periods of breakdown and conflict, have continued since the 1990s. In the meantime, the United Nations voted to recognize Palestine as a nonvoting observer state in 2012.

In spite of its motley origins and the lamentations of those who hold onto the myth of Sykes-Picot, the Middle East state system has been remarkably stable ever since the end of the Period of Decolonization. There have been exceptions, of course, including the shifting borders of Israel and the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. Nevertheless, the state system in the Middle East has been one of the most stable state systems in the world. It certainly has been more stable than the state system in Europe.

There are two reasons for this stability. First, the passage of time. Although most member states of the state system in the region received their complete independence after World War II, the process of formulating distinct national identities began while those states were under foreign rule. Ever since, states engaged their citizens in common practices and worked to develop their own internal markets and divisions of labor—necessary (but obviously not sufficient) preconditions for the formation of distinct national identities. The states in the region also jealously guarded their borders, rewrote their histories, and, indeed, produced enough of their own histories to differentiate their national experience from that of their neighbors. As a result, with the exception of Yemen, no attempt to adjust state borders by negotiation—including the short-lived union between Egypt and Syria (the United Arab Republic, 1958–1961)—bore fruit during the postcolonial era.

The second reason the state system has been relatively stable has been support for that system provided by great powers—first Britain, then the United States—and by regional actors anxious to maintain the status quo. Great power intervention

has occurred whenever some strongman or national liberation movement has risen to the surface and threatened to upset the balance of power or great power interests. Britain twice intervened in Oman (1959, 1975) to crush rebellions that threatened to divide the country. The British again intervened in the Gulf in 1961 to protect newly independent Kuwait from its northern neighbor, which claimed it as Iraq's nineteenth province. Iraq's Saddam Hussein reasserted that claim in 1990. Once again, foreign intervention forced an Iraqi retreat.

Do the states in the Middle East have anything in common?

At first glance, the states in the Middle East seem as varied as the people who inhabit the region. The Middle East includes twelve republics and eight monarchies. Three states—Egypt, Turkey, Iran—currently have populations in excess of eighty million, while the populations of Lebanon and Kuwait (including guest workers) hover around four million. Algeria, geographically the largest state in the region, spans close to one million square miles. Bahrain, the smallest, includes fewer than three hundred. Then there are the differences in wealth. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as of 2015 the adjusted annual income for each citizen of Qatar, the wealthiest state in the region, was \$132,000; for those living in Yemen, the poorest, it was under \$2,700. And, considering Yemenis have experienced years of civil strife, that figure now can be only an overestimation.

Nevertheless, beneath the apparent variations among the countries of the region, there are some striking similarities. From the Period of Decolonization through the last decades of the twentieth century, governments throughout the region (Lebanon excepted) played a major role in the economy. They did so to force-march economic development, expand employment opportunities, reward favored groups in the population, and gain control over strategic industries. Governments also provided a wide array of social benefits for their populations,