This book retells the origin story of the modern Middle East: how an extended period of conflict that I term the Long Great War (1911–1934) unmade a centuries-old Ottoman regional system and opened up a tumultuous window of time during which the Middle East’s political order was fundamentally reimagined and remade. The revisionist twist concerns how this took place. The usual account of this period is top-down, focused on how the British and French imposed artificial new political boundaries on the region after World War I, which are then blamed for ensuing unrest. In its place, I offer a new version, arguing that the modern Middle East was actually shaped by power struggles on the ground that were fueled by competing local and international visions for the post-Ottoman future.

The following chapters trace this process over a two-decade period of transition and upheaval in the Middle East as the Long Great War progressed through three distinct phases. In the first (1911–1918), the last vestiges of the greater Ottoman political order were unmade in an interempire global conflict. This opened up a second moment in which a wide range of post-Ottoman polities became imaginable for both local and colonial actors. In the last phase of the Long Great War (from the mid-1920s through the mid-1930s), these visions clashed violently. It was these struggles that narrowed down the types of political structures, generated locally or by colonial powers, that survived in the region; transformed
how political communities could be imagined; and ultimately produced the new polities and redefined boundaries that constituted the region’s new map.

Focusing less on peace settlement pen strokes and more on the realities of state formation and violent conflict—recognizing that it was war that made borders in the region from Morocco to Iran, rather than the reverse—forces a rethinking of the modern Middle East’s origins. My hope is that it also helps us reimagine the region’s present and future. The greater Middle East has been passing through a similar critical transitional period in the early twenty-first century, during which political orders have again been undone in revolution and civil war, new polities have been imagined, and political boundaries have become both more fluid and more rigid.

Over my years of research for this book, I have repeatedly been struck by the complicated entwinement of the Middle East’s century-old Great War past and its present-day violent processes of state and boundary formation. One of these times was physical, when my face was pushed down in the hard dirt, about a hundred yards from the Syrian border, by a Jordanian soldier in early January 2017.

I was in northern Jordan to do field site visits in the southern reaches of the Jabal al-Druze and the Hawran volcanic plain that extend across the border from Syria. In the aftermath of World War I, these areas were initially under Faisal’s Damascus-based Arab Kingdom, which briefly governed an inland territory stretching from Aleppo down to Amman before being crushed by France in the summer of 1920. This region was then split between French and British zones of control roughly laid out in a secret 1916 wartime agreement divvying up the Ottoman Empire, known by the names of its negotiators, Mark Sykes and Georges Picot. Five years later, however, the Hawran was the launching point and epicenter of the Great Syrian Revolt, a countrywide uprising in 1925 that threatened the French Mandate granted by the League of Nations over Syria and Lebanon. Druze communities traversed more or less freely across the porous frontier, using northern Transjordan, nominally under British control, as a refuge during the fighting and again fleeing there when the conflict
ended in 1927. To guard against another uprising, French forces occupied many of the villages in this area until a bilateral commission finally settled and surveyed the international boundary in 1931 and 1932.²

That Saturday morning in early 2017, my brother-in-law and I had driven up the international highway heading north from Amman toward Damascus, passing through the towns of Zarqa and Mafraq to the Jaber-Nassib checkpoint. This was once the busiest crossing into Syria, but it had been closed as a result of the civil war that escalated after the Assad regime cracked down on protests just over the border in the city of Daraa in March 2011.³ From Jaber, our plan was to cut southeast down to the village of Umm al-Jimal to see the ancient black basalt ruins. This Nabatean city had thrived through Roman, Byzantine, and Ummayad periods before being destroyed by an earthquake in 749 CE. In 1925, with the outbreak of the Syrian revolt, the British stationed armored-car units at the Umm al-Jimal ruins and further east at Azraq to try to control movement across the ostensible international border.⁴ Along the route, we would have views to the north toward al-Suwayda and Salkhad, key Druze strongholds during the Great Syrian Revolt, now inaccessible because of the ongoing conflict in Syria.

On our way, we decided to cut north slightly from the village of Elmntaih to get to a well-paved road that, on Google maps, paralleled the border and would take us to Umm al-Jimal. Soon after making this turn, though, I started hearing the pinging sounds of (what I later realized were) warning shots. A minute later, two 4x4 Toyotas with mounted guns and a squad of Jordanian soldiers on foot, with machine guns drawn, raced at us, pulled us out of the car, and pinned us on the ground. Turning my head slightly, I watched as they immobilized the car, systematically shooting out the tires and windows. Thankfully, the patrol’s sergeant got his men to stand down once he realized we were not a threat and loaded us into the pickups. In the back of the truck, the gunner kept looking at us, smiling and laughing, pointing to his right and saying “Suria, Daesh”⁵—Syria, ISIS—and to his left “al-Urdun”—Jordan—as we sped on the well-paved road feet away from the Syrian border to the nearest army post. The rest of the day we were treated with the utmost courtesy (and countless cups of tea and coffee) while we tried to explain to higher-ranking officers why we had gone so foolishly close to the border, hearing the refrain, “You should thank God, you should be dead,” over and over.
Unwittingly, we had entered a no-go zone established along the entire Syrian frontier by the Jordanian military, who had a shoot-to-kill protocol for anyone approaching the border from either side. This had been established after ISIS launched several attacks in the summer of 2016 against Jordanian border posts, including a suicide attack in which a bomb-filled truck was driven into a post at al-Rukban, killing seven Jordanian soldiers. Afterward, the Jordanian military installed a U.S.-funded, Raytheon-built, hundred-million-dollar security system, including ground radar, communications infrastructure, and quick-response vehicles along the length of the Syrian and Iraqi borders. We had just had a traumatic, much-too-close encounter with one of the most highly securitized territorial boundaries in the world. Echoing the aftermath of the Great Syrian Revolt, when the threat of Druze mobility forced the British and French to demarcate and police the frontier, the twenty-first-century Syro-Jordanian border had been drastically hardened because of the Syrian civil war and the specific cross-border threat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

The past and present negotiation of the region’s emerging states, political identities, and boundaries became viscerally real to me during another research trip, this time in May 2016 to northern Iraq, on the opposite edge of the archipelago of territory amassed by ISIS since 2014. In the northwest Duhok governorate, I was at the Rabban Hermizd monastery (founded by Christian monks in the 640s), standing on the first ridgeline of the Kurdish highlands that rise from the Nineveh Plains, twenty-five miles north of Mosul. A hundred years ago, in the last weeks of World War I, the British raced up to these plains from Baghdad to stake a claim to the Mosul province, despite the fact that the Anglo-French Sykes-Picot land-share agreement designated it part of a French zone after the war. Throughout the rest of the 1920s, the Mosul Question—the nexus of competing British, French, and Turkish claims to the former Ottoman province—remained an ongoing tension until a series of League of Nations commissions finally apportioned Mosul province to British-mandate Iraq in 1926, though it took six more years to finally negotiate and demarcate its boundaries with the Turkish Republic and French-mandate Syria. None of these settlements, however, accommodated the Kurdish political aspirations that had been stoked by the Great War, an omission with long-term repercussions.
By 2016, a new iteration of the Mosul Question had crystallized in the aftermath of U.S. invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003, namely, the emergence since the early 1990s of a functionally autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq’s northern provinces and the spectacular rise of a self-proclaimed Islamic State, which occupied the city of Mosul in 2014. In contrast to Jordan, territorial boundaries in this area were in extreme flux. In the summer of 2014, on the plain right below where I stood, ISIS forces had reached within less than a mile from a Christian Assyrian village, Alqosh, before Kurdish Peshmerga forces stemmed the tide. In the wake of their dramatic push from Syria into Iraq—taking Mosul, Tikrit, and much of the west and north of the country—the Islamic State released a video on June 29, 2014, proudly titled “The End of Sykes-Picot.” Clips showed a bulldozer plowing through a berm on the Iraq-Syria border and a border checkpoint being blown up to dramatically illustrate the erasure of the “artificial” boundaries imposed on the region by Britain and France a century before.6 The same day, at the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul, the Islamic State’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the creation of an Islamic caliphate, a post-national polity intended to encompass Muslim lands.

Standing there two years later, the boundary between the KRG and the Islamic State was about six miles south of Alqosh. The Kurdish Peshmerga—with significant North American, European, and Middle Eastern material and advisory support7—were pushing that boundary back down toward Mosul from the north while the Iraqi army prepared a campaign to retake the city from the south. Aid agencies had already constructed additional refugee camps near Dohuk to try to deal with the flood expected to flee the fighting in the city. In October 2016, the Peshmerga and Iraqi army launched the Battle of Mosul. Victory was declared in July 2017 by the Iraqi prime minister.

The contemporary Mosul Question, however, remains far from resolved. The claims of the KRG and the Iraqi state clash in the Nineveh and Kirkuk northern governorates, as do the economic, political, and strategic interests of regional powerhouses Turkey and Iran. These concerns remain deeply interconnected with complex neighboring conflicts. In Syria, emergent polities like the Islamic State and Kurdish-dominated Rojava have vied with the Assad regime and a myriad other militia forces, and Turkey has taken an increasingly aggressive interventionist posture
across the border. The Turkish military also continues to wage a counter-insurgency in the southeast against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a Kurdish group that uses cross-border support bases in Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan. While hiking in the Gara Mountains just south of the Turkish border in Iraqi Kurdistan, we saw PKK shelters, craters made by Turkish airstrikes, and, far below, PKK groups driving Toyota pickups on tracks in the valleys. In this complicated political topography, the guide coordinating our trip had had to notify the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Turkish air force, and the PKK to give them a heads-up that our group was hiking in the area.

Today’s Mosul Question is one manifestation of a deeper question hanging over the region: How are political orders reconfigured in historical moments of profound change? In 2003, the U.S. invasion of Iraq functionally demolished state control over a strategic space right in the center of the Middle East. Seizing this opening, multiple local political-military networks and external nonstate and state actors—al-Qaeda, the proto-Islamic State grouping created by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Sadr’s and other Iraqi Shi’i militias, the Kurdish factions, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and the occupying U.S. military—joined the fray to reshape Iraq. With the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the region’s interstate system was further destabilized as bottom-up pressures threatened incumbent regimes, with some successfully reconsolidating, reforming, and co-opting resistance or waging a counterrevolution (Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan) while others were overthrown or functionally destabilized (Libya, Syria, and Yemen). Since then, the region’s most intense conflicts have raged at these friction points where, in the absence of a functioning state even loosely approximating a monopoly of force, a wide array of local, regional, and international forces clash for control on the ground. Hundreds of thousands have been killed and millions displaced over the past two decades within and across what constitute the world’s most fluid and most hardened political boundaries.

My experiences in Jordan and Iraq have driven home how the past is inextricably tied to the Middle East’s present, how the early twentieth century is connected to the early twenty-first century. This book focuses on the critical earlier window during which the Ottoman political order was unmade and reshaped into the modern political map, but, like any historical analysis, it is deeply influenced by the present moment. This is
perhaps even more true in this instance, as the century-old post–World War I settlement is continually invoked to explain the current crisis by present-day politicians and analysts. Particularly in the case of the Middle East, though, history is unfortunately often paradoxically invoked in ways that dehistoricize the actual processes that shaped the present. Though the contemporary Middle East has striking parallels to and resonances with the past century (as the old adage goes—history doesn’t repeat itself, but it does often rhyme), figuring out the historical rhyming schemes through which the past and present are connected is complicated and requires a careful study of that past on its own terms.

This book represents my best attempt to do that. The earliest seeds for this project were planted long ago when I took my first undergraduate class about the Middle East—Clement Henry’s Arab-Israeli Conflict course at the University of Texas–Austin—and first learned the standard narrative about the impact of World War I and the postwar settlement on the region. Over subsequent decades of study, research, and teaching about the Middle East, this period continued to be of great interest to me, but it was working on the Rif War (1921–1926) for a chapter in my first book on Morocco that eventually led me back to the Great War.

This process happened in two stages. First, while studying how the erstwhile Rif Republic achieved astounding success before being snuffed out by a vast Franco-Spanish joint military force, I realized that what was happening in Morocco in the 1920s was deeply connected to similar political projects launched at the same time across the region. Some of these ultimately ended in failure (the Sanusi state in eastern Libya, the Idrissid Asir emirate in southern Arabia, Kurdish polities in the Zagros, the Arab Kingdom in Syria), and others were spectacularly successful (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Turkish Republic). As I started to work on a comparative study of these concurrent cases, the twenty-first-century present began to resonate with that past as virtually every one of the sites at which there was significant conflict a century ago began to reemerge in the wake of the 2011 uprisings as primary friction points: Syria, southeast Turkey, northern Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, eastern Libya, and, most recently, the Rif region of northern Morocco (from which I was banned
by the Moroccan government from doing research for this project during a Fulbright year in 2017 and 2018). The memories of these earlier episodes have been palpable, whether it is Kurds constructing a narrative of national resistance, Benghazi rebels invoking Omar al-Mokthar (the hero of Sanusi anti-Italian resistance in the 1920s) in their fight against Qaddafi, ISIS defying “Sykes-Picot,” Houthis mobilizing against a Saudi threat in Yemen, or Moroccan hirak protesters in al-Hoceima waving the Rif Republic’s flag.

Noticing the connectedness of conflict and fluidity across the region from northwest Africa to the Iranian Plateau (well after the Paris Peace Conference supposedly wrapped up World War I) in the region’s early-twentieth-century past and in my twenty-first-century present led me to a second stage: questioning the basic narrative that I had been taught and that I had taught about the making of the modern Middle East. This project’s main focus became to critically reevaluate and retell the Great War genesis story, particularly with respect to its widely diagnosed original sin, “Sykes-Picot.” Beyond the specific 1916 secret Anglo-French (and Russian, until the 1917 revolution) agreement to divide up the Ottoman Empire after the war, this phrase invokes a deeper explanatory paradigm: that the root of the region’s problems traces back to artificial political boundaries the British and French imposed on the Middle East after World War I.

The Sykes-Picot shorthand is widely accepted across the spectrum at a popular level, from ISIS propaganda to the Daily Show segment in which John Oliver plays a gin-soaked British colonial official, Sir Archibald Mapsalot III, drawing and redrawing “arbitrary lines betwixt Middle Eastern tribal allegiances” on a white board.⁸ This is also the basic causal story, though more nuanced and complex, informing most of the policy-oriented and academic interpretations of this period of history. The way I myself have taught the making of the modern Middle East largely centers on a catechism of dates including (a) the 1915 Husayn-McMahon correspondence, in which the British promised the Arabs a state; (b) the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, in which the British and French divided up colonial spheres of control; (c) the 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which the British promised the Jews a homeland/state in Palestine; and the (d) 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, in which the League of Nations gave mandates to the British and French closely resembling (b) with the promises of (c) included in the Palestine mandate. After this litany, the 1923 Treaty
of Lausanne recognizing the gains made by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in creating modern Turkey is tacked on as an addendum, and the story of the Arab Middle East (with North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula out of the frame) carries on within the mandate system’s arbitrarily defined boundaries.

In both its more blatant and implicit forms, the Sykes-Picot standard narrative privileges a linear causal arrow in which the European colonial powers unilaterally imposed boundaries on the post-Ottoman Middle East map in the postwar settlement negotiated in Paris in 1919 and 1920. As other scholars have argued, however, the Sykes-Picot “myth” actually obscures the obvious fact that the 1916 map of British, French, Russian, and international zones of direct and indirect control never translated directly into a concrete reality in Iraq or Syria and definitely not in Anatolia or Palestine.9

At a deeper level, the myth perpetuates a misconception that the whole of the modern Middle East was “made” by agreements and treaties drawn up by western Great Powers and that artificial borders they imposed have hence been the root cause of conflict in the region. This story, though intuitive, rests on at least three fundamental errors. First, the Sykes-Picot standard narrative glosses over the difference between treaty terms and realities on the ground: it tells us nothing about why there was a decade-long gap between the 1918 armistice and the actual, physical demarcation of the region’s post-Ottoman territorial map in the early 1930s, skipping over the puzzling large-scale military conflict from the Rif to the Zagros that persisted after the matter was supposedly settled. Second, it implicitly assumes there were “natural” political boundaries that could and should have been set, a presumption that begs the question of what they might be. And, third, it reifies the mandate fates of a particular part of the region (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq) as representative of the whole.

Erasing the record of local political agency in these cases, this narrative does not even get the mandate story right, much less account for what happened in the vast majority of the region that did not come under the mandate system (Anatolia, Arabia, Iran, and Northern Africa). In sum, the red herring of misdrawn borders diverts attention from the more important question: What kind of worlds—identities, politics, and political systems—emerged, evolved, and survived through this period of intense colonial intervention, local mobilization, and ongoing warfare
from 1911 through the mid-1930s? And, secondarily, how did those processes shape the region’s political boundaries?

In telling an alternative narrative of the making of the modern Middle East, this book aims directly at those gaps. Opening up a wider field of view temporally and geographically, this revised account looks at how regional and local political orders were undone and reimagined through the Long Great War from Morocco’s Atlantic Coast to the Iranian Plateau. It focuses carefully on the local and colonial political projects envisioned and mobilized during this period and how they clashed head-on, examining how winning and losing polities and governance structures were narrowed down in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The modern Middle East was not made by international actors unilaterally imposing their will after World War I; it was shaped by warfare between colonial powers and local movements as they tried to do so. The borders eventually negotiated and demarcated among the surviving political units were neither arbitrary nor natural; they were, as in the rest of the world, produced through historical processes. By tracing how complex interactions among local, regional, and international actors forged the modern Middle East in the early twentieth century, I hope to also provide context for how we can reimagine the present moment, as political orders are, in many parts of the region, being unmade and remade through violent conflict in the early twenty-first century.