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978-0-521-13307-4 - Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism, Second Edition

Zachary Lockman

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Contending Visions of the Middle East

The History and Politics of Orientalism

Zachary Lockman's informed and thoughtful history of European Orientalism and US Middle East studies, the "clash of civilizations" debate and America's involvement in the region has become a highly recommended and widely used text since its publication in 2004. The second edition of Professor Lockman's book brings his analysis up to date by considering how the study of the Middle East has evolved in the intervening years, in the context of the US occupation of Iraq and the "global war on terror."

ZACHARY LOCKMAN teaches modern Middle Eastern history at New York University. His previous publications include *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (1996). He has served as president of the Middle East Studies Association, speaks and writes widely on current events in the Middle East and US foreign policy, and is a contributing editor of *Middle East Report*.

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New York University



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For Maya

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Acknowledgments

It will be obvious that this book draws on the work of many other scholars. They are (I hope) all properly cited in the notes and listed in the bibliography, but I thank them here for the thinking and writing that helped make this book possible. I would also like to thank Joel Beinin, Juan Cole, Brandon Fine, Bill Madsen, Eugene Rogan, James Schamus and the anonymous reader recruited by Cambridge University Press for their perceptive comments on my manuscript. I must also thank Eugene Rogan for editing the series in which this book appears, and Marigold Acland for supporting the series, and my contribution to it, with patience and good humor. As has often been the case over the years, Robert Vitalis has been a most careful reader and energetic critic. I suspect that he won't agree with everything in this book, but I hope that he will like at least some of it and recognize his influence on how it turned out. I am, as always, especially grateful to Melinda Fine, for her thoughtful readings of draft chapters and for her exceedingly generous love and support throughout this project.

I committed to writing this book soon after my younger daughter, Maya Michal Lockman-Fine, was born; by the time the first edition was published she had turned eight years old. I promised her many years ago that I would dedicate this book to her, and among the many reasons that I was happy to be done with it is that it allowed me to fulfill that promise. I have been, and always will be, grateful for her great spirit, intelligence and energy, and for the joy she brings into my life.

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Preface to the second edition

On October 17, 2006, the *New York Times* published an op-ed essay by Jeff Stein, the national security editor at *Congressional Quarterly*, entitled “Can You Tell a Sunni from a Shiite?” Sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing were convulsing Iraq, US military forces there were confronting a growing insurgency, and observers were voicing concerns about the prospect of rising tensions between Sunnis and Shi’is across the Middle East. But Stein reported that many of the top counterterrorism officials he had been interviewing in Washington, along with many of the members of Congress supposedly overseeing their work, could not offer even a rudimentary explanation of the difference between Sunni and Shi’i Islam or reliably identify whether Iran, Hizbullah or al-Qa’ida were Sunni or Shi’i. “After all,” Stein asked, “wouldn’t British counterterrorism officials responsible for Northern Ireland know the difference between Catholics and Protestants?” His conclusion: “Too many officials in charge of the war on terrorism just don’t care to learn much, if anything, about the enemy we’re fighting.”

In the Afterword to the first edition of this book, written half a year after the US invasion of Iraq, I noted some of the illusions and delusions that have frequently informed US policy in the Middle East, and the forms of knowledge and interpretive frameworks (some of them with long pedigrees) that have underpinned them. As I write these lines more than five years later, it would not seem that a great deal has changed. There remains a substantial gap between vision and reality, between policy and consequence, along with a great deal of the kind of willful ignorance Stein uncovered, itself perhaps best explained as a byproduct of imperial hubris. The very fact that one or another variant of the term “war on terror” is still widely accepted as a useful and accurate way of describing what the United States is actually engaged in around the world indicates that not all that much progress has been achieved; indeed, in his op-ed piece Stein himself refers to “the war on terrorism” and “counterterrorism” as if these were self-evident or unproblematic terms.

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It is of course true that the Bush administration's original vision of transforming Iraq into a docile (and happily oil-rich) client of the United States lies in ruins; a majority of the American people long ago turned against the war; and much of the political and media elite now understands that the United States must find a way out of the disastrous situation it has gotten itself into in Iraq and engage more intelligently with the rest of the Middle East and the world. As I note in Chapter 7, since September 11 many Americans (including college students) have also manifested a genuine desire to learn and understand more about the rest of the world (including the Muslim world) and their country's role in it.

Yet it is not at all clear that the more fundamental lessons have been learned, despite the many trenchant critiques of US foreign policy that have been published and the wealth of resources on the Middle East and the Muslim world – and US relations with them – now widely available. Most critics of the Iraq war, at least among politicians and in policy-making circles, do not question the need to maintain US hegemony in the Middle East and beyond; they only criticize the specific means the Bush administration has employed to maintain that hegemony, as well as its spectacular incompetence. Nor do they generally ask whether the deployment of US military personnel and facilities in more countries around the world than ever before really enhances either the national security of the United States or the prospects for global security and stability. So, however the United States eventually extricates the bulk of its military forces from Iraq, the stage seems set for a continuation of many of the same policies, and thus for future interventions that will have profoundly unhappy consequences for those on the receiving end of American power.

Iraq has already provided us with an all-too-graphic demonstration of what that can mean. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died as a consequence of the US invasion and occupation, many others have been wounded or maimed, millions have been displaced from their homes, and Iraqi society has been devastated. Afghanistan, where since September 11 the United States has once again become deeply involved, continues to suffer from a bloody (and currently escalating) insurgency and the apparent absence of an effective state, and neighboring Pakistan is now being sucked into the maelstrom. Meanwhile, a range of other internal and interstate conflicts in the Middle East, including the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, continue to fester, with sporadic explosions of violence, even as the social, economic and political situation in much of the region deteriorates.

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In the meantime, the fraught relationship between scholarly knowledge and the needs of the state continues to demand attention, as it has since at least the Second World War. On this front there is perhaps hope that scholars have learned some useful lessons. For example, in 2007 news surfaced of the “Human Terrain System,” a \$40 million Pentagon program that involved “embedding” social scientists with counter-insurgency units in Iraq and Afghanistan so that the military could more effectively benefit from scholars’ knowledge of local societies, cultures and languages. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) promptly investigated and issued a report highlighting the serious ethical issues raised by the direct participation of anthropologists in military operations and intelligence activity. The AAA and other organizations and individuals also voiced concerns about the Pentagon’s Project Minerva, announced in 2008 and designed to promote and fund research by university-based scholars on issues deemed important to national security, for example the development of the Chinese military and the “strategic impact of religious and cultural changes within the Islamic world.” This immediately evoked memories of the Project Camelot fiasco, discussed in Chapter 4, and led to calls that such research be funded and managed through institutions that are independent of the military/intelligence establishment and that adhere to standard academic procedures, including peer review.

Many of the issues discussed in this book concerning the relationship between knowledge (of the Middle East and the Muslim world) and power (largely American, in this period) thus continue to be all too relevant today, and I therefore continue to hope that a better understanding of the origins and development of the study of Islam and the Middle East in the West, and particularly in the United States since the Second World War, may remain useful. In revising this book for a second edition I have focused on Chapter 7, where I now discuss the atmosphere in which US Middle East studies has operated in recent years, particularly the wave of politically motivated attacks on scholars of the Middle East and Islam and on the institutions at which they are based. Limitations on space have prevented me from delving into the spate of scholarly work on the history and politics of Orientalism, Arabic and Islamic studies, and Middle East studies which has appeared since the first edition was published. However, I cannot resist briefly mentioning three relatively recent works on Orientalism.

The first is Robert Irwin’s 2006 book *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents*, published in the United Kingdom under a more lurid and provocative title, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies*. I find this a quirky, indeed rather odd, book, though also quite

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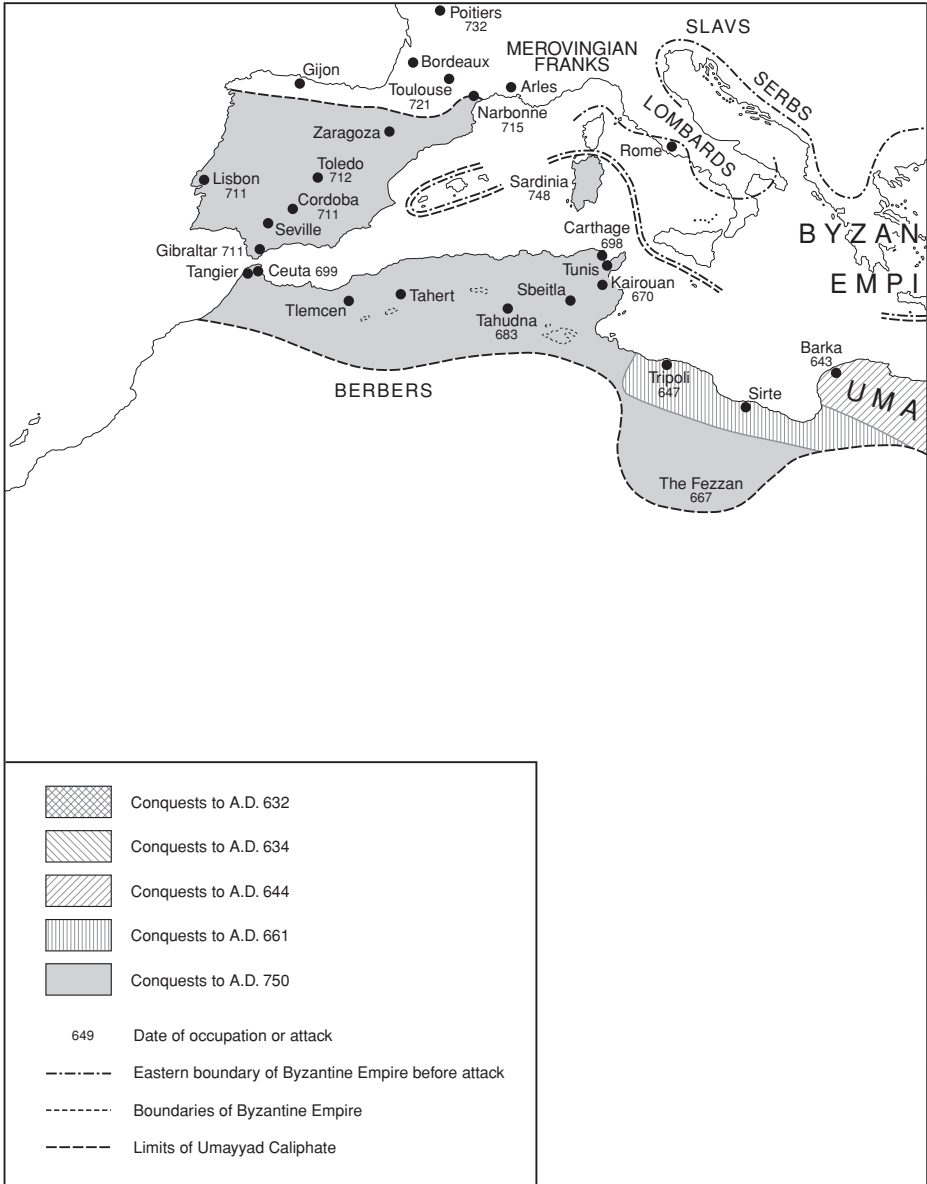
entertaining in its own way. Irwin offers a comprehensive survey of individual Orientalist scholars through the centuries but is largely uninterested in interpretive paradigms and their links with power, imperial or otherwise; and he displays an *ad hominem* animus toward Edward W. Said that strikes me as both excessive and intellectually counterproductive. *Dangerous Knowledge* is nonetheless worth reading, particularly for its lively portraits of scholars, their idiosyncrasies and their milieux.

Then there is Daniel Martin Varisco's *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (2007), which the author describes as "judicious satirical criticism" directed at the "polemized rhetoric" of Said's *Orientalism*. I find this book neither judicious nor successfully satirical, and too much of it rehashes (often tendentiously, if in great detail) the many useful critiques of *Orientalism* advanced over the past three decades. Finally, in contrast to both Irwin and Varisco, *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, Politics* (2008), edited by Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska, offers a set of thoughtful essays that engage critically but productively with aspects of Said's intellectual legacy and illuminate ongoing scholarly conversations about Orientalism, colonialism, nationalism, modernity and the writing of history.

There is certainly a good deal of other work, published or on the way, on the histories and issues addressed in this book, and there is much more research yet to be done before we will be anywhere near an adequate scholarly understanding of the development of the kinds of knowledge discussed in this book, and of the politics with which they have been enmeshed. As I freely acknowledge in the Introduction, this book is meant only as an introduction; it makes no claim to offer the final word on any subject.

Meanwhile, despite the grim situation that prevails today in much of the Middle East and the rather uncongenial climate in US academia, scholars writing within and on the field of Middle East studies broadly defined continue to produce much excellent work, teach their students and train new cohorts of scholars and teachers. I hope that this new edition will be useful for them, as well as for a wider public interested in understanding how a part of the world in which the United States remains so deeply entangled has been studied and portrayed.

January 2009

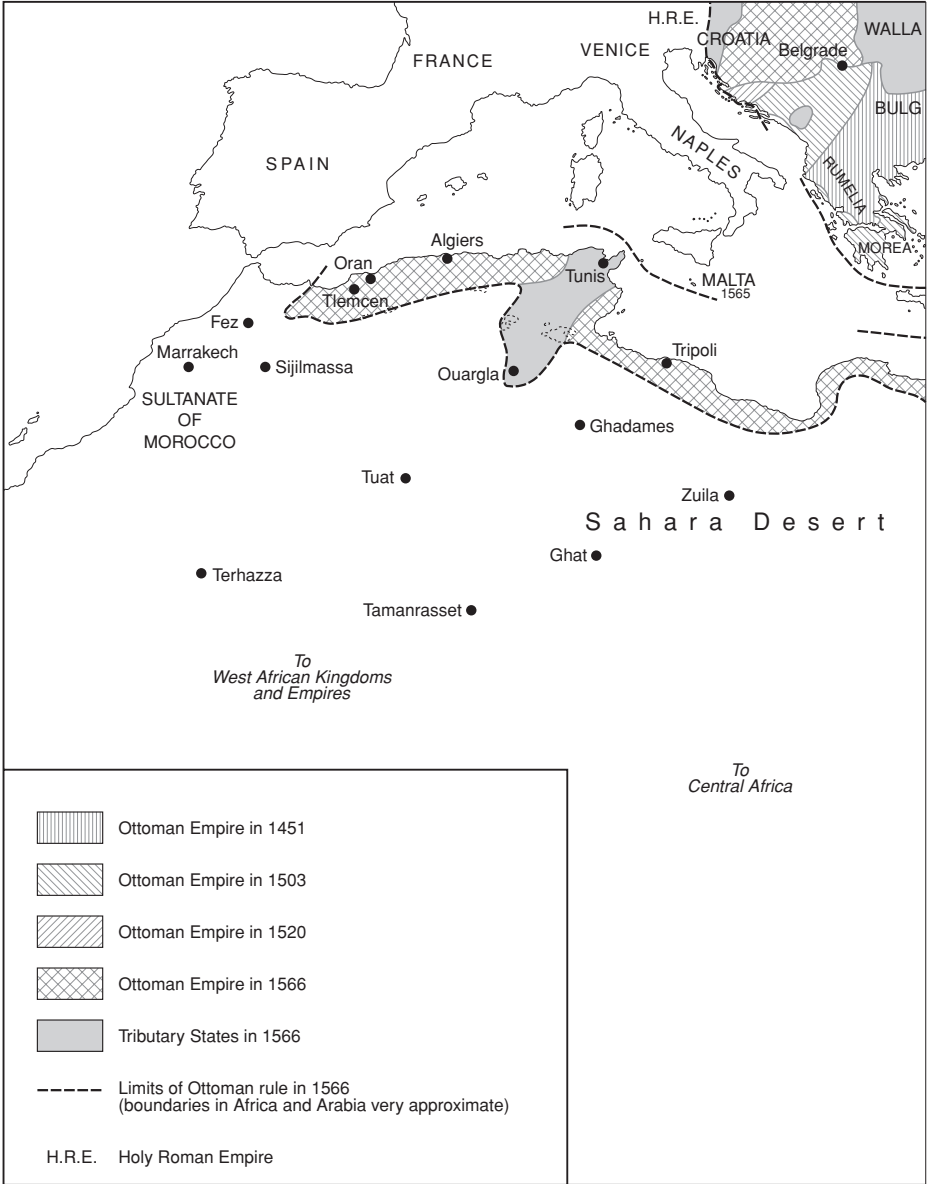


Map 1: The rise of Islam and the Arab conquests

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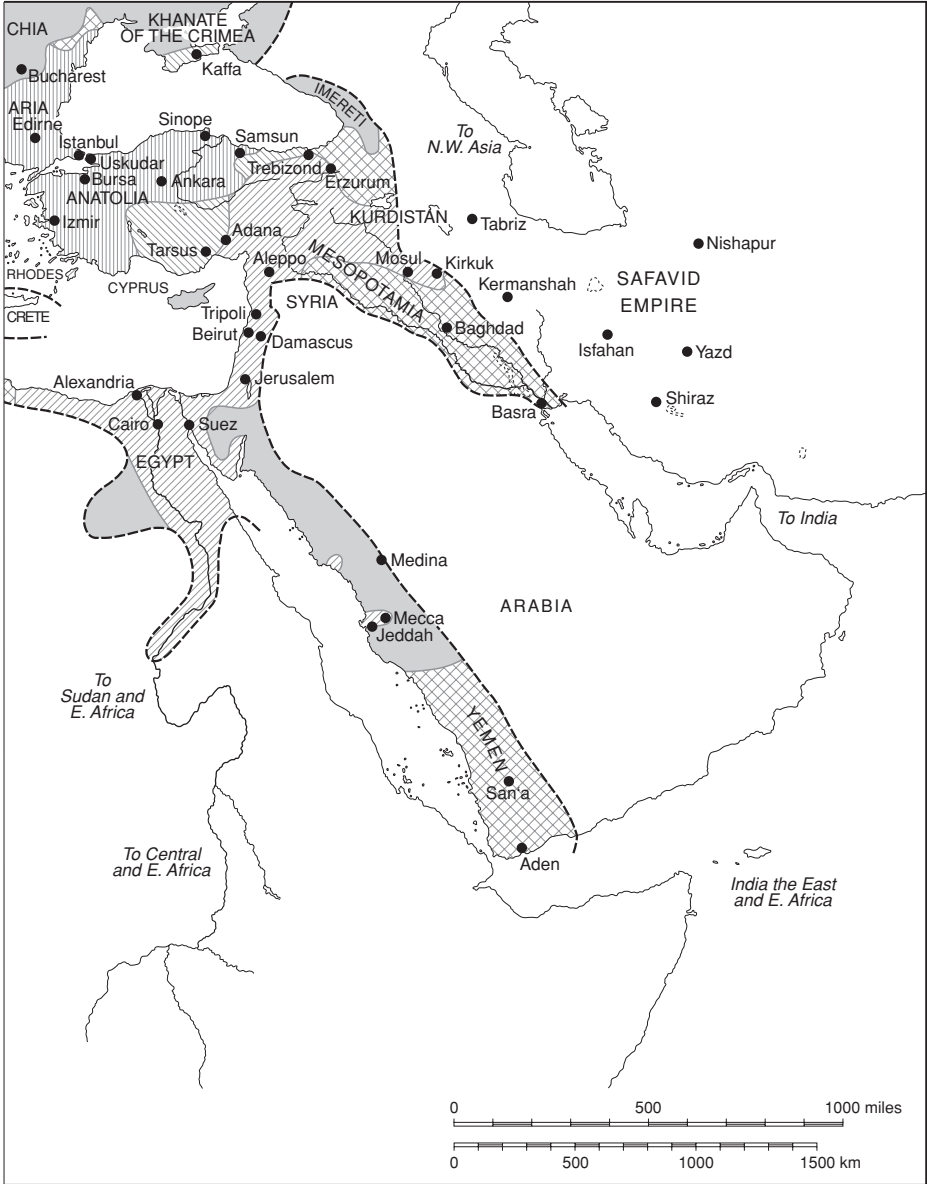


Map 1: (cont.)



Map 2: The Ottoman empire to 1566

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Map 2: (cont.)

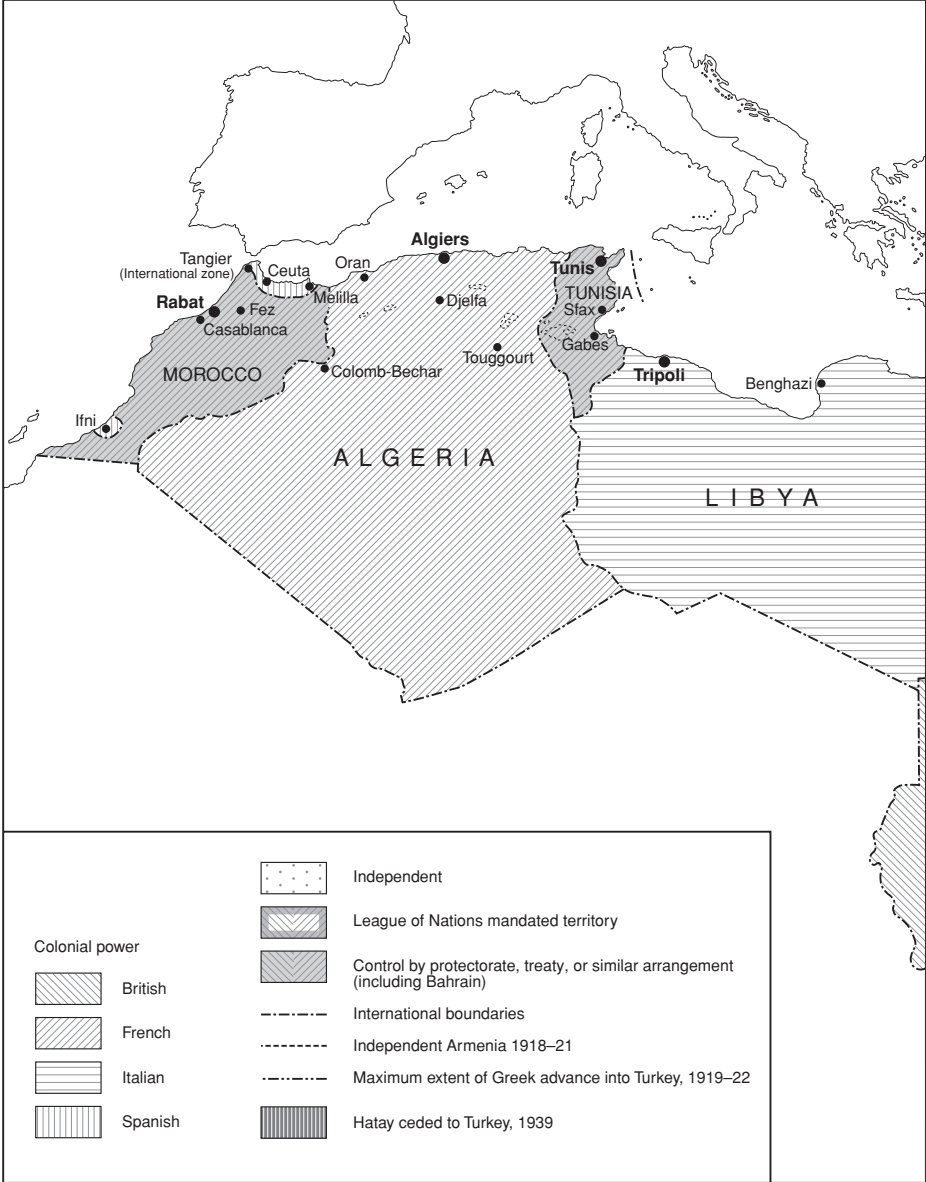


Map 3: The Middle East and North Africa on the eve of the First World War



Map 3: (cont.)

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Map 4: The Middle East and North Africa between the two World Wars

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Map 4: (cont.)

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Map 5: The Middle East and North Africa – boundaries

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Map 5: (cont.)

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Map 6: The Middle East and North Africa in the world

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Map 6: (cont.)