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Excerpt

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Introduction

THE NATURE OF THE OTTOMAN-IRANIAN FRONTIER

From their first confrontation in 1514 through the Ottoman occupation of northwestern Iran between 1905 and 1912, the Ottomans and the dynasties ruling Iran fought over the borderlands extending from the Persian Gulf to Mount Ararat. However, domination of these regions, inhabited by various autonomous ethnocultural groups, remained an elusive dream, as the borderland peoples defied the authority of both powers, who in turn refused to recognize each other's sovereignty. A host of historical, military, social, religious, political, geographic, and environmental factors prolonged the process of the transformation of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier into a boundary for almost four centuries. In the meantime, control of this ill-defined and highly porous expanse and the peoples inhabiting it shifted frequently, as it continued to be a place of perpetual motion, of separation as well as crossing and mixing.

In the words of a pioneering historian of the borderlands, this frontier functioned as an “ancient interacting frontier” rather than a “sudden” one.¹ Swinging like a pendulum between Iranian and Ottoman rule, and organized by patterns of interaction developed over centuries, it was a classic frontier zone. Failing to extend their authority on a permanent basis, the competing imperial powers engaged in a continuous process of conciliation and coercion with local elites, which provided ample opportunities for “localized political autonomy and relative freedom of socio-economic

¹ Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928–1958* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 25.

borderland movement.”² Such autonomy, an outcome of the bargaining process between the state and local semi autonomous structures and communities, gradually came to an end with the delimitation and demarcation of the frontiers, which began in earnest only in the mid-nineteenth century, as agendas of reform and modernization gained pace.³ A British and Russian intervention in 1840, triggered by the threat of renewed military conflict in the frontier, also speeded the process by which this borderland was to be permanently fixed and its political order transformed from “a suzerain to a sovereign reality.”⁴ This intervention, in conjunction with *tanzimat* reforms on the Ottoman side and a less ambitious modernization project on the Iranian side, dramatically altered the nature of the frontier and the lives of the borderland peoples. Beginning in 1843, the intermittent work of diplomats, soldiers, engineers, translators, cartographers, archeologists, and botanists from Istanbul, Tehran, St. Petersburg, British India, and London slowly carved a thin dividing line. The finalized boundary was formally recognized after more than seven decades of such labors, days after the beginning of the First World War. Still, partial changes were made to that line as late as the 1930s and again in the 1970s.

Boundary studies are gradually becoming part of Ottoman and Iranian historiography.⁵ However, despite its significance in shaping Ottoman-Iranian relations, the notion of *frontier* has only recently emerged as an organizing theme of this historiography. Yet a cursory look at Ottoman-Iranian wars and the treaties they produced over the centuries reveals that frontiers are at the heart of their entangled histories. Neglect of this fact is due, in part, to a well-established tradition in Middle Eastern

² Richard Schofield, “Narrowing the Frontier: Mid-Nineteenth Century Efforts to Delimit and Map the Perso-Ottoman Boundary,” in Roxane Farmanfarmanian ed., *War and Peace in Qajar Persia* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 150.

³ For the notion of bargaining as a tool of state building, see Dina Rizk Khoury, “Administrative Practice between Religious Law (*Shari’a*) and State Law (Kanun) on the Eastern Frontiers of the Ottoman Empire,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 5.4 (2001): 305–30; and Rudi Mathee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 62.

⁴ B. D. Hopkins, “The Bounds of Identity: The Goldsmid Mission and the Delineation of the Perso-Afghan Border in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Global History* 2.2 (2007): 2.

⁵ For Iran, see Schofield, Mathee, O’Shea, and especially Kashani-Sabet’s works in the bibliography. The Iran-Iraq war prompted an expansive and partially partisan literature on their mutual frontiers; see Schofield and Keith McLachlan, *A Bibliography of the Iran-Iraq Borderland* (London: Menas Press Ltd, 1987). For the Ottoman side, see Kemal H. Karpat and Robert W. Zens, eds., *Ottoman Borderlands: Issues, Personalities and Political Changes* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); and A. C. S. Peacock, ed., *The Frontiers of the Ottoman World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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historiography, one that proposes that the Iranian–Ottoman boundary – at present shared by Iran, Turkey, and Iraq – is one of the oldest in the world, already established in 1639. Yet this frontier, which first began to take shape in the early sixteenth century, was not a formal border. As was the case with most premodern borderlands, there was no exact line of demarcation and the entire region was characterized by multiple social, linguistic, and political identities. Even by the nineteenth century, it was not a pacified and settled borderland. Indeed, until the mid-nineteenth century, the territorial limits of both the Ottoman Empire and Iran were to a large extent defined by the pledged allegiance of local groups; as the primary loyalty of these groups was to their own territories, such allegiances shifted as the incessant struggle for hegemony continued.

This book tells three intertwined stories of this frontier. First, it recounts the transformation of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier into a boundary. Second, it analyzes how their mutual borderland shaped Ottoman-Iranian relations during the life of the Qajar dynasty in Iran (1796–1925). Third, it highlights the role played by borderland communities in the process of boundary making. It also answers the question of how the making of this “ancient” boundary became an international problem requiring the intervention of great powers in the 1840s. While thus taking into account regional and global economic, political, and military ambitions, this book nevertheless privileges the local context, illuminating what happened when state actors created the foundation for the emergence of new identities through the introduction of new administrative structures and the imposition of state subjecthood on the borderlanders.

The multifaceted processes that transformed a permeable borderland into a legally defined boundary drastically altered the human and political geography of the region. Affecting patterns of exchange, notions of belonging, and migratory movements of itinerant populations, these processes also necessitated a complicated separation of myriad ethno-religious and tribal groups – including Lurs, Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Jews, Armenians, Persians, and Nestorians – into citizens of Iran or the Ottoman Empire. Some groups complied, whereas others resisted by fashioning alternative ideas of sovereignty, identity, and spatial organization. Nonetheless, backed by military might and modern technologies of mapping and surveying, as well as by Ottoman, Iranian, and European geographical discourses of sovereignty, territoriality, and citizenship, the frontier commissioners opened the way for the eventual displacement of local practices that, antagonistic to such discourses, favored a porous border. As Benedict Anderson has noted in

another context, “Triangulation by triangulation, war by war, treaty by treaty, the alignment of map and power proceeded.”⁶

The demarcating of the boundary was also facilitated by shifting ideas of territorial sovereignty that “gradually heightened the importance of the boundaries of kingdoms at the expense of other divisions; local, pacific boundaries eventually merged with militarized state frontier defenses into a single concept of sovereign divisions between states.”⁷ Charles Maier has described such shifts as the “transformation of territoriality,” in which a bounded territory and the control of populations within it increasingly became “the premise of state sovereignty.”⁸ In the Ottoman-Iranian borderland, as in Europe, this “evolving premise of social organization” emerged around the mid-seventeenth century; experienced decisive modifications in the eighteenth century; and culminated in the nineteenth century, when states successfully intensified efforts to territorialize, integrate, and reclaim space with the help of new technologies. As Robert Sack has argued, the geographic/spatial strategies of territoriality developed during this period aimed “to affect, influence, and control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area.”⁹ This book argues that the resulting contest between states for control over a finite space and its inhabitants was inextricable from the process of transformation of borderlands into boundaries. Following the lead of Paolo Novak, I also attempt to show how this spatial strategy “unfolds in its actuality.”¹⁰

The borderlands – that is, the spatiotemporal areas most profoundly impacted by this actuality – were home to demanding geographies, climates, and ecosystems that helped produce and shape the histories of a variety of human cultures and modes of life. Yet, despite the significant differences that distinguished the Ma’dan or Marsh Arabs in the south, for example, from the Jalali or Haydaran Kurds in the north, the borderlanders were connected by social, religious, and kinship networks, as well as a frontier ethos, that transcended geography or environment.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 173.

⁷ Daniel Power, “Introduction,” in Daniel Power and Naomi Standen, eds., *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 5.

⁸ Charles S. Maier, “Transformations of Territoriality 1600–2000,” in Oliver Janz, Sebastian Conrad, and Gunilla Budde, eds., *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen Und Theorien* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 34.

⁹ Robert Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 19.

¹⁰ Paolo Novak, “The Flexible Territoriality of Borders,” *Geopolitics* 16.4 (2011): 742.

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This is not to say that they lived without conflict. To the contrary, their world of narrow mountain passes and gorges, deserts and marshes, large rivers and thousands of small creeks was also home to vendettas, tribal allegiances, and multigenerational conflicts. Highway robbery, theft of flocks, and other raids were also part of daily life. Consequently, without the intervention of states, borderlanders developed intricate ways of negotiating and resolving conflict to manage the scarce resources they shared. The same challenging geographical and environmental conditions that necessitated such strategies also allowed them to evade or limit state control of their lives, thus permitting their semi-independent social structures to thrive. At the same time, those conditions blocked the emergence of alternative forms of power and ultimately created conditions that would make subjugation to central states possible and even desirable.

It should be noted that central states were never altogether absent from the borderlands; rather, they ruled indirectly. The process of replacing indirect with direct rule ran parallel to the process of territorializing sovereignty. Both were part of the larger project of increasing state capacity, which in turn marks the transition from premodern to modern forms of borders and hegemony. Negotiation and indirect rule thus needed to give way to more direct forms of governance in which appointed representatives replaced the hereditary aristocrats who had long brokered between state and society.¹¹ The end result – that is, the destruction of local autonomies, the inscription of interstate boundaries, and the imposition of uniform state identities – had far-reaching consequences that even today ripple through the borderland: traditional ways of life were shattered, migratory patterns were altered, and long-held mechanisms of conflict resolution were abandoned without being replaced.

Delimitation and demarcation also meant the end of the notion of frontier as an outer limit open to state expansion. Now, limits of legitimate state authority had to be defined by boundary conferences and the surveys that followed.¹² To borrow from Howard Lamar and Leonard Thomson, the making of the boundary signified the “closing” of the frontier that occurs when “a single political authority” establishes its hegemony over the border zone, making it less porous and mutable.¹³ In this book, however, such a

¹¹ Khoury, “Administrative Practice,” 305.

¹² Michael Kodarkowsky, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire 1500–1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 49.

¹³ Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, “Comparative Frontier History,” in Lamar and Thompson, eds., *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 3–14.

closing is not imagined as total or totalizing. Not the erection of an impregnable wall, it is rather the tightening of a frontier filter.¹⁴

Similarly, taking my inspiration from Peter Sahlins' work on the borderlands of France and Spain, I do not see the act of "b/ordering" as a unidirectional imposition from above or "a mere expression of imperial fiat" that limits itself to global or regional imperial actors or centers.¹⁵ To the contrary, it is a process that also foregrounds the voices of the borderlanders and their territorial strategies and rationalities.¹⁶ Although concerned with charting Ottoman-Iranian relations, my project thus aims as well to bring borderland peoples back into history, giving voice to an indigenous agency whose role in the making of local as well as imperial histories has been consciously silenced.¹⁷ As Thongchai Winichakul maintains in a different context, although the dispute was about territories, too little attention has been paid to the people residing in those territories or even to the territories themselves. Existing studies mislead us by considering only the perspective of those who became the ruling powers of the emerging nation-states. The fates of tiny tributaries and the people, especially the nomadic people, of the disputed regions remain virtually unknown, as if they occupied a void with no view, no voice, and no history of their own.¹⁸

This is not because of a lack of written records, but, to the contrary, because of the ideological construction of Turkish and Iranian national historiographies, and an accompanying hostility aimed at scholars situated outside the confines of the nationalist linear time frame. As Mark Bassin argues in another context, however, an additional factor is perhaps even more important than an a priori political bias, which should be taken into consideration.¹⁹ When a teleology is created, the course of events it describes – in this case, the formation of the modern nation states of Iran and Turkey (and Iraq) – leads inexorably to a preordained conclusion, which inevitably leaves a significant gap in our knowledge. To begin to fill

¹⁴ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *The Journal of American History* 98.2 (2011): 358. For the state of borderland studies, see this inspiring article.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Novak, "Flexible Territoriality," 748. I borrowed the notion of "b/ordering" from Novak.

¹⁷ For the role of mobile groups in Ottoman history, see Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 96.

¹⁹ Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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this gap, while also highlighting the interdependent nature of historical processes, this book investigates how imperialist interventions, the rivalry between the Ottoman and Qajar states, the local peoples' reactions to the new limits placed on their social and economic habitats, and the habitat itself all worked in concert to shape the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Above all, however, this study privileges the peoples at the margins of the empires. In this sense, it is a project of spatial and temporal de-marginalization that attempts to reclaim the roles and recover the voices of the occupants of this land in-between.

The length of the frontier defines the geographical scope of the book, but I make no claim to give an exhaustive account of the themes, sources, actors, or geographies of the borderland. No doubt it is impossible to explain such a long and contentious trajectory in all its complexity or to do justice to all groups involved. I aim, rather, to show that the borderland peoples were not merely swallowed up by the imperial cultures that encroached on them. Instead, they actively participated in, or fought against, the creation of the imperial frontiers and the modern state. As such, this study challenges teleological and ethnocentric conceptions of the past that mislead us into considering only the point of view of history's winners. By denying the agency of the people at the margins, such ethnocentric or, as David Weber has called them, "myopic histories" not only propagate incomplete versions of the past, but also facilitate the continuing denial of rights and responsibilities to the region's marginalized peoples.²⁰ By treating the borderlanders as subjects rather than objects in global power plays, I hope to provide a more inclusive, egalitarian version of Middle Eastern history and shed new light on the past as well as some of the most contentious issues of our day, such as the origins of the Kurdish question and the frontier issues that led to the eight-year-long war between Iran and Iraq. Nevertheless, it should be stated at the outset that a lack of local archival material inevitably hampers any attempt to tell a different kind of history. Ironically, perhaps, it is through official documents that the borderlanders establish a presence in this narrative.²¹

Situating itself within the larger field of border/borderland studies that aims at what Hämäläinen and Truett called "unsettling centrist paradigms" and nation-state-centered teleologies, this study claims to be

²⁰ David Weber, *Spanish Borderlands in North America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

²¹ See Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8.2 (1997): 211–42.

neither an Ottoman history nor an Iranian one.²² Readers looking for such histories should refer to the extensive and well-established literature that already exists. It is, more simply, a history of the making of the Ottoman-Iranian boundary in the long nineteenth century. Even within this limited scope, it is hardly exhaustive. It does not analyze, among many other themes, the myriad forms of boundary crossing, such as trade and pilgrimage, that deserve their own books; neither does it give extensive consideration to the Ottoman and Iranian geographical literature, which is vast.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout the book, I use the words *borderland*, *border*, and *frontier* interchangeably. However, I privilege the term *borderland* because, as recent scholarship has stressed, it does not imply only encounters between states straddling a line but more broadly describes an interdependent cross-boundary region that “encompasses areas immediately beside a state’s external border, or straddling it, and also administrative regions abutting a border whose centers are physically and socially distant from that border.”²³ This notion of the borderland thus facilitates a recognition that the state is not the only agent of history, allowing historians to break the shackles of the nation and, consequently, of nationalist historiography. As I argue in later chapters, both notions of and lived realities in the frontier began to change with the rise of the idea of a fixed political boundary or territoriality, which many identify with the Westphalian system, during the Russo-British interventions of the second half of the nineteenth century. *Boundary* thus refers to this notion of a cartographically identifiable line marking the territorial limits of states. The process of making a boundary involves both *delimitation*, the marking on maps of the range of territory that will contain the final boundary, and *demarkation*, the actual construction of the boundary on the ground by members of survey commissions.²⁴

Delimitation and demarcation were parts of a process, not a rupture in time and space. As Weber argues, frontiers represent place and process, linked inextricably. Cross-border interactions of state and non-state actors,

²² Hämäläinen and Truett, “On Borderlands,” 339.

²³ James Anderson and Liam O’Dowd, “Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance,” *Regional Studies* 33.7 (1999): 595.

²⁴ For the definition of these terms, see Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, chap.3; Baud and van Schendel, “Toward a Comparative History”; Anderson and O’Dowd, “Borders”; John Robert Victor Prescott, *The Geography of Frontiers and Boundaries* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965), 64; and Power, “Introduction,” 3.

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or the process of expansion and contraction, gave shape to the contested place we refer to as the frontier.²⁵ Political geographers understood this process as the successful evolution from frontier to boundary.²⁶ As Sahlins argues regarding France, however, such thinking relied on binary notions of progress and linear development unsupported by historical evidence. The most historical part of the frontier, the concept of the *linear boundary*, long preceded modern delimitation efforts.²⁷ In his famous article on the notion of *frontière*, Lucien Febvre warns against defining the frontier as premodern and the boundary as modern, an impulse that privileges the evolutionary perspective described earlier, which traces a progressive movement “from the broad, sterile and empty separating zone to the simple non-substantial line of demarcation; from the lack of the precision of a line which often wandered to the rigorous determination of a mathematically defined contour.”²⁸ Instead of studying the frontier as an isolated phenomenon, he maintains, we should analyze it in relation to the state; concepts of sovereignty; the transition from subjects, vassals, and members of restricted communities into the body of citizens and the militarization of the nation or universal conscription. Accordingly, this book defines boundary making as part of a state-building process that relies, in part, on increasing the capacity of states at the margins, but it does not treat borders solely as lines or as zones. Instead, it suggests that they are filters.²⁹ As the rise in the capacity of states and their powers of surveillance led to the institutionalization and standardization of state practices and the penetration of the peripheries, the porosity of these filters decreased over time.³⁰ Treating boundary formation and the rise of state capacity as concomitant processes allows us to describe different stages or degrees of frontier formation or territoriality in terms of different

²⁵ Weber, *Spanish Borderlands*, 12.

²⁶ See Sahlins, “State Formation and National Identity in the Catalan Borderlands during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in T. M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, eds., *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 37.

²⁷ Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 4.

²⁸ Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1973), 212. Also Wilson and Donnan, “Introduction” in *Border Identities*; and Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996), 9.

²⁹ See also Anderson and O’Dowd, “Borders.”

³⁰ The literature on state building or the establishment of the modern states and the drawing of the borderlands is too extensive to list here. The concept of *state capacity* is adapted from Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

stages or layers of a filter, tightening not only in time but also in space as the borderland is transformed into bordered lands.³¹

DIVIDING THE *UMMA*, DEFINING ITS FRONTIERS

As a European power, the Ottomans were hardly ignorant of European notions of frontiers and boundaries. Indeed the historical trajectory of the Ottoman-Iranian borderland traces the same path to territoriality that has so far been identified as post-Westphalian. At the same time, non-European notions of territorial limits had long shaped political thought and action in Ottoman and Iranian lands. Specifically, concepts of frontier and of separation between the lands of Islam, or *dar al-Islam*, and the lands of disbelief, or *dar al-harb*, were integral to the development and spread of Islam from its beginning.³² The need for such distinctions arose from the fact that except for during the formative period of Islam, the ideal of an Islamic community, or *umma*, united under the authority of a single caliph, was never a reality. From the eighth century onward, the *umma* was divided under often competing sovereigns only nominally under the caliph's authority. When the Mongols extinguished the remnants of the Abbasid caliphate in the mid-thirteenth century, the Islamic community had already been divided into fifteen separate Muslim-ruled states. In time, Muslims overwhelmingly accepted the reality of territorial pluralism, and "authoritative Muslim writers have come to elaborate a new 'consensus of speech' (*ijma'al-qawl*), which argues that the territorial state is a natural, and even worthy institution."³³ Consequently, in addition to distinguishing between Islamic and non-Islamic lands, there arose the need to define the internal boundaries of the *umma*.

The former division – that is, between *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-harb* – has been the subject of numerous studies. Indeed, it has been a dominating concept, if not an organizational theme, in Ottoman historiography for the past century, especially as it related to concepts of *jihad* and *ghaza*.³⁴

³¹ I borrow this last concept from Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *The American Historical Review* 104.3 (1999).

³² Ralph W. Brauer, *Boundaries and Frontiers in Medieval Muslim Geography* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995), 9–11.

³³ James P. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45.

³⁴ Colin Heywood, "The Frontier in Ottoman History: Old Ideas and New Myths," in *Power and Standen, Frontiers in Question*, 228.