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MATTHEW H. ELLIS, *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018). Pp. 280. $65.00 cloth, e-book available. ISBN 9781503605008.

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In his introduction to the excellent new monograph *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya*, which traces the ways in which a crucial hinterland in the Maghreb became a state space, historian Matthew Ellis argues that "national maps derive much of their power from rendering invisible the messy configurations of social relations that actually exist on the ground at the time maps are made." Throughout the book, Ellis details that officials in Egypt in the nineteenth century, first under the khedive and then under the British protectorate government, had little interest in creating border maps that outlined the territorial "nation." Instead, the making of maps delineated statistical data on geographical resources. In consequence, Ellis states, maps rendered the borderlands beyond the Nile Valley and the Delta as "so much white space." Understood to be of little value due to a certain absence of productivity, borderland spaces had no place on nineteenth-century maps. Yet, as Ellis shows us, hinterlands or borderlands are in fact of crucial value to understandings of mobility, state-inscribed methods of control, identity formation in the absence of state centralization, and in this case, the impact of internal Ottoman and Egyptian colonialism.

In reality, within the nineteenth-century borderland between Egypt and Ottoman Libya there existed an articulated awareness of where difference ended and began. In the absence of imperial or colonial officials, semi-nomadic bedouin and more settled oasis dwellers negotiated their own understandings of political space, territorial belonging, and the existence of markers of sovereignty. The most significant takeaway of Ellis's study is one not stressed enough, particularly in light of the focus by scholars in recent years on the

colonial creation of other Middle Eastern borders: territoriality is not an outcome solely of state power. In the space between Egypt and Libya, territoriality developed not as an imposed set of institutions and practices from above, but rather out of negotiations between state authorities and the mobile population. *Desert Borderland* offers a detailed history of the lived experiences along the Egyptian-Libyan border-to-be in the years before the First World War. Bedouin inhabitants, for their part, engaged in a remarkable political game playing the Ottoman sultan against the khedive. By the start of the twentieth century, desert inhabitants could dictate the terms of the states' involvements in their lives and livelihoods.

Furthermore, the book's chapters highlight just how different this desert appeared in both the Ottoman and later European colonial imagination from spaces in the Mashriq or in Egypt's more eastern environs. Ellis consulted an impressive range of sources to tell the story of this particular borderland, the people who moved across it, those who wished to remain in it, and the powers that shaped it. The study fits alongside a number of newer works focusing both on the concept and practice of territoriality and the making of borders in the colonial Middle East and North Africa. It emphasizes the sparse scholarship on Egypt's borderlands in the historiography of state formation; however, it can certainly be stated that a number of geographical and historical studies do exist on the formation of borders between Egypt and Ottoman and British Palestine, and later, Israel. Whilst the focus of *Desert Borderlands* is neither specifically the Tanzimat nor Mehmet Ali's reform program, the book contributes to a wider reassessment of the centralizing reforms enacted across the Ottoman and formerly Ottoman lands from the mid-nineteenth century. Echoing a similar theme in the work of Selim Deringil, Metin Atmaca, and others, the book highlights how Egyptian state centralization went alongside a policy of decentralization in more remote peripheries.

What is most compelling in the first half of the book is a focus less on the borderland space, but on the flexibility of identities within that space. Actions by Mehmet Ali to settle the bedouin in the Nile Valley in the 1840s, and the latter's reactions that led to a paring back of attempts at central control over these communities, meant that it became increasingly difficult for authorities to distinguish between who was and was not actually from a tribal community. Egyptian fellahin claimed bedouin extraction in order to receive exemptions from conscription and to benefit in other ways from decentralized administration. The book does not chronicle how claims to bedouin

identity manifested themselves in twentieth-century nationality legislation during the British protectorate and after, but this flexibility in self-definition surely faced disruption by the end of the First World War.

The book uses several case studies to examine the processes of state territoriality in the desert frontier between Egypt and Libya. In chapter 4, the study of Marsa Matruh, now on Egypt's Mediterranean coast but formerly a governate that extended to Tripoli just after the turn of the century, is informative. Abbas Hilmi proposed various development projects for this region: he "reclaimed" the land for agricultural estates and opened a railway here. Investment radically transformed internal social structures, and in providing employment opportunities to bedouin communities (namely the Awlad 'Ali) it also cultivated a deeper sense of loyalty toward the state and the khedive as the legitimate sovereign. At the same time, the investments meant that the state could impose far better police and coast-guard control over this part of Egypt's western desert. These actions of the khedive and state in the desert should be seen within the framework of colonialism and as a way for Abbas Hilmi to prove economic "modernity" to the British, as Ellis rightly emphasizes.

Chapter 5, meanwhile, demonstrates the ways in which continued bedouin cross-border mobility in the Eastern Sahara challenged decades of Ottoman and Egyptian acts of territoriality to denote not only borderland space, but those inhabiting that space as their own. After Sultan Abdülmecid granted Mehmet Ali the hereditary governorship of Egypt, the Ottoman government refused to recognize any formal border in this region. This allowed for both sites to exploit the vague notion of a border. It would be the continued cross-border movement by the population of this space that prompted both governments to examine the ambiguity of territorial sovereignty. As part of this narrative, the somewhat brutal attempts by the Ottomans to tax the bedouin in order to finance administrative efforts in Benghazi province led to other claims of sovereignty in the borderland. By the 1911 Italian occupation of Libya, this space remained fluid.

The status quo before the outbreak of the First World War led to an intriguing situation in which bedouin who had fled to Egypt from Benghazi to avoid Ottoman taxation were promised "Libyan nationality" if they returned. Libyan nationality, in this context, meant that the tribes would effectively be Italian subjects. Egypt contested the Italian government's proclamation, and the question of nationality persisted through the 1920s despite an official border treaty in 1925.

This, as Ellis notes, was related to the lack of consensus over how to define "residency" in the context of tribal mobility. While Ellis concludes that the postwar treaties to settle the border actually *unsettled* the border, and the meaning of residency on both sides of it, a further discussion of residency in Egypt and Libya in relation to the League of Nations and Treaty of Lausanne debates on this very same term would have been useful. Egypt and Libya were not alone at this very point in history in debating what *jus soli* meant for nationality, particularly for the nationality of migrants, tribes, and others across the formerly Ottoman landscape. While *Desert Borderland* does emphasize the importance of this borderland's story to a greater understanding of state territoriality—and its discontents—in the Middle East, it could have further connected this story to the global tensions involved as states tried to link nationality, citizenship, and mobility to the nation-state. Indeed, the story that Ellis tells remains very much with us today. While border wars continued throughout the twentieth century, the twenty-first century rise of Islamic militancy has brought this historically porous nature of the border into even sharper focus.