The intervention of one political actor into the affairs and sovereign territory of another is, perhaps, about as age-old a phenomenon as might be identified amidst the overall history of political life—and is, as such, assuredly integral to the grand sweep of Middle East history. However, the peculiar modern notion of ‘interventionism’, as a by-product of political theorizing and practice within what is traditionally understood to be the seventeenth-century originating global system of nation-states, holds an extraordinary significance for the region, to say little of the broader world within which the Middle East is ensnared. Certainly, when one thinks of interventionism relative to the history of the modern Middle East, landmark events and processes whose legacies bear manifestly upon the present come readily to mind: e.g., the late 1790s Napoleonic incursion into Egypt that is sometimes viewed as the bellwether of modern ‘Western’ imperialism within the region; the previous century’s imperial Ottoman forays in the opposite direction, deep into central Europe; and, having in mind the genealogy of our immediate, unfolding historical moment, the ongoing commemoration of the World War I centennial, occurring coincident with the Islamic State’s (IS’s) determination to dissolve the ‘Sykes-Picot borders’ stemming from British and French (and initially also Russian and Italian) colonial designs emerging during that conflict.

Proceeding in the light of this historical backdrop, I would like to consider the significances conveyed by the singularly complex concatenation of interventionist actors and interests impinging on the Middle East today. Situating the analysis primarily within the embattled, no-longer distinctly bounded countries of Syria and Iraq, but also making mention of other salient locales like Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain, I will point to several categories of intervening actor, along with varying, explicit and implicit rationales for, modalities of, and fallouts from intervention. Thus, attention will of course be given to an interventionist (and, no less important, in strategic instances an assiduously non-interventionist) Western power like the United States, as well as to international associations comprising that nation’s putative allies in intervention, like NATO (Turkey’s ambivalence vis-à-vis IS offering a salient example of why such a supposed alliance must be qualified). Within this context, focus will be placed on the fraught enterprise of humanitarian intervention—viewed as it is by its critics as a thinly-veiled cover for selective, strategic and economic gain seeking to justify itself through reductive tropes whereby ‘civilized’, modernist national and international saviors promise rescue from ‘medieval barbarians’ (who often are, by necessary assumption, non-state ‘outlaws’). More than this, though, I am concerned to discuss interventionism exemplifying the ambitions and calculations of non-Western actors. Russia is notable here, with its pointed critiques of recent Western interventionism coming in juxtaposition with its own interventionist impulses in the Middle East and the region’s Eurasian periphery. Above all, though, I will point to states within the region, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey,
whose decisions to deploy (or not to deploy, as is again underscored by the decided, anti-Kurdish Turkish preference towards seeing IS assault Kobani) indicate a determination, and ability to pursue their own strategic and ideological aims. Far from least, and especially telling, is the interventionist force of non-state (in the customary, Westphalian nation-state sense, at least) actors, from Hezbollah’s pivotal role in shoring up the Bashar al-Assad regime, to the ambiguously named IS, itself.

I will suggest that recent and current embodiments of interventionism within the Middle East together signify an unprecedented array of contending political agents and forces whose willingness to project their influence intimates, in turn, fundamental twenty-first century political transformations and contradictions. Emblematic among these intersecting transformations and contradictions is that the increasingly tenuous, early-modern logic of nation-state sovereignty—a colonial superimposition within the region, as it is—finds itself ever-more challenged, in a paradoxical fashion; this, by long-running (and perhaps waning), as well as burgeoning state powers seeking to enhance their own sovereign authority, by violating basic sovereign principles of non-intervention, often in the name, moreover, of supposed, universal or otherwise trans-boundary imperatives of humanitarianism or religious identity. At the same time, interventionist non-state actors such as IS seek to overcome colonially inscribed state formations, while yet supplanting them with such formations of their own devising. Withal, and again paradoxically, violence remains a chief propellant of interventionism. This is so, whether violence is undertaken, for instance, by state or international actors who assert that their limited military intervention acts as a necessary, more-humane antidote to ‘barbaric’ violence; and indeed also as an ostensible alternative to open warfare (even as such intervention, arguably, must act to perpetuate ongoing warfare in order to justify itself, and its underlying political authority). Then, too, an alternative example is posed by IS, with its interventionist endeavor of brutally seizing and reimagining all territory upon which it and its interloping fighters can lay hands, in the pursuit of a mythic caliphate purporting to establish authentic authority, agency, and identity within the Middle East.

Ultimately, the contending logics of interventionism within today’s Middle East appear to signify conundrums of late-modern existence occurring at a foundational, epistemic level that actually underlies the political. Interventionism implies the quintessentially modern notion that problems of violent conflict, together with the persistence of unjust socio-political orders, misguided worldviews, or merely disadvantageous strategic arrangements supposedly feeding (or justifying) conflict, can be subjected to surgical, or other modes of technocratic management—or, indeed, to utopian, and even apocalyptical projects of social engineering. As such, the (if anything, multiplying) disorder that seems often to flow in the wake of interventionism within the region might serve as a cautionary warning against the hubristic idea that the world—the Middle East, to say little of elsewhere—can be rationalistically manipulated, as one devises and wills.