



THE LINES THAT BIND

**100 YEARS OF
SYKES-PICOT**

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MARTIN KRAMER

REPAIRING SYKES-PICOT

I would suggest that no second edition of the Sykes-Picot Treaty be produced. The geographical absurdities of the present Agreement will laugh it out of Court, and it would be perhaps as well if we spared ourselves a second effort on the same lines.

—T. E. Lawrence, November 1918¹

“SYKES-PICOT” has become convenient shorthand to describe a century-old order supposedly in its death throes. Indeed, hardly a day passes when some politician, journalist, or academic does not declare “the end of Sykes-Picot” or argue in favor or against “a new Sykes-Picot.” If the Ottoman Empire was “the sick man of Europe” in the fifty years before its collapse, Sykes-Picot is the sick man of the Middle East today.

Both Sir Mark Sykes and Monsieur François Georges-Picot would be astonished to hear this, because their agreement was never implemented. Britain, which bore the brunt of the war to drive the Ottoman armies out of the Arab provinces, decided that the deal gave too much to France. By late 1918, Lord Curzon, a member of the war cabinet, could declare Sykes-Picot “not only obsolete, but absolutely impracticable.”² In subsequent renegotiations, Mosul, which would have been under French protection, became part of British-controlled Iraq. Palestine, most of which would have been “internationalized” as an Anglo-French condominium, came under exclusive British control. The French also balked at the notion that Damascus might become the seat of an independent Arab state in

which they would serve as mere advisors. They fixed that by conquering Damascus in 1920.

So the Sykes-Picot map never became real, and it certainly doesn't resemble the map of today, which dates to the mid-1920s. Elie Kedourie's landmark book, *England and the Middle East* (1956), even has a chapter entitled "The Unmaking of the Sykes-Picot Agreement," which affirms that by 1918, "the Sykes-Picot scheme was dead... There was nothing to replace it."³

If Sykes-Picot died in 1918, why is it thought to live on? Arab nationalists claimed that the deal shortchanged the Arabs on wartime promises and that it wrongly separated Arab from Arab. "Sykes-Picot" became a signifier for the never-ending Western betrayal of the Arabs. Never mind that, as far back as 1919, T. E. Lawrence called Sykes-Picot "the 'charter' of the Arabs, giving them Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and Mosul for their own."⁴ Sykes-Picot, he wrote in 1929, "was absurd, in its boundaries, but it did recognize the claims of Syrians to self-government, and it was ten thousand times better than the eventual settlement"—the mandates system.⁵ Just as important, Sykes-Picot left no opening to Zionism: Chaim Weizmann called it "devoid of rhyme or reason" and "fatal to us."⁶

Arab resentment thus should have fastened on the deal that superseded Sykes-Picot: the Anglo-French partition agreed upon at San Remo in 1920, which included recognition of Zionist claims. But indignation is more readily stirred by the notion of two lone British and French diplomats deep in the bowels of the Foreign Office, furtively "carving up" the Middle East with crayons, than the more mundane reality of the British and French prime ministers and their delegations publicly doing the carving in a sun-drenched villa on the Italian Riviera. One also cannot discount the effect of the utterly inaccurate presentation of Sykes-Picot in David Lean's Oscar-winning *Lawrence of Arabia*, where it stands for the most shameful deceit. And finally, of course, there is the propaganda of the Islamic State, with the now-famous theatrical twist of blowing up a border post for its video on "The End of Sykes-Picot."

Stepping back from the Arabist rhetoric, Islamist theatrics, and Hollywood distortion, one sees that Sykes-Picot, however modified and misrepresented over the years, still left behind a legacy. It wasn't

the Sykes-Picot *borders* but the Sykes-Picot *order* that survived. Under Ottoman rule, one could travel from Alexandretta on the Mediterranean to Basra by the Persian Gulf without crossing a border—the same distance as Paris to Warsaw. During and after the war, Britain and France occupied this expanse and divided it into new states, in borders drawn to minimize friction between the two rival powers. This left behind four distinct legacies that persist to this day.

1. Sykes-Picot ruled out the reestablishment of Turkish dominion over the area between Mosul and Aleppo—a real possibility once Turkish nationalists under Mustafa Kemal went on the counteroffensive. The population of this area was of mixed origin, and it included important loci of sympathy for Turkey. The British and French kept the Turks out of Mosul and Aleppo, so that modern Turkey's southern border, as finalized at the Lausanne Conference in 1923, roughly followed the northern border of the Arab state under French protection (Area A) sketched on the Sykes-Picot map.
2. Sykes-Picot left out the Kurds. In particular, the agreement included parts of Kurdistan in the projected Arab state or confederation, ensuring eventual Arab control of important oil and water resources. For Kurds, "Sykes-Picot" also connotes imperialist double-dealing, but for a very different reason than it does for Arabs: the order it created gave them no place on the political map and put a portion of them under an Arab thumb.
3. Sykes-Picot laid the foundation for two independent states, Syria and Iraq, thwarting the (Sunni) Arab dream of a unified empire stretching from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Realizing that dream would have been a challenge even without foreign interference. It became impossible once local urban elites in Damascus and Baghdad accustomed themselves to the two states, and even grew envious of their independence from each other.
4. Sykes-Picot proposed the first partition of Palestine, into a French Upper Galilee, a British Haifa Bay, an international

regime in the Jerusalem-Jaffa corridor, and an Arab Negev. Thereafter, some sort of sharing became the most frequently proposed solution to Palestine, and it has remained so. Moreover, Sykes-Picot determined that ever after, the outside powers would demand a say in the future of the Holy Land.

“The end of Sykes-Picot,” much touted by the pundits, would require that these four legacies come undone. Have they?

1. Turkey has not moved to establish its sway across its borders with Syria and Iraq. Despite the much-heralded neo-Ottomanism of the present Turkish government, there is no sign of a Turkish willingness, let alone an eagerness, to reach down and order the affairs of northern Syria and Iraq. To the contrary: just as Turkey once conceded them to France and Britain, it now defers to Russia and the United States.
2. The Kurds, both in Iraq and Syria, have built up autonomous enclaves. Yet the Kurds haven't made a clean break with the regime in either Damascus or Baghdad, and certainly have not put forward clear-cut demands for independence. The Sykes-Picot order may be weakened, but it is still sufficiently robust to deter the Kurds from moving unilaterally to overturn it.
3. Sykes-Picot divided the region into blue and red zones, which became the two distinct states of Syria and Iraq. This division has become so deeply ingrained that even the Arab nationalist Baath Party, when simultaneously in power in Damascus and Baghdad, not only failed to unite the two countries but fostered hostility between them. Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Assad effectively completed the work of Sykes and Picot. True, the Islamic State at its height created a *de facto* “Sun-nistan” spanning the Syria-Iraq border on the Upper Euphrates, but the jihadist group could not overwhelm Damascus or Baghdad, nor could it unify them.
4. While there is much talk about the end of the two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians, no party in Israel favors total annexation of the West Bank. Not only does a soft partition between Israelis and Palestinians exist *de facto*;

partition remains the declaratory aim of the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. Likewise, the United States, the European Union, and Russia, which continue to see themselves as interested parties in any resolution, remain adamantly in favor of partition.

A century later, then, each of the four principal legacies of Sykes-Picot, while undermined, remains intact. If Sykes-Picot so defied demography and geography, as its critics insist, how is it that these legacies have persisted? The answer is that the agreement, although driven by imperial interests of the moment, captured deeper realities that remain salient to this day. The fact is that Turkey does not have the means to sort out the affairs of the Arabs without again becoming a “sick man.” The Kurds are still scattered and landlocked, without a clear path to true independence. The Levant and Mesopotamia are still two distinct regions that cannot be stitched together, except by a foreign empire. And no single party has the legitimacy to decide the fate of the Holy Land on its own.

In sum, Sykes-Picot does live. And so it is T. E. Lawrence’s opinion that begs to be addressed. Granted, the map is full of “absurdities,” but what map would not be? Every so often, a magazine or journal invites experts to propose a new map, along presumably more “natural” lines. The results are riddled with contradictions, and all are unworkable in the absence of a Great Power willing to expend blood and treasure to impose them.

And here lies the crucial difference between 1916 and 2016. A century ago, this part of the Middle East was hugely important to the European powers for maintenance of their far-flung empires. It provided ports, rail connections, and buffer zones that were needed to control the Mediterranean, Suez, and India. It was thought to have oil before anyone knew of the vast reserves in Arabia proper. It really mattered who controlled Mosul—just as eighteen years earlier, it really mattered who controlled Fashoda.

But those days are long gone. Yes, in 2016 there are still Western interests—in particular, the fear that chaos there could become a source of chaos here, through the spillover of terrorism and refugees. But why go to the trouble and expense of a “new Sykes-Picot” when some renovation work on the old one might suffice?

One idea would be the promotion of strongmen who could enforce the borders as they now exist. But we now know that this sometimes creates more problems than it solves—first, because it produces horrific violence within those borders, and second, because strongmen have a tendency to push too far (see under: Hafiz al-Assad occupies Lebanon and Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait). A second idea would be to license regional powers to create order. This is the Sunni option, and it has the merit of building on the stability of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, two of the most successful cases of state building in the region. But Saudi Arabia foments Sunni-Shiite strife and Turkey provokes Kurdish resistance. The order they foster would be tenuous at its edges.

A third idea was floated by Henry Kissinger in 2013: “An outcome in which the various nationalities agree to coexist together, but in more or less autonomous regions so that they cannot oppress each other... [is] the outcome I would prefer to see.” To which he quickly added: “But that’s not the popular view.”⁷ It has become rather more popular over time, although no one knows how this agreement to coexist might be reached. Such a hybrid (dis)order of states, rump states, autonomous zones, and nonstate actors might be volatile in some places (e.g., northern Syria and western Iraq) but stable in others (e.g., the West Bank and Iraqi Kurdistan).

Some combination of the second and third scenarios might have the most potential to evolve toward a new equilibrium. What can be done to advance this? The Sykes-Picot order was always high maintenance, relying largely on two kinds of dictatorship in succession: colonial and indigenous. No one wants to return to that. But a beaten-down Sykes-Picot order is still better than the alternatives. If it is to be given another lease, an enlightened outside power, leading an alliance, will need to put a finger—and occasionally a fist—on the scale in favor of local actors who meet an agreed standard of constructive moderation.

Is the United States that power? If not, there is no small chance that a future historian might write about 2016: “The Sykes-Picot scheme was dead.... There was nothing to replace it.”

NOTES

1. T. E. Lawrence, "The Reconstruction of Arabia," report to the British cabinet, November 4, 1918, in *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, ed. David Garnett (New York: Doubleday, 1939), p. 269.
2. Quoted by Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1990), 591.
3. Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956), p. 141.
4. T. E. Lawrence, "To the Editor of The Times," September 11, 1919, in *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, 282.
5. T. E. Lawrence to William Yale, October 22, 1929, in *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 670.
6. Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), p. 191.
7. "@fordschool—Henry Kissinger and Paul O'Neill: Policy Reflections," YouTube video, 1:04:21, posted by "Ford School," University of Michigan, June 19, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVasCE1uOf4>.