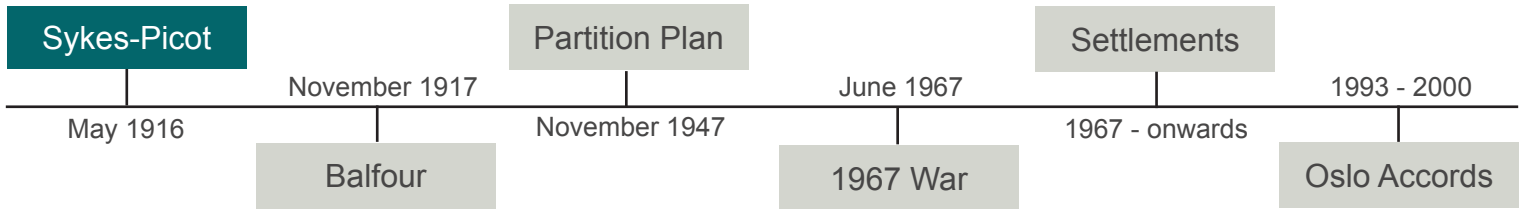


Arab-Israeli Relations



Sykes-Picot Agreement

Prepared by Anna Siodlak, Research Associate

The Sykes-Picot agreement divided the Levant into spheres of influence between France and Britain. These lines still exist today as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. The political and demographic upheaval created by these new borders continued well after independence and has contributed to regional instability, most recently in Syria and Iraq.

What was the agreement?

At the turn of the century, the Ottoman Empire comprised several provinces administered by governors who reported to the Sultan in Constantinople. The Sykes-Picot Agreement proposed spheres of control in the Levant should the Triple Entente succeed in dismantling the Empire.¹ It was envisaged that France would acquire most of Ottoman Syria (Syria and Lebanon) while Britain would take control of Ottoman Mesopotamia and the southern part of Ottoman Syria (Iraq and Transjordan). Palestine was to be internationally administered, but in reality the British became the de facto ruler from 1917-1948. The Allies endorsed Russia's post-war occupation of certain northern parts of the Ottoman Empire (Armenian provinces and some Kurdish territory) for Russian acceptance of the Agreement. Planning continued at the San Remo conference where the League of Nations mandates were determined. The agreement gained legal status with the ratification of the British Mandate for Palestine and Transjordan,



Zones of influence established in the agreement. Photo courtesy of www.npr.org

and the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon in 1923.

Why was the agreement made?

The Sykes-Picot negotiations must be understood in the context of more complex power struggles. The alliance between Ottoman Turks and Germany during World War I threatened the Allies in Europe. The British therefore encouraged an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire (1916-1918) by promising Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca Arab independence after the Empire's collapse. At the same time, British cabinet ministers were rallying support for a Jewish homeland. Sykes-Picot became part of a contradictory web of agreements, all forged against a background of political and imperial motivations.

¹ The Agreement was negotiated in London between the Triple Entente powers, Britain, France and Russia in 1916. Although officially recognised as the Asia-Minor Agreement, it usually takes the name of its chief negotiators, François Georges-Picot, a French diplomat and Sir Mark Sykes, a British Conservative party politician and diplomatic advisor.

Who won and who lost?

Britain and France benefited from territorial control of the region, especially given their imperial agenda and the economic hardship of the Great Depression. Access to Haifa and Alexandretta ports enabled the transport of capital thereby increasing trade. The Haifa station was the only railway station that connected the continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia, enabling the transportation of troops and raw materials. The Agreement also fostered a sense of mutual security as it was stipulated that no third party could acquire territorial possessions or a naval base in the region, therefore protecting the Arabian Peninsula from further interventions.

Sharif Hussein maintained relations with Britain, whom he relied on for political and economic support. The urban notables of the late Ottoman Empire continued to govern social, cultural and religious aspects of life, and leaders such as Emir Abdullah of Transjordan enjoyed close relationships with their European overseers. The Arab population, however, was angered at being misled by the promise of Arab independence. The violence that followed would eventually lead to the collapse of the Mandate period in 1948.

How does this agreement remain relevant today?

The Islamic State (IS) declaration of the establishment of a caliphate in June 2014 is the latest reminder of the lasting influence of these events. Many scholars link the artificial division of post-Ottoman land to the current sectarian conflict, yet this fails to recognise the entrenchment of nationalism in Arab states.² The IS are not the first group



Winston Churchill, Sir Herbert Samuel and Emir Abdullah of Transjordan in 1921. Photo courtesy of Photographium.

that has attempted to re-plot borders. Egyptian and Iraqi leaders attempted to construct an Arab empire in the 1940s, and in 1958 Egypt and Syria created the United Arab Republic. Colonel Gaddafi also attempted (unsuccessfully) to form a Federation of Arab Republics. Moreover, the forces of tribalism in the Arab world are deeply entrenched and are likely to persist with or without borders.

² R. Khalaf. 'Colonial powers did not set the Middle East ablaze'. Financial Times. (June 2014). [Online]. Available: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/86c958c2-ff78-11e3-8a35-00144fea-b7de.html#axzz37wQtcVLQ>. 19.07.2014.



Anna Siodlak

Anna is a Research Associate with the West Asia – North Africa Institute, where she focuses on mechanisms for achieving Arab integration and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Before joining the WANA Institute, Anna was based at a development organisation in the region where she launched a number of initiatives including discussion groups on current affairs and career mentoring sessions for students. She holds a Bachelor of International Relations and is completing a Master's degree in Global Politics at the London School of Economics, specialising in international relations of the Middle East and human security.