

SYMPOSIUM ON THE MANY LIVES AND LEGACIES OF SYKES-PICOT

THE DANGER OF ANALOGICAL MYTHS: EXPLAINING THE POWER AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE SYKES-PICOT DELUSION

*Toby Dodge**

Introduction

Even before its hundredth year anniversary on 16 May 2016, the Sykes-Picot agreement had become a widely cited historical analogy both in the region itself and in Europe and the United States. In the Middle East, it is frequently deployed as an infamous example of European imperial betrayal and Western attempts more generally to keep the region divided, in conflict, and easy to dominate. In Europe and the United States, however, its role as a historical analogy is more complex—a shorthand for understanding the Middle East as irrevocably divided into mutually hostile sects and clans, destined to be mired in conflict until another external intervention imposes a new, more authentic, set of political units on the region to replace the postcolonial states left in the wake of WWI. What is notable about both these uses of the Sykes-Picot agreement is that they fundamentally misread, and thus overstate, its historical significance. The agreement reached by the British diplomat Mark Sykes and his French counterpart, François Georges-Picot, in May 1916, quickly became irrelevant as the realities on the ground in the Middle East, U.S. intervention into the war, a resurgent Turkey and the comparative weakness of the French and British states transformed international relations at the end of the First World War. Against this historical background, explaining the contemporary power of the narrative surrounding the use of the Sykes-Picot agreement becomes more intellectually interesting than its minor role in the history of European imperial interventions in the Middle East.

The Influence of Sykes-Picot

The seizure of Mosul in June 2014 by the rejuvenated forces of the Islamic State (in Arabic *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmīyah fīl-‘Iraq wa ash-Shām*, or its acronym *Da‘esh*) came as a shock to the Iraqi government, the United States, and the international community. Later in June, Daesh, with its panache for well-timed publicity, released a video entitled “The End of Sykes-Picot.” A voice-over by a Chechen jihadi explained that Daesh were breaking the colonially imposed borders across the Middle East, whilst video footage showed earthmovers destroying a berm that had previously marked the division between Iraq and Syria.¹

Within Arab political discourse, “Sykes–Picot” refers to both the colonial conquest of the Middle East by Britain and France during the First World War and covert attempts to retain control over Arab lands in the

* *Kuwait Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science and teaches in the International Relations Department.*

Originally published online 28 September 2016.

¹ Gianluca Mezzofiore, *Iraq Isis Crisis: Is This the End of Sykes-Picot?*, INT’L BUS. TIMES (June 30, 2014, 3:54 PM).

aftermath of the conflict by dividing the population of the region into separate, weaker states. In the aftermath of the fall of Mosul, Lebanese Druze politician, Walid Jumblatt, very publicly presented his fellow Lebanese politician, Hezbollah's leader Hasan Nasrallah, with a book explaining the historical genesis of Sykes-Picot whilst he declared its demise.²

The fall of Mosul and Daesh's subsequent activities on the Syrian-Iraqi border also caused an upsurge in media commentary across the United States and Europe. Both academics and senior states people deployed the Sykes-Picot agreement in their attempts to explain the fall of Mosul and the crisis in both Syria and Iraq.³

The hundredth anniversary of the agreement, in 2016, brought a fresh wave of media pundits, freshly minted think tank experts, and academics using the agreement to explain Daesh's continued violence, the on-going horrors of Syria's civil war, and indeed the whole of the region's travails in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. This commentary reached its peak in a series of articles written by Robin Wright and an accompanying map. Wright's sociological and cartographic imagination conjured a stable Middle East delivered through the creation of fourteen new, more religiously and ethnically homogeneous states.⁴

The Sykes-Picot Delusion

A close examination of the history surrounding the European powers' role in the Middle East during WWI makes the alleged explanatory power of the Sykes-Picot analogy difficult to sustain. As outlined in the book that Walid Jumblatt gave to Hasan Nasrallah, Sir Mark Sykes did indeed reach a secret agreement with François Georges-Picot in May 1916 that allowed for the French and British to divide the Middle East into separate areas of influence in the aftermath of a successful war.⁵ This was at the high point of Anglo-French imperial ambition and their optimism about how the war would end. However, even at the time, the confidence underpinning the agreement was questioned, with the head of British military intelligence likening it to two "hunters who divided up the skin of the bear before they had killed it."⁶

Almost as soon as it was signed, the suppositions underpinning the agreement came under siege and were discarded. The British government made radical policy changes with regards to the Middle East twice in 1917 and again in 1918.⁷ The dynamics driving this transformation came first from the U.S. entry into the war, but then from Britain's own military and political weakness, a military resurgent Turkey, and finally, from the Iraqi population's rejection of British domination. This meant that the borders of the new states created after the First World War were not the product of a covert Anglo-French conspiracy but were instead shaped by negotiations that reflected British and French imperial weakness, the rise of powerful nationalisms across the region, and a new Turkish state that rejected the imperial division of the old Ottoman Empire.

This complete transformation of the international system, the Middle East, and Britain's position in both, led Mark Sykes himself to declare, "imperialism, annexation, military triumph, prestige, White man's burdens,

² See *Jumblatt presents Nasrallah with Sykes-Picot book*, THE DAILY STAR LEBANON (July 29, 2014, 2:36 PM) and Robert Fisk, *The old partition of the Middle East is dead. I dread to think what will follow*, INDEPENDENT (June 13, 2014).

³ See, e.g., Vali R. Nasr, *A Crisis a Century in the Making*, INT'L N.Y. TIMES, (Aug. 10, 2014) and Paddy Ashdown, *Western intervention over Isis won't prevent the break-up of Iraq*, THE GUARDIAN, (Aug. 14, 2014, 5:41 PM).

⁴ Robin Wright, *Imagining a Remapped Middle East*, INT'L N.Y. TIMES SUNDAY REV., (Sep. 28, 2013) and Robin Wright, *How the Curse of Sykes-Picot Still Haunts the Middle East*, THE NEW YORKER, (Apr. 30, 2016).

⁵ JAMES BARR, *LINE IN THE SAND: BRITAIN, FRANCE AND THE STRUGGLE THAT SHAPED THE MIDDLE EAST* (2011).

⁶ *Id.* at chapter 2.

⁷ See TOBY DODGE, *INVENTING IRAQ: THE FAILURE OF NATION BUILDING AND A HISTORY DENIED* 5-41 (2003).

have been expunged from the popular political vocabulary, consequently Protectorates, spheres of interest or influence, annexations, bases etc., have to be consigned to the Diplomatic lumber-room.”⁸

The Sykes-Picot Delusion and the Power of Historical Analogies

A close reading of post-WWI history reveals that the frequency of references to the Sykes-Picot agreement cannot lie in its empirical veracity. Instead, it is better viewed as a cognitive device, something akin to a historical analogy used to understand a novel or complex situation, but in this case deployed to impose a “primordial” understanding on the populations of the region. Under this rubric, religious and ethnic identities are understood to be the primary drivers of instability in the Middle East. The states supposedly imposed by the Sykes-Picot agreement have failed to overcome these primordial realities and hence need to be removed and replaced by political units that more accurately represent what are perceived to be realities in the region.

Insight into the use of the Sykes-Picot analogy may be found in cognitive psychology and its application to International Relations. Individuals have to be “cognitive misers”: they have a limited ability to process complex information so must deploy subconscious short-cuts to identify and simplify information that is important.⁹ Yuen Foong Khong has used this insight to understand why historical analogies are frequently deployed. Analogical reasoning matches new experiences or data to existing memories or perceptions of the past already stored within an individual’s mind. Once this match has been made, the new information can be processed “top down” and a stable meaning imposed upon it. Historical analogies or myths allow people using them to define the new situation they are facing and provide prescriptions for overcoming any problems these situations might pose. However, by deploying a series of case studies, Khong demonstrates that it is very difficult to use historical analogies positively to aid the accurate as opposed to efficient processing of information. Historical analogies instead tend to emphasize “superficial and irrelevant parallels.” These parallels may be comforting, replicating existing bias, but they tend to lead to costly or poor decision-making.¹⁰ In this case the deployment of Sykes-Picot panders to ahistorical Orientalist stereotypes of the Middle East, allowing simple solutions to be recommended for complex problems by reference to ahistorical views of the region.

The inaccurate use of the Sykes-Picot agreement to explain Daesh’s rise, the continuation of the Syrian civil war, and the general instability of the Middle East highlights the dangers involved in using historical analogies as analytical tools for understanding contemporary events. The deployment of the Sykes-Picot analogy may give its promoters a veneer of historical learning but it also directs them to see the current set of regional crises in a very specific and inaccurate way. By its very nature, seeking to understand contemporary Middle Eastern politics by reaching back a hundred years into history leads to a static view of those societies and populations over the last century. First, it damns the states of the Middle East that were created after the First World War as false creations, the exogenous outcome of imperial machinations that were bound to fail. Second, it removes all agency from Middle Eastern populations, removing their ability to react to and change the supposedly trans-historical determinations of religion and ethnicity. Under this rubric they can only be rescued by external interventions to clear up the mess created by previous outside attempts at sociopolitical re-engineering. The policy proscriptions that originate from such an approach are clear—these false states have gained no loyalty from their populations and are thus the problem that needs to be solved. They should be replaced with smaller more religiously and ethnically coherent units that can gain loyalty from their citizens.

⁸ Quoted in *id.* at 13.

⁹ Jerel A. Rosati, *The Power of Human Cognition in the Study of World Politics*, 2 INT’L STUD. REV. 45, 51-56 (Autumn, 2000).

¹⁰ See YUEN FOONG KHONG, *ANALOGIES AT WAR: KOREA, MUNICH, DIEN BIEN PHU AND VIETNAM DECISIONS OF 1965* 10-13 (1992).

Even a cursory examination of a world map should problematize such an argument. The majority of states that form the international system are themselves postcolonial creations, the result of imperial conquest, followed by the struggle for self-determination. Against this background, the historical origins of a state in colonial conquest does not, in anyway, invalidate their ability to function once the colonial powers were driven out.

The other analytical outcome of the Sykes-Picot analogy is, if anything, even more damaging. In negating the validity, legitimacy, and influence of Middle Eastern states, it seeks an alternative organizing dynamic or principle, primarily the religious identity of the populations contained within these states. By focusing on religion as the way to understand the Middle East, an unchanging “essence” that can be traced back over a hundred years, the promoters of the Sykes-Picot analogy are clearly guilty of primordialisation. This analysis of the Middle East refuses to register the transformation that the region has undergone, almost continually, since 1916. Those using the Sykes-Picot analogy claim substate communities in the Middle East are largely geographically homogenous, mutually hostile, and locked in artificial, minority-dominated states. This analysis leads its promoters to view the civil war in Iraq and Syria as an unavoidable tragedy. For this approach, regional politics have always been animated by deeply held communal antipathies; the conflicts in Iraq and Syria are simply a by-product.¹¹ The use of the Sykes-Picot allegory allows for the promotion of religion instead of states as the main units of analysis and hence policy formation. Today’s Middle East can then be compared to the “30 years’ religious war of 17th-century Europe” with the current crisis being caused by “rivalries among tribes and religious sects.”¹²

Conclusions: Moving Away From the Sykes-Picot Analogy

Any sustained examination of Iraq’s history not only relegates the influence of the Sykes-Picot agreement to a misplaced historical analogy, it also problematizes the supposed transhistorical dominance of religious and ethnic identities over any other identity. Since 1920, Iraqi history has been dominated by ideational and coercive conflict over the boundaries of the state and the political loyalties of its citizens. However, these conflicts have not always or even primarily been dominated by fights over religion and ethnicity. From the creation of the state until at least the 1970s, the main ideological fault lines were between two different types of national identity, one emphasizing Iraqi territorial nationalism, the other focusing on Iraq’s population as a small part of a greater Arab nation, united by a common language and history. The British imposed monarchy was removed by a bloody coup in 1958, and from then until 1968, the main struggle was between the Middle East’s largest Communist Party and various Arab nationalist organizations. Once the Baath Party seized power in 1968, in an attempt to court popular opinion, it slowly transformed its own ideological message from one promoting Arab nationalism to one promoting Iraqi nationalism.¹³

This is not to suggest that political ideologies stressing ethnic and religious identity were not present throughout Iraq’s history as a state. Like other basically modernist ideologies, powerful appeals to a distinctly Kurdish nationalism arose in the late 1900s, in a conflictual but symbiotic relationship with both Arab nationalism and Iraqi nationalism. A specifically Shia identity, juxtaposed against a Sunni one, was slower to emerge but was

¹¹ For a short account of this argument see Leslie H. Gelb, *The Three-State Solution*, INT’L N.Y. TIMES, (Nov. 25, 2003) and Leslie H. Gelb, *Divide Iraq into three states*, INT’L HERALD TRIBUNE, Nov. 26, 2004. Peter W. Galbraith develops the argument at greater length in Peter W. Galbraith, *How to get out of Iraq*, N.Y. REV. BOOKS (May 13, 2004) and PETER W. GALBRAITH, *THE END OF IRAQ: HOW AMERICAN INCOMPETENCE CREATED A WAR WITHOUT END* (2006). For the policy proscriptions that arise from this approach see Joseph R. Biden Jr., & Leslie H. Gelb, *Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq*, INT’L N.Y. TIMES (May 1, 2006).

¹² Ashdown, *supra* note 3, and Nasr, *supra* note 3.

¹³ See AMATZIA BARAM, *CULTURE, HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY IN THE FORMATION OF BA’THIST IRAQ, 1968-89* (1991) and ERIC DAVIS, *MEMORIES OF STATE: POLITICS, HISTORY AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN MODERN IRAQ* (2005).

clearly visible by the 1980s, reaching new heights after the failed uprising against the Baathist government in 1991. This identity, free of Baathist oppression that did so much to create it, reached its peak in the aftermath of regime change in 2003. However, substate communal identities, be they Shia, Kurdish, or latterly Sunni, have coexisted side by side and competed with unitary identities like Arab and Iraqi nationalism.

Instead of deploying the Sykes-Picot analogy and seeking to primordialise Iraq, Syria, and the wider Middle East, it would be more accurate to conceive of Iraq as a dynamic “political field” dominated by a hybrid or polycentric struggle. The struggle for national politics then becomes much more than the evolution of an “imagined community” but a conflict over what communities can be imagined and who has the right to join them.¹⁴ Iraqi and wider Middle Eastern history can then be seen as a constant ideational struggle between competing visions of the nation. In certain periods of history a religious or ethnic categorization of the nation may dominate, but in others, unitary nationalism may win the backing of a majority of the population. The struggle is relational, with one ideology becoming dominant because its purveyors have convinced, albeit temporarily, enough people that its vision is the correct one.

¹⁴ PIERRE BOURDIEU & LOIC J. D. WACQUANT, AN INVITATION TO REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY 97, 101, 104 (1992) and Pierre Bourdieu, *The political field, the social field and the journalistic field*, in BOURDIEU AND THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD 30 (Rodney Benson & Erik Neveu eds., 2005). On this concept's application to Iraq, see SAMI ZUBAIDA, ISLAM, THE PEOPLE AND THE STATE: POLITICAL IDEAS AND MOVEMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST 145-150 (1989), Samit Zubaida, *Community, class and minorities in Iraqi politics*, in THE IRAQI REVOLUTION OF 1958. THE OLD SOCIAL CLASSES REVISITED 207 (Robert A. Fernea & Wm. Roger Louis eds., 1991).