

HH Sheikh Nasser  
al-Mohammad  
al-Sabah  
Publication Series

**Ending Sykes-Picot:  
The Arab World and  
the West After 2011**

Robert Bowker

Number 7: September 2013



## About the Author

**Robert Bowker** is Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (The Middle East and Central Asia), The Australian National University, Canberra. He is the author of several monographs and papers on Egypt and wider Middle East, including Egypt and the Politics of Change in the Arab Middle East (Edward Elgar, 2010), Egypt After Mubarak: The Challenges Ahead (Durham, UK: al-Sabah Paper No. 1, November 2011). An experienced diplomat, Bowker has served as Australia's Ambassador to Jordan, Tunisia and most recently to Egypt (2005-08), as well as postings to Syria and Saudi Arabia.

### *Acknowledgments*

The author would like to thank Dr. Jeroen Gunning for sharing his insights, and suggesting use of the term 'nebulous popular forces' in the context of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Author also thanks Dr. Minerva Nasser-Eddine for her advice and insight into the Ottoman period.

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# Ending Sykes-Picot: The Arab World and the West After 2011

Robert Bowker

## Introduction

Amidst ongoing instability in the post-2011 Arab political, economic and social environment, accelerated in many cases by the weakening of the authority of the state - and in some cases by the removal or terminal decline of regimes - fundamental issues about what it means to be Arab and modern in the post-colonial Arab order are in dispute.

The driving forces of change - demographic pressures, education, connectivity, unemployment and other frustrations and indignities - continue to fracture most Middle East Arab societies in complex ways, while the core political, judicial and economic institutions created by modernising rulers since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (in the case of Egypt) and in the colonial and early post-colonial era mostly remain in place. In Egypt and some other non-oil exporting Arab countries an amorphous desire to widen space for political and cultural expression was met by hard-edged determination to secure the success of an ill-defined and largely unarticulated Islamist vision. While initially it enjoyed political ascendancy<sup>1</sup> the Islamist trend has subsequently encountered major challenges to its authority and political legitimacy.

The debate about what it means to be both Arab and modern now mostly pits multiple versions of an Islamic discourse against an equally reductive discourse which is secular in spirit, and which is deeply antagonised by what it believes the Islamist 'other' represents. Among Islamists it contrasts inclusive thinking against neo-traditional, exclusivist notions of what the faith requires of its adherents. There is no consensus about the role of the state in responding to patterns of behaviour judged to be at odds with the values of Islam in either its modernist interpretation or its neo-traditional forms. Generational gaps and power struggles, leftist and Islamist notions of social justice competing with advocacy of welfare through business-led economic growth, and as yet unresolved questions of transitional justice add further political and ideological complications to the debate.

The opposition previously faced by Arab elites and leaderships that inherited the power once enjoyed by colonial regimes (including in some cases the legislative means through which that power was given effect) was mostly either nationalist, leftist or Islamist. The picture now is more anarchic. There is a powerful sense of disconnection and frustration, alienation and marginalization from politics and decision-making not only at the government level but across society in general.<sup>2</sup> On the Islamist side of the spectrum - broadly speaking, those who engage in politics according to an Islamic discourse - the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Mohammed Morsy has raised serious questions about the capacity of Arab political systems to contain, through constitutional means, the struggle between Islamists and those who reject the use of Islamic discourse and lifestyles in defining their identities.<sup>3</sup> The



rivets of Arab society have visibly loosened, with the fading of government authority in the face of street-level challenges ranging from football ‘ultras’ to lynch mobs.

Robert Kaplan’s observation in 2011 that it “is less democracy than the crisis of central authority that will dominate the next phase of Middle Eastern history”<sup>4</sup> seems increasingly apt. Rhetoric aside, this is not a struggle for democracy: it is mainly about the future of power structures and the places of political Islam and the military, brought on by a popular convulsion, in Egypt at least, at the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to take a genuinely inclusive approach to government, and a refusal of the non-Islamist side of the political spectrum to accept the prospect of Islamist rule. Military intervention is unlikely to address any of those problems, let alone resolve them. It is a grim situation, fed by economic stress, with potential to grow worse.

If the shadow of the future now hangs over much of the Arab world it is largely because of the failure of key institutions: government, family structures, education systems, business networks and other bastions of privilege to change fast enough to meet the demands of an increasingly articulate, educated, globally-connected, mobilised younger generation of Arab activists.<sup>5</sup> The contest which has followed is the inevitable outcome of that failure. It is a debate about values and power, full of fury, chicanery, suspicion and fear.

Because it is bounded only weakly by the uncodified norms of traditional or conventional Arab political behaviour, rather than by credible, institutionally-based political processes, and perhaps also because it is taking place in a climate of increasing economic insecurity, the debate about the future of Arab society is contributing to the destruction of the social fabric. It is fed to some extent by developments beyond national borders, especially the sectarian bloodshed in Syria and the contest in that country between regional powers.

Sunni-Shia antagonism has risen to unprecedented heights across the region. The civil war in Syria combines carnage of civilians and the destruction of the core elements of Syrian society and the state itself. It will take at least a generation to restore some sort of normality to a very different Syria, with its youth brutalised, sharper sectarianism, smaller minority communities and a greatly reduced middle class. The Kurds of Iraq see a future pregnant with national possibilities, while violence elsewhere between the Shia and Sunni has returned to levels not seen since 2007. Jordan and Lebanon are under pressure from both the influx of refugees from Syria. The Syrian conflict may lead to a renewal of conflict between confessional groups within Lebanon itself. Egypt has rarely been more fragile, economically and politically.

Against that background, this paper seeks to examine the durability of the foundations of much of the contemporary Middle East, from three perspectives: national or territorial sovereignty, political values and cultural expression. These issues fall, directly or indirectly, within the framework of what has often been referred to as ‘Sykes-Picot’: the agreement<sup>§</sup> reached between

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<sup>§</sup> Barr notes that the agreement was not seen by the British as a blueprint for the future government of the region but rather as a ‘hypothetical exercise’ intended to resolve problems with their French allies. The deal, which concerned territory that neither signatory controlled, was “vulnerable to events” (Barr, p. 36). The practical effect of the agreement was largely overtaken by later negotiations and territorial tradeoffs, agreed between London and Paris and ultimately endorsed by the League of Nations. Nevertheless, it was “even by the standards of the time... a shamelessly self-interested pact, reached well after the point when a growing number of people had started to blame empire-building for the ... war” (Barr, p. 32). More importantly, from an Arab perspective, it also contradicted the undertakings previously provided by the British to the Hashemite leader Hussein bin Ali, or Hussein’s understanding of those undertakings, in regard to his ambition after the war to rule Syria and Iraq.



Britain and France in January 1916, and with Tzarist Russia in May 1916, which envisioned a post-war division of the Arab remnants of the Ottoman Empire between them.<sup>6</sup> A further aim of the paper, in the light of the above, is to examine the implications of Sykes-Picot for Western interests in the Arab world, and the question of how closure might be brought to the issue as a shaping factor in the relations between Arab governments and society and their Western counterparts.

While reports of its passing are in vogue<sup>7</sup> it is probably more instructive to ask why Sykes-Picot has taken almost a century to die. The answer lies in the fact that the agreement was always more than a matter of diplomatic history or geopolitics. It represented an era when imperial values existed alongside national aspirations; when subject populations were both coerced and coopted into national frameworks which were based on fundamentally unequal and often conflictual dealings with external powers. But it was also an era which saw the transmission and migration of a range of non-traditional, modernising capabilities and values from the Western powers into Arab societies.

In other words, Sykes-Picot represents a process, as well as an historical event. And both the agreement itself – in terms of its ultimate impact on state sovereignty – and the contemporary consequences of the process in terms of the unfolding of Arab political values and culture continue to reverberate within Arab societies, helping to shape the relationship between state and society in the Arab context.

## Strong Societies and Weak States Paradigm Revisited

It was once fashionable to focus on the power of primordial loyalties and beliefs in Arab societies and the struggle facing governments seeking to impose institutional discipline and political order upon those unstable foundations. Arab nations were ‘tribes with flags’.<sup>8</sup> Strong societies were contrasted with weak states.<sup>9</sup> Albert Hourani underscored the importance of power, obligation (*asabiyya*) and collective identity in Arab political culture and society.<sup>10</sup> Many pondered upon the problematic association, real or perceived, between diverse notions of Arab society, Islam, democracy and modernity.<sup>11</sup> Still others focussed on the resilience of authoritarianism amid the politics of reform.<sup>12</sup>

In a narrow sense, states were stronger than they looked. Their authority evolved due to the cumulative impact of nation-building institutions ranging from education systems to anthems and football teams to the remorseless propaganda surrounding leaderships. States at times were frighteningly violent towards their citizens: recourse to coercion was always available where persuasion and deal-making failed to suffice to meet the state’s purposes. Authoritarian rulers had control over the resources of the state. The state (or in practice, the ruler and those closest to him) not the tribe, was ultimately the arbiter of policies.

Cooptation often worked well for leaders, especially with minority groups and other elements which chose to cast their lot with the regime in return for privileged access to opportunities. The state, not the society, was at the forefront of creating role models and success stories for a younger generation to respect and perhaps emulate. Some negotiation between states and non-state actors was inevitable, but with a few exceptions (as in Lebanon, where confessional arrangements provided the basis of the state itself) the temptation for those who saw themselves as upwardly mobile was mostly to accommodate to the state and the power of its leader, not vice versa.



From such limited and coercive beginnings, the political authority of Arab leaderships grew to represent, to much of their own populations at least, the expression of a new and attractive form of Arab modernity. For all their shortcomings, Arab leaders from Gamal Abdel Nasser to Saddam Hussein provided an affirmation of collective dignity of a higher order than tribal affiliation. Primordial loyalties, in contrast, provided only a limited basis for dealing effectively with the demands of the modern world.

The strength of states formed in the dying days of the colonial era was ultimately, however, a mirage. It lay in the power accrued by leaders rather than institutions. Where leaders introduced progressive reforms in such areas as personal status, and quota-based parliamentary representation for women and minorities, those reforms were not driven by a sense of popular empowerment or collective will.<sup>13</sup> Civil society was kept politically ineffectual. The values of constitutionalism were subsumed in a drive for power to give effect to a national vision held by the leadership rather than society as a whole.

The ascendancy of the authoritarian state over Arab society also widened the gulf between their expectations of each other. Economic reform promoted macroeconomic stability at the expense of inclusive growth.<sup>14</sup> Modernisers within Arab leaderships began to reshape the processes of government, especially in the economic sphere, but not its values.<sup>15</sup> Corruption flourished and accountability remained limited. Reforms that generated economic growth advantaged the already privileged.<sup>16</sup>

Especially in the decade before the Arab uprisings, Arab intellectuals called for popular empowerment as a means of fixing the shortcomings of manmade institutions.<sup>17</sup> Regimes chose not to listen. Modernisation was envisaged among leaders: democratisation was not.<sup>18</sup> Some leaders shamelessly distorted the functional effect of steps suggesting political reform so as to reaffirm their own control. While uncomfortable with this direction of events, Western governments accorded priority – and more importantly, were perceived to accord priority – to their security interests in their dealings with the leaders concerned.

Ultimately, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria the result was the calcification of regimes and a loss of authority and political legitimacy, not only for the leader but also for the system as a whole. The state had weakened without the emergence of a clear-cut alternative. Leaderships and their enabling systems were challenged, including in some cases by judiciaries previously under leadership control. In most cases, the institutions of the state remained formally in place but their role had been compromised.

Like the regimes themselves, organized opposition forces had not been prepared for the convulsion of nebulous popular forces which overtook the region in 2011. Where regimes fell or were severely weakened, and especially where regimes turned to violence in their attempts to preserve themselves, the stronger became the appeal of primordial values, expressed through families, tribes, religious and other affiliations, and militias.

One direct legacy of that experience was the consolidation of a significantly deepened, and enduring, challenge to the authority of the state, at precisely the moment when leadership by the core institutions of the state was most sorely needed. Politicians, judiciaries, parliaments, constitutions, security services, police, business systems and civil society forces now face the challenge of rebuilding their credibility among populations whose confidence in and respect for many such institutions has been severely damaged.



The revision of constitutional arrangements has seen fierce debate over whether the establishment of precedent through the rulings of Islamic courts, rather than the general principles of *sharia* should provide the basis for law.<sup>19</sup> There are serious concerns about the prospect of ideologically-driven regulation of cultural expression and other individual freedoms. Secular tertiary institutions are under heightened pressure from salafist groups.<sup>20</sup> Restrictions, enshrined in legislation, are being laid down on the role of non-government organisations, especially where they have links to external bodies.<sup>21</sup> In many cases the institutions themselves are likely to be refurbished or redirected according to the preferences and vision of whoever finally emerges victorious from political contests.

This complex of political, social and security issues has profound implications for the sovereignty, long-standing values and political direction of those Arab countries whose borders, and whose structures of government, were created in a very different era.

## The End of Sykes-Picot Era Sovereignty?

Despite their unprepossessing origins in deals struck between London and Paris, where British and French officials drew the borders of Syria and Palestine, or where British officials negotiated and enforced treaties with rival Arab forces in the early 1920s, in most cases those border arrangements, when finalised, proved remarkably enduring. Competing dynastic claims, rivalries and suspicions; squabbles about territory among the Persian Gulf Arab states; the historical connections between such urban centres as Aleppo in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, and a multitude of tribal connections across borders had little overall effect on formal dealings between the governments that emerged in the colonial period.

The domination of colonial powers also provided the means to subsume or force distinct historical and territorial divisions into modern states. In Iraq, the British created a state from three complex, historically distinct entities, and placed a Sunni minority and Hashemite leadership of their expedient choice in political control. Nevertheless, despite (or some would suggest, because of) the ruthless application of state coercion against elements among its own citizens, and the “exacerbation and recreation of ethnic and communal divisions as a strategy of rule”<sup>22</sup> the idea, and, the performance of the state proved sustainable long after the British departed and the monarchy was overthrown. In Syria, the French quelled nationalist and Druze uprisings, and laid the basis for what was to become an Alawite minority-dominated government under the Ba’athists.

In Libya, the formation of the single state by 1951 from what was previously Tripolitania in the west, Cyrenaica in the east and Fezzan in the southwest was only possible under duress, initially through Italian colonialism and later with British support. Oil (located in a way that prevented any one group claiming it for themselves alone) enabled the distribution of economic largesse to ease those tensions. Under Moammar Qadhafi a complex, chaotic blend of political accommodations and tyranny helped to secure the state itself.

In each of these examples the power of the state was sufficient to manage or to contain, and in some cases to draw upon the potentially problematic aspects of traditional loyalties and identities. Since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in late 2010 (and in the case of Iraq, since the overthrow of the Saddam regime in 2003) however, the paradigm has changed. Demands for a federal system have emerged in Libya, although the degree to which such demands and insistence on Berber, Tuareg, tribal and regional identity concerns represent bargaining points, rather than serious issues at a national level, is questionable. The assertion of Shia political



authority and Kurdish identity politics following the removal of the Saddam regime, the renewed contest between the Sunni and Shia for political power, the impact of events in Syria and contests over the rights to oil wealth and territorial control have renewed concern about the capacity of the Iraqi state to hold firmly together. In Egypt, the most serious issue is not so much a matter of demands for territorial separation as the challenge of establishing effective government authority in the Sinai, and dealing with Islamist movements questioning the values of the secular Arab state model, now once again under military control.

The territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria is of particular concern. The orientation of the Kurdish minority is affected not only by the civil war in Syria but also by developments in Iraq, where the growing separation of Kurdish areas from the remainder of that country and the strengthening of ties between the Kurds and Turkey will not easily be reversed. Although the Kurdish-dominated area of Syria would be difficult to defend if the Syrian government were to seek to re-establish its control there by military means, such a campaign would almost certainly also require the assistance of the Iraqi and Turkish governments in suppressing support for the Syrian Kurds from their sides of the border. Neither government has an inclination to do so at present.

Barring the remote possibility of a sudden military reversal, it would seem unlikely that the Alawites of Syria will find themselves eventually having to defend merely a rump state – ‘Myanmar on the Mediterranean’.<sup>23</sup> However if the government’s territorial reach is nevertheless to be severely limited, and militia groups continue to have a significant impact at the popular level, the Druze and the Kurds are likely to seek to protect themselves by asserting more direct control over areas where their populations are mostly located. For the Kurds, significant interests in oil production are now also involved.<sup>24</sup> Bedouin tribes on both sides of the Iraqi border may assume a larger role in protecting their interests against non-tribal forces, including jihadist elements. Iran and Hezbollah will continue to pursue their interests in Syria from Iraq and Lebanon without borders significantly constraining their activities.

The upshot is that even if Syria’s borders, like those of other regional countries, may be expected to remain formally in place – and no regional government has shown any obvious interest in changing their borders, nor willingness to contemplate abrogating sovereignty within them – sovereignty will be increasingly difficult to enforce. In other words, although the Sykes-Picot-based structure of national borders is unlikely to change significantly, on the ground over the next decade things are set to look very different.

## **It’s the Metaphor that Matters Most**

More rests under the rubric of the end of Sykes-Picot than the borders or territorial integrity of Arab states, although those issues are obviously significant. As mentioned, Sykes-Picot is also the metaphor for an era in which the values, and in some cases the lifestyles of significant elements of the Arab political economic and social elite were shaped. In some cases, those values and lifestyles were derived in large part from secular Western models of modernity closely associated with the colonial era in the Arab world.

Limited engagement with Western technical and scientific advances was a feature of the Ottoman Empire from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Western imperial ambitions and interests had a profound impact on Egypt, Syria and Lebanon in the century that followed. Initially, at least, it was intended to be a selective, carefully circumscribed process on the Ottoman side, driven to a large extent by the need to be competitive in the military arena with Western powers. In the





case of the Albanian-origin dynasty established by Mohammad Ali in Egypt it was also meant to accrue economic benefits to the ruling elite.<sup>25</sup> Rather than take on the complete Western package of technology, innovation and initiative, however, authoritarian rulers sought to ensure the barriers to Western cultural values infecting their societies remained firmly in place until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The barriers, always porous, grew increasingly ineffectual. Recourse to minority groups (Greeks, Jews, Copts and Armenians) as the primary commercial and intellectual interface with Western countries gave those groups a privileged place, especially with the introduction, under pressure from imperial powers, of economic and other reforms in pursuit of their own commercial and other interests. In addition to the modernising effects of economic reforms and development, Lebanese Christians made major contributions to the emergence of Arab political consciousness<sup>26</sup> and to the awareness of Western culture. Imperial interventions which purported to guarantee the rights, and therefore the distinctiveness of particular religious groups (Maronites, Greek Orthodox and Jews); the intellectual influence of Western secular educational institutions such as the American University of Beirut, whose parent college was founded in 1866; the dominance of Western economic forces over local economies and the exposure of succeeding generations of impressionable young leaders to the seductive pleasures and achievements of Western societies, as well as scientific, technological and organisational advances ranging from urban planning to public infrastructure had a cumulative impact upon thinking at the elite level about what it meant to be ‘modern’.

Though proudly nationalist, often paying a high personal price for their staunch opposition to the humiliation of an unequal and mostly conflictual relationship with colonial powers, and often despite resistance from traditionally-minded Muslim scholars (*ulema*), for many Arab reformists the conceptualisation of a Western brand of modernity therefore came to represent the benchmark against which they wished their societies, and their individual accomplishments, to be measured. In the words of Albert Hourani,

The idea of Europe as the exemplar of modern civilization, which had animated the reforming governments of the (19<sup>th</sup>) century was powerful in these national movements. To be independent was to be accepted by the European states on a level of equality, to have the Capitulations, the legal privileges of foreign citizens, abolished, to be admitted to the League of Nations. To be modern was to have a political and social life similar to the countries of western Europe.<sup>27</sup>

The overall impact, benefits and costs of colonial experience varied according to the particular brand of colonial control that was exercised, be it direct rule (as in the case of Algeria), indirect (as in Egypt, at least until the Anglo-Egyptian treaty arrangements of 1936) or under the guise of League of Nations mandate arrangements in Palestine, Syria and Iraq. Tribal and sectarian divisions were amplified in Iraq, Jordan and Syria by Western powers seeking to strengthen their capacity to shape outcomes in favour of their protégés and their own interests and objectives. The effects on Arab nationalism of decisions by colonial powers in regard to Palestine shaped perceptions of the West for generations that followed.

The realities of coping and in some cases prospering within colonial frameworks produced their own effects on thinking about the desirable nature of Arab society. Arab elites took advantage of opportunities to acquire education and experience in Western environments. In some cases (notably among such figures as al-Afghani, Abduh and al-Banna), observation of, occasional engagement with and individual reaction to colonialism fostered a determination to



reaffirm the authenticity of Islamic culture as the bedrock of Arab society, and to seek to rejuvenate Islam to meet the challenges of colonial rule.

Importantly, however, with the exception of reformists such as Abduh, few members of the post-colonial Arab elite political class lived “within the bounds of the sharia”<sup>28</sup> or expressed their aspirations largely through an Islamic discourse. Thinking about nationalism before 1939 was generally secularist and constitutionalist.<sup>29</sup> Moreover those who under the influence of Western thinking were most active on such issues as gender reform – notably the remarkable Egyptian feminist, Huda Sha’rawi who led the way with the unveiling of women on her return from a women’s conference in Rome in 1923 – directly challenged traditional social values, including those of the Muslim community.

The dominant political response to colonialism, which drew mainly from nationalist sentiment that eschewed Islamic symbolism and references, was essentially advocating normative arguments and values shared to some extent with progressive-minded Western leaders and intellectuals. From the warmth with which Arab intellectuals welcomed the call for self-determination for colonial peoples in US President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points outlined in 1918, to the editorials of the *New Statesman* of which Nasser was a devoted reader, much of Arab intellectual society hoped Western governments would be willing to match liberal sentiments with practical action. They were to be sorely disappointed by Western responses. But even in the aftermath of the colonial era, when newly-independent Arab leaderships were inclined in many cases to espouse values from the socialist side of the spectrum of Western thinking, Western models of modernity, both real and imagined, continued to have a disproportionate impact upon the notions of social progress envisaged by significant elements within Arab elites.

Whatever their contribution to the ultimate emergence of a progressive Arab civil society, the values underpinning the colonial era rarely served Arab objectives. External players set the framework of national sovereignty, from borders to the privileged status of certain minorities, to serve their own purposes, hopes, fears and illusions about the Arab world.<sup>30</sup> They preserved tribal structures and monarchies that many urbanised, educated, urban nationalist Arabs believed were outmoded. In Syria and Palestine they resolved Western political dilemmas and needs at the expense of Arab aspirations.

Even when the colonial period had ended the actions of major Western powers humiliated rather than respected those aspirations. They believed their own needs and purposes – which they all too often represented to their domestic audiences and to each other as serving the interests of the international community or, in the Cold War era, the ‘free world’ – embodied a greater collective good than the interests and concerns of the Arabs. The latter, for the most part, had a very different interpretation of Western motives and behaviour.

Whether or not in historical retrospect one considers the damage the Western countries did during the Sykes-Picot era was more enduring than the developmental benefits they brought to the Arab world, the (few) redemptory aspects of the colonial period are likely to be interred with its bones. Experience of colonialism vitiated its pretensions for many, whereas its most negative consequences (notably in regard to Israel and the Palestinians) look set to endure in popular imagination and collective memory.

Little can be done to address the prism of pain and in some cases, xenophobia through which the relationship with Western countries is still viewed at the popular level in most of the Arab



world.<sup>31</sup> The sense of historical injustice and betrayal by Western powers runs deep. Even at leadership level, any perceived association with the West on the part of domestic civil society actors carries connotations of political agendas that threaten to undermine the authority of governments already under siege over their economic and political performance.

So far as dealing with the Western countries is concerned with the management of collective memories, real and imagined, and political mythologies in the Arab world is set to become more problematic. Among Islamists, especially, there is rejection of secular notions of modernity with their connotations of Western backing. Feelings of victimhood, shaped in large measure by the interpretation of history and values from an Islamic and nationalist perspective will support the reaffirmation of hazily-understood 'authentic' Arab values.

## Intellectual and Cultural Expression and the Reshaping of Arab Society

The dynamism of intellectual and cultural expression in the Arab world is deeply affected by this process because of the complex connection of Arab secular cultural forms and intellectual discourse to Arab society on one hand, and to global cultural influences and ideas on the other. Those connections and values are now being contested in ever more troubling ways, especially in Egypt, the Arab country which has long had a pre-eminent place in Arab cultural affairs.

Historically one of the Arab world's major strengths, Arab cultural expression has both reacted against and benefitted from the impact of colonialism and globalisation, providing sources of popular inspiration and pride in Arab cultural heritage in fields ranging from music to literature and the visual arts. It has provided sources of immense popular pleasure, especially in the realm of music and film as well as shaping the self-image of successive generations of the educated Arab elite.

At the intellectual level, liberal European secular ideas and cultural values were prominent among the educated elite during Egypt's late khedival and interwar period.<sup>32</sup> Ernest Renan's iconoclastic views on Islam challenged and sharpened the contribution of key Arab intellectuals to debates about religion and modernity. Emile Durkheim strongly influenced Arab intellectual discourse, including in regard to notions of freedom and the role of the state.<sup>33</sup> French historian Francois Guizot deeply influenced the modernist Islamist thinker Mohammed Abduh's reconstruction of Arab history and traditions, "negotiating modernity in the context of imperialism".<sup>34</sup> Arab elite culture also reflected to some extent a Mediterranean cultural and intellectual environment shaped by the large expatriate (mostly Greek, Italian and Jewish) presence, notably in Alexandria.<sup>35</sup> From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe influenced Egyptian middle class fashion, architecture, artistic expression, poetry and sport.<sup>36</sup>

Cultural expression was also one of the rare devices through which the Arab world and Western intellectual circles had an occasional influence on each other: for example beneath romantic orientalist picture postcard scenes and images generated by Western artists and travellers lay a genuine interest on the part of significant contemporary Western artists such as Henri Matisse in the applique art generated by Egyptian tentmakers (*khayaniyya*). Interaction with Western customers and cultural traditions also helped to keep various traditional forms of Arab artisanship alive, creative and adaptable, including as a response to commercial competition and changing consumer tastes while remaining authentic as a genre.<sup>37</sup>



Political leaderships have always had some capacity to determine the boundaries of legitimate debate over societal values and behaviour, although with political considerations in mind they have rarely chosen to exercise that capability with much conviction. Under more authoritarian Arab regimes, including Iraq and Syria, nationalist themes and some crass examples of sycophantic, politically-inspired image-building were present in state-sponsored cultural works. But more importantly there was always in practice some latitude afforded to authentic artistic and cultural expression, especially where its more subversive elements were camouflaged with a degree of intellectual and political subtlety.

Arabic literature, in particular, represented a key area in which intellectuals struggled to give expression to their concerns for deeper values imbued in Arab society, including rejection of injustice in all its forms, as well as pursuing the question of how Arab creativity could achieve its full potential in an era associated with dispossession, occupation and cultural appropriation. In the words of Ahmed Shboul,

Arabic literature has been a witness and a participant in this age of Arab self-questioning, grief, protest, defiance, struggle and persistent hope. It is a literature of a culture in crisis, a culture trying to re-find itself, to be recognised, to be its potential self.<sup>38</sup>

While certainly facing constraints from authoritarian regimes all too easily offended by evidence of independent thinking and commentary in any form, the principal points of pressure upon Egyptian writers, artists, film-makers and others concerned for intellectual freedom tended to come from the Islamist side of the political spectrum.<sup>39</sup> In those quarters, concern to educate and instruct was deemed appropriate, but not the pursuit of critical enquiry or the depiction of immoral behaviour or imagery deemed to be erotic. Pressure was applied directly, in the form of harassment of prominent secular intellectuals critical of the Islamists, including the attempted assassination of Nobel Prize winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz in 1994, and the murder of the controversial liberal columnist Farag Fouda in 1992. There were ongoing insidious attempts by Islamists to denigrate the reputation of prominent academic, literary and other figures at odds with their views, including by bringing accusations of apostasy against them.<sup>40</sup> Against that background it is not surprising that control of the institutions of government by those Islamists whose views of cultural expression are defined largely by their own agendas and negative ideological preconceptions (both political and cultural) of secularism was seen among the secular cultural elite as posing a significant risk to the sophistication of cosmopolitan Arab societies.<sup>41</sup>

Although Islamists do not have a monopoly on iconoclasm in the Arab world, the neo-traditionalist Islamist trend and the leadership style and values of the Muslim Brotherhood, like other Egyptian political and social institutions of long standing, are strongly hierarchical and authoritarian.<sup>42</sup> The rejuvenation of Arab cultural expression in the aftermath of the uprisings will depend on whether political leaderships genuinely attach value to diversity rather than turning inward, and are prepared to defend and respect difference within Arab societies as part of the process. Their actions to date have suggested otherwise.

The outrage among Salafist elements of the Islamist spectrum of Egyptian political opinion at art forms that have been accepted among the cosmopolitan Egyptian elite for over a century reflects deeper issues than prudish concern about nudity. As Nervana Mahmoud has cogently argued, the Islamist approach is based on four core concerns: an obligation for the state to uphold the building of a moral society; a perceived linkage between appearance and morality; the belief that success for political Islam requires 'regaining Islamic morality within society', and



deep disdain for Western artwork, ballet and sculpture (the last of which, she believes, also suffers from a misrepresentation of a *hadith* in which the Prophet warns that sculptors will be judged harshly on Judgement Day).<sup>43</sup>

There will inevitably be a need to balance among wider political and policy priorities in government when formulating stances on issues of cultural and intellectual freedoms, which may cause Islamist political forces to reach accommodations in some areas of government policy with non-Islamist counterparts. However it remains too early to judge whether, and if so to what degree, the pursuit of such objectives may be allowed to cause a revision of their approach in the cultural sphere. Under the Morsy government in Egypt the issue of cultural expression was complicated by dealings between the various dimensions of the Muslim Brotherhood itself, since its organisational, parliamentary and executive aspects each represent distinct interests and constituencies. Since the removal of that government it remains to be seen what political balance will be struck between the Brotherhood and its Salafist rivals such as al-Nour, on one hand, and its secular and Coptic counterparts on the other. Policy will of course be shaped to some extent by the mundane realities of politics: arrogance, fear and the political weight and strength of convictions of the Salafist and secular opponents and critics of the government on particular issues.

For an Islamist-led or influenced government to depart, however, from the core concerns mentioned above would be to pose serious challenges to the ideology and distinctiveness of Islamist agendas instrumentalising religion for political advantage, as compared to the agendas of secular and leftist opponents and critics. There would also be very little likelihood of commensurate political reward among an overwhelmingly conservative electorate if the Islamists were seen to be obliging the narrow element within Arab societies that genuinely attaches a high priority to cultural and intellectual freedoms. The criticism most likely to resonate at the popular level would come from Salafist voices, rather than from the secular side of Egyptian politics and society.

In short, under Islamist-dominated governments, especially in Egypt, Arab society is more likely to exploit possibilities for closing down creative space rather than widening it.

## **Bringing Closure to Sykes-Picot: The Arab World and the West Beyond 2011**

The tectonic plates of Arab society are shifting, amidst abundant evidence of social malaise, but there is no consensus at this point about the desirable direction of social change. Over a decade, possibly longer, the majority of Arab political systems can evolve, mainly through their own efforts, towards meeting a broad desire among young adults, both male and female, to be regarded as both Arab and modern. The capacity of civil society in Arab countries to harness the intellectual energy of a more empowered political audience and thereby to make further progress in terms of human security and economic development will improve if political leadership is effective. Social and political cohesion will be strengthened if both the formal aspects and the essential values of constitutionalism are promoted by Arab activists in the public sphere. In most cases, Arab political reform which manages to achieve a reasonable and inclusive balance between progress and stability will be part of the process of economic transformation, and vice versa.

Recognising that potential for progress, however, is far from being confident that such an outcome will materialise. Especially in Egypt, if it were to be combined with ongoing political



and economic malaise, there is a real risk ultimately of failing to build strong and effective civil society institutions and a confident, progressive view of Arab modernity. Not only Egyptians and most regional countries would suffer from the emergence of an even more alienated and marginalised younger generation of Egyptians. The capacity of leading Western countries to generate respect for their advocacy of democratic values for the Arab world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would also be affected.

For Western governments, a key challenge as this process unfolds is to find ways to construct relationships with their Arab counterparts that transcend a reading of history framed by the Sykes-Picot era that serves as a very important part of contemporary Arab identity. Western countries including donor countries have significant foreign policy and security interests at stake in the unfolding debate. They would wish their values to be respected, and hopefully admired, in the emerging Arab world. For those reasons many Western governments will regard the battle of values in the Arab world as one in which they should be willing to engage.

In the volatile political environment of the next few years, however, external parties seeking to participate in shaping an intricate, multidimensional playing field do so at their peril. More importantly, perhaps, they risk undermining the credibility and influence of those political actors within Arab countries who advocate the values most Western countries would wish to see prevail. External players are not being asked to shape developments in that context directly. Unless handled with extraordinary care and sensitivity to local conditions, attempts on their part to become involved on behalf of the Egyptian and other Arab activists with whom they have worked in the past, or with whom they sympathise at present, are more likely than not to generate resentment and unanticipated outcomes.

Most Western countries would hope to see a conscious Arab political effort to build confidence in the prospect of achieving positive and constructive outcomes that engage Arab society with progressive, achievement-oriented world society. At the same time, Western governments will not easily find a durable balance between on the one hand the pursuit of their strategic interests in the region, a task which hinges in large part upon the quality of dealings with regional governments, rather than societies; and on the other hand the desire to uphold the values they regard as universal but which are not shared to the same degree at either the leadership or popular levels of Arab society.

For Arab governments, the challenge is to find a politically sustainable balance between the need for Western assistance, especially financial support pending the restoration of political stability and economic growth; and meeting or at least managing the expectations and pressures of Western countries in regard to their domestic political, economic and foreign policy agendas. Many will seek support from the Gulf Arab states instead.

So far as the contest of values within the Arab world about what it means to be Arab and modern is concerned, however, the most important consideration among Western countries should be to remain consistent in expressing their views on matters of principle; and to do no harm to the voices within the Arab world that continue advocating political reform, inclusiveness and constitutionality as core values of Arab society. If they are to change, the values of Arab society will have to be re-booted by those societies themselves.

The Western objective should be as modest as the limited means available for its pursuit. The worst outcome would be the transformation of the debate about civilisational benchmarks and principles into a political contest at precisely the moment when battle has been joined between



reformists and Islamist neo-traditionalists to capture not only the space between state and society, but also the instrumental power of the state itself. Contests along those lines would inevitably be framed (however unconvincingly in the minds of outside observers) around questions of legitimacy, authenticity and sovereignty, while the gaps between Arab society and world society grow ever larger. That is a struggle which could only wind up serving the political interests of those most likely to stifle worthwhile reform and social progress.

To contribute to achieving closure to Sykes-Picot from a Western perspective will require renewed focus on engagement aimed at increasing Arab and Western exposure to the experience and aspirations of each other through strengthened institutional interaction, people to people contact, commercial, scientific and technical cooperation. By any measure, engagement with Arab society by Western countries has lagged well behind programmes with countries arguably of lesser significance to the future of the Arab world and Western interests in that context and beyond. There were, for example, only around 2,000 Egyptians studying in the United States in 2011, compared to more than double that number from Kenya, and almost 10,000 Nepalese and 100,000 Chinese students.<sup>44</sup> Egypt is not among the top 20 recipients of US economic aid, and Western development assistance to Egypt is at risk of declining.

Over-generous funding of Arab civil society organisations and partner agencies is not the answer to fostering new values either – even if such funding were permitted by Arab governments suspicious of the motives behind such programmes. But helping to strengthen basic capacities in such areas as health, nutrition, water management, agricultural research and business management, including in some cases through cooperation with Arab and other multilateral development assistance programmes, will foster the conditions under which Arab governments may, in due course, address those issues themselves. And by increasing the positive and constructive exposure of Arab civil servants, educators, intellectuals and other opinion-shapers to the values and behaviour of a wider range of Westerners beyond the often tawdry imagery of the tourism sector, let alone the collective memories of the colonial era, a more balanced appreciation of respective strengths, weaknesses and aspirations may develop on all sides.

Empowerment of Arab audiences, in Egypt and elsewhere, presents both risks and opportunities for the pursuit of Western interests. It is instructive to note that in the turmoil in Egypt in mid-2013 both supporters and opponents of the government bitterly denounced the United States: indeed, underlining the enduring power of the colonial metaphor, one leading Egyptian liberal commentator saw fit to describe the US ambassador as ‘the American version of Lord Cromer’, the British Controller-General and later Consul-General in Egypt from 1883 to 1907.<sup>45</sup> It demands still greater effort to advocate, educate and instil confidence in audiences which have long had reason to be sceptical of the agendas and purported values of external parties linked to the former regimes. Balance and moderation in foreign policy choices, dialogue and continuing effort to address regional tensions can only work to the advantage of those advocating liberal democratic values within Arab society.

## Conclusion

If the end of Sykes-Picot means anything, it marks the beginning of the establishment of a new set of benchmarks for what it means to be both Arab and modern, to replace a model whose authenticity and whose relevance to the expectations of contemporary Arab society is increasingly in question.



Arab reformists during the colonial era sought changes but mostly lacked the political skills, backing and commitment to shape values and behaviour on issues beyond their own social strata. In the post-colonial era and even during the last decade their experience was not notably different. The reluctance of authoritarian Arab leaders who inherited the institutions of the colonial period to cede power, initially while pursuing a nationalist vision and subsequently amidst the seductive and corrosive effects of power itself, effectively ensured stasis. Although states gained a degree of strength through the role of the leader, in most respects primordial loyalties remained stronger than the institutions of the state. The Arab uprisings that have weakened the authority of states have highlighted the dilemmas arising from that situation.

Closure to the metaphorical Sykes-Picot era is long overdue. The way forward demands a process, embedded in transparent, inclusive institutions, of establishing a new and broadly-accepted paradigm of Arab modernity in support of which the energy and resources of leaders, state and society can be directed.

The future, however, is clouded by uncertainty. Authoritarian models, relying mostly on electoral outcomes or military interventions to defend the authority of governments to determine political directions or even to dictate social values, while those same governments fail to protect the most basic freedoms of their own citizens against bigotry and xenophobia, will not widen the space for intellectual creativity and social progress. Nor does Western intervention with its attendant risks of reinforcing the fractures and political mythologies of the Arab world provide an answer. Arab states have to find their own pathways to be both accountable and refreshed if the creative potential of their citizens is to be realised.





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HH Sheikh Nasser  
al-Mohammad  
al-Sabah

The al-Sabah Programme  
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**Contact information:**

Lorraine Holmes  
lorraine.holmes@durham.ac.uk  
The Al-Qasimi Building  
Elvet Hill Road  
Durham  
DH1 3TU

