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# Mark Sykes, The British Arabists and the Enduring Consequences of the Sykes-Picot Agreement

Nicholas Comaratta

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## Introduction

The ongoing actions of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq are motivated by both religious and political conditions which exist as a result of drastically irresponsible foreign diplomacy conducted by both Great Britain and France nearly a hundred years ago. In a viral video declaring the establishment of their Islamic Caliphate in the summer of 2014 entitled *End of Sykes Picot*, the Islamic militants of ISIS expressed their goal to reverse the territorial lines established by the Sykes Picot Agreement of 1916.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the summer, many geo-political analysts speculated that the group's recent advances in Northern Iraq and at the Turkish-Syrian border had in fact destabilized the existing borders which were drawn in the agreement.<sup>2</sup>

The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a deal negotiated between the British, French and Russian Empires in anticipation of the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War One. The agreement effectively split the Middle East (which had been under Ottoman Rule

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<sup>1</sup> *The End of Sykes Picot*, (ISIS. 2014. Syria: Youtube, February 26th, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Worth, Robert. "Redrawn Lines Seen as No Cure in Iraq Conflict," *The New York Times*. (New York, NY), June 26, 2014.

for nearly four hundred years) between the three nations; Britain would maintain control over modern day Iraq, and France the region of modern day Syria and Lebanon. While Russia was originally partitioned a small section of land north of Iraq, their zone was delegitimized by the collapse of their Imperial state and the rise of the Bolsheviks in 1917. Nevertheless, the boundaries drawn in the agreement would eventually be used in the post-war formation of the mandate system in the Middle East under the League of Nations.<sup>3</sup>

Mark Sykes represented the British Empire in the negotiations with French ambassador Georges-Picot. Sykes, an imperialist minded member of the Tory Party, had a wide range of personal experience in the region and expressed his views on the local religions and tribal-political dynamics through travel writings as well as his own personal letters. While Sykes was for the most part religiously tolerant, he still held many racial and cultural prejudices which played into his final decision making process. In addition to these biases, he was convinced the Arabs were incapable of self-rule and he therefore sought to continue the advancement of the British Empire by maintaining its influence in the Middle East. These imperialist ideals combined with Sykes' disposition to lie and withhold pertinent information made him absolutely unfit to draw a map deciding the fate of the Middle East in the twentieth century and beyond.

Sykes' negotiations virtually ignored the proposals

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<sup>3</sup>Karabell, Zachary. *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*, (2 vols. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 2128.

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made by a group of scholar administrators from Mesopotamia known as the British Arabists. These men and women were members of the British foreign service or media who worked almost exclusively in the Middle East and developed strong self-determination ideologies through their direct experiences with the local culture and people. Most notable of these British Arabists were T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell and along with other prominent figures they petitioned for the British Empire to move forward with a policy supporting independence in the Middle East in order to avoid future conflict in the region.

Ultimately the voices of Lawrence and Bell were silenced by the machinations and deliberations which dominate international politics and the borders drawn by Sykes-Picot were effectively recognized during the San Remo Conference of 1922 through the League of Nations mandate system.<sup>4</sup> Had more influential members of the British government sympathized with their policies, the post-war borders drawn for the Middle East may have been more sensitive to the cultural and religious variations which complicated the politics of the region. By ignoring the sympathetic opinions of the British Arabists, the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 was clouded by the imperialist leaning ideologies and prejudices held by Mark Sykes and thus altered the trajectory of Middle Eastern society and politics in the twentieth century in a way which still motivates militant groups such as ISIS.

This paper will examine the background of the agreement as well as the men and women involved in the establishment of Britain's policy in the Middle

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<sup>4</sup> Karabell, *Encyclopedia*, 2128.

East. Drawing mainly upon the discussion of the Sykes-Picot Agreement from *Lawrence in Arabia* by Scott Anderson as well as "British Scholar Administrators in Iraq" by F.S. Naiden, it will attempt to place the effects of the accord into a more modern context focused around the contemporary events carried out by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. By looking at the personal works of Sykes, Lawrence and Bell it will seek to better understand the backgrounds and experience which played a role in forming their ideas and aspirations for the future of the Middle East. Ultimately, this paper will seek to compare the proposed maps drawn by T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell with Sykes' map in order to understand the fundamental problem of Sykes and Picot.

### **Background: Leading up to the Treaty**

By 1915 the Allied powers in World War One had witnessed vast amounts of unimaginable devastation across the European landscape. In a conflict motivated by imperial rivalries, Britain's and France's final objectives shifted towards consolidating concessions and post-war reparations after only one year of bloodshed.<sup>5</sup> Both Britain's and France's post-war imperial ambitions included inhibiting their aggressors in order to prevent future conflict as well as securing new provinces "as though to compensate for the loss of an entire generation in Flanders."<sup>6</sup>

Seeking provinces, they naturally turned to where

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<sup>5</sup> Anderson, Scott. *Lawrence in Arabia*, (New York, USA: Random House, 2013), 151-152.

<sup>6</sup> Alaric, Jacob. "The British Arabists," *History Today*. 23, no. 5 (1973) : 323.

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any empire looks to expand: lands inhabited by people and societies they deemed inferior. No region was more ripe for a transition of power than the dwindling reign of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. More importantly, both of these empires had important ties to the area through their twisted and complicated pasts. The French had been heavily involved with the Catholic population in Syria for over four hundred years while Britain hoped to protect India and Egypt from its imperial rivals (including France and Russia) through a colony or protectorate in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> Thus the avaricious European giants looked promisingly toward the future collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Defeating the Turks proved to be a more difficult task than expected. Even as they directed their eyes upon the spoils of victory, the British were producing dismal results in their campaign against the Ottomans on the beaches of Gallipoli. Soon enough they would need to reformulate their scheme to defeat the Ottomans and inevitably they turned their attention further East.<sup>8</sup> Fearful of another disastrous campaign resulting in countless more casualties, British strategists sought a military solution utilizing the local Arabs living under the oppressive Ottoman rule. In their minds, if they could incite a rebellion amongst the Arabs they could "paralyze the Ottoman Empire from within."<sup>9</sup>

In early 1914 the British opened discussions with the ruler of Mecca, Emir Hussein, also known as the

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 150.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 142.

King of Hejaz. Because they were direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, Hussein and his sons could be used as a tool to unite both Sunnis and Shias in a revolt.<sup>10</sup> Prior to Britain's war with Turkey, it was Hussein's son Abdullah who had reached out to the British consulate in Cairo regarding their reaction to a potential Arab revolt in Hejaz. As Britain eventually was drawn into the conflict with the Turks, discussions continued over the next two years as both sides specified their demands.<sup>11</sup> Over time these negotiations were largely carried out through what is now known as the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence. This series of letters between Hussein and the British High Commissioner in Egypt Henry McMahon centered mainly around Hussein's desire for an independent Arab state in the Middle East following his cooperation in defeating the Turks. While the British badly needed the local Arab support, they also would not abandon their imperial ambitions in the region and as a result these overtures were largely scoffed at and ignored.<sup>12</sup>

Negotiations took an abrupt turn however when Hussein gave the British an ultimatum in October of 1915. At this point Hussein had become increasingly incensed over Britain's unwillingness to agree to his terms and gave them thirty days to concede to Arab independence following the war. If the British declined, the King of Hejaz informed them that he would sign an agreement with the Turks who were willing to consent to his demands in return for his allegiance to Turkey

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<sup>10</sup>Karabell, *Encyclopedia*, 2039.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 115-116.

<sup>12</sup> Naiden, F.S. "British Scholar - Administrators in Iraq," *The Journal of the Historical Society*. 7, no. 2 (2007) : 185.

and Germany in the final years of the war.<sup>13</sup>

Britain's foreign ambassadors in the Middle East were left with an important decision to make. They could grant Hussein his wishes, abandoning hopes of any post-war consolation provinces in the Middle East, while also potentially saving thousands of British lives. On the other hand, they could decline his offer and thus turn potential allies into yet another enemy in the Middle East. In the end, imperial ambitions combined with political motives forced McMahon to take a dangerous middle ground.

On October 24th McMahon sent a letter to Hussein consenting to his conditions in return for his aid in defeating the Turks. This consent, however, came with specific modifications, most importantly the demand by the British that specific regions of Mesopotamia (coincidentally abundant in oil) be placed under "special administrative arrangements."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, McMahon also specified that such conditions could only be upheld with the approval of Britain's ally, France. Such an addition could only be attributed to McMahon and his advisors' full knowledge of French ambitions in Syria and the potential trouble which could be stirred there following an Allied victory.<sup>15</sup> Thus the British had essentially made Hussein a promise which they would not and could not keep.

Conscious of these potential diplomatic entanglements the British quickly gauged France's aspirations for territorial gains in the Middle East. In November, French ambassadors in London discussed their

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<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 142.

<sup>14</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 186.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 161-162



determination to take hold of the entire region, including Britain's favored regions of Baghdad and Basra. While the British were certainly lenient towards Syria, they were clearly not willing to relinquish their claim to the area of modern day Iraq. With this in mind, the two empires set out to negotiate an agreement to split the Middle East between them following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. By January 1916 British representative Mark Sykes was meeting with Georges-Picot of France to draw a map which would ultimately determine the boundaries of the modern day Middle East.<sup>16</sup> With such a massive arrangement determined by only two men the results were certainly partial. With Mark Sykes as the British representative in these discussions the results were catastrophic. As Anderson says of Sykes in *Lawrence in Arabia*, "Few people in history have so heedlessly caused so much tragedy... It's hard to think of any figure who, with no true malice intended and neither a nation nor an army at his disposal, was to wreak more havoc on the twentieth century."<sup>17</sup>

### **Mark Sykes: Man of Many Contradictions**

In 1916 Mark Sykes was an experienced 36 year old British imperialist who had traveled the Middle East extensively and over time had developed a unique set of opinions on the region. In both his book *Dar ul-Islam* and his collection of letters Sykes expresses his reactions to the religions and identities of the Arabs in the Middle East. While he was certainly a man full of racist convictions (T.E. Lawrence would call him "a

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<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 162

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 153-155.

bundle of prejudices")<sup>18</sup> Sykes was for the most part both tolerant of and fascinated about Islam.<sup>19</sup> For him, religion and politics were "the ultimate interest in life."<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, his arrogance outweighed his tolerance and was often reflected in his actions. Sykes believed he had the power to solve immense problems with a quick and simple solution and moreover that it was his duty to use this power. He was both a liar and a sneak who was incapable of maintaining a steady opinion:

Perhaps to be expected given his frenetic pace and catholic range of interests, Mark Sykes had a very hard time keeping his facts, even his own beliefs straight. Impressed by the last person he had spoken with, or the last idea that had popped into his fecund mind, he was forever contradicting positions or policies he had advocated earlier.<sup>21</sup>

These inconsistencies are reflected throughout his book *Dar ul-Islam* and in *Mark Sykes: His Life and Letters*, which describe his travels in the Middle East. In these works we gain an important glimpse into the mind of Mark Sykes and his stances towards important issues in the Middle East. Throughout the letters describing his travels he haphazardly stamped labels

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<sup>18</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Leslie, Shane. *Mark Sykes: His Life and Letters*, (London, England: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1923), 116.

<sup>20</sup> Leslie, *Mark Sykes*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 155.

and identities upon ethnic groups from around the region based simply upon the swift assessment of their lifestyles and cultural attitudes. Moreover, his discourse on Islam was equally ambiguous as he frivolously explored the religion in order to support his own grandiose religious connections and theories.

Nevertheless, Sykes understood the divisions between tribes and religious groups in the region. Sykes referenced the differences between the Kurds and their Arab counterparts by proclaiming that “an Arab of Beirut could not comprehend an Arab of Mosul.”<sup>22</sup> He also asserted that war and violence were in the fabric of Arabian society.<sup>23</sup> Referencing the “six-thousand year long Bedouin intertribal wars” he stated:

It is obvious that war was necessary for the purpose of infusing manliness into the race and relieving the boredom of the desert, for to be a dweller therein, with no other occupation than that of moving from one spot to another, would produce a race of congenital idiots. It will be seen, therefore, that a race abhorring manual labour as degrading, eschewing settled life, and knowing no other amusements than horsemanship and a litde hunting, must be naturally forced by instinct into war ; but wars of this kind must necessarily partake more of the

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<sup>22</sup> Leslie, *Mark Sykes*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Sykes, Mark. *Dar ul-Islam*, (London, England: Bickers and Son, 1904), 14.

nature of a game than a struggle for life and death.<sup>24</sup>

Thus he considered most ethnic groups in the Middle East to be in a stagnant state of development without the ability to repair themselves.<sup>25</sup> More specifically considering the cultures of Iraq and Syria, he described the men of Mosul as those "with the minds of mudlarks<sup>26</sup> and the Kurds as "the simplest and most gullible of mortals... [their] uninquisitiveness great."<sup>27</sup> Simultaneously, he also disliked the Westernization of Islam and the cities of the region that he had seen in places such as Tadmur in central Syria.<sup>28</sup>

The man who took the Bedouin from their present state of happiness and purity, and taught them to be civilised, to be rotted by foul diseases, to be emasculated by drink, to leave their tents and herds, to become spies, lawyers, soldiers, thieves, discontented citizens, millionaires and prigs, would be committing a crime crying to heaven for vengeance.<sup>29</sup>

Sykes' views on Arab people and culture varied from city to city as he tried to piece together an encompassing vision for the diverse and complex region. These

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<sup>24</sup> Sykes, *Dar ul-Islam*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Leslie, *Mark Sykes*, 88.

<sup>26</sup> Leslie, *Mark Sykes*, 94.

<sup>27</sup> Leslie, *Mark Sykes*, 109.

<sup>28</sup> Sykes, *Dar ul-Islam*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Sykes, *Dar ul-Islam*, 16.

methods of generalizations and simple solutions would unfortunately also dominate his negotiations with Picot. This was also the same man who believed the British were "destined to be the masters of Turkey" as he described its treasures and missed opportunities.<sup>30</sup> He determined the Arabs to be unable to govern themselves, describing them further as "unamenable to civilization."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, while Sykes opposed the Westernization of the Middle East, he encouraged the British Empire to harness its vast resources through the careful manipulation of the local Arab tribes.

These ideas combined with his charm and practical knowledge convinced many British operatives in the Middle East of the effectiveness of his imperialist policies. His experience and cunning earned him an appointment as an advisor to the de Bunsen Committee guiding British policy in the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> With his influence growing, Sykes seemed like the obvious choice at the time to dictate the terms that Britain would settle with France over the future of the Middle East. By the beginning of 1916 he had been chosen by his peers to meet with French ambassador François Georges-Picot to discuss the map of the future of the Middle East.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916**

French Ambassador Georges-Picot held many of the same racial and imperialist prejudices which had

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<sup>30</sup> Leslie, *Mark Sykes*, 114.

<sup>31</sup> Leslie, *Mark Sykes*, 89.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 153.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 155.

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landed Sykes at the negotiation table.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, he had the backing of a French state which was prepared to drive a hard bargain, demanding at the very least to maintain their influence in Syria and Lebanon. Thus the discussions between the two were competitive and fueled by the deep seated hubris and imperious tendencies.<sup>35</sup>

As expected, the negotiations could not go on without some deception on behalf of Sykes. While Sykes was privileged to the information involving the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence and the subsequent promises made, he decided to withhold this knowledge from Georges-Picot.<sup>36</sup> Naturally, such a decision played a major role in how the negotiations played out as the French maintained their lofty expectations without any familiarity with the agreement with the Arabs.

Through these muddled imperial discussions the Sykes-Picot Agreement was created. In the treaty the British would take Basra and have administrative control over Baghdad while the French would take Lebanon, Syria and Mosul (Sykes said of the Kurds, "let the French try to deal with them"<sup>37</sup>) with administrative control over the central region of Syria. This small region on the modern border of Syria and Iraq was what would constitute the "independent" Arab Kingdom promised in the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence. These small areas, because of their "inabil-

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 163.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 162.

<sup>36</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 163.

<sup>37</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 186.

ity to govern themselves," would essentially be British and French vassal states.<sup>38</sup> With this agreement, the "special arrangements" were designed so that Arab protectorates would be created under the administration of the British and the French.<sup>39</sup>

This map, as can be seen below in Figure A, represents a complete failure to consider the desires and cultural boundaries of the people of the Middle East. It is a map drawn completely on the basis of imperialist geographic and resource-driven motives with complete disregard for the ethnic and social boundaries of the area. Finally, and most importantly, this map entirely neglected the promises made to the King of Hejaz and relegated his portion to only a small share of central Syria under the control of the French.<sup>40</sup>

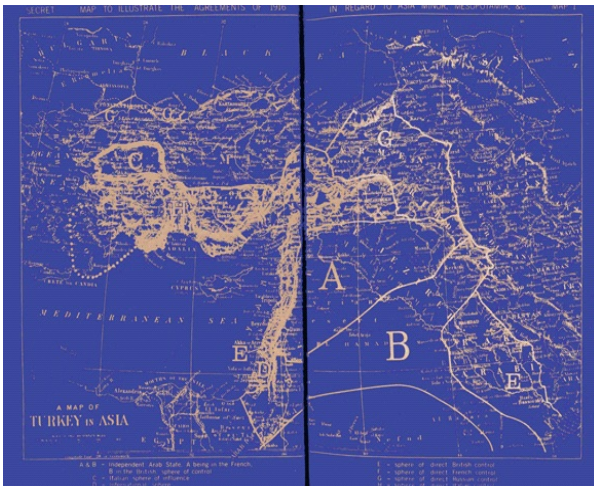


Figure A: Sykes-Picot Map

<sup>38</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence* , 163.

<sup>39</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 186.

<sup>40</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 186.

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Of course, with this agreement nothing was entirely official. The Arab Revolt still had yet to begin and the Ottoman Empire was still no closer to being defeated than before. But what the Sykes-Picot Agreement did was create a map, and this map became the precedent for British and French imperial projections of the Middle East in the post-war treaty negotiations. With the creation of the League of Nations' mandate system and the passage of subsequent agreements the Sykes-Picot boundary lines would more or less come to represent the borders of the modern day Middle East.<sup>41</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the negotiations, the agreement remained secret in order to quell the potential political reaction which such an imperialist initiative would create. This changed with the fall of the Tsarist Russian Empire in late 1917 as the war was grinding towards a conclusion. While the Russian partitions were forgotten as a result of the 1917 Revolution and subsequent turmoil, the Bolsheviks' decision to release the secret treaty to the public ignited a massive campaign for self-determination amongst the British Arabists.

These British Arabists were the special young brand of English men and women who had a combination of compassion for and fascination in the Arab cause. While Ronald Storrs dubbed it "the Arab Movement"<sup>42</sup> as it gained momentum in the post-war political excitement, Mark Sykes had a more pessimistic view of these young English foreign agents:[On the selection and training of those young English-men who are destined to serve their country in the East as

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<sup>41</sup> Karabell, *Encyclopedia*, 2128.

<sup>42</sup> Alaric, "The British Arabists," 323.



either its representatives or its administrators] ... appears to me most open to criticism, the selection being based entirely on competitive examinations, which can in no case afford any test of such important qualities as imagination, style, or personality, even if they were made to hinge more upon a knowledge of the languages, religions, and history of the East, and less on natural science, mathematics, and political economy ; which latter things, though all very well in their way, appear to me to be of quite secondary importance for the understanding of the character and idiosyncrasies of Eastern peoples, by which alone one would have thought it would be possible to govern them with tact, discretion, and sagacity.<sup>43</sup> Sykes was conscious of the sympathies for the Arabs held by the British Arabists and clearly felt threatened by the superiority of their knowledge and experience in the Middle East. More importantly, he understood their views on the assurances made to the Arabs in the agreement struck in the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence and how they clashed with his own map of the Middle East. Sykes was rightfully anxious as the same men and women who planned the Arab Revolt now hoped to fulfill the promises made to the Arabs in their agreement to commence it.

### **T.E. Lawrence: The Map Driven Optimist**

Among them of course was T.E. Lawrence, an important figure because of his involvement in the Arab Revolt. Lawrence's story has been sensationalized over the years through both his own memoirs in *The Seven Pillars* as well as in David Lean's depiction of

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<sup>43</sup> Sykes, *Dar ul-Islam*, xii.

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Lawrence in the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*. The first man to popularize Lawrence's story was American filmmaker and journalist Lowell Thomas who encountered Lawrence in Jerusalem during the Arab Revolt. Thomas' film, photos and lectures on Lawrence intrigued audiences across America and Europe and made Lawrence a household name as well as drew further attention to the Arab cause.<sup>44</sup>

While Lawrence's popularity through his dramatized story gave him some weight in public perceptions of negotiations, he was also vastly experienced in the affairs of the Middle East. He had worked in the Cairo Intelligence Bureau studying maps for an extended period of time while also gaining valuable experience throughout the region and ultimately specializing mainly in Syrian affairs.<sup>45</sup> Most importantly, Lawrence had good relationships with Hussein and his sons Abdullah and especially Faisal, whom he had worked alongside in the Arab Revolt.<sup>46</sup> These connections would be essential in his projection of the future of the Middle East.

What Lawrence envisioned was a Syria and Iraq split between three Arab Kingdoms, one for each of Hussein's sons while Hussein himself remained the King of Hejaz. Abdullah would rule Lower Mesopotamia, Zeid Upper Mesopotamia and Faisal would rule Syria.<sup>47</sup> Lawrence did not sympathize with the French ambitions because they had not fought anywhere near

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<sup>44</sup> Alaric, "The British Arabists," 323.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 192.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 208.

<sup>47</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 190.

the Middle East during the war; instead he called for "Syria independent under Faisal: it [the Arab "nation"] has fought for it [Syria], and deserves preferential treatment."<sup>48</sup> The map which Lawrence presented before the de Bunsen Committee in 1918 can be seen below in Figure B with sections 3, 4, and 5 representing the independent Arab kingdoms.<sup>49 50</sup>

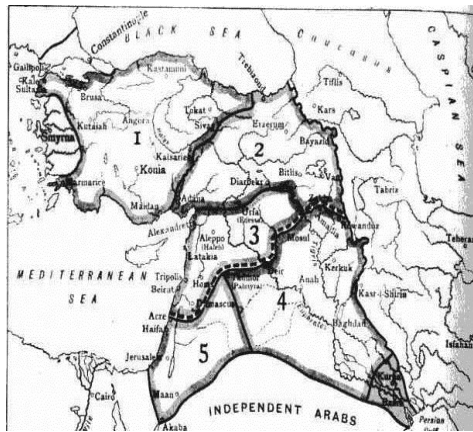


Figure B: T.E. Lawrence's Map

While Lawrence's projection of the Middle East was certainly more rational and calculated than Sykes', it still reflected some of his own gaps in understanding of the region. Lawrence recognized the ethnic boundaries between the Turks and Armenians of the North and granted their independence in sections 1

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<sup>48</sup> Malcolm Brown and T.E. Lawrence. *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, (London, England: J.M Dent & Sons Limited, 1988), 162.

<sup>49</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 190.

<sup>50</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 190.

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and 2 of his map.<sup>51</sup> However, Lawrence failed to grant the same autonomy to the “blustering” Kurdish groups around Mosul whom he held a “wary respect for.”<sup>52</sup> Instead, Lawrence was convinced of the optimistic British belief that Hussein and his sons could unite the Arab people under their leadership. Without an in-depth understanding of Iraq and its predominantly Shi’a population, he believed both the Kurds and the wealthy elite of Baghdad would submit to Hussein’s Sunni rule. In drawing the boundaries of the Middle East himself, Lawrence’s map was therefore still both imperial and inaccurate, albeit much less-so than the one created by Sykes.

### **Gertrude Bell: The Nationalist Idealist**

Lawrence was thus fortunate to have worked with Gertrude Bell, the British expert in Iraq at the time. The first woman to complete the requirements for a first-class degree in History at Oxford,<sup>53</sup> Bell, whose writings on the region had gained some solid traction in Europe, was an experienced traveler in the Middle East. “The East was undoubtedly Gertrude's home” and in 1915 she was called to Cairo in order to assist in the formation of British policy in the East.<sup>54</sup> By the end of the year she had compiled a functional “who's who” of the Middle East, cataloguing the tribes and

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<sup>51</sup> Naiden, “British Scholar - Administrators,” 190.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, *Lawrence*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Brown and Lawrence. *Letters*, 36.

<sup>54</sup> Burgoyne, Elizabeth. *Gertrude Bell: From Her Personal Papers, 1914-1926*, (London, England: Ernest Benn, 1961), 30.

religious affiliations of the Arabs.<sup>55</sup> This directory would be used throughout Britain's administration in the Middle East in the 1920s.

Following the war Bell was sent to London where she would "make a solid bloc of Near Easterners, including Mr. Lawrence, and present a united opinion" arguing the case for Arab self-determination.<sup>56</sup> Compared to Lawrence, Bell originally sought a much less direct solution to the Arab issue. While Lawrence hoped to distinctly draw the borders of the Arab kingdoms, Bell initially hoped to sit back and wait for an Arab nationalist movement to arise.<sup>57</sup> Unlike Lawrence, Bell was not necessarily convinced that Hussein or either of his sons could unite the whole of an Arab nation based solely on inheritance and instead insisted that a nationalist movement should give way to a class of "professional politicians of Baghdad" to carry the region forward.<sup>58</sup>

Her apprehension stemmed from an understanding of the complicated nature of the region's ethnic and religious disputes. Bell was wary of the Shi'a majority in Iraq and the potential backlash which would ensue if they refused to accept Hussein. Moreover, she recognized that the delicate nature of the situation of the Kurds could not be solved easily. Finally, Bell considered the minorities of the region, including Christians in Mosul as well as "whole men of wealth and position, of whatever creed" who would

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<sup>55</sup> Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell*, 31.

<sup>56</sup> Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell*, 108.

<sup>57</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 193.

<sup>58</sup> Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell*, 106.

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object to the installment of an outright Sunni King.<sup>59</sup> Instead Bell hoped that a temporary British administration could foster the establishment of a national movement of Arabs not dependent upon ethnic or religious barriers.

Such a national movement proved impossible after the publication of the Sykes-Picot document by the Bolsheviks in 1917. This coupled, with the inclusion of Sharif Faisal at the Paris Peace Conference as a representative of an independent Arab State, incensed local minority groups and created anti-British sympathies in Baghdad and Mosul.<sup>60</sup> These "premature" national movements instead replaced the all-encompassing one Bell hoped would come in the following years and forced her hand. Bell was mindful both of the Arab dependence on the British and the potential backlash this could create: "It's an open question whether we don't do these people more harm than good and one still feels more despairing about it now that our civilization has broken down so completely. But we can't leave them alone, they won't be left alone anyway."<sup>61</sup>

It is important at this point to stop and recognize the imperial ambitions of both Lawrence and Bell. While they were promoting policies of independence and autonomy in the region, these were still Western backed strategies which were derived from Western notions of the "nation" and "state." Lawrence's and Bell's calls for the British Empire to remove itself from the region reflected their motivations to serve the best

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<sup>59</sup> Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell*, 106.

<sup>60</sup> Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell*, 106.

<sup>61</sup> Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell*, 48

interests of the Empire itself rather than the people of the region. In their eyes, the Middle East was much too diverse and complex for the British to maintain any profitable presence over time. As described in the above selection from Gertrude Bell's "Speech on Self-Determination in Mesopotamia"<sup>62</sup> in 1917, the Sykes-Picot Agreement and its shocking revelation to the public effectively drew the British Empire into a situation in which it must preserve its presence in the region in order to protect both its own interests as well as those of the local populations. With no other options, Bell was drawn to Lawrence's idea of independent Arab kingdoms. The French quickly declined any interest in Mosul and the British eventually secured the city, causing Lawrence and Bell to reformulate Lawrence's original map into one single Arab Kingdom. If the French were consigned to having the whole of Syria, the least Lawrence and Bell could do was create an independent Arab Kingdom in Iraq.<sup>63</sup> Bell sought to create the national movement she had envisioned by facilitating the establishment of an Iraqi National Museum to inspire the formation of an Iraqi nation under the British mandate.<sup>64</sup>

Time wore on and the dust settled on the peace conference while the League of Nations established the mandate system. As the local populations rebelled against British administration by June 1920, the creation of Iraq became a more possible objective. The British, keen to maintain their influence in the region, would promote their interests through a Royal Air

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<sup>62</sup>Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell*, 48.

<sup>63</sup>Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 194.

<sup>64</sup>Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 194.

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Force base in Mesopotamia by “administering the country as though it were part of India.”<sup>65</sup> Faisal, forced out of Syria by the French, would eventually be crowned the King of Iraq. Desperate to achieve national unity, Lawrence and Bell toured the country with Faisal but because he was not native to the region Faisal was unable to foster unanimous national support.<sup>66</sup>

Thus neither Lawrence's imaginative map of three kingdoms nor Bell's map drawn by an Arab national movement was achieved. The boundaries of modern day Iraq and Syria were instead drawn according to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The map based upon imperial ambitions had outweighed the maps based upon aspirations for independent Arab nations. More importantly, the final boundaries completely disregarded the promises made to the Arabs in the McMahon-Russett Correspondence.

### Modern Perspectives

With the failures of the Sykes-Picot boundaries evident today, there is still a movement to envision a map of the Middle East more aligned with the ethnic and religious differences which permeate the region. As Ross Douthat says, many current observers are drawing prospective maps of the Middle East in the hope to best define its way into the future: Every so often, in the post-9/11 era, an enterprising observer circulates a map of what the Middle East might look like, well, *after*. after America's wars in the region, after the various revolutions and counterrevolutions,

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<sup>65</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 196.

<sup>66</sup> Naiden, "British Scholar - Administrators," 194.



after the Arab Spring and the subsequent springtime for jihadists, after the Sunni-Shiite struggle for mastery. At some point, these cartographers suggest, the wave of post-9/11 conflict will necessarily redraw borders, reshape nation-states, and rub out some of the lines drawn by Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot in a secret Anglo-French treaty almost 100 years ago.<sup>67</sup> Now, with the rise of powerful militant groups in the region, there is an effort being conducted by both foreigners and local populations. The actions undertaken by ISIS reflect this endeavor to redraw the map of the Middle East based upon Arab conceptions.

This rejection of the Sykes-Picot map and borders could only be seen as inevitable as the situation in the Middle East deteriorated over the past two decades. As English politician Paddy Ashdown writes,

What is happening in the Middle East, like it or not, is the wholesale rewriting of the Sykes-Picot borders of 1916 in favour of an Arab world whose shapes will be arbitrated more by religious dividing lines than the old imperial conveniences of 100 years ago.” The difficult situation for Western countries is to find the middle ground between accepting the demolition of the Iraqi state and denouncing the violence brought upon it by ISIS. While the former is inevitable, the latter is unacceptable in the modern geopolitical climate. Therefore from a Western perspective our actions in the Middle East today

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<sup>67</sup> Douthat, Ross. “The End of Iraq: Changing Maps in the Mideast.” *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), June 14, 2014.

are simply making up for our imperialist mistakes of the past. We must help usher in a new and stabilized Arabic state while also defending it from the militant extremism which has dominated its recent history. “None of this will be easy, of course. But better, surely, to face up to the realities of the post-Sykes-Picot Middle East and influence it where we can, than lose the moment standing impotently by, hoping that yesterday will come back again.”<sup>68</sup>

### **ISIS and Sykes-Picot**

If one looks at the map describing the ongoing conflict involving ISIS in Syria and Iraq today (Figure C) they will find striking connections to the negotiations between McMahon and Hussein. The Islamic State has established a perimeter stretching from Falluja through Haditha and Mosul across the border of Syria and Iraq to Aleppo and Kobani on the border of Turkey. They have reclaimed the areas originally promised to Arab independence by Sykes-Picot in the center of Syria and have expanded beyond the borders of Syria and Iraq established in the agreement. As a whole, ISIS seeks to create the Sunni Islamic-Arab State promised in the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence a hundred years ago and expand beyond it into a worldwide caliphate in revenge for the past.<sup>69 70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ashdown, Paddy. “Western Intervention Over ISIS Won’t Prevent the Breakup of Iraq.” *The Guardian*, (London, England), August 14th, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Worth, “Redrawn Lines,” 2014.

<sup>70</sup> P.J.W. “State of Terror.” *The Economist*, (London, England), June 16th, 2014.



Figure C: The Campaign of ISIS

This rapid rise and success of ISIS reflects the repercussions of the inadequacies of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The militant extremists have taken control of areas that were controversial in the dispute between Sykes and the British Arabists. While ISIS has retaken the desert areas in central Syria and Iraq, it has also taken the contested city of Mosul in Northern Iraq. Just as the question of Mosul was avoided during the Sykes-Picot negotiations because of its diverse demographics and political sensitivities, the city was targeted by ISIS as an area of interest for political expansion as well as the ethnic cleansing of Kurds and other opposition groups. The mixed population made integration easier for the militants as many residents were initially welcoming in reaction to their disagreements with the Shia-dominant Iraqi government.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Worth, "Redrawn Lines," 2014.

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Moreover, the group with the fiercest opposition to ISIS in the region is known as the Peshmerga. This group of well-trained military units is composed of Turkish and Iraqi Kurds in opposition to the extremist policies and ethnic cleansing of ISIS. The Kurds are fighting for autonomy and the recognition of a Kurdish state in the areas of Northern Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish quest for autonomy stems from Sykes-Picot's ignorance about ethnic barriers of the region. Thus the two major forces fighting in the Middle East today are both motivated by the ineffectiveness of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.<sup>72</sup>

The question is whether the maps drawn by Lawrence and Bell would have effectively avoided such massive religious and ethnic conflicts. While Lawrence's map would have created the single Arab Kingdom which ISIS fights for, it also disregarded the complicated nature of many tribal relationships in the region. On the other hand, Bell's embrace of an Arab nationalist movement would have potentially fostered the creation of a nation centered around a charismatic leader rather than one based on religious diversity and support. While the boundaries drawn by their joint opinions may have been more sympathetic to the wishes of the Arab population, they still would have been perceived as imperialist by many in the local populations and would likely have been rejected as foreign duplicity. Ultimately, because of the ineffectual boundaries established by Sykes-Picot, these ideas for an autonomous Middle East were disregarded; and we will never know which map might have been more successful in creating and maintaining harmony in the

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<sup>72</sup> Worth, "Redrawn Lines," 2014.

diverse region. Instead, we are faced with the reality of a region which has been plagued by political and religious disputes and periods of violence for nearly one hundred years. Because of the imperial ambitions of Mark Sykes and the obstinate stance of France in the region of Syria, the borders of the Middle East projected by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 were futile in helping to produce a condition of stability in the region. Conversely, they ignored the self-determining sympathies of the British Arabists such as T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, which could have potentially brought congruity to the Middle East. Had a more functional map been created by a mixture of British Arabists with the input of major Arab ethnic groups, many of the inconsistencies of Sykes' map may have been avoided. In the end, the follies of Mark Sykes in establishing the map of the modern day Middle East have brought constant upheaval and turbulence to the region which is now being exacerbated by the violent actions of extremist groups such as the 'Islamic State'.

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