

The Viability of a Second Sykes-Picot

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Brief Analysis

Given the reluctance of Western powers to intervene in today's Middle East crises, hopes and fears regarding a new grand resolution may be overblown.

For a few decades, the Arab political order provided both the region and the world with an illusion of sustainable stability. Now, after a succession of uprisings, crises, and wars afflicting the Middle East, the illusion of stability has vanished and the region has entered into an amorphous transitional phase.

A conviction is asserting itself in Arab political culture that this transitional phase will lead to a "Sykes-Picot 2" -- a definitive redefinition of the Middle East's states and borders similar to the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement. In Arab political mystique, "Sykes-Picot" is not merely an understanding between two waning world powers, it is the foundational event that redesigned the Middle East in the aftermath of the Great War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

While there may be thus a quasi-consensus on the expectation of a "Sykes-Picot 2," the debate is largely focused on identifying the potential leading partners of this agreement and estimating the shape and character of the entities that will emerge.

Some in the Arab world consider a border reshuffle as a welcome necessity, stopping regional hemorrhaging and establishing a new political order more in line with communitarian realities. Yet others attribute the origins of the region's suffering to the machinations of outside forces prodding the region into an order aligned with their interests, summed up by the now infamous term "creative chaos."

The phrase originated as a figurative, almost apologetic, expression used by former U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice in an attempt to explain what seemed to be an untamable reality bucking the expectations of an orderly U.S.-led transition in the Middle East. But for many analysts in the Arab world and beyond, the term "creative chaos" has become the summation of a firm and lasting strategy of the West. In some circles, it is deployed as the prime exegetical tool by those who believe in a ubiquitous hidden hand of the United States.

However, it is worth questioning whether the expectation of another Sykes-Picot agreement is justified, and whether

the original 1916 agreement was indeed the seminal event that some expect to be reproduced.

In the midst of the First World War, Britain and France were confident, at the peak of their respective colonial might. British diplomat Mark Sykes and his French counterpart François Georges-Picot discussed and drafted their eponymous agreement, which anticipated the fall of the Ottoman sultanate and allocated its provinces to the respective empires. But by the end of the hostilities, the ambitions of the agreement's signatories remained far from realized. Instead, the agreement's effects devolved into a mere confirmation of British and French military presence in territories abandoned by the Ottomans.

The agreement, as originally conceived, envisioned the creation of five entities: the first would extend from Baghdad to points south, encompassing Kuwait and much of the western coast of the Gulf, and would be under direct British rule; the second would include the northern half of today's Iraq, together with Jordan, Israel's Negev desert, and Sinai, and would form a British zone of influence. On the French side, a narrow coastal strip would extend from today's Lebanon north to the Bay of Alexandretta, then inland into Cilicia and considerable spans of Anatolia, and would be under direct French rule, while the Syrian hinterland would be the French zone of influence. In addition to these four well-delineated entities, the agreement envisaged the transformation of the final entity, the Jerusalem Sanjak (the northern half of today's Israel and the West Bank), into an international zone, while granting the port region of Haifa and Acre to Britain. Yet none of these five spheres became a reality.

The inspiration for the Sykes-Picot agreement may have been Britain's control over India and the French colony of Algeria. While the Sykes-Picot agreement reads as a recasting of the same colonial ingredients, the postwar reality was considerably different and rather disappointing for both France and Britain. The League of Nations recognized the British and French presence in the Middle East as "mandates" to assist the local societies in developing state structures -- not colonies. With this ruling, the cost-benefit analysis was no longer to the evident advantage of the mandate holders. The French and British militaries, to which authority was initially assigned in their respective zones, were drawn into onerous acts of repression. Initial military control was replaced by civilian administrations that aimed to usher the new states toward independence with treaties that safeguarded mandate power interests.

The initial conception of states and boundaries failed to be realized, and neither Britain nor France was able to sustain a productive presence in their mandates. The historical realities of the Sykes-Picot treaty do not correlate with the grandiose political imagination of "Sykes-Picot" -- supposedly carving borders, dividing nations, and depleting the region of its wealth. Certainly, both colonial powers and in particular Britain have maneuvered incessantly to maximize strategic, political, and economic interests. Nevertheless, the Middle East never experienced the exploitation that was the hallmark of British India or French Algeria.

If it were not possible to realize the intent and vision of the original Sykes-Picot agreement in the age of open colonialism and unabashed oppression, then a successful "second Sykes-Picot" is even less likely. Today, the world's sole superpower seems to be retreating from the global stage, leaving behind regional and international actors with exaggerated confidence in their power and political savvy but with limited real ability to impose their will. The lack of trust in rivals coupled with illusions of ultimate victories stand in the way of the sincere pursuit of compromise.

World capitals, notably Washington, were well equipped to know that neglecting the crises in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen would exacerbate them, promoting the dispatch of legions of fleeing refugees to European shores and seeding societies the world over with returning jihadists. Yet for many reasons, some understandable, others inexcusable, these crises were left unattended, with only minor, almost insincere, efforts devoted for their resolution.

Why would action and resolve be expected today from the same actors who displayed broad neglect and incompetence toward the cataclysm in its period of fomentation? In light of the persistent lack of serious interest on the part of the West, particularly the United States, waiting for another Sykes-Picot is akin to waiting for Godot.

Instead of a careful redrawing of the borders in the region, it is more realistic to expect the continuation of the structural and cultural dissolution experienced by the afflicted countries. Syria, much of Iraq, Libya, and Yemen are thus joining Somalia as locales where the notion of "state" is no longer applicable, and seem unfortunately doomed to continue as loci of crises to be merely contained by international initiatives, if at all. Further candidates for the affliction of dissolution abound, in the immediate neighborhood and remotely.

This bleak assessment is not a fatalistic acceptance of the ongoing collapse. It is instead a cautionary note that the unwarranted expectation of a savior from without falls within political fiction, particularly when the hopes (or fears) are about a comprehensive overhaul. Such reliance may further delay movement toward actual remedial measures. The need of a new foundational meeting in the region is indisputable. However, the elements required for such a gathering are to be found in the region, not outside of it. They include, first and foremost, a novel realism through which regional actors recognize their own limitations in will and capacity to overcome their maximalist ambitions -- including the delusion of rehabilitating potentates who have engaged in major crimes. Unfortunately, the losses incurred by the diverse parties in the region have not risen to the level of highlighting the value of the virtues of modesty, dialogue, and compromise. ❖

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