May 23, 2016

Sykes-Picot: 100 Years Later

(Due to the Memorial Day holiday, our next issue will be published June 6, 2016.)

Last week marked the 100th anniversary of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided the disintegrating Ottoman Empire territories in the Middle East into British-controlled and French-controlled areas following WWI. One hundred years after the agreement, the effects of the borders established by these European powers continue to reverberate as the region remains unstable. The Middle East has a rich and complex history that could fill several volumes of books. Although we will give a condensed overview of the long history in the region, we will focus on the WWI time period, specifically the circumstances that led to the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

History
Throughout its history, many powers have held direct and/or indirect power in the Middle East, which is widely accepted as the cradle of civilization. Historically, borders have been fluid as local tribes and imperial powers have fought for control over this strategically important territory.

As a reference, this map shows the Middle Eastern countries as they stand today.

(Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica)

The region's rivers fed the fertile farmlands of the ancient Sumerian communities, which gave rise to the first cities in civilization. Geographically, the region is located at the crossroads of major trade routes, contributing to its strategic importance throughout history. This area held an important place in the ancient world, from the expansion of Mesopotamia and Babylonia in 3500 BC to the development of Egypt around the River Nile starting around 2500 BC. As ancient powers spread their territories, one way they controlled these vast areas was by re-settling the conquered peoples, scattering groups with little regard for ethnic, sectarian or economic viability of the new communities. This kept the local tribes from becoming too powerful in their own right. Throughout its complex history, the Persian and Roman Empires along with various caliphates and sultanates controlled parts of the region. Local tribes also attempted to establish claims on lands, which often resulted in bloody wars. The Middle East's location and agricultural riches have also made it the target of many outside powers.

The Ottoman Empire, ruled from Constantinople (modern day Istanbul), controlled most of the region starting in 1453 AD, stretching its power to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Although ultimately controlled by Constantinople, the garrisons of Syria, Egypt, Iraq and many others were governed by local forces who ran them as virtually independent states. The Ottoman Empire weakened in the 1800s and was forced to give up some of its territories, including Egypt, which became an independent state, but strengthened its grip on Iraq and Syria. The Empire did take a strong stance toward the emergence of nationalistic opposition movements, often banishing or executing the movements' leaders. The map below shows the Middle Eastern powers from 1837 to 1871.

(Source: Time Maps)

WWI Era
Toward the end of the 19th century, European powers, especially Britain and France, started to exert control in the region. The area represented a vital interest as it was part of an important trading route and also provided naval military access for the European powers holding colonies in East Africa, India, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Specifically, the Suez Canal, opened in 1869, connected the

Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and allowed for easy naval access from Europe to Asia. The British Empire sought to control the trade route as it was the fastest path to its colonies in India and Southeast Asia. However, the Ottoman Empire's presence complicated the strategic interest that European powers had in the region.

Egypt and several countries along the Arabian Coast had come under British control (shown in pink on the map below). Controlling these countries assured the safety of the trade route as well as increased British influence in the region. Britain also controlled Iraq and Iran, while France had strong influence in Syria. Additionally, the Russian Empire vied for control of Iran. In the beginning of the 20th century, oil was found in the region, amplifying its global importance. The map below shows the region as it stood leading up to WWI.

(Source: Time Maps)

In the face of increasing British and French interest in the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire sought to align itself with Germany. The Ottoman Empire was part of the Central Powers in WWI alongside Germany, Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria, fighting against the Allied Powers. Britain, France

and Russia, who all had strategic interests in the Middle East, were part of the Allied Powers. All in all, the Middle Eastern battles of WWI covered the largest territory of all theaters in the war.

During the war, the British needed help from the Arab communities to defeat the Ottoman Empire (this effort was assisted by Lawrence of Arabia). In return for their efforts, the British High Commissioner to Egypt promised to "recognize and support the independence of the Arabs within the territories." However, at the same time, the British had made conflicting promises to various other players. Britain had also formed a strong alliance with France, who was also interested in controlling the Christian territories of the Middle East. It was under these conflicting promises that the British and the French met to divide the Ottoman Empire spoils.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement
On May 19, 1916, Britain and France signed a secret agreement to divide the territories of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. The following map shows the original borders drawn by the two statesmen, with "A" indicating French control and "B" indicating British control. The two men heading the efforts, the British parliamentarian Mark Sykes and the French diplomat Francois Georges-Picot, were both "imperial men" who wholeheartedly believed that the territories were better off being ruled by European imperial powers. The straight lines that the agreement denoted were shamelessly self-interested, even by standards of the times.[1]

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[1] Barr, J. (2011). *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle That Shaped the Middle East*. London: Simon & Schuster UK.
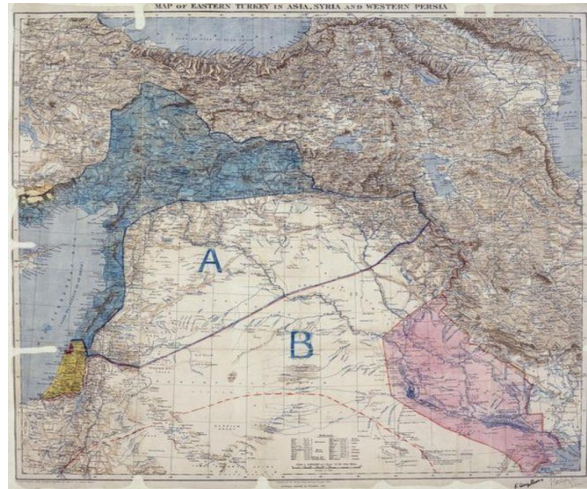
(Source: BBC)

Under the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Britain controlled Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine, while France controlled Syria and Lebanon. The map below shows the areas of direct British control in dark gray and areas of British influence in light gray. French direct control is shown in dark green and areas under French influence are shown in light green. Yellow indicates international control. The Russian Tsarist government was a minor party to the agreement and received control of Istanbul, the Turkish Straits and Armenia.
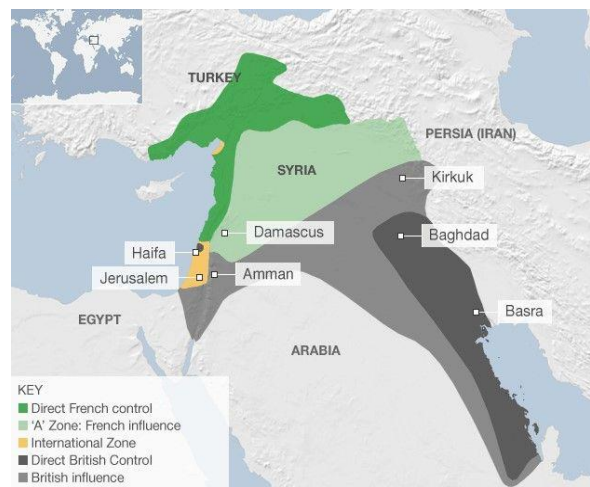
(Source: BBC)

The borders were drawn with European interests in mind, specifically to keep sea

lanes open for trading and facilitate naval military movement. They ignored sectarian/ethnic lines, geographic features of the territories and economic viability of the new countries. This created instability not only directly following WWI, but the effects of civic strife have continued for a century.

The European powers also kept this agreement a secret from the Arabs, since the agreement directly conflicted with the promises made to them in 1910. The Arabs rebelled against the Ottoman Empire on British promises to support a unified Arabic country. Up until Russia leaked the agreement in 1917, those Arabs who had rebelled against the Ottomans still believed that Britain's promises would be honored. As a backlash to this duplicity, many Arab countries moved toward nationalistic military regimes with central tenets of removing colonial powers from their national politics.

The European powers further divided the area and supported regional strongmen, such that no single power would be strong enough to rule the region. This is not unlike the Babylonians' actions to re-locate the conquered peoples or the Ottoman Empire's suppression of nationalistic opposition movements, thus making the emergence of a powerful opposition group unlikely.

Conclusion

(Source: Time Maps)

The map above shows the Middle Eastern countries as they stand today. Since Sykes-Picot, the Middle East remains complicated and rife with conflict. Events both positive and negative have transpired, but the region remains unstable. Adding to the complexity of the balance of power since WWI, many countries have become independent, the state of Israel was established, military strongmen have risen and fallen from power and there is a race to control the region's oil riches. It is due to these unresolved conflicts that instability and conflict are likely to continue in the region a century later.

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