

The Sykes Picot Legacy, 100 Years On. Secret Deal between France and Britain which Plunged the Middle East into a Century of Bloodshed

By [John Hilary](#)

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One hundred years ago this week, a secret deal was concluded between Britain and France that plunged the Middle East into a century of bloodshed. Two colonial negotiators, Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, agreed to carve up the Middle East between their respective countries in order to secure European control of the failing Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. Promises of self-determination that had been made to the Arab peoples by the British in order to secure their help in defeating the Turkish occupying forces were swiftly brushed aside. Instead of national liberation, there would just be a changing of the imperial guard.

The treachery was brutally simple. France and Britain would divide up the Middle East between them by means of a 'line in the sand' drawn on the map between Acre on the Mediterranean coast and Kirkuk in northern Iraq. Everything to the north of that line would be controlled by the French, and everything to the south by the British. France would get Syria and Lebanon, while Britain would have Iraq and Transjordan. "Even by the standards of the time," writes the [leading historian](#) of Anglo-French rivalry during the inter-war years, "it was a shamelessly self-interested pact."



The question of who would rule Palestine remained unresolved in the Sykes-Picot agreement, so the British government turned to another stratagem to ensure that Britain, not France, would secure that mandate at the end of the First World War. Through a series of guarantees to leading figures in the burgeoning Zionist movement, the British government was able to secure international backing for its control of Palestine on the pretext of more than just imperial self-interest. The strategy culminated in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which announced British support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" and ushered in a century of Palestinian dispossession by successive waves of European settlers. As Balfour himself admitted, "The weak point of our position of course is that in the case of Palestine we deliberately and rightly decline to accept the principle of self-determination."

British duplicity was further compounded by the Anglo-French declaration of November 1918 to the Arab peoples, which promised "the complete and final liberation of the peoples who have for so long been oppressed by the Turks, and the setting up of national governments and administrations that shall derive their authority from the free exercise of the initiative and choice of the indigenous populations". When this unambiguous

commitment to national self-determination was published in Jerusalem, the Palestinian response was a mixture of elation and relief. Only later was it revealed that the British government had always intended to exclude Palestine from the declaration, and that the order for its publication in Jerusalem had been issued by mistake.

To Britain's colonial administrators, Palestine was originally valued as a buffer zone to protect the all-important Suez Canal. By 1927, however, the British high commissioner in Iraq was excitedly reporting the discovery of "immense quantities" of oil in that country, and Palestine offered a crucial outlet for the pipeline that would connect the Iraqi oil fields to the Mediterranean. The Sykes-Picot agreement had left the French in charge of the northern route to the sea ports of Lebanon, effectively granting them permanent control over any oil exports from Iraq. The Palestinian port of Haifa offered the British an alternative route free from French control, and the Palestine mandate thus acquired a new strategic importance in securing Britain's national energy needs.

The Sykes-Picot agreement cast its shadow over more than just Palestine, as shown by the bloody histories of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon up to the present day. French rule in Syria and Lebanon finally came to an end in 1946, but neither pan-Arab nationalism nor Ba'athism were able to overcome the Sykes-Picot legacy. Tragically, it was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, former head of al-Qaida in Iraq, who was finally able to hail the 'End of Sykes-Picot' in a widely circulated video when he proclaimed the founding of Islamic State on territory spanning both sides of the Iraq-Syria border in 2014. Indeed, when ordered by Osama bin Laden's successor Ayman al-Zawahiri to pull back from Syria and concentrate his forces on Iraq alone, al-Baghdadi responded contemptuously that he did not recognise the artificial frontier created by the "infidel" agreement of 1916.

The rise of Islamic State is just the latest and most vivid reminder of the catastrophic consequences of British imperialism in the Middle East. In 2005, as the US-led occupation of Iraq spiralled out of control, the CIA warned that the decision to foment sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shi'a would result in a 'blowback' far more deadly than that experienced in the wake of the West's earlier intervention in Afghanistan. Sure enough, the peoples of Iraq, Syria and the wider region must now face unimaginable levels of violence at home, or risk their lives as refugees in the increasingly desperate search for sanctuary abroad. The jihadist attacks on London, Paris, Madrid and Brussels are a reminder in Europe of the ongoing horrors experienced by those living with the fallout of our imperialist wars in the Middle East itself.

According to George Santayana's famous dictum, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In truth, those who have been on the receiving end of Britain's imperialist past need no reminding of their history, as they are condemned to live out its consequences on a daily basis. It is the British people who need reminding of the human cost of our interventions in the Middle East and across the wider world, just as we need reminding of our absolute responsibility to provide refuge to all those fleeing the wars that we have started. The centenary of the Sykes-Picot agreement is a good place to start.

John Hilary, Executive Director, War on Want

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