

The Ghosts of Sykes-Picot

by

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Class of 2014

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved--OMB No. 0704-0188

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 15-04-2014		2. REPORT TYPE STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Ghosts of Sykes-Picot				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Colonel Mitchell H. Fridley United States Army Reserve				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Dr. Larry P. Goodson Department of National Security and Strategy				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Word Count: 5683					
14. ABSTRACT The European imperialism after WWI embodied in the Sykes-Picot agreement and exacerbated by the French mandate rule reinforced and made worse the geographical, social, religious and societal divisions within Syria and the Levant. In addition to laying the foundations for political and sectarian conflict seen today in the Levant, Sykes-Picot and the French mandate policies paved the way for the rise of the Baathist party and the Assad Regime. This paper starts with a look at the historical divisions in the Levant that existed during the Ottoman Empire, then focuses on the period of the Sykes-Picot negotiations and the French Mandate period. The author argues that the divisions imposed by the French during this period had profound and lasting effects on the region leading up to the 2011 uprisings against the Assad regime. In conclusion, this paper considers some forward-thinking conflict resolution ideas involving a remapping of the Middle East. This author does not agree that a 'partition solution' can be foisted upon the region to solve the seemingly intractable regional sectarian problems orbiting around the Syrian civil war, but that eventual solution may be the only way to bring a modicum of lasting peace to the region.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Ottoman, League of Nations, Mandates, Balfour, Assad, Alawite, Levant, Syria, Baath, French Colonialism					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 33	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UU	b. ABSTRACT UU	c. THIS PAGE UU			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (w/ area code)

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract

Title: The Ghosts of Sykes-Picot
Report Date: 15 April 2014
Page Count: 33
Word Count: 5683
Key Terms: Ottoman, League of Nations, Mandates, Balfour, Assad, Alawite, Levant, Syria, Baath, French Colonialism
Classification: Unclassified

The European imperialism after WWI embodied in the Sykes-Picot agreement and exacerbated by the French mandate rule reinforced and made worse the geographical, social, religious and societal divisions within Syria and the Levant. In addition to laying the foundations for political and sectarian conflict seen today in the Levant, Sykes-Picot and the French mandate policies paved the way for the rise of the Baathist party and the Assad Regime. This paper starts with a look at the historical divisions in the Levant that existed during the Ottoman Empire, then focuses on the period of the Sykes-Picot negotiations and the French Mandate period. The author argues that the divisions imposed by the French during this period had profound and lasting effects on the region leading up to the 2011 uprisings against the Assad regime. In conclusion, this paper considers some forward-thinking conflict resolution ideas involving a remapping of the Middle East. This author does not agree that a 'partition solution' can be foisted upon the region to solve the seemingly intractable regional sectarian problems orbiting around the Syrian civil war, but that eventual solution may be the only way to bring a modicum of lasting peace to the region.

The Ghosts of Sykes-Picot

The Middle East, as we know it from today's headlines, emerged from decisions made by the Allies during and after the First World War. Great Britain and France transformed what had been relatively quiet provinces of the Ottoman Empire into some of the least stable and internationally explosive states in the world. As a consequence, the First World War agreements are at the very heart of the current conflicts and politics in the Middle East.

—Ayse Tekdal Fildis ¹

In 1915, as Great Britain and France made military gains in the Levant and the Ottoman hold over its empire became more tenuous, the great powers of the Triple Entente began to formulate plans to partition the Middle East. A series of secret agreements, negotiations, and broken promises not only established most of the national boundaries still in existence today, but laid the groundwork for much of the mistrust amongst the nations in the region and towards the West. Further, the policies and administration put in place by France during the interwar years contributed significantly to the fervent nationalism, independence movements, and rise to power of regimes that still shape the region today.

It is not as simple as stating that the “arbitrary lines on a map” drawn by the colonial powers in 1918 caused the seemingly intractable problems occurring in Syria and surrounding region in the 21st century. Yet, it is without question that the influence and involvement of these Western powers have left a legacy that is still felt today. A review of the agreements, conferences, decisions, proclamations, and the administration of the French Mandates in Greater Syria informs policymakers of how the region became as conflicted as it is today. Perhaps most importantly, this review may help stakeholders better understand the feasibility, acceptability, and suitability of potential solutions.

This paper begins with an examination of the historical divisions in the Levant that existed during the administration of the Ottoman Empire. After this, the paper focuses on the period that begins with the Sykes-Picot negotiations that started in 1914 and continues through the French Mandate period that ended after World War II. The author argues that the divisions imposed by the French during this period had profound and lasting effects on the region leading up to the 2011 uprisings against the Assad regime. After a brief discussion of how the French Mandates contributed to the rise of the Baathists and Alawites to power, the author reviews Hafiz al Assad's policies and the succession of his son, Bashar. Lastly, this paper considers some forward-thinking conflict resolution ideas involving a remapping of the Middle East to potentially 'correct' the colonial partitions of the Levant imposed by the Sykes-Picot agreement.

The historical notion of a Syria composed of a mosaic of ethnicities, religions, and cultures, resulting in a profound lack of Syrian national identity, goes back many centuries. The Ottoman Empire ruled Greater Syria (consisting of the lands stretching south from Constantinople to southern Arabia) from 1516 to 1918. The Ottomans divided 'Syria' into a variety of administrative districts (*vilayets*) that had little significance or basis for their boundaries other than convenient administration. These *vilayets* did not interfere with trade or the movement of the populace, and goods and cultures freely moved about the region, promoting diversity.² To further complicate matters, Syria has few firm natural boundaries; "Instead, its contours can change with each war, diplomat, or theorist."³

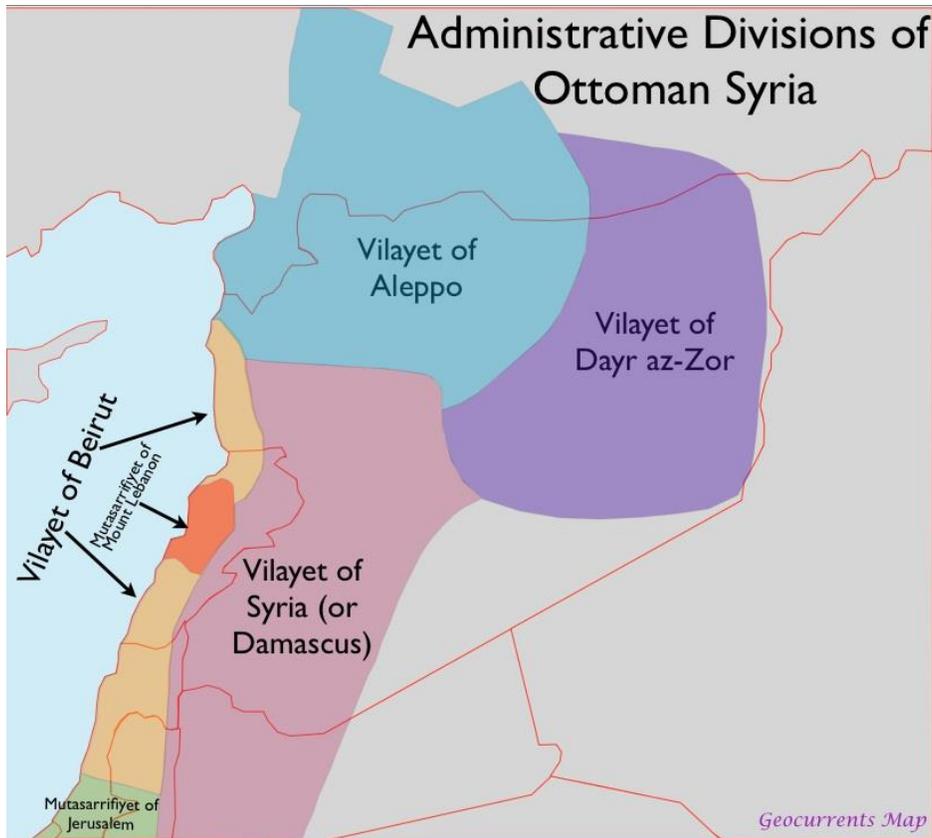


Figure 1: Map of Ottoman Empire Administrative Divisions of Syria, Circa 1900⁴

Daniel Pipes, writing in 1988 (long before the 2011 Syrian uprising), stated presciently, “Syria contains probably the most fractured population in the world... Except for specific commercial or political purposes, communities did not cooperate, and there was certainly no sense of common identity as Syrians.”⁵ These observations are predicated by earlier commentators; British Lord Shaftsbury wrote in 1835 that Greater Syria was a “country without a nation,” and K.T. Khairallah wrote in 1912 that in Syria, “There was nothing but distinct and often hostile groups. It was a vast cluster of disparate elements brought together through conquest...”⁶

It was under this shadow of a splintered society held together by the Ottoman Empire that the European powers set about to bring post-war order, primarily through

geographical partitioning and imperialistic heavy-handed rule. Many volumes have been written about the years from 1914 into the 1920s, and the diplomatic and political factors are abundant and fascinating...and much too convoluted to be discussed in this paper. Simply stated, the primary issue was that with the defeat of the controlling Ottoman Empire government in the Levant, the British and French victors wanted to protect their regional interests while sharing the spoils of war. Where would the lines be drawn to the satisfaction of the powers negotiating in Paris and London? The Arabs ostensibly had a say in the matter and they had their advocates in President Woodrow Wilson and the famed T.E. Lawrence. The Zionists had powerful advocates in Europe as well. In the end, the political structure of the Levant would be mostly manipulated by heretofore lesser known diplomats holding sway in the cabinets of the two great powers.

As England and France fought the Ottomans in the Middle East during the war, a series of secret agreements brokered between the diplomats from the major allied powers conspired to divide up the region after the Turks were defeated. While the Italians, Greeks and czarist Russia would get pieces of the pie relative to their geopolitical influence, most of the Arab lands would be divided between France and Great Britain. Simultaneously, other secret assurances that were in contradiction to the European negotiations were taking shape between British emissaries and Arab leaders. To further compound the challenge, the wealthy European Zionist movement centered in London was influencing the decision makers in British Parliament.⁷

Although often remembered for the post-war philosophical differences and imperialistic posturing, the two nations wrangling over the spoils of the Middle East had legitimate strategic interests in the region. Britain was focused on safeguarding the

route to their colony in India, fulfilling emerging energy needs (with the discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula), protecting established financial concerns, and maintaining an advantageous balance of power in the Mediterranean. For its part, France was interested in preserving ties with Lebanon and Syria that were centuries old, gaining strategic advantage in the Mediterranean, and preventing Arab nationalism from infecting the French empire in North Africa.⁸

The 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement brokered between France and Great Britain essentially proposed to draw an East-West line dividing Greater Syria along the modern day southern boundary of the state of Syria (although going as far west as Mosul), with France in charge of the north and Britain in charge of all of the south. Under Sykes-Picot, only the desert of modern day Saudi Arabia would be free from Western control.⁹

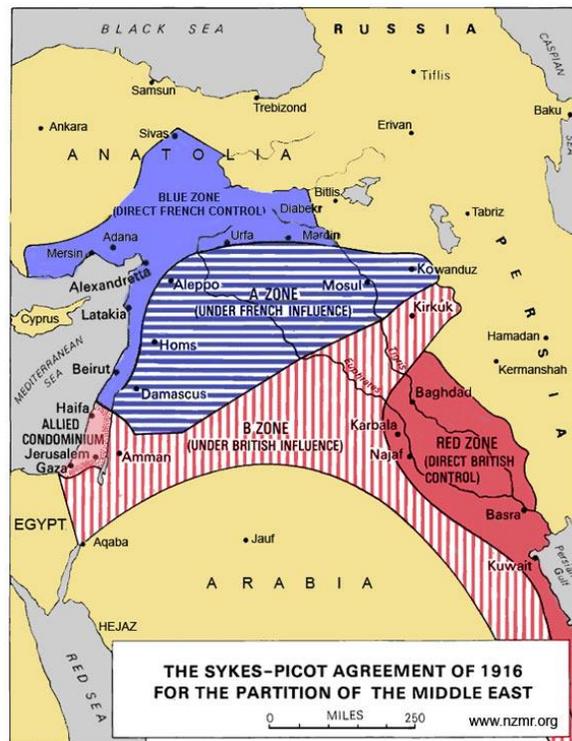


Figure 2: Map of Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916¹⁰

But it was not to be that simple. The British in control of Egypt wished for Arab assistance in defeating the Ottomans. Sir Henry McMahon urged the self-proclaimed ruler of the Arab peoples, Husayn ibn Ali of Mecca, to revolt against the Turks with a pledge of British support for Arab independence at the end of the war. Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. states that, "Because the Arabs predominated in Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, their leadership expected Britain to grant them independence in return for their support..."¹¹ Concurrently, the Zionist movement in England successfully lobbied for a new Jewish home in the Middle East and British Foreign Secretary Sir Arthur James Balfour issued a declaration in 1917 officially demonstrating British support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.¹² Competing interests of the major powers and other stakeholders ensured that several parties would be dissatisfied with any outcome.

While the Allied powers gathered to negotiate a post-war settlement in Paris in 1918, Amir Faysal – son of Husayn and field commander of the Arab Revolt – declared an "independent Arab constitutional government with authority over all Syria."¹³ At the San Remo Conference in April 1920, Britain and France jointly agreed to the nature of the partitioning of the Middle East, and Faysal was left with few options; the British were withdrawing from Syria and the French were to be in charge. At the end of July 1920, the French occupied Damascus and a new era of French control of Syria began.¹⁴

Although it had taken nearly a decade of war and negotiation - with political leveraging and backstabbing, and with broken agreements and smashed Arab aspirations - "the program Sykes had formulated was realized after the war, and was embodied in the documents formally adopted (for the most part) in 1922."¹⁵ Elizabeth

Thompson, writing in 2009 for the United States Institute of Peace, calls the post-World War I betrayal and occupation of Arab lands by European powers as “significant as the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor is in American history,” and further surmises that “any new plan to promote democracy in the Arab world must begin by recouping this moment of ‘justice interrupted’ ninety years ago.”¹⁶ There would be much more ‘injustice’ perpetrated on the Arabs over the coming decades prior to their independence after World War II.

In late 1920, with a French military presence in Syria numbering close to 200,000 and King Faysal forced into exile, French Prime Minister Alexandre Millerand was asked what part of Syria his government intended to rule and for how long. He resolutely replied, “The whole of it, and forever.”¹⁷ Millerand’s assertion was somewhat inaccurate for two reasons: half of what was then known as ‘Syria’ was controlled by Great Britain, and France did not technically ‘rule’ Syria but rather ‘temporarily governed it’ under the mandate system. However, his reply set the tone for the French administrative mandates over the next two decades. The northern half of Syria ceded to the French in the San Remo Conference was termed the “Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon.”¹⁸

The League of Nations designed the mandate system to be a paternal and temporary arrangement. A.T. Fildis writes that, “According to the principle of the mandate, an ‘advanced’ state was going to tutor a less-advanced state in the complexities of democratic self-government until it was ready to rule itself.”¹⁹ Although this principle was formally stated by the League of Nations to legitimize the mandate system, it was in reality “little more than nineteenth century imperialism repackaged to give the appearance of self-determination.”²⁰ Constitutions and laws were to be

developed and enacted, governments 'of the people' were to be elected, and autonomy pursued. However, France had little interest in the region's autonomy and instead pursued policies that solidified its control over its new imperial possession.²¹

Somewhat as an aside, in defense of France's failure at incubating a Syrian nation-state, John Keay in his book *Sowing the Wind* suggests that France in the 1920s was incapable of effectively complying with the mandates due to a scarcity of monetary, logistical, and administrative resources. France was faced with a Hobson's choice of losing control of the new mandate by allowing pan-Syrian nationalism to flourish in an undivided region requiring far fewer resources to oversee, or dividing the region to thwart the nationalism while guaranteeing failure through an inability to fully form and fund multiple governments and political systems.²² Having militarily and politically fought so hard for their new territory, the French chose to make the best of a difficult situation and divide the territory's governance.

Similar to the British to their south, between 1920 and 1923 the French set about dividing up their mandate into six units. In an effort to ensure control in their new colony, they intentionally attempted to exploit religious and ethnic differences by drawing lines between different groups, particularly isolating the Arab nationalists. The Sunnis comprised about 85% of the population of the two districts of Aleppo and Damascus. In the other four districts, the Sunnis represented a minority; Latakia was 60% Alawi, Lebanon was 55% Christian, Alexandretta was a mixture of all groups but mostly Alawis and Turks, while Jabal Druze was nearly all Druze.²³

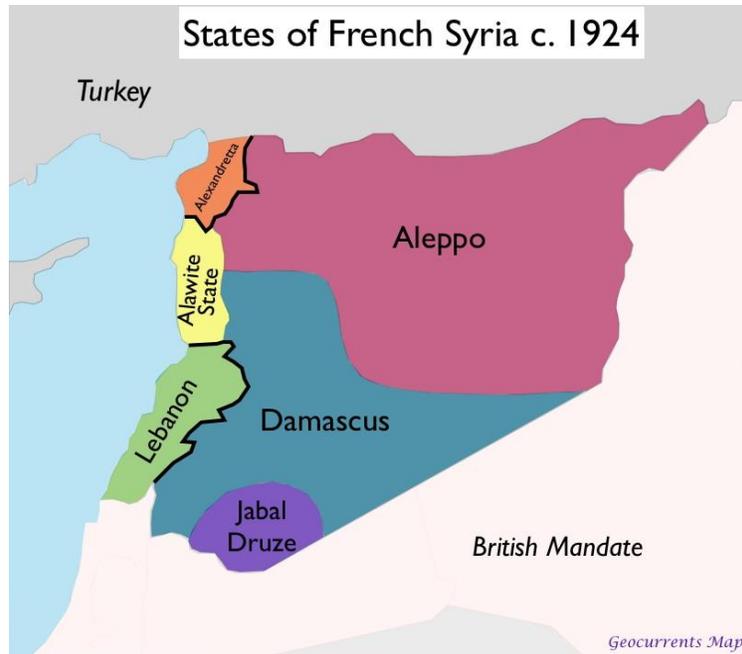


Figure 3: Partition of the French Mandate of Syria Circa 1924²⁴

Daniel Pipes accurately states in his book, *Greater Syria – the History of an Ambition*, that “decisions taken on the spur of the moment for fleeting imperial interests endured long after the collapse of the European empires.”²⁵ From the point of view of an imperial power in a distant land, France had strong strategic reasons for dividing the region along these lines. First, as previously stated, these divisions greatly enhanced the ability to control the territory by encouraging tensions between communities (i.e. no national unity in opposition to the ruling power). In fact, many of the minority communities were grateful to be out from under Sunni rule and they openly supported the French mandate rule. Second, some of these divisions created polities that were too economically weak to stand on their own and required French support to remain autonomous. Third, by putting minorities in charge of certain regions that were not openly hostile to the French, they hoped to retain access and influence in the event of independence in the Sunni areas. Finally, by dividing the Muslim majority of greater

Syria, France hoped to diminish the possibility of a unified threat against an independent Maronite Christian Lebanon.²⁶

The mandate divisions would have long term effects on Syrian identity and nationalism. Throughout their twenty-plus years of administrative rule in Syria, the French had to wrestle with surges of nationalism based along religious (Islamism), nationalistic (Pan-Syrian) and Arab lines (Pan-Arab). The French strategy was designed to inhibit the spread of nationalistic sentiment in Syria, particularly from the Sunni areas into the minority regions. In this process, the French not only failed to instruct in good governance, but actually obstructed the unity necessary for a representative government to emerge. In open noncompliance with the League of Nation's principled charter to 'tutor' the fledgling country, France fruitlessly "haggled for decades over the terms of an independence treaty and eventually had to be forced by the British to evacuate without a treaty...Syria emerged after 1945 as a unitary state with very little experience of unity."²⁷

Reva Bhalla has noted, "When the French mandate ended in 1943, the ingredients were already in place for major demographic and sectarian upheaval, culminating in the bloodless coup by Hafiz al Assad in 1970..."²⁸ Soon after the end of the French mandate, the urban Sunni elite established themselves at the head of the new Syrian government. The French system had placed certain ethnicities at the head of the various branches of government and had ensured some minority representation. The Sunni elite dominated politics, the police, and the officer corps of the army. The Alawites and the Circassians were overrepresented in the rank and file of the army. Additionally, the compact minorities living predominantly in their own regions had

enjoyed a higher level of autonomy under the French than had their Sunni neighbors. The first thing the new Sunni government did was tear down the interior regional boundaries and incorporate the minority compacts into one Syrian nation. Laws that protected Alawite and minority representation in government and courts were simultaneously abolished.²⁹

As previously stated, the Alawites and other rural minorities comprised the bulk of the Syrian armed forces under the French. By design, the French recruited heavily from areas distant from the urban centers where Arab nationalism was most prevalent. In the 1940s just prior to independence, Sunni representation in the military was negatively disproportionate to their composition of the general population. Furthering the Sunni-Alawite divide, the army under French leadership had been used to suppress uprisings of nationalism primarily orchestrated by the powerful Sunni majority. As a series of coups, insurrections, and infighting rocked the Sunni leadership in the late 1940s through the 1950s – to include within the predominantly Sunni officer corps of the military – the Alawites rose through the ranks to fill the vacant leadership positions.³⁰

The second factor that advanced the Alawite rise to power in Syria in 1963 was the formation and growth of the Baathist political party. Fildis states, “Baath nationalism was different from Sunni Arab nationalism in that the Baaths wanted a united secular Arab society.”³¹ While anti-colonial and ‘pan-Arab,’ the Baathists added the dimension of ‘socialist’ to their doctrine. This ideology encouraged the underprivileged, not the privileged elites, and the rural minorities found it appealing. Fildis further states, “from the outset, the social base of the Baath party was lower middle class and rural... Many of them were from minority communities, notably Alawites, attracted by a secular,

nationalistic message that accepted minorities as equals.”³² In 1963, a military coup brought down the ruling Sunni government and the Alawite officers (now also predominantly Baathists) successfully took control from the remaining Sunni army officers. This Alawite faction further consolidated its control of the army and Syrian politics by eliminating the Druze and Ismaili factions, and “became the masters of Syria.”³³ This bloody Alawite/Baathist takeover was a decisive point in Sunni and Alawite relations with implications reaching the present day.

The successful Baathist coup of 1963 did not bring about stability and an end to political infighting; quite the contrary. Baathist rulers had not come to power by a ‘revolution from below’ but rather a coup perpetrated by a small group of military officers. Support of the majority of the population was weak and the new government faced much opposition, leading to a time of struggle harkening back to the Sunni-Alawite divide that had been simmering since the turn of the century. The ideological leaders of the party sought unity and legitimacy, and an attack against Israel in the Golan Heights in 1967 provided a potential opportunity to further that goal. The outclassed Syrians were defeated, leading to the occupation of the Golan Heights by the Israelis. More important domestically, this defeat discredited the ideologically radical wing of the Baath party and paved the way for the more pragmatic wing of the party under General Hafiz al Assad to come to power in 1970.³⁴

Hafiz al Assad constructed a ‘presidential monarchy’ and filled the powerful positions in the army, the party, and the robust security apparatus with Alawite loyalists, thus consolidating and ensuring his hold on power. Assad further ensured his political longevity by entering into alliances with Sunni bourgeoisie and by cultivating a following

among the rural population through moderate socialist economic reforms. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Assad bolstered his international power by partnering both with the Soviets for weaponry and the southern Arab oil producers for funding. Finally, to secure legitimacy for his regime among regional Arab countries, Assad cultivated Syria's role as the 'beating heart of Arabism' in opposition to the Israeli occupation of Palestine.³⁵

Hafiz al Assad's position toward Israel was grounded in strategic thinking and legitimizing his regime in the region was a byproduct of an astute worldview that drove Syria's foreign policy for most of his rule (and also that of his successor). According to Flynt Leverett, Assad held fast to the belief that "European colonial treachery had undercut the possibility of Arab unity," but more relevant to Syrian national interest, Assad also believed that Israel was "a territorially acquisitive neighbor bent on becoming the dominant power in the region."³⁶ The realist Assad understood that the formation of Israel by the so called 'catastrophe of 1948' was not going to be reversed, "but there was still a battle to be fought over the terms on which it stayed."³⁷ Thus, Syria's foreign policy agenda under Assad focused on the two overarching and related objectives of containing Israel's hegemonic aspirations and preventing Syria's diplomatic isolation.³⁸

With the strategy formulation model in mind, these two strategic interests drove Assad's policies beginning in the 1970s. The four components of this foreign policy were "establishing and protecting Syria's position in Lebanon, defining Syria's posture in the Arab-Israeli arena, ensuring Syria's role in the regional balance, and managing Syria's relationship with the United States."³⁹ The ways and means that the Assad

regime used to achieve these ends between the 1970s and 1990s still have significant bearing on the expansion and the conduct of the present day Syrian Civil War. Most notably these ways include: (1) the creation of and support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, (2) the cultivation of strong military ties with Iran while nimbly attempting to remain 'politically acceptable' to other neighboring states, (3) expansion of an effective and ruthless intelligence apparatus (both domestically and in Lebanon), (4) procurement and development of strategic weapons, (5) foment of terrorism and unconventional warfare, and (6) by working both with and against the United States throughout the Cold War era.⁴⁰

Despite the international strategies and Hafiz al Assad's prominent role on the regional stage, according to Pipes, "Bedrock Sunni opposition remained the Assad regime's greatest problem...a small and divided minority knew they could not rule indefinitely against the wishes of more than half the population."⁴¹ Just as the French had done before him, Hafiz was adept at handling this challenge. Through heavy-handed repression of any insurrection, co-opting support from the other non-Sunni minorities in Syria (the Druze, Christians, and other Shias) and by giving the Sunni elite just enough governmental representation, Hafiz reduced his opposition.⁴² All of these were tried and true ways successfully utilized by the colonial rulers seventy-five years before and would lead towards the predictable conflict that began in 2011.

With a precarious hold over the balance of power in Syria through the aforementioned means, loyalist patronage, and a prolific and ruthless security apparatus, the Assad regime was able to withstand uprisings and weather an economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. The final challenge to minority Alawite Baathist regime

rule would be the death of Hafiz al Assad and the succession of power to his son Bashar in 2000. While the transition went relatively smoothly at first, the unravelling of the regime's power was abruptly brought to a head with the 'Arab Spring' in 2011. It is an academic argument whether or not Bashar would have been able to uneventfully stay in power had Syrian youth not embraced the tide sweeping the Middle East, but many factors were already straining his ability to control the Syrian nation. Similar to other countries in the region, Syria was faced with a burgeoning youth bulge, high unemployment, declining oil production and therefore a declining economy, proliferation of social media, urbanization, rising Islamism, and an aging ruling elite. These demographic challenges all coincided with the succession of the 'new' patrimonial authoritarian ruler generally viewed as less capable than his father.

According to David Lesch, Bashar al Assad "was popular, seen as uncorrupted and a modernizer, and, in fact, he came to power with an agenda to reform – economically 'modernize' – the regime."⁴³ With a stagnant GDP and petroleum revenues inexorably declining, private capital investment was required to stave off collapse (both of the economy and his regime). The older cronies in ministerial positions in the government were replaced with younger, more technically savvy leaders. Raymond Hinnebusch equates Syria's reforms with a 'Chinese model' - "a dual-track approach through which the market is introduced, while the state-dominated system, including populist welfare measures, is downsized only gradually in order to avoid social instability."⁴⁴ But Bashar faced a conundrum; if the markets were opened too much, the crony-capitalists and state control of the economy would decrease and the fundamentals of his power base would erode. If he did not reform enough, Syria could

face economic collapse and/or widespread lower and middle class revolts like those brewing in places like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Hinnebusch thinks he went too far in creating (or it could be said 'maintaining') a capitalistic class within his powerbase, thereby increasing socioeconomic inequality.⁴⁵

Additionally, Bashar inadvertently inflamed the rural Sunni opposition with his austerity measures and the disbanding of peasant and worker unions. Since the days of the French mandate rule, the linchpin to minority rule is segregation and repression of out-group subjects to prevent unified opposition, coupled with amelioration of the majority's discontent and feelings of underrepresentation. With the removal of unions and trade groups, the regime reduced its connection to the rural Sunni middle class. The regime's power base was shrinking, as was the peoples' means of peaceful civil recourse against the government.⁴⁶ In March 2011, a nonviolent protest against a government policy was violently suppressed in an overreaction on the part of the military and the Syrian Civil War began.

In simplistic terms, the Syrian Civil War is between the ruling minority Alawite regime (an offshoot of Shia Islam), against the Sunni majority population. In Syria, various factions control strongholds of territory held by the ethnic or sectarian groups that have historically inhabited those areas; the coastal region of Latakia is firmly in Alawite hands, the Kurds control the northeast, and opposition Sunni rebels of all stripes control or contest much of the rest. According to Josie Ensore, "for the most part, the zones of control reflect the ethnic composition of the country that has existed for decades."⁴⁷

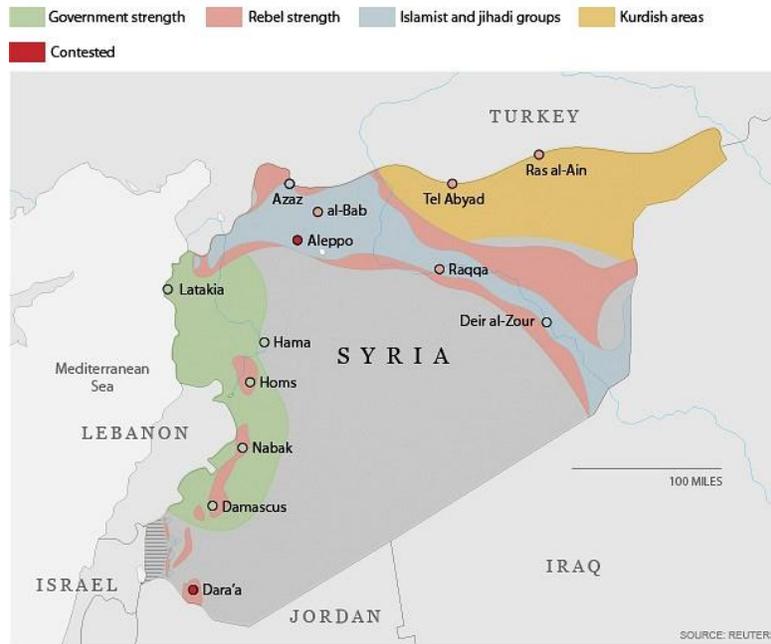


Figure 4: Areas of Control in Syria, March 2014⁴⁸

This conflict between the Syrian opposition dominated by Sunnis and the ruling Alawites and their minority allies has been fermenting for at least a century. Yet, over the course of nearly four years of fighting, the conflict has become a secular regional proxy war fought between major regional players. Further, the conflict itself has spread beyond state boundaries to Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. Regardless of the possibility of a wider conflict, the struggle has its roots in the divided sectarian nature of the country and suppression of the Arab nationalism of the Sunni majority. This division and suppression existed during the Ottoman Empire, was perpetuated and exacerbated by French policies during the interwar mandate period, and was exploited by the Assad regimes. Only with the breakdown of the minority ruler's ability to segregate and appease the Sunni majority – whether the French in the 1940s or the Alawites in 2011 – did the peaceful 'order' within Syria turn to opposition hostility.

Can what the stakeholders know about the true origins of the confrontation inform long-term solutions to the conflict? Many of the prototypical ideas put forth by world powers (and in some cases, put into practice), such as funding and/or arming the rebels or the regime, regional terrorism and assassinations in support of one side or the other, controlling strategic weapons, providing a 'golden parachute' for Assad, and/or holding power-sharing talks in Geneva, are ways that offer a short-term end to a broader underlying problem. Certainly, this brief review of European imperialism and French control of Syria in the early 20th century may inform scholars of the fundamental causes of the present situation, but is it possible to review the interstate and intrastate boundaries first codified by Sykes-Picot in order to find a solution to the complex challenges posed by the Syrian civil war? Without delving too deeply into the panoply of current larger international interests, several potentially longer-lasting options can be discussed.

Although difficult to imagine when viewed through an economic or nationalistic lens, the concept of changing the Arab state system established by Sykes-Picot is being discussed in some circles. In theory, the ideas have merit and might offer hope for longer lasting harmony among 'interest groups' in the Levant, although in practice they will likely prove too impractical in the near term. In discussing a possible remapping of the Middle East, Robin Wright, author of *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World*, asks the essential question of "...whether nationalism is stronger than older sources of identity during the conflict or tough transitions?"⁴⁹ Wright argues that Sykes-Picot illogically carved up the region based on imperialistic requirements, although state nationalism still exists in varying degrees.

Syrians optimistically tout that 'Syrian nationalism' will prevail at war's end, no matter who wins, but the problem according to Wright is that "Syria now has multiple nationalisms."⁵⁰ Wright argues that Syria has disintegrated into three loosely defined 'statelets,' as discussed previously – the coastal Alawite region, the northern Kurdish zone, and the rest of the country dominated and nominally controlled by the Sunni majority. Further, the Sunni-Shia conflict has also inflamed the fractured nature of neighboring Iraq, with the predominantly Sunni north backing the Syrian opposition and the Shia government aligned with Iran in at least tacitly supporting the Assad regime. Codifying these divisions, if only in naming secure autonomous regions that span greater country constructs may offer a lasting solution that placates the factions.



Figure 5: Wright's Proposal for Remapping the Middle East, September 2013⁵¹

Itmar Rabinovich asserts that although “ambitious monarchs” challenged Sykes-Picot after the colonial period, as did Gamal Abd al-Nassar in the 1950s and Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, the Syrian conflict has prompted the latest and most pressing reevaluation. The prominence of the Syrian crisis in this reevaluation is due to its central core position in the region and the very real prospect of its collapse.⁵² Rabinovich argued in February 2014, that “a draw of sorts has been established in Syria,” with the regime “able to consolidate its control over Syria’s central part with extensions to the west and south.”⁵³ He further asserted that Assad is not necessarily seeking to reconquer all of the country and may in fact settle for a defensible area of Alawite control as an alternative to complete collapse of his regime. Rabinovich concludes that “a small Alawite statelet is a less desirable option of last resort, but Assad must have resigned himself to the notion that a preservation of his regime in western and parts of central Syria may be the best option available to him at present.”⁵⁴ Similar to Robin Wright, Rabinovich refers to partitioning Syria into three autonomous regions: the previously discussed Alawite enclave in the west, Kurds to the north, and Sunnis to the east and southeast with possible integration or overlap with the Sunnis of northern Iraq. But, Rabinovich argues, the Iraqi Kurds and Sunnis still hold fast to a real sense of Iraqi national identity. Coupled with the complication of national oil wealth, this makes any disintegration of the Iraqi state in the near term highly unlikely.⁵⁵

As to a potential remapping of the Sykes-Picot boundaries, most international powers are opposed to a total collapse and partition of the Syrian nation. A new order in the Levant would likely result in a diffusion of power and influence into smaller states or autonomous regions that would have to be dealt with individually, not to mention the

potential creation of radical Islamic states or regions that could threaten world powers such as Turkey, Russia, Europe, and the United States. Israel reluctantly prefers the 'devil it knows.' Iran prefers a strong unified partner with which to continue pursuit of its interests in Lebanon and Israel. Iraq fears the impact a fragmented Syria would have on its diverse conflicted population. Russia fears the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism unchecked by a controlling central government in its southern sphere of influence. Yet, many of the fighting forces are strong, "and most are beyond the control of the actors involved."⁵⁶

Admittedly, the broad proposals to redraw the maps of the Middle East, and the Levant in particular, as a solution to the Syrian crisis are at present somewhat fantastical. Many pressing concerns and interests of the warring parties and their sponsors must first be addressed. But, these proposals or variants of them offer intriguing concepts to reverse colonial constructs that could come to pass either by concerted efforts of committed leaders or by a natural course of events necessitated by irreconcilable sectarian and geopolitical realities under the present state boundaries.

Conclusion

European imperialism after World War I embodied in the Sykes-Picot agreement and exacerbated by the French mandate rule reinforced and made worse the geographical, social, religious and societal divisions within Syria and the Levant. The treachery – the 'justice interrupted' in Elizabeth Thompson's words – lingered for nearly a century, and Arabs today still see Western politics through the lens of colonialism. In addition to laying the foundations for political and sectarian conflict seen today in the Levant, Sykes-Picot and the French mandate policies also paved the way for the rise of the Baathist party in 1963 and the Assad Regime in 1970. First formulated by the

Balfour Declaration, the creation of Israel was arguably a part of the overarching calculus that resulted in the implementation of Sykes-Picot in 1922. Although not an implicit cause of the Syrian Civil War, the creation of 'Jewish Palestine' arguably had the second order effect of not only bringing Assad to power but giving him the basis to legitimize his nationalism and rule against the common Arab enemy of Israel. Within the societal structure he eventually inherited from the French mandates, coupled with the galvanizing issue of Israel both as a distraction from internal problems and as a unifier of a diverse population, Hafiz al Assad retained power by paradoxically and skillfully perpetuating divisions while harnessing Arab nationalism. By introducing economic reform while simultaneously enhancing the status of his loyal minority supporters and concurrently alienating moderate Sunni constituents, Bashar al Assad weakened the useful historical divisions that kept the regime in power. The spark of a popular protest ignited by overzealous security forces brought about an incredibly bloody war that challenges not only the existence of the minority regime in Syria, but also the entire state order of the Middle East created by Sykes-Picot.

A 'partition solution' probably cannot be foisted upon the region to solve the seemingly intractable regional sectarian problems orbiting around the Syrian Civil War, but that eventual solution - evolving on its own over many years of strife - may be the only way to bring a modicum of lasting peace to the region. Bellicose groups may need to gravitate and consolidate into homogenous regions and pursue autonomous rule with the blessings of remnant state rulers, regardless of the 'lines on a map' drawn by Messrs. Sykes and Picot.

Endnotes

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²⁴ Lewis "Greater Syria and the Challenge to Syrian Nationalism."

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²⁶ Ibid., 29-31.

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