

Deceit in the Desert: The Partition of the Ottoman Empire

George Young

Negotiations regarding the partition of the crumbling Ottoman Empire took place in 1915 among the British, French, and Russian Empires. This Triple Entente hoped to secure territory, trade routes, and oil within the former world power. Several attempts at partitioning the Ottoman Empire, including the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, established the foundation for each empire's sphere of influence. In addition to establishing security in the region, the Triple Entente was also keen on secret treaties and unfair agreements, which were aimed at cutting out their Hashemite allies. As the Ottoman Empire disintegrated towards the end of World War I, secret treaties among the Entente Powers and unfaithful negotiations with their Hashemite allies laid the groundwork for the political tensions in the contemporary Middle East.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement

In the summer of 1915, following the start of the Gallipoli campaign, the French, British, and Russian empires began negotiations to split up the Ottoman empire and claim their own spheres of influence. Each empire's interests in the region varied. Russia wanted to secure ports in the Dardanelles, including Constantinople, in order to gain trade routes to the Black Sea.¹ Great Britain wanted control over what is now Palestine, due to its close distance to the Suez Canal in Egypt. Britain also viewed the Middle East as an extension of their already existing colonial empire.² Meanwhile, France already had investments in the Ottoman empire and was the largest investor in the Ottoman empire with Germany following behind.³ France's existing investments motivated them to maintain their hold over the region so their investments wouldn't fall through. All three major Entente powers also had great interest in the oil wealth of the region.

Negotiations started in November of 1915.⁴ The French delegate Francois Georges-Picot had studied and practiced law prior to becoming a delegate for the French government. Picot was left to write his own instructions regarding the negotiations, and did so. He implored that France should take the entirety of Syria,

but he did not expect to be granted so much territory. It should be noted that Picot and the French had little to no interest in any of the territory.⁵ Picot demanded Cilicia, northern coastal Syria, and a majority of Lebanon, which to his surprise he ended up receiving.⁶ His counterpart Mark Sykes, who was a scholar and guard in the British military during the Boer War, spent much of his early life travelling throughout the Ottoman empire while also learning a great deal about its language, region, and culture. Sykes was not as demanding and arguably not as successful as his French counterpart Picot. Sykes did manage to secure Britain a sphere in Iraq, as well as ports along the Mediterranean coast. One of the main issues that both France and Britain faced was dealing with their claims over Palestine.⁷ Britain managed to receive port cities in Acre and Haifa, which were also in Palestine. The rest of Palestine was to be left to an international committee due to the fact that Jerusalem, a holy site, is located in the area.⁸ Once France and Britain had sectioned off their spheres of influence, the documents were sent to Russia in 1916. Once Russia reviewed the documents and maps, they were unsatisfied with how much territory France and Britain got and demanded more territory in Armenia and Kurdistan, which were along the Russian frontier in East Asia Minor. Picot then travelled to Petrograd for more negotiations with Russia and, unbeknownst to Sykes, managed to secure a Russian agreement for the French to control Palestine.⁹

The negotiations also attracted the attention of the later Entente power, Italy. One major success that came out of the Gallipoli campaign was that it managed to win Italy's support in favor of the Entente powers for the war effort. Now that Italy was in the picture, they demanded a section of the Ottoman empire. Unfortunately for Italy, both France and Britain did not want to see Italy lay claim to any sort of territory. Britain and France then claimed that Russia needed to agree to the new terms presented by Italy in order for Italy to receive any of their claimed territories. Russia did not agree to the terms, as predicted by the French and British. With Russia declining Italy's claims, the British and French could now completely ignore Italy and press on with their own personal gains in the region.¹⁰

When the negotiations concluded, the outcomes diverged greatly from each empire's original aspirations for the region. Russia would receive territories in what is now Armenia. These included the provinces of Van, Erzurum, and some Kurdish territories to the southeast, as opposed to their original intentions of receiving Constantinople and the Dardanelles.¹¹ Britain would obtain areas in southern Mesopotamia, which included Baghdad and the Mediterranean ports of Haifa and

¹ J.C. Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics*, (city: Octagon Books, 1979), 27-30.

² Malcolm E. Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East, 1792-1923*, (New York: Longman Inc., 1987) 276-278.

³ Necla Geyikdagi, *France's Direct Investment in the Ottoman Empire Before World War I*, (Oxford University Press, 2011) ,527.

⁴ A combined effort by Britain and France in 1915 at securing the ports along the Ottoman held Dardanelles. The allies hoped to secure the Dardanelles and capture the city of Istanbul and rush the Ottomans out of the war. Unfortunately the allied efforts were in vain because the Ottomans managed to fend off the British Commonwealth forces and French forces for a long and bloody eight months in their only major victory of the war.

⁵ Yapp, *Making*, 277.

⁶ Yapp, *Making*, 277.

⁷ Yapp, *Making*, 278.

⁸ Yapp, *Making*, 278.

⁹ Yapp, *Making*, 277.

¹⁰ Yapp, *Making*, 278

¹¹ Britannica, *Sykes-Picot Agreement 1916*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sykes-Picot-Agreement>, (Britannica, 2018).

Acre.¹² Finally, France would acquire Lebanon, Syria, and cities within the region like Mosul. France's region was also adjacent to Russia's sphere of influence.¹³ The French and British managed to secure their interests, while Russia did not. However, it should be noted that Russia was not as involved as France or Britain was. Vitaly Naumkin, a scholar from the Russian Academy of Science, notes that the Russian empire had little to no interest in acquiring more territories in the Middle East and only wanted to weaken the German empire, while also securing trade routes from the Black Sea through to the Dardanelles in modern day Turkey.¹⁴

(Fig. 2)¹⁵

The Great Arab Revolt and the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence

The Great Arab Revolt of 1916 was a combined effort by the British, French and their Arab allies, specifically the Hashemites, in which Britain and the Entente would show their deceitful ways to. The operations against the Ottomans were originally started by Hussein bin Ali on June 10th, 1916.¹⁶ Both the British and French did not send much manpower, but instead sent officers, gold, and munitions to help the Hashemites fund their war efforts against the Ottomans. The only way the British could get the support from the Hashemites was to agree to the terms of Hussein bin Ali; a free and independent Arab state. The British responded with vague agreements due to their previous promises and the aspirations laid out by the Sykes-Picot Agreement.¹⁷ The terms of Arab independence and British rule were laid out in a series of 10 letters between Hussein and British High Commissioner in Egypt Sir Henry McMahon in July of 1915.¹⁸

When McMahon first came into contact with Hussein, he was extremely hesitant to work with him and called Hussein's territorial claims "extravagant bargaining counters."¹⁹ Eventually, three major factors changed McMahon's tone from hesitant to a welcoming tone in regards to Hussein. In October of 1915, an Ottoman lieutenant named Muhammad Sharif al-Faruqi deserted the Ottoman Army and told the British a tale of an enormous secret society amongst Ottoman officers that aimed at creating an independent Arab caliphate in Arabia, Syria, and Iraq. Faruqi also claimed that this secret society would be willing to join the Entente ranks if Britain supported their cause.²⁰ Even with numerous red flags, the story left an impression with the British authorities in

¹² Ritchie Owendale, *The Middle East Since 1914*, (Longman Group Limited, 1992), 9-10.

¹³ Britannica, *Sykes-Picot*.

¹⁴ Vitaly Naumkin, *The Sykes-Picot Agreement and Russia*, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/nuzhno-li-privsedinyat-rossiyu-k-soglasheniyu-sayksa-piko/> (August 23, 2016).

¹⁵ This map shows a modern context in regards to the partition outlined by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Britannica, *Sykes-Picot*.

¹⁶ The Royal Hashemite Court, *The Great Arab Revolt*, http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/his_arabrevolt.html

¹⁷ The Royal Hashemite Court, *The Great Arab Revolt*.

¹⁸ Yapp, *Making*, 279.

¹⁹ Yapp, *Making*, 279.

²⁰ Yapp, *Making*, 279.

Cairo, especially because it seemed to confirm Hussein's claims of an Arab movement within the Ottoman ranks. Another reason for his change of tone was the failing Gallipoli campaign and the pressures from said campaign. McMahon felt that if there was a big enough Arab nationalist uprising in the ranks of the Ottomans, it would disrupt any chances for the Ottomans to attack Entente garrisons in Iraq and Egypt while simultaneously distracting the Ottomans. Meanwhile, the Entente forces in Gallipoli could make a hasty tactical withdrawal from the beaches. The Gallipoli campaign was costing the allies a bloody penny with over 35% of their forces lost and had produced another stalemate rife with trenches, disease, and supply shortages.²¹ The campaign proved the Ottoman's willingness to fight, and that they weren't so easy to push over. The failure of the campaign also made Hussein's plans of an Arab revolt more desirable to the British, as it would weaken Ottoman forces in the region.²² Finally, McMahon and his British superiors saw great profit if they were to support a free and independent Arab state.²³

Starting in November of 1915 McMahon and Hussein began negotiations through mail. These letters outlined Britain's support of an independent Arab state, but it excluded three areas due to not being considered "Arab enough:" The Ottoman provinces of Basra, and Baghdad, the Turkish districts of Alexandretta and Mersin, and portions of Syria that lay west of Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and Hama.²⁴ The last of the three regions; Homs, Aleppo, and Hama were the most controversial as the British would later go on to say that Palestine was not to be controlled by the Arabs. The reason being that it was technically west of Damascus, which fell under the British sphere.²⁵ Another term in the letters that weren't clearly stated to the Arabs was that certain independent Arab states would be subject to British advice and administration. Lastly, Britain would also respect any treaties made between them and Arab chiefs with exception to those in France's sphere of influence in the region.²⁶

In 1916, British and Arab ties were cemented following the conclusion of the Hussein-McMahon correspondence. Unfortunately for the Hashemites, the British would consistently fail to uphold their end of the bargain following the collapse of the Ottoman empire. The Hussein-McMahon correspondence arguably had more weight than the Sykes-Picot treaty in terms of how the Middle East would continue following the conclusion of the war, but lacked any formalities to make it a treaty of any sort. Instead they were pieces of papers full of empty promises.²⁷

²¹ Yapp, *Making*, 280.

²² Yapp, *Making*, 280.

²³ Yapp, *Making*, 279-280.

²⁴ Yapp, *Making*, 281.

²⁵ Hashemite, *The Great Arab Revolt*.

²⁶ Yapp, *Making*, 281.

²⁷ This is a map of the excluded area of Palestine. Jewish Virtual Library, *Map of Pre-1948 Palestine: "Excluded Areas" under*

Another Thorn in the Side: The Balfour Declaration

In November of 1917, Lord Balfour had sent a letter to a prominent Zionist, Lord Rothschild, that would upset British Arab allies operating in the Ottoman Empire. The letter outlined Britain's promise of establishing a homeland for Jewish people within the region and around the world. The unfortunate detail about this "Balfour Declaration" is that it would be known as the homeland, located in Palestine.²⁸ Palestine was meant to be a protectorate under all three Entente powers as was outlined in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence and would remain independent due to the important religious sites in the country.²⁹ However, the letter was yet another piece of paper that held the British to absolute zero accountability in terms of keeping their promise. This time Britain had not only managed to betray the Hashemites yet again, but would also refuse to take responsibility for the issues that would arise in regards to Palestine.

Reasons behind the publication of the Balfour Declaration vary. One reason could have been to gain support from Zionists in Palestine, which would also attract the support of Jews from all around the world. The British sought the support of Jewish communities in America in order to gain more support for an active role in the war from America. There was also the thought that winning the support of Jews in Russia would encourage Russia to stay in the war.³⁰ However, these motivations were flawed because even with the support of Jews in both America and Russia, neither country changed their policies concerning the war. In fact, in the month prior to the publication of the Balfour Declaration, Russia had already stepped out of the war to deal with the Bolshevik Revolution.³¹

The Balfour Declaration proved to be another thorn in the side of the Hashemites. It exposed British interests in regards to Palestine, and proved that the British were dishonest when it came to dealing with Palestine and their promises to the Arabs. History would write off the Balfour Declaration as just another document in a World War, but to the Arabs who had thrown in with the Entente, it was yet another sign of betrayal and mixed interests that still plague Palestine and the Middle East today.

The Russian Revolution (1917)

In October of 1917, Russia had gone through a revolution that shook the very core of Western Europe. The revolution led to the release of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and other secret treaties drafted between the Russian Empire and their Entente in Western Europe. The revolution came to be known as the Bolshevik Revolution, and ousted Tsar Nicholas II and his royal family. With the collapse of the Russian empire and the the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (1916), <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/map-of-ldquo-excluded-areas-rdquo-under-the-hussein-mcmahon-correspondence-1916>.

²⁸ Yapp, *Making*, 290.

²⁹ Hashemite, *The Great Arab Revolt*.

³⁰ Yapp, *Making*, 290.

³¹ Yapp, *Making*, 291.

withdrawal of their troops, the Ottomans were no longer pressured by the Russian empire to their east.³²

In addition to the Ottomans new tactical advantage, the Bolsheviks release of the secret treaties between the Tsar's regime and his western allies, including the Sykes-Picot agreement, led to distrust between the Entente powers and their Arab allies.³³ The release of these documents was countered with the assurance from the British that their intent was to stand by the Arab peoples in their struggle for an independent Arab state. The British went as far as to amplify the promises made to their Arab allies and also tried to talk down their Arab allies by stating that their negotiations were merely conversations and provisional exchanges amongst the Triple Entente.³⁴

By the end of the war the Sykes-Picot agreement seemed all but abandoned. In fact, one could argue that the agreement should have been abandoned once the Russian revolution concluded in late 1917. The Entente powers' original intentions, as expressed in the Sykes-Picot agreement, never came to fruition. However, they provided guidelines for the actual partition of the Ottoman empire following the conclusion of the war along with the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence. The secrecy of the negotiations greatly contributed to the distrust between the Arabs and their Entente allies in the west. The nail in the coffin was the release of the secret treaties by the Bolsheviks in 1917. Regardless of the fact that the Sykes-Picot agreement never came to fruition, it is still an important event, affecting both the outcome of events following the First World War, and souring relationship between the West and the Middle East.

References

- Britannica. Sykes-Picot Agreement 1 16. 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sykes-Picot-Agreement>.
- Criss, B. Nurs. Occupation During and After the War (Ottoman Empire). August 5, 2015. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/occupation_during_and_after_the_war_ottoman_empire
- Jewish Virtual Library. The Balfour declaration, Text of the declaration (November 2, 1 17). Jewish Virtual Library; A Project of AICE. 2018. Accessed November 12, 2018. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/text-of-the-balfour-declaration>
- Jewish Virtual Library. Map of "Excluded Areas" Under the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (1916). Jewish Virtual Library; A Project of AICE. 2018. Accessed November 2 , 2018. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/map-of-ldquo-excluded-areas-rdquo-under-the-hussein-mcmahon-correspondence-1916>

³² John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein, et al., *Europe and the Islamic World, A History*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2013).

³³ Howard Sachar, *The Emergence of the Middle East 1914-1924*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1969), 171-174.

³⁴ Sachar, *Emergence*, 173-174.

Lawrence, T.E.. Seven Pillars of Wisdom. New York.: Dell Publishing Company, 1926.
 The National Archives. Sykes-Picot Agreement, Eastern Turkey in Asia, Syria and Western Persia.
 The National Archives. July 01, 2015. Accessed November 12, 2018. <https://images.nationalarchives.gov.uk/assetbank-nationalarchives/action/viewAsset?id=5584&index=13&total=14&view=viewSearchItem>

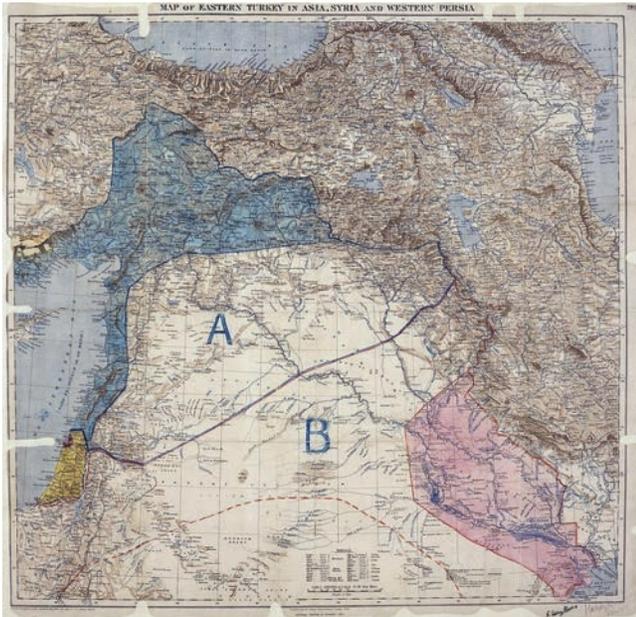


Figure 1

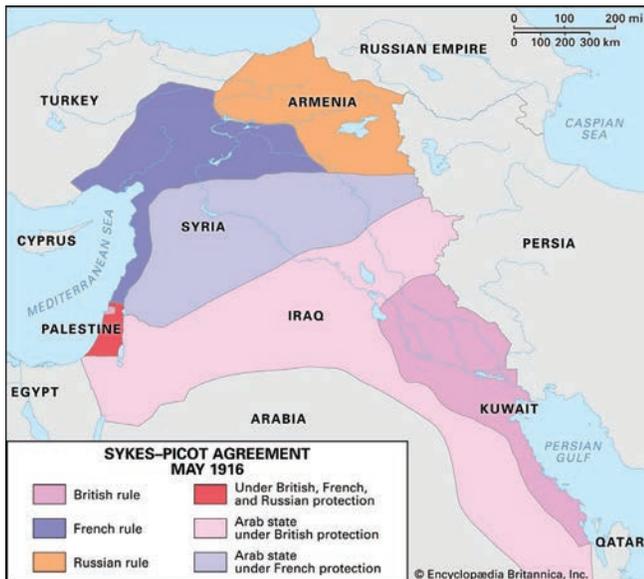


Figure 2

The National Archives. Extent of Ottoman Empire 14. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/maps/ottoman.htm>
 The Royal Hashemite Court. The Great Arab Revolt.
 The Royal Hashemite Court. 2018. Accessed November 15, 2018. http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/his_arabrevolt.html
 Tolan, John ,Veinstein, Gilles , et al., Europe and the Islamic World, A History, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013
 Saylor Academy. The Sykes-Picot Agreement.
 Saylor Academy. 2018. Accessed November 13, 2018. <https://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/HIST351-.2.4-Sykes-Picot-Agreement.pdf>
 Sachar, Howard, The Emergence of the Middle East 14-124, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1966.
 Smith, V. Leonard. Post War Treaties (Ottoman/ Middle-East). October 8, 2018. https://encyclopedia.14-1918-online.net/article/post-war_treaties_ottoman_empire_middle_eas
 Vitaly, Naumkin. The Sykes-Picot Agreement and Russia. August 23, 2016. <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/nuzhno-li-prisoedinyat-rossiyu-k-soglasheniyu-sayksa-piko/>.
 Yapp, Malcolm E., The Making of the Modern Near East, 172-123, New York: Longman Inc., 1987.
 Yapp, Malcolm E., The Near East Since the First World War, New York: Longman Inc., 1981.

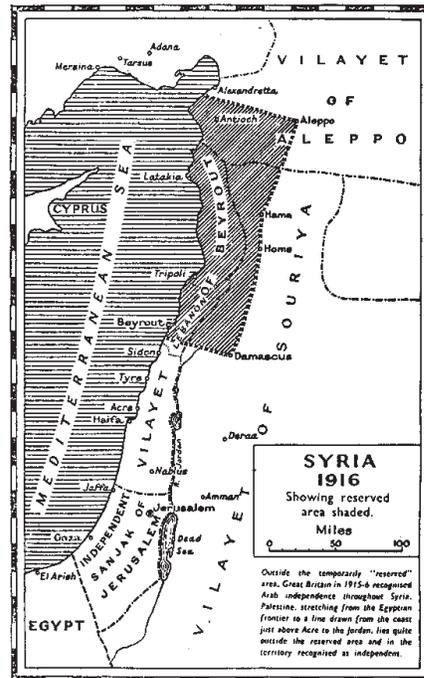


Figure 3