

Sykes-Picot Agreement (15-16 May 1916)

Hurewitz, J.C. *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics, A Documentary Record*. 2nd, Revised and Enlarged ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. 62-3. Print. Vol. 2 of *British-French Supremacy*.

In May 1915, Sir Mark Sykes (1873-1919), a distinguished British orientalist, and Charles Georges-Picot, formerly the French Consul in Beirut, prepared a draft agreement regarding the post-war division of the Middle East. The agreement was, in principle, also approved by Russia. These artful yet artificial divisions confirmed British strategic interest in creating a “land bridge” from the strategically vital Suez Canal, which Britain had controlled since 1881, to Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf. Britain, concerned with protecting its commercial trade to India and access to oil from Persia, wished to assert influence over the eastern Mediterranean. France was interested in solidifying its influence in Syria and Greater Lebanon.

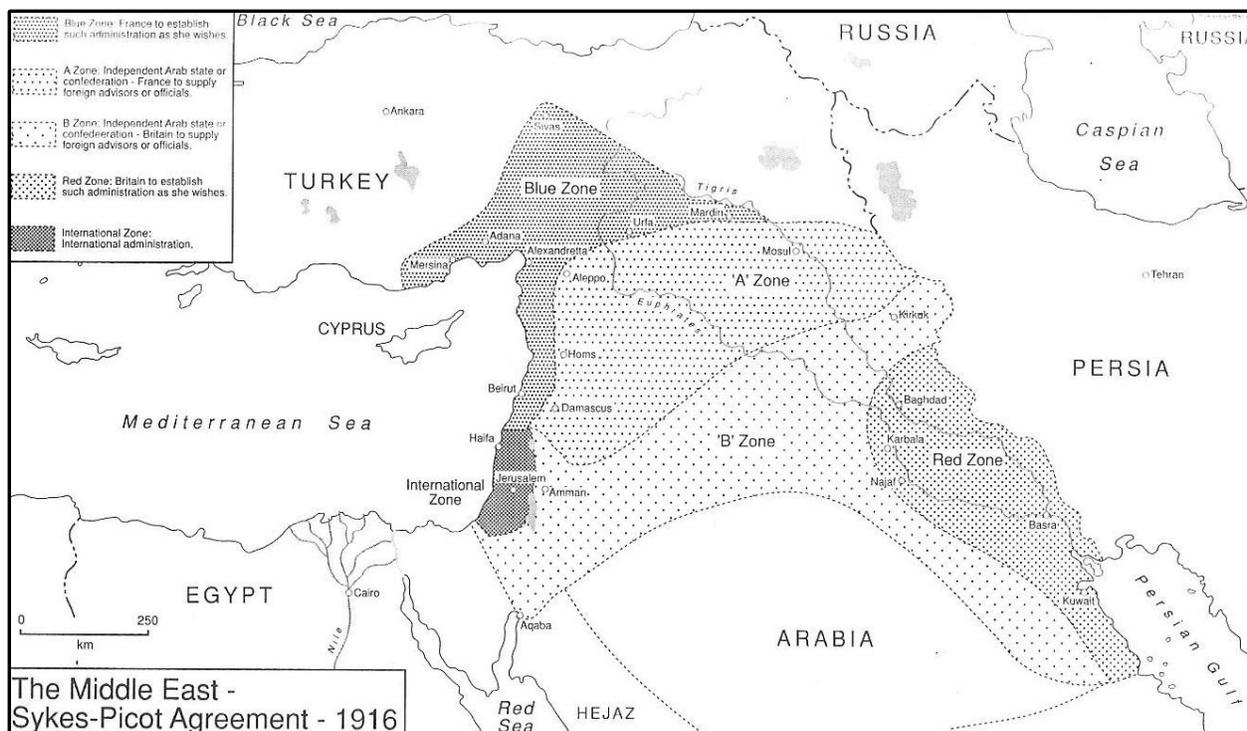


Figure 1 Map provided exclusively for Editor (1985).

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, with slight modifications, received international acceptance at the San Remo Conference in April 1920. In 1922, the newly established League of Nations gave international sanction to this French and British collusion on how the Middle East would be divided at the conclusion of World War I. It is worth comparing the maps of the Middle East in 1914 and in 1920 to see the enormous impact the Sykes-Picot Agreement had on ultimately setting the boundaries for the contemporary Middle East. These artificially constituted geopolitical divisions did not take into account ethnic, tribal, religious, or linguistic groupings that ultimately overlapped the drawn borders. It is not surprising, therefore, that for the remainder of the 20th century these political borders were regularly crossed because ethnic and political groups were artificially separated by them. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was another in



Figure 2 British orientalist Sir Mark Sykes (*Public Domain)

a series of treaties, alliances, and understandings that the British undertook before, during, and after World War I, all aimed at solidifying British interests in the eastern Mediterranean, Arabian Peninsula, Persian Gulf, and beyond.

D.G. Hogarth, later a member of Britain's Arab Bureau in Cairo, noted in 1902 that "the Near East [is] an intermediate land, that is to say a thoroughfare—the region through which must lie, and by which can be endangered, the communication between the West and the West-in-East." ¹ As for the Suez Canal, Britain's Prime Minister James Ramsey MacDonald affirmed in 1924 that the free use of the [Suez] Canal in peace and war was "the foundation on which the entire

defensive strategy of the British Empire rest[ed]." ²

For all intents and purposes, the political divisions caused by this agreement stimulated the development of local Arab identities. However, local identities based on clan, family, religion and ethnicity preceded British presence by centuries. Before, during and after WWI the British made dozens of alliances and agreements with shayks, tribal leaders, kings and emirs all through the Middle East. The British evolved a solid wall of allies where London's imperial interests could be fostered. When the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917, which promised the Jews the chance to establish a national home, the British identified their local client to assist the imperial reach. The Sykes-Picot Agreement alone did not inhibit pan-Arabism.



Figure 3 French diplomat Georges-Picot (*University of Montreal Archives)

-Ken Stein, February 2010

A. Sir Edward Grey to Paul Cambon, 15 May 1916:

I shall have the honour to reply fully in a further note of the 9th instant, relative to the creation of an Arab State, but I should meanwhile be grateful if your Excellency could assure me that in those regions which, under the conditions recorded in that communication, become entirely French, or in which French interests are recognised as predominant, any existing British concessions, rights of navigation or development, and the rights and privileges of any British religious, scholastic, or medical institutions will be maintained.

His Majesty's Government are, of course, ready to give a reciprocal assurance in regard to the British area.

B. Grey to Cambon, 16 May 1916:

¹ D.G Hogarth, *The Nearer East*, London: William Heinemann, 1902, pp. 280-81.

² J.R. MacDonald, Dispatch to British High Commissioner in Egypt and the Sudan, 7 October 1924, HMG, Cmd. 2269, p. 3.

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your Excellency's note of the 9th instant, stating that the French Government accept the limits of a future Arab State, or Confederation of States, and of those parts of Syria where French interests predominate, together with certain conditions attached thereto, such as they result from recent discussions in London and Petrograd on the subject.

I have the honour to inform your Excellency in reply that the acceptance of the whole project, as it now stands, will involve the abdication of considerable British interests, but, since His Majesty's Government recognise the advantage to the general cause of the Allies entailed in producing a more favourable internal political situation in Turkey, they are ready to accept the arrangement now arrived at, provided that the co-operation of the Arabs is secured, and that the Arabs fulfill the conditions and obtain the towns of Homs, Hama, Damascus, and Aleppo.

It is accordingly understood between the French and British Governments--

1. That France and Great Britain are prepared to recognize and protect an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States in the areas (A) and (B) marked on the annexed map (map not reproduced: Ed.), under the suzerainty of an Arab chief. That in area (A) France, and in area (B) Great Britain, shall have the priority of right of enterprise and local loans. That in area (A) France, and in area (B) Great Britain, shall alone supply advisers or foreign functionaries at the request of the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States.
2. That in the blue area France, and in the red area Great Britain, shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States.
3. That in the brown area there shall be established an international administration, the form of which is to be decided upon after consultation with Russia, and subsequently in consultation with the other Allies, and the representatives of the Sherif of Mecca.
4. That Great Britain be accorded (1) the ports of Haifa and Acre, (2) guarantee of a given supply of water from the Tigris and Euphrates in area (A) for area (B). His Majesty's Government, on their part, undertake that they will at no time enter into negotiations for the cession of Cyprus to any third Power without the previous consent of the French Government.
5. That Alexandretta shall be a free port as regards the trade of the British Empire, and that there shall be no discrimination in port charges or facilities as regards British shipping and British goods; that there shall be freedom of transit for British goods through Alexandretta and by railway through the blue area, whether those goods are intended for or originate in the red area, or (B) area, or area (A); and there shall be no discrimination, direct or indirect against British goods on any railway or against British goods or ships at any port serving the areas mentioned.

That Haifa shall be a free port as regards the trade of France, her dominions and protectorates, and there shall be no discrimination in port charges or facilities as regards French shipping and French goods. There shall be freedom of transit for French goods through Haifa and by the British railway through the brown area, whether those goods are intended for or originate in the blue area, area (A), or area (B), and there shall be no discrimination, direct or indirect, against French goods on any railway, or against French goods or ships at any port serving the areas mentioned.

6. That in area (A) the Baghdad Railway shall not be extended southwards beyond Mosul, and in area (B) northwards beyond Samarra, until a railway connecting Baghdad with Aleppo via

the Euphrates Valley has been completed, and then only with the concurrence of the two Governments.

7. That Great Britain has the right to build, administer, and be sole owner of a railway connecting Haifa with area (B), and shall have a perpetual right to transport troops along such a line at all times.

It is to be understood by both Governments that this railway is to facilitate the connection of Baghdad with Haifa by rail, and it is further understood that, if the engineering difficulties and expense entailed by keeping this connecting line in the brown area only make the project unfeasible, that the French Government shall be prepared to consider that the line in question may also traverse the polygon Baniyas-Keis Marib-Salkhab Tell Otsda-Mesmie before reaching area (B).

8. For a period of twenty years the existing Turkish customs tariff shall remain in force throughout the whole of the blue and red areas, as well as in areas (A) and (B), and no increase in the rates of duty or conversion from ad valorem to specific rates shall be made except by general agreement between the two Powers.

There shall be no interior customs barriers between any of the above-mentioned areas. The customs duties leviable on goods destined for the interior shall be collected at the port of entry and handed over to the administration of the area of destination.

9. It shall be agreed that the French Government will at no time enter into any negotiations for the cession of their rights and will not cede such rights in the blue area to any third Power, except the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States without the previous agreement of His Majesty's Government, who, on their part, will give a similar undertaking to the French Government regarding the red area.
10. The British and French Governments, as the protectors of the Arab State, shall agree that they will not themselves acquire and will not consent to a third Power acquiring territorial possessions in the Arabian Peninsula, nor consent to a third Power installing a naval base either on the east coast, or on the islands, of the Red Sea. This, however, shall not prevent such adjustment of the Aden frontier as may be necessary in consequence of recent Turkish aggression.
11. The negotiations with the Arabs as to the boundaries of the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States shall be continued through the same channel as heretofore on behalf of the two Powers.
12. It is agreed that measures to control the importation of arms into the Arab territories will be considered by the two Governments.

I have further the honour to state that, in order to make the agreement complete, His Majesty's Government are proposing to the Russian Government to exchange notes analogous to those exchanged by the latter and your Excellency's Government on the 26th April last. Copies of these notes will be communicated to your Excellency as soon as exchanged.

I would also venture to remind your Excellency that the conclusion of the present agreement raises, for practical consideration, the question of the claims of Italy to a share in any partition or rearrangement of Turkey in Asia, as formulated in Article 9 of the Agreement of the 26th of April, 1915, between Italy and the Allies.

His Majesty's Government further consider that the Japanese Government should be informed of the arrangement now concluded.