The de Bunsen Committee and a Revision of the 'Conspiracy' of Sykes-Picot

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Abstract: The Sykes-Picot Agreement is often cited as evidence of a Western conspiracy to carve up the Middle East and subordinate the Arabs. It is a prevalent view across the region, and has been a refrain repeated by many critics. Yet almost nothing is known of the far more significant conclusions of the Committee, formed by Maurice de Bunsen on the orders of the British government, which ascertained the options open to the Allies in 1915. Far from a nefarious conspiracy, the Committee came down in favour of long term partnership with the Arabs and a decentralised, ultimately independent region. The First World War compelled some revision of the original intent, but the essence of the Committee's conclusions remained intact throughout the war and after. Conversely, Sir Mark Sykes repudiated the 'agreement' he had made with the French diplomat Picot, and substantial revisions were made to that temporary scheme. Yet it seems that 'conspiracy sells', and generations have colluded with the theme of perfidy to reinforce particular narratives, including, most recently, the Da'esh movement's claim to have 'ended Sykes-Picot'.

Keywords: Sykes-Picot; De Bunsen; desiderata; McMahon; Hussein; Balfour; Lawrence.

The Notorious Agreement

On a flight to Philadelphia, an ageing American of Palestinian origin insisted on a conversation. He regaled his neighbouring passenger with his reasons for supporting Donald Trump in his presidential campaign, citing his reason as the surprising claim that Trump would overturn Jewish interests prevailing in the capital. The gentleman then went on to extol the virtues of strong leadership, comparing Trump to the Egyptian nationalist leader, Gamal Abd'al Nasser, but, after an hour of hagiography, he condemned only one thing: Nasser's apparent unwillingness to tear up the Sykes-Picot agreement. Interrogated further, he claimed this instrument of humiliation proved that the West had set out to subordinate the Arabs and set them against each other. But he admitted he knew very little of the details, except that, the 'facts are widely known'. He seemed genuinely disappointed that Nasser had not 'gone further' and 'united all Arabs' and overturned Sykes-Picot.[1] Such views are not uncommon across the Middle East.

A century after the publication of the 'secret treaties' of the imperial powers by Russian communists, the Sykes-Picot agreement continues to resonate in the Middle East, as our aircraft passenger could testify. The claims made of Sykes-Picot, and the allegation of a blueprint to carve up the Middle East between British and French colonial powers, and thus render the Arab peoples subordinate, are widespread. They are repeated endlessly. Journalists, popular writers, and commentators articulate the idea that the British authorities were guilty of, at best, contradictory promises, and, at worse, imperialist designs.

The jihadist movement calling itself 'Islamic State' claimed to have finally ended Sykes-Picot in 2014, making a video of their destruction of border posts between Iraq and Syria. As others had done before them, they argued the West had deliberately divided Arabs to weaken them and subject the people to foreign, and Christian, domination. To reinforce their message, they filmed themselves detonating the buildings in which they had imprisoned the border guards, describing them as agents of 'shaitan'. Their murderous progress was designed to terrorise the region into submission and to reorder the territory as a single Caliphate under the austere atavist al-Baghdadi. The Da'esh militants were wrong in every respect.

[1] Very reluctant interview conducted by the author at 35,000 feet over the Atlantic, March 2017. Names Withheld.

The Sykes–Picot agreement was a temporary arrangement between two diplomats that sketched out vague 'zones of interest' if the Ottoman Empire collapsed suddenly, as everyone expected it to do, in 1915. It was a temporary wartime measure, designating areas of likely military occupation and control that would avoid disagreements between Britain and France over their areas of responsibility. It did not create any firm borders and it left most of the region in Arab hands. The chief concern at the time was that Germany, France or Russia might try to dominate the Middle East if the Ottoman Empire no longer existed, or if it remained intact as a weak, we would say today, 'failed' state. But the original Sykes–Picot agreement was superseded even before the war was over and it was never intended to be any more than a vague understanding of areas of temporary territorial responsibility, at least in Britain.

The Allies were not carving up some homogenous Arab polity, since the Arabs were already divided by their own rival factions. Attempts to unite them failed, not just in 1916–19, but also in the decades that followed. The primary concern for Britain was to maintain support for each of their existing Arab partners. There were good relations with the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Mubarak, who persuaded many clans to remain neutral and ignore Ottoman demands for manpower. Ibn Saud, then the Emir of Nejd, who also enjoyed close links with Britain, enlisted the Umm Tair and other groups to contain the pro-Ottoman leader Ibn Rashid of the Shammar.[2] Strikingly, the British and French did not abolish the Caliphate, which was abolished by Turkey in 1924. But was the need to explain the failure to achieve a united Arabia in 1919 that led to the Sykes-Picot agreement being attributed with greater importance than it possessed at the time. It ceased to look like a contingency agreement and was regarded as a secret attempt to turn Mesopotamia (Iraq), Syria and Palestine into colonies.

Sir Mark Sykes is now caricatured as a grasping imperialist, ignorant of the facts on the ground. His rival, T.E. Lawrence, labelled him 'a bundle of prejudices, intuitions, [and] half-sciences.'[3] In fact, most contemporaries regarded him as a bon viveur, a reasonable author of four books, and a well-travelled diplomat. He had accompanied his father to the Ottoman Empire as a child and went to serve in the British Embassy there. In 1911, he became an MP and his maiden speech was on the Turkish domains. While enamoured by the picturesque and historic, Sykes was clear about the squalor and degradation he saw in the Sultan's empire, all of which pointed to a system in terminal decline. Sykes also noted how substantial French influence had become, especially in engineering, finance and planning.[4] When the war broke out, Sykes was called not to command his local territorial battalion, as he had expected, but summoned to give his insights on the Middle East to the Cabinet.[5] To organise the British approach, it was Sykes who suggested a special office be established, which later became the Arab Bureau, and Sykes remained in favour of Arab autonomy under British supervision, with some regions fully independent.[6]

Before the war, the Hashemites of Mecca had secretly approached General Kitchener, then the Sirdar or Governor General of Egypt, to obtain support in principle, should it be necessary to fight the newly-installed Committee of Union and Progress movement in Constantinople. This Turkish organisation demanded urgent modernisation and militarisation of the Ottoman Empire in order to recover territories just lost in the two disastrous Balkan Wars, and it was prepared to use force against any imperial factions that opposed its ruthless policies of Turkification.[7] Concerned that the Turks meant to purge anyone who opposed them, Emir Hussein of the Hashemites, the Grand Sharif of Mecca, had sent his son, Abdullah, to negotiate with the British to see if they would be willing to come to their aid.[8] The precedent was that

[2] Confidential letter from Lt-Col W.G. Grey, Political Agent, Kuwait to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Bushire, no. C/8 of 1915, 9 June 1915 FO 371/2486 97255. The National Archives, Kew.
[3] T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935 edn.), Chapter VI, p. 58.
[4] Sykes attributed significant influence to French financiers, see 'Meeting held at 10 Downing Street [16 Dec 1914]: Evidence of Sir Mark Sykes on the Arab Question', CAB 24/1/G.46, The National Archives, Kew.
[5] 'Meeting held at 10 Downing Street [16 Dec 1914]: Evidence of Sir Mark Sykes on the Arab Question', CAB 24/1/G.46, The National Archives, Kew.
[6] Sir Mark Sykes to Gilbert Clayton, 28 December 1915, FO 882/2. The National Archives, Kew.
[7] Ryan Gingeras, *Fall of the Sultanate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 98 and 103; Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), pp. 18-24.
[8] 'Sherif of Mecca', 14 August 1915, FO 371/2486/34982. The National Archives, Kew.

the Emir of Kuwait, the sheikhs of the Trucial States, the Sultan of Muscat and the chiefs of southern Arabia (today's Yemen) had all looked to the British for backing in the past.[9]

Hussein was to be disappointed. After discussions and reference to instructions from London, there were to be no pre-war designs on the Middle East.[10] The British were concerned to preserve the Ottoman Empire and could not countenance support for active resistance against what was, in effect, a strategic partner. The Ottoman Empire acted as a buffer against French, German and Russian ambitions, and Britain had supported Constantinople for decades, even going to war on its behalf in 1854 to preserve it.

That view changed when Britain was confronted by the Ottoman declaration of war in November 1914, when the Committee of Union and Progress joined Austria-Hungary and Germany. The Ottomans regarded the German Kaiser's support as the best means to recover their lost territories in the Balkans and the Caucasus, although relations with Britain had been deteriorating for some weeks. Already stretched by the requirement to fight Germany in France and Flanders, the Ottoman decision was deeply unwelcome in London. The Ottomans would not only cut the supply route to Russia through the Bosporus Straits, they could threaten the Suez Canal, Britain's maritime link to the east. It raised the possibility of a landward threat to Persia and therefore to India. Crucially though, it meant a declaration by the Caliph calling for a Jihad against the British and French empires, which could mean internal resistance by millions of Muslims. The Ottoman decision effectively turned a European conflict into one that would engulf the entire Middle East.

Apart from peripheral naval operations, and the landing of an Indian Army brigade to secure the oil terminals south of Basra, the British government had to decide what its policy was going to be towards the Ottoman Empire, its own war aims, the 'desiderata', and the post-war dispensation. Britain had to decide what its interests were, and any peace terms, because it was anticipated that, given its track record in recent wars, the Ottomans were likely to be defeated and would seek an early peace settlement.

This article is divided into three sections. The first examines the de Bunsen Committee's findings, to ascertain what the British intended for the Middle East. The second analyses the Sykes-Picot agreement and the other negotiations that developed during the war, under the well-known pressures of conflicting French and Arab claims, the anxieties of the Government of India, and the urgency imposed by the proposed Arab Revolt. The third and final section evaluates the allegation of conspiracy and malignant design, contrasting the consistent lines of British policy.

The de Bunsen Committee and the 'Carve Up' Claim

According to one author: 'the government formed a committee to decide which bits of Ottoman territory it wanted' and 'they eventually agreed that the best way forward was to carve up the vanquished empire into provinces that Britain would seek to influence, rather than control directly.'[11] Such a view is typical and full of loaded language. The use of phrases 'to decide which bits of Ottoman territory it wanted' and 'carve up' suggests the committee was entirely focused on annexing land, which fits with the trope of some colonial conspiracy. Even the alleged intention to 'seek to influence, rather than control directly' reinforces the idea of some clandestine means of manipulation or the abrogation of full responsibility. It fits the readers' expectations, and feeds a popular idea, thus completing the positive feedback loop

[9] 'Committee of Imperial Defence: The War, The Future Settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and Arabia', 14 March 1915, CAB/24/1 G.16, p. 12, The National Archives, Kew. For Britain's relationships and treaties with the Arab leaders, see J.B Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); James Onley, 'The Politics of Protection in the Gulf: The Arab Rulers and the British Resident in the Nineteenth Century', *New Arabian Studies* 6 (2004), pp. 30-92; David Gilmour, *Curzon* (London: John Murray, 1994), pp. 203 and 269 and the Curzon papers, III/159/59/204, Mss Eur F 11, India Office Records, British Library, London.

[10] See FO 800/48, correspondence with Kitchener, The National Archives, Kew.

[11] James Barr, *A Line in the Sand* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), p. 17.

between writer and reader. As a literary device, it is very effective. As history, however, it is deliberately misleading.

The de Bunsen Committee did not decide to carve up the Ottoman Empire at all and its conclusion was to avoid long term British occupation. Its verdict was to find a mechanism that would give local autonomy to the population of the region and therefore find a solution to decades of Ottoman brutality and mismanagement. It examined commercial viability, how to satisfy all belligerent parties, and what would best ensure a lasting peace. Far from a colonial conspiracy, it foregrounds what was to come in President Woodrow Wilson's '14 Points', namely the idea of self-determination of peoples.

Many historians of the Middle East and the First World War make no mention of the de Bunsen Committee, and instead focus on the Sykes-Picot agreement, which will be dealt with shortly. One of the few historians to describe the work of the de Bunsen committee is Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. He notes that, as Assistant Undersecretary of State in the Foreign Office, Maurice de Bunsen was appointed chair of a cross-department government enquiry, the others being drawn from the Colonial Office, India Office, Admiralty, and War Office. The committee considered the issues over three months, the final report being released on 30 June 1915. Ulrichsen maintains that the committee's findings were 'initially cautious and broadly anti-annexationist' but, in light of later events, he states they 'inexorably gave way to more ambitious and sweepingly imperialist visions'.[12]

This verdict and the detail of the de Bunsen Committee need testing. Were the British, in the midst of the most serious and demanding war in their history, really filled with 'sweeping visions' or something more practical? A re-evaluation of the significance of this critical report is long overdue. An examination of the text of the committee's findings, far from extending from a cautious verdict in 1915 to imperial ambitions by the end of the war, reveals a remarkably consistent British policy throughout the war. Indeed, despite having to accommodate greater French ambitions and the interests of other nations and minorities in 1917-18, the plan outlined in the de Bunsen Committee was not only intact by 1918, it was delivered in the years that followed. This would not be the case with Sykes-Picot.

Critics have turned to other negotiations that took place, such as the Hussein-McMahon correspondence and the Balfour Declaration to argue that the British were either contradictory through departmental and individual rivalries, or deliberately misleading in order to further their own interests. But the de Bunsen Committee Report shows there were consistent lines in British policy and therefore the charges of conspiracy, contradiction or confusion tell us more about the agendas of the critics rather than the thinking of contemporaries.

British Desiderata: War Aims

The Sultan's declaration of war forced Britain to abandon its traditional policy of preserving the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, yet the underlying objective, to have buffer zones to shield its vital interests, such as the Suez Canal and the Gulf, was to be maintained. The purpose of British policy was not concerned primarily with borders and territory, however, but with the political future - how the region was to be governed, and by whom – for this was the key to its future security. Moreover, the record of Turkish governance was brutal, with episodic cycles of uprisings and repression, and that instability threatened to weaken its security. Some solution was required. Yet a further calculation was that of Britain's wartime partner, France. Paris was determined to protect French investments and its influence in the Ottoman dominion, and there was a strong sentimental attachment amongst Catholics to the Levant. More significant still was the French aspiration to create a base in the Eastern Mediterranean. It was suspicious of the British intentions, following its possession of Cyprus (1878), its unilateral occupation of Egypt (1881), its control over Suez (1882), and the confrontation over the Sudan at Fashoda (1898). The

[12] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst & Co., 2014), p. 152.

Foreign Office, under Sir Edward Grey, insisted that Britain's relationship with France must be prioritised.[13]

The de Bunsen Committee was a sub-group of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the pre-eminent organisation for defence matters until the outbreak of war. From that point, the War Committee (and later War Council) took over. The fate of 'Asiatic Turkey' was regarded as a special issue which required detailed evaluation although it had to be considered within the context of the war and British foreign policy. It had been prompted not only by the Ottoman declaration of war, but by the Russian government. The Tsarist authorities expected that, in the forthcoming British operations at the Dardanelles, the British and French would break through relatively quickly and the Russians were therefore eager to assert their claim to Constantinople before it fell under Anglo-French occupation. Britain agreed in principle but stipulated two conditions. The first was that, after years of Russian intrigues, the future of Persia under the Anglo-Russian Conventions should be revisited. The British government was annoyed at the constant interference with British interests in the country. The second was that the Russians would have to respect the British desire that 'Arabia and the Moslem holy places should remain under independent Moslem rule.'[14]

The Russians accepted the British conditions, including the inclusion of a previously designated 'neutral zone' between the Russian northern sphere of influence over northern Persia, and the British 'sphere' in the south, which meant that most of Persia would come under British protection. The Russians also accepted that a future Caliph would be separated from Turkey, and that there should be no single country in charge of the holy places of Jerusalem. There was consideration of the demands of the other Allied powers, but paragraph 12 laid out the nine British war aims.[15]

The desiderata first dealt with security concerns: (1) consolidation of control of the Gulf to provide security; (2) the security of trade within the Ottoman Empire against punitive discrimination; (3) maintaining the security of Gulf leaders and other partners in the region, namely the Emir of Kuwait, the Emir of Nejd (bin Saud); the population of Basra, Said Idris, Imam Yahya, Sheikh Mavia (Yemen), the Sherif of Mecca and the Arabs; and (4) the security of investments and developments including irrigation, river navigation and the oil industry.

The second set of desiderata was concerned with other interests: (5) the development of wheat production in Mesopotamia which could be exported to India; (6) the continued security of British communications in the Eastern Mediterranean; (7) Muslim rule of the Islamic holy places, in part to satisfy Indian Muslim opinion; (8) a solution to the Armenia question, ending persecution there by Turks, and (9) a settlement over Christian holy places in Jerusalem.

The Committee considered four options, labelled A to D and analysed each one against these war aims, then wider British interests and those of their allies and partners. The four options, in essence, were A: partition of the Ottoman Empire; B: the Ottoman Empire to remain intact but under European control or 'zones of interest'; C: an Ottoman Empire left intact, in the *status quo ante bellum*; and D: decentralisation on federal lines. It was the final option, D, which was favoured, and which would mean, in effect, a series of autonomous regions nominally still part of the Ottoman dominion, but progressing towards full independence organically. The bulk of the Committee's report considered each of the four options in turn, examining their strengths and weaknesses.

The Rejection of Partition and Annexation

The first option was partition, which was divided into political, strategic and commercial considerations. The reason why partition was being considered was not to further any British colonial expansion, which

[13] See, for example, Sir Edward Grey to Sir Henry McMahon, 8 March 1915, FO 800/48, The National Archives, Kew.
[14] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 2. The National Archives, Kew.
[15] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 3. The National Archives, Kew.

would only increase responsibilities and costs. Commercial benefits, modest though they were, could be achieved without such direct control too. The main issue was the assurances required for their local Arab partners. The population of Basra had been promised a more benign governance that than of the Ottomans, so the Committee were reluctant to abandon the city after the war and allow the Ottoman authorities back in to wreak their revenge. Similar assurances had been given to the Arab leaders of the Gulf and southern Arabia.

Interestingly, the dilemma the Committee faced was based on a theory of imperial expansion which had been common throughout the nineteenth century. This posited that European administration will always expand when it finds itself adjacent to weak governance, and will only be arrested when it meets another European form of government. The solution was therefore to find some form of governance that was robust enough to prevent the Arabs being overrun by the Turks, or by some other European state.

From the strategic perspective, any partition would mean establishing a garrison, but the scale of that force would mean increasing costs. The solution would be to establish a relatively small formation, that could be reinforced if an enemy commenced an offensive. Yet there was concern that there appeared to be few 'natural' frontiers where an adversary could be held by a small garrison until larger numbers of these reinforcements could be brought in. Indian troops would take too long to arrive. Basra was relatively easy to attack if the Mesopotamian plain was in the hands of a foreign power, and Russia or Turkey might make such an attack in the future. The solution, if the partition option was adopted, would be to secure all of Mesopotamia, and establish a border in the mountains to the north of Mosul. The reasoning was also that the hill stations, being cooler, would be better for British troops, and any force could be augmented by Arab and Kurdish recruits. To ensure rapid reinforcement, it was thought that a railway was needed from the Eastern Mediterranean coast.

The route of that railway was much debated.[16] The best port was Alexandretta, but French and Turkish objections would be strong.[17] A rail link, while running in an arc across to Mosul, would be vulnerable to interdiction at any point from the north. The French, who regarded Syria as part of their national interests and were suspicious of British ambitions, had been clear, when the British proposed landings at Alexandretta in early 1915, that they would only accept a British presence if there was a French force equal or greater in size.[18] Given that French troops were needed in France to halt the German offensives, they scotched the plan. As a result, the British turned their attention to the Dardanelles. The de Bunsen Committee convened at the same time as the fighting developed on the Gallipoli peninsula.

In Cairo, officials believed that a railway might link the Egyptian economy with that of the Levant and Mesopotamia, while providing a valuable strategic reinforcement network. Although one author has described the scheme as 'madcap' since it would mean crossing the shifting sands of the desert, the British were in fact aware of the engineering problems of such a proposal, and opted for a route that extended from Haifa, via Damascus, to Mosul and then down to Basra.[19] The other commercial aspects

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[16] See FO 882/2 and 'Committee of Imperial Defence: The War, The Future Settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and Arabia', 14 March 1915, CAB/24/1 G.16, p. 3, The National Archives, Kew.

[17] 'Committee of Imperial Defence: The War, Alexandretta and Mesopotamia', 17 March 1915, CAB/24/1 G.13, p. 3, para. 12, The National Archives, Kew. Barr incorrectly attributes the idea of taking Alexandretta to T.E. Lawrence, but it was first posited by the Royal Navy in the previous century. In 1907 and again in November 1914, the Committee of Imperial Defence had considered an amphibious operation in the Levant, with options for landings at Haifa or Alexandretta, where communications between Turkey and the Arab south could be severed. Sir Charles Callwell, the Director of Military Operations, and Lord Kitchener had both given serious thought to the plan, but the lack of available manpower meant it was shelved in January 1915 in favour of the Dardanelles, a plan the French found more agreeable. Hew Strachan, *The First World War, I: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 738.

[18] Kitchener reminded the British Cabinet how strongly France felt about this issue, which risked fracturing the relationship with Paris. 'Meeting held at 10 Downing Street, 16 December 1915: Evidence of Sir Mark Sykes on the Arab Question', CAB 24/1 G.46 (CAB 42/6/10), p. 6, The National Archives, Kew.

[19] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 6. The National Archives, Kew; Barr, *Line in the Sand*, p.18. The British government actually regarded the completion of the existing rail network as

of the partition option were concerned with economic viability. Baghdad was the hub of the Mesopotamian economy and with development, especially irrigation and engineering, the Committee believed that wheat production could be increased significantly. With river navigation already in the hands of British companies (established in the mid-nineteenth century), ports and the Shatt al Arab under British naval protection, there was optimism about the potential of the region. Nevertheless, there was some concern from the Government of India that a trans-Arabian railway and the economic development of Mesopotamia would draw trade away from India, putting further pressure on the economy. The Committee nevertheless concluded that cereal exports were more likely to be sent to the west, with Mesopotamia importing agricultural machinery and manufactured goods. Profits from the pilgrims passing on their way to Mecca were also thought to be beneficial to local economies, and it would be easy to meet the demands for subsidies, established by the Ottomans, required to keep the Bedouin from raiding.[20]

The partition option raised a number of concerns, however, which meant it was not adopted as a recommendation of the Committee. The French would want not only Syria, but also Palestine, which would jeopardise the opening of a strategic and commercial railway to the east. While the French could be prevented from annexing Palestine, given the conflicting claims to the holy places there, they could only be compensated by the offer of territory east and north of Syria. The sole advantage this offered Britain was the creation of a security zone against Russian intrigues from the Caucasus, although it was anticipated that the Russians would exercise this sort of pressure through Persia anyway. Indeed, if the Ottoman Empire was partitioned and Britain was left in possession of Mesopotamia, it would mean a coterminous land frontier with Russian-occupied Persia, thus making 'a serious breach in our cherished policy of isolation.'[21] British policy hitherto had always sought to place seas or neutral zones between its territorial possessions and other European powers, as in the case of Afghanistan. The India Office believed these neutral zones now to be 'futile' for security.[22] The lesson of the Russo-Japanese War had been that Russia could, using railways, place over 750,000 men into the field and could intrigue against Britain within any neutral area and render it under their *de facto* control. Only by holding mountain passes, with reinforcement options, or interposing French territory between British-held Mesopotamia and the expanded Russian Empire, could a defence scheme be considered viable.

There were other factors which dissuaded the British from the partition option for the Ottoman Empire. The likely impact on Muslim opinion, especially in India, was significant for the British authorities, and it would seem incongruous to claim to support Muslim Arabs and yet seem to abolish the Muslim polity of the Ottoman Empire at the same time.[23] The increased liabilities, costs of defence, increased German influence over the Turks, and the inevitable development of French naval bases made this option unattractive. The Committee concluded, clearly, that an annexation, or colonial 'carve up', was not the policy to be pursued.

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entirely feasible and a trans-Arabian line as part of the 'remoter future': 'Committee of Imperial Defence: The War, The Future Settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and Arabia', 14 March 1915, CAB/24/1 G.16, p. 3, The National Archives, Kew. It is interesting to note that the current rail network across the Middle East not only fulfilled the British aspiration but exceeded it. The Gulf Cooperation Council announced in 2012 their intention to build a line that connects Jordan and Saudi Arabia with the GCC coastal route. See Gulf Times at IFPInfo http://www.ifpinfo.com/Construction-NewsArticle-1431#.WXBzVIWcFqA The Saudi Arabian Rail company opened the line in 2015 for both freight and passenger services, fulfilling the British plan exactly one hundred years later.

[20] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 8. The National Archives, Kew.

[21] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, pp. 10-11. The National Archives, Kew.

[22] 'Committee of Imperial Defence: The War, The Future Settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and Arabia', 14 March 1915, CAB/24/1 G.16, p. 12, The National Archives, Kew.

[23] Sykes believed it was important 'not to mix ourselves up with religious squabbles which have to do with the Khalifate', 'Meeting held at 10 Downing Street, 16 December 1915: Evidence of Sir Mark Sykes on the Arab Question', CAB 24/1 G.46 (CAB 42/6/10), p. 3, The National Archives, Kew.

The Rejection of 'Zones of Interest'

Despite the prevalence of the literature on the Sykes-Picot agreement, which envisaged zones under British and French control and more extensive areas of influence, this option had been specifically rejected by the de Bunsen Committee.

The essence of the approach, as an option, was protecting British commercial interests and their Arab partners, with minimum liability. There was considerable disquiet about the abuses of Turkish officials when British enterprises tried to operate in the Ottoman Empire, and there was every expectation that this challenge would return after the war. It was thought that there could be controls, by a condominium of foreign powers, over the Ottomans with regard to financial management, the treatment of European nationals, schools, missions, arms trafficking and free access to ports. If Russia was, however, to possess Constantinople, as it had stated in its war aims in March 1915, then the Turks would be compelled to establish a new capital city. One suggestion, Damascus, was thought unsuitable as it would lead to strong Arab objections.

The second aspect of the Zones of Interest option was the extent of foreign territorial control. Russia would seek a sphere of influence over Armenia and the Caucasus region; France could be expected to include Syria, the Levantine coast, and possibly southern Anatolia. The Greeks and Italians, who were considered Allies from 1915, would also seek a hinterland of influence in the Dardanelles and beyond Smyrna (Izmir). The Committee was confident that, through diplomacy, a negotiated settlement to these interests could be reached.[24] Moreover, an international board could be established to confront 'Turkish maladministration.'[25] There was the possibility too of developing commerce and investment by encouraging the Eastern Bank of India to consider Basra and Mesopotamia, thereby curbing the dominant position of the Imperial Ottoman Bank which was under French influence.

There were, however, significant concerns. There was the possibility that Britain's rivals, including Germany, would use the existence of ill-defined Zones of Interest to further their own ambitions. They would 'leave the field open to German intrigue and enterprise, which would thwart in every way the full development of the various zones of interest.'[26] This was no idle concern. At that very moment, German and Turkish agents were stirring unrest in Persia and Afghanistan, seeking to profit from the destabilisation and convince Muslims to enlist against the British.[27]

The advantages of the Zones of Interest option were that this could be put in place immediately after the war, without changes to the governance of the region or any adjustments in Britain's pre-war policy. It offered the opportunity for economic development, without significant military costs or damage to Muslim opinion. The problem was that it lacked clarity, which could lead to further conflict. There was nothing to stop any of the Allied powers subsequently changing the status of their respective sphere into an annexed territory, which would spark an international crisis. The entire arrangement might work in peacetime, but any hostilities would make this temporary arrangement unviable, and it did nothing to tackle the ineffectiveness of Turkish government in the region.[28]

Option B, the Zones of Interest model, was therefore dropped by the de Bunsen Committee. This is important because of the subsequent Sykes-Picot agreement. The Sykes-Picot plan appeared to be an amalgam of options A and B that had been considered by the Committee. To unpick this development,

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[24] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, pp. 14-15. The National Archives, Kew.

[25] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 16. The National Archives, Kew.

[26] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 15. The National Archives, Kew.

[27] Donald M. McKale, *War by Revolution: Germany and Great Britain in the Middle East in the Era of World War I* (Kent, OH.: Kent State University Press, 1998). The threat had been the subject of John Buchan's novel Greenmantle, written in 1915 and published the following year.

[28] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 18. The National Archives, Kew.

we need to consider the final two options that came under review in 1915, and then the circumstances that led to the Sykes-Picot agreement.

Continuity of the Ottoman Empire or Decentralisation and Autonomy?

The third option considered by the de Bunsen Committee was to leave the Ottoman Empire intact, although it would be deprived of Constantinople by Russia, and the Greeks would demand the hinterland of Smyrna, and Britain would administer Basra. The option would also mean that the autonomy Britain had envisaged for its Arab allies pre-war would be honoured by the Turks, as would the commercial agreements it had arranged before 1914 with France and Britain. The advantages of this scheme were that it would ensure an immediate settlement after the war, it would fulfil Britain's nine war aims (which it had set out in paragraph 12 of the Committee Report), and it would satisfy Russia, France and the other wartime allies.

The reason why this option could not be adopted, however, was that it was the least likely to produce guarantees of a lasting peace. The forced movement of the Ottoman capital would antagonise the Turks; Russia would be effectively in control of the Ottomans militarily and the French financially; and the Turks, with German support, would almost certainly seek revenge against Britain, and look to divide the wartime allies by exploiting their differences over the future of the Ottoman Empire. Interference with the Arab leaders was very likely, and the aggressive posture of the Caliph promised endless trouble amongst the Muslim subjects of the British Empire, and this agitation could be expected at Basra too. Moreover, the episodic political crises of the Ottoman regime, with their massacres of subject peoples, would not be tackled, necessitating further interventions. In short, maintaining the status quo did not resolve any of the political and strategic questions in the long term.

This leads us to the fourth option, the decentralised and federated Middle East. The basis of the discussion was that the Ottoman Empire consisted of five significant regions which might form the nuclei of autonomous regions with greater integrity than the sprawling domains that Constantinople struggled to govern. Given that Russia was likely to seize the old capital, there would have to be revision of the Ottoman political structure. There was already a precedent for the establishment of much more successful local governments, especially in the Balkans after 1878.

The moral case for federated and autonomous regions seemed clear. The centralised government of the Ottoman Empire had dragged its subjects, especially the Arabs, unwillingly into Germany's war. The mismanaged Turkish government had also resorted to great brutality to enforce its writ across the region, and the massacres of Armenians, Assyrians and Syrian nationalists had reinforced the point. Here instead was a plan that gave greater independence to local populations and reduced the power of the centralised state.

The decentralisation model also appeared to satisfy British national interests. The autonomous regions would not require a large British garrison, and yet it guaranteed trade and investment opportunities. The Committee did not seem to notice this apparent advantage as one of the reasons they had cited for not wanting partition and immediate independence, but the argument deployed in the report of 30 June 1915 was that autonomy gave local actors the opportunity to choose their own next step, and that might include Basra opting for an end to British occupation. This was, according to the Committee, perfectly tolerable if British commercial interests, and the security of partners in Kuwait, Muhammerah and Riyadh were guaranteed. Local needs would be met by the decentralisation model, and that was the priority. It was envisaged that, amongst the autonomous states, an 'Arab Federation' could be realised. In short, the people of the Ottoman Empire were going to have the 'opportunity to help themselves' against tyranny.[29] As the India Office noted:

> They are animated by intense patriotism for [their] country, a profound veneration for [their] religion, and a single-minded desire to do [their] best for [their] people' – what they want is

[29] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 23. The National Archives, Kew.

> "Arabia for the Arabs"; and all they want from us is a guarantee against attack by sea and our good offices in securing their independence in the settlement at the end of the war. This, it is submitted, we are in a position to give them… The "protectorate" over Arabia therefore amounts to nothing more than Arabia for the Arabs under the aegis of Great Britain.[30]

The concerns about the plan of decentralisation were that the security of Arab partners might not be honoured by the Turks, but there was faith in the idea that, even if one or more of the autonomous regions failed, they would still have the support of corresponding interests from either Britain or France. In other words, these European powers would assist the struggling autonomous states. In Palestine, there would be international assistance to settle the question of jurisdiction over the holy places.[31] This was a prescient deduction, foregrounding the work of the League of Nations in the 1920s. For Armenia too, there was to be some guarantee of further investigation, since 'a large section of the public will expect' the matter to be included in a peace settlement, and perhaps inspectors-general to supervise this region, although this was a question for the subsequent negotiations.[32]

The Committee hinted that the greater the commitment of local elements in the war, the greater reward and compensation they could expect. Firm support would be a 'guarantee of independence' although 'it remains to be seen in some cases whether the Chiefs will fulfil their part of the bargain.' This referred to the Hashemites and to the clans of Ibn Saud in 1915, although there were more encouraging signs in southern Mesopotamia, where local groups had shown reluctance to support the Ottomans and in some cases attacked withdrawing Turkish forces. The British were clearly sanguine about what support they could expect. The report noted that, since there was no single king or government amongst the Arabs, it was possible for the Ottomans to manipulate them. Arab leaders, it was felt, would lend their support to the Ottomans if they could make use of the Sultan's forces against their own local enemies. The British did not expect unity of effort, but they wanted co-operation to ensure peace in the Gulf and a cessation of arms trafficking which destabilised the entire region.

The British made it very clear that there was to be no British Protectorate over Arabia and instead there should be independent Muslim rule, especially over the holiest sites of Islam. The aspiration was for Britain to withdraw all its own troops, obtain guarantees of non-intervention by the Turks, and then ensure that local forces took responsibility for their own security.[33] At first sight, this stands in complete distinction from Sykes-Picot, which appeared to suggest areas of British and French jurisdiction. Yet Sykes could not have defied the conclusions of the de Bunsen Committee of which he was a part. His objective in the talks with Picot was to secure a temporary agreement on areas of responsibility, but he in no way intended any permanence.

The Committee concluded that, after decades of Ottoman withdrawal and decay, the decentralisation, federation and eventual independence of the regions of the old empire were inevitable. The Committee's Option D met Britain's interests, strategic and commercial, but, crucially, also those of its local partners and the peoples of the region. It noted that the report was prepared on the assumption of an Allied victory, but, in the event of a settlement imposed by Germany, the British would insist that, at the very least, all of Arabia, 'south of the line from Haifa to Rowanduz' would be left outside of the Ottoman Empire, like the agreement with Russia over southern Persia in 1907. In other words, British war aims in 1915, regardless of victory or defeat, were to achieve the liberation of the Arabs.

Construction of the Conspiracy: The Sykes-Picot Agreement and Divided Opinions

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[30] 'Committee of Imperial Defence: The War, The Future Settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and Arabia', 14 March 1915, CAB/24/1 G.16, p. 12, The National Archives, Kew. Parentheses are in the original.
[31] Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas,* p. 95.
[32] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 26. The National Archives, Kew.
[33] Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12, p. 25, especially paragraph 94. The National Archives, Kew.

Sykes had personally informed the French of the essence of the de Bunsen report, including the idea of a liberated Arabia and the rail line from the Mediterranean to the Gulf. The ideas had caused some concern amongst the French colonial lobby because they were not sure how far the British intended to go, and memories of Fashoda, where French claims to southern Sudan had been denied by the presence of a large British army, were still raw and recent. The Quai d'Orsay reported, erroneously, that the English had 'designs' on Syria.[34] The information was passed on immediately to the Comité de l'Asie Française, the colonial lobby group who feared that the British would acquire an advantage in the Middle East while France was engaged in the war in Europe. The French government, which had been indifferent to the idea of claims to Syria, found itself compelled to compete with Britain. The envoy to negotiate with London was Francois Georges-Picot, a member of the Comité de l'Asie Française and former consul of Beirut. Picot had been gun-running in the months before the war, trying to get the Greeks to supply arms and ammunition to the Lebanese. He had been active in trying to keep abreast of Syrian national sentiment before 1914 too, but after his precipitous departure on the outbreak of war, the Ottomans acquired all his records and systematically arrested, deported or killed the nationalist elite.[35] In the event, this was to serve French interests in Syria very well.

Between July 1915 and March 1916, concurrently with the discussions in London, Sharif Hussein of Mecca had reopened negotiations with the British, represented in Cairo now by the High Commissioner, Sir Henry McMahon.[36] The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, just nine letters, has gained a notoriety not unlike Sykes-Picot because they have been used to claim perfidy or conspiracy, usually without any acknowledgement of their context and the war's fortunes at that point. In July 1915, there was still some confidence that the Gallipoli campaign, which had begun just two months before, could end with a breakthrough and the capture of Constantinople, and that meant some early indication of Arab aspirations, and how they could be engaged on Britain's side. The correspondence was secret to protect the Hashemites. Had the Ottomans discovered the overtures, Hussein and his sons would have been executed. Once the French became aware of the negotiations, through their Consulate in Egypt, the British Foreign Office asked Paris to permit them a single and therefore secure negotiation route.[37] The claim made by Hussein, via Abdullah, his second son, to leadership of the entirety of Arabia, Syria, Mesopotamia and the Gulf, was not entertained seriously at all, for there were plenty of rival claims to the leadership of the Arab world, and, while British troops were dying on Gallipoli, the Arabs had not yet joined the war on the Allied side.[38] Not everyone was convinced that 'a transfer of the Caliphate from the Ottoman dynasty to that of the Sherifian family would prove the most satisfactory solution, [as it] would result in general turmoil in Arabia'.[39] If a settlement was to be made, it was clearly going to be between the belligerent powers, and not by Hussein.

Sir Edward Grey, as Foreign Secretary, believed the French must be regarded as the priority in reaching an agreement over the future Middle East. When Hussein presented his territorial claims to all of Arabia, including Syria and the entirety of Mesopotamia, without having even committed to the war, McMahon agreed with Grey that his claims were preposterous. The India Office believed the claims were 'obviously unacceptable as they stand and probably incompatible with the rights and interests of other Arab Chiefs

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[34] de St Quentin to Millerand, 'Visées anglaises sur la Syrie', 28 July 1915 in Vincent Cloarec, *La France et la question de Syrie, 1914-1918* (Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2002), p. 126; Barr, *Line in the Sand*, p. 18.

[35] Rogan, *Fall of the Ottomans*, pp. 287-8; 292-95; Gingeras, *Fall of the Sultanate*, pp. 187, 209-211.

[36] The talks were facilitated by Sir Ronald Storrs, who imagined Hussein more as a new papal-like Caliph with spiritual rather than temporal powers. Letter to φίλτατος [Beloved], 22 February 1915, Storrs Papers, Pembroke College, Cambridge.

[37] Barr, *Line in the Sand*, p. 22.

[38] Evidence of British doubts, from the outset, can be found in, for example, the Foreign Office in 6 July 1915 which stipulated there would be no recognition to a claim of 'all Arabia' and that British support was dependent on Arabs not taking up arms on the Ottoman side, FO 371/2486/34982. Hussein's claims are outlined in the secret despatch from Sir Henry McMahon, 22 August 1915, FO 371/2486/117236, 34982. The National Archives, Kew.

[39] Sir Mark Sykes to General C.E. Callwell, DMO, citing Colonel Jacob, 23 July 1915, FO 371/2486/114293. The National Archives, Kew.

with whom His Majesty's Government have engagements.'[40] Ronald Storrs, the Oriental Secretary in Cairo, concluded: 'it may be regarded as certain that he [Hussein] has received no sort of mandate from other [Arab] potentates.'[41] It was interesting to note that the Iraqi population of Mesopotamia provided 10,000 men for enemy service, which was a natural response given the Ottoman jurisdiction over them and the fact that they did not come 'under the influence of [British] Persian Gulf officials'.[42] Sir Reginald Wingate, the Governor of Sudan, was one of the few who advocated strongly that Hussein must be given sufficient support that would enable him to challenge, with credibility, the authority and prestige of the Sultan.[43]

Nevertheless, by the autumn of that year, progress seemed far away because the Gallipoli campaign was at a stalemate.[44] If the British were to withdraw from the Dardanelles, then a larger number of mobilised Ottoman divisions would be released to march on Suez, into the Hejaz, or down through Mesopotamia (as they subsequently did). If the Arabs were going to commit to the war, then McMahon felt this was the time, but there was still a strong possibility that the Hashemites might actually side with the Ottomans and so some assurances had to be given. Mindful of the instructions of the Foreign Office to acknowledge and even prioritise the French aspirations for Syria, McMahon wrote on 24 October 1915 that British favoured Arab autonomy but there would be exclusions, including Basra and 'portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo … [which] should be excluded from the limits demanded.' The vilayets of Beirut, west of Damascus, included northern Palestine. Despite attempts to claim this meant Palestine would go to the Arabs, which McMahon did not even mention, it was clear he was referring to the Levantine coast around Beirut and up the coast towards Alexandretta. Jerusalem was, according to the de Bunsen Committee report, a separate case and all along it was to be excluded until the conflict was over. Separate negotiations, along the lines of an international conference, would be needed then. There was a possibility the French would make a claim to Jerusalem, but McMahon excluded reference to it so as to prevent any claim being advanced by either side, French or Arab. The British were consistent in this approach and certainly not conspiratorial.[45]

Time was a factor in the talks. Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, had explained: 'the matter … is urgent and there is not time to discuss an exact formula.'[46] This was because there seemed a strong chance that not only the Arabs of the Hejaz, but Arabs troops with the Ottoman Army were waiting to see what the British would do in support of pan-Arabism.[47] McMahon later recalled that he had been 'necessarily vague' because the British government did not want to be committed to a definite course of action by which the Arabs might have been 'frightened off'.[48] There was growing concern that, with each passing day, the Arabs might abandon the attempt to side with Britain and simply align with the

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[40] A. Hirtzel to the Foreign Office, 'Pressing', 24 August 1915, FO 371/2486/118580, 34982. The National Archives, Kew.
[41] 'Communication from the Sherif of Mecca', 20 August 1915, and 4 September 1915, FO 371/2486/125293. The National Archives, Kew.
[42] Letter from Lieutenant Colonel W.G Grey, Indian Army, Political Agent to the Resident of Kuwait, dated 9 June 1915, FO 371/2486/97255 of 19 July 1915. The National Archives, Kew.
[43] Sir R. Wingate, 'Note', dated 25 August 1915, in 7 September 1915, FO 371/2486/125293. The National Archives, Kew.
[44] David Charlwood, 'The Impact of the Dardanelles Campaign on British Policy Towards the Arabs: How Gallipoli Shaped the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* 42, 2, (2015): 241-252.
[45] For a contrary view, see Dr Peter Shambrook who argues that the British concealed and later denied they had indicated Palestine should be excluded from Arab hands and that McMahon had 'lapsed into clarity' in his letter to Hussein on 24 October 1915. His thesis is not consistent with the findings of the de Bunsen Committee and certainly does not mean that British governments 'are quite prepared to be economical with the truth'. 'A Lapse into Clarity: The McMahon–Hussein Correspondence Revisited', The Balfour Project, 9 November 2015, at www.balfourproject.org/the-McMahon-Hussein-correspondence-revisited/ (Accessed June 2016).
[46] Grey to McMahon, 20 October 1915, FO 371/2486/155203; see also McMahon's suggestion to increase the offer to Hussein lest the Hashemites remain on the Ottoman side, McMahon to Grey, 18 October 1915, FO 371/2486/153045, The National Archives, Kew.
[47] 'Sherif of Mecca', Sir Henry McMahon, 19 October 1915, FO 371/2486/152901. The National Archives, Kew.
[48] Elie Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 119; Barr, *Line in the Sand*, p. 27.

Ottomans.[49] James Barr believes the meaning of McMahon's vagueness 'proves he was deliberately trying to mislead the sharif', a view shared by others.[50] Yet this interpretation is often selected because of the desire to find the 'smoking gun' of the fate of Syria and Palestine, and to complete the narrative of British deception. It is a view that ignores the reality of the situation in London or in Cairo. Simply put, the British could not give assurances to Hussein, a potential adversary who was still in communication with the Ottoman authorities, when talks were still underway with France, their ally, about exactly the same region.[51] Grey met Cambon, the French Ambassador, on 21 October and suggested that the French should appoint a representative to discuss the future of the Middle East. Until the talks with the French were complete, no definitive territorial assurances were possible. Kitchener noted that this consultation with both the French and the Arabs, in turn, was necessary to reconcile claims as early as possible or 'we shall be heading straight for serious trouble'.[52] It was for this reason that McMahon wrote, with reference to Hussein's claims and British exclusions three days' later, 'we accept these limits of boundaries; and in regard to those portions of the territories therein in which Great Britain is free to act without detriment to the interests of her ally France.'[53] This was not a conspiracy, but a clear statement of the limits to the assurances that Britain could give at this stage of the negotiations.

Picot's initial meeting with Sir Arthur Nicholson and the Foreign Office in London did not go well.[54] Picot was confident that the British would not entertain any demands for a united Arabia which had been advanced by Hussein, but he believed the British were not yet in agreement over French claims to Syria and Palestine. He stated that 'Syria was very near the heart of the French and that, after the expenditure of so many lives, France could never consent to offer independence to the Arabs, though at the start of the war she might have done so'.[55] Picot argued that the British were trying to use France's sacrifice in the war with Germany to further their own interests in the globe, but, evidently shocked by 'sentimental trash' and 'feeble' claims, the British sought to reassure the prickly French diplomat and his Ambassador.[56] Lord Crewe, without contradiction, informed Cambon that there was 'no intention of arranging a new Arab state, if one could be formed, that would include the Lebanon or any part of the world to which the French could lay distinct claim.'[57] Gilbert Clayton, as head of military intelligence in Cairo, was appalled that the French were making claims to territory that lay in enemy hands.[58] General Callwell noted that failure to assist the Arabs might mean a united Muslim front, uprisings in British territories and therefore withdrawal of some troops from France.[59] Callwell recommended a unilateral

[49] Grey to McMahon, telegram, 18 October 1915, FO 371/2486/153045. See also the Minute by McMahon, 18 October 1915, FO 371/2486/152901, The National Archives, Kew.
[50] Barr, *Line in the Sand*, p. 26. Barr insists the deception was in punctuation. The misunderstanding was actually the result of mistranslation.
[51] Allegations of Hussein's collusion with the Ottomans over logistics appeared in reports sent from Cairo to the Foreign Office on the day that Picot met to discuss the future of the region, 23 November 1915, FO 371/2486/176502, The National Archives, Kew.
[52] 'Sherif of Mecca', Note by Lord Kitchener, 19 October 1915, FO 371/2486/152901. See also Grey to McMahon, 20 October 1915, FO 371/2486/155203, and 'Syria': notes on Sykes to the Foreign Office, 29 November 1915, FO 371/2486/180234, The National Archives, Kew.
[53] McMahon to Grey, 26 Oct 1915, FO 371/2486/163832. The National Archives, Kew.
[54] 'Results of the 2nd Meeting of the Committee to Discuss the Arab Question', 23 November 1915, FO 800/48, also listed as AP/15/9, The National Archives, Kew.
[55] 'Results of the 2nd Meeting of the Committee to Discuss the Arab Question', 23 November 1915, FO 800/48. The National Archives, Kew.
[56] See Nicholson to Crewe, 30 October 1915, FO 371/2486/158561; McMahon to the Foreign Office, 28 October 1915, FO 371/2486/161325, The National Archives, Kew.
[57] Crewe to Bertie, 17 December 1915, Add Mss 63040, British Library, cited in Barr, *Line in the Sand*, p. 29.
[58] Clayton's annotations to 'Results of the 2nd Meeting of the Committee to Discuss the Arab Question', 23 November 1915, FO 800/48. See also Clayton to Parker, 10 Dec 1915, enclosure C, dated 8 December 1915, The National Archives, Kew.
[59] War Office letter and Minute by General C.E. Callwell, DMO, 29 November 1915, FO 800/48. The National Archives, Kew.

policy towards the future of Syria and the Middle East, excluding France. The Foreign Office could not agree to that.[60]

The French government was less enthusiastic about a greater Syria and the 'worthless' environs of Jerusalem than the colonial lobbyists, and so on the 21 December 1915, Picot was instructed to compromise.[61] The British were prepared to offer the region north and east of Mosul, forming the security zone envisaged in the de Bunsen Committee, but in return they felt that part of Lebanon should form a district within a larger Arab state. This would satisfy another idea of the de Bunsen Committee, namely access to an entrepot that would serve a rail link across the region, while also keeping with Arab aspirations for autonomous regions. Picot would not accept Nicholson's idea of French influence being limited to a coastal strip.[62]

Sykes was unconvinced by the existence of a developed Arab nationalism in the region, which he believed was limited to some Syrian intellectuals, and agreed with Picot and Nicholson that a single Arab state was unlikely because the Arabs were 'scattered tribes with no cohesion'.[63] Sykes thus intended to fulfil the objectives described in the de Bunsen Committee to put Haifa and Palestine 'in our sphere of enterprise'.[64] Sir Reginald Wingate nevertheless believed that amongst Arab intellectuals there was an emerging sense of collective consciousness, and, for all classes, an attachment to a 'Khalifate'.[65] The military verdict, in late 1915, was that while London regarded the Arab movement as 'unreal, shadowy, and vague', the reality was that there was a widespread awareness that embraced 'every district and tribe'.[66] The optimistic report hinted that the 'Turks had been unable to place Arab troops in the firing line, and on several occasions mutinies have been reported among these troops.' Yet, the failure of the Ottoman authorities and their German backers to raise a Jihad, seemed to suggest that the 'racial desire of the Arabs to separate themselves from the Turks is considerably stronger than the purely religious movement.'[67] There was more than a little wishful thinking in the assessment.

In late November 1915, Sir Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot continued the discussions on the future of the Ottoman Empire. It has been suggested that a scheme for the international control of Palestine, rather than British jurisdiction was a compromise that satisfied neither side, but this is not the case. The de Bunsen Committee had concluded several months before that this was to be the outcome. Moreover, Britain had acknowledged French aspirations for Syria as early as March 1915.[68]

Various schemes were discussed: Sykes looked to have a buffer zone for Egypt, the Gulf, and southern Arabia, just as had been outlined in the de Bunsen Committee. He discussed the possibility of some supervisory role for Armenia, another idea that emerged from the Committee, through the sultan of Egypt and the Sharif of Mecca. The French argued they must have a Greater Syria.[69] The central problem was that Britain was negotiating in order to get French agreement on future Arab independence, so they

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[60] The consensus was that if the Arabs' territorial interests were not met they would not only join the Ottoman war effort, but Christian Arabs would be massacred. Nicholson concluded the French had to be made aware of the dangers of their claims and suggested that the Alexandretta plan be reconsidered. 28 November 1915, FO 371/2486/180734, The National Archives, Kew.

[61] Minutes of the 2nd Meeting of the Committee to discuss the Arab Question, 23 November 1915, FO 882/2.

[62] Sir Arthur Nicholson to Lord Hardinge, 16 December 1915, FO 800/380, The National Archives, Kew. Sykes, in December 1917, believed that French religious interests dominated their claims to Jerusalem and 'la Syrie intégrale'. See Christopher Andrew and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas: The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 89.

[63] Sykes to C.E. Callwell, 21 November 1915, 135/6, Wingate Papers, Sudan Archive, Durham.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Sir Reginald Wingate to Grey, 27 February 1915, FO 800/48/folio 306.

[66] 'The Arab Question', secret, [notes prepared to support the negotiations], 23 November 1915, FO 371/2486/177016, folio 402, The National Archives, Kew.

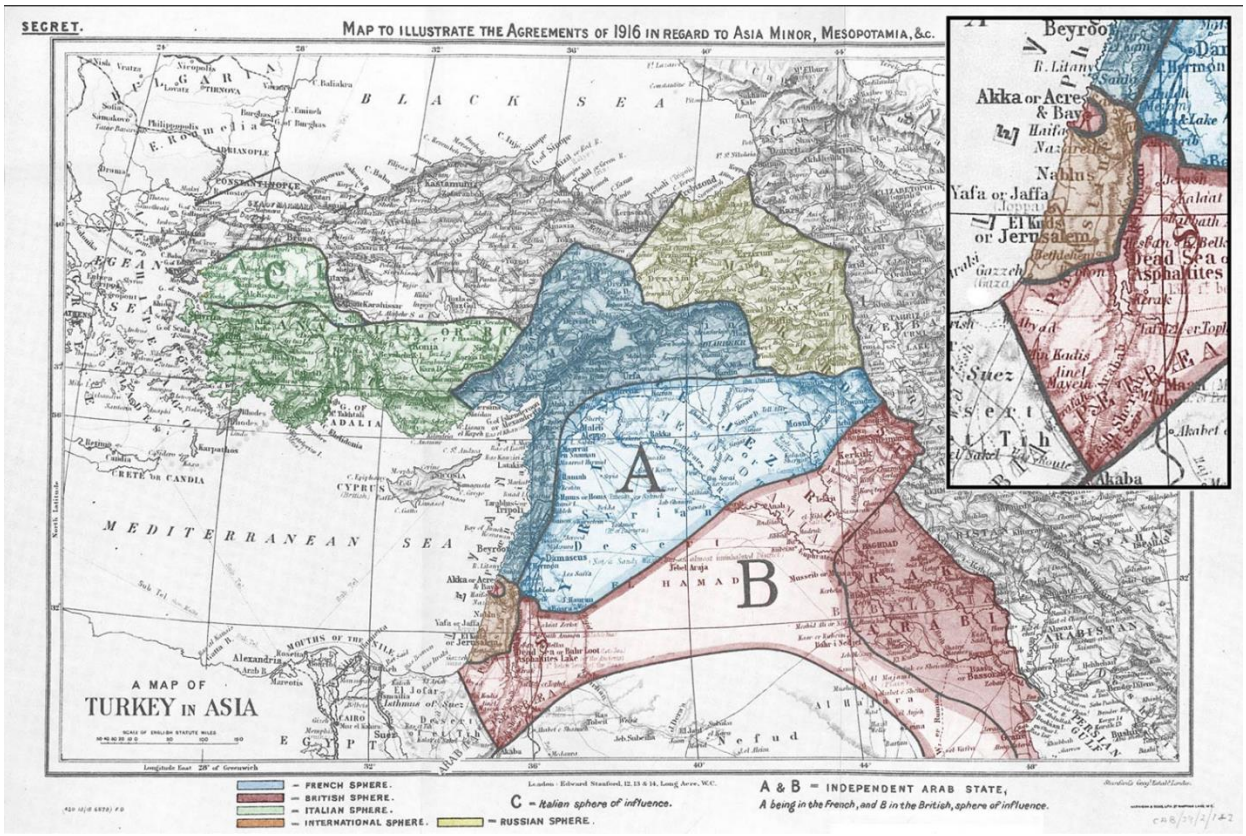
[67] Ibid. folio 403.

[68] Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas,* pp. 58 and 65.

[69] Edward Peter Fitzgerald, 'France's Middle Eastern Ambitions, the Sykes-Picot Negotiations and the Oil-Fields of Mosul', *Journal of Modern History*, 66, 4 (1994), p. 709.

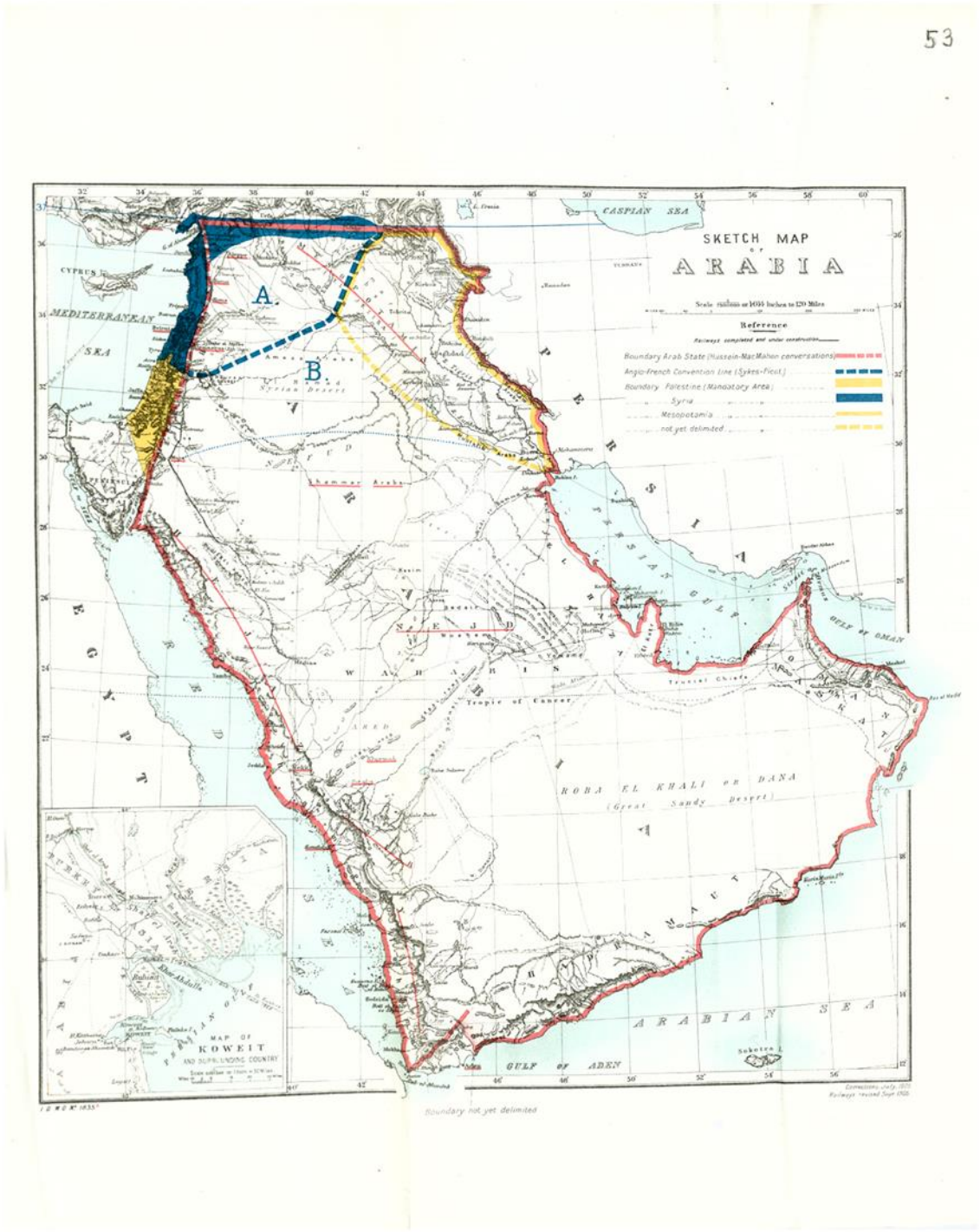
could mobilise Hussein, and, to protect their national interests in security. The French were eager to assert territorial claims for the future of France, and that meant denying Arab nationalist aspirations in Syria altogether.[70] In the second round of talks, territorial zones of interest were debated, and there was inclusion of Greek and Italian claims. The approximate divisions for zones of protection were agreed, and then approved by Russia, in May 1916, although the Russian government gave secret assurances to France that it would argue in favour of France having Palestine, which the British had insisted be excluded from a Greater Syria.[71] To administer the enemy occupied territory, demanded by the wartime occupations that would follow, it would be necessary to exercise full control for a period of time.

The problem is that the map produced to represent the zones of interest has been used subsequently to argue that this was a deliberate carve up of the Middle East at the expense of the Arabs. This is an interpretation placed on it after the event, and certainly is not supported by the contemporary discussions, at least on the British side. The British were concerned from the outset that the French did not intend to permit any form of self-determination in Syria and Lebanon, where they would rule through selected intermediaries. This conflicted with the British assurance offered by Sir Henry McMahon to Hussein that Damascus and part of Syria would come under Arab jurisdiction. The British government envisaged a far greater degree of autonomy and sovereignty in the provinces they would offer to protect, even to the extent of granting the Jews a homeland of their own within an autonomous region of Palestine, as they made clear in 1917. They saw no contradiction in these arrangements, as 'federation' plans had succeeded in Canada and South Africa where communal differences were stark, and, crucially, the idea of autonomous federated states had been the key recommendation of the de Bunsen Committee.



[70] Fitzgerald, 'France's Middle Eastern Ambitions', p. 712.
[71] Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas,* p. 101.

Map 1: The Sykes-Picot Agreement (northern detail), corresponding to the idea of autonomous or independent regions. Note how the British map demarcates A and B as 'independent Arab State' in the singular.



Map 2: The Sykes-Picot Agreement, McMahon-Hussein Correspondence, illustrating the extent of the autonomous regions and Arab access to the sea. Notes how this contrasts with the usual depiction (map 1) which purports to show Arabs 'deprived' of access to the sea, or a 'house with no door'.

Sykes and Picot had set aside the entire interior of their demarcated zones for Arab autonomy, and the coastal regions, from Kuwait, though Muscat and Yemen, to the Hejaz were to be guaranteed their independence by Britain. Despite Ottoman attempts to draw the Arabs back from the Allies by the argument that the British and French would deprive them of access to the sea and make them dependent on food imports, the extent of coastal territory offered by the British indicates why Hussein rejected the Ottoman overtures.

1917: Bolshevik Propaganda, Zionist Aspirations, and American Principles

In March 1917, General Maude's army captured Baghdad, which changed the situation in the Middle East irrevocably in Britain's favour. Maude issued a proclamation a week later, claiming that the British were not conquerors or occupiers, but liberators. The text had been carefully crafted by Sir Mark Sykes, but the population of Baghdad were suspicious of British intentions and doubted British sincerity about 'independence'. What the population could not appreciate was that Maude was, in essence, the military governor and this gave him the authority, prompted by London, to prevent Sir Percy Cox, the political officer with the Indian Army, announcing that the Government of India would administer these occupied provinces. The India Office had wished to avoid the extension of imperial responsibilities of the Government of India. There was also a hope to avoid the 'colonial' relationship that characterised the Indian administration, with layers of bureaucracy, money-lending and privileged intermediaries, which was deemed inappropriate for Mesopotamia.[72] The main motive for British actions, however, was to avoid a complete breakdown of order after the Ottoman authorities had been ejected, a point made by Sir Mark Sykes to the War Office in July 1915 following interviews with Ottoman-Iraqi prisoners of war.[73]

London was ensuring that it could control the fate of Mesopotamia, and ensure its most efficient governance.[74] A Mesopotamian Administration Committee was formed under Lord Curzon: the verdict was that Britain would, temporarily, govern Basra in the south, while Baghdad would be placed in Arab hands, in accordance with the de Bunsen Committee.[75] Until the war ended, however, Mesopotamia was still 'Occupied Enemy Territory' and legally subject to martial law. The 'liberation' therefore remained theoretical, not for ideological motives, but the practical wartime necessity of maintaining order and operational security. Yet this absence of independence only served to fuel the local feeling that the British intended to colonise the region. There was an international dimension too. Picot had first cast French claims as far as Mosul, but subsequently retracted them. In the private talks with Sykes in the French embassy in London, Sykes had explained that Mosul was 'indispensable for the English and they would not give it up', but in the interests of reaching an agreement, he was prepared to compromise and draw up a line that awarded the area near Sharqat to French control.

Many have interpreted this as Sykes' casual willingness to give away Mosul to France, but this is not the case. Fitzgerald argued that 'Britain abandoned the de Bunsen committee's recommendation to claim Mosul because of a fundamental fact of the "Great Game" in Asia', that is, to create a security zone that kept an extended Russian Caucasus, eastern Anatolia and Armenia away from areas controlled by Britain.[76] In fact, Sykes did not envisage overturning de Bunsen's findings at all. His solution was consistent with the aspiration to reach an agreement with France while protecting Britain's key interests. Sykes insisted on a guarantee that the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates would not be diverted from the regions downstream, an issue which had appeared in the de Bunsen report. The India Office viewed the abandonment of northern Mosul as an economic sacrifice, but one worth accepting to prevent any further French demands.[77] At the end of the war, the British entered Mosul to secure the entirety of

[72] 'Memorandum by Sir Mark Sykes', FO 371/2486/188109, folio 473, The National Archives, Kew.
[73] Mark Sykes to General C.E. Callwell, DMO, 23 July 1915, in FO 371/2486/114293. The National Archives, Kew.
[74] 'Memorandum by Sir Mark Sykes', FO 371/2486/188109, The National Archives, Kew.
[75] F. J. Moberly, *The Campaign in Mesopotamia*, III, (London: HMSO, 1924), pp. 204-211.
[76] Fitzgerald, 'France's Middle Eastern Ambitions', p. 715.
[77] Marian Kent, 'Asiatic Turkey, 1914-1916', in F. H. Hinsley, (ed.) *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 44.

Mesopotamia, and retained it. The dispute over the Kurdish region of upper Mesopotamia remained unresolved, and a source of antagonism with France and Turkey, until the League of Nations ruled in Britain's favour in 1926.[78]

The rationale for Mosul and a security zone in French hands had been to prevent Russian border disputes from any of its future bases in Anatolia, and the advance of Tsarist forces to Erzerum and the Persian border close to Baghdad (1916) seemed to vindicate the concern. However, the Bolsheviks seized power in the autumn of 1917, and, eager to discredit the imperialist powers, published the Tsarist 'secret treaties' in November that year. These were reproduced by the world's press, including the Sykes-Picot agreement.[79] There were accusations of betrayal, because McMahon's correspondence, showing favour to an Arab state under the Hashemites, appeared to contradict 'territorial awards' to Britain and France. Djemal Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Syria, used the information to communicate with Emir Feisal, now the commander of the Arab northern army that was co-operating with the British, and offer an amnesty for all the Arabs in revolt against the Ottoman Empire. He questioned why the Arabs would support the British if, as the agreement suggested, Syria would go to France, Iraq to Britain, and Palestine would be under international control. Djemal did not release details of the Sykes–Picot Agreement to Ottoman officials of Syria, however, for two reasons: first, he feared that Syrians and Lebanese might welcome the idea of French 'liberation' forces arriving in the region, and second, he was eager to win the Arabs back to the Ottoman cause, which meant presenting a particular interpretation of Sykes-Picot.[80]

The same month, the British government announced, via Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, (via the British banker Walter Rothschild) to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, that his government intended there to be a 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine. Balfour had added the careful proviso, 'it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine'.[81] This letter, the Balfour Declaration, was in fact the product of a long period of negotiation. Balfour was motivated by a desire to encourage the Anglo-American Jews to support the war effort, as the United States joined the Allies, because Jewish opinion was anti-Russian and therefore not well-disposed towards the Entente.[82] The motive was also to find suitable partners in the Palestine region who could temper French demands for a 'Greater Syria'.[83] The Declaration was not, as later posited, a blueprint for the creation of the state of Israel. Balfour had written only that the British government would help to 'facilitate' an entity they 'viewed with favour'. Like the vagueness of the 'Zones of Interest' demarcated broadly as 'Zone A' and 'Zone B' on the map produced by the Sykes– Picot agreement, this was not a concrete international agreement and did not determine borders.[84] The need for Zionist support was coincident with pressure to acknowledge the American principles for peace articulated by President Woodrow Wilson, namely there should be self-determination for subject peoples. The British government felt obliged to reinforce its commitment in the Middle East to both Arab and minorities' self-determination. Elsewhere in the British Empire there was a search to find the mechanisms for granting self-government after the war where it

[78] Fitzgerald, 'France's Middle Eastern Ambitions', p. 713. Fitzgerald concluded that France had not made the claim on the basis of oil reserves, but as part of their greater Syria aspirations. Oil became a consideration after the war, noting French claims to Mosul under Sykes-Picot, but which, if honoured, might give Britain access to oilfields in Algeria: see, 'The Oilfields of Persia and Mesopotamia', 15 March 1919, FO608/97/15; FO 371/5/3, no. 192.
[79] Eugene Rogan, *Fall of the Ottomans*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 358; James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 209.
[80] Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 210.
[81] Leonard Stein, *The Balfour Declaration* (London, 1961), p. i.
[82] It is sometimes forgotten that the key lobbyist in Britain, Chaim Weizmann, was a research chemist at Manchester University and when he invented a new formula to make explosives more effective he asked for no reward except the British government's consideration for a Jewish homeland. Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error* (New York: Harper, 1949).
[83] Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas,* p. 101.
[84] D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 49.

wold not threaten chaos and disorder. In India, for example, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms were proposed that would give self-government at a local level.

T. E. Lawrence, the British military advisor to the Arab Northern Army, did much to popularise criticism of Sykes-Picot, claiming it was part of 'a lie' to the Arabs about their independence. He wrote afterwards:

> The Cabinet raised the Arabs to fight for us by definite promises of self-government afterwards. Arabs believe in persons, not in institutions. They saw in me a free agent of the British Government, and demanded from me an endorsement of its written promises. So I had to join the conspiracy, and, for what my word was worth, assured the men of their reward. In our two years' partnership under fire they grew accustomed to believing me and to think my Government, like myself, sincere. In this hope they performed some fine things, but, of course, instead of being proud of what we did together, I was bitterly ashamed.[85]

While there is no doubt Lawrence was an advocate of the Arab cause, his conduct and his intelligence reports at the time do not always reinforce the neat narrative that he felt the British government was deliberately misleading the Arab leaders. Lawrence certainly had his own agenda. In March 1915, after the planned operation at Alexandretta was abandoned, and long before the Arab Revolt, Lawrence had written to David Hogarth that, with Arab forces, the British could 'rush right up to Damascus, & biff the French out of all hope of Syria.'[86]

When the Sykes-Picot agreement was published in 1917, Lawrence reassured Feisal at his headquarters that Djemal had distorted 'either from ignorance or malice' the original intent of the Sykes–Picot agreement, and Djemal had deliberately omitted, for example, the British commitment to obtain the 'consent of native populations and safeguarding their interests'.[87] Lawrence later wrote that he had disclosed the essence of the Sykes–Picot agreement in 1916 to the Arab leaders anyway and felt a sense of shame. Yet this sentiment may well have strengthened after the war, through his disappointment at the failure of the united Arab cause and the peace settlements.[88] Shame and honour were two recurrent themes in Lawrence's personal life that influenced his views of both people and events.

Lawrence wrote that he had only learned of the full details of the Sykes-Picot agreement from Sykes himself on 7 May 1917, but his dismay was that the Arabs were not going to be granted full independence immediately, only autonomy. The meeting was evidently stormy. Sykes believed immediate independence would lead to 'poverty and chaos', suggesting that a transition and British protection were essential.[89] He believed it would take ten years before the Arabs could form a nation. Lawrence, who had his own misgivings about Arab unity, claimed they believed the Arabs had legitimacy to govern because they were fighting for their independence. In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, he condemned Sykes 'the imaginative advocate of unconvincing world-movements, … a bundle of prejudices, intuitions, half-sciences'.[90] At the time, Lawrence probably hoped to get the best arrangement he could for the Arabs, and he opposed the French control of Damascus and Syria, but that did not mean he opposed the British project of trying to obtain the federated, autonomous regions for the Arabs entirely: he merely saw this as a temporary stage to full independence, a view that had been expressed in the report of the de Bunsen Committee. Only later did Lawrence claim he had consistently resisted his own government.

Gilbert Clayton, the head of the Arab Bureau in Cairo, had refused to send an angry letter from Lawrence to Sykes in August 1917, on the basis that the Sykes-Picot agreement, 'never a very workable instrument',

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[85] Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, introduction.
[86] Lawrence to Hogarth, 22 March 1915, cited in D. Garnett, (ed*), The Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, (London, 1938), pp. 195-6.
[87] E.H.T. Robinson, *Lawrence the Rebel*, (London: Lincolns-Prager, 1946), p. 119.
[88] T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, (New York and London: 1926, republished 1991), p. 326; 'Arabia-Hejaz', Intelligence Report, 24 July 1917, cited in Malcolm Brown, *T.E. Lawrence in War and Peace* (London: Greenhill, 2005), p. 200.
[89] Sykes to Drummond, 20 July 1917, Sykes Papers, Middle East Centre Archive, St Anthony's College, Oxford.
[90] Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, Ch. VI.

was 'now almost a lifeless monument.'[91] The successful advance of General Allenby's Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Palestine, along with the British advance through Mesopotamia, was changing the facts on the ground. Although a small French detachment accompanied the Sherifian Arabs, the French were aware they were becoming dependent on Britain's willingness to honour the 1915-16 talks. Sykes himself repudiated the agreement with Picot, arguing that he hoped to realise the idea of Arab autonomy and persuade the French of the case, which was in line with the de Bunsen Committee conclusions.[92] In 1918 he repeated the sentiment, arguing that the agreement was 'dead and gone, and the sooner scrapped the better.'[93] It had, after all, been a temporary measure.

The End of Sykes-Picot

Part of the purpose of the Sykes–Picot Agreement had been to counter post-war Russian ambitions, and complete the containment of the tsarist state from the coasts of the Levant and upper reaches of Mesopotamia. This had been a consistent line in British foreign policy for decades. The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917-18 rendered this strategic consideration redundant. In light of this, and subsequent negotiations with France about the future extent and status of Syria and Palestine, the original Sykes–Picot agreement was declared 'dead'.

Hussein was eager to see the end of the Sykes–Picot proposals too. Nevertheless, his concern was to keep the British on side in order to diminish his Arab rival Ibn Saud. The Sharif argued, for example, that the only reason the Ottoman General Hamid Fakhri Pasha was still in control of Medina was due to the support he was getting from Ibn Saud.[94] The British already knew this was not the case: Ibn Saud had ignored the requests for help from the Ottoman garrison, despite his declaration in October 1914 that he would back the Turks. As the Foreign Office noted: 'The Sherif's two Arab enemies are our two Arab friends – Idrissi and Bin Saud'.[95] It was this inter-Arab rivalry, rather than de Bunsen or the Sykes–Picot agreement, that would damage irrevocably the idea of Arab nationalism and sustain divisions across the Middle East.[96]

In October 1918, Feisal claimed Damascus by right of conquest, although the occupation had been enabled by the British. General Allenby permitted the move and told the War Office that the Arabs had raised their flag the moment they entered the city.[97] Somewhat chaotically, they quickly established a provisional government. Yet Allenby demanded that, while the war continued, he must retain supreme control of the administration of Syria. Balfour, as Foreign Secretary, insisted that France would be granted control as soon as it was possible for them to take over, although, since he was referring to the duration of the war, it was unclear when this would be. Amongst the Arab forces there was shock, disbelief, and anger, and there were scenes of 'frenzied and almost despairing Arabs' in the Syrian capital.[98] In the period immediately after the Armistice, Allenby offered a compromise, giving the Arabs control of the city and the French a coastal strip in Lebanon, an arrangement that was in no way intended to be permanent, but was in accordance with the de Bunsen Committee, the McMahon-Hussein correspondence and, although now defunct, the spirit of Sykes-Picot.

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[91] Clayton to Lawrence, 20 September 1917, Clayton papers 693/12, Sudan Archive, Durham.
[92] Sykes, memorandum, 18 July 1917; Sykes to Clayton, 22 July 1917, Sykes Papers, Middle East Centre Archive, St Anthony's, Oxford; Barr, *Line in the Sand*, pp. 52-3.
[93] Sykes to Wingate, 3 March 1918; see also Sykes to Clayton, 3 March 1918, Sykes Papers, Middle East Centre Archive, St Anthony's, Oxford.
[94] Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, pp. 216-217.
[95] 'Sherif of Mecca', 14 August 1915, FO 371/2486/34982.
[96] The main operations of Ibn Saud were directed against Ibn Rashid of Hail and its Shammar clans. See Letter from Lieutenant Colonel W.G Grey, Indian Army, Political Agent to the Resident of Kuwait, dated 9 June 1915, FO 371/2486/97255 of 19 July 1915.
[97] Allenby to War Office, 6 October 1918, WO 33/960, 133, The National Archives, Kew.
[98] Barr, *A Line in the Sand*, p. 62.

Lawrence departed for London to plead the Arab case, and soon after conceived of taking an Arab delegation to the Paris peace conference to demonstrate that the Arabs had to be taken seriously.[99] Allenby had some sympathy for Feisal and pointed out to his government that the Arabs had, to that point, not been notified officially of Foreign Office plans for the region, which would explain the reaction in Damascus.[100] But the Foreign Office took a different view. The Cairo Residency informed London: '…during Commander Hogarth's conversations with [Hussein] in January 1918 he appeared both to grasp and to accept the condition [that the peace conferences would decide the fate of Arab aspirations]. Nor has he ever seemed to be under any illusion about the desires and aims of France in Syria or about the limitations which the consideration of these imposed upon our diplomatic engagements to himself.'[101]

Whatever the sincerity of the British, it was France that now determined the future of Syria. The arrival of French forces increased local tensions. There were skirmishes, the first in December 1918 and with increasing in frequency thereafter, especially in Damascus and in Aleppo. In Lebanon, an administrative council was formed under the supervision of the French military occupation, but it was opposed immediately by pro-Syrian factions and nationalists. Some twenty-two delegates were to be sent to Paris, drawn from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, to plead the united greater Syrian cause.[102] Feisal supported the delegation, hoping to reinforce his case as leader of the Arab people.[103] Allenby struggled to placate the French and the Arabs. Noting that the French military governor had little conception of local politics, and that the Arabs were concerned with French control of the coast, which confined them to 'a house with no door', he continued to insist that his was a temporary administration of enemy-occupied territory.[104] There was concern that Feisal might resign, leading to 'blood, fire and ruin throughout all Arabia and Syria'.[105] Sir Henry Wilson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, sympathized, and intended that the remnants of the Sykes–Picot agreement, meaning the French insistence on treating Syria as a colony, 'must be torn up, somehow'.[106]

At the very end of the war, while Allenby tried to find a solution to French and Arab disagreements, British forces were authorized to secure Mosul, subsequently bringing this province into the new Iraq. General Marshall was directed to take the town just as the Ottomans had begun their armistice negotiations. The official reason given was to disarm the Ottoman units there, but the government was eager to acquire as much of northern Mesopotamia as possible to adjust the Sykes–Picot agreement and, mindful of their ambitions, deprive both France and Russia of any access to Mesopotamia, which had been the concern expressed in the de Bunsen Committee in 1915. The Government of India, while accepting that it would not annex lower Mesopotamia, got on with establishing an administration there, including new revenue surveys in preparation for the economic development of the plains adjacent to the Tigris and Euphrates. Taking the region from the Ottomans had cost thousands of lives and of rupees, and security was dependent on its rapid economic improvement.

In London, in December 1918, the prime ministers Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau held a meeting in private to revise the Sykes–Picot agreement. Lloyd George, aware that northern Mesopotamia in British hands would ensure development along the Tigris, and seal off Persia and its oilfields from the Turks, the Russians, and the French, claimed Mosul and the right to supervise Palestine. Clemenceau agreed.[107] In return, the French would keep Syria, although Clemenceau admitted he had little interest in

[99] Minute, 22 Jan 1919, FO 608/97/403, The National Archives, Kew.
[100] Allenby to War Office, 7 October 1918, WO 33/960, 136, The National Archives, Kew.
[101] M. Cheetham to Earl Curzon of Kedleston, 9 February 1919, FO 608/97; FO 371 375/1/3, no. 467.
[102] Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 214.
[103] The Foreign Office facilitated Feisal's representation at Paris, which subsequently helped to reduce the most expansionist of their demands. 'Representation of Hedjaz at the Peace Conference', 24 February 1919, and 9 February, provision of Pleins Pouvoirs; FO 608/97; FO 371/1/3.
[104] Allenby to Wilson, 19 October 1918, HHW2/33A/28, Wilson papers, Imperial War Museum.
[105] Allenby to Wilson, 9 November 1918, HHW2/33A/29, Wilson papers, Imperial War Museum.
[106] Wilson to Allenby, 7 December 1918, HHW2/33B/1, Wilson papers, Imperial War Museum.
[107] Maurice Hankey, diary 11 December 1920, (entry of 4 December 1920), 1/6, Hankey papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge; Imperial War Cabinet Minutes, 20 December 1920 CAB 23/42, The National Archives, Kew.

the matter personally—the concession was to placate the political right in France. The meeting was informal, and for which we are dependent on the diary of Maurice Hankey, the Cabinet Secretary, as documentary evidence. This was to cause considerable debate and confusion later. But the discussion gave Britain what it had wanted throughout the war, and which had been expressed in the de Bunsen report in 1915: security zones that would protect its strategically important interests: Suez, the Persian oilfields, navigation of the Bosporus, the reduction of the Turkish and German threats, limitations to French colonialism and Russian expansionism, and, consistently advocated, honouring the assurances of autonomy for their Arab partners.

When the war came to an end, and the United States had asserted more strongly the idea of national self-determination, Britain and France agreed in a Declaration, in November 1918, to the establishment of 'national governments and administrations'. They insisted that this declaration superseded the Sykes–Picot Agreement, and, again, it was certainly in line with the recommendation of the de Bunsen Committee, three years' earlier. The British Eastern Committee and the Foreign Office supported firmly the policy of self-determination. In addition, the new League of Nations was to be the governing body that would supervise the occupied territories administered by Britain and France in the Middle East. The so-called Mandate territories, territorial units administered on behalf of the Arabs, still left ambiguity in the question of sovereignty in the long term, but, certainly in the case of Palestine, an international jurisdiction had been the arrangement that Britain had sought from the beginning. Indeed, one could argue that the Mandates, arranged after the war, were far more damaging than Sykes-Picot, but they lack the iconography of a shaded map. The fact is that, by 1924, there were independent or autonomous states for Turkey in Anatolia, with a new capital at Ankara; for Iraq in Mesopotamia; and for each of the Arab partners specified in de Bunsen's committee report. The Greeks and Italians did not acquire their hinterlands, nor Russia its control of Istanbul. Palestine was supervised by an international committee, under the jurisdiction of the League of Nations, although British officials were responsible for its governance and economic development. The exception was Syria, which was indeed treated as a colony by France.

James Barr notes that the Sykes-Picot agreement was a temporary 'academic exercise to resolve an argument, not a blueprint for the future government of the region.'[108] When British troops withdrew from Syria and handed over responsibility to the competing French and Arab authorities, the Sykes-Picot agreement was already gone. The principles of the de Bunsen Committee report were applied, and the only compromises made had been necessary to retain French and American co-operation during the war. It was inter-Arab rivalry and a degree of French intransigence, rather than the Sykes–Picot agreement, that would damage irrevocably the idea of Arab nationalism and create divisions across the Middle East.

Ultimately, in 2015, Daesh were wrong. Their destruction of border posts were attacks, not on Sykes-Picot and colonialism as they claimed, but the independent nations of Syria and Iraq. Where the British had foreseen federalism and independence in 1915, Daesh spoke of subordination and submission to their interpretation of a centralised Caliphate. The British had embraced self-determination for the Arabs in 1915, two years before it appeared in the lexicon of Woodrow Wilson, but, in 2015, Daesh offered only tyranny and death.

Sykes-Picot was no more than an icon, a symbol against which successive generations could rail and use as 'evidence' of foreign conspiracy, interference and intervention. The inconvenience of the matter is that it was not the policy of the British government, and was only a vague sketch in case the Ottoman Empire collapsed suddenly in 1915. It was more akin to the Allied zones of control envisaged for Germany in 1945 than a colonial project. Britain acknowledged the need to compromise in the fluid conditions of the war and the rival claims to the region, in which it found itself the occupying military power. It has suited critics to brandish the Sykes-Picot map without ever acknowledging its context and its relative significance. Ultimately, it was the de Bunsen Committee Report that represented far more accurately Britain's intended approach to the Middle East.

[108] Barr, *Line in the Sand*, p. 36.