

What is the point about Sykes-Picot?

Pınar Bilgin

Summary

The Sykes-Picot agreement (1916) became (in)famous once again following a tweet in 2014 announcing a propaganda video by the group that call themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) declaring ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’. Since then, ‘Sykes-Picot’ was googled thousands of times, and hundreds of opinion pieces were written seeking to answer the question whether it is indeed ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’ as declared by ISIS. In this essay, I do not engage with this question. Rather, I inquire into the reasons offered by those who have declared ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’, those who agreed with them, and those who differed. The essay is organized in two sections. In Section 1, I consider the argument that it is not ‘the end of Sykes Picot’ because the agreement was never implemented. Second, I turn to those who maintain that there is no need to mourn the Sykes-Picot agreement because the borders drawn by the European colonial powers were ‘artificial’. I conclude by suggesting that the point about Sykes-Picot is not about the ‘artificiality’ of borders in the Middle East (for all borders are artificial in different ways) or the way in which they were drawn (for almost borders were agreed on by a few ‘men’ behind closed doors following or in lieu of wars) but how the agreement symbolizes a regime of top down, state-centric and statist security governance in the Middle East. ISIS does not seek to replace but inherit this regime.

Key Words

Sykes-Picot agreement, Asia Minor agreement, Middle East, security, ISIS

About the Author

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Analysis:

Introduction

Until mid-2014, if you uttered the names Sykes and Picot together, only those with a decent amount of knowledge in Middle East history would have recognized the reference to the Sykes-Picot agreement concluded between Britain and France during World War I. In 2014, the Sykes-Picot agreement became (in)famous following a tweet announcing a propaganda video by the group that call themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). The video showed the group destroying the border barriers between Syria and Iraq, declaring ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’ (see Tinsley, 2015). Since then, ‘Sykes-Picot’ was googled thousands of times and hundreds of opinion pieces were written seeking to answer the question whether it is indeed ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’ as declared by ISIS.¹ In this essay, I do not engage with this question. Rather, I inquire into the reasons offered by those who have declared ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’, those who concurred and other who did not.

The essay is organized in two sections. In Section 1, I offer a brief background on the Sykes-Picot agreement and consider the argument that ISIS did not bring ‘Sykes Picot’ to an end because the agreement was never implemented in full. Second, I turn to those who agree with the need to bring ‘Sykes-Picot’ to an end because the borders drawn by the European colonial powers are ‘artificial’. I underscore that where the critics of the so-called ‘Sykes-Picot order’ wish to replace ‘artificial’ borders with (presumably) ‘natural’ ones, ISIS wishes to do away with borders for all Muslims, therefore challenging the very notion of ‘nation-state’. Yet I emphasize that both ISIS and the critics of the ‘Sykes-Picot’ order share similar assumptions regarding ‘statehood’ and ‘artificiality’. In the concluding section, I suggest that the point about Sykes-Picot is not about the artificiality of borders (for all borders are artificial in different ways) or the way in which they were drawn (for almost all borders have been agreed on by a few ‘men’) but the ways in which Middle East politics was shaped in the century that followed World War I. It is not the borders themselves, but life inside and across those borders that have rendered Sykes-Picot a symbol of a regime of top down, state-centric and statist security governance in the Middle East.

1. This is not the end of Sykes-Picot, because it was never implemented!

‘Sykes-Picot’ is the better-known name of the ‘Asia Minor agreement’ negotiated in May 1916 by Sir Mark Sykes (Britain) and Georges Picot (France) to decide on the post-World War I fate of the Middle East. The agreement was kept secret until 1917

¹ Compare (Gause III, 2014) with (Falk, 2015) and (Ottaway, 2015).

when the Russian revolutionaries divulged the ‘secret deals made by the imperialist powers’. The agreement had to be kept secret, for it betrayed Britain’s promises to those Arab leaders who had agreed to join the fight against the Ottomans in return for promises regarding the governance of Arab lands. The degree of British betrayal is disputed (Rogan, 2015). What is beyond dispute is that the Sykes-Picot agreement was less about the future of the Middle East and more about the prospects for British-French rivalry in this part of the world. As such, the agreement was concerned not with creating so-called ‘viable states’ (Ottaway, 2015) but with furthering British and French colonial interests.

The agreement concluded by Sykes and Picot was never fully implemented. It was revised numerous times. One such revision came after the Allied powers lost the war in Asia Minor (the part of the world that the agreement was originally named after), thereby making the way for the formation of a Republic of Turkey. The Lausanne Treaty (1923) signed between the Allied powers and Turkey decided the newly established Republic’s borders.² What is currently problematized as the ‘Sykes-Picot order’ was shaped at San Remo Conference in 1920 but was further negotiated in the coming years. That is to say, those who argue that ISIS did not bring ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’, base their argument on the historical fact that that particular agreement was never implemented in full.

If this comes across as a trivial argument to consider, it is nevertheless worth scrutinizing. I will raise two issues. First, that the Sykes-Picot agreement was morphed into the San Remo consensus of the League of Nations does not render the order that followed any less problematic. For, after San Remo, the agreement ceased to be a secret deal between two imperial powers and became a part of the regime of security governance enforced by the International Society as reflected in the League of Nations decisions. Second, that the Sykes-Picot agreement was not implemented had also to do with the ways in which some were more equipped than others to participate in the drawing of their boundaries. As that time, some members of the International Society sought to intervene in the affairs of those who they deemed ‘backward’ as regards their ‘failure’ in meeting the standard of civilization (Bilgin, 2012). The League of Nations considered it necessary to impose ‘mandate regimes’ in some parts of the Middle East because peoples of this part of the world were not deemed capable of self-rule. As such, the Sykes-Picot agreement encapsulates a discursive economy that allowed the International Society to decide the fate of those who were deemed ‘backward’. Those who insist that ISIS did not bring ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’ overlook the ongoing yield of that discursive economy.

² Another revision was made between France and Turkey before the beginning of World War II deciding the fate of the Hayat province which was then under French mandate rule in Syria.

2. Sykes-Picot imposed ‘artificial’ borders—good riddance!

The critics who make the ‘artificiality’ point do not contest the desire of ISIS to bring the so-called ‘Sykes-Picot order’ to an end. They agree with ISIS that borders in the Middle East were (largely but not wholly) decided by European powers under conditions of colonial rule. They also agree that something needs to be done about them. However, a closer look at the solutions the critics of the ‘Sykes-Picot order’ offer highlights how far removed they are from the concerns raised by ISIS. Yet another look suggests that they share some of the same Eurocentric assumptions.

To start with the critics of the ‘Sykes Picot order’, they underscore the fact that regional peoples themselves were not sitting at the table when the borders in the region were drawn and that is what has rendered the border between Syria and Iraq (among others) ‘artificial’. As a solution, some suggest that borders should be re-drawn to allow for some kind of stability (Ashdown, 2014), other argue that it is impossible to seek to re-order the region in the absence of superpower resolve (Gause III, 2014). That both solutions are as top down, state-centric and statist as the creators of the so-called ‘Sykes-Picot order’ seems to escape their proponents. Accordingly, the critics fail to note that their top down outlook toward the region is part of the problem highlighted by ISIS.

As regards ISIS, the aforementioned video explains their reasons in the following way:

Today we are happy to participate in destroying the borders placed by the tawaghit [oppressors] to prevent the Muslims from traveling in their lands. The tawaghit broke up the Islamic Khilafah and made it into countries like Syria and Iraq, ruled by man-made laws...today we begin the final stage after the Ummah was divided... Their plot was to divide and conquer. That is what they had done with us (quoted in Tinsley, 2015).

Their suggested solution is very different in that they wish to do away with ‘nation-states’. Yet their way of doing this is to set up another state and impose an order that is no less statist. As such, ISIS and the critics of the ‘Sykes Picot order’ share a commitment to the state-centric and statist regime of security governance that has characterized the Middle East in the past century.

Furthermore, both ISIS and the critics of the ‘Sykes Picot order’ share the same Eurocentric assumption that some borders are ‘artificial’ and others are ‘natural’. However, all borders are artificial insofar as they are decided by a few ‘men’ behind closed doors following (or in lieu of) wars. For instance,

Winston Churchill may have drawn the border between Iraq and Jordan with a pen, but he was just as central in delineating the border between France and Germany when he led the allies to victory in World War II. Determining whether Alsace and Lorraine

would be French or German was never as simple as just sending a commission to find out where the French people stopped and the German people started—rather, the territory was awarded as a prize following each of the Europe’s bloody conflicts (Danforth, 2013).

In the Middle East, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are considered to have ‘natural’ borders insofar as their representatives participated in the drawing of those borders either after a war or at the negotiation table. Furthermore, Turkey’s border with Greece is shaped by the river Meriç. What could be more natural than that! Yet it took a League of Nations sanctioned population exchange between Turkey and Greece to render the populations on either side more ‘homogenous’ (Özsu, 2011). The point being that borders are always ‘artificial’ insofar as they are drawn without consulting the people whose lives they run through.

Finally, claiming that borders in the Middle East are ‘artificial’ is a Eurocentric move that asserts the agency of European colonial powers in wreaking havoc into this part of the world while underestimating the amount of agency exercised by regional peoples. This is not to underestimate the destructive consequences of the divide and rule tactics employed by the colonial powers, which is considered as having ‘postponed the rise of a new order shaped from within the region’ (Kamel, 2014: 8). Rather, my point is that the critics of the ‘artificiality’ of Sykes-Picot boundaries, even as they seek to be self-critical (by virtue of owning up to the colonial legacy), betray their obliviousness to the history of the region and its peoples. As Lorenzo Kamel has maintained, ‘modern-day Syria and Iraq have both several meaningful antecedents in the pre-Islamic world’ and that

the claim that Iraq is an artificial creation concocted by the British after World War I overlooks the fact that...for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries...Basra, Baghdad and Mōsul were governed as a single entity with Baghdad as their center of gravity’. Already at the time numerous local intellectuals indicated the area as “Iraq” (Kamel, 2014: 8-9).

This is not to claim access to historical ‘facts’ about the region and its peoples. Rather, the point is that ISIS and the critics of the ‘Sykes-Picot order’ raise the same Eurocentric arguments that are produced through similarly Eurocentric categories regarding ‘statehood’ and ‘artificiality’. The difference between the two is that where the former problematizes a century of interventionism in the affairs of the region, the latter only takes responsibility for the Sykes-Picot moment. Neither of the two challenges the top-down state-centric and statist regime of security governance that was instated as part of the ‘Sykes-Picot order’. Arguably, it is that very regime of security governance, which is shaped by the discursive economy of the International Society that temporalizes dif-

ference, that has allowed for military interventionism in the Middle East in present-day politics (Jabri 2013).

Conclusion

The point about Sykes-Picot is not the artificiality of borders or the way in which they were drawn; all borders are 'artificial' insofar as they are decided by a few 'men'. The point about Sykes-Picot is also not that it was a secret agreement concluded between France and Britain, but that it was made possible by a discursive economy that allowed for the International Society to decide the fate of those that were deemed as not-yet capable of governing themselves. That the current discussions about the 'end of Sykes-Picot' are conducted in a similarly top down manner suggests that the same discursive economy prevails and continues to shape a top-down, state-centric and statist regime of security governance. ISIS does not seek to replace but inherit this regime. The only difference being the replacement of 'nation-states' with a state for the *Ummah* ruled by a particular understanding of 'Islamic law'.

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