The Sykes-Picot Agreement

Gord Beck, Map Specialist, Lloyd Reeds Map Collection (January 2016)

The Sykes-Picot Agreement was the result of a secret meeting between Sir Mark Sykes, representing Great Britain, and Francois Georges Picot, representing France. The meeting took place in the second year of the First World War, in the month of May 1916.

The purpose of the meeting was to decide the fate of the territories currently under control of the Ottoman Empire should it collapse as a result of the war. After 600 years of existence, the Empire was in decline. The reasons for which were many: poor leadership, corruption, and loss of trade were only a few. In the century leading up to WWI, Great Britain had continually helped to prop-up the failing Empire in order to use it as a pawn in its 19th century "Great Game" of imperial strategy against Russia. Britain's fleet helped safeguard Constantinople and the straits, so as to block Russia's access to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea, while the eastern Ottoman territories likewise blocked Russia's aspirations of southward expansion into the Middle East, which threatened to sever Britain's lifeline to India and the rest of its eastern empire.

The dawn of the twentieth century, however, brought with it a shifting of alliances. Russia was now more concerned with the rise of Japan, and Britain was more concerned with the rise of Germany and the economic impact of its Berlin-to-Baghdad railway. With the signing of the Anglo-Russian convention in 1907, Britain no longer needed the Ottoman Empire as a buffer zone. As a result, at the outbreak of WWI in 1914, Britain suddenly found itself in the strange position of fighting alongside its old, traditional rivals of Russia and France against Germany and the Central Powers, which soon included the Ottomans.

Despite Britain's failure against the Turks at Gallipoli in 1915, it was increasingly felt by the Allies that the Ottoman Empire would not outlast the war. To avoid the potential chaos of a vacuum of power and—more importantly—to protect their own interests in the area, the Western Allies began to make plans for the "carving-up" of Turkey.

In secret negotiations prior to the Sykes-Picot meeting, Russia had already been promised control of Constantinople and the straits, as well as the Turkish provinces adjacent to its borders in the Caucasus. Italy had been promised parts of Southern Turkey. The Hashemite Arabs, who had agreed to rise up and fight alongside the British against their Ottoman masters, had been promised their independence and control of their own lands, including Syria and what soon become known as Palestine.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement gave Britain direct control of Baghdad and Basra (two of the three provinces of Ottoman Mesopotamia now beginning to be referred to by the British as Iraq) located in the so-called, "Red Zone," on the Sykes-Picot map. France got direct control of the third province, Mosul which it absorbed into its other acquisitions consisting of Syria and Lebanon in the so-called, "Blue Zone." The two remaining zones labelled "A" and "B" were of less interest to the European powers and could therefore be semi-autonomous areas ruled by local Arab chiefs under the indirect influence of the French in the north and the British in the south. The area referred to by Europeans as Palestine, but whose name was a western invention and held no meaning for the local population, was of intense interest to all Christian nations and Zionists hoping to create a homeland there for the Jews. For these reasons it was designated an "International Zone" with the details to be worked out post-war.

The French were initially happy with the agreement as they had considerable investments along the Syrian coast and their textile industry in Lyon demanded Syrian silk. They had also viewed themselves since the days of the crusades as protectors of Christian communities, like the Maronites near Mount Lebanon. The British were equally pleased as they had safeguarded their interests in Egypt and the Suez through the creation of Palestine—a safe, international zone directly on its borders—which contained the port of Haifa under British control. It had also secured its lifeline to India and the eastern empire by means of attaining control of a "land bridge," formed by the territories under its direct and indirect control, which would become known as the modern countries of Jordan and Iraq. They had also managed to cleverly situate France as a buffer between themselves and Russia.

The ink had barely dried on the agreement, however, when Britain began to have regrets as the geopolitical situation quickly altered. The following year Russia fell into revolution and dropped out of the war. Britain and France no longer felt obligated to fulfill their promises to a Bolshevik Russia and began to eye each other with suspicion. Britain realized it no longer needed France as a buffer between itself and Russia and began to regret giving so much territory in the north to France, especially oil-rich Mosul in the former province of Mesopotamia. Britain had, after all, just converted its navy from coal to oil in the years just prior to the war, and this would be a valuable prize.

Also in 1917, the new Bolshevik government discovered a copy of the secret Sykes-Picot plan in the Russian archives and revealed it to the world as proof of Imperialist deceit. This news, coupled with the British Foreign Secretary's declaration that same year that his country supported a Jewish homeland in Palestine, enraged the Hashemite Arabs who felt betrayed by these clandestine dealings. They believed they were to be cheated out of Syria by the French, and out of Palestine by the Jews—lands which had been promised to them by Britain's High Commissioner in Egypt, as well as by General Allenby, and T.E. Lawrence of Arabia, in exchange for their help in the Palestine campaign.

The U.S. president Woodrow Wilson was also outraged at these secret dealings. He announced that he was not prepared to see the postwar world dominated by "little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools." Two years later, during the peace conference, he unveiled his 14 points for peace, one of which was the right of nations to self-determination. Unfortunately, his dream proved to be unattainable, and at the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the lines in the sands of the Middle East were drawn very close to those of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of seven years earlier.

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