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## **Sykes-Picot at 100: The Unexpected Resilience of Artificial Borders**

With the “Sykes-Picot” agreement in 1916, Britain and France may have sought to reproduce their respective most successful colonial enterprises. India was the jewel in the British crown; it consisted of vital parts under direct British control, and many others governed by a multitude of local arrangements. It was a good balance of securing interest and delegating responsibility. North Africa was shaping up as France’s most promising venture. Just across the pond from the Métropole, it offered lands for “colons” in Algeria, while extending protectorates and lucrative investments to neighboring Tunisia and Morocco.

Unfortunately for the two 19<sup>th</sup> century towering powers, “Sykes-Picot” did not live up to its promise. Instead, each was saddled with unruly territories, subject to a “Mandate” from the League of Nations, delegating them to prepare these lands for self-rule, and thus proving to be more liability than asset. Both endeavored to navigate the new reality to their advantage, but neither was able to safeguard its longer term interests well past its military exit.

What Britain and France left behind was deemed artificial then, and is often called artificial today. Iraq? Merge three Ottoman provinces, and appoint a friendly figure as a monarch. Jordan? Chalk down a few lines across the desert, and appoint another friendly figure as a monarch. Palestine? Just let them fight it out. Lebanon? Add to the Christian majority mountain enough land to may be make it viable, and call it “Grand”. Syria? Offer a part to Turkey in courtship and courtesy, then slice, then merge, then leave it as it is.

By 1948, France and Britain were out, an unexpected Israel was in, and calls for a reset were multiplying. Arab nationalism shaped up as the ideology rejecting all the borders as relics of colonialism and calling for “unity”, as a restorative act to revive a past golden age. A League of Arab States emerged as a first step towards the remedy.

A few decades later, a retooling in the other direction was suggested. Washington DC politicians turned amateur Iraq historians opined that this nation, manufactured out of three provinces, ought to be re-conceived into three parts to accommodate its three constituent groups (Sunni, Shi‘i, Kurd). Similar “forward” thinking is also applied to Syria.

The fact is that, a century after “Sykes-Picot”, no fundamental change has affected the “artificial” borders, neither in the direction of shedding presumed “divide-and-rule” artifacts installed to fracture the “One Nation” into many, nor in the direction of returning to elemental components batched together for colonial convenience. The borders did not melt away, even when nationalists of the same Ba‘thist conviction ruled Damascus and Baghdad, and new ones are yet to be erected, now that the ideological, linguistic, and political orientations of Baghdad and Erbil have so drastically diverged. Lebanon suffered a devastating internal war between 1975 and 1991, with most parties to the conflict brandishing visions that redesign the space: a smaller Christian Lebanon for some, a Lebanon fused into Syria for others, and even Lebanon as a distant province of the Islamic Republic. None materialized. The war ended with Lebanon depleted, but still one. Iraq, since 2003, and Syria, since

2011, are undergoing similar mayhem, with central rule having retreated to a mere fraction of the national territory, and with claims of autonomy and statehood emerging. However, it may be premature to assume that the Syrian erosion and the Iraqi dysfunction would usher the end of the Sykes-Picot order, and that a redrawing of the map is in order.

The two conflicting propositions that are often invoked to anticipate an end to the “Sykes-Picot” order are both flawed. The first posits a unified and harmonious past that exists only in the romantic re-readings of history by nationalists. The second freezes the pre- “Sykes-Picot” administrative arrangement, attributing to it a function that it did not have. The Washington DC Iraqi equation of three provinces at the origin of Iraq and three constituent groups is simplistic and false. Neither the provinces were perennial, nor the groups distinct, and there was no match between province and group.

What these propositions ignore is that a century of “Sykes-Picot” created and cemented new identities. Jordan may have been arbitrary when Trans-Jordan was carved out of the Palestine British Mandate. It is as real today as any other nation-state. Jordanian identity, as all others, is complex, with ethnic, religious, regional, and class elements shaping it as a function of setting and circumstances. The new national identities are not only shaped by the complex cultural settings of the “Sykes-Picot” states, but even more so by the material cycles of economy, society, politics, and demographics that the modern state have fostered. Indeed, the main import of “Sykes-Picot” was not the borders, but a notion of state as a structural reflection of society — a notion that the Middle East had only vaguely considered. Unfortunately, this notion failed to be carried to full implementation, leading to deep and corrosive crises of governance. If the international experience in South Sudan, Eritrea, and Timor Leste is any indication, no extent of border changes will shield the region from this reality.

As the Lebanon experience proves — a republic called “precarious” with virtually no one ideologically committed for its survival, but that overcomes more than a decade of devastation — it is structure, not ideology, that creates, maintains, and eventually reshapes the state borders. The “Islamic State” claims to have shattered “Sykes-Picot”. But devastating all elements of society and state, with no ability or intent to erect viable replacements, does not create a new map. It leads to dissolution, not re-partition, with the corrective impulse pointing towards the restoration of what was destroyed.

The one potential candidate for map change is Iraqi Kurdistan. Since the early 1990s, this autonomous region has been on a set course of structural divergence from Iraq. Still, a quarter of a century later, the continuation of shared institutions and common interests underline the difficulty of separation.

It is both easy and convenient to blame the current cataclysm in the Middle East on the borders shaped by “Sykes-Picot” (or even to dig deeper into the Sèvres treaty, generally less utilized in political discourse). It is far more difficult and costly to recognize that what the region has failed to achieve is not well-bordered identities, but a well-balanced modernity. The future of the Middle East cannot be in the rehabilitation of dictators, the “recognition” of exclusive identities, or in the abandonment of the region to dissolution. It is indeed in sound governance, respecting individual and community, and fulfilling the plan that the League of Nations, almost a century ago, imposed on would-be colonial powers.