

Steven Heydemann intervention

Without Sykes-Picot: Reconceptualizing the Arab East

The boundaries negotiated a century ago by Mark Sykes and George Picot defined the post-Ottoman political landscape in the Arab east. The state order that resulted is often described as artificial, a colonial creation that lacked legitimacy, and the genesis moment that fixed the Arab east on a century-long path of failed politics, failed economics, failed nation-building, and fragmented societies. Were alternative pathways available? Are there plausible counterfactual trajectories that might have improved prospects for political and economic development in the Arab east? This paper will assess counterfactual pathways for the Arab east—defined as the Levant and Saudi Arabia—by revisiting the period from 1918, the year in which US President Woodrow Wilson issued the Fourteen Points, to 1923 and the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne.

The paper will argue that the Sykes-Picot agreement was codified through post-WWI treaty arrangements that secured its implementation, and that exploring rigorously designed alternative treaty arrangements offers the most plausible framework for the development of counterfactual histories for the Arab east in the 20th and early 21st centuries. The paper will provide a justification for this choice of historical pivot points, review potential alternatives for establishing a post-WWI political order in the Arab east, and trace their likely effects on the region's subsequent political and economic development.

The paper will argue that even had the Sykes-Picot agreement not existed, the political landscape of the Arab east would not have escaped the effects of colonialism, war, state formation, capitalism, and nationalism. However, alternative mechanisms for defining political communities, delineating borders, and constituting polities might nonetheless have emerged in the immediate post-WWI period, with the potential to alter the historic trajectory of the Arab east over the subsequent century.