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# IS THE SYKES – PICOT AGREEMENT OF 1916 WAS THE BASIS FOR THE POLITICAL DIVISION OF THE MIDDLE EAST?

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### Abstract

In 1916, Britain and France signed an agreement deals with the future division of the Ottoman Empire. This agreement, known as the Sykes – Picot Agreement, after its two designers, the British Sir Mark Sykes and the French François George Picot, is seen up today as the main act which created the modern Middle East and responsible for some of its problems. The article present here point to another act, the decision of the newly established League of Nation to create the Mandate System and , following it, the San Remo decision of April 1920 giving the Mandates concerning the Arab Middle East to France and Britain, as the main designer of the division of the Middle East to its present form.

### Key words

First World War, Ottoman Empire, League of Nations, Britain, France, Mandate System.

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## 1. Preface

Lately, especially in light of the events of the past five years in Syria and Iraq, popular as well as scientific publications, as well as political groups and leaders, wrote and mentioned the agreement signed a hundred years ago, in May 1916, between the representative of the British Empire, Sir Mark Sykes, and the French representative, Francois Georges –Picot concerning the future of the Middle East<sup>1</sup>. All considered the “Sykes – Picot Agreement” as the base for

the creation of the political map of the Middle East divided for several independence states which exists today in that area. More new information to this ‘known’ agreement was supplied in a book called “A Line in the Sand” (Baar, 2012) written by the journalist and political analyst, James Barr, published in 2011 (American Edition 2012). According to the overall public opinion, this agreement between the governments of Britain and France created the existing political structures of the Middle East – a structure that the Muslim State (ISIS) tries to abolish. ISIS declared that the boundaries of the Sykes – Picot

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<sup>1</sup> See for example – The Sykes – Picot Agreement at 100, YouTube discussion of 2 hours, 26:24 minutes. Also see – Rethinking the map of the Sykes – Picot Agreement Legacy, BBC World YouTube.

Agreement are void and null<sup>2</sup>, tried to abolish the separate Arab states units, and bring back the Middle East to the situation in which there were no borders separating and disintegrate the Arab world – the Muslim Middle East. James Barr's book reinforces this argument and tries to show that the "Line drawn in the Sand" drowned on the map attached to the agreement, put the Middle East as a conflict area between France and Britain struggled for control of the territory after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, hence the root of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Moreover, from this stems the notion that Middle Eastern countries, with the possible exception of Turkey and Israel, are being artificial and unnatural, never been established according the frame of the "nation-state idea".

Is that right? It seems that a historical research, which is based on original documents and previous studies, which try to examine what happened during the years 1914–1920, without preliminary views, present a slightly different picture.

## 2. Background

In the Eve of World War I the Ottoman Empire controlled the entire area currently defined as the Middle East (but not independent Persia – now Iran), with the exception of Egypt, which was officially still under the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan but actually was, since 1882, control by the British empire. The accession of the Ottoman Empire in the Great War (WWI) alongside with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria) against the Allied (Entente Cordial) Powers (Britain, France, Russia and Serbia later joined by Italy, Greece, Portugal, Rumania and the USA), which took place mainly in Europe but also in the Middle East (and even in central Africa) brought about discussions between these powers concerning the future of the Middle East. An Ottoman – Germany victory would leave the situation as it is, under the authority of one empire – the Ottoman, but a victory of the Allied Powers could bring into the creation of a new Middle East. Pre-war Great Britain held diplomatic outposts in the Middle East, in Egypt, Cyprus and Aden, and held a series of agreements with Arab sheikhs along the Persian Gulf. France had religious, trade and political interests on the east coast of the Mediterranean, particularly in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Thus France sought to achieve influence and control over the Christian holy places in the Ottoman Empire

(especially in Palestine – the Terra Sancta) and to secure control all over the area from the Egyptian border – a line set in 1906 – as far north as Aleppo in Syria and the Gulf of Alexandretta (Iskenderun, today in Turkey) and in the area of Mosul in northern Mesopotamia (now Iraq). In contrast, Britain sought to strengthen its Persian Gulf positions and extend its control to the north of Mesopotamia, where she hoped to find oil<sup>3</sup>. In Western Middle East Britain look for Palestine, due to activities which took place in the course of the war itself. Attempts to attack the Suez Canal "The life line of the British Empire", by the Ottoman army (with German encouragement and planning), although twice failed, made it clear to Britain that the Sinai desert is no longer a buffer in the age of modern war, aided by railroad and motor traffic by land and airplanes. Crossing the desert barrier became more easily. It became clear to Britain that a modern military force located in Palestine is a constant threat to the Suez Canal, a waterway vital to the British Empire. Britain sought therefore to expand the actual power and control to all the territory between Palestine and Mesopotamia from Egypt in the west, up to the Ottoman – Persia boundary, demarcated in 1914, in the east. Britain wanted to get this area in order to ensure direct contact between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean by continental railroad, roads and oil pipelines (Frieschwasser-Raanan, 1955). Tsarist Russia had no territorial ambitions in Palestine and focused its ambitions in other parts of the Ottoman Empire – the area of Istanbul, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, and parts of eastern Anatolia and Armenia. The Italians, who had occupied the territory of the Ottoman Empire in Libya and some islands in the Aegean Sea, (The Dodecanese Islands) just before the War, asked for international approval of their control in these areas, as well as controlling some areas in central Anatolia. Russia and Italy as well as Britain, refused to accept that only one European power (France) and one Christian faith (The Catholic Church) will rule the holy places in Palestine. Those conflicting ambitions of the Allied countries, formed the basis for discussions on a possible partition of the Ottoman Empire, if the War will end in the collapse of it. Thus, immediately upon the outbreak of war, after the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Power in 31 October 1914, France demanded for herself Syria, including Lebanon and Palestine. Russia, the closest ally of France, tended at the beginning to agree to this request but later Russia withdrew its support for this demand because of the reluctance to see a Catholic control

<sup>2</sup> Melisa Ruthven, *The Map ISIS Hates*, *The New York Reviews of Books*, 25 June 2014.

<sup>3</sup> On the rival between Britain and France in the Middle East see Y. Nevakivi (1969) and E. Monroe (1963).

of the holy places in Palestine, where the Russian Orthodox Church had also interests and properties.

In March 1915 the French government asked officially Russia to accept French future control of Syria and Palestine at the end of the war, but the Russians rejected the French demand for the control of the holy places in Palestine, and to do so, Russia enlisted the help of Britain. The British government was not prepared to formally discuss the future of the Ottoman Empire before the latter defeated, but the British Cabinet set up, in April 1915, a committee of experts headed by Maurice De – Bunsen, to discuss the British interests in the Middle East<sup>4</sup>. France, which faced Russian opposition and non cooperation from Britain concerning its ambitious demands, withdrew from those demands and place a demand to control Syria, Lebanon and only part of Palestine but suggested the internationalization of the holy cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Russians claimed that the holy places in Palestine also include Nazareth, the Galilee and the Sea of Galilee, and they were not willing to let the Catholic Church a control in these places. While France and Russia discussed the future control over the holy places, Britain found herself facing the Ottoman – German threat on Suez canal, and therefore demanded that all the territory of Palestine, from Haifa to Aqaba, will become a Neutral Territory according to the suggestions of the De – Bunsen committee, as well as allocated the Alexandretta area to Britain. Thus Britain and Russia stood against the French claim to control Palestine.

### 3. The Sykes – Picot (and two other partners) Agreement

These conflicting ambitions and the entry of additional plaintiffs for the territory of the Ottoman Empire –the Zionist movement on the one hand and the Arabs on the other – resulted in the opening of formal discussions between France and Britain over the future of the Middle East. These discussions began in October 1915. Britain was represented by Sir Arthur Nicholson, and later replaced by Sir Mark Sykes. James Barr describes in detail how well Mark Sykes enters the discussion and how he achieve a central place in it. Barr also describes in detail the stands of the French discussant, Francois Georges-Picot. After five months of discussion, an English–French agreement, known as the Sykes – Picot Agreement, was signed by the British and the French .foreign secretaries in March 1916, dealing with the division of the

Ottoman Empire after the war. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, which was later joined by Russia and Italy, France was due to have direct control over most of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, from Rosh Hanikra in the south to Alexandretta golf in the north and the great Syrian – African rift in the east. In addition, she was supposed to directly control Cilicia, the south Asian region of Anatolia. The French control area was painted by blue color on the map that accompanied the original agreement. As concerning Palestine France was supposed to have complete control of the area from Rosh Hanikra to the Sea of Galilee, including the Upper Galilee region, with the city of Safed, Hula Lake and the northern part of the Jordan River (fig. 1).

In addition to this area France was due to help run an independent Arab state, which was supposed to stretch from the Great Rift Valley in the west and from the Yarmouk River in the south, to the foothills of the Zagros Mountains in the east (The pre-war boundary between the Ottoman and the Persian Empires) including Mosul area in northern Mesopotamia and to the Taurus mountains in the north. This area, which included the Golan Heights, Horan and the Druze Mountain, was due to become an independence Arab state, in the France’s sphere of influence. This area was marked on the map (fig. 1) as zone A.

Britain, the other senior partner in this Agreement, whose ambitions were mainly located in the eastern region of the Persian Gulf, was supposed to have full control over the southern and central Valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, from the city of Baghdad south to the Persian Gulf coast and along this coast southward. Britain was supposed also to control the Haifa Bay, the cities of Haifa and Acre and the area of the valley between them. This was due to Britain’s desire for the construction of a deep water port in Haifa that will be used in the future as the oil pipeline terminal and railroad connecting the Rivers Valley to the Mediterranean Sea. Those two areas were painted with red color on the attached map (fig. 1). There was no territorial link between the two areas of British control, but between them another Arab state was supposed to be established, which was due to stretch between the 1906 boundary line of Egypt in the west to the Persian Gulf in the east. This area, which was due to be in British sphere of influence, was marked on the map (fig. 1) as zone B.

Russia and Italy were jointed to the agreement. Russia was due to control a large area in eastern Anatolia, included Armenia (yellow color on the map), while Italy was to get the official control of the Aegean Sea islands occupied before the war, (Rhodes and the Dodecanese islands), as well as area in central

<sup>4</sup> Document „Secret“ A220 D.I.C. from 30 January 1915, file CAB 1/27 in British Archive P.R.O.



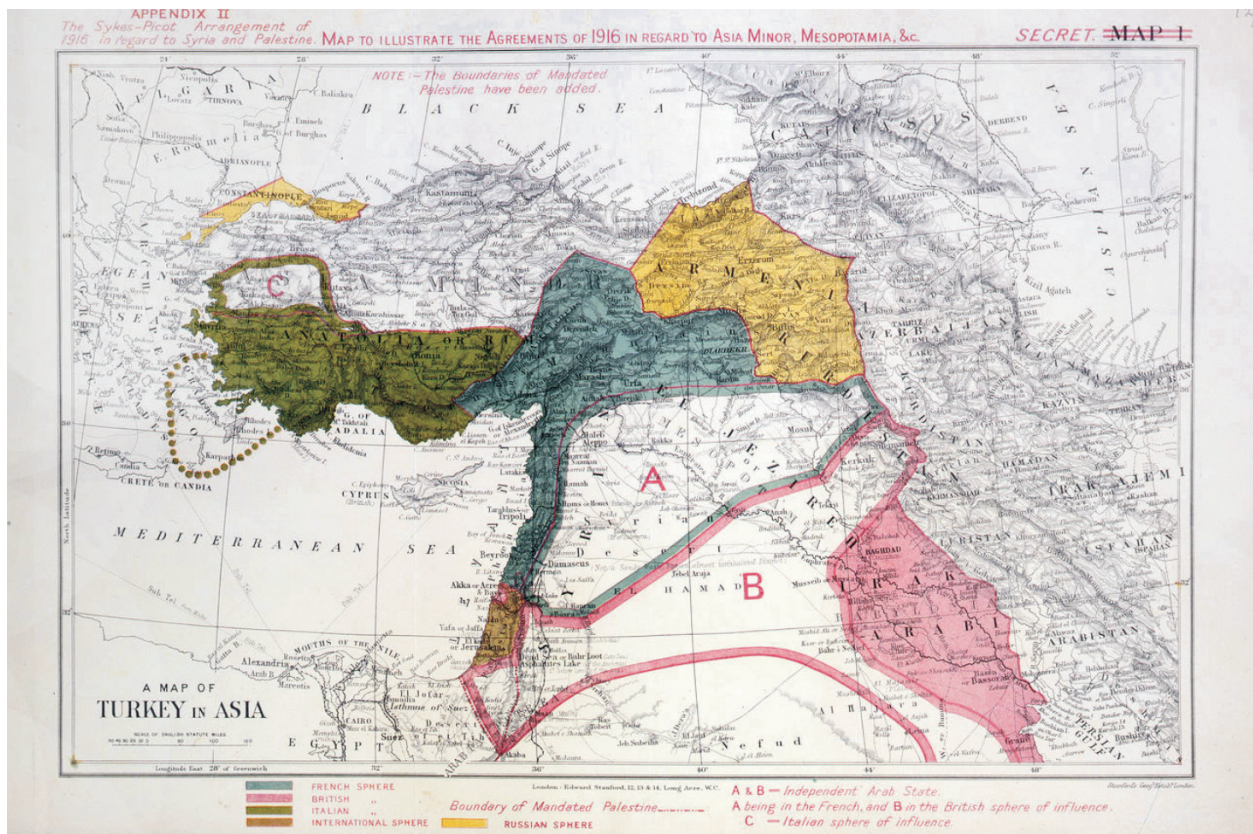


Fig. 1. Sykes – Picot Agreement map with French, Britain, Russia and Italy control and sphere of influence areas  
Source: The British Archives P.R.O.

Anatolia (green color on the map (fig. 1) as well having an area which due to be in the Italian sphere of influence (Marked C on the map (fig. 1)). The desire for controlling the holy places in the Holy Land, led to the creation of a neutral zone in Palestine, which was supposed to be managed jointly by Britain, France, Russia, Italy and a representative of the Arab – Moslem world. This area, known in the literature as the “international area” was painted by brown color on the map. This area was delimited around the holy cities of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth at the center, and all the area included in a line runs from Rosh Hanikra to the north west of Sea of Galilee, included Capernaum) on the shore of the Sea. From there the line run along the Jordan River as far south as the Dead Sea, then westward toward the Mediterranean Sea, south of the city G (fig. 2).

The very small scale of the map, 1:2,000,000 as the discussion was made regarding all areas of the Middle East, not about Palestine apart, later created some difficulties to the exact location of the line on map with larger scale (Biger, 2003).

#### 4. The meaning of the Sykes – Picot Agreement

The Sykes – Picot Agreement as presented here was partly in contrast to the agreement achieved between Britain with the Arabs discussed early in 1915, promising the Arab Hashemite Sharif Hussein a total independence Arab state in the whole Arab Middle East, but not the area west of the great cities of Syria (Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Damascus). It is also stand in contrast to the 1917 Balfour Declaration in which Britain promised to support the establishment of A Jewish National Home in Palestine.

Anyhow, in a first sight, and as such it was first present to the world by the Bolshevik authorities back in 1918, it appears that the Sykes – Picot Agreement is an example of dividing the world by imperial powers irrespective of terrain or the will of local residents. Such divisions have characterized the international politics during the nineteenth century and up to the War, and can therefore be seen herein as the culmination of the Imperial process. However, this agreement can also identify new elements, and perhaps the beginnings of a new policy.

The agreement initially recognized rights of the residents of the areas to be independent. The idea of establishing two independent Arab states, albeit under the auspices of imperial powers but with the

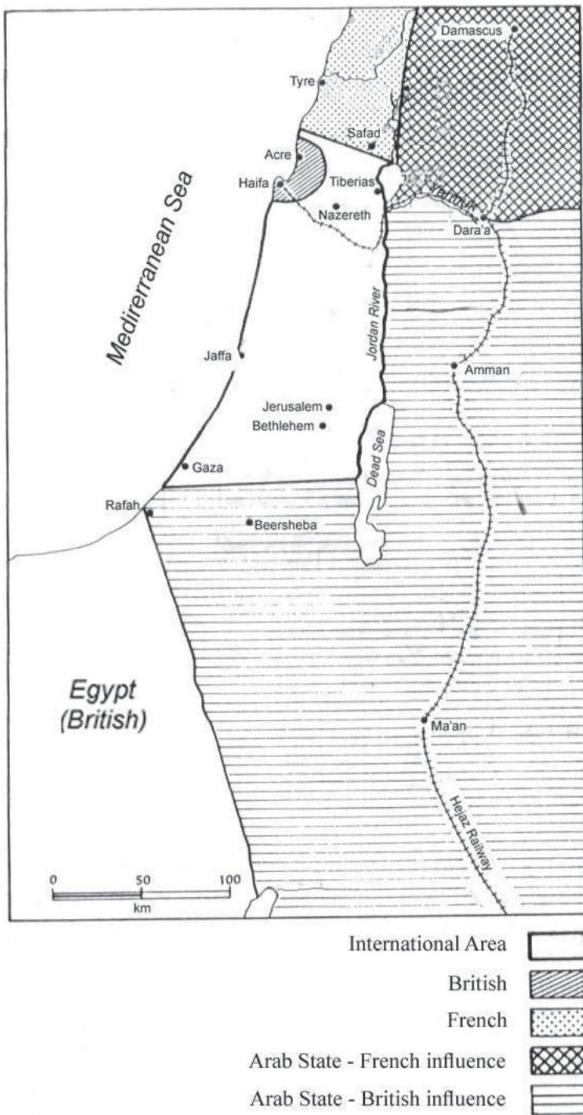


Fig. 2. Palestine according the Sykes – Picot Agreement  
 Source: Author own map.

definition of an independent state, was certainly an idea that never appeared before in any partition set by world powers. This idea was, perhaps without referring to its drafters and perhaps due to recognition of the emerging international system, a new ruling from which will continue to influence global policy, i.e. – the principle of self-determination, although still under the auspices of the superpowers, but in a new way. In the Wards of the Agreement: "1. That France and Great Britain are prepared to recognize and protect an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States in the areas (A) and (B) marked on the annexed map, under the suzerainty of an Arab chief. That in area (A) France, and in area (B) Great Britain, shall have priority of right of enterprise and local loans. That in area (A) France, and in area (B) Great Britain, shall alone supply advisers or

foreign functionaries at the request of the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States"<sup>5</sup>.

According to many scholars, among them also the author of "The line in the sand," There is but a continuation of the policies of the past, but this view does not explain why certain parts of the division of the Ottoman Empire were to be British, French, Russian and Italian, while other parts were supposed to be Arab independent states, although in European spheres of influence. More ever, this agreement also present for the first time the idea of joint international control over space containing holy sites of religious importance for the Christianity and the Islamic faiths. A similar idea was held on the eve of the war in the city of Tangier in Morocco, but there, political and economical reasons were behind it. Thus the agreement proposed for the first time a Joint International control for the regime which was due to govern Palestine. From then on, this idea continued to be suggested, in one form or another, in subsequent programs of partition presented during the British Mandate period in Palestine, before the formal establishment of the State of Israel. The idea which was rose in our days in order to create an "international space" in the "Holy Basin" of Jerusalem is the direct result and continuation of an idea proposed by the Sykes – Picot Agreement.

### 5. The demise of the agreement

The agreement between Britain and France which was signed due to the constraints of the War, did not fulfilled the requests of the signatories, and each side sought to attract the terms of the agreement to its benefit. The agreement was a confidential one, not being published publicly, and only the relevant governments know about it. However, Tsarist Russia, which was a one of the partner of the Sykes – Picot Agreement, underwent a revolution when the Communists took over the country in late 1917. The new regime revealed the Agreement and released it publicly in order to show the evils of the imperialist powers. The Soviet Union announced its withdrawal from the agreement (fig. 3).

This measure eliminated from the Agreement. By this, the agreement lost its legal validity as one of its members abolished his participation in it. More ever, at the same time (late 1917 to September 1918), the Egyptian Expeditionary Force – the military power of

<sup>5</sup> Sir Edward Gray, British Foreign Secretary to Paul Cambon, French Foreign Secretary, 16 May 1915, in British WWI Document Archive, Official Papers, Sykes – Picot Agreement, 15&16 May, 1916.





Fig. 3. Newspaper publication about secret treaty in Manchester Guardian, after Soviet Russia Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, M. Trotsky.

Source: The Manchester Guardian, November 26, 1917, 5.

the British Empire led by General Allenby in the West Middle East, occupied Palestine and Syria. Another British expeditionary force captured Mesopotamia – the East Rivers Valley. Thus, when the War was ended, in November 1918, Britain ruled over all the areas designated for partition according to Sykes – Picot Agreement of 1916, except North Eastern Anatolia which was intended for Russia. Shortly after the British military journey along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, in October 1918, General Allenby organized the occupied area into three administrative subdivisions called "occupied enemy territory."<sup>6</sup> Thus, "The Southern Occupied Territory" included the districts of Jerusalem, Nablus and Acre and was put under the command of a British General. "The Northern Occupied Territory" (later called "Western"), which included the districts of Beirut, Lebanon, Latakia, Antioch and Alexandretta Bay, was placed under the command of a French Colonel. The third area – "The Eastern Occupied Territory" included all the region east of the areas mentioned above, and was placed under the command of an Arab officer, Gen. Ali Reza Al-Riqabi. This act was based mainly on the division of the territory according to the lines of the Sykes-Picot agreement, with one key difference. Palestine, the area designed to be placed under international regime, was placed under the command of a British officer. This was the first significant deviation from the agreement. Not only had these acts changed the meaning of the Agreement. Even before, when United States joined the Allied Forces in 1917, its president, Woodrow Wilson, presented his 14 points determination of the US war's goals. One of the points dealt with the idea of non – annexation of occupied areas after the War, another dealt with the independence of the Arabs in the Middle East (Manuel, 1949). Britain and France agreed to accept the American principles, and by this, they waived the Sykes – Picot Agreement which allocated areas for British and French control in the Middle East. The League of Nations which was established in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, intended to deal with the future of the world after the War, tried to fulfill the idea of self – determination. Thus new states were established in Europe based on this principal (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia) in the areas of the defeating empires. Anyhow it also claimed that "with regard to those colonies and territories which as a result of the recent war ceased to stand under the sovereignty of states ruled them before, populated by people who are not yet able to stand by themselves under the

<sup>6</sup> Allenby to War Office, telegram A.W. 1808, 23 October 1918, in File WO/101/71 in the British Archives P.R.O.

difficult conditions of the modern world, we must act according to the principle that the welfare and development of the member nations concerned are a sacred trust of civilization”<sup>7</sup>. It was also stated that “custody of these people will be entrusted to advanced nations.” As for the Middle East the League of Nation declared that “certain committees, belonging to the Turkish Empire, reached the rank of development where we can recognize the existence of independent nations, provided they receive help and advice from a government mandate, until they can stand on their own”. According to those Statements, Advance countries, Britain, France, South Africa (For areas belong to the German Empire in Africa), Australia, New Zealand, Japan (for areas belong to the German Empire in the Pacific Ocean), got the mandate to administer those area, which were called “The Mandate Areas.” Thus, the issues that were discussed during the Peace Conference were those dealing with which advance countries will get the Mandate and for which areas of the previous Ottoman Empire it will be given. The League of Nations stated that “the requests of these committees should be used as a main consideration in choosing a mandate.” Britain and France, which stood behind the Mandate idea, were the main candidates for the task to manage the new Middle East as both were empires that had extensive experience in controlling and managing overseas regions, and they had clear interests in the Middle East affairs. The League of Nations recognized the right of the self determination of various groups settled in the Middle East including the Arabs, the Christians Maronites of Lebanon,) The Armenians and The Kurds and added to them the Jewish People because of their historical rights to the Holy Land, though actually they were not settled (but in minor number) in Palestine at that time. The Maronites and the Jews gladly accepted the offer to manage them by the French (Maronites) and the British (The Jews) while the rest of the peoples of the region, and especially the Arabs, have expressed their desire for the management of a modern superpower that hold no interests in the Middle East, i.e. at that time, the United States (Documents..., 1946). Anyhow, the new regime in United States (President Wilson ended his presidency in 1920) halt its actual activities in the Middle East partly because its reluctance to be involved in that area and partly because of the isolationist policies it adopted, which even prevent her to join the newly established League of Nations. Thus, Armenia and Kurdistan, which were due to become mandate territories under the United

States, lost that status (Armenia got its independence only in 1989, after the abolition of the Soviet Union, Kurdistan is still not an independent state). The League of Nations, according to the interests of France and Britain, decided, in April 1920, at a conference of San Remo, after lengthy negotiations, that Britain will receive a mandate to administer Palestine and Mesopotamia and France will get a mandate to the administration of Syria and Lebanon. This decision was the final act to abolish the original Sykes – Picot Agreement, although, as will be present later, parts of its boundary’s lines have affected the new boundary lines which were created in the Middle East. Britain and France had to decide where the dividing line between the areas under their management will be delimited, which they did in the 1920’s, and each of them was sovereign to draw the internal boundaries of the areas under their management. France was to determine the line between Christian Lebanon and Arab Syria, which she did in 1920 as well as to negotiate the delimitation of the new boundary between Syria and Turkey. Britain was supposed to place a line between Palestine and Mesopotamia (later Iraq), as well as the future boundary between their controlled areas and Saudi Arabia. All of those lines, established in the 1920s, but not of Palestine (now partly the State of Israel), with minor changes, are the International boundaries of the Middle East up to now. These boundaries are the boundaries ISIS wanted to abolish and not the Sykes – Picot lines.

## Conclusion

Thus, The San Remo Resolution of 1920 and the later arrangements developed from it, not the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, is the international act which gave Britain and the France the power to act in the Middle East, determine as they wish according to their ability, and thus created the territorial division and the border demarcation of the new map of the Middle East. The new map used only some minor sections of the lines suggested by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Palestine, which became a British mandate territory, instead of an international area, adopted from the Sykes – Picot map only part of its eastern boundary, the line along the Jordan River. The boundary between French Lebanon and French Syria with British Palestine is differ from the Agreement’s lines, Transjordan was created entirely as a new area which did not appeared in the Agreement, British Iraq was extended far north of the Sykes-Picot line and included the Mosul area. Only the outgoing line from a point south of the Druze Mountain in Syria to the town of Deir A-Zor on the

<sup>7</sup> Article 22, League of Nation Declaration. All the other citation are from this Declaration.

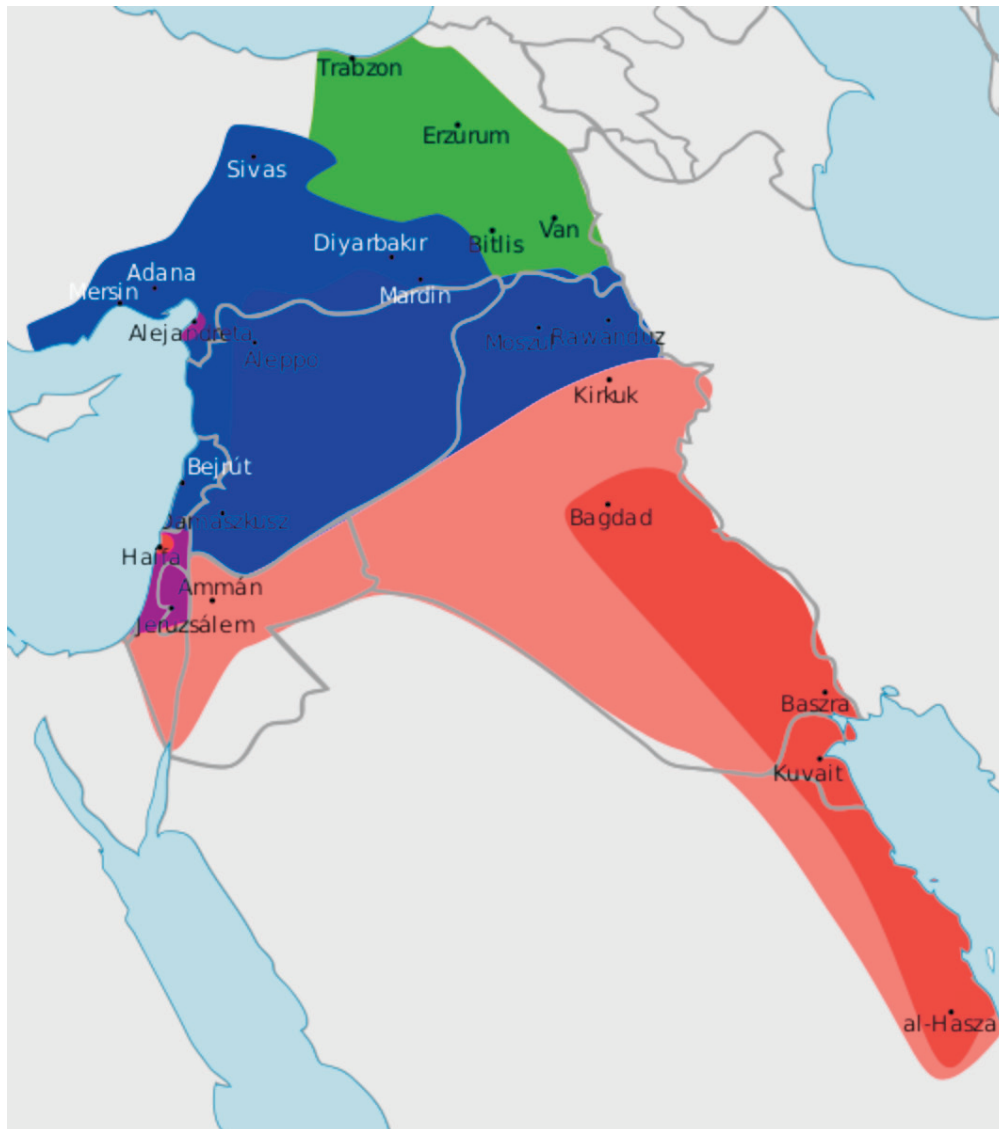


Fig. 4. Sykes Picot map and the actual map of the Middle East

Source: *A Line in the Sand*, James Barr, 12.

Euphrates River remained unchanged from the map of the Agreement.

It therefore appears that the Sykes – Picot Agreement did not “lived” too long, and “died” shortly after obtained and actually never came to realization (fig. 4). However, since the agreement became known to the world, and thus entered the history books, and partly because of extensive Soviet propaganda as to the evil of the imperialist’s activities, which was adopted by all the post colonial countries and writers, especially those which deals with the breaking of the pseudo – Arab Unity, it remains etched in the memories of statesmen, political science students and politicians of all parties, as the Agreement that shaped the territorial division of the Middle East, without having any historical or geographical true base for this.

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