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The Sykes-Picot Agreement and its Enduring Impact on State Formation and Conflicts in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT :

The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 represents a defining moment in the modern history of the Middle East, marking the clandestine division of Ottoman Arab territories between Britain and France during World War I. This paper examines the origins, implementation, and enduring impact of the Agreement on state formation and regional conflicts in the Middle East. Drawing on historical analysis, international relations theory, and political geography, the study reveals how the secretive nature of the Agreement and its imperial motivations shaped a political order characterized by artificial borders, fragmented societies, and contested sovereignties.

The research traces the Agreement's transition from a wartime diplomatic accord to the formalized mandate system established by the League of Nations, which institutionalized European control under the guise of trusteeship. The resultant states—most notably Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan—were constructed without regard to ethnic, tribal, or religious realities, generating states that were inherently unstable and lacking broad legitimacy. The paper highlights how these colonial-era decisions seeded long-term structural weaknesses, manifesting in recurring conflicts such as the Iraqi sectarian strife, the Syrian civil war, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and Kurdish statelessness.

The analysis further explores the symbolic power of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in contemporary Middle Eastern political discourse. The Agreement has evolved into a potent metaphor for foreign betrayal and imposed fragmentation, invoked by a diverse array of actors including authoritarian regimes, nationalist movements, and extremist groups like ISIS. Such references underscore how colonial legacies persist not only materially but also within the collective memory and political narratives of the region.

To contextualize these historical and contemporary dynamics, the study applies multiple theoretical frameworks. Realism explains the strategic calculations that motivated Britain and France to negotiate the Agreement, emphasizing the pursuit of power and national interest. Constructivism sheds light on how imposed borders disrupted indigenous identities and undermined state legitimacy. Postcolonial theory critiques the imperialist epistemologies that justified colonial control and continue to influence regional politics. Political geography highlights the enduring spatial consequences of artificially drawn borders and the challenges they pose to traditional Westphalian notions of sovereignty.

Finally, the paper considers the contemporary resonance of Sykes-Picot amid ongoing regional instability, shifting alliances, and debates over state sovereignty. It emphasizes the limitations of the post-Ottoman state system and argues for the need to develop more flexible, inclusive governance models that recognize the complex social realities of the Middle East. The study concludes by offering recommendations for policymakers and scholars, advocating for approaches that integrate historical awareness, local agency, and interdisciplinary perspectives to address the persistent challenges rooted in the colonial legacy.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the Middle East's enduring crises by situating them within a long-term structural framework shaped by imperial interventions. It asserts that any meaningful effort to promote peace and stability must reckon with the legacies of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which continue to define both the physical and ideological contours of the region.

Keywords: Sykes-Picot Agreement, Middle East State Formation, Colonial Legacy, Mandate System, Regional Conflicts

1. INTRODUCTION

Few diplomatic documents have had as far-reaching and enduring consequences for the modern Middle East as the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. Secretly negotiated between Britain and France, with the assent of Tsarist Russia, this wartime accord carved up the Arab provinces of the decaying Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence and direct control, in anticipation of an Allied victory in World War I. Though originally conceived as a pragmatic instrument of imperial ambition, the Sykes-Picot Agreement laid the groundwork for a fragmented and externally imposed geopolitical order. Its artificial boundaries, forged without consultation with the populations they affected, have had lasting implications for state formation, political legitimacy, and patterns of conflict in the Middle East.

This paper argues that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was not simply a relic of colonial diplomacy but a formative event that institutionalized a structural legacy of instability. The agreement inaugurated a pattern of externally engineered statehood that privileged Western strategic interests over indigenous political dynamics. In doing so, it catalyzed a series of contradictions—between territorial integrity and communal heterogeneity, between promises of Arab independence and imperial governance, and between the rhetoric of self-determination and the reality of mandate rule. These contradictions reverberate through the twentieth century and into the present, visible in persistent contestations over borders, identity politics, and the legitimacy of state authority.

The enduring impact of Sykes-Picot lies not only in its cartographic consequences but in the ideational and political frameworks it imposed. It created states where none had previously existed in their modern form—such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan—often without regard to the sectarian, ethnic, or tribal compositions within. These states emerged under the League of Nations mandate system, which transformed the Sykes-Picot understanding into an international legal structure of governance by Britain and France. Thus, a temporary wartime understanding became a durable geopolitical architecture, one that embedded imperial hierarchy and dependence into the foundations of Middle Eastern political life.

The importance of revisiting the Sykes-Picot Agreement is underscored by its continued invocation in contemporary discourse, particularly by insurgent and revisionist actors. From the Islamic State's declaration of the "end of Sykes-Picot" in 2014 to renewed scholarly and policy debates about the potential redrawing of regional borders, the agreement retains a potent symbolic and material presence in shaping the region's conflicts and collective memory. It has become a cipher for grievances related to colonial intrusion, fractured sovereignty, and postcolonial disorder.

This study situates the Sykes-Picot Agreement within the broader contexts of World War I diplomacy, colonial strategic interests, and the early international system. It draws upon a range of historical documents, cartographic analysis, international relations theory, and secondary scholarship to trace both the immediate outcomes and long-term implications of the agreement. The central research question is: *To what extent did the Sykes-Picot Agreement create structural conditions for conflict and fragmentation in the modern Middle East?* In answering this, the paper adopts an interdisciplinary and analytical approach, linking historical evidence with international relations frameworks to understand how a single agreement contributed to the enduring volatility of a region caught between imposed borders and contested identities.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: PRE-1916 MIDDLE EAST AND WORLD WAR I DIPLOMACY

To understand the Sykes-Picot Agreement's implications, one must first examine the complex historical and geopolitical landscape that preceded it. By the early twentieth century, the Middle East was undergoing a profound transformation. The Ottoman Empire, once a formidable Eurasian power, had become known as the "Sick Man of Europe," plagued by administrative decay, territorial loss, and rising nationalist unrest. The balance of power in the region was further destabilized by the ambitions of European empires, particularly Britain, France, and Russia, whose expanding strategic interests converged in the weakening Ottoman domains. These dynamics set the stage for a clandestine imperial bargain—Sykes-Picot—that would attempt to reorder the Middle East not in the interest of its peoples, but in accordance with colonial priorities shaped during World War I.

2.1 The Ottoman Empire on the Eve of Collapse

By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the Ottoman Empire retained nominal control over a vast but fragile Arab-majority territory encompassing modern-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and the Arabian Peninsula. Yet this control was increasingly challenged. Internally, the Empire faced growing Arab nationalist sentiments—most notably from intellectual circles in Damascus, Beirut, and Cairo—fueled by a broader trend of anti-imperial consciousness that paralleled developments in South Asia and Africa. The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the rise of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) introduced a policy of Turkification that alienated Arab elites and reinforced ethno-political divisions.

The Ottomans also faced severe military and economic challenges. The Balkan Wars (1912–13) had resulted in the loss of nearly all Ottoman territories in Europe, accelerating the empire's decline. Furthermore, railways such as the Berlin-Baghdad line symbolized both infrastructural modernization and the growing entanglement of European powers in the internal affairs of the empire. The Ottomans' decision to ally with the Central Powers in 1914 was partly driven by a desire to resist further encroachment, particularly from Russia in the Caucasus and British ambitions in Egypt and the Gulf.

2.2 Competing Imperial Ambitions in the Middle East

The Middle East was a region of immense strategic importance to European powers. For Britain, control over the Suez Canal—opened in 1869—was crucial to safeguarding the route to India, its most prized colony. Britain had already declared a protectorate over Egypt in 1882 and maintained strong influence in the Persian Gulf through agreements with local sheikhdoms. For France, the Levant represented a long-standing sphere of cultural and religious interest, particularly in Lebanon and Syria, where French missionaries and schools had deep roots. Russia, meanwhile, had longstanding ambitions for access to warm-water ports and the protection of Orthodox Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire.

These overlapping imperial interests collided as the war progressed. The Allies viewed the disintegration of Ottoman control as inevitable and began preparing to partition the Arab provinces even before they had militarily occupied them. This was not merely opportunism; it reflected long-term strategic planning embedded in the logic of imperial competition. The Middle East was not just a periphery—it was a pivot in global empire-building.

2.3 The Arab Revolt and British Wartime Diplomacy

A critical element in the lead-up to the Sykes-Picot Agreement was the series of wartime promises made by Britain to various actors. The most prominent of these was the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (1915–16), a series of letters exchanged between Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, and Sharif Hussein of Mecca. In these letters, Britain appeared to promise Arab independence in exchange for a revolt against

the Ottomans. While the terms were vague—particularly regarding the inclusion of Palestine and Lebanon—they were interpreted by the Arab leadership as a commitment to post-war sovereignty.

In June 1916, Sharif Hussein launched the Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule, aided by British officers such as T.E. Lawrence. The revolt was symbolically and tactically significant: it contributed to the weakening of Ottoman control in the Hejaz and facilitated British advances into Palestine and Syria. However, this Arab contribution was ultimately subordinated to imperial calculations, as would be revealed with the disclosure of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

2.4 The Sykes-Picot Agreement in Context

It was in this context of military alliance, strategic deception, and diplomatic duplicity that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was secretly negotiated. Signed in May 1916, the agreement was named after its chief architects—Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and François Georges-Picot of France. It divided the Ottoman Arab provinces into several zones:

- **Direct French control** (blue zone): including coastal Syria and Lebanon.
- **Direct British control** (red zone): including southern Mesopotamia and the Baghdad-Basra corridor.
- **Zones of indirect control/influence** (Area A and Area B): covering inland Syria and northern Iraq for France, and inland Palestine and Transjordan for Britain.
- **International administration**: proposed for Palestine due to its religious significance.

The agreement not only betrayed the promises made to the Arabs but also conflicted with subsequent diplomatic initiatives—most notably, the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which Britain expressed support for a Jewish national home in Palestine. This contradiction would become a source of long-standing grievance and mistrust.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917, they published the full text of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, exposing the duplicity of Allied diplomacy. The disclosure was a profound shock to Arab leaders and fueled a growing perception of betrayal by the West. This moment marks the beginning of what Rashid Khalidi calls “the colonial construction of the Middle East,” wherein legitimacy was redefined not by indigenous agency but by European negotiation tables.

3. THE SYKES-PICOT AGREEMENT: CONTENT, SECRECY, AND REPERCUSSIONS

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, formally signed in May 1916, was not merely a secret wartime accord—it was a blueprint for imperial reordering that ignored indigenous political aspirations and laid the foundation for a century of contested legitimacy and unstable borders in the Middle East. Negotiated between Britain and France, with Russian assent, the agreement defined spheres of influence and direct control in anticipation of Ottoman defeat. Although it was never legally binding and was partially modified by later agreements and wartime events, Sykes-Picot’s conceptual and territorial logic shaped the architecture of the postwar Middle East. It exemplified the colonial mindset of externally imposed statehood and reflected the realpolitik of wartime diplomacy at the expense of the region’s future stability.

3.1 The Structure and Provisions of the Agreement

The Sykes-Picot Agreement envisioned the partition of Ottoman Arab lands into British and French zones, combining direct control with spheres of influence. The territorial arrangements included:

- **French control (Zone A and Blue Zone)**: France was to control southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq (including Mosul), Syria, and Lebanon. The Blue Zone would be under direct French administration, while Zone A would be a nominally independent Arab state under French influence.
- **British control (Zone B and Red Zone)**: Britain was to control southern Mesopotamia (now Iraq), including Basra and Baghdad in the Red Zone, with influence extending over what is now Jordan and parts of northern Saudi Arabia (Zone B).
- **International Administration (Brown Zone)**: Palestine was designated for international administration, due to its religious importance to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, with no clear sovereign authority defined at that point.
- **Russian Interests**: Although not assigned specific territories in the agreement’s map, Russia was promised control over Istanbul, the Turkish Straits, and parts of eastern Anatolia in a related agreement among the Triple Entente powers.

The agreement was explicitly imperial in intent. It was negotiated in secrecy by two diplomats—Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and François Georges-Picot of France—without consulting the Arab populations whose lands were being divided. It also pre-emptively nullified the implications of the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, which many Arab leaders interpreted as a promise of independence in exchange for their revolt against the Ottomans.

3.2 Imperial Mindsets and Contradictory Diplomacy

Sykes-Picot exemplified the colonial logic of spatial control, whereby strategic depth, resource security, and trade routes took precedence over indigenous sovereignty. Britain sought control of Iraq for access to oil, recently discovered in Masjed Soleyman (1908), and for securing the Persian Gulf and Suez Canal route to India. France, meanwhile, emphasized its historical-cultural ties to Syria and the Levant, framing its claim in civilizational terms. These imperial objectives were cloaked in the rhetoric of "protection" and "civilization," typical of the period's colonial discourse.

Importantly, Sykes-Picot was only one part of a triad of contradictory British commitments, which also included:

- The **Hussein-McMahon Correspondence** (1915–16), promising Arab independence.
- The **Balfour Declaration** (1917), supporting a Jewish national home in Palestine.

- The **Sykes-Picot Agreement** (1916), dividing Arab territories between Britain and France.

These conflicting promises exposed the deeply duplicitous nature of wartime diplomacy, reflecting the British Empire's attempt to appease different strategic partners while maximizing postwar territorial control. The agreements were not designed to reconcile interests, but to delay and deflect competing claims until victory was secured.

3.3 The Bolshevik Leak and Arab Reaction

The true nature of the Sykes-Picot Agreement was not publicly known until November 1917, when Leon Trotsky, Commissar for Foreign Affairs in the newly established Bolshevik regime, leaked the full texts of the secret wartime treaties signed by the Tsarist government. The Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* published the agreement, causing an international scandal. The document was later reprinted by *The Manchester Guardian*, confirming fears among Arab leaders that British wartime assurances had been duplicitous.

The revelation deeply undermined Arab trust in British intentions. Faisal bin Hussein, one of the central figures of the Arab Revolt, expressed disillusionment, stating in the aftermath of the Paris Peace Conference (1919) that the promises made to his father were systematically violated. Arab nationalist thinkers such as Sati' al-Husri and Michel Aflaq increasingly emphasized the betrayal of the Arab cause by Western powers, linking the Sykes-Picot division to the broader colonial subjugation of the Arab world.

The leaked agreement also galvanized the emerging Pan-Arabist sentiment, which now coalesced around a shared grievance of betrayal and a common demand for unity and sovereignty. This shift in Arab political consciousness would shape the trajectory of nationalist movements throughout the 20th century, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine.

3.4 From Secret Treaty to Institutional Reality

Though the Sykes-Picot Agreement was never implemented in full, its basic geopolitical architecture was transformed into policy at the San Remo Conference (1920) and under the League of Nations Mandate system. Britain and France effectively retained control of their agreed-upon zones through the legal fiction of the Mandates—supposedly designed to guide "less developed" nations toward self-rule. In reality, these mandates functioned as extended colonial rule.

- Britain received the Mandates for Iraq and Palestine (including Transjordan).
- France was awarded Syria and Lebanon.

This continuity between Sykes-Picot and the postwar settlement illustrates the institutionalization of imperial intentions. As political geographer Derek Gregory has argued, the map drawn by Sykes and Picot became "a blueprint for the colonial ordering of space." The arbitrary nature of these borders, drawn with scant regard for ethnic, tribal, or sectarian realities, sowed the seeds for future instability—from Kurdish statelessness and sectarian competition in Iraq to Alawite dominance in Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

4. POST-WWI STATE FORMATION AND THE MANDATE SYSTEM

The end of World War I marked not the liberation of the Arab provinces from Ottoman rule, as many in the Arab world had anticipated, but rather the institutionalization of European control through the League of Nations Mandate system. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, though never fully implemented in its original form, provided the essential ideological and cartographic template for the mandates imposed by Britain and France. This new political architecture represented a shift from informal empire to formalized trusteeship, legitimized by the rhetoric of internationalism but driven by imperial ambition. The outcome was the creation of new states and borders that were often misaligned with local identities and interests, sowing the seeds for persistent political fragmentation and interstate as well as intrastate conflicts in the Middle East.

4.1 From Sykes-Picot to San Remo: Legalizing Imperial Interests

The San Remo Conference in April 1920 formalized the redistribution of Ottoman Arab territories under the League of Nations' newly devised Mandate system. Though couched in the language of international law and moral duty, the mandates were direct continuations of the Sykes-Picot blueprint, rebranded under the auspices of international legitimacy. Britain was granted mandates over Iraq and Palestine (which included Transjordan), while France was granted control over Syria and Lebanon.

The mandate system, theoretically predicated on the idea of "tutelage," was based on Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which categorized former Ottoman and German colonies into three classes. Arab lands were designated as "Class A" mandates, implying that their peoples had reached a stage of development where independence was feasible, but still required "administrative advice and assistance" from advanced nations. In practice, this arrangement permitted the uninterrupted continuation of colonial control under a more palatable legal guise.

4.2 The Creation of Artificial States

The new borders drawn under the mandate system largely disregarded pre-existing ethnic, tribal, religious, and linguistic affiliations. Instead, they were shaped by European strategic interests and the desire to assert geopolitical influence. In Iraq, the British combined three formerly distinct Ottoman provinces—Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra—into a single state. These provinces housed Kurds in the north, Sunni Arabs in the center, and a Shi'a Arab majority in the south. The unification of these diverse populations under one state, with limited historical cohesion, created deep structural tensions that would repeatedly resurface in the form of sectarian conflict and Kurdish insurgency.

In Syria and Lebanon, the French adopted a policy of divide and rule, encouraging sectarian fragmentation to undermine Arab nationalist aspirations. Lebanon was carved out of Greater Syria in 1920 and designed as a Maronite Christian-majority state, despite substantial Muslim and Druze populations. In Syria, France further divided the country into multiple autonomous regions (including Alawite and Druze states), reinforcing communal divisions and weakening pan-Syrian unity. These policies were not only destabilizing but were deliberately intended to prevent the emergence of a strong, unified Arab nationalist opposition to French rule.

4.3 Resistance and the Rise of Arab Nationalism

The imposition of the mandate system sparked widespread resistance movements across the region. In Syria, the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925–27 united Druze, Sunni, and Christian factions in a rare display of cross-sectarian cooperation against French colonialism. The revolt was violently suppressed, but it galvanized anti-imperial sentiments and became a foundational narrative in Syrian national identity.

In Iraq, a similar revolt occurred in 1920, involving tribal leaders, religious figures, and nationalists opposed to British rule. The British responded with significant military force, including the use of aerial bombardment—a stark indicator of the militarized nature of colonial governance. While Britain ultimately established a monarchy under Faisal I, the new Iraqi state remained highly dependent on British military and political support, undermining its domestic legitimacy.

Meanwhile, in Palestine, Britain's dual commitment to the Balfour Declaration and its responsibilities under the Mandate led to escalating tensions between Zionist immigrants and Palestinian Arabs. The contradictory nature of British policy—simultaneously facilitating Jewish immigration while attempting to appease Arab demands—laid the groundwork for a conflict that would define regional geopolitics for the next century.

4.4 Enduring Institutional Weakness

The states created under the mandate system were structurally weak, lacking both genuine sovereignty and social cohesion. As political scientist Charles Tripp notes in the context of Iraq, these states were often "institutions imposed from above", more responsive to colonial administrators than to local demands. Bureaucratic systems were staffed by foreign officials or local elites co-opted by imperial powers, creating ruling classes that were disconnected from the broader population.

This lack of legitimacy was compounded by the absence of participatory governance. Political dissent was often suppressed, civil society was weak, and institutions such as parliaments or representative councils served as façades for continued colonial control. In many cases, these governance deficits persisted after formal independence, contributing to authoritarianism and the militarization of politics.

4.5 Mandates and the Failure of Postwar Self-Determination

The mandate system's failure lies not only in its imposition of arbitrary borders but in its betrayal of the principle of self-determination, which had been promoted by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson during the postwar peace process. The contradiction between Wilsonian rhetoric and European colonial practice became starkly evident in the Middle East. The King-Crane Commission (1919), sent by the U.S. to assess Arab opinion on postwar arrangements, found overwhelming opposition to French control and widespread support for Arab independence. Its recommendations were ignored in favor of strategic colonial agreements already in place.

The exclusion of Arab voices from the peace negotiations—despite their wartime alliance with the Entente and their contributions to the defeat of the Ottomans—further fueled political radicalization. Arab nationalism evolved in direct response to the marginalization and fragmentation inflicted by the mandate system, becoming a unifying ideology that aimed to reverse the divisions instituted by Sykes-Picot and its postwar derivatives.

5. ENDURING IMPACT ON REGIONAL CONFLICTS

The Sykes-Picot Agreement and the subsequent mandate system not only shaped the political map of the modern Middle East but also entrenched a structural legacy of conflict. By imposing artificial borders, fostering weak institutions, and privileging colonial strategic interests over indigenous sociopolitical realities, this imperial framework generated long-term patterns of fragmentation, grievance, and contestation. From Iraq's sectarian tensions to Syria's civil war, from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Kurdish statelessness, the ripple effects of the 1916 accord are still evident today. This section explores how the Sykes-Picot architecture has contributed to the persistence of regional instability, emphasizing the relationship between colonial-era state formation and contemporary geopolitical crises.

5.1 Arbitrary Borders and Fragmented Identities

The most immediate and visible legacy of Sykes-Picot lies in the arbitrary borders it produced—borders that largely ignored the region's complex ethnic, tribal, and religious mosaic. The lines drawn in 1916 and institutionalized by the mandate system did not reflect organic national identities but were constructed to serve European interests. As historian David Fromkin observes, "the modern Middle East was not born but was invented—shaped by decisions taken in Europe."

In Iraq, for example, the fusion of Kurdish-majority Mosul in the north, Sunni Arab Baghdad in the center, and Shi'a Arab Basra in the south created a territorially unified but socially fragmented state. This internal heterogeneity, combined with authoritarian governance and uneven development, has led to chronic instability, including:

- The 1991 and 2003 uprisings and insurgencies;
- The rise of sectarian militias post-2003;

- The temporary collapse of state authority during the ISIS occupation of Mosul in 2014.

ISIS, in fact, directly referenced Sykes-Picot in its propaganda, declaring in its 2014 video *"The End of Sykes-Picot"* that it had dismantled the "colonial borders" imposed by unbelievers. The symbolic destruction of the border between Syria and Iraq was more than theatrical—it was a direct challenge to the legitimacy of post-Ottoman statehood.

5.2 Syria: Civil War, Sectarianism, and the Colonial Legacy

Syria, another creation of the Sykes-Picot-derived mandate system, presents a striking case of how externally imposed structures have contributed to protracted conflict. The French Mandate over Syria institutionalized sectarianism by dividing the territory into sectarian mini-states (e.g., Alawite and Druze regions), reinforcing community divisions. The French also empowered minority groups like the Alawites in the military, setting the stage for the eventual rise of an Alawite-dominated ruling elite under Hafez al-Assad and later his son, Bashar al-Assad.

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 revealed the fragility of this constructed state. Deep cleavages—ethnic (Kurds vs. Arabs), sectarian (Sunnis vs. Alawites), and regional—resurfaced with devastating consequences. Although internal and external factors contributed to the escalation of the conflict, the colonial-era territorial and institutional design created structural vulnerabilities that made Syria particularly prone to fragmentation.

5.3 Palestine and the Structural Contradictions of Sykes-Picot

Perhaps no conflict better exemplifies the contradictions of Sykes-Picot than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestine, designated for international administration under the original agreement, was later placed under British Mandate control, during which time the British issued the Balfour Declaration (1917), expressing support for a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine.

This position stood in direct contradiction to the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, which had suggested Arab sovereignty over Palestine. The conflicting promises embedded within British wartime diplomacy produced a legacy of mutual distrust and political collision.

Under the mandate, Jewish immigration—encouraged by Britain—sparked growing Arab opposition and led to cycles of violence. The 1936–1939 Arab Revolt, brutally suppressed by the British, reflected widespread Palestinian rejection of both colonial rule and the changing demographic balance. The British failure to reconcile Zionist and Arab nationalist claims culminated in the 1947 UN Partition Plan and the subsequent 1948 war, displacing over 700,000 Palestinians and entrenching the conflict.

The absence of a sovereign Palestinian state, the ongoing occupation, and repeated cycles of violence are deeply rooted in the imperial manipulation of Palestine's legal and territorial status during the mandate era. The Sykes-Picot framework helped create a "problematic geography" where overlapping claims, externally imposed promises, and denied sovereignty generated a chronic crisis.

5.4 The Kurdish Question and Statelessness

Another critical consequence of the Sykes-Picot system was the failure to establish a Kurdish state, despite promises made in the Treaty of Sèvres (1920). The subsequent Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which replaced Sèvres, made no provisions for Kurdish autonomy, leading to their division among Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

This division has led to recurring Kurdish uprisings and armed struggles, including:

- The Kurdish revolts in Iraq (1960s–1990s) and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG);
- The PKK insurgency in Turkey since 1984;
- Syrian Kurdish autonomy experiments under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava.

The Kurdish case exemplifies how the imperial denial of self-determination—a consequence of the same realpolitik logic that produced Sykes-Picot—continues to generate tension and conflict, not only within states but also between them.

5.5 Transnational Repercussions and Geopolitical Insecurity

The post-Sykes-Picot regional order has been marked by transnational spillovers of conflict. The rigid preservation of artificial borders, combined with authoritarian state models and exclusionary identities, has fostered a regional system where domestic unrest often escalates into cross-border crises:

- The Syrian civil war spilled into Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan.
- The rise of non-state actors such as Hezbollah, ISIS, and Iranian-backed militias has eroded the sovereignty of multiple states.
- Regional rivalries—especially between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey—often play out within the fragile structures left behind by colonial designs.

The result is what many scholars have termed a "postcolonial security dilemma"—a condition in which the very states created under colonial logic are unable to ensure either internal cohesion or external security.

5.6 Sykes-Picot beyond the Map

The legacy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement is not confined to a map drawn over a century ago; it is embedded in the institutions, borders, and political crises of the contemporary Middle East. By creating states without nations, ignoring local agency, and privileging imperial interest over social coherence, the agreement set in motion a series of conflicts whose roots remain deeply entangled in that colonial moment. Understanding today's regional volatility

demands more than a focus on recent developments—it requires confronting the enduring consequences of the geopolitical architecture constructed in 1916.

6. THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, while often treated as a historical aberration or the product of wartime expediency, fits squarely within key theoretical paradigms in International Relations (IR) and political geography. It offers a case study that illustrates the interplay between imperialism, sovereignty, and spatial order in international politics. By examining the Agreement through the lenses of Realism, Constructivism, Postcolonial theory, and critical political geography, one can better understand how externally imposed borders and state systems are not merely outcomes of historical contingency but are also embedded in systemic patterns of international power.

6.1 Realism: Strategic Interests and the Logic of Power

Realist theory, which views international politics as a struggle among self-interested states operating in an anarchic system, offers a foundational explanation for the motivations behind the Sykes-Picot Agreement. From a realist standpoint, the secret treaty was a classic expression of balance-of-power politics, designed to pre-empt competition between Britain and France in the aftermath of Ottoman collapse.

Britain's interest in securing Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf corridor was driven by the imperative to protect its imperial lifelines to India, while France's push for the Levant was informed by a combination of strategic and symbolic factors, including its longstanding claim to protect Maronite Christians. Neither power prioritized the aspirations of local populations; their primary concern was geostrategic depth and postwar positioning.

The principle of raison d'état—reason of state—was clearly in operation. As classical realist Hans Morgenthau posited, states act based on national interest defined in terms of power. The secretive nature of the negotiations and the calculated division of Ottoman lands reflected an amoral calculus, wherein the region's internal dynamics were subordinated to external rivalries.

Yet realism cannot fully account for the consequences of the agreement. While it explains why Britain and France acted as they did, it does little to address how the imposed order interacted with local social fabrics, or why the resulting states have faced chronic legitimacy crises. For this, we must look beyond realism's rationalist assumptions.

6.2 Constructivism: Identity, Legitimacy, and State Formation

Constructivist IR theory, emphasizing the social construction of political reality, helps unpack the normative and ideational legacies of Sykes-Picot. From a constructivist view, the borders and states created in the agreement were not merely geographic partitions but symbolic impositions that reshaped how people in the region understood authority, identity, and belonging.

The artificiality of the imposed borders fractured pre-existing tribal, religious, and linguistic communities, forcing them into new national containers that lacked organic legitimacy. The creation of Iraq, Syria, and Jordan as "nation-states" masked the absence of a unified national identity. These were not nation-states in the European sense, but colonially imagined political spaces.

Moreover, the legitimacy of these entities was undermined from inception. Constructivists argue that legitimacy arises from shared norms and collective identity. The mandates, built on European paternalism, denied indigenous agency and generated a crisis of normative legitimacy—a condition that persists, as large segments of the population in these countries continue to view the state as an external imposition rather than a representation of collective will.

In this sense, Sykes-Picot helped codify what Benedict Anderson famously termed "imagined communities," but ones imagined not by the people within them, but by foreign powers. This inverted nation-building process explains, in part, the enduring appeal of Pan-Arabism, Islamism, and Kurdish nationalism as alternative identity frameworks.

6.3 Postcolonial Theory: Empire, Resistance, and the Politics of Memory

A postcolonial reading of the Sykes-Picot Agreement reveals the deep power asymmetries embedded in its logic and consequences. The agreement exemplified what Edward Said critiqued as "orientalism"—a system of knowledge production and political control in which the Middle East was constructed as a passive, backward space to be ordered by enlightened European powers.

The mandate system that followed Sykes-Picot cloaked imperial control in the language of progress and civilization, rationalizing occupation through legal and moralistic discourse. Postcolonial scholars argue that such structures perpetuated epistemic violence, by denying local societies the ability to define their own political futures. The continued instability of the region is thus not merely a post-independence failure but a colonial inheritance.

Moreover, postcolonial theory draws attention to how Sykes-Picot has been inscribed into the collective memory of the region. The agreement is remembered not just as a diplomatic maneuver but as a foundational betrayal, a narrative that has been mobilized by both secular Arab nationalists and Islamist movements. Whether invoked by Gamal Abdel Nasser or ISIS, Sykes-Picot functions as a symbol of violated sovereignty and imperial duplicity. This narrative power sustains its political relevance long after its formal dissolution.

6.4 Political Geography: The Problem of Territoriality

Political geography contributes another crucial lens, emphasizing the spatial dimensions of power and authority. The modern state system assumes territorial sovereignty, but in the Middle East, this Westphalian model was transplanted onto a region with historically fluid and overlapping affiliations. As scholars like Derek Gregory and Gearóid Ó Tuathail argue, geopolitical cartography is never neutral; it is an instrument of control. The Sykes-Picot borders were drawn not to reflect social realities but to partition strategic value. The "territorial trap"—the assumption that social and political authority

must be confined within fixed borders—has proven particularly problematic in the Middle East, where cross-border identities (tribes, sects, transnational movements) continue to defy rigid state boundaries.

The durability of these borders, despite their artificiality, demonstrates the coercive power of colonial spatial production. Even amid calls for federalism or redrawing, international norms still enforce these lines. Ironically, the very international system that once imposed Sykes-Picot continues to enforce its territorial logic through the principle of non-intervention and state sovereignty enshrined in the UN Charter.

6.5 Sykes-Picot Agreement – a systemic event

The Sykes-Picot Agreement cannot be fully understood without embedding it in broader theoretical contexts. Realism explains its genesis; constructivism and postcolonialism explain its consequences; and political geography explains the spatial fixity of its outcomes. Together, these frameworks reveal how Sykes-Picot was not merely a historical agreement but a systemic event—a moment where empire, identity, and international order intersected to produce a regional architecture whose contradictions continue to shape Middle Eastern politics.

7. CONTEMPORARY RESONANCE AND REINTERPRETATION

Over a century since it was signed, the Sykes-Picot Agreement remains more than a historical artifact—it is a living symbol embedded in the political consciousness of the Middle East. Its legacy reverberates not only through the geopolitical structures it helped to establish but also through the symbolic and discursive frameworks that continue to shape regional politics. Across ideological lines—from Arab nationalists to Islamists, from Kurdish movements to global media—the agreement is evoked as shorthand for foreign betrayal, illegitimate borders, and imposed fragmentation. Far from fading into the archives of imperial diplomacy, Sykes-Picot has become a reference point for interpreting the failures and fractures of the postcolonial Middle Eastern order.

7.1 The Political Afterlife of a Secret Agreement

In many parts of the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, the Sykes-Picot Agreement is remembered less for its precise cartographic details and more for its symbolic weight. It is viewed as the original moment of dismemberment, the beginning of a Western-designed regional system that privileged imperial interests and undermined indigenous sovereignty.

Leaders and militants alike have invoked the agreement to frame present-day crises as colonial legacies. The late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, for instance, frequently blamed Sykes-Picot for Iraq's fragility, especially in the context of Kurdish separatism and sectarian unrest. Likewise, Bashar al-Assad, amid the Syrian civil war, referred to the conflict as a Western conspiracy to "redivide" Syria—implying a new Sykes-Picot in the making.

This narrative of betrayal has proven politically potent. For secular regimes, it provides a convenient external scapegoat for internal failures. For opposition movements, it serves as a critique of the inherited legitimacy of post-Ottoman borders and states. In either case, Sykes-Picot functions less as a historical reference and more as a mythic origin story for the region's contemporary disorder.

7.2 The Islamic State and the "End of Sykes-Picot"

The most explicit and high-profile reference to the agreement in recent years came from the Islamic State (ISIS). In June 2014, after capturing territory across northern Iraq and eastern Syria, ISIS released a propaganda video titled *"The End of Sykes-Picot."* In the footage, jihadist fighters are seen dismantling border posts between Syria and Iraq—dramatically declaring that "this is not the border of Iraq and Syria. This is the division of the Muslim Ummah by the crusaders."

ISIS's declaration was not merely rhetorical. It directly challenged the state system imposed after World War I, seeking instead to construct a transnational Islamic caliphate that superseded colonial boundaries. The group understood the symbolic power of Sykes-Picot and used it to frame their own project as one of historical correction—the erasure of imperial cartography in favor of religious unity.

This invocation resonated with some audiences precisely because it tapped into a deeper collective memory of betrayal and artificiality. While the group's brutality alienated most of the population, its critique of the post-Ottoman state order found some traction, especially among marginalized Sunni populations who felt excluded from the governance structures in both Iraq and Syria.

The video's virality—viewed and shared across platforms—demonstrates the continued emotional and symbolic relevance of Sykes-Picot. It also underscores how colonial legacies are not just preserved in textbooks but are constantly reinterpreted, repurposed, and weaponized in contemporary struggles for legitimacy and power.

7.3 The Legacy in Foreign Policy Discourse

Beyond militant rhetoric, the legacy of Sykes-Picot continues to inform foreign policy discourse—both within the region and in global capitals. During the Arab uprisings of 2011, Western policymakers debated whether the revolts would result in the collapse of the artificial post-Ottoman state system. Commentators frequently referred to a possible "end of Sykes-Picot borders," suggesting a perception that the entire regional order could unravel.

In the aftermath of the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS, several Western think tanks and policy journals (e.g., *Foreign Affairs*, *Brookings*, *Carnegie*) speculated on the need to redraw Middle Eastern borders to align more closely with ethnic or sectarian realities. Although few such proposals gained serious traction, the fact that they were seriously considered illustrates the persistent unease with the viability of the Sykes-Picot state framework.

In the region itself, governments have both resisted and exploited these legacies. Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has occasionally referred to the Sykes-Picot era as a moment of "Muslim disinheritance," while promoting a neo-Ottoman vision of regional influence. Iran, meanwhile, has framed its role in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as part of a broader resistance to Western-imposed borders and intervention.

Thus, while the physical borders remain largely intact, the discursive consensus around them has frayed. In today's Middle East, the boundaries drawn in the aftermath of Sykes-Picot are increasingly seen as vulnerable, open to contestation, and lacking normative legitimacy.

7.4 Regional Realignments and Structural Tensions

The aftershocks of Sykes-Picot can also be traced in current regional realignments. The Abraham Accords (2020), normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states, are partly reflective of a reordering of regional priorities—shifting from Arab unity and anti-colonial solidarity to state-centric interests and security realpolitik.

Yet this very shift also underscores the incoherence of the regional order created under colonial auspices. The weakness of pan-Arab institutions, the fragmentation of conflict zones (Yemen, Libya, Syria), and the rise of non-state actors all reflect the inability of the Sykes-Picot-derived states to produce sustainable regional governance.

Further, the deepening economic interdependence between Gulf states and external powers like China, Russia, and India suggests a multipolar rebalancing, but one still unfolding within the inherited framework of colonial boundaries and weak institutional integration. The Middle East remains structurally disjointed—a condition traceable to its colonial inception and the absence of organic regionalism.

7.5 Sykes-Picot as a Discursive Battleground

What makes Sykes-Picot particularly unique is the way it continues to function as a discursive battleground. It is invoked not only by scholars and statesmen but also by poets, novelists, filmmakers, and activists. Its name appears in protest banners, in graffiti across Beirut and Baghdad, and in Friday sermons.

This symbolic potency indicates that Sykes-Picot is not merely a set of lines on a map—it is a cultural and political metaphor. It encapsulates regional grievances against foreign domination, internal fragmentation, and illegitimate state formation. It continues to serve as a touchstone for alternative imaginings of political community, whether in the form of a unified Arab world, a Kurdish homeland, or a pan-Islamic caliphate.

7.6 Contextualizing the Sykes-Picot Agreement

The endurance of the Sykes-Picot Agreement lies not in its technical implementation but in its emotional, symbolic, and political afterlife. It represents the founding moment of a regional order that many continue to experience as externally imposed and structurally unstable. As the Middle East navigates the 21st century—amid shifting alliances, resurging nationalism, and persistent instability—Sykes-Picot remains a powerful lens through which the region interprets its past, critiques its present, and imagines its future.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, forged in secrecy amid the turmoil of the First World War, stands as a pivotal moment in the history of the modern Middle East. This paper has traced its origins, analyzed its content, and explored its profound and lasting impact on state formation, regional conflicts, and political discourse. Far from being a mere historical curiosity, Sykes-Picot's legacy persists in the fragile borders, contested sovereignties, and unresolved grievances that continue to shape the region's complex geopolitical landscape.

8.1 Synthesis of Key Findings

The research reveals that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was fundamentally a product of imperial calculation, prioritizing British and French strategic interests over the political aspirations of the Arab peoples. The secretive division of Ottoman Arab lands institutionalized a system of artificial borders and externally imposed statehood, which was later cemented through the League of Nations mandate system. These developments introduced structural weaknesses—fragmented societies, weak institutions, and legitimacy deficits—that have fueled cycles of conflict from the interwar period through to the present.

The paper's analysis of contemporary conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and the Kurdish regions underscores the enduring nature of these problems. Arbitrary borders and sectarian divisions rooted in the colonial settlement have manifested in insurgencies, civil wars, and transnational violence. The symbolic power of Sykes-Picot, continually invoked by actors ranging from authoritarian regimes to militant groups, demonstrates how the colonial past remains a vital frame of reference in regional politics.

Theoretical reflections highlight that understanding the Sykes-Picot legacy requires moving beyond realist explanations of power politics to include constructivist and postcolonial perspectives that emphasize identity, legitimacy, and historical memory. Additionally, political geography illuminates the spatial dynamics of imposed borders and their coercive persistence despite their evident mismatch with social realities.

8.2 Broader Implications

This research contributes to a growing scholarly consensus that the current instability of the Middle East cannot be fully comprehended without reckoning with its colonial origins. The persistence of fragile statehood and contested sovereignty reflects a historical continuity of imperial fragmentation rather than merely the failure of post-independence governance.

Moreover, the paper's findings caution against simplistic calls to redraw borders or impose external solutions without deep engagement with local identities and political agency. The post-Sykes-Picot order reveals the dangers of ignoring sociopolitical complexities when constructing political units.

From an international relations standpoint, the Middle East exemplifies the limits of the Westphalian state system when transplanted onto heterogeneous and historically fluid societies. This calls for innovative approaches that consider multi-layered governance, federal arrangements, and inclusive political processes to better accommodate diversity and reduce conflict.

8.3 Recommendations for Future Research and Policy

1. **Re-examining State Sovereignty:** Scholars and policymakers should explore models of sovereignty that allow for greater flexibility in multi-ethnic and multi-religious contexts. This could include devolved powers, consociational governance, and recognition of sub-state identities.
2. **Local Agency and Inclusive Dialogue:** Future peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts must prioritize indigenous voices and foster inclusive political dialogue that addresses historical grievances linked to the colonial legacy.
3. **Addressing Symbolic Politics:** Understanding how historical narratives like Sykes-Picot are mobilized politically can help design more effective communication strategies to counter divisive rhetoric and promote reconciliation.
4. **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Combining insights from history, IR theory, political geography, and postcolonial studies offers a richer understanding of the region's challenges and can guide more nuanced policy interventions.
5. **Regional Cooperation Mechanisms:** Encouraging regional frameworks that transcend colonial borders, such as economic integration and cross-border cultural initiatives, may gradually build trust and mitigate conflict.

8.4 Final Reflection

The century-old Sykes-Picot Agreement serves as a stark reminder that political orders imposed without popular consent or consideration of social realities sow long-term instability. As the Middle East continues to grapple with conflict and transformation, revisiting this colonial inheritance provides critical lessons. It underscores the need to move beyond inherited frameworks and foster political structures grounded in legitimacy, inclusion, and respect for diversity.

Ultimately, this research reinforces the imperative for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to approach Middle Eastern politics with a historically informed and theoretically sophisticated perspective. Only then can pathways toward durable peace and self-determination be envisaged in a region still haunted by the shadows of Sykes and Picot.

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