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The Sykes–Picot Agreement

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The Sykes–Picot agreement (1916) is often associated with an annotated map signed by the English MP, Orientalist and diplomat Marc Sykes, and the French diplomat François Georges-Picot (Figure 1), illustrating a proposed Anglo-French disposition of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire. The confident line-drawing has been taken as exemplary of imperialist diplomacy, attempting to fashion political order from above, and afar. Neither the map nor the larger agreement actually determined the post-WWI settlement in the Middle East. Yet the agreement has retained a central place in the historical and political imagination of this region. It is enmeshed in themes that have been foundational to both history and IR, from the shifting modalities of imperialism, to cultural and religious difference, to nationalism and state-making. As a discrete 'moment' it offers a very particular, and partial, avenue into the intersecting histories of European imperialism and the Arab world. Read in this way, for both what it captures and what it obscures, the Sykes–Picot agreement offers a promising lens on this volume's organizing themes of 'modernity' and 'granularity'.

Part I begins with the map, situating the agreement in histories of European imperial vision and wartime strategy. Part II turns to a messier terrain in which Arab and other political actors are pursuing political projects of their own, and traces competing influences on the interwar territorial settlement. Part III takes up the theme of modernity, suggesting that a closer look at Sykes–Picot poses questions about the affinity in both IR and history scholarship between notions of modernity and the emergence of the (nation-)state. Part IV reflects on how a notion of granularity might open new understandings of Sykes–Picot, but also on how the Sykes–Picot agreement might challenge what we understand by granularity.

[1] I am grateful to the editors, and to Adam Mestyan, for comments on a draft, and to Mestyan for exchanges which have sharpened the analysis in Parts III and IV in particular. All errors remain my own.

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[Insert Figure 1 (see separate image file submitted; I believe this is in public domain so no copyright permission required)**]**

Figure 1**.** Map as signed by Sykes and Picot, 8 May 1916, UK National Archives MPK 1/426**.**

I. Sykes-Picot, the 'Eastern Question' and European Imperial Visions

Though the Sykes–Picot agreement was on its face an Anglo-French transaction, the series of letters constituting the agreement was embedded in a longer tradition of thinking about the Ottoman territories, in which Russia also had a central role. Since the nineteenth century, 'the Eastern Question'—what should become of Ottoman territories after the envisaged collapse of the empire and caliphate—was a recurring diplomatic preoccupation. The Ottoman Empire had figured in the European balance of power since the sixteenth century, initially as a major military force. By the eighteenth century, the Empire posed less of a direct threat, and the nineteenth century saw territorial losses to local struggles for autonomy and European imperial expansion in the Black Sea, the Balkans and North Africa. Britain and France resisted Russian expansion into Ottoman territories, fighting against Russia in the Crimean War (1854–56), and restraining Russia's territorial gains in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877. Britain itself occupied Egypt in 1882. In the Balkan war of 1912–13, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Montenegro left the Empire with only a tiny foothold in Europe. To the Anglo-French diplomatic mind, Sykes–Picot was a continuation of longstanding logics of conquest and rivalry, part of the answer to the question pending in 1914: if the 'sick man of Europe' declined further, to whom might the spoils fall, and with what effects for the European balance?

Britain and France had agreed with Russia in 1915 that Russia was to have Constantinople, and thus control of the Straits, in exchange for French and British spheres of interest in the Middle East (DBFP, vol 4, 635–8). The Sykes-Picot terms complemented this so-called Constantinople Agreement, giving greater specificity to Anglo-French claims. The core provisions, agreed in January 1916, were put first to Russia. Russia consented in an exchange of letters of April 1916, subject to annexations of territory on the Black Sea coast and Kurdistan, and on the

understanding that each state might maintain pre-existing religious and educational institutions on the territory of the other (DBFP, vol 4, 241–3).

Having secured Russian consent, the French Ambassador in London and the British Prime Minister exchanged letters in May 1916 referring to the signed map (DBFP, vol 4, 244–7). The zones marked 'A' and 'B' were designated as areas in which France and Britain were 'prepared to recognise and protect an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States … under the suzerainty of an Arab chief', with zone A being a French sphere of influence (involving priority of right of enterprise and local loans, exclusive supply of advisers at the request of the Arab State or Confederation), and zone B being a British sphere. Britain and France were referred to as 'protectors of the Arab State'. In the blue (dark-shaded, north of A in Fig 1) and red (lighter-shaded, east of B) zones respectively, France and Britain were to 'be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and … may think fit to arrange with the Arab [State/Confederation]', and prohibited from ceding these rights to any third power other than the Arab state. Palestine was to be subject to an 'international administration' of a form devised through consultation with Russia, and thereafter other allies and Sharif Husayn of Mecca. Other provisions dealt in detail with ports, water rights, railways and customs tariffs.

The brief mention of the Sharif links the Anglo-French plans to parallel correspondence in the preceding months between Henry McMahon (British High Commissioner in Egypt), and Sharif Husayn, guardian of the holy places of Mecca and Medina, in the Hejaz. After the Ottoman government had entered the war and, the sultan as caliph had proclaimed a *jihad*, calling on Muslim subjects of the Entente powers to rebel, the Sharif had emerged as a potential British ally. It was thought he might undermine the religious authority of the sultan's proclamation, foster revolt against Ottoman forces (increasingly important after the failure of the Gallipoli campaign in January 1916), and ensure that a Young Arab reformist movement in the Ottoman Army would incline towards Britain.

In correspondence which may have been drafted by his son Abdallah, the Sharif, invoking the 'whole of the Arab nation', invited Britain to recognize 'the independence of the Arab countries' within a certain territory (comprising roughly the Arabian peninsula and the whole of what was later Palestine, Transjordan, Syria and Iraq; the only specific exclusion being Aden); and to

approve the 'proclamation of an Arab Khalifate' (that is, supplanting the Sultan as caliph). In return he offered British priority in economic enterprises and an alliance against foreign powers attacking either party—most critically, at this point, Ottoman forces. Husayn pressed a reluctant McMahon for precise negotiations on the territorial claims. In a letter of 24 October 1915, McMahon noted that districts of Mersina and Alexandretta, as well as portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo, 'cannot be said to be purely Arab' and should be excluded from the territory sought. The letter stated that, 'in regard to those portions of the [remaining] territories … in which Great Britain is free to act without detriment to the interests of her ally, France', Britain was 'prepared to recognise and support the independence of the Arabs' (Cmd 5957, 1939). (This phrasing was mistranslated, and the Arab version suggested that, aside from the specifically excluded areas, Britain *was* free to act without regard to France (Barr 2007, 312–13)). Whatever the true nature of the reservation, it was subject to further stipulations, including that this be without prejudice to existing treaties with Arab chieftains (ruling in, e.g., Muscat and Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Nejd); that the new Arab state rely exclusively on British advice and advisers; and that special administrative arrangements be made in Baghdad and Basra to accommodate Britain's 'established position and interests' there.

The Sharif in reply insisted that the districts of Aleppo and Beirut—where Britain accepted French interests—were 'purely Arab' even if Christianized to some extent. He acquiesced to special administrative arrangements in Baghdad and Basra, but for a short time, and subject to compensation. The British response was ambivalent: on Baghdad more detailed consideration would be required, and on Aleppo and Beirut the interests of France were involved, and a further communication was promised. At the same time McMahon urged the Sharif to 'attach all the Arab peoples to our united cause'. The Sharif was uncompromising in reply: though Beirut and its coastline was left for the present to the French out of the need to protect the Anglo-French alliance in the current war, 'it is impossible to allow any derogation that gives France, or any other power, a span of land in those regions'. This was met with further platitudes from the British. The promised British communication concerning Syria was never sent.

From the British perspective, the McMahon–Husayn correspondence and the Sykes–Picot agreement were part of the same general design: to offer Husayn prospects sufficient to elicit

Arab mobilization against Ottoman forces, while managing potential conflict between Husayn and France (and, to a lesser extent, between Britain and France) over their relative positions. Nevertheless, the McMahon–Husayn and Sykes–Picot terms were in tension. Basic concordance was achieved insofar as Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus were excluded from direct French control under Sykes–Picot, on the basis that they had been promised to Husayn, but there were clearly differences concerning the nature and extent of Anglo-French control over various tracts of territory earmarked for a future Arab political entity. Some British officials at the time, and historians since, have maintained that the Sykes–Picot terms were reconcilable with undertakings given to Husayn (Friedman 1970, 87). However, the reluctance to inform Husayn immediately of the Sykes–Picot terms suggests that contemporaries felt there was tension between the commitments and, by 1919, many officials saw contradictions (Kedourie 2000, 124–6, 203–20). The position of Palestine, while not of concern to McMahon or Husayn during the initial exchange, would also be the subject of extensive later controversy. On the official British view in the 1930s, Palestine was *excluded* from a future Arab state, inter alia because it was part of those portions of Syria lying to the west of the district of Damascus. On the Arab view, the reference to Damascus meant the town itself and immediate surrounds rather than the whole administrative district. As Palestine was *not* to the west of Damascus in this sense, it was included in the territory of the future Arab state (Cmd 5974, 1939).

The Sykes–Picot agreement reflected the conceptual apparatus of nineteenth-century imperial diplomacy, seen also in Asia and Africa. The agreement paid close attention not only to borders, the precise location of which was sometimes secondary, but to ports, railways and sea routes: territorial divisions did not preclude a regional vision informed by military strategy and economic exploitation (Loevy 2016). Categories such as 'spheres of influence' and direct rule were part of a repertoire of imperial governance, as was a certain coyness about the nature of the authority in issue (after the original Anglo-French exchange of letters concerning the Sykes–Picot map, the French suggested that the reference to 'protectors' be struck out, as possibly suggesting that what was involved was 'a sort of protectorate', when the parties had only intended to 'guarantee the full independence of the new State' (DBFP, vol 4, 248–9)).

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The diplomatic form of Sykes–Picot, too, was in keeping with nineteenth-century precedent, in its secret, sometimes contradictory, promises (Donaldson 2016, 127–9; 2017, 578–81). Knowledge of the Sykes–Picot commitments circulated only slowly and partially, even within European governments. Husayn was not told of the Sykes–Picot agreement until May 1917, and may still not at that point have seen the text of the letters (Kedourie 2000, 124–5, 160–66). The Sykes–Picot agreement was publicly revealed after the Bolsheviks published a Russian internal memorandum summarizing the transactions, the gist of which was reported in Britain in November 1917, with a full English translation in January 1918 (Manchester Guardian, 19 Jan 1918, 5). The McMahon–Husayn correspondence was publicly known by 1920 but the British resisted publication, from fear of controversy about whether Palestine had been included in the territory promised, and because British support for an Arab caliphate might have aroused anger among Muslim subjects in India. It was not published officially by the British until 1939 (Cmd 5957, 1939; Kedourie 2000, 249–66).

II. Post-Ottoman visions of political order and Sykes-Picot in the post-war settlement

There was a rough continuity between prewar British imperial desiderata, the Sykes–Picot terms, and the settlements of the mid-1920s, in which French interests were concentrated in Syria, and British in Mesopotamia, each with (formal and informal) influence over new Arab polities. But there was no direct transposition of the Sykes–Picot terms. The Sykes–Picot and McMahon–Husayn commitments had met with some skepticism even among French and British officials at the time of their making (Barr 2011, 32–6; Friedman 1970, 93–4). Subsequent developments, such as the Balfour Declaration, and military and political initiatives in the Middle East, further undermined the plausibility of Sykes–Picot as a precise blueprint. New articulations of principle among the Allied Powers, particularly on self-determination and the renunciation of secret diplomacy, weakened the legal and rhetorical authority of the agreement, and the mandate system subjected territorial claims to a new international template. Perhaps most critically, Ottoman forces carved out the territory of modern-day Turkey, and populations across the region proved resistant to Anglo-French arrangements.

While Sykes–Picot and other wartime territorial arrangements acknowledged (and tried to instrumentalize) Arab political agency, they assumed that the ultimate resolution of the 'Eastern

Question' rested with Christian Europe. These transactions combined older European strategic imperatives (Russian acquisition of warm-water ports and control of the Straits; French expansion in the Mediterranean; British protection of sea routes to India) with new attention to resources like oil (although thinking about oil was often less focused than one might have expected: Fitzgerald 1994). Yet actors within the Ottoman Empire, too, had a dynamic sense of the region's future. Both 'Arab nationalists' (a complex category, discussed further below) and the 'Young Turk' movement anticipated a future political order distinct from existing Ottoman structures; often looking to the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy as a loose inspiration for Turco-Arab co-existence on a sort of federal model (Mestyan, n.d.; Yenen 2020). Husayn envisaged a new Arab caliphate; and groups such as the Kurds and Armenians had political projects of their own—visions which would play out in the interwar period and beyond.

In a first phase of post-war negotiations, running roughly 1918–20, something like the Sykes–Picot design was still in British and French contemplation. The Bolshevik Revolution and peace of Brest-Litovsk released the Allied powers from the Constantinople Agreement undertakings to Russia; and Britain occupied Mesopotamia, Palestine and Syria (allowing Faysal and his Arab forces to take Damascus). In September 1918 Britain and France agreed three 'zones' of of Occupied Enemy Territory Administration: South (Palestine, controlled by the British); West (coast of Syria and Lebanon, controlled by France); and East (interior of Syria, controlled by Faysal and his Hijazi Northern Army jointly with the British). These admittedly temporary arrangements reflected readjustment of Franco-British claims. France, which had played less of a role in the victories in the Levant, relinquished aspirations to a 'greater Syria' which would have included Palestine (and some British figures felt that France ought to lose Syria altogether). France also agreed to accord part of the oil-rich area around Mosul, originally in the French zone of the Sykes–Picot map, to Britain. Britain and France had to settle for League mandates over Iraq and Palestine (Britain) and Syria (France), rather than bilaterally-agreed acquisitions of territory and spheres of influence. However, this scheme still divided Arabic-speaking peoples (particularly between Syria and Palestine) in a way that was deeply unpopular.

The British paid lip-service to Arab independence. In a declaration of November 1918, Britain and France committed to 'emancipation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks and the establishment of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the

initiative and free choice of the indigenous populations' (Cmd 5974, 1939, 50). However, there was little meaningful political consultation with Arab peoples. Faysal attended the Paris Peace Conference as head of the Hejazi delegation, and the British hoped he could appeal to American espousal of self-determination as a check on French claims. But France in particular rejected Faysal's claim to speak for a larger Arab population. Though Faysal was allowed to speak in favour of independence and unity for Arabic-speaking peoples, or at least their power to choose their own mandatory (FRUS PPC 1919, vol 3, 889–94), he was excluded from negotiations. The 'King-Crane Commission' established on American insistence to investigate the desires of the populations in occupied areas reported in August 1919 that there was no appetite for a French mandate (Faysal having made an effort to distance Maronite Christians and others sympathetic to France from these consultations, to give greater weight to what he claimed was the Arab majority); and recommended that the US, or Britain, would be more welcome. On Anglo-French insistence, the report was withheld from publication. Faysal was excluded from the San Remo Conference of May 1920, which confirmed the mandate allocations, because he refused to accept the separation of a smaller Syria from Palestine, and the Balfour Declaration.

In a second phase of negotiations, a strengthening Kemalist campaign in Anatolia forced further divergence from the wartime secret treaties. In August 1920, Britain, France and Italy had signed a treaty of peace with the Ottoman sultan (the Treaty of Sèvres) dictating, among other things, a zone of French influence on the south coast of Asia Minor (over which they had claimed direct control under Sykes–Picot), north of the French mandate; and virtual control of Turkey's economy by the Allied powers. Yet Ottoman forces were still fighting, pushing the French southwards from claimed territory in Asia Minor. There was also widespread armed resistance across the occupied territories to both occupation and partition, inspired in part by the Anatolian example. In March 1920 the Syrian National Congress proclaimed Faysal King of a greater United Syrian Kingdom (including Palestine), and denounced Zionist settlement; and many former Ottoman army officers were actively fighting the French. As the cost of the Middle East occupations rose and the British sought to conciliate France, they abandoned Faysal, and the French took Damascus by force in July 1921, deposing him. There were clashes between Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem. In May–June 1920, armed opposition to the British erupted in Iraq, and was repressed only by aerial bombardment.

By late 1921, it was becoming clear that the Sèvres treaty was a dead letter. In October 1921 France withdrew from Anatolia and, by the Treaty of Ankara, recognized Kemal's nationalist government in exchange for Turkish recognition of the French mandate in Syria. By September 1922, Turkish forces had pushed Greek forces out of Smyrna (the Greek initiative having been encouraged by the Allies), and were marching on Allied positions in Constantinople. There was no political will in Britain for enforcement of the Sèvres terms, and negotiations began towards a new peace. Kemal initially demanded that Arab-majority areas of the former Ottoman Empire be offered a referendum on their futures. But in the final Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923), Turkey renounced claims to former Ottoman lands in exchange for recognition by the powers of Turkish sovereignty, within new borders vastly more favourable than those of Sèvres.

As emerges from the foregoing, it was not Sykes–Picot which determined the borders of the Middle Eastern mandates, and later states (Dodge 2004; Bâli 2016). Even after 1923, many borders remained unresolved. They would be established through negotiation but also conflict with local populations, such as the Kurdish minority around Mosul, territory disputed in the 1920s between Turkey and Britain/Iraq (on Iraq's borders, see Pursley 2015b). Nevertheless, broad features of Sykes–Picot did endure: the political division of Arabic-speaking peoples, and imposition of foreign rule.

The negotiations of the 1920s left much of the Middle East under mandatory rule, a system which in places was less representative of local populations than late Ottoman governance (Provence 2017, 86–7). Across the Middle East, mandatory rule elicited a spectrum of opposition among civilian elites, and episodes of armed resistance, inspired in part by Kemalist insurgency and assisted by a roving generation of former Ottoman army officers. Faysal, deposed from his position in Syria, was installed as King of Iraq, in the face of local suspicion of his closeness to the British. His brother Abdullah was courted by the British (in part to prevent him from joining resistance to the French in Syria); and in May 1923 Britain recognized the Emirate of Transjordan, part of territory administered by the British under the Palestine mandate, under Abdullah. In Iraq, Faysal balanced uneasily between his Britain and Cabinet members who were veteran Ottoman army officers, and suspicious of British intentions. The proposed mandate text was supplanted by treaties of 1922 and 1924, nominally between independent powers but giving Britain a formal role in government, and allowing Britain access to air bases in the country. These treaties,

unpopular in Iraq and forced through, were then accepted by the League Council in lieu of the proposed mandate. An Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1930 paved the way for Iraq's admission to the League of Nations as an independent state, but, given extensive allowance for British air bases and the like, is perhaps better seen as a novel mode of internationally-brokered informal empire (Pedersen 2015, 262–86). A 1928 treaty recognized the existence of an independent government in Transjordan (but did not remove Transjordan entirely from the mandate system). In Hejaz, Britain broke from Husayn: he was increasingly resistant to cooperation, and his proclamation of himself as caliph in 1924—a status he considered had been acknowledged in the McMahon–Husayn correspondence—was a provocation to the Wahhabist ruler of the Nejd, bin Saud, another British ally. Britain ultimately stood back as bin Saud defeated Husayn, ruling as King of Hejaz and of Nejd until the proclamation of a unitary Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

Though Faysal and Abdullah both retained pan-Arab ambitions, Britain's eagerness to diminish its direct role in the early 1920s meant that military conflict between the populations and installed governments in Iraq and Transjordan was largely averted. In the British Palestine mandate, however, and French Syria, there were major proto-nationalist and sectarian revolts. In Palestine, long-standing disputes over access to the Wailing Wall (and underlying Arab fears of growing Jewish predominance) prompted riots in 1929; and in the late 1930s a wholesale revolt against the British mandatory administration, seeking Arab independence and an end to Jewish migration. In Syria, there had been considerable resistance to the French invasion in 1920, much of it focused in urban areas. However, the key military challenge to French rule came with the 'Druze revolt' of 1925–6, which took root in rural areas among the Druze minority and former Ottoman army officers.

There was heavy reliance by mandatories on martial rule during periods of crisis, and on aerial bombardment during the Druze revolt in particular. The handling of both the Palestine and Syrian cases, with their asymmetric violence, attracted international criticism from exile groups and humanitarian constituencies. The Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations offered a novel arena for contestation of this quasi-imperial administration, but, itself permeated with imperialist expertise and sensibilities, rarely challenged the underlying assumptions, and was guarded in its commentary (Pedersen 2015; Wheatley 2015).

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III. Modernity and the making of (post-Ottoman) states

The basic political and territorial structures consolidated during the interwar period had a surprising longevity. WWII brought Arab hopes that the ending of the Syrian mandate would presage a fundamental reconfiguration—the union of Iraq, Syria, Transjordan and Palestine. Although variations of pan-Arabist confederations were attempted in different moments, Syria and Transjordan emerged to a fragile independence, and have remained independent states since. Palestine, following the failure of a UN partition plan, descended into war, with the creation of the state of Israel exacerbating Arab grievance.

The Middle East remains a terrain of sectarian and political conflict, and an object of great power rivalry. The significance of Sykes–Picot in the trajectory linking 1916 to the present is a matter of contestation. However, Sykes–Picot has become not only a historical episode in this trajectory, but a shorthand for different arguments about what has shaped the history of the region. It retains a totemic importance in a wide range of political visions. Sykes–Picot as anathema spanned the rival post-WWII pan-Arabisms of the Hashemite rulers and Nasser, functioning as a shared symbol of foreign imposition and political division. It was cited, for example, in the 1958 creation of a United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria and, it was hoped, Iraq. More recently, it surfaced in some justifications by Al Qaeda of the need for defensive *jihad*. ISIL propaganda made much of the ceremonial destruction of a section of the Iraq–Syria border, presenting this as the triumphant final break with Sykes–Picot and the refounding of a united Arab caliphate (Tinsley 2015). In the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Sykes–Picot was revisited in Western discourse, too, as commentators invoked the 'failure' and 'artificiality' of states in the region as an explanation for continuing instability, and sought to imagine some more viable and stable political map.

These invocations of Sykes–Picot serve political projects in the present as much as they capture the possibilities of the past. For post-colonial Arab states (and, in a different way, groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIL), an ultimately inoperative agreement overriding Arab sovereignty is a more compelling foil than Husayn's efforts to forge Arab and Muslim unity with and through British sponsorship. Western references to Sykes–Picot, while castigating European governments for the clumsiness of its territorial allocation (and often, also, Arab leaders for failing to make

successful states within these territories), are coupled with new, rationalized proposals for boundaries, reanimating a posture of imperial power (Pursley 2015a; Neep 2015).

Many of these invocations of Sykes–Picot are arguments, fundamentally, about the nature and limits of the states which should have emerged from the Ottoman Empire. What these invocations have in common is a sense of a historical process interrupted, turned from its natural or desirable course. In this regard, discussions of Sykes–Picot converge with tendencies in IR and history to accord the state an axiomatic importance, and to assume a close relationship—both chronological and definitional—between 'modernity' and the (nation-)state. Precisely because it has proved so tempting to understand Ottoman history and post-Ottoman possibilities through this framework of (interrupted) modernity and state-making, the Ottoman Empire offers a good ground on which to interrogate the framework itself.

The Ottoman Empire's liminal status—conceived as in, but not 'of' Europe (Naff 1984, 143)—has sometimes posed a challenge to the theorization of the international order, and of Europe itself (see, e.g., Dunne and Little 2014, 99; Özsu 2012; Tusan 2010). However, the conceptual linkage in IR and history between modernity and the emergence of states consolidates a picture in which the Ottoman Empire stands apart from Western Europe. The treatment of the Ottoman Empire in a foundational work of English School IR (Naff 1984) emphasizes the way in which the Ottoman Empire, in part because of the conceptual structure of Islam, operated on fundamentally different understandings of the state, law and government to Western European powers, and the barriers that this created to full participation in diplomatic relations and a (European) law of nations. This parallels a narrative of the Ottoman Empire left out of European scientific and technical progress, trapped in archaism and corruption. The sense of the Empire as a declining relic then gives a certain organic logic to the emergence from it of younger and more vigorous 'nations', in the Balkans and elsewhere. Revisions of the basic 'expansion' narrative of international order have insisted that Europe was itself shaped in the encounter with extra-European peoples; and was not a cluster of uniform states but encompassed multiple hybrid forms (Welsh 2017). Nevertheless, the revisionist narrative still assumes a basic modularity in the category of statehood, and does not necessarily complicate the sense of nations as natural components breaking through a moribund imperial edifice.

The Ottoman case brings to the surface a recurrent ambiguity spanning IR and history about what exactly is captured in shorthand references to 'the state': whether these accounts are stressing the unitary state as a political form (as opposed to, say, composite monarchy, or the layered and differentiated jurisdiction characteristic of empire); or whether they refer rather to various techniques of rule (bureaucratic administration, taxation and the like) which, while associated with a centralizing impetus, are capable of being operationalized across an array of political forms. This slippage may have substantive consequences. In relation to the Ottoman Empire, the notion that the nation-state form goes hand in hand with certain techniques of rule (as Buzan and Lawson put it, the nineteenth-century phenomenon of 'rational state-building' as 'the process by which many administrative and bureaucratic competences were "caged" within national territories' (Buzan and Lawson 2013, 621)) may entrench assumptions that the endurance of the caliphate as a loosely imperial form went hand-in-hand with torpor in techniques of government, whereas Ottoman modernization over the long nineteenth century actually had much in common with wider European trends (Provence 2017, 10–32).

Finally, the Ottoman case puts in question whether nation or state function as universal analytical categories. 'Nationalism' was available in the early twentieth century, and today, as a sort of 'modular' political category (Anderson 2006, 4). But Antonius' classic account of a recognizable 'Arab national movement' with roots in the late nineteenth century (Antonius 1939) has been criticized. The label of 'Arab nationalism' has often been used without any precise account of the extent to which cultural or other affinities have translated to a demand for the political form of a nation-state (Dawisha 2016, 4–12). There remain important questions about the relationship between Arab identity and Ottoman loyalty, and the way in which Arab solidarity took shape in response to pressure on Ottoman identity from Turkish self-assertion, European imperialism, and later Zionist settlement (Khalidi 1991). The task may not be to look for Arab instances of nationalist movements agitating for independence but rather 'to account, theoretically, for local patriotic ideas that were not premised on a fundamental rejection of [Ottoman] empire'; patriotic ideas which crystallized not across a language group as such but in distinct ways in urban hubs like Cairo, Beirut, Tunis and Damascus (Mestyan 2017, 7; see also Khoury 1983; 1987). Even by WWI, to the extent that there was an Arab 'national' identity, there was not a neat relation between a sense of nation-ness and an aspiration for the political form of an independent state. Though the Husayn letters invoked the 'Arab nation', this may well have been a translation in

more than one sense: a framing of claims in a language intelligible to Europeans, relative to Arabic terms which refer more loosely to community, or region.[2] Moreover the question of the caliphate mandated a layered authority in which the state itself would not be a final authority.

The Ottoman case highlights not only the possible distortions which categories of nation and state impose on Arab political thought, but the way in which these concepts were themselves in flux in the interwar period—not settled concepts over which Europe enjoyed intellectual mastery. The League in many respects accommodated, rather than challenged, European imperial understandings. Yet, in opening the possibility of statehood brokered by an expanded international community, through newly institutionalized and public processes, the League also revealed considerable uncertainty about what counted as a state, and how to make states (Donaldson 2020). The notion of self-determination offered the notion that a nation (understood in ethnic, sectarian and historical terms) ought to find expression in a state. Large-scale population transfers, like that between Greece and Turkey, vindicate an ethnically and culturally essentialist view of nationhood (Robson 2017). In other respects post-WWI peace-making in fact veered away from an ethno-sectarian basis of statehood, seeking through the 'minorities' regime basic collective protections for minorities within states (Mazower 1997); indeed, in places like Syria, the idea of the nation-state and the conception of majority and minority populations evolved together (White 2011). Questions about the relation between ethnic or sectarian identification and statehood remain vexed today. Sykes–Picot is less a betrayal of primordial ethnic, linguistic or religious identities which might otherwise have found expression in distinct states (Dodge 2016) than an invitation to think about how precarious is the connection—empirical and conceptual—between these identities and modern states.

IV. Granularity and perspective

This chapter opened with the 1916 map signed by Sykes and Picot: a choice of scale which foregrounds certain figures and *their* sense of scale and perspective. In this final section, I explore how the volume's second organizing theme, granularity, illuminates the agreement as a

[2] I am here indebted to an exchange with Adam Mestyan.

'moment', and how the agreement might challenge the notion of granularity at stake in history and IR.

Across both disciplines, a focus on granularity in the sense of changes of scale offers possibilities for seeing the agreement in different guises. It invites scrutiny of what is lost in moving from one level to another; for example, the difficulty of generalizing, as this chapter has sometimes done, about developments across a highly diverse region. It might open the way for shifts of frame, from global imperial patterns in treaty-making or approaches to territory, to regionally-specific strategic questions, to more localized political resistance. A global frame might advance enlightening comparative work: just as Arab thinkers themselves looked to Austro-Hungary as a model, we might in history or IR probe further whether there are similarities between the fraying of imperial authority and emergent political identities in Habsburg and Ottoman empires (see, e.g., Reynolds 2011); between the weaknesses of a standard account of nationalism for both the Spanish Americas (Chiaramonte 2012) and the Arab peoples; or between, for example, pan-Arabist and pan-Africanist projects of unification or federation post-WWII, and their relation to imperial boundary-drawing.

That said, an understanding of granularity as primarily a question of scale would posit an (illusory) vantage point beyond the phenomena being examined. The Sykes–Picot agreement illustrates the importance also of perspective: the point from which, and *how*, one apprehends the phenomenon in question. It prompts questions in particular about how mapping and treaty-making fix actors' perspectives, and shape later analysis.

Colonial-era cartography seems to have helped shape European and even Ottoman perceptions of Lebanon and Palestine as distinct entities; conversely, the fact that there was no major map of the 'greater Syria' to which Arab nationalists aspired may have hindered the prosecution of these claims (Kaufman 2015). On Sykes–Picot specifically, commentary has often emphasized the abstraction of the 'line[s] in the sand' (Barr 2011). However, while the diagonal splitting of the 'A' and 'B' spheres of influence was largely arbitrary, other lines reflected pre-existing Ottoman administrative divisions and local affiliations, as well as European imperial desiderata. It may be the pseudo-precision of the lines, rather than their exact location, which warrants critical scrutiny. By contrast, Arab territorial claims remained in looser written formulations (unsurprisingly, given

Britain's reluctance to enter into negotiations). This is not to say that, had the McMahon–Husayn undertakings been reduced to a map, Britain would necessarily have avoided the conflicting commitments. Certainly, however, the absence of a McMahon–Husayn map was a factor in the precarity of those undertakings, and the prolonged controversy over the parties' original intentions regarding Palestine.

The 'agreement' label attached to Sykes–Picot arrangements (often in juxtaposition to the McMahon–Husayn 'correspondence') hints at the role of legal discourse in drawing out some acts and actors as important, and marginalizing others. On prevailing legal doctrine, a course of correspondence between ministers or high officials could constitute a treaty binding a state in law, but the McMahon–Husayn correspondence, still inchoate in key respects, did not enjoy this status, at least to the Anglo-French legal mind. Of course, by the time the Sykes–Picot arrangements were being consulted in 1919, their legal force was not the primary issue (Donaldson 2016, 130)). Yet whether enjoying legal force or not, or in practical terms superseded by events, agreements have influence simply as points of reference, and they channel contestation about interests or rights. It is striking how much discussion about the future form of the Middle East since 1916—both within government bureaucracies and in broader public discourse—has taken the form of readings and re-readings of the Sykes–Picot agreement, Husayn–McMahon correspondence and Balfour declaration (although issues like translation, the interrelation of written undertakings and oral explanations, and the parties' different rhetorical traditions, which bear on the parties' initial understandings, have received less systematic attention).

The centrality of these texts makes them a logical framing for both history and IR, but also tends to foster certain perspectives over others. It directs attention to particular actors, without always acknowledging that their authority might be partly constituted by, rather than merely reflected in, the text: Husayn's kingship, and certainly the position of his sons in Iraq and Jordan, was perhaps as much a product of the McMahon–Husayn correspondence than a precondition of it (Mestyan forthcoming). The reification of a particular text or transaction can reinforce a disposition to treat the arrangement as punctual, logical and consequential, rather than—as is the case with Sykes–Picot—part of shifting negotiations, somewhat arbitrary in content, and highly contingent in effect. More generally, the focus on texts pulls to the fore those who operate

in writing and through recognizably European diplomatic conventions, rather than, say, non-elite populations, whose conceptions of political order leave few written traces, but whose actions give shape and force to political movements (Provence 2005, 22; Eddé 2004).

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