



Sykes-Picot and Syria

by Florence Gaub and Patryk Pawlak

As the Arab world (and Syria in particular) is in turmoil, it has become fashionable of late to hold the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement responsible for the current *maelstrom*. The artificial creation of states and boundaries by France and Britain, so the reading goes, has rendered the region unstable and prone to violence. And yet, this understanding is orientalist at best – à la Edward Said – and erroneous at worst. It misreads the causes of violence – on at least four accounts – and it hardly contributes to a solution.

Error No.1: ‘Sykes-Picot created artificial borders’

Contrary to common belief, the map of the Arab world as we know it was not drawn by Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot: their secret agreement applied solely to the Middle East ranging from Palestine to Iraq (excluding North Africa and large parts of the Arabian Peninsula); furthermore, it did not create states but merely divided the area into five different desired zones of influence. The states which later emerged in this area did not coincide with these zones. Although it is true that France and Britain heavily influenced the set-up of contemporary Middle Eastern states, the state boundaries drawn following the 1920 San Remo Conference were not entirely artificial: in most cases they followed district boundaries from Ottoman times and had a certain historical, demographic and geographic logic.

Nevertheless, these borders are often seen as artificial due to three misperceptions: (i) they do not delineate

mono-cultural entities; (ii) they are straight-lined; and, (iii), more often than not, they are porous. These misperceptions generate a distorted view of the reality and need to be addressed. Firstly, the intermingled nature of Middle Eastern populations never allowed for the creation of mono-ethnic states: any set-up of states, whether the result of foreign interference or not, would have entailed plural populations to some extent. The European perception of Arab multi-ethnicity as a driver of instability ignores the fact that some large multi-ethnic states (such as India) are demonstrably stable, and that, statistically, there is no direct correlation between ethnic pluralism and civil wars. Secondly, the area’s partly desert nature logically resulted in linear borders due to the absence of other permanent markers, which seems aberrant in a European context, where borders are typically demarcated by natural topographical features and reliefs. Thirdly, the general difficulty of border management in desert or mountainous areas (such as in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq or Jordan) is amplified by the absence of adequate state resources, leading to corruption and illicit cross-border flows – which, in turn, further undermine state authority and increase the potential for instability, which then cannot be contained in a single country.

Error No.2: ‘Arab statehood is not home-grown’

As the current crisis seems to question Arab state legitimacy, the very concept of Arab statehood has been labelled as unnatural. As the argument goes,

Arab states materialised in the area solely as a result of Sykes-Picot and are therefore an imported product doomed to instability. Yet this view is wrong on several accounts: Arab regimes, not Arab states, are currently being challenged; the very Arabic word for state, *dawla*, contains the notion of rotation and therefore contestation without hollowing out the whole notion of statehood; and statehood in the Arab world precedes Sykes-Picot. Not only did a number of Arab states build themselves on historical predecessors (e.g. Morocco, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Oman), but states like Syria were simply thwarted in their ambition rather than created by colonial powers.

Indeed, Syria was the very birthplace of pan-Arabism in the nineteenth century: it saw itself as the natural heir to the medieval province *Bilad el-Sham*, which covered the territories of contemporary Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel as well as parts of Turkey and Iraq. It was here that the first modern Arab state – the Arab Kingdom of Syria – proclaimed its existence in 1920. Although it was crushed after only four months (following a French military intervention) and carved up into several parts, a pan-Syrian national movement still pursued a Greater Syrian construct based on the notion that geography, rather than language or religion, forges a nation. When in 1936 Syria became an independent state as we know it today, it was far from being a French creation: rather, it was an aborted state whose sense of loss has ever since not only marked its foreign policy but also its inhabitants' multi-faceted identity. Syria's pluralism – its population consists of Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Alawites, Sunni Muslims and other groups – has been part and parcel of its image and self-perception. The notion that the current conflict opposes Alawites (President Bashar al-Assad's sect) against Sunni Muslims is dangerously reductive and misrepresents its complexity.

Error No.3: 'Arab states are tribes with flags'

Since Arab states are supposedly not naturally born entities, the logical upshot is that there is no Arab national identity. Instead, the Arab world is seen as a puzzle of tribal or religious identities, without 'national' ones. While it is true that both tribal and religious identities have more leverage in the Arab world than they do in Europe, this does not imply that there are no other identities. Rather, Arab nationalism is dual in a unique way: it is attached to states (*wataniyya* in Arabic) as well as to the entire Arabic-speaking world (*qawmiyya*). Both concepts

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have complemented and/or rivalled with each other for the best part of the twentieth century. The League of Arab States, although commonly seen as aiming at one single Arab compound, actually represents the cementation of the 22 Arab state system: mutual respect for Arab sovereignty has defined inter-Arab politics and explains general Arab hesitancy when it comes to interference in internal matters, especially through military means. That notwithstanding, Arab state-related nationalism is stronger in some countries than others – but it continues to grow as it is asserted over time and in recurring conflicts.

Error No.4: 'The Arab Spring is challenging statehood'

The civil war in Syria (along with developments in the neighbouring countries) has little to do with the contestation of the state or the borders as such, but rather with the state's failure to provide for basic physical or social security. Just as the philosophical Arab concept of statehood is less concerned with freedom than with social and legal justice, social dislocation was largely caused by economic concerns. Syria, for instance, had been undergoing a severe economic crisis for several years when the conflict erupted: its water resources dropped by 50% between 2002 and 2008, pushing two to three million people into extreme poverty; herders in affected areas lost 85% of their livestock, and large-scale migration into cities added pressure to existing state structures. Previously guaranteed food security was lost; fruit and vegetable prices rose by around 27% in the year leading up to January 2010, and inflation kept spiking throughout 2010. In addition, poverty rates in Syria increased sharply from 2007 on; and, as a side effect of the transition towards a market economy, the Syrian government started to cut subsidies (e.g. for fertilisers and fuel) leading to diesel prices tripling overnight.

In this context, the Syrian state is being challenged primarily because of its inability to deliver rather than because of its allegedly 'artificial' statehood or borders. The current crisis, therefore, is one of justice, provision and governance. Long-term stability in the area will only be achieved with the strengthening, rather than diffusion, of Arab state power – not exclusively or primarily in security terms, as was the case until now, but also in its cultural, social and economic dimensions.

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