

The agreement that shifted Middle East powers after World War I

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TOP: Sir Mark Sykes (1879-1919) courtesy of Dailymail.com. BOTTOM: Map of Sykes–Picot Agreement showing eastern Turkey in Asia, Syria and Western Persia, and areas of control and influence agreed between the British and the French. Photo: Courtesy of National Archives United Kingdom.

The Great War between the Central Powers and the Allied Powers began in 1914. The Central Powers were Germany, Austria-Hungary Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire. The Allied Powers were Great Britain, France, Belgium, Russia and Italy.

For hundreds of years, The Ottoman Empire had control of lands between the Mediterranean Sea and Persian Gulf. In 1915, the empire was much weaker. The Allied Powers were always interested in getting more control of the region. They saw the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and their Central Powers partners as a way in.

Two years before the end of the war, Great Britain, France and Russia secretly discussed how they would take control of the lands belonging to the Ottoman Empire. Today, these lands include parts of Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Turkey.

Sykes-Picot Agreement

From November 1915 to March 1916, leaders from Great Britain and France had talks and came up with a secret treaty. Russia agreed to it as well. It was known as the Sykes–Picot Agreement, named for Sir Mark Sykes of Great Britain and François Georges-Picot of France. It set up borders for areas that would be controlled by Great Britain and France.

It was confidential because Britain was saying that since Arabs were supporting the Allied Powers, Arabs would be in control of Arab lands when the war was over. British military strategist T. E. Lawrence (also known as Lawrence of Arabia), had promised the Arabs that an independent Arab state, or a group of united Arab states, could be set up after the war. The Sykes-Picot Agreement would not allow this, so it had to be kept secret.

A Region Divided By Color

The color-coded map showed that Great Britain ("B") would receive control over the red area, known today as Jordan, southern Iraq, and Haifa in Israel; France ("A") would have the blue area, which covers modern-day Syria, Lebanon, northern Iraq, Mosul and southeastern Turkey, including Kurdistan.

The yellow area of Palestine, excluding the cities of Haifa and Acre, would be under the control of a committee of many countries. Russia, Great Britain, France, Belgium and Arab leaders would set up this committee.

The Russian Revolution in 1917, took Russia out of the war. This meant that Russia was no longer a part of the agreement. However, the new Russian leaders found a copy of the Sykes–Picot Agreement and made it public. The news embarrassed the British and caused many protests.

The war ended November 11, 1918.

Borders Were Not Thought Out

In March 1920, a new Arab state of Syria that included Palestine and parts of Iraq was set up by Syria's King Faisal. A month later, the San Remo Conference in Italy announced that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was to be followed. There could be no independent Arab country. France attacked King Faisal's forces in June and defeated them. Faisal fled to London.

France and Great Britain took control of the area. Borders based on Sykes-Picot were approved by the League of Nations in 1922. However, these borders were just straight lines. Different groups, tribes and different religions were not considered when the borders were set. For almost 100 years, anger, wars and violence have deeply divided the Middle East.

Today, many problems in the Middle East can be traced back to the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916.

This article is excerpted from Scott Christianson's "100 Documents That Changed The World."

Quiz

- 1 Based on the article, why was the Ottoman Empire important to the Sykes-Picot Agreement?
 - (A) The Sykes-Picot Agreement needed the Ottoman Empire's permission to take lands.
 - (B) The Ottoman Empire welcomed the changes made by the Sykes-Picot Agreement.
 - (C) The Sykes-Picot Agreement divided the Ottoman Empire's lands after it lost the war.
 - (D) The Ottoman Empire was trying to take more lands using the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

- 2 Which of the following options explains the primary problem with the Middle Eastern areas created by Britain and France?
 - (A) The British and French areas were in conflict with the Russian areas.
 - (B) The borders did not respect the different cultural groups of the areas.
 - (C) The League of Nations did not approve of how the area was divided up.
 - (D) The San Remo Conference forced Britain and France to change their borders.

- 3 Read the second paragraph of the section "Sykes-Picot Agreement."

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Which word from the paragraph helps the reader understand what "confidential" means?

- (A) supporting
- (B) control
- (C) strategist
- (D) secret

- 4 Read the selection from the section "Borders Were Not Thought Out":

Different groups, tribes and different religions were not considered when the borders were set. For almost 100 years, anger, wars and violence have deeply divided the Middle East.

How does the phrase "deeply divided" affect the TONE of the last sentence?

- (A) It suggests relief that the wars and violence were only temporary.
- (B) It conveys the sense that the borders were a good solution.
- (C) It suggests confidence that the borders were intended to help the different groups get along.
- (D) It conveys a sense of the seriousness of the long-lasting anger and violence in the region.