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Pinar Bilgin

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Pinar Bilgin*

Department of International Relations, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

The Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916) became (in)famous once again following a tweet announcing a propaganda video by the group that call themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) declaring "the end of Sykes–Picot". In this essay I suggest that the point about Sykes–Picot is not about the "artificiality" of borders in the Middle East (for all borders are artificial in different ways) or the way in which they were drawn (for almost all borders were agreed on by a few men, and seldom women, behind closed doors) but (also) that it was shaped by a discursive economy that allowed for the International Society to decide the fate of those that were deemed as not-yet capable of governing themselves. ISIS preoccupation with the "end of Sykes–Picot" is conditioned by the same discursive economy that it apparently seeks to resist.

Keywords: Sykes–Picot Agreement; Middle East; security; ISIS

Introduction

In 2014, the Sykes–Picot Agreement became (in)famous following a tweet announcing a propaganda video by the group that call themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS).[1] The video showed the group destroying the border barriers between Syria and Iraq, signalling the end of a need to control "national" frontiers; for they have now become "one people" under ISIS rule (see Tinsley, 2015). In doing so, ISIS claimed to bring a physical end to the so-called "Sykes–Picot order" insofar as both sides of the border had come under ISIS control. It was also a metaphorical end in that ISIS was challenging both the borders and the nation-state order in the post-First World War

"Middle East". Since then, "Sykes–Picot" has been Googled thousands of times and hundreds of opinion pieces have been written seeking to answer the question of whether it is indeed "the end of Sykes–Picot" as declared by ISIS (see Danforth 2013; Gause III 2014). In this essay, I suggest that the point about Sykes–Picot is not about the artificiality of borders (for all borders are artificial in different ways) or the way in which they were drawn (for almost all borders have been agreed on by a few men, and seldom women, behind closed doors) but the ways in which Middle East politics were shaped in century that followed the First World War.[2] It is not the borders per se, but life inside and across those borders that have rendered Sykes–Picot a symbol of the

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*Email: pbilgin@bilkent.edu.tr

century-old regime of top-down, military-focused, state-centric and statist security governance in the Middle East.

The essay is organized in two sections. In section 1 I offer a brief background on the Sykes–Picot Agreement and consider the claim that ISIS did not bring Sykes Picot to an end because the agreement was never (fully) implemented. Second, I turn to those who agree with the need to bring Sykes–Picot to an end on the grounds that the borders drawn by the European colonial powers are "artificial". Here, I underscore that where the critics of the so-called "Sykes–Picot order" wish to replace "artificial" borders with (presumably) "natural" ones, ISIS wishes to do away with borders for all Muslims, therefore challenging the very notion of "nation-state". Yet I emphasize that both ISIS and other critics of the Sykes–Picot order share similar assumptions regarding "statehood" and artificiality. In the concluding section, I submit that while multiple actors have invoked the symbolism of Sykes–Picot, none has thus far offered to do away with the century-old regime of top-down, military-focused, state-centric and statist security governance that the notion of Sykes–Picot order has come to symbolize. ISIS is no exception in this regard – notwithstanding the group's declarations to the contrary.

This is not the end of Sykes–Picot, because it was never implemented!

"Sykes–Picot" is the better-known name of the Asia Minor Agreement negotiated in May 1916 by Sir Mark Sykes (Britain) and Georges Picot (France) to decide on the post-First World War fate of the Middle East. The agreement was kept secret until 1917 when the Russian revolutionaries divulged the "secret deals made by the imperialist powers". The agreement had to be kept secret, for it betrayed Britain's promises to the Arab peoples who had agreed to join the fight against the Ottomans in return for promises regarding the governance of Arab lands. The degree of British betrayal is disputed

(Rogan, 2015). What is beyond dispute is that the Sykes–Picot Agreement was less about the future of the Middle East and more about the future of British–French rivalry in this part of the world. As such, the agreement was concerned not with creating so-called "viable states" (Ottaway, 2015; compare with Pursley, 2015) but with furthering British and French colonial interests.

The agreement concluded by Sykes and Picot was never fully implemented. It was revised numerous times. One such revision came after the Allied Powers lost the war in Asia Minor (the part of the world that the agreement was originally named after), thereby making the way for the formation of a Republic of Turkey. The Lausanne Treaty (1923) signed between the Allied Powers and Turkey decided the newly established Republic's borders. What is currently problematized as the "Sykes–Picot order" was shaped at San Remo Conference in 1920 but was further negotiated in the coming years. That is to say, those who argue that ISIS did not bring "the end of Sykes–Picot" base their argument on the historical fact that that particular agreement was never (fully) implemented.

If this "historical fact" comes across as too trivial to consider, it is nevertheless worth scrutinizing that some feel authorized to "fact-check" ISIS. I will raise two issues. First, the fact that the Sykes–Picot Agreement was morphed into the San Remo consensus of the Allied Powers (UK, France, Italy and Japan), and approved later by the League of Nations, does not render the order that followed any less of a concern regarding the colonial legacy in the Middle East. For, after San Remo, the agreement ceased to be a secret deal between two colonizing powers and became a part of the security governance regime enforced by the international society. As such, the San Remo consensus and later the League of Nations approved the colonizing powers' designs for the Middle East. Second, the fact that the Sykes–Picot Agreement was not implemented also had to do with the ways in which some were more equipped than others to participate in the drawing of

their boundaries. Following the war of national independence, Turkey was able to participate in the drawing of its own borders. Some others could not. For, at that time, some members of the international society intervened in the affairs of those who they portrayed as "backward" by virtue of their "failure" in meeting the standard of civilization (Bilgin, 2012). The League of Nations considered it prudent to impose mandate regimes in some parts of the Middle East because peoples of this part of the world were not deemed capable of self-rule. Those who insist that ISIS did not bring the end of Sykes–Picot overlook the ongoing yield of such a discursive economy that allows some to claim to "know" and/or "order" others (Neep, 2015).

Sykes–Picot imposed "artificial" borders – good riddance!

The critics who make the "artificiality" point do not contest the desire of ISIS to bring the so-called Sykes–Picot order to an end. They agree with ISIS that borders in the Middle East were (largely but not wholly) decided by European powers under conditions of colonial rule. They also agree that something needs to be done about them. However, a closer look at the solutions the critics of the Sykes–Picot order offer highlights how far removed they are from the concerns raised by ISIS. Yet another look suggests that they share some of the same Eurocentric assumptions about the "Middle East" and security governance.

To start with the critics of the Sykes Picot order, they underscore the fact that regional peoples themselves were not sitting at the table when the borders in the region were drawn, and that is what has rendered the border between Syria and Iraq (among others) "artificial". As a solution, some suggest that borders should be re-drawn to allow for some kind of stability (Ashdown, 2014); others argue that it is impossible to seek to re-order the region in the absence of superpower resolve (Gause III, 2014). That both solutions are as top-down as the creators of the so-called Sykes–Picot order seems to escape

their proponents (also see Neep, 2015). Accordingly, the critics fail to note that their top-down outlook toward the Middle East is part of the problem highlighted by ISIS.

As regards ISIS, the aforementioned video explains their reasons in the following way:

> Today we are happy to participate in destroying the borders placed by the tawaghit [oppressors] to prevent the Muslims from traveling in their lands. The tawaghit broke up the Islamic Khilafah and made it into countries like Syria and Iraq, ruled by man-made laws … today we begin the final stage after the Ummah was divided … Their plot was to divide and conquer. That is what they had done with us. (Quoted in Tinsley, 2015)

Their suggested solution is very different from the critics above in that they wish to do away with "nation-states". Yet their way of doing this is to set up another state and impose an order that is no less military-focused and statist than the existing regime of security governance. As such, ISIS and the critics of the Sykes Picot order share a commitment to the military-focused, state-centric and statist regime of security governance that has characterized the Middle East in the past century.

Furthermore, both ISIS and the critics of the Sykes Picot order share the same Eurocentric assumption that some borders are "artificial" and others are "natural". However, all borders are artificial insofar as they are decided by a few men, and seldom women, behind closed doors. For instance,

> Winston Churchill may have drawn the border between Iraq and Jordan with a pen, but he was just as central in delineating the border between France and Germany when he led the allies to victory in World War II. Determining whether Alsace and Lorraine would be French or German was never as simple as just sending a commission to find out where the French people stopped and the German people started – rather, the territory was awarded as a prize following each of the Europe's bloody conflicts. (Danforth, 2013)

In the Middle East, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are considered to have "natural"

borders insofar as their representatives participated in the drawing of those borders either after a war or at the negotiation table. Furthermore, Turkey's border with Greece is shaped by the river Meriç. What could be more natural than that! Yet it took a League of Nations sanctioned population exchange between Turkey and Greece to render the populations on either side more "homogenous" (Özsu, 2011). The point is that borders are always "artificial" insofar as they are drawn in a top-down manner, without consulting the people whose lives they run through.

Finally, claiming that borders in the Middle East are "artificial" is a Eurocentric move that asserts the agency of European colonial powers in wreaking havoc in this part of the world while underestimating the amount of agency exercised by regional peoples. This is not to underestimate the destructive consequences of divide and rule tactics employed by the colonial powers, which is considered as having "postponed the rise of a new order shaped from within the region" (Kamel, 2016, p. 8). Rather, my point is that the critics of the "artificiality" of Sykes–Picot boundaries, even as they seek to be self-critical (by virtue of owning up to the colonial legacy), betray their obliviousness to the history of the region and its peoples. As Lorenzo Kamel has maintained, "modern-day Syria and Iraq have both several meaningful antecedents in the pre-Islamic world" and that

> the claim that Iraq is an artificial creation concocted by the British after World War I overlooks the fact that … for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries … Basra, Baghdad and Mōsul were governed as a single entity with Baghdad as their center of gravity. Already at the time numerous local intellectuals indicated the area as "Iraq". (pp. 8–9; also see Pursley, 2015)

This is not to claim access to "historical facts" about the region and its peoples. Rather, the point is that self-styled anti-colonial subjectivity of ISIS betrays a Eurocentric notion of "artificiality" and "statehood" that presumes states to have "natural" borders to make them

"proper" states in a way that is reminiscent of state "failure" debates of the 2000s. The difference between ISIS and its critics is that where the former problematize a century of interventionism in the affairs of the region, the latter only take responsibility for the Sykes–Picot moment of the early twentieth century. Neither of the two challenge century-old top-down, military-focused, state-centric and statist regime of security governance. Arguably, it is that very regime of security governance, which is shaped by the discursive economy of the international society, that has allowed for military interventionism in the Middle East in present-day politics (Jabri, 2013). The critics of the "Sykes–Picot order" do not challenge the discursive economy that allowed for that order to be enforced by the international society. Nor do they challenge the regime of security governance that was instated as part of this order.

Conclusion

The point about Sykes–Picot is not (only) that it was a secret agreement concluded between the colonizing powers, but (also) that it was shaped by a discursive economy that allowed for the international society to decide the fate of those that were deemed as not-yet capable of governing themselves. ISIS preoccupation with the "end of Sykes–Picot" is conditioned by the same discursive economy that it apparently seeks to resist. That the current discussions about the end of Sykes–Picot are conducted in a similarly top-down manner suggests that that the same discursive economy prevails and continues to shape a top-down, military-focused, state-centric and statist regime of security governance. ISIS does not seek to replace, but to inherit this regime of security governance. The only difference being the replacement of "nation-states" with a state for the *Ummah* ruled by a "particular understanding of Islamic law".[3]

Disclosure statement

Notes

1. An earlier shorter version of this article was published at http://www.sdu.dk/-/media/files/om_sdu/centre/c_mellemoest/videncenter/artikler/2016/bilgin+article+(feb+16).pdf?la=en
2. I am sometimes reminded that Gertrude Bell's role as a woman taking part in "inventing" the Middle East disproves my point. On the contrary, those who point to Gertrude Bell's role help reinforce my point about the persistence of Eurocentrism in the study of the Middle East. See Bilgin (2016).
3. I put emphasis on "particular", because orthodox interpretations of Islam impose strict regulations on the exercise of direct violence, especially against believers of monotheistic religions and fellow Muslims. It is by obliterating this orthodox understanding of Islam, and by imposing its own interpretation that brands all non-Muslims as "unbelievers" and those Muslims who do not fit its own brand as "unIslamic", that ISIS seeks to warrant its exercise of direct violence. This is a particular body of knowledge about Islam that ISIS wishes to render prevalent, thereby replacing other competing interpretations of holy texts. As such, ISIS could be viewed as unleashing its own kind of "epistemic violence" to warrant its exercise of direct violence.

Notes on contributor

Pinar Bilgin specialises in critical approaches to International Relations and Security Studies. She is the author of *Regional Security in The Middle East: A Critical Perspective* (2005), and *The International in Security, Security in the International* (2016). A full list of publications is available at www.bilkent.edu.tr/~pbilgin.

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