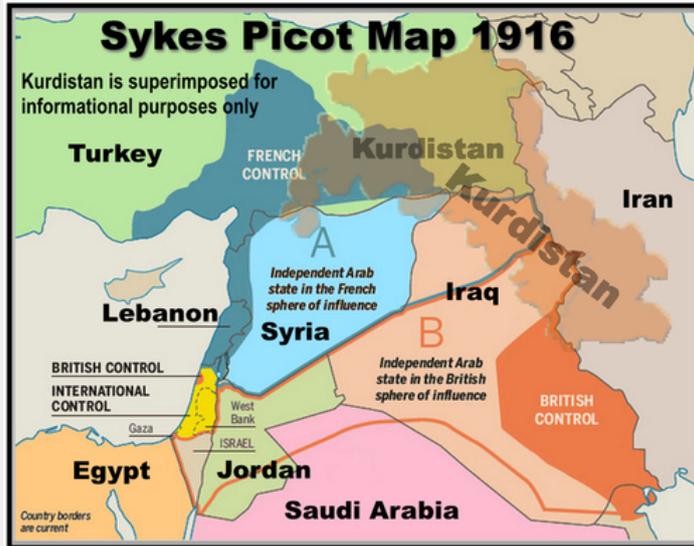


# SECRET DEAL SPAWNED PERMANENT CONFLICT

Posted on May 21, 2016 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



**Tony Burman**, [theStar.com](https://www.thestar.com), Toronto, 21 May 2016

In the imploding Middle East, where disarray and division rule, the need to reverse the downward spiral has never been greater. But more than ever, it is a region scarred by war, instability, occupation and violence.



It is also a region where the legacy of the past is always a burden — and a flashpoint for fresh debate. Incredibly, the Middle East is still trying to sort out the aftershocks left a century ago following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which was one of the largest and longest empires in history.

**Tony Burman**, [theStar.com](https://www.thestar.com), Toronto, 21 May 2016

In the imploding Middle East, where disarray and division rule, the need to reverse the downward spiral has never been greater. But more than ever, it is a region scarred by war, instability, occupation and violence.



It is also a region where the legacy of the past is always a burden — and a flashpoint for fresh debate. Incredibly, the Middle East is still trying to sort out the aftershocks left a century ago following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which was one of the largest and longest empires in history.

One hundred years ago this week, Britain and France secretly carved out a "new" Middle East that would emerge under their control at the end of the First World War. It was called the Sykes-Picot Agreement, named after the two British and French diplomats who created it.

This centennial has produced considerable attention in the Middle East. The May 1916 agreement, which is widely loathed in the Arab world, was not intended to set precise borders but to define "spheres of influence" that would ultimately shape the modern Middle East. But it was done in a way that would foreshadow how western colonial powers would treat the Middle East for decades to come.

It was an act of betrayal, done in secret and with the goal of imposing their will on the entire region. For these reasons, and in spite of its odd name, the Sykes-Picot Agreement has had an enduring popular and political resonance in the Middle East debate.

In the Oscar-winning 1962 drama *Lawrence of Arabia*, widely regarded as one of the greatest films in the history of the cinema, Peter O'Toole played the role of T.E. Lawrence, a British army officer and diplomat whose First World War exploits in the Middle East earned him fame.

Perhaps Lawrence's greatest achievement was to convince the Arabs to support the British during the war in exchange for assurances that they would be allowed to govern their own regions after it ended. But one of the film's most dramatic scenes was when he — and the Arabs — learned that Britain and France had betrayed them with this secret pact.

Two years ago, the Islamic militant group Daesh, also known as ISIS or ISIL, actually produced a video called "The End of Sykes-Picot," followed by this pledge from the group's head, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: "This blessed advance will not stop until we hit the last nail in the coffin of Sykes-Picot." Much of this recent rhetoric is nonsense, of course. The tragedy in the Middle East in modern times is largely due to its own failures. The corruption of its dictators, the squandering of its oil wealth and the oppression of its own people cannot be blamed only on western politicians, however complicit they may have been. That would be too easy.

But it would be equally wrong to deny the burden of history. It is a fact that, immediately after the end of the First World War, the western colonial powers worked to protect their own power, and did little to help the people of the Middle East to set out on their own.

A hundred years after Sykes-Picot, we have Syria festering in front of us, with more than 400,000 people dead. We have Daesh. We have Egypt's horrors, Libya's anarchy and Israel's continuing brutal occupation of Palestinian lands. And we have the gradual disintegration of Iraq.

So, yes, the "borders" of this 21st-century Middle East will inevitably be far different than what was imagined in 1916 — and what we see today.

But there are signs of hope. There was an international effort this past week in Vienna to kick-start a new round of negotiations over the Syrian crisis. The U.S., Russia and other countries — including, finally, Canada — agreed to use airdrops for humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians.

They couldn't agree on a date to resume stalled peace talks, and that was disappointing. But the fact that efforts are still happening is important.

The message 100 years ago from the Sykes-Picot Agreement was that military power and western self-interest should be deciding factors in the Middle East of the 20th century.

That has proven disastrous.

Let us hope that we are now learning it will be our diplomats, not our soldiers, who will guide us through this next century.

**Tony Burman**, former head of CBC News and Al Jazeera English, teaches journalism at Ryerson University.

