9 Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements

David Fromkin

In the century before the First World War, Great Britain pursued a policy aimed at preserving the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. Though briefly abandoned by Prime Minister William Gladstone in his 1880–1885 government, it was a policy followed with remarkable consistency up until the outbreak of the 1914 war. Its purpose was to use the Turks as a buffer covering and protecting England's vulnerable road to India against the drive southward by Tsarist Russia.

In those antebellum years, Britain, ruler of 25 percent of the world, was the largest of the planet's empires, followed closely by its rivals, Russia and France. India was the jewel in England's crown — Victoria had insisted on becoming Empress of India as well as Queen of Britain and its other possessions — and the road east to India, by land and sea, was the artery of empire that London could never afford to see severed. Hence the importance of Ottoman Turkey, holding the land route and the coast up above the sea route, cushioning it against Russian expansion from the north toward the warm waters of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. It was because the Turks protected Britain's empire in this way that Britons, in turn, upheld the ramshackle Turkish Empire against long-prophesied collapse.

But in 1914 things changed. As the result of a sort of coup d'état within the ruling clique in the Ottoman Empire, the Turks — unnecessarily and, as it turned out, unwisely — chose to enter the world war,

and to enter it on the German side. Ever since the summer of 1914, the British government, though ill-informed as to what was going on in Constantinople, had been aware of the possibility that Turkey might become an enemy. Some, in London, welcomed an opportunity to overthrow the Ottoman Empire because it had become such an anachronism in the modern world and because, from a European point of view, much better use could be made of the lands that the Ottoman Sultan then ruled — or misruled.

Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, saw advantages that could accrue if Turkey sided with Germany. It would mean that Britain could use the prospect of giving away Ottoman territories to Balkan states as a lure for joining the Allies, Britain, France, and Russia. Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey were more cautious, but tended in the same direction.

In order to persuade Turkey to remain neutral, the representatives of the British government eventually had been instructed to give assurances that, if she did so, Ottoman territorial integrity would be respected. From this there followed a converse proposition, that Grey had made explicit as early as August 15, "that, on the other hand, if Turkey sided with Germany and Austria, and they were defeated, of course we could not answer for what might be taken from Turkey in Asia Minor."[1]

When the Ottoman Empire entered the war, the conclusion that British policymakers drew therefore seemed to be inescapable. In a speech delivered in London on November 9, 1914, the Prime Minister predicted that the war had "rung the death-knell of Ottoman dominion, not only in Europe, but in Asia."

Earlier in 1914, Sir Mark Sykes, the Tory M.P. who was his party's leading expert on Turkish affairs, had warned the House of Commons that "the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire must be the first step towards the disappearance of our own." Wellington, Canning, Palmerston, and Disraeli had all felt that preserving the integrity of the Ottoman Empire was of importance to Britain and to Europe. Yet in a little less than a hundred days the British government had completely reversed the policy of more than a hundred years, and now sought to destroy the great buffer empire that in times past British governments had risked and waged wars to safeguard.

The Cabinet's new policy was predicated on the theory that Turkey had forfeited any claim to enjoy the protection of Britain. In the turmoil of war the Asquith government had lost sight of one of the most important truths about traditional British foreign policy: that the integrity of the Ottoman Empire was now to be protected not in order to serve the best interests of Turkey but in order to serve the best interests of Britain.

In turn, the British decision to dismantle the Ottoman Empire finally brought into play the assumption that Europeans had shared about the Middle East for centuries: that its post-Ottoman political destinies would be taken in hand by one or more of the European powers.

Thus one thing which British leaders foresaw in 1914 was that Ottoman entry into the war marked the first step on the road to a remaking of the Middle East: to the creation, indeed, of the modern Middle East.

> Should Britain itself take part in the land grab that seemed likely to ensue? Prime Minister Asquith, speaking for himself and for Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, wrote at the time that "I believe that at the moment, Grey and I are the only two men who doubt and distrust any such settlement," that is to say annexing parts of the Ottoman Empire. "We both think that in the real interest of our own future, the best thing would be if at the end of the war we could say that we have taken and gained nothing. And that not merely from a moral and sentimental point of view, but from purely material considerations. Taking on Mesopotamia [today's Iraq] for instance, means spending millions in irrigation and development with no immediate or early return, keeping up quite a large army — white and colored — in an unfamiliar country, and a hornet's nest of Arab tribes."

It has a certain ring today.

In the winter of 1915, the French Foreign Minister, Theophile Delcassé, came over to London for talks with Grey. For the Frenchman, a fact of overwhelming importance was that the lion's share of Ottoman debt, sovereign and nonsovereign alike, had been subscribed by French investors. The disappearance of the Ottoman Empire would mean the

disappearance of a significant percentage of the French public's liquid wealth.

Delcassé and Grey agreed that their top preference was to keep the Ottoman Empire intact. But they also agreed that if that could not be done, Britain would be sympathetic to French claims on Syria. In France, these claims were vigorously asserted by a colonialist bloc of very considerable strength in the parliament and in the government's asserted continuity with French crusader kingdoms in the Levant won and established a thousand years earlier. Delcassé protected his own political position by obtaining a fallback agreement to respect these claims.

But even as the foreign ministers confirmed their preference to keep Turkey intact, that option was foreclosed, leaving only the fallback in its place.

A British-led Allied naval armada invaded the strategically vital waterway that runs between the Straits: the narrow link that separates Europe from Asia and that joins the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. In March 1914 it looked as though the armada was set to steam up to Constantinople and knock Turkey out of the war.

In Russia this caused panic. If the British-French war fleet took Constantinople, would they ever give it back? Would Russia lose forever the prize it had sought for centuries? In all haste, the Russians pleaded with their allies to let the Tsarist Empire have the prize — and, with Russian blessings and support, to take anything at all that they wanted for themselves elsewhere in the Ottoman domains.

France, with designs of its own on the Straits, was inclined to put off the Russians by the use of delaying tactics. Grey persuaded them instead to give Russia the pledge that it sought. Whether or not it was his real reason, Grey argued that Britain and France ought to agree to Russia's requirements in order to keep the Tsar's empire wholeheartedly on the Allied side of the war — for it would be a disaster if Russia defected to the other side.

Once the pledge was given, it remained for Britain and France to negotiate between themselves their respective shares of the Ottoman domains. There seemed to be no hurry about this. The war was going all too slowly. The day of victory was no longer expected to come quickly.

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In retrospect, the negotiations between Britain and France resulted in the only Great Power agreement that survived the war. Russia had been a party to the Anglo-French accord, but both forfeited and renounced its position when the Bolsheviks seized power in late 1917. Two treaties with Italy failed by their own terms. The most discussed promises that Britain was asked to make in regard to postwar shares in the Ottoman Middle East were made to indigenous peoples — Arabs, Jews, Armenians, and others — that were not Great Powers.

The secret treaty between Britain and France, then, was the only Great Power treaty concluded during the war that specified what each of the two parties would get in the postwar Middle East. The events leading up to the negotiation of the treaty were odd indeed.

Britain's bureaucrat in charge of the Middle East was Sir Mark Sykes. He was appointed by, and reported to, Lord Kitchener or to Kitchener's spokesman, Oswald FitzGerald. Kitchener, Britain's greatest general and a living legend, served as War Minister and was allowed by the government to exercise complete control over all policy in the Middle East, where he had spent much of his life.

In 1915, Sykes had left London to tour British positions in the East, from Egypt to India, exchanging views with the men on the spot, and returning at the end of the year with an important report. Accepting what he had been told by British intelligence in Cairo, he repeated, in London, what they had said. And they had been hoaxed.

A junior officer in the Ottoman army named al-Faruqi had deserted to the Allies. Purporting to be from the inner councils of a secret Arab nationalist society within the Ottoman army, he claimed that more than half the army was Arab and would come over to the Allied side if certain demands were met. It would bring about an Allied victory in one blow. The demands that had to be met were those that already had been presented to the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon. They had been presented by the Sharif Husayn, the Turkish-appointed guardian of the holiest places in Islam, Mecca and Medina. Husayn proposed to lead a revolt against Turkey if his far-reaching demands for an independent Arab kingdom were met. His correspondence

with McMahon along these lines proved inconclusive. Al-Faruqi claimed that Husayn was the leader that the Arab Ottoman army would follow. It later transpired that al-Faruqi made it all up, and that Husayn had no significant following. But British intelligence did not know that; and Sykes knew that, in order to be free to meet Husayn's conditions, Britain would need to obtain permission from France, as Britain's wartime partner.

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In December 1915, Sykes reported to his government that in Cairo he had been told by al-Faruqi that if British Egypt were to launch an invasion of Palestine and Syria, it would trigger a revolt in which the Arabic-speaking troops and provinces of the Ottoman Empire would come over to the Allied side. The problem was that Britain needed France's permission to divert the resources from the western front to launch such an offensive; and what Sykes told the Cabinet ministers was that they ought to seek such permission from the French immediately. (France was reluctant to allow any diversion of resources from Europe, and not without reason; early in 1916 Germany attacked Verdun in what by 1918 was to become the biggest battle in world history. Seven hundred thousand men on both sides were to be killed, wounded, gassed, or captured at Verdun in 1916, and 1.2 million at the Somme; it was not a year in which the Allies could easily afford to send manpower elsewhere.)

At the same time, Sykes raised a related matter: the Sharif Husayn hesitated to come over to the Allied side (Sykes reported) for fear of French ambitions in the Arabic-speaking world. Negotiations with France aimed at allying such fears were the answer, he said. If these problems with France were not resolved soon, Sykes warned, the Sharif might be deposed and killed by the Turks, and events in the Holy Places might ignite a *real* Holy War.

The radical new view that Sykes had brought back with him from the Middle East was that in terms of winning the war, the Arabs were more important than the French. France was a modern industrial power that had mobilized eight million men to fight the war, while Husayn,

without industrial, financial, military, or manpower resources, brought with him only an uncertain prospect of subverting loyalty in the Ottoman camp; in retrospect, Sykes's new view was unbalanced, but his government nonetheless attempted to persuade France to make the concessions Sykes believed to be necessary.

In fact, the British government already had initiated talks with France. Britain could not make promises about Syria to the Sharif Husayn without France's permission, for the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, had recognized France's special interest in that area. Moreover, al-Faruqi had persuaded Lord Kitchener and his followers that Husayn's claims to Syria also had to be accommodated, at least to some extent. The Foreign Office, having authorized McMahon to make pledges to Husayn on October 20, 1915, therefore immediately requested the French government to send a delegate over to London to negotiate the future frontiers of Syria so as to define the extent to which Britain was free to deal with Husayn.

The French representative, François Georges Picot, came over to London and commenced negotiations on November 23, 1915. The British negotiating team was at first headed by Sir Arthur Nicolson, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, and included senior representatives from the Foreign, India, and War Offices. The talks had deadlocked by the time Sykes returned to London in December; late that month the British government delegated Sykes — Kitchener's man — to take the place of the Nicolson team in order to break the deadlock. In effect the Foreign Office turned the responsibility over to Lord Kitchener.

Sykes possessed some qualifications necessary to carry out his assignment. He passionately wanted to succeed in reaching an agreement with the other side. He was pro-French. As a result of early schooling abroad, he spoke French — though it is not clear how well. As a Roman Catholic himself, he was not prejudiced against France's goal of promoting Catholic interests in Lebanon. He had lived and traveled in the East, and had met with and knew the views of Britain's soldiers and civil servants there.

On the other hand, he had held government office for less than a year, and it was his first diplomatic assignment. He had no experience

in negotiating with a foreign government, and was in a weak bargaining position because he wanted too much from the other side, too obviously.

Until January 3, 1916 Sykes went to the French embassy on a daily basis to negotiate. He reported in detail at night to FitzGerald and through him continued to receive the ghostly guidance of Kitchener. It is impossible to know what Sykes said or was told: Kitchener and FitzGerald kept no proper files, and none of the three men left a record of what occurred. There may have been a misunderstanding between them as to what Sykes was instructed to demand and what he was told to concede. Later, in describing his dealings with Lord Kitchener, Mark Sykes remarked that "I could never make myself understood; I could never understand what he thought, and he could never understand what I thought."

There is more evidence from the French side of the negotiations than from the British side as to the secret hopes and plans that were involved. Documents exist that establish what Picot and his political associates hoped to gain from the negotiations and how they hoped to achieve their goals.

Picot, the scion of a colonialist dynasty in France — his father was a founder of the Comité de l'Afrique Française, and his brother was treasurer of the Comité de l'Asie Française, of which his father was also a member — acted effectively as the advocate of the colonialist party within the Quai d'Orsay and was as dedicated a proponent of a French Syria as his government could have chosen to represent it. Earlier in 1915 Picot had inspired a parliamentary campaign in Paris against the ministers who were prepared to give way to Britain in the Middle East. The mixture of French commercial, clerical, and political interests in support of Picot's position proved potent. The Lyons and Marseilles Chambers of Commerce sent resolutions to the Quai d'Orsay in support of a French Syria. Proponents of a French Syria took control of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies.

Pierre-Étienne Flandin, leader of the French Syria movement in the Senate, issued a report on Syria and Palestine in 1915 that became the manifesto of the "Syrian Party" in French politics — the party that Picot championed. Syria and Palestine form one country, he argued, that for centuries had been shaped by France, to such an extent that it formed

the France of the Near East. (His argument harked back nearly a thousand years, to the Crusades and the establishment of Latin Crusader kingdoms in Syria and Palestine.) It was incumbent upon France to continue its "*mission historique*" there, he wrote. The potential wealth of the country was immense, he claimed, so that for commercial reasons, as well as historic and geographic ones, it was vital for the French Empire to possess it. Then, too, according to Flandin, it was vital for strategic reasons. Flandin claimed that Damascus was the third holiest city in Islam and was the potential center of an Arabic Islam; France dared not let another power direct it and perhaps use it against France. Flandin claimed that at heart Syria-Palestine was French already. Its inhabitants, according to him and his colleagues, were unanimous in desiring to be ruled by France.

The French deluded themselves. Opposition to French rule was intense among the educated classes in Syria (other than the Maronites, the Eastern-rite Roman Catholic community sponsored by France). Sykes and his friends in Cairo believed that the French were blinding themselves when they ignored this opposition. (The British intelligence community in Cairo—Clayton and his colleagues—did not see, however, that they were deluding themselves in the same way by thinking that the peoples of those areas ardently desired to be governed by Britain.)

Picot drafted his own negotiating instructions outlining a strategy to win the concessions that he wanted from the British. They show that he would have preferred to preserve the Ottoman Empire intact, for its "feeble condition" offered France "limitless scope" to expand her economic influence. Partition had become inevitable, however; it therefore was advisable to take control of Syria and Palestine, even though France would dismember the Ottoman Empire by doing so.

The French Foreign Office recognized that policing inland Syria would strain French resources; what Picot and his government most desired was to assert direct French rule only over the Mediterranean coastline and an enlarged Lebanon, and to control the rest of Syria indirectly through Arab puppet rulers. Picot's plan was to pretend to Sykes that France insisted on obtaining direct rule over all of Syria, so that when he moderated the claim he could obtain some concession in

return. What he hoped to get was an extension of the French sphere of influence eastward from Syria to Mosul (in what is now Iraq).

In secretly planning to take Mosul, Picot was unaware that Kitchener and Sykes were secretly planning to give it to him. They wanted the French sphere of influence to be extended from the Mediterranean coast on the west all the way to the east so that it paralleled and adjoined Russian-held zones; the French zone was to provide Britain with a shield against Russia. France and Russia would be balanced one against the other, so that the French Middle East, like the Great Wall of China, would protect the British Middle East from attack by the Russian barbarians in the north. This concept had been suggested to Kitchener, perhaps by Storrs, and it became central to his strategic plan for the postwar East. Even Britain's claim to Mosul, with the oil riches strongly suspected to exist there, was to be sacrificed in order to place the French in the front line, at a point where the Russians might be expected one day to attack. The War Office point of view was that "From a military point of view, the principle of inserting a wedge of French territory between any British zone and the Russian Caucasus would seem in every way desirable."

On the British side of the negotiations Sykes also wanted France's agreement to an Egyptian offensive; Kitchener wanted Alexandretta, and an agreement that Britain could invade the Ottoman Empire at Alexandretta; Sykes held a brief from Cairo to reserve the towns in Syria that were being promised to the Sharif Husayn; and nobody in the British government wanted to see any other Great Power established in the postwar world astride the road to India. It was a challenging agenda, especially for Sykes, a neophyte in diplomacy.

The British feared that Picot would not compromise on France's claim to exercise direct rule over all of Syria, while the French feared that they would not be allowed to rule any of it, not even coastal Lebanon. Picot argued that Christian Lebanon would not tolerate even the nominal rule of the Emir of Mecca, while Paul Cambon, the French ambassador in London, warned that French rule would be necessary to avert the outbreak of a religious war: "It is enough to know the intensity of rivalries between the various rites and religions in the Orient to fore-

see the violence of the internal strife in Lebanon as soon as no external authority is there to curb it."

In the end both Sykes and Picot obtained what they wanted from one another: France was to rule a Greater Lebanon and to exert an exclusive influence over the rest of Syria. Sykes succeeded in giving, and Picot succeeded in taking, a sphere of French influence that extended to Mosul. Basra and Baghdad, the two Mesopotamian provinces, were to go to Britain.

Palestine proved to be a stumbling block. Sykes wanted it for Britain, even though Lord Kitchener did not, while Picot was determined to get it for France. In the end a compromise was reached: Britain was to have the ports of Acre and Haifa (rather than Alexandretta, north of Syria, the harbor that Kitchener preferred) and a territorial belt on which to construct a railroad from there to Mesopotamia, while the rest of the country was to fall under some sort of international administration.

Except for Palestine and for the areas in which France or Britain exercised direct rule, the Middle East was to form an Arab state or confederation of states, nominally independent but in reality divided into French and British spheres of influence.

The agreement reached by Sykes and Picot was to come into effect only after the Arab Revolt was proclaimed. Picot and the French ambassador, Cambon, were not persuaded that Husayn would contribute anything of value to the Allied cause; they told their Foreign Minister to ratify the preliminary Sykes-Picot Agreement (concluded on January 3, 1916) as soon as possible, before the British had a chance to become disillusioned about the Arabs, and therefore to regret the extensive concessions they had made to France in order to be free to deal with Husayn.

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Husayn proclaimed his revolt, but it fell on deaf ears. It was intended to help the Allies, but instead the Allies had to divert scarce resources to protect Husayn. However British intelligence in Cairo, mounting a rogue campaign to withdraw the concessions made to France in the

Sykes-Picot Agreement, found political uses for Husayn and his sons in doing so. That, however, is another story.

Weeks after armistices brought hostilities to an end, the prime ministers of France and Britain met privately. Clemenceau, the Frenchman, wanted British support for France's claims in Europe, and in return asked the Briton, Lloyd George, what *he* wanted. Mosul and Palestine, Lloyd George replied. Clemenceau agreed — and assumed that Britain would willingly honor its remaining promises made in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. When the Peace Conference convened, that turned out not to be so.

Endnote

1. Citations to quotations in the text will be found in David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (New York: Holt, 1989).