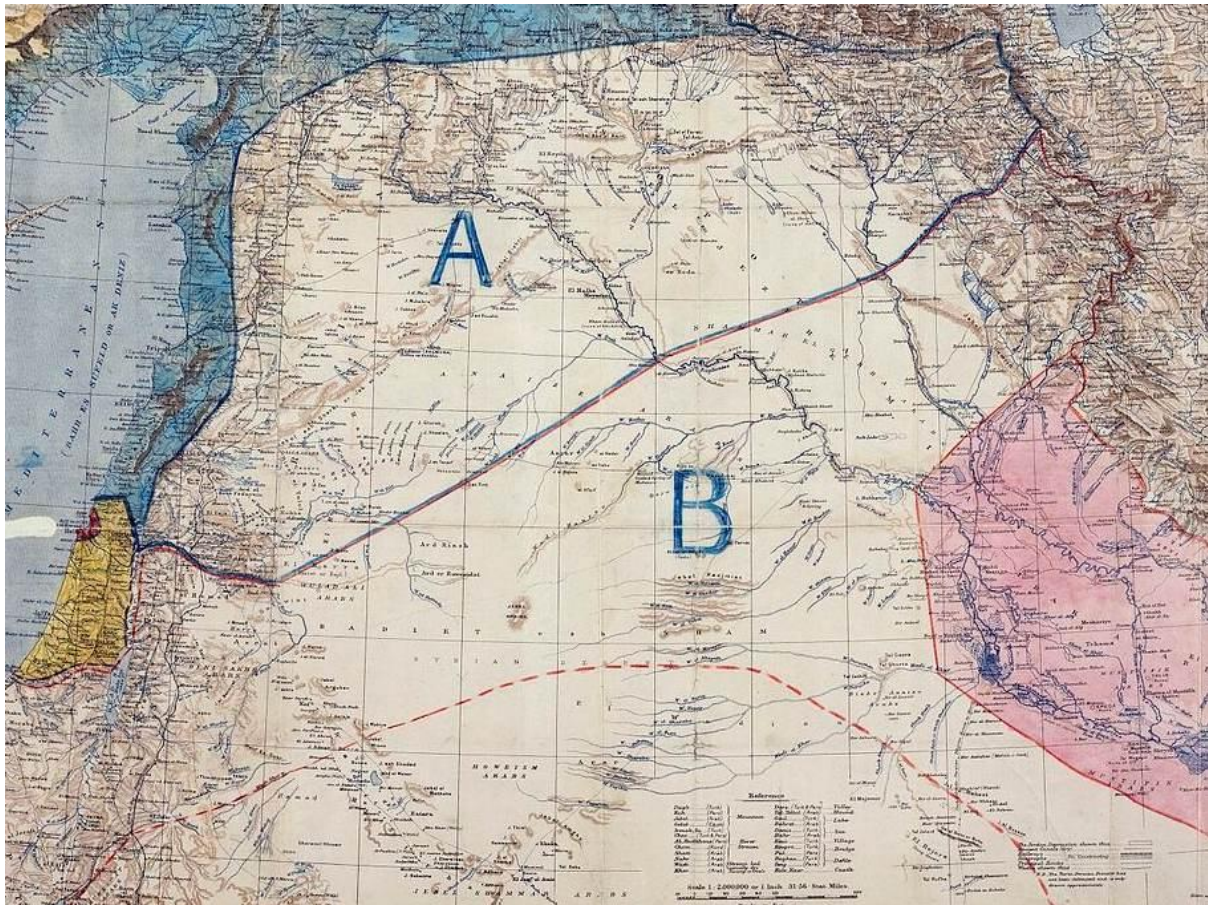


Redrawing the Lines in the Sand?

Quests for decentralisation, regional autonomy and independence among Syrian Kurds and South Yemeni separatists

By: Leo Kwarten

This text is included as Chapter 11 of 'Stabilising the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa: Regional Actors and New Approaches'. Editors: Victor Gervais & Saskia van Genugten (Eds.). Published by Palgrave Macmillan (2020), ISBN 978-3-030-25231-1, pp. 233-257



In August 2014, at the height of its power, Daesh was keen to show to the world that the borders that have kept the Middle Eastern countries divided were sacred no longer. As a bulldozer brought down the fence that had once been the border between Syria and Iraq but was now a mere relic in the recently established “Caliphate”, a Daesh fighter proudly proclaimed on video: ‘We don’t believe in the Sykes-Picot Agreement.’¹ Of course, he referred to the 1916 agreement between Great Britain and France which carved the Ottoman Empire up in British and French spheres of influence. Although based on their imperial interests at the time, the ‘lines in the sand’ drawn by Sykes-Picot became the blueprint for the current borders in the Levant.

¹ VICE News, 13 August 2014, ‘Bulldozing the Border Between Iraq and Syria: Daesh (Part 5)’ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxX_THjtXOW&t=283s

Despite routinely being criticised by Islamists, minorities and Arab nationalists alike as the main cause of many present-day evils in the Middle East, such as religious division and incompetency to unanimously engage regional crises, the 'lines in the sand' have never been redrawn. On the contrary, when challenged Middle Eastern countries are able to act with unusual unanimity to defend these borders as was the case with Iraq's annexation of Kuwait in 1990.² At the time, in a highly unconventional coalition soldiers from the Arab Gulf States, Syria and Egypt among other states fought shoulder by shoulder with US forces to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein's army. A quarter of a century later, Daesh could never have been dismantled - and Sykes-Picot 'restored' if you like - if there would not have been a shared interest to do so by unusual bedfellows such as the US, Russia, Iran, Syria, Iraq and local Kurdish fighters in both Syria and Iraq.

Nevertheless, borders in the Middle East are increasingly being challenged today by local actors striving for decentralisation of state powers, far-reaching autonomy or independence. The Arab revolts that flooded the Middle East in 2011 have destabilised political orders once considered unshakable. Some of the old regimes, like in Libya, crumbled under mounting popular pressure and post-Qaddafi elite infighting. This effectively split the country into several regions with self-styled governments and militia based armies. This not only upset the existing political, economic and social balance that the former autocratic regime had so meticulously construed in order to remain on top, but it also awakened dormant desires in hitherto neglected regions for a radical re-division of power.

Despite the fact that the warring parties in Libya in a UN-led initiative have agreed to the formation of a Government of National Accord (GNA), which was installed in Tripoli in March 2016, this did not prevent Libya to continue being a playground for centrifugal forces. Some of them are ethnic minorities, such as the Amazigh (Berbers), Tubu and Tuareg who reclaim their language, culture or sometimes even their civilian rights for which there was not place in Qaddafi's highly centralised and oppressive state structure. Other forces, such as the Barqa movement in Cyrenaica, strive to introduce a federal system in Libya with its own parliament, police force and courts while foreign policy and the armed forces would remain with the central government.

Other regimes, like Assad's in Syria, desperately fought back and countered the opposition by the use of excessive force. In the process, social cohesion disintegrated as religious and ethnic groups were played off against each other by the regime in an attempt to survive. This resulted in civil strife and foreign intervention. In the turmoil, opportunities unexpectedly arose ...

For purchasing the whole chapter, please turn to: [Stabilising the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa - Regional Actors and New Approaches | Victor Gervais | Palgrave Macmillan](#)

² Arab unanimity was not complete however. On 3 August 1990, the rejection of Iraq's invasion was endorsed by 14 of the 21 Arab League member countries and was opposed by six (Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Sudan, Yemen and the PLO). The Arab Gulf States retaliated by expelling hundreds of thousands of Yemeni workers. Furthermore, not all attempts at alteration of the colonial borders in the Middle East have been unsuccessful. When North Yemen forcefully imposed unification on the South in May 1994, supported by the unification agreement that had been concluded four years earlier, it succeeded in doing so despite serious objections from most of the GCC states.