

Annexations and Territorial Agreements

SYKES-PICOT AGREEMENT

TREATY AT A GLANCE

Completed (Ratified)
May 9, 1916, at London

Signatories
Britain, France, and Imperial Russia

Overview
A secret tripartite agreement defining the goals of the Allied powers of Britain, France, and Russia for the partition of the Ottoman Empire at victorious close of the Great War, the Sykes-Picot Agreement did not remain secret for long. News of the secret deal excited the territorial ambitions of the Italians and created what would become a long-term resentment among the Arabs, then in revolt and seeking postwar autonomy and nationhood.

Historical Background

Most, if not all, the belligerents entered World War I claiming that they did so defensively, either to protect territory that had been invaded or was threatening to be invaded by a foreign power, or to maintain their national honor by coming to the aid of an ally under such attack. As the war got under way and the body count and the costs began to mount, each side—Allies and Central Powers—began to define their war aims more broadly and to justify their involvement with dreams of adding new territory or colonies. Thus, under the guise of making the enemy pay for his perfidy, did the old imperial lusts resurface.

By 1916 the Allies pretty much understood that should they win, they would be dividing up spoils between themselves, and there was no greater spoil than the ailing Ottoman Empire, whose instability had contributed so much to the start of the war. It was in the spring of that year that two diplomats, Mark Sykes of Britain and Georges Picot of France, got together and hammered out the secret convention between Great Britain and France, with the assent of soon-to-be moribund Imperial Russia, for the dismemberment of the Turkish lands in the Middle East. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, as it came to be called, would lead to the division of Turkish-held Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and

Palestine into various areas administered by either the British or the French, despite the fact that some of those lands—sometimes even the same lands—were in effect promised to the leaders of the Arab Revolt on the one hand and, through the BALFOUR DECLARATION, to the Jews on the other.

Terms

The agreement promised that Russia should acquire parts of Armenia and some Kurdish territory to the southeast; that France would get Lebanon and Syria; and that to Britain would fall Mesopotamia, including Baghdad, and the Mediterranean ports of Haifa and Acre. Between the French and British holdings, Sykes and Picot agreed, there would fall either a confederation of Arab states or a single Arab state, which, however, would be divided into French and British spheres of influence. Egyptian Alexandria would be a free port, and Palestine, because it was a holy center for several religions, would be placed under “international” supervision. The agreement took form in an exchange of notes between April 26 and October 23, 1916, such as these two from British foreign secretary Edward Grey: one to French ambassador Cambon, one to Russian ambassador Benckendorff, both residing in London.



Grey to Cambon, 16 May 1916

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your Excellency's note of the 9th instant, stating that the French Government accept the limits of a future Arab State, or Confederation of States, and of those parts of Syria where French interests predominate, together with certain conditions attached thereto, such as they result from recent discussions in London and Petrograd on the subject.

I have the honour to inform your Excellency in reply that the acceptance of the whole project, as it now stands, will involve the abdication of considerable British interests, but, since His Majesty's Government recognize the advantage to the general cause of the Allies entailed in producing a more favourable internal situation in Turkey, they are ready to accept the arrangement now arrived at, provided that the cooperation of the Arabs is secured, and that the Arabs fulfil the conditions and obtain the towns of Homs, Hama, Damascus, and Aleppo.

It is accordingly understood between the French and British Governments:

1. That France and Great Britain are prepared to recognize and protect [this was changed in August 1916 to read "uphold"] an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States in the areas (A) and (B) marked on the annexed map, under the suzerainty of an Arab chief. That in area (A) France, and in area (B) Great Britain, shall have priority of right of enterprise and local loans. That in area (A) France, and in area (B) Great Britain, shall alone supply advisers or foreign functionaries at the request of the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States.

2. That in the blue area France, and in the red area Great Britain, shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States.

3. That in the brown area there shall be established an international administration, the form of which is to be decided upon after consultation with Russia, and subsequently in consultation with the other Allies, and the representatives of the Shereef of Mecca.

4. That Great Britain be accorded (1) the ports of Haifa and Acre, (2) guarantee of a given supply of water from the Tigris and Euphrates in area (A) for area (B). His Majesty's Government, on their part, undertake that they will at no time enter into negotiations for the cession of Cyprus to any third Power without the previous consent of the French Government.

5. That Alexandretta shall be a free port as regards the trade of the British Empire, and that there shall be no discrimination in port charges of facilities as regards British shipping and British goods; that there shall be freedom of transit for British goods through Alexandretta and by railway through the blue area, whether those goods are intended for or originate in the red area, or (B) area, or area (A); and there shall be no discrimination, direct or indirect, against British goods or any railway or against British goods or ships at any port serving the areas mentioned.

That Haifa shall be a free port as regards the trade of France, her dominions and protectorates, and there shall be no discrimination in port charges or facilities as regards French shipping and French goods. There shall be freedom of transit for

French goods through Haifa and by the British railway through the brown area, whether those goods are intended for or originate in the blue area, area (A), or area (B), and there shall be no discrimination, direct or indirect, against French goods on any railway, or against French goods or ships at any port serving the areas mentioned.

6. That in area (A) the Baghdad Railway shall not be extended southwards beyond Mosul, and in area (B) northwards beyond Samarra, until a railway connecting Baghdad with Aleppo via the Euphrates Valley has been completed, and then only with the concurrence of the two Governments.

7. That Great Britain has the right to build, administer, and be the sole owner of a railway connecting Haifa with area (B), and shall have a perpetual right to transport troops along such a line at all times.

It is to be understood by both Governments that this railway is to facilitate the connection of Baghdad with Haifa by rail, and it is further understood that, if the engineering difficulties and expense entailed by keeping this connecting line in the brown area only make the project unfeasible, the French Government shall be prepared to consider that the line in question may also traverse the polygon Baniyas-Keis Marib-Salkhad Tell Otsda-Mesmie before reaching area (B).

8. For a period of twenty years the existing Turkish customs tariff shall remain in force throughout the whole of the blue and red areas, as well as in areas (A) and (B), and no increase in the rates of conversion from ad valorem to specific rates shall be made except by agreement between the two powers.

There shall be no interior custom barriers between any of the above-mentioned areas. The customs duties leviable on goods destined for the interior shall be collected at the port of entry and handed over to the administration of the area of destination.

9. It shall be agreed that the French Government will at no time enter into any negotiations for the cession of their rights and will not cede such rights in the blue area to any third Power, except the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States, without the previous agreement of His Majesty's Government, who, on their part, will give similar undertaking to the French Government regarding the red area.

10. The British and French Governments, as the protectors of the Arab State [the phrase "protectors of the Arab State" was deleted in August 1916], shall agree that they will not themselves acquire and will not consent to a third Power acquiring territorial possessions in the Arabian peninsula, or consent to a third Power installing a naval base either on the east coast, or on the islands, of the Red Sea. This, however, shall not prevent such adjustment of the Aden frontier as may be necessary in consequence of recent Turkish aggression.

11. The negotiations with the Arabs as to the boundaries of the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States shall be continued through the same channel as heretofore on behalf of the two Powers.

12. It is agreed that measures to control the importation of arms into the Arab territories will be considered by the two Governments.

I have further the honour to state that, in order to make the agreement complete, His Majesty's Government are proposing to the Russian Government to exchange note analogous to those

exchanged by the latter and your Excellency's Government on the 26th April last. Copies of these notes will be communicated to your Excellency as soon as exchanged.

I would also venture to remind your Excellency that the conclusion of the present agreement raises, for practical consideration, the question of the claims of Italy to a share in any partition or rearrangement of Turkey in Asia, as formulated in Article 9 of the Agreement of 26th April 1915, between Italy and the Allies.

His Majesty's Government further consider that the Japanese Government should be informed of the arrangements now concluded.

Grey to Benckendorff, 23 May 1916

I have received from the French Ambassador in London copies of the notes exchanged between the Russian and French Governments on the 26th ultimo, by which your Excellency's Government recognize, subject to certain conditions, the arrangement made between Great Britain and France, relative to the constitution of an Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States, and to the partition of the territories of Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia, provided that the cooperation of the Arabs is secured.

His Majesty's Government take act with satisfaction that your Excellency's Government concur in the limits set forth in that arrangement, and I have now the honour to inform your Excellency that His Majesty's Government, on their part, in order to make the arrangement complete, are also prepared to recognize the conditions formulated by the Russian Government and accepted by the French Government in the notes exchanged at Petrograd on the 26th ultimo.

In so far, then, as these arrangements directly affect the relations of Russia and Great Britain, I have the honour to invite the acquiescence of your Excellency's Government in an agreement to the following terms:

1. That Russia shall annex the regions of Erzeroum, Trebizond, Van, and Bitlis, up to a point subsequently to be determined on the littoral of the Black Sea to the west of Tebizond.
2. That the region of Kurdistan to the south of Van and of Bitlis between Mush, Sert, the course of the Tigris, Jezireh-ben-Omar, the crest-line of the mountains which dominate Amadia, and the region of Merga Var, shall be ceded to Russia; and that starting from the region of Merga Var, the frontier of the Arab State shall follow the crest-line of the mountains which at present divide the Ottoman and Persian Dominions. These boundaries are indicated in a general manner and are subject to modification of detail to be proposed later by the Delimitation Commission which shall meet on the spot.
3. That the Russian Government undertake that, in all parts of the Ottoman territories thus ceded to Russia, any concessions accorded to British subjects by the Ottoman Government shall be maintained. If the Russian Government express the desire that such concessions should later be modified in order to bring them into harmony with the laws of the Russian Empire, this modification shall only take place in agreement with the British Government.

4. That in all parts of the Ottoman territories thus ceded to Russia, existing British rights of navigation and development, and the rights and privileges of any British religious, scholastic, or medical institutions shall be maintained. His Majesty's Government, on their part, undertake that similar Russian rights and privileges shall be maintained in those regions which, under the conditions of this agreement, become entirely British, or in which British interests are recognized as predominant.

5. The two Governments admit in principle that every State which annexes any part of the Ottoman Empire is called upon to participate in the service of the Ottoman Debt.



Consequences

The secret arrangement was in direct conflict with British pledges already made to Hussein ibn Ali, sharif of Mecca, the Hashimite king, who—with, most famously, the help of the British agent T. H. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia")—was about to launch the Arab Revolt against the Turks, with the understanding that the Arabs would get a much larger and more important share of the fruits of victory. The good news was that the Arabs did not yet know about the agreement, and would not know about it until late in 1917, when the new Soviet government published Sykes-Picot along with several other secret treaties entered into by the czar's government.

Meanwhile, the Italians, who as nominal allies did indeed know about the agreement, began to clamor for spoils of their own. The Allies promptly promised them southwestern Anatolia in another secret agreement. Russia lost her piece of the pie when the Russian Revolution took her out of the conflict prematurely, and Italy never got the lands she wanted because of the Young Turks' nationalist victories following the military collapse of the old empire during the war.

When the Arabs finally heard about the agreement, they were scandalized, and Britain only added salt to the diplomatic wounds it had inflicted on them by promising the Jews a homeland in Palestine. Arab resentment persisted beyond the concessions made to them in the Allies' conference at San Remo in April 1920. In some measure, it persisted through the rest of the century, long after the breaking up of the Middle East after the war into newly constructed, sometimes arbitrary kingdoms, in which Sykes-Picot played its role, which had become a fixed and problematic reality that haunts modern diplomacy.