# The Legacy of Sykes-Picot
# National and Political Crisis in the
# Syrian Fertile Crescent

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The Fertile Crescent, once the cradle of civilization, has become one of the most unstable regions of the world. Among its present features the following may be noted: violence, wars, scandals, corruption, patronage, human right abuse, economic mismanagement, military incompetence, social intolerance, uncontested or managed elections accompanied by bribery and violence and amounting to what has been called "election without representation", absence of stable parties and of effective and loyal opposition, and subordination of public to private interests. The list is endless.

To understand the situation in the Fertile Crescent it is not enough to study contemporary records, comments and speeches, still less the charges and counter-charges of the various sides and parties. Calmly and dispassionately the facts of history must be recalled and prevalent misconceptions dissipated. In this brief paper the facts about the Fertile Crescent will be simply set forth with the object of correcting a widespread but mistaken notion, namely that the current situation in the Fertile Crescent is due to circumstantial and transitory factors.

## Current situation in the Fertile Crescent

Before we begin our analysis, let's briefly look at the 'countries' that make up the Fertile Crescent:

***Lebanon:*** One of the most complex and divided countries in the region. For the past three decades Lebanon has been on the fringes, and at times at the heart, of the conflict caused by the existence of 'Israel'. Despite a long civil war, the country has slipped further back into its sectarian cocoon. That war began nearly 25 years ago and left at least 100,000 dead, cities in ruins, and much of the population traumatized. The physical detritus of the war is everywhere, in the pocked facades of countless buildings and the graveyards that dot the country. Yet in the view of many analysts, an officially sanctioned amnesia has obscured memories of the war and discouraged the Lebanese from drawing lessons from it: talk of the war is regarded as beyond the bounds of polite conversation; in most history courses the war goes all but unmentioned; television talk shows on the war have been cancelled; even language itself has been massaged to avoid a direct reckoning with the past. When they

mention the civil war at all, many Lebanese refer to it as "the events," or, indulging the notion that foreigners were mainly to blame, "the war of the others."(1)

The risk in Lebanon's indifference to its recent history, say observers, is that it may intensify the danger of repeating the past. Sectarian hatreds among rival groups of Muslim and Christian Lebanese, which gave rise to the war and provided much of its fuel, are at least as great now as they were before the war's outbreak in 1975. Those tensions have dissuaded tens of thousands of Lebanese who fled the war and live overseas from returning to their homeland, even as the Lebanese economy struggles to right itself. "This wound has not healed," said Farid al-Khazan, a political scientist at the American University of Beirut. "The idea is that we should forget the war, turn the page and move on. It's a scandal."(2)

From a historical perspective, modern Lebanon was created in 1920 from subsidiary reasons which were valid at a time when the sectarian idea formed the predominant social ideology. Erudite Lebanese, like Antun Sa'adeh, even questioned the legitimacy of the Lebanese State: "The Lebanese question is not based on the existence of Lebanon as something independent, or on the existence of a separate Lebanese homeland, or even on an independent Lebanese history. Its only basis is religious party partisanship and theocracy."(3) This means, in effect, that the foundations of modern Lebanon hinge on the continuing presence of a sectarian feeling. If this feeling were to be eradicated, the claim to a separate Lebanese nation would lose its political legitimacy. It also means that the problem of national identity will continue to haunt Lebanon until the sectarian divide is resolved, and this seems highly unlikely at present.

***Arab Republic of Syria:*** Once the centre of a great nation, Syria has been invaded and occupied over the ages by almost all the great powers: Romans, Mongols, Crusaders, Turks, etc. After World War I, it was occupied by the French and the British, partitioned, and reduced to its present-day form.

Today, the political situation in Syria is "under control," but highly immobile. Internal conditions remain obscure for several reasons: the lack of free speech, the absence of independent human rights monitoring organizations, a government-controlled press, and the intimidating presence of all-powerful state security forces and an omnipresent intelligence network.

The Syrian Economy is a multi-resources economy based on agriculture, industry, trade in addition to the oil sector which has witnessed a great development since 1989 in the fields of oil and natural gas extraction and has become one of the essential resources for the development of the Syrian economy. Nevertheless, the country continues to grapple with economic backwardness and deteriorating living standards. It is "severely indebted" (the country's outstanding foreign debts amount to approximately $22 billion, and are growing at about $1.0-1.5 billion a year), shut out of most international banking and financial markets, and trades with most countries on a cash basis without trade credits. Although since the death of Hafez al-Asad it has undergone a degree of relaxation, foreign investment and capital inflow, particularly from the Syrian diaspora, have remained relatively low.

The impoverishment and lack of development not only hold the potential for increasing Syrian political instability, but they also seriously constrain the ability of the regime to negotiate at the international level. In fact, it has already fostered that view in the United States and 'Israel': "A Syria whose economy is contracting may be one that can be deterred by an Israel willing to engage it in an economic race, or - more specifically - an arms race. This has the clear implication that Israel need not hurriedly accommodate Syria. If anything, it should sit back and await Syria's collapse to proceed, for the economic situation is getting worse with time. As with the Soviet Union, there is every reason to believe that Syria can be defeated economically, without military confrontation. It can simply be allowed to collapse under its own economic dead weight. Its collapse can be accelerated by imposing additional economic burdens upon it, much as the Cold War's arms competition under Reagan and Bush did to the Soviet Union."(4)

Syria's economic and political vulnerability is made worse all the more by the presence of two hostile states on its frontiers: Turkey in the north and Israel in the south.

*Jordan:* Most of Jordan is semi-desert, while the eastern regions often tip over to being desert. Jordan relies much on the sparse rain falling over the country, and water flushing through the Jordan Valley (along the Jordan River). When Jordan's territories west of the Dead Sea were lost in the war against Israel in 1967, half of the country's agricultural land disappeared (the just claim to this land is since 1988 transferred from Jordan to Palestine). Jordan is partly mountainous.

Jordan is stable, and this is to a large extent explained by the fact that Jordan has some democratic structures, even if the king is very strong and omnipresent in Jordanian political life. There is also a certain level of freedom of speech. Jordan thrives from the moderate politics and flexibility of its new king, a line he continues from his father, Hussein I, who died in 1999.

Nevertheless, the Kingdom has many problems. It has many times been on the fringes of civil war, particularly with the Palestinians. Jordan is basically a puppet of Western and especially American interests in the Middle East. Outwardly, it supports Palestinian issues, but its capacity to go beyond the rhetoric is constrained by its heavy dependency for survival on Western powers. Palestinian suffering under Israeli occupation takes place within eye view of the Royal family, but there is nothing that Jordan can do to help.

The Jordanian economy is also vulnerable. Major export products are phosphates and fruits. Increasing tourism is helping on the Jordanian economy, with 2.5 million visitors a year. Jordan has never been self sufficient on food, but now that gap is increasing, as internal demands rise quicker than production. Today, Jordan is importing products after the same criteria that apply for underdeveloped countries: exports of some products, and import of basic food stuffs. Even if industry and foreign investments are growing, and the Jordanian governments are supporting this, Jordan is still a poor country. A GNP/capita on only $1,500 (35% of world average) is one of the lowest in the Middle East, and Jordan is must rely on foreign help and bank loans.

***Iraq:*** On October 13, 1932, Iraq became a sovereign state, and it was admitted to the League of Nations. Iraq still was beset by a complex web of social, economic, ethnic, religious, and ideological conflicts, all of which retarded the process of state formation. The declaration of statehood and the imposition of fixed boundaries triggered an intense competition for power in the new entity. Sunnis and Shias, cities and tribes, shaykhs and tribesmen, Assyrians and Kurds, pan-Arabists and Iraqi nationalists - all fought vigorously for places in the emerging state structure. Ultimately, lacking legitimacy and unable to establish deep roots, the British-imposed political system was overwhelmed by these conflicting demands.

The arbitrary borders that divided Iraq and the other Arab lands of the old Ottoman Empire caused severe economic dislocations, frequent border disputes, and a debilitating ideological conflict. The cities of Mosul in the north and Basra in the south, separated from their traditional trading partners in Syria and in Iran, suffered severe commercial dislocations that led to economic depression. In the south, the British- created border (drawn through the desert on the understanding that the region was largely uninhabited) impeded migration patterns and led to great tribal unrest. Also in the south, uncertainty surrounding Iraq's new borders with Kuwait, with Saudi Arabia, and especially with Iran led to frequent border skirmishes. The new boundaries also contributed to the growth of competing nationalisms; Iraqi versus pan-Arab loyalties would severely strain Iraqi politics during the 1950s and the 1960s, when Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser held emotional sway over the Iraqi masses.

Ethnic groups such as the Kurds and the Assyrians, who had hoped for their own autonomous states, rebelled against inclusion within the Iraqi state. The Iraqi government maintained an uneasy peace with the Kurds in the first year of independence, but Kurdish hostility would remain an intractable problem for future governments. The relationship with the Assyrians was openly hostile. Britain had resettled 20,000 Assyrians in northern Iraq around Zakhu and Dahuk after Turkey violently quelled a British-inspired Assyrian rebellion in 1918. As a result, approximately three-fourths of the Assyrians who had sided with the British during World War I now found themselves citizens of Iraq. The Assyrians found this situation both objectionable and dangerous. The Assyrians had hoped to form a nation-state in a region of their own. When no unoccupied area sufficiently large could be found, the Assyrians continued to insist that, at the very least, their patriarch, the Mar Shamun, be given some temporal authority. This demand was flatly refused by both the British and the Iraqis.

These tensions fostered an atmosphere of military intervention. Between 1936 and 1941, four years after obtaining its independence, no less than seven coups and counter-coups were staged in Iraq. The first coup, which one perceptive British observer described as "an innovation of the most startling kind,"(5) established a bad precedent for the intervention of the army in Iraqi politics, and established the pattern for the next five years and for the period after 1958, when Iraq experienced a second wave of military coups. On both occasions, the overthrow of civilian rule was staged under the impact of internal and external influences: to some extent these were a consequence of the feuds and reprisals among Iraqi

political and military leaders. But whereas the first wave of coups did not lead to any fundamental change in the legitimacy of the monarchy or the parliamentary system of government, the second wave put the military in firm control and destroyed the monarchy once and for all. The new republican military regime that replaced the monarchy did not lead, however, to the creation of a durable system of government as in Egypt. It led, rather, to what might be called a durable condition of instability and constant intrigue on the part of the ruling military officers.

Under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, Iraq engaged in two major wars, against Iran in the 1980s and against an American-led alliance in 1991 after it invaded Kuwait. This resulted in the imposition of UN sanctions against Iraq which lasted almost thirteen years. A UN report said Iraq had been reduced to a pre-industrial state, while later reports described living standards as being at subsistence level.

It will take Iraq many years to recover from the effects of UN sanctions if it is allowed at all to do so.

Today, Iraq is occupied by Britiah and American forces. Law and order in the country has broken down, any semblance of central authority has been erroded, and the population of Iraq is deeply divided.

The future of Iraq hangs in the balance. It could split up into several autonomous states or might remain as it is today - a country of chaos.

**Kuwait:** The State of Kuwait is a small, oil-rich country nestling at the top of the Gulf, flanked by large and powerful neighbours - Saudi Arabia to the south, Iraq to the north and Iran to the east.

Kuwait was the first state to terminate the agreement connecting it with Britain. Oil production in Kuwait had developed more quickly than in neighboring states; as a result, Kuwaitis were better prepared for independence. They declared independence in 1961 but ran into immediate trouble when Iraq claimed the territory. The Iraqis argued that the British had recognized Ottoman sovereignty over Kuwait before World War I and, because the Ottomans had claimed to rule Kuwait from what was then the province of Iraq, the territory should belong to Iraq.

The British immediately sent troops to Kuwait to deter any Iraqi invasion. British and Kuwaiti positions were supported by the newly formed League of Arab States (Arab League), which recognized the new state and sent troops to Kuwait. The Arab League move left the Iraqis isolated and somewhat intimidated. Accordingly, when a new Iraqi government came to power in 1963, one of its first steps was to give up its claim and recognize the independence of Kuwait.

After the second Iraqi invasion in 1990, Kuwait's infrastructure was left in bad shape and had to be rebuilt. Oil exports ceased for a period during this time. The 'liberation' of 1991 by the Allies changed the dynamics of Kuwaiti politics, but not the system of rule. More importantly, it turned the country into a training field for American and British forces and, consequently, into a Western outpost against its neighbours, Iraq and Iran. As a weak state

dependent on foreign protection, Kuwait will always be vulnerable to shifts in regional and local balance of power.

*Palestine:* In 1895 the total population of Palestine was 500,000 of whom 47,000 were Jews who owned 0.5% of the land. Following the appearance of anti-Semitism in Europe, Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionism, advocated the creation of a Jewish state in Argentina or Palestine. A year later, in 1897, the first Zionist Congress was held in Switzerland, which issued the Basle programme on the colonization of Palestine and the establishment of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). With the outbreak of World War I, Britain promised the independence of Arab lands under Ottoman rule, including Palestine, in return for Arab support against Turkey which had entered the war on the side of Germany. But in 1917, Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary sent a letter to the Zionist leader, Lord Rothschild, in which he stated that Britain would use its best endeavors to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.

After the War, in 1919, the Palestinians convened their first National Conference and expressed their opposition to the Balfour Declaration. But their action amounted to nothing. In 1920, the San Remo Conference granted Britain a mandate over Palestine and two years later Palestine was effectively under British administration, and Sir Herbert Samuel, a declared Zionist, was sent as Britain's first High Commissioner to Palestine. As a result, the conflict between the Palestinians and the Jews turned nastier. In 1936 the Palestinians held a six-month General Strike to protest against the confiscation of land and Jewish immigration. The Strike was only partly successful. In 1939, the British government published a new White Paper restricting Jewish immigration and offering independence for Palestine within ten years. This was rejected by the Zionists, who then organized terrorist groups and launched a bloody campaign against the British and the Palestinians. The aim was to drive them both out of Palestine and to pave the way for the establishment of the Zionist state.

In 1947, the United Nations approved the partition under which the Palestinian Arabs, who accounted for 70% of the population and owned 92% of the land, were allocated 47% of the country. (UN resolution 181) The following year, British forces withdrew from Palestine and the Zionists proclaimed the state of Israel without defining its borders. Arab armies moved to defend the Palestinians, but were unsuccessful. In 1949, a cease fire was finally agreed. The Zionists controlled 77% of Palestinian land and over 1 million Palestinians were forced to leave their country. The West Bank was put under Jordanian control and the Gaza Strip under Egyptian control.

In 1967, Israel launched a new war against the Arab states and seized the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Syrian Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. From 1967 to the present many things happened: the PLO became a key player; Jordan expelled the Palestinian resistance; war broke out between 'Israel' and the Arab states (October War); Camp David; Israel invaded Lebanon twice (1978 and 1982); the massacres of Sabra and Shatilla; PLO recognized Israel and denounced 'terrorism'; the Madrid Conference; the Oslo Agreement;

and, finally, the intifada. In all, it has been a difficult period for the Palestinians and the Arab States.

## The Partition of the Fertile Crescent

If we follow closely the course of history between 1915 and the present, it is not hard to see that the tribulations of the Fertile Crescent, past and present, stem from one major source: national division.

Before the First World War, the countries that we know today did not exist so we must think in terms of geographic regions. In the southwest Asian part of the Ottoman Empire there were two such regions. We can call them geographical Syria and Mesopotamia. Each region had several provinces, and although the Turks governed the whole area, they allowed some of their provinces considerable local autonomy. For example, Mount Lebanon north of Beirut in Syria had been largely self governing since the 1860s and the province of Kuwait in Mesopotamia had been self governing even longer.

During the war, the Allies (Britain and France) decided to partition the Arab world and turn the various provinces into countries. They did this through the "Mandate" system created after World War I by the League of Nations, which Britain and France controlled. Initially the area was broken into three Mandates: Palestine under Britain, Mesopotamia under Britain, Syria under France. But in the 1920s Syria and Palestine were subdivided, Syria into the countries of Syria and Lebanon, Palestine into the countries of Jordan and Palestine. Also, Kuwait was kept separate from Mesopotamia.

During the war, also, the Balfour Declaration - pledging British support for a Jewish "homeland" in Palestine - was issued in late November, 1917. It stated:

**His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use its best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.**

Why did Britain issue the Balfour Declaration during the war rather than wait until it was over? The answer to this question lies in the nature of Britain's war efforts: "Many British leaders were convinced that if Jews spoke up for the war it could make a difference. Starting in 1916 they began negotiating with Jewish leaders, promising British support for a Jewish Homeland in Palestine in exchange for Jewish support for the war. While some British leaders were sympathetic to Jews for humanitarian or cultural reasons, others thought an alliance with Jewish Nationalists (Zionists) would be strategically advantageous."(6)

Jewish capital was also a significant motive at the time: "Britain, France and Germany attached considerable importance to the attitudes of Jewry towards them because money and

credit were needed for the war. The international banking houses of Lazard Freres, Eugene Mayer, J. & W. Seligman, Speyer Brothers and M.M. Warburg, were all conducting major operations in the United States as were the Rothschilds through the New York banking house of Kuhn, Loeb & Co. Apart from their goodwill, the votes of America's Jewish community of 3,000,000 were important to the issue of that country's intervention or non-intervention in the war, and the provision of military supplies. The great majority represented the one-third of the Jews of Eastern Europe, including Russia, who had left their homelands and come to America between 1880 and 1914."(7)

The Balfour Declaration was issued during World War I because Zionist leaders were secretly informed of the Sykes-Picot agreement. The culprits were the self-confessed Zionist politicians in the British Government and Zionist sympathizers, like Lloyd George and Churchill. The connection between the Sykes Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration was recently investigated by Alan R. Taylor in his study Prelude to Israel. According to Taylor, the Sykes-Picot Agreement "served to negate any implied promises to the Arabs, thus eliminating the possibility of Arab control and affording the Zionists time to wrest Palestine for themselves."(8) On the other hand, the Balfour Declaration was designed to allay Zionists' fears arising from the Sykes-Picot agreement, which provided for an international control of Palestine instead of a mandate, run by a pro-Zionist British government. The period between the two documents was one of intense Zionist lobbying to secure British government support of the Zionist plan before the Sykes-Picot Agreement came into effect. The Zionists lobbied both France and Russia, the other parties to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, to persuade them to make a similar pledge, though with limited success.

Another way of looking at the connection between the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration is as follows. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was the historical document which Zionism needed to ensure that Syria would emerge from the war stateless and incapable of defending Palestine against their designs. The Balfour Declaration was the document that it needed to realize those designs with international approval.

A century later, the Fertile Crescent continues to reel from the Sykes-Picot agreement. The Sykes-Picot agreement tore the Fertile Crescent apart, created artificial divisions inside it, and deprived its people of an independent state, and why? - to cater for the needs and aspirations of a wicked movement called Zionism. I say 'wicked' because so called Jewish nationalism is sterile. It is a figment of Zionist imagination. To the extent that the Jews are only a religious brotherhood, Zionism is not a national movement at all. At best, it is a phase of a Jewish self awakening based on a false interpretation of human laws. As Morris Jastrow Jr wrote: "It is a surface view to regard Zionism, as is done by most of the political Zionists, as part of the general movement of the rise of nationalities which is a distinguishing trait in the political history of the nineteenth century, which led to the resuscitation of the Balkan nationalities, which prompted the union of Italy and found another expression in the formation of the united German Empire in 1871, and which manifested itself at the end of

the war in the efforts of Polish, Bohemian and Magyar nationalities for a renewal of their national independence. These movements furnish no analogy for Zionism."(9)

## The legacy of Sykes-Picot

The Sykes-Picot agreement was a secret understanding concluded in May 1916, during World War I, between Great Britain and France, with the assent of Russia, for the dismemberment of the Fertile Crescent. The agreement, which took its name from its negotiators, Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Georges Picot of France, led to the division of Turkish-held region of the Fertile Crescent (Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine) into various French and British-administered areas. The agreement conflicted with pledges already given by the British to the Hashimite leader Husayn ibn Ali, Sharif of Mecca, who was about to lead an Arab revolt in the Hejaz against the Ottoman rulers on the understanding that the Arabs would eventually receive a much more important share of the territory won. It also excited the ambitions of Italy, to whom it was communicated in August 1916, after the Italian declaration of war against Germany, with the result that it had to be supplemented, in April 1917, by the Agreement of Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne, whereby Great Britain and France promised southern and southwestern Anatolia to Italy. The defection of Russia from the war canceled the Russian aspect of the Sykes-Picot Agreement; and the Turkish Nationalists' victories after the military collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to the gradual abandonment of its projects for Anatolia. The Arabs, however, who had learned of the Sykes-Picot Agreement through the publication of it, together with other secret treaties of imperial Russia, by the Soviet Russian government late in 1917, were scandalized by it; and their resentment persisted despite the modification of its arrangements for the Arab countries by the Allies' Conference of San Remo in April 1920.

The provisions of the Sykes-Picot Agreement were as follows: (1) Russia should acquire the Armenian provinces of Erzurum, Trebizond (Trabzon), Van, and Bitlis, with some Kurdish territory to the southeast; (2) France should acquire Lebanon and the Syrian littoral, Adana, Cilicia, and the hinterland adjacent to Russia's share, that hinterland including Aintab, Urfa, Mardin, Diyarbakir, and Mosul; (3) Great Britain should acquire southern Mesopotamia, including Baghdad, and also the Mediterranean ports of Haifa and Akka (Acre); (4) between the French and the British acquisitions there should be a confederation of Arab states or a single independent Arab state, divided into French and British spheres of influence; (5) Alexandretta (Iskenderun) should be a free port; and (6) Palestine, because of the holy places, should be under an international regime.

Although the Sykes-Picot Agreement did not specifically call for the dismemberment of the Fertile Crescent into the states we know today, it laid the foundations for this division. In the first place, the Sykes-Picot Agreement enshrined the European colonization of the Fertile Crescent as an intrinsic part of post-WWI political order. In the second place, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, by dividing the Fertile Crescent into several spheres of influence, paved the way for its division into smaller entities because European colonization, wherever

it went, followed the 'divide and rule' policy. For this reason, the Sykes-Picot Agreement is generally regarded as the primary instigator of the suffering that the Fertile Crescent has endured since WWI. The following remark by Osama El Sherif, Editor-in-chief of the Jordan-based *Star* illustrates the point:

> The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 divided the Levant into areas under British and French rule (Palestine was mandated to Britain later under the San Remo agreement of 1922) and facilitated the creation of a federation of "independent Arab states" under both countries' protection. We can easily trace the Middle East, as we know it today, to those historic events. The outcome of this disgraceful intervention by the supreme powers of the day in the fate of this region and its people is self-evident. (10)

Long before this, George Antonius wrote: "The Sykes-Picot Agreement is a shocking document. It is not only the product of greed at its worst, that is to say, of greed allied to suspicion and so leading to stupidity; it also stands out as a startling piece of double-dealing.(11) The Sykes-Picot Agreement, by cutting up the Fertile Crescent, it placed artificial demarcation lines inside its body and soul. The fact of a common language and life and the growth of national consciousness, which had made its influence felt through anti-Turkish sentiments, were treated with utmost contempt. On ground level, the territorial and national division of Sykes-Picot led to the creation of artificial barriers between families, between sects, between villages and major towns, and between communities. It created resentment and jealousy in the region, fostered parochial sentiments, sectarian as well as ethnic, and opened old wounds and animosities. The net result was social dislocation on the largest possible scale in conflict with the natural forces at work.

The geographical division of the Fertile Crescent tore the socio-economic cycle of the region apart. It broke up centuries-old trade routes, created new economic barriers, impeded the process of social interaction, and provided for an unstable future. As Antonius stated: "Whatever gains the Allied Powers may have hoped to derive from the partition of that territory, it showed a lack of perspicacity on their part to have imagined that it could make for a peaceful or a lasting settlement."(12) The Allied Powers did not consult the people of the Fertile Crescent or engage their sentiments. They did not hold elections or referendums in the region, but imposed their decisions from above. In the absence of democratic processes, the authors of Sykes-Picot were forced to rely on traditional institutions and centres of power. This deprived the Fertile Crescent of the opportunity to develop a democratic system. Present-day confessional and autocratic rule in the Fertile Crescent is primarily the product of this deprivation.

But more serious even than those results was the effect on national standing. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, by facilitating the dismemberment of the Fertile Crescent and retarding its institutions, weakened the national zeal of its people and their ability to defend the national rights. Political consciousness turned inwardly and public attention increasingly became

entitistic (as per entity). Zionism could not have wished for a better outcome as it set out to colonize Palestine. Suffice to quote the following observation by Herbert Dobbing:

Much of the first quality land in the coastal belt [of Palestine] and the Esdraelon plain was owned by a few rich landlords who lived in Beirut and had become thoroughly westernized in their culture and way of life. In Ottoman times much of northern Palestine was part of the vilayet, or administrative district, of Beirut, which extended well south of Haifa, so that it was not difficult for these absentees, when not traveling in Europe or otherwise busy in the social and commercial life of Beirut, to visit their estates in the south and maintain a tenuous link with their tenantry and labour force. The Sykes-Picot frontier drawing, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918, separated the landlords in the French mandated territory of Lebanon from their land in British controlled Palestine. Visits became a complicated nuisance and provided an easy excuse to sell out at fabulous prices, an excuse described by Christopher Sykes in Cross Roads to Israel as one of the feeblest on record for abandoning their dependents to the tender mercies of alien masters. (13)

The immediate political ramification of Sykes-Picot can thus be summarized as follows: A Lebanon without identity or sense of direction; A Syria too weak to defend itself from covetous states (Turkey coveted Alexandretta and Cilicia); A Palestine cut-off from its national life-link and left with meager resources to fend off Zionist advancements; A Jordan and an Iraq ruled by two brothers (Abdullah and Feisal respectively) who were Saudi by nationality; and a Kuwait confined to a principality.

## The new system of territorial states
## in the Fertile Crescent

The mockery of Sykes-Picot was translated into action in the form of demarcation lines. These lines, or borders as we know them today, were imposed on the Fertile Crescent by the Allied Powers without consulting the local governments or the people of the territory. In other words, Sykes-Picot created a territorial system in the Crescent consistent with the colonial aspirations of foreign powers and their local cronies, the traditional leadership and sectarian interest groups, than with reality at ground level. It deepened the sectarian divide among the people, sowed ethnic discord, broke up the economic unity of the territory, and fostered a provincial spirit along sectarian and ethnic lines.

Despite these adverse ramifications, the state territorial system in the Fertile Crescent is vigorously defended. A recent example is Efraim Karsh's "Why the Middle East is so Volatile," an essentially pan-American perspective. Karsh's begins his paper with the following observation:

Since its formation in the wake of World War I, the contemporary Middle Eastern system based on territorial states has been under sustained assault. In past years, the foremost challenge to this system came from the doctrine of pan-Arabism (or *qawmiya*), which sought to "eliminate the traces of Western imperialism" and unify the "Arab nation," and

the associated ideology of Greater Syria (or Suriya al-Kubra ), which stresses the territorial and historical indivisibility of most of the Fertile Crescent. (14)

For Karsh, the contemporary history of the Middle East begins from the end of WWI. No one doubts the significance of the Great War, but if one is to remain on firm historical grounds, it is important to step back in history to the period in which the new territorial system was framed and start with examining its legitimacy. One must also not ignore social and economic factors and focus only on politics. Had Karsh paid more attention it would not have been hard for him to realize that both Arab and Syrian nationalism emerged before the new territorial system was created in 1920, not in response to it.

In one of the few occasions in which Karsh steps back to pre-1918, we find a description that is out of this world:

> Likewise, the imperial ambitions of Faysal and 'Abdullah placed the Greater Syria ideal on the Arab political agenda. Already during the revolt against the Ottoman Empire, Faysal began toying with the idea of winning his own Syrian empire independently of his father's prospective empire. He tried to gain great-power endorsement for this ambition by telling the Paris Peace Conference that "Syria claimed her unity and her independence" and that it was "sufficiently advanced politically to manage her own internal affairs" if given adequate foreign and technical assistance. When the conference planned to send a special commission of inquiry to the Middle East, Faysal quickly assembled (a highly unrepresentative) General Syrian Congress that would "make clear the wishes of the Syrian people." And by way of leaving nothing to chance, Faysal manipulated Syrian public opinion through extensive propaganda, orchestrated demonstrations, and intimidation of opponents. (15)

This statement should be put to the test to determine the degree to which it is valid. Depicting Greater Syria as an "imperial ambition" is a blemish on history because the Syrian-Arab nationality idea did not ask for anything more than an independent state in the Fertile Crescent. This is a basic and legitimate national right. Even if we accept the argument that Arab leaders, the Hashimites and others, embraced the concept of Greater Syria for personal aggrandizing reasons, it does not take anything away from the authenticity of the concept.

Secondly, the attack on the Syrian National Congress is unwarranted. The Congress was democratically set up from a uniform number of delegates from all parts of Syria, including Lebanon, Palestine and parts of Iraq. "Although [it] had had to be elected in some haste and the customary routine of electoral procedure not fully observed everywhere, there is no doubt ... that it was a representative assembly in the true sense of the word, that its deliberations did reflect the fears and hopes of the vast majority of the population, and that the resolutions it passed may safely be taken as expressing those views and sentiments that were most widely held."(16)

The resolutions of the Congress were expressed in ten clauses and contained demands which may briefly be summarized as follows:

1. Recognition of the independence of geographical Syria.
2. Repudiation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration.
3. Rejection of the mandate system.
4. Rejection of French assistance in any form.
5. Economic union with Iraq followed by national unity.

The proposal to send a special commission of inquiry to the Fertile Crescent (not the Middle East, as Karsh says), was foiled by the British and the Quai d'Orsay, not Faysal or the Syrian National Congress. Hence the King-Crane Commission. Instead of working with the Syrian National Congress, the Allied Powers chose to destroy it. In doing so they destroyed the only genuine institution in the Fertile Crescent and the only real opportunity for peace and stability in the region. The decision to break up the Congress gave birth to a new sentiment in the Levant - that of contempt for the Powers of the West that refuses to go away.

The rest of Karsh's article talks about the failure of pan-Arabism "to undo the much-maligned international order established on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire." This is about one thing Karsh is absolutely right about, but his criticisms miss the mark. The problem lies not, as he claims, in "the rejection of the contemporary Middle Eastern state system" by the pan-Arabs and Syrian nationalists, but in the illegitimacy and unpopularity of this system. Hence Fuller's observation: "Karsh yearns for a Middle East that accepts realities as he perceives them; perplexed, he seeks reasons for why this does not happen... In the end, he presents an historical account distinguished by a heavily Western optic that, in my view, avoids dealing with the genuine realities of Middle East or Arab history."(17)

## Fertile Crescent Unity in Zionist political literature

Not long ago, Umar F. Abd-Allah wrote: "The division of [geographical] Syria into artificial petty states was - and remains - a fundamental necessity of imperialist and Zionist politics. A unified, independent [geographical] Syria would be a region power on a par with any in the Middle East, and the further unification of [geographical] Syria with any of its neighbours would bring into being a world power that would effectively put the Middle East beyond the global reach of the superpowers."(18)

In the last hundred years, the Western powers have thwarted every single attempt to establish a central state in the Fertile Crescent. Even partial attempts at unity, between two or more states, have not been sparred. In every instance, the principal motivation has been to preserve the territorial status quo in the Fertile Crescent as a safety valve for the Zionist State and Western economic interests.

Not surprisingly, an extensive literature has evolved in the West, spearheaded by Zionist writers and sympathizers, depicting Fertile Crescent unity, in any form, as imperialist grand

designs. The shining armor in this campaign is Daniel Pipes. He has gone out of the way to try to show that Greater Syria is basically a political tool of the Asad regime in Syria (first the father and now the son) to dominate other countries in the Crescent. In one of many articles on this topic, Pipes writes:

During a meeting with leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1976, Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad referred to Palestine as a region of Syria, as Southern Syria. He then went on to tell the Palestinians: "You do not represent Palestine as much as we do. Do not forget one thing: there is no Palestinian people, no Palestinian entity, there is only Syria! You are an integral part of the Syrian people and Palestine is an integral part of Syria. Therefore, it is we, the Syrian authorities, who are the real representatives of the Palestinian people."(19)

In the same article, Pipes writes:

Until 1920, Syria meant Greater Syria to everyone, European and Middle Easterner alike; For example, an early nineteenth-century Egyptian historian, 'Abd ar-Rahman al-Jabarti, referred to the inhabitants of El Arish in the Sinai Peninsula as Syrians. Palestine was called Southern Syria first in French, then in other languages, including Arabic. The 1840 Convention of London called the area around Akko "the southern part of Syria" and the 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (published in 1911) explains that Palestine "may be said generally to denote the southern third of the province of Syria." These examples could be multiplied a thousand-fold. (20)

Pipes does not deny Greater Syria because it is a political and social fact. Instead, he attempts to portray it as an expansionist dream lacking the foundations of a modern state: "Greater Syria conjured up a geographic unit, not a political entity. Like Scandinavia or New England, Greater Syria was an abstraction, an ecological and cultural unit. It had never assumed political form; indeed, no one had even tried to establish a Greater Syrian state as such."(21)

A symposium held in Jerusalem under the title "The Greater-Syria Plan and the Palestine Question," in which four prominent Israeli writers (Itamar Rabinovich, Moshe Maoz, Amnon Cohen, Eliahu Elath) gave their views on this topic, concluded that the concept of Greater Syria was a 'historic' dream that can "be interpreted as Syrian domination over Palestine and the Zionist enterprise."(22)

The Zionist view leads to the following 'reverse logic': Greater Syria = imperial expansionism; Greater Israel = national right. Greater Syria, a social fact, becomes expansionist and Greater Israel, a political fallacy, becomes a fact!

What independent Western observers and Zionist writers often overlook when they discuss Greater Syria is its socio-economic unity. The Fertile Crescent, or Greater Syria as some might call it, is much more than a geographical designation: it is home to a national

way of life that has been forming from interaction of its people throughout history. It is a social fact, and a social fact cannot be denied or divided. That this life cycle is dysfunctional at the present time is due in part to the political division instituted after 1920, and, in part, to the creation of a Zionist state in a portion of it.

## Conclusion

The Fertile Crescent is a region of great historical and national significance. It is the cradle of civilization *par excellence*. Today, however, it is a region of tension and instability. In order to understand why it has come to this, it is important to move beyond transient political discourse and circumstantial problems. The Fertile Crescent is hyperactive not because of poor governance, or poor leadership, or economic incompetence, or political corruption, or lack of democracy - these are symptoms not causes of its woes. It is unstable, and will probably stay like this for many years more, because its territorial integrity and the cycle of its socio-economic life have been violated. Until this problem is addressed it is hard to imagine the Fertile Crescent as anything other than a region of tension and instability.

## Endnotes

(1) http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/civwr1.htm
(2) Ibid.
(3) Antun Sa'adeh, *The Ten Lectures*, SSNP Cultural Dept. p183.
(4) http://www.danielpipes.org/article/170
(5) Quoted in R. N. Al-Rayyes and Dunia Nahas, *Politics in Uniform: A Study of the Military in the Arab World and Israel*, (Beirut: An-Nahar Arab Report Books, 1972), 28.
(6) See A. Beshara, *Syrian Nationalism: An Inquiry into the Political Philosophy of Antun Sa'adeh*, Beirut: Bissan, 1995.
(7) http://www.users.cyberone.com.au/myers/balfour.html
(8) Alan R. Taylor, *Prelude to Israel: An Anakysis of Zionist Diplomacy, 1897-1947*, NY: Philosophical Library, 1959.
(9) In Gary Smith (Ed.), *Zionism: The Dream and the Reality*, NY: Barnes and Noble, p. 43.
(10) Osama El Sherif, "Our Say...New Sykes-Picot," *Star* (Jordan), July 20, 2002.
(11) George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 248.
(12) Ibid, p. 249.
(13) Herbert Dobbing, *Cause for Concern: A Quaker's view of the Palestine Problem*, Beirut, 1970, p. 24.
(14) http://www.meforum.org/article/51
(15) Ibid.
(16) Antonius, op.cit., p. 293
(17) Graham E. Fuller, "Longing for a "Reasonable Arab World," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2000, No. 4.
(18) Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, Berkley: Mizan Press, p. 31.
(19) Daniel Pipes, "Palestine for the Syrians?" *Commentary*, December, 1986.
(20) Ibid.
(21) Ibid.

(22) Symposium, "The Greater-Syria Plan and the Palestine Question," *The Jerusalem Cathedra*, 1982.