

**Note to self: Don't let Europeans draw up borders. A geopolitical tour of the Middle East's imaginary lines**

Borders are the prime tools that humans employ to assert governance. They connect, separate, and define the limits of one society, while presenting the beginnings of another. However, when they're drawn artificially, when it all comes down to a map, some issues almost inevitably arise. That could not be more true for those naïve Europeans with a pen in their hands. The scrupulous eye will most definitely see that there is a region of the world that has been plagued by this same curse. A land rich in history, diversity, cultures, and, unfortunately, conflicts: The Middle East. In modern history, the Middle East has yet to experience total peace. In fact, the questionable stability of the Middle East can be argued to be shrouded by a thick and impenetrable fog of uncertainty: the fog of war – an inevitable theme in every conflict that extends beyond the battlefield, hiding away different actors in a complicated scenario of rich historical legacies, regional dynamics and colonial influences. Therefore, let's delve into a geopolitical tour of the borders of the Middle East and explore how many conflicts have actually arisen from mere arbitrary lines drawn by shortsighted European colonisers, and how solutions may be easier said than done.

**Shaping Shadows: the history of the Colonial legacy of the Middle East**

Before exploring the many border issues in the Middle East, we must first look back at history to see how these issues first materialised. The end of the First World War (November 1918) is generally regarded as a positive end to the suffering that saw millions of lives lost –that is– if you were one of the victorious powers (Turan, 2017). The Ottoman Empire was one of these nations that saw the worst end of the deals. Suddenly, over 600 years of existence, and around 400 of those controlling the Middle East, came to an end, and its non-Turkish provinces were partitioned (Turan, 2017). The secret Sykes-Picot agreement signed by Great Britain and France in 1916 anticipated this partitioning and delineated zones of direct British and French colonial rule, a portion of which were to become independent states under their colonial influence, such as Iraq and Syria, respectively (Turan, 2017). These new borders were based on the internal divisions of the Ottoman Empire, a state that never tolerated the non-Turkish ethnic, cultural or religious compositions of its subjects. The needs and aspirations of Arabs, Kurds, Armenians,

Bedouins, Christians, Jews, Shia and Sunni Muslims and other sizable ethnic groups were disregarded entirely (Bontemps, n.d.). While this agreement underwent several revisions with the Treaties of Versailles (1919), Sèvres (1920) and Lausanne (1923), problems with the borders nonetheless evolved.

While this all happened around a century ago, its effects are still visible. In fact, some examples come to mind of how borders drawn by Europeans are the cause of the instability, uncertainty and fog of war that we see today.

### **Uncharted Borders: No Kurdish state:**

In certain cases, the British over-structured borders for political motives, and in others, they took the easy way out by not drawing any. On its 100th anniversary, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) is a harsh reminder for the Kurdish community that their aspirations for an independent Kurdish state were crushed after the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) was overturned (Saeed, n.d.). The drawing of new borders and the consolidation of the British Mandate in Iraq saw the Kurds be displaced across Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. It can be argued that Britain's desire for geopolitical stability overshadowed the anguish of the Kurds. Though very easy to say in hindsight, by ignoring the Kurds, the Europeans indirectly caused more instability in light of the persecutions of the minority population (Saeed, n.d.). By prioritising their relationship with Turkey over the self-determination of the Kurds, this shortsightedness would eventually turn on the Kurds. For example, the repression they faced under Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship would perhaps culminate with the Halabja 1988 chemical attack, which saw the deaths of 3200 to 5000 people (Saeed, n.d.). Although nowadays, Iraqi Kurdistan sees some regional autonomy, the future is still uncertain and is constantly at odds with the central government in Baghdad (Qaed, 2023).

### **Lines in the Sand: Historical Claims and the First Gulf War:**

Despite treaties being signed decades ago, their legal and historical validity technically remains. While it may only seem like a small detail, the Treaty of Lausanne saw the "Basra" Province be split from Iraq and handled as a separate British protectorate, becoming the modern State of Kuwait in 1961 (Chardell, 2023). On the one hand, this might have been nothing more than a classic British transfer of land for whatever suited them best, ancient historical claims still lived

on (Chardell, 2023). Ultimately, it gave more than enough justification for Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait and claim it as Iraq's own in 1990 with the First Gulf War, igniting once again more conflicts, uncertainty and foreign intervention primarily because of artificial borders.

### **Mix and Match: French Puzzle-Making: Syria and Lebanon:**

The European desire to artificially split nations for their view on stability did not only rest with Great Britain; France was equally involved. The treaty of Sèvres (1920) put the region that we now know as Syria and Lebanon under France. While the region had initially seen peaceful coexistence between the many ethnic and religious groups, France saw itself as a protector of the Christians in the region and fostered the regional differences to undermine the unity of Greater Syria to preserve its power (Turan, 2017). Flash forward a couple of decades, and we have two independent states split somewhat on religious demographics, leading to one of the most complicated conflicts ever: the Lebanese civil war between Christians, Shia, and Sunni, with foreign interventions by Israel, Palestine, Iran, the US, the foundation of Hezbollah, the occupation by Syria etc. Lebanon is unstable, divided and uncertain to this day. Once again, it is to show how mere artificial borders can have lasting ripple effects.

### **Solutions:**

At the same time, this short paper is not all about pointing fingers at history and being outright pessimistic. Perhaps I can attempt to shed light on some hypothetical solutions.

While redrawing borders comes to mind, attempts over the past century have all come crashing down (Liang, 2019). Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism movements to create a united Arabic and/or Islamic identity have seen efforts at this: Jordan and Iraq attempted to unite in the 1940s, but to no avail, The United Arab Republic between Syria and Egypt only lasted three years (1958-1961), and Saddam Hussein's attempt to incorporate Kuwait into Iraq was promptly stopped (1991) (Liang, 2019). Redrawing the actual borders would most definitely also see important oil reserves change hands, marking a big global change.

Altogether, these borders currently serve as the prevailing geopolitical landscape. Thus, strong support for current borders may be the best way forward, together with the development of civic

national identities rather than ethnic or religious ones, where people identify with their secularised nation first or equally as that of their individual creed. This would, in part, avoid the situation where the newly established nations of the Middle East in the early 20th century developed their identities by accentuating the differences with their neighbours, rather than their statehood (Turan, 2017). Leading to a situation where justifying existence and borders was synonymous with a violent intervention to maintain such. But overall, this is easier said than done.

**Conclusion:**

Ultimately, we've seen how artificial borders drawn up by colonisers may actually represent much of the evidence that we need to properly understand the instability and uncertainty of the Middle East. From certain groups, such as the Kurds lacking self-determination, to historical claims being used to justify violence and European self-interest taking the upper hand. Now, I can only partially tell whether the fog will eventually lift, and peace, prosperity and other clichés politicians hold so dearly will ever be realised. Hopefully, history has taught us not to let Europeans draw borders outside their own domain, yet with the prospect of causing more harm than good, these current borders may actually be the only ones viable enough.

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