



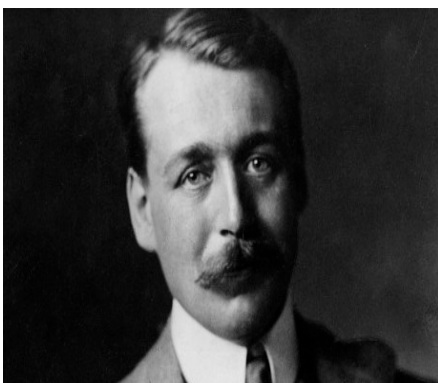
A POWERFUL AND MERCILESS FORCE HAS EMERGED ON THE WORLD STAGE

Isis militants on the Iraq/Syria border: Iraq as we have understood it for the past century or so no longer exists Photo: AFP/HO-ALBARAKA NEWS. Peter Osborne BST 12 Jun 2014 Telegraph UK

As Middle East borders are redrawn by jihadists, the West should regard Iran as an ally. It is almost one hundred years since Sir Mark Sykes, an otherwise forgettable British politician, entered into an agreement with a French diplomat called François Georges-Picot (great uncle of the former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing) to carve up the Middle East after the end of the First World War.

The arrangement was kept secret, and for understandable reasons. In the United States, President Wilson was an enthusiastic advocate of national self-determination. He would have been appalled had he known that the British and French were determined to share out the remains of the collapsed Ottoman empire between them. Of more immediate importance, Sharif Hussein of Mecca launched the Arab revolt against the Ottomans in June 1916. In return, the British had pledged the Arabs full independence, a promise that Lloyd George casually betrayed once it was over.

Though sordid and cynical, the Sykes-Picot arrangement endured far longer than anyone had a right to expect. Out of it arose the modern states of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (followed in due course by Saudi Arabia, Israel and Jordan). Ninety-eight years later, however, Sykes-Picot is finally starting to collapse. Look at a map and (fortified by the notorious straight lines of the agreement) Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are all still theoretically present and correct. In practice, though, a series of spectacular events are steadily turning their maps into works of fiction.



Sir Mark Sykes, who with François Georges-Picot carved up the Middle East after the First World War.

Yesterday's fall of Mosul (ironically a key point of dispute between the French and the British 100 years ago, because oil had just been discovered there) shows vividly that Iraq as we have understood it for the past century or so no longer exists.

In the north, the Kurdish region has become an autonomous state, and it cannot be long before it declares itself formally independent. Kurdistan is guarded by a system of checkpoints and command posts that are impossible to penetrate. Indeed, any Arab who enters without proper credentials disappears, and so do all his friends and family. This may sound brutal, but it does explain why Erbil, the Kurdish capital, has been almost as safe from terror attack as London over the past decade.

Meanwhile the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, is building a sectarian state around Baghdad and the south capable of commanding the support of most Shia Muslims. The fate of the remainder of his country, however, is of extraordinary interest, because it is falling very fast into the hands of a terrifyingly violent new entity called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Isis). Isis recognises none of the rules inherited from Sykes-Picot. Photographs on Facebook show its fighters dismantling border points and burning their passports, thus making a virtue of statelessness.

However, Isis does levy taxes and controls a tranche of territory ranging from northern Iraq through to eastern Syria. No local army seems capable of confronting it. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, says he is a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, thus claiming to be more than a mere political leader or general. According to one Arab observer, al-Baghdadi "has designated himself as a global leader of the jihad fighters in particular and Muslims in general, and as a herald of the caliphate".

He has broken off former links with al-Qaeda. Bin Laden and his successor, al-Zawahiri, aimed their fire against what they called "the far enemy" – in other words, the United States and its local allies and clients. Isis, by contrast, more violent than al-Qaeda, is driven by merciless hatred of all sects and minorities that fail to endorse its bigoted and narrow ideology. This has started to terrify the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, the source of so much of its cash and arms. Isis fighters deny the legitimacy of any secular power, including the Saudi King Abdullah. And the Saudis fear that one day soon, the Isis jihadists will return home with a vengeance. (As with Soviet Russia and apartheid South Africa, it is obvious the Saud regime will at some stage collapse, but impossible to judge when.)

Isis also has the range and power to strike at will in the West, because so many young Muslims have travelled from Europe to join up. Indeed, it has already started to do so. The recent murder of four people in the Jewish museum in Brussels was carried out by a young Frenchman called Mehdi Nemmouche, who had fought alongside Isis in Syria before returning home on his murderous mission. These jihadists are able to move more freely and across a greater range than ever before. Their area of operations stretches from northern Iraq, through Syria and across north Africa to Libya and down towards Nigeria. For the first time, they directly control huge swathes of land. As with the Bolsheviks in 1917 or the fascists in the Thirties, a merciless new force capable of deploying horrifying violence has emerged on the world stage.

In order to understand this new phenomenon, it is essential to grasp what brought it into being. Its emergence can be traced straight back to the Iraq invasion. Some of its fighters (who bring formidable military capability) are former Ba'athist soldiers. Others learnt their trade with the so-called "Awakening fighting" groups created by the US to head off an all-out Iraqi civil war back in 2007. The Western campaign to dislodge President Assad of Syria was another contributing factor. While our leaders were ready to call for Assad to go, they were unwilling to intervene directly to dislodge him.

Instead, mainly through allies such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the West supported militant rebel groups which have since mutated into Isis and other al-Qaeda connected militias. The comparison with the terrible mistakes made by Western intelligence agencies during the Afghan war against the Soviets is startling. We supported al-Qaeda, which later turned on us. Thanks to this policy, Pakistan now faces a permanent terrorist insurgency bordering on civil war. It is very likely that Turkey (and probably Jordan and Saudi Arabia) will face the same problem in due course as a result of the Syrian backlash.

Meanwhile, jihadists have found a new terror base from which they can mount attacks on the West. All this was predictable at the start of the Syrian war – indeed, President Assad warned of it. How can the West hope to contain the monster it helped to create? The countries we formed at the stroke of a pen in the Sykes-Picot treaty 98 years ago are being washed away. Only Egypt and Iran, states whose history stretches back for thousands of years rather than decades, are certain to survive intact.

With Egypt facing grave problems, Iran has emerged as the most stable and powerful country in the Middle East. Again and again since the 9/11 attack on the twin towers in 2001, the Iranians have offered cooperation against al-Qaeda and its allies. These entreaties have repeatedly been turned down. It is time for President Obama and David Cameron to acknowledge that we have been helping to sponsor terror for the past few decades. We have to choose new allies, and they must include Iran. If we carry on with our present deluded course, the threat to the West will only grow more dangerous.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/10892615/A-powerful-and-merciless-force-has-emerged-on-the-world-stage.html>