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## **The Political Situation on the Eve and During of the Great War and the Role of Sir Mark Sykes Reshaping British Middle East Policy**

### **Abstract**

Before the First World War broke out, two powerful alliances dominated world politics: the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance. The war started in August 1914, but when in November of the same year, Ottoman sultan declared jihad on the Entente powers, the political situation in the Middle East crucially changed for the Great Powers, especially for Great Britain, for which Middle East had much more importance for securing Imperial Road and the oil resources. Immediately, Britain sought for new strategies in the Middle Eastern policy. Establishment of the De Bunsen Committee was the first step, by which Sir Mark Sykes, a devoted English statesman emerged as the man who created the Middle East. With his wide knowledge about Middle East and the Ottoman Empire, Mark Sykes gained influence in the foreign policy of Great Britain in a short time. The conclusion of the Sykes-Picot agreement was the most effective duty he performed in his carrier.

**Keywords:** *Great Britain, France, World War I, Sir Mark Sykes, Sykes-Picot agreement*

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## **Birinci Dünya Müharibəsi ərəfəsində və dövründə siyasi vəziyyət və Ser Mark Sayksın Britaniyanın Yaxın Şərq siyasətini yenidən formalaşdıran rolu**

### **Xülasə**

Birinci Dünya Müharibəsi başlamazdan əvvəl dünya siyasətinin formalaşmasında iki güclü ittifaq üstünlük təşkil edirdi: Üçlü Antanta və Üçlər İttifaqı. Birinci Dünya Müharibəsinin başlaması 1914-cü ilin avqustuna təsadüf etsə də, həmin ilin noyabr ayında Osmanlı Sultanının Antantaya qarşı cihad elan etməsi gedişata böyük təsir göstərdi. Yaxın Şərqdəki siyasi vəziyyətin dəyişməsi Böyük Dövlətlər, o cümlədən İmperiya Yolunun və neft ehtiyatlarının təhlükəsizliyindən ehtiyat edən Böyük Britaniya üçün böyük əhəmiyyət kəsb edirdi. Böyük Britaniya dərhal Yaxın Şərq siyasətində yeni strategiyalar axtarmağa başladı. De Bunsen Komitəsinin yaradılması, ingilis dövlət xadimi Ser Mark Sayksın “Yaxın Şərqi yenidən quran şəxs” kimi formalaşmasında ilk addım oldu. Yaxın Şərq və Osmanlı İmperiyası haqqında geniş biliyi ilə Mark Sayks qısa müddətdə Böyük Britaniyanın xarici siyasətinin formalaşmasında özünəməxsus yer qazandı. Onun karyerasında yerinə yetirdiyi ən əhəmiyyətli vəzifə isə Sayks-Pikot müqaviləsinin bağlanması idi.

**Açar sözlər:** *Böyük Britaniya, Fransa, Birinci Dünya Müharibəsi, Ser Mark Sayks, Sayks-Pikot müqaviləsi*

### **Introduction**

On the eve of the First World War, the world is divided between two rival alliances: the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance. Ottoman Empire was standing in the center of the world politics at that time, as the great powers were competing over supremacy in the Ottoman lands. Before the war, Great Britain continued the Ottoman preservation policy that started in the XVIII century. The core idea was to have Ottoman Empire as a buffer state in the Middle East, in order to prevent the actions

of Great Britain's rivals, namely France, Germany and Russia, in the region and protect the Imperial Road and access to oil resources in the Middle East. In November 1914, when Ottoman empire under the Committee of Union and Progress, which rose after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, declared jihad on the Triple Entente, Britain sought to change the previous policy (Ekinci, 2015). Allied with Austria-Hungary and Germany, Ottoman Empire maintained a geostrategic power in the War. Controlling the straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles, Ottoman government would be able to block the supply route to Russia, Great Britain's ally in the war. Additionally, Germany could threaten the Suez Canal through the Ottoman lands, which had a crucial role in the British Middle Eastern policy. The Suez Canal and Gulf of Basra were important for their geopolitical location as they were passkey to India, the jewel of Crown for the British empire. When Ottoman Sultan who was also the spiritual ruler - caliph of the world Muslims declared holy war on the Allied powers, Britain worried about a possible uprising of Indian Muslims against the empire.

Nevertheless, encountering with the Ottoman in the Great war, change the balance in the Middle East region and caused a shift in the European policy in the Middle East. It should be mentioned that the Britain's closest ally in the War, France also had some other plans for its interest in the region. At that time France was dominating Ottoman finances and playing a role like the protector of the Catholics in the Levant. Before this alliance, the two had several conflicts over the superiority in the Middle East. French and the British ambitions were clashed in the region for several times as France aimed to gain a sphere of influence in the East of the Mediterranean Sea. When Britain invaded Egypt and gained control over Suez in the 1880's the French desires in the region were ruined.

### **Research**

**1. The new British policy in the Middle East.** With the war, Britain preferred preserving Ottoman integrity to finding a new solution to have a buffer zone in the region. The war did not change the British approach to Middle East; it changed the implementation of Eastern policy during and afterwards of the war. To renew the Middle Eastern policy the De Bunsen Committee was founded. De Bunsen committee was established by the order of Prime Minister Helbert Henry Asquith on April 8, 1915, and finished the report on June 30, 1915. The committee was headed by Maurice de Bunsen as the government commanded to negotiate the possible variations for post-war imperial policy in the Middle East. The Committee was focused on four scenarios for the fate of the Ottoman lands afterwards the war. The Four Options were decided by taking British war interests into consideration and named as Option A to D. The solutions included desolation of the empire; divided the empire into spheres of interest; supporting establishment of the autonomous regions under European hegemony etc. (Johnson, 2018, pp. 611-620).

De Bunsen Committee was consisted of various ministers from all over the British empire. As the head of War affairs, Lord Kitchener had appointed General Charles Calwell as the delegate of the Ministry on the committee. It should be mentioned that, alongside Calwell, Kitchener had sent Sir Mark Sykes as his personal representative, who remained as a bureaucrat responsible for Middle East throughout the war. Since 1910, when he was back from Constantinople, Mark Sykes tried to be elected to British Parliament. After several unsuccessful attempts, Sykes was elected to House of Commons for Hull in 1911, when he was 36 years old. With his first ever parliamentary speech in November which was about Islamic affairs, he was able to impress the members. He kept his position afterwards (Leslie, 1923, pp. 18-22). During his schoolyears Mark Sykes visited Ottoman Turkey for several times with his family, so his knowledge and understanding of Middle East was much more than any other statesman in the Parliament during the World War One. As a friend of Captain Oswald FitzGerald who was the personal secretary of Lord Kitchener, Sykes was able to find a job in the Ministry of War in 1915. This job opened a path to De Bunsen committee for Sir Mark Sykes (Berdine, 2020, pp. 18-31). Sykes acted actively during the negotiations in the Bunsen committee. He suggested several alternative scenarios for the post war political order in the Ottoman Empire: annexation of Ottoman territory to Allied powers; division of Ottoman territories into spheres of influence of European powers; to keep Ottoman Empire but to change the government to a dependent one; dividing Ottoman Empire into semi-independent new states etc. To implement one of the versions mentioned below, the Committee members needed to name the areas they want to divide

from the Empire. The English statesmen were not aware of the current situation in the Middle East, and they used the Greek terms they had learnt from school. The Arab-speaking region located in the north of the Arabian Peninsula was called “Mesopotamia” in the East, while Europeans called this region as “Syria”. They named the area south to Syria as Palestine. This was a geographical term in the Western Christian World to define the Holy lands. Under the leadership of Sykes, the committee almost reached an agreement on establishing five independent provinces in the Ottoman Middle East. These were Syria, Palestine, Armenia, Anatolia and Jazira-Iraq (North and South of Mesopotamia) (Fromkin, 2020, pp. 126-128). According to the committee, the British sphere of influence would be established from the Mediterranean coast and to the Gulf of Basra and a new railway would be constructed from Mediterranean port to Mesopotamia, which will ensure the easy route to the east. Lord Kitchener wanted the railway to end in Alexandria; however, Mark Sykes insisted on Haifa. FitzGerald, the secretary of Kitchener and a friend of Sykes, supported Haifa version of the plan. Both Kitchener and Mark Sykes were sure about relocating Caliphate to Southwards in order to keep it safe from Russian influence. This plan would also help England to keep Caliphate far from the financial control of France (Fromkin, 2020, p. 128).

So, in the early period of the Great War, Britain realized that Ottoman Empire would stand by the side of the Central powers and eventually decided to develop anti-Ottoman foreign policy during the War. One of the attempts was to make contacts with the Sharif Hussain, who was the head of Mecca, the holy city for the Muslim world. However, the negotiations gone wrong, and the sides were not able to make an agreement beneficial for both, as Hussain demanded independence of Hijaz and right of caliphate. By this way he would be both king and the spiritual leader of the Muslim Arab world. Nevertheless, as the war advanced, Britain decided to renegotiate with Sharif Hussain, as the Allied Powers believed that a general Arab revolt in the Ottoman Middle East would help them to weaken the Ottoman Empire in the War. At this time, Sharif Hussain demanded to be head of an independent state with the area covering all the Arabian Peninsula, including all Syria and Iraq. In 1916, after the long term of negotiating process covering 1915, finally the sides agreed on the terms of Sharif Hussain, excluding Lebanon (Armaoğlu, 2020, pp. 102-103).

**2. The Sykes-Picot Agreement.** In June of 1915, Mark Sykes was given an important duty to perform by Lord Kitchener, as he was sent for a mission to Middle East. During his embassy, he visited major Eastern cities like Cairo, Aden, Baghdad, Basra etc. After returning to London in December of the same year, Kitchener gave him a new task. Mark Sykes was sent to make an agreement with M. Georges Picot for the future division of Syria, Mesopotamia and Anatolia (Leslie, 1923, pp. 18-29). The so-called Sykes-Picot agreement emerged as a result of discussions between the two. Nevertheless, the terms of Sykes-Picot agreement were mainly based on the reports of Sir Maurice de Bunsen’s commission. Mark Sykes was a representative of the Foreign Office during the negotiations of the De Bunsen, however his role as a driving force in the resolution was undoubtful. Making an agreement with France was the only way to regain control over the Middle East at that time. So, the head of the Foreign Office, Sir Edward Grey could not underestimate the French interests in the Levant, and giving autonomy to Arabs without agreement with France would start a new clash in the region. When Gray visited Jules Cambon, the ambassador of France in London, Cambon suggested Charles Franchois Georges-Picot as the one “who knows the Syrian question better than anyone”. As the previous Consul-General in Beirut, Picot was sent to London Embassy in August of that year to participate in the negotiations to divide the Middle East. (Sykes, 2017, pp. 252-254)

In order to make conclusion on the negotiations with France, England needed permission from Russia, who has a strong influence and interest in the region. At this point, by the order of the foreign office, Mark Sykes was sent to Russia to negotiate the terms with the Russian representatives. In February 1916 he left for Russian realm, and until April, Sykes travelled to Bergen, Stockholm, Petrograd, Moscow, Tiflis and Baku. Sykes had personally met the emperor and the Grand-Duke Alexieff in the Caucasus. (Leslie, 1923, p. 21) Nevertheless, the ally of Britain in the Great War, France was not satisfied with the agreement that was concluded with the Sharif of Macca. This dissatisfaction resulted with the secret Anglo-French negotiations that covered 9 to 16 May of 1916. As the sides were represented by Georges Picot and Sir Mark Sykes this deal is called the Sykes-

Picot agreement. According to the Sykes-Picot agreement, all the coastal region starting from Akka (in Syria) to the north (including Beirut), Adana and Mersin would be under French control, Mesopotamia (Tigris-Euphrates region), the area between Baghdad and Basra would be under British control. An Arab state or confederation would be established in the rest of the Middle East. Nevertheless, Arab province was divided between two spheres of influence: the area north to the Akka-Kerkuk line went under French and south to the line went under British sphere of influence. Iskenderun would operate as independent port and Palestine would become an international zone. It was idea of Sykes to leave Mosul for France in order to have a buffer zone between Russian Empire and the British Middle East. (Armaoğlu, 2020, pp. 102-103)

The Sykes-Picot agreement was concluded as a result of negotiating process that followed the word given to Arabs by McMahon about Arab Independence, mainly to discuss the promises in a broader term. The agreement resulted with the division of the Middle East by a straight single line, that was drawn by Sir Mark Sykes. This line stretched from Acre on the Mediterranean coast to Kirkuk, near to Persian frontier. This line also divided the land promised to Sharif Hussain. The division was simple, the north of the line – the Blue zone, would pass under French control, while the south part- the Red zone, would enter under British protectorate. The two sides gained solo control over the regions. With the agreement France finally gained Syria and Lebanon, while Britain took Iraq (Barr, 2012, pp. 31-37). As England agreed on including the “independent” Arab states into the sphere of interest and allowing France to take control of the coastal region of Syria was a betrayal to the correspondence with the Sharif. Even though, England was making negotiations with Ibn Suud who was the ruler of Najd, which ended with the agreement concluded in December of 1915. With that agreement, England recognized the suzerainty of Ibn Suud over Najd region, South coast of the Gulf of Basra (excluding Kuwait). After the arrangement, unlike Hussain, Suud didn't declare war on the Ottoman Empire, instead guaranteed safe passage of Britain through the Gulf of Basra, which helped Britain during the war in Iraq. Sharif Hussain started war over the Ottomans in June 1916 and declared himself king of Arabia. Great Britain recognized his reign immediately. (Armaoğlu, 2020, pp. 102-103)

### **Conclusion**

In the course of World War I, Great Britain took several attempts to ensure control in the Middle East. In the early 1916, British representatives promised independence to Arabs in return of their uprising against the Ottoman Empire. T.E. Lawrence, better known as “Lawrence of Arabia”, was an English officer who negotiated with Arab leaders and persuaded them to fight against Turks. On the other side, in May 1916, Great Britain and France concluded the secret agreement of Sykes-Picot, by which the Arab world would be divided into provinces with artificial borders under French and British control. At this time, Arabs were still fighting against Ottoman Empire, with the hope of independence which should be granted by Britain. However, at this time, the worst is yet to come for Arabs. In 1917, British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour declared Balfour Declaration in hope for gaining financial support for ongoing war. With the Balfour Declaration Britain showed “sympathy” for establishing national home for Jewish people in Palestine and promised “support” for realizing this idea (Wiest, 2017, p. 139).

Britain chose a deeper and more complicated way to agitate Ottoman empire, by supporting Arab nationalism and Zionism at the same time. This policy was an obvious mistake that carried out by British officials, as it created a whole chaos in the Middle East region. Gilbert Clayton, a political adviser in British Foreign Office, criticized London's Middle East policy and claimed that “Arab-Jewish-Armenian combination” idea in the region would eventually cause Arab dissatisfaction, as the Arabs dislike the other two nations alike. As a supporter of this combination policy, Mark Sykes was notified by Clayton, as Sykes was trying to change the traditional behavior against Jews and Armenians in a short period (Mcmeeking, 2011, p. 352). Nevertheless, there was no possibility for Britain to carry out all their projects in the Middle East.

To sum up, The British pre-war and wartime Middle East policy completely changed with the participation of Mark Sykes. The century-lasting Ottoman preservation policy left its place to

encouraging Arab separatism. Britain sharply changed its defensive policy to expansionist one during and after the war. While mainly focusing on securing British interests in the region until 1914, after that year they started active intervention policy. Moreover, Middle Eastern oil and territorial control became more important for the Empire than the British India at that time. Zionist diplomacy which emerged with the Balfour Declaration emerged during wartime. Mark Sykes died in 1919, during the negotiations in the Paris Peace Conference, however, his influence and ideas lived and affected to the emergence of the Mandate System following the Peace conference. This shift in the British Middle Eastern policy resulted emergence of the artificial borders in the Middle East, namely in Iraq, Syria and Palestine (Boyd, 2014).

The importance of Mark Sykes for Britain can be observed from the memories of Winston Churchill about him, which he wrote after the death of Mark Sykes: “He was clearly marked out for service in the East. He became an invaluable factor in all that intricate and remarkable policy which split the Arab from the Turk, divided the Moslem world at a most critical juncture, and eventually furnished important forces on the desert flank of Allenby’s armies. He became increasingly employed in the interallied questions about the Middle East arising out of the victory. He could certainly have occupied, had he so desired, a considerable official position in the Parliament of that day.” (Leslie, 1923. p. vii-viii)

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