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THE WAR TO END WAR

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

GEORGE SANTAYANA

Spanish Philosopher¹

After the release of a video showing the beheading of journalist James Foley in August 2014, President Barack Obama stood before the nation and declared, “One thing we can all agree on is that a group like ISIL has no place in the twenty-first century.”²

President Obama expressed our collective rage and horror over this brutal execution of a Western hostage by an ISIS soldier. And yes, we all agreed: ISIS must be stopped.

Yet, since then, there have been more beheadings. Shocking reports of children and women being brutalized and murdered at the hands of these terrorists have rattled even the most apathetic among us. Reports on nightly newscasts have chronicled confusing details of ISIS gaining more and more control over key regions of the Middle East. How can something like this be happening in such a civilized, highly sophisticated world?

THE ISIS CRISIS

As strong as President Obama's words may have been at the time, they did not answer all our questions . . . or calm all our fears. What's more, the media's attempt to make sense of it all leaves most people dazed and bewildered. And our questions go unanswered. Where in the world did a group like this come from? And how can they be stopped?

ISIS has threatened to send its soldiers to attack the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries. When will they make their way into my neighborhood? Are they already here?

Fear feeds off lack of understanding and an ignorance of the truth. That's why it's so important for everyone to understand the origin and motives behind ISIS and to be best prepared for a very uncertain future.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

To understand the rise of ISIS, we need to travel back in time a hundred years. Our journey takes us to Europe in the dark days of World War I, the "war to end war."³ Events from the front lines dominated the news, but political intrigue and shifting alliances slinked through the power corridors of London, Paris, and Moscow. Treaties and secret agreements were forged that unknowingly created problems that would cripple the Middle East for the next hundred years . . . and led to the rise of ISIS.

World War I pitted the Allied Powers (Great Britain, France, Russia, and later the United States) against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire). The conflict centered in Europe and quickly degenerated into a brutal war of attrition that ultimately claimed the lives of nine million soldiers and seven million civilians.

THE WAR TO END WAR

Advances in technology multiplied the number of dead and wounded as each side developed more efficient and effective weapons, including submarines, airplanes, and poison gas.

The Allied powers needed to find a way to break the stalemate in the trenches of Europe. Their solution was to attack Istanbul (part of modern-day Turkey), the capital of the Ottoman Empire. If they could get the Ottoman Empire to collapse, they could outflank the remaining Central powers. The plan was brilliantly conceived, but poorly executed. It failed, and the war dragged on. And that's when the Allies made the first of three crucial agreements that ultimately changed the course of the Middle East.⁴

A PROMISE TO THE ARABS

In 1962 the cinematic grandeur of Peter O'Toole riding across the Arabian Desert in *Lawrence of Arabia* captivated moviegoers. The film is a highly dramatized yet essentially true story of how British army officer T. E. Lawrence encouraged the Arabs to side with the British and fight against the Ottoman Empire. Lawrence did lead Arab forces on an attack to capture the port of Aqaba. He also tried to convince British officials that Arab independence would benefit England.

To help enlist Arab support, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, wrote a letter to Abdullah bin al-Hussein, who would later become the first king of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. In that letter McMahon expressed British approval for an independent Arab state extending across most of the Middle East. "I am empowered in the name of the Government of Great Britain to give the following assurance and make the following reply to your letter: Subject to the above modifications, Great Britain is prepared to

THE ISIS CRISIS

recognize and support the independence of the Arabs within the territories in the limits and boundaries proposed by the Sherif of Mecca.”⁵

T. E. Lawrence’s personal efforts, coupled with this letter from the British High Commissioner, persuaded the Arabs to side with the British against the Ottoman Empire. The die was cast. The promise was made. Arabs accepted at face value the British promise to reward them for their assistance by guaranteeing independence and rightful control over much of the Middle East.

A PROMISE TO THE JEWS

The British faced many problems during World War I. German submarines patrolled the waters around Great Britain, threatening to choke off the sea-lanes, which were the island’s lifeline. The Germans also cut off Britain’s access to acetone, a solvent used in the production of cordite, the main propellant in bullets and shells. The Germans controlled the production of acetone, so Britain had to find an alternative way to manufacture it. They could very well have lost the war had not the Jewish chemist Chaim Weizmann developed a fermentation process that allowed the British to produce their own acetone.

Weizmann was the right man at the right time for Britain and, so it seemed, for the Jewish people as well. In addition to being a chemist, he was also one of the leaders of Zionism in Britain, a movement committed to establishing a Jewish state or homeland within the boundaries of Palestine. His acetone discovery brought him to the attention of David Lloyd George (Minister of Munitions) and Arthur Balfour (First Lord of the Admiralty) and placed him in a remarkable position of influence. The three developed a friendship that

continued after Lloyd George became prime minister and Balfour became foreign secretary.

Weizmann suggested to both men that a permanent Jewish homeland in Palestine had many benefits. It would provide security for the Jewish population already living there, and it would provide a safe haven for Jews trying to escape the war-tattered surroundings of Eastern Europe. A Jewish homeland would benefit the other people of the Middle East by bringing European modernity and scientific advance to an otherwise very backward region of the world. And, he added, the announcement of a Jewish homeland might also help persuade America to join the war effort on the side of the European Allies.

Weizmann proved persuasive.

On November 2, 1917, Arthur Balfour sent a letter to Baron Rothschild, another leader of Britain's Jewish community, detailing Britain's official position on the subject of establishing a permanent Jewish homeland in Palestine. "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours 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."⁶

Jews in Palestine and around the world celebrated and eagerly anticipated the end of the war when Britain would make good on its promise. Unfortunately, the British had now promised parts of the same land to the Arabs and the Jews. To make matters worse, Britain had little intention of honoring *either* promise.

THE SECRET AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE ALLIES

Imagine selling the same home to two different families—making promises to both that are mutually exclusive and that can't possibly be fulfilled. That's exactly what happened to the land of Palestine. It was promised to the Jews and to the Arabs, as both groups already were claiming ancient and even prophetic rights to those territories.

Britain's duplicate promises to the Arabs and Jews are partly responsible for many of the misunderstandings in the Middle East. But it was the third agreement—one the Allies hoped to keep secret—that is most responsible for today's crisis in the Middle East and eventually the rise of the ISIS crisis.

Britain and France decided to quietly carve up the Middle East among themselves!

In May 1916 the British, French, and Russians reached an understanding. Should they succeed in defeating the Ottoman Empire, they planned to divide it among themselves, with most of the territory going to the British and to the French. The agreement was to remain secret. But after the Russian revolution of 1917, the new communist government published all the documents in an effort to embarrass the British and the French.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, as it was known, carved up much of the Middle East into British and French spheres of influence. The agreement, which was largely adopted during the 1920 San Remo conference following World War I, effectively canceled out or modified much of what had been promised

Many of the nations in the Middle East are creations of World War I, their borders drawn by Europeans. And they were drawn badly. We're seeing the consequences of that in the conflicts right now.

—Richard Engel
*NBC Nightly News*⁷



to the Arabs and the Jews. That agreement, more than anything else, fundamentally altered the landscape of the Middle East in two major ways.

COLONIAL INFLUENCE, WESTERN IDEALS

First, the Sykes-Picot Agreement laid the groundwork for aggressive European colonial influence in the Middle East. Each country was allowed to establish direct or indirect control over its designated area of influence. Britain wanted to control an area that would give it a clear path to the oil in the Persian Gulf and to its empire in India. France initially wanted a clear path to the oil fields around Mosul, but they settled instead for control of greater Syria, along with a major share of the Turkish Petroleum Company. These spheres of influence are the reason the second most prominent language spoken (after Arabic) in Lebanon and Syria is French . . . while in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, it is English.

The second way the Sykes-Picot Agreement shaped all subsequent events in the modern Middle East was through trying to impose the Western ideals of nations and nationalism on a region defined by ethnic and religious loyalties. Look closely at the following map of the Middle East, “Middle East Boundaries Set by the Sykes-Picot Agreement.” Many of the borders between Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia are little more than straight lines drawn on a map. The borders of these countries were determined by European cartographers with little or no consideration for geographical or ethnic boundaries—completely ignorant of the subtle distinctions related to religious or tribal loyalties. In short, the countries created were totally artificial, a recipe for unending conflict and intensifying frustration toward the West.

Middle East Boundaries Set by the Sykes-Picot Agreement

A prime example is Iraq. Most of us have grown up assuming there must have always been a country named Iraq. There wasn't. Prior to World War I the region was actually divided into three separate provinces in the Ottoman Empire, each named after a principal city—Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. And each region was dominated by a different group: the Kurds in the north, the Sunni Arabs in the center, and the Shiite Arabs in the south.

Britain pushed to have the three provinces cobbled together into the country of Iraq.

Consequently, the area has been a tinderbox of ethnic conflict and racial tension ever since. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein (1979–2003) led a Sunni-dominated government that oppressed the Kurds in the north and the Shiites in the south. More recently the Shiite-dominated government of Nouri al-Malaki oppressed the Kurds and the Sunnis. And it

was the Sunni opposition to Mal-aki's government that encouraged so many Sunnis to support ISIS.

In an ironic twist of fate the Great War—the “war to end war”—ultimately plowed, planted, and cultivated the land of the Middle East in a way that has caused it to yield a never-ending crop of conflict. But to understand how ISIS grew to become one of the most prolific products of that garden, we need to move forward in time to the late 1970s—a time with eerie parallels to what we're experiencing today.



[Britain and France] created the contemporary Arab world. They played God and produced mutilated entities that almost a century later are coming apart.

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