

Carved in Stone or Written in the Sand? The Uncertain Legacy of Great War Diplomacy in the Middle East

Editors' Note

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The Hussein-McMahon correspondence (1915–1916), the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), the Balfour Declaration (1917): a century old, these terms no longer refer only to historical documents hidden in dusty archives; they have become a group of contested symbols, trigger points making frequent appearances in contemporary discussions about the future of the Middle East. Historically speaking, all were part and parcel of the same wartime diplomacy, but they offered different, potentially incompatible visions for the region's future. The first is the correspondence between Sharif of Mecca Hussein ibn Ali and British High Commissioner to Egypt Sir Henry McMahon, who engaged in a written exchange between July 1915 and March 1916 about the future boundaries of an envisioned caliphate under Hussein's aegis, should the sharif's forces help the British defeat the Ottoman Empire. Though the British *Daily Telegraph* informed the public about the correspondence less than a year after the end of the war, the quotations from the correspondence were not published until 1923.¹ The letters gained additional significance in 1938, when they were included in the appendix to George Antonius's *The Arab Awakening*, in the context of the anticolonial Arab Revolt in Palestine.² Next came the agreement signed in May 1916 between the French diplomat François Georges-Picot and his British counterpart, Sir Mark Sykes, which divided the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire between the two colonial powers. Signed in secrecy, the Anglo-French agreement became known only in winter 1917, following the Bolshevik Revolution, after it had been published in the Russian newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia* as damning evidence showcasing the arrogance and lack of transparency of the Allies' imperialist politics. The third, the British public statement issued on November 2, 1917, known as

the Balfour Declaration, expressed the government's support for the creation "in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." Significantly, this last document would be internationally endorsed and later found its way both into the League of Nations' Mandate for Palestine (formally confirmed on July 24, 1922), and the Israeli declaration of independence (May 1948).

The three documents were first and foremost products of wartime diplomacy. Indeed, we have good reason to turn Carl von Clausewitz's aphorism on its head in these cases, since here diplomacy and politics were, ultimately, the continuation of war by other means, and not the other way around. Once British and French policy makers came to view the Arab Revolt and the endorsement of Zionism as unique political assets, the ground was ripe for Orientalist daydreaming. It is a story of an inverse correlation, really: think of the mud in "the trenches," the "wet, cold, smelly, and thoroughly squalid"—as Paul Fussell described them in his classic book on the war in Europe—a temporary device that had turned, by 1916, into a permanent mechanism of slaughter and the key symbol of the Western Front.³ As the mud in the trenches became soaked in blood and frozen, literally as well as metaphorically, it was easier to inflame the imagination with images of bedouin storming the desert on the backs of their camels or the Australian Light Horse troops staging the last cavalry assault in Beersheba. Anachronistic acts of bravado in the age of machine guns and artillery? Maybe. But these were also romantic counterweights to the gruesome images coming from Europe's killing fields, regardless of the military effectiveness of the raids.

But far more significant was the reception and the uncertain legacies of these agreements. For the subsequent history of the modern Middle East, the wartime Hussein-McMahon, Sykes-Picot, and Balfour moments were, perhaps, no less important than the post-World War I "Wilsonian Moment," as historian Erez Manela has dubbed it.⁴ The outbreak of sectarian and national conflicts the region witnesses today, many observers agree, can be traced to that decisive historical period and its heritage, marking the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the rearrangement of the region's geopolitics. Not only the centenary of World War I but also the weakening of the nation-state system—a weakening many consider to be a key challenge to regional stability in the Middle East—triggered renewed interest in these wartime agreements and their attempts at border making.

The threat posed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) brought these concerns most vividly to the public eye. Active mainly in Syria and Iraq, in June 2014 the militant group proclaimed itself to be a worldwide, all-Islamic

caliphate and has defined its main goals using the slogan *kasr al-budūd* (the breaking of the borders)—that is, the erasure of the existing national borders and divisions in the Middle East that were imposed on the region by Western powers. Notwithstanding the recent decline of ISIS, the propaganda films in which its fighters were seen moving barbed wire in the Syrian desert, signaling the physical and symbolic change of the political borders, brought the Sykes-Picot agreement back to public attention.⁵

The constant references made to Sykes-Picot by ISIS leaders is an extreme, albeit not exceptional, illustration of the way in which names of past documents are awakened from their dormancy, turned into tags, and thrown into an ongoing, unresolved debate about the future of the entire region. In this ideologically charged setting, such documents function first and foremost as political codes. These codes are at once “cultural keywords,” as Raymond Williams and Anna Wierzbicka have explored, reflecting core values within a given society, while simultaneously representing fault lines separating communities and national aspirations, reminding their users of past promises and present grievances.⁶ They are constantly revisited, reevaluated, and reinterpreted in an attempt to show that the past still haunts the present, to lift the cloak disguising sinister political behaviors. Far more significantly, they are revisited to encourage counterfactual “what if” thinking, as though one could reverse the wheels of history and return to a precolonial past, a lost Mashriq, by erasing the “Middle East”—or the “Levant,” its French colonial equivalent.⁷ At the same time, the “meaning” of these documents—especially when it comes to the conjoined epistolary messages that bear the names of McMahon and Balfour—is obtained by reading them in tandem. Once glued to each other, they are either read as dual, conflicting promises or as parts of a grander scheme of European colonial expansion and exploitation, well disguised by the fog of war. Subsequently, they have become the yin and yang of modern Middle Eastern history, read not so much as Siamese twins but as signifying two polar opposites, incompatible cosmic vectors and visions for the future. Thus, as much as these documents and their authors are rooted in the past, they reveal a curious ability to resist historicist *Entzauberung* (disenchantment), pushing back attempts to reduce the air of mystery surrounding them and rooting them instead in a historical context.

The current volume of the *Journal of Levantine Studies* constitutes an attempt to both resist and explore the mythologies with which these terms are now coupled. This volume is the product of two workshops: the first, on Sykes-Picot, was held at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute in 2016; the second, on the Balfour Declaration, was hosted by Princeton University and the National University of Singapore in 2017. These

workshops aimed to place these documents in their historical context and to evaluate their uncertain legacies.⁸ Both workshops sought to consider serious questions about borders, state fragility and instability, the post–World War I colonial and imperial heritage in the Middle East, the role of the various actors in the post–World War I arrangements in the region, and the conflicting ways in which these documents have been remembered, utilized, and exploited by parties battling for both territory and legitimacy. They also offered different readings and analyses of these two documents and tried to shed some light on the context in which they were drafted. The articles in this volume developed out of the discussions surrounding several of the papers presented in these two stimulating workshops.

The opening article in the issue, “Declarations of (In)Dependence: Tensions within Zionist Statecraft, 1896–1948,” by **Derek Jonathan Penslar**, offers an analysis of the relationship—one best characterized as a dialectic tension—between notions of dependence and independence as they appear in four foundational texts related to Zionist statecraft: Theodor Herzl’s *The Jewish State* (1896), the Balfour Declaration (1917), the Biltmore Program (1942), and the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel (1948). While these documents differ greatly in terms of authorship, structure, and audience, taken together they illustrate the Zionist project’s convergence with and divergence from anticolonial projects and postcolonial states during the first half of the twentieth century.

Jonathan Marc Gribetz’s article, “‘This Shameful Document’: Early PLO Intellectuals on the Balfour Declaration and the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence,” brings to the fore the debate regarding the Balfour Declaration that took place among PLO intellectuals, especially those affiliated with the PLO Research Center in Beirut. Gribetz explores why, half a century after the Declaration was issued, the PLO still deemed it relevant and what their arguments challenging the Declaration tell us about how they understood their predicament in the 1960s and early 1970s. Gribetz also probes the dissonance between the PLO’s arguments about the Balfour Declaration, on the one hand, and the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, on the other.

Haya Bambaji-Sasportas brings to this issue the perspectives offered by the late Iraqi-born British Jewish historian Elie Kedourie (1926–1992) on British imperial policies in the Middle East in general and the Sykes-Picot agreement in particular. In her article, “From Empire to Nation: Some Reflections on Elie Kedourie’s ‘Version’ of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and Other British Moments in the Middle East,” she connects Kedourie’s interpretation of the Sykes-Picot agreement to his personal position as a scholar and pioneer of Middle Eastern and nationalism studies

in postwar Britain. While tracing the evolution in Kedourie's thinking—from early writings that were focused on conventional diplomatic and political history to later writings in which Kedourie evinced a growing interest in conceptual and institutional aspects of political knowledge—the article locates Kedourie's reading of the famous document at the center of a web connecting histories, cultures, multifaceted discourses, concepts, and fields of knowledge. By using the Sykes-Picot agreement as a starting point for discussing Kedourie's concepts, Bambaji-Sasportas captures the way Kedourie's agency was woven into his historiography and into his intellectual, academic, and personal biographies.

Brian Klug's article, "Zionism, Binationalism, Anti-Semitism: Three Contemporary Jewish Readings of the Balfour Declaration," offers us a textual analysis of three documents: a "Zionist Manifesto," which appeared in the name of the London bureau of the Zionist Organization under the joint signatures of Chaim Weizmann, Nahum Sokolow, and Yechiel Tschlenow; Ahad Ha'am's essay "After the Balfour Declaration"; and a memorandum written by Edwin Montagu, secretary of state for India, who was the sole Jewish member of the cabinet in Lloyd George's government. Klug analyzes the logic and rhetoric underlying each text, with a particular emphasis on two topics: Jewish identity vis-à-vis nationhood and statehood, and the existence of an Arab population in Palestine. The article offers a juxtaposition of three radically different Jewish European readings of the Declaration within three years of its being issued.

Geoffrey R. Watson's article, "The Balfour Declaration in International Law," begins with this question: Was the Balfour Declaration legally binding, or was it merely an unenforceable political undertaking? Looking at this text from a legal perspective, he argues that the question's importance relates less to a possible British liability for breach of the Declaration than to the fact that the Declaration is part of the pre-existing legal framework upon which any Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty will be constructed. The article examines the legality of the document, taking into account its different aspects, and proposes that, in contrast to the apparent contemporary consensus, the Declaration might productively be embraced by Palestinians in their effort to achieve independent statehood.

Sarah Griswold's article, "Allies in Eastern Trenches: Archaeological Salvage Operations in the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon," takes the discussion into yet another discipline and practice. Focusing on French archaeologists, it explores the competing rationales and realities they encountered in rescuing archaeological artifacts from various perceived perils. These acts of salvage brought archaeologists

from France and Britain together in an intentional practice of international cooperation that bridged the border between the mandates for Syria and Palestine. Griswold demonstrates how these archaeological partnerships developed intellectual and institutional arguments about the nature of the ancient past that sowed doubts about imperial politics in the Levant, as well as about the virtues of the Sykes-Picot agreement itself.

Taken together, these articles represent a fresh assessment of a set of fateful documents penned a century ago. Among the underlying themes of this volume are the questions of how politics colors the reception of these texts and what we gain by reading them side by side, as a group. How did “Team Weizmann,” Ahad Ha’am, and Montagu come to such different understandings of the Balfour Declaration? Why did Kedourie understand Sykes-Picot as he did? How did French archaeologists understand the political implications of the Anglo-French agreement for their work across the Syria-Palestine border? Why did the PLO ask questions about the Balfour Declaration that it ignored in connection to the Hussein-McMahon correspondence? How might Palestinians employ the Balfour Declaration for their political benefit today? And how did Zionists, responding to changing circumstances and new political challenges, fall back on earlier documents, treating them as precedents and blueprints for the future? Coming from diverse disciplines, the authors propose unexpected answers to these and other questions.

The *document* section features an essay by **Rita Ender**: “Living with This Name: ‘Foreign’ Names of Turkey’s Non-Muslim Natives” (translation and introduction by **Nathalie Alyon**). Ender’s essay exposes the nuances of living with a foreign name in Turkey. Based on the author’s book *İsmiyle Yaşamak* (Living with this name), it presents the author’s interviews with non-Muslim natives of Turkey about one of people’s most basic possessions: their names. As these conversations demonstrate, the debate over who is “local” or “foreign,” and according to which criteria, is ongoing.

The Review Section (**Yonatan Mendel**) features three books, all relevant to the discussion about ethno-national or religious minorities in the Middle East, and the current and historical tensions between majority and minority groups, primarily within the Israeli and Palestinian contexts.

A Farewell from Abigail Jacobson:

This is the last issue of the *Journal of Levantine Studies* for which I will serve as editor. I want to take this opportunity to thank all my friends and colleagues at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, particularly the *JLS* editorial team, with whom I

have worked since 2015: Medi Nahmiyaz Baruh, Sophie Schor, and Duygu Atlas are all talented and smart editorial coordinators with whom it was a pure pleasure to work. Dr. Edo Litmanovitch served until recently as the associate editor and was my right hand in the demanding process of editing the journal, as well as the process of thinking more broadly about *JLS* and what it stands for. His critical reading and thinking and his collegial work are much appreciated. Duygu Atlas stepped into Edo's big shoes recently as the associate editor, and is constantly proving her talent and knowledge. Dr. Yonatan Mendel and Natalie Alyon are the talented editors of the book review and *document* sections, and always brought excellent ideas on board. In addition, the outstanding language editor, Deborah Schwartz, is a real asset to any editorial team.

It is also my pleasure to thank Dr. Tal Kohavi, the director and editor-in-chief of Van Leer Institute Press, for her support, wise advice, and broad experience over the last few years. Prof. Gabi Motzkin and Prof. Shai Lavi served as directors of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, and I thank them for their support and trust throughout the years.

In the introduction to the first volume of the *Journal of Levantine Studies* in August 2011, Dr. Anat Lapidot-Firilla, the founder and first editor of the journal, wrote: "In re-framing the Levant we hope to create a unique platform with novel possibilities for academic discussion that will catalyze productive debate and theoretical and empirical scholarship on the Levant and the Levantines in different geographical and historical contexts."⁹ Indeed, especially in this region, whose history and current realities are overshadowed by diverse national conflicts, the mission of the journal is still very relevant. The uniqueness of *JLS* lies in its ability to create a stage for a cross-disciplinary and cross-geographical discussion of the Levant as a whole, while offering the reader an opportunity to explore and challenge disciplinary, national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. The current issue, as the preceding issues, does exactly this. It is my hope that this scholarly exploration will continue to provide the opportunity to think outside of the national narratives and the real (and imagined) borders, and to investigate the interesting dynamics that enable their crossing.

Notes

- 1 Sarah Huneidi, *A Broken Trust: Herbert Samuel, Zionism and the Palestinians 1920-1925* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 65.
- 2 George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938). For details and additional discussion, see Karin Loevy, "Reinventing a Region (1915–22): Visions of the Middle East in Legal and Diplomatic Texts Leading to the Palestine Mandate," *Israel Law Review* 49, no. 3 (2016): 309–337.
- 3 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 46.
- 4 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 5 On June 18, 2014, ISIS fighters straddled the border between Iraq and Syria, a border that the agreement had created, and on Twitter proclaimed their military advance using the hashtag #SykesPicotOver. See <http://opil.ouplaw.com/page/Sykes-Picot/the-sykespicot-agreement-may-1916>.
- 6 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Anna Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 7 The term "Middle East" is, after all, rooted in British imperial geography: it emerged in the 1850s as a way of linking the "Far" and "Near" East but turned into common currency in the early years of the twentieth century. On this point, we follow Michelle Tusan, *Smyrna's Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide, and the Birth of the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), intro.
- 8 "The Sykes Picot Moment in the Middle East: Border Making, International Intervention and the Uncertain Legacy of WWI Diplomacy in the Middle East," held at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute on November 7–8, 2016; "Balfour Declaration: 100 Years of History and Memory," held at Princeton University and cohosted by the National University of Singapore on May 8–9, 2017. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all who attended both workshops for their participation.
- 9 "Editor's Note," *Journal of Levantine Studies* 1 (Summer 2011): 6.