

2017

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Recommended Citation

Lopez, I. R. (2017). Finding the Enigmatic Road to Damascus. *Exigence*, 1 (1). Retrieved from <http://commons.vccs.edu/exigence/vol1/iss1/2>

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Finding the Enigmatic Road to Damascus

“The people who can destroy a thing, they control it,” Paul said.

- Frank Herbert, *Dune*.

“Big” Ali and I were enemies once, long ago. Ali told me how Muqtada Al Sadr’s men murdered elder members of his family, the holy caretakers of the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, Iraq, to use it as a base of operations for further violence in August of 2004. He described the horrible incident in detail. During my time in Iraq, I heard this and many other unjust and traumatizing accounts from the mouths of Lebanese, Syrians, and Iraqis. There are not enough tears for the countless senseless deaths. Years later, after we became friends, he bid me farewell as I was to return to my home in America. In spite of our efforts, we were no closer to vindicating justice or even petty revenge. Like the shifting desert sand, the things that were remained. At the end of my journey, I learned that the future of these lands was never in western hands, and I departed as splintered as the Sykes-Picot agreement had engineered them to be. The current refugee crisis in Syria and the broader bloody turmoil that engulfs the Middle East is the result of the Sykes-Picot agreement.

Yassamine Mather, an Iranian exile, and currently a professor at the Centre for the Study of Socialist Theory and Movement at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, has keen insight on the Middle East due to her personal experiences. In her article “From Sykes-Picot to ‘Islamic State’ Imperialism’s Bloody Wreckage,” Mather summarizes the history of the Ottoman Empire and continues to the period of British and French colonialism under Sykes-Picot. Mather describes British and French blunders that helped to worsen the situation in their mandates. Mather writes, “The current civil [war] in Syria... can be traced back to that era” (13). That is the era of Sykes-Picot, or as Mather put it, the era of “divide and rule” (13).

Syria is a nation invented in the early 20th century. It is a region inhabited since the dawn of history by ancient civilizations and ruled by foreign powers, such as the Egyptians and the Hittites. At the onset of World War I, Syria, known as Bilad al-Sham, and all the Middle East from Russia to Bulgaria and Persia to Egypt, was ruled by the withering Ottoman Empire (Dostal 32). The Ottoman Empire was a Central power, an enemy of the allies, during World War I. The Sykes-Picot agreement, or the 1916 Asia Minor Agreement, was written in secret by the British diplomat Mark Sykes and the French diplomat François Georges Picot two years into World War I. Mather writes, “The Arab allies of Britain and France were completely unaware of the content of the agreement” (15). In his article “Borders of Blood,” veteran journalist Ed Blanche, who has written extensively on the Middle East, concurs, “This agreement was concluded with the full knowledge that they unilaterally abrogated British pledges to the Hashemite leader Sharif Hussein of Mecca” (17). In a stroke of bureaucratic folly, the empires of France and the United Kingdom determined how to carve up and profit from territories they imagined would be seized from the Ottoman Empire. This agreement, which aimed to generate the greatest financial gain, failed because it considered nothing of the people or the geography of the Middle East, exacerbated the Sunni-Shi’ite conflict of over 1300 years, and instead of creating peace and wealth has created death and destruction from inception.

Once Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence of the United Kingdom believed that peace and stability could be achieved in the Middle East. Lawrence espoused a plan that carefully considered the customs of the diverse ethnic groups living in the Middle East and the establishment of independent natural nations after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Dr. Jeffrey Meyers, a seasoned author and retired professor of many prestigious institutions, analyzes the life of Lawrence in his article “T. E. Lawrence and the Character of the Arabs.” Meyers

maintains that Lawrence is the architect of modern instability in the Middle East, "...he led the West into permanent conflict with Arab countries," however, he fails to consider or address the Sykes-Picot agreement (135). Meyers argues, "Lawrence promised self-government to the [Arabs]" (135). Meyers does not recognize Lawrence was under direction of British commanders in Cairo. Had this been a plan of Lawrence's own doing, he would never have been promoted to Captain, much less Colonel, and never in such a brief period of time.

Lawrence was ordered by British commanders to bring this message of self-rule, with full guarantees of future independence, to encourage the native people to rebel against the Ottoman Empire. Mather writes, "Since 1910 Britain had promised many Arab tribes that if they rebelled against Ottoman rule they would gain independence after the fall of the empire" (15). The British sweetened the deal promising Damascus would be the capital of this new Hashemite Arab state. Literally on his own and in the desert, Lawrence forged alliances with many disparate factions including Sharif Hussein of Mecca.

While Europe's finest commanders were bogged down in trench warfare, throwing lives away cheaply, Lawrence's Arab coalition, fighting with the bare minimums, was punishing the Ottomans and enjoying one sided military successes not seen since Alexander the Great invaded. This kept the Ottomans largely out of Europe and cut the Central powers from supplies of petroleum in territories over which they claimed sovereignty. The British provided little support against the enemy and were not needed thanks to Lawrence's military genius. At the end of the war, the British Empire rewarded Lawrence with a single medal and rewarded their Arab allies with the now revealed Sykes-Picot agreement. Lawrence, perhaps not taken seriously in matters of state because of his homosexuality (Meyers 139), was a critic of Sykes-Picot (Mather 13). President Woodrow Wilson's declaration, "Peoples and provinces are not to be bartered about

from sovereignty to sovereignty as mere chattels and pawns in a game... Every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned,” was ignored by the allies (Mather 13). Lawrence’s plan for the future nations of the Middle East was trampled by the French and British forces, which quickly moved to occupy the region.

The purpose of the Sykes-Picot agreement was to maximize profits for the French and British. With only the consideration one would give to cutting a pizza – perhaps a pepperoni should not be split – Sykes and Picot drew an arbitrary line across Mesopotamia, from near modern Be’er Sheva Israel overlapping the Syrian border through about Erbil Iraq to Iran, splitting it into two delicious slices. In the Middle Eastern mandates, minorities were frequently given monarchical powers over unrepresented majorities, which as Dostal writes, “[thus] the region was subjected to a colonial policy of ‘divide-and-rule’” (32). In Syria Feisal I, son of Sharif Hussein of Mecca and a Sunni, became king of the majority Sunni population. Meyers writes, “Feisal, king of Syria, was ousted by the French” (151), in favor of rule by the minority Alawites, a Shi’ite sect (Dostal 33). This vision of financial gain never bore fruit, failing in the frost of European manipulation that led to political and economic insecurity.

The consequences of the Sykes-Picot agreement are evident as instability plagued the region from inception. From the Turkish war to overthrow occupying World War I allies to the rise of the House of Saud, the ensuing death and destruction created more loss than wealth for the Empires of France and the United Kingdom. These empires gradually withdrew, leaving splintered kingdoms in their wake, perhaps with the hope that no new Arabian power would rise to replace the Ottoman Empire. Syria was consumed with turmoil from the onset, saddled by the

French with a perpetual border dispute with Turkey and suffering from transitions of power from one government to the next driven by violent coup d'états.

Dr. Jörg M. Dostal, an associate professor at the Graduate School of Public Administration of the Seoul National University, South Korea, in his article, "Syria - The Outcast State" discusses modern Syrian history and how the current leader, President Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite, received the right to rule from his father. Dostal details the factors that led to the current instability which include U. S. pressure for regime change, drought, a population explosion, and a policy change that created a price increase in food. The United States has done little to endear themselves to Syrians employing the CIA in the 40's and 50's to destabilize Syrian governments in profiteering attempts to control Syrian oil to no avail. In 1963 military rule under the socialist Ba'ath party was established with support of the Soviet Union. General Hafiz al-Assad became the longest ruler of Syria, ruling from 1971 until his death on 10 June 2000. Hafiz al-Assad instituted popular and stabilizing reforms, but engaged Syria in senseless conflicts that only weakened the people and the state. Bashar al-Assad was designated as heir to the 'throne' of Syria, although for appearances he was elected president. In March of 2011, amid calls for al-Assad's resignation, a highly destructive and ongoing civil war broke out in Syria, leading to the rise of ISIS.

The country of Syria is fractured with Alawites ruling the south, various rebel groups controlling the northwest and ISIS controlling the northeast. Indiscriminate warfare has led to a catastrophic over 8 million people being displaced and becoming refugees, or more than a third of the population in 2011. This number rose by 2 million in one year from 2013 to 2014. 4 million people are displaced internally. Over 4 million are split in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. Various European countries and other regions host much smaller numbers.

People are leaving Syria because all aspects of their lives are destroyed. Many non-combatants are attacked by snipers, artillery, and aircraft doing things like going to work, to school, to worship, and to buy food.

Melissa Fleming is the Head of Communications and Public Information for the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNCFR) with 25 years of experience. In her TED talk, Fleming discusses challenges faced by Syrian refugees. Fleming tells us the personal story of Hany, a young Syrian who risked his life dodging sniper fire just to finish high school and get his diploma. Fleming reports, “But one day, the family got terrible news. Hany's aunt, his uncle and his cousin were murdered in their homes for refusing to leave their house. Their throats were slit. It was time to flee” (01:58). Hany and his family fled to a refugee camp in Lebanon. There is a litany of such accounts from people who now languish in refugee camps through the Middle East.

Syrian refugees try to have normalcy in their lives in many ways. In the article “Zaatari Refugee Camp: Rebuilding Lives in the Desert” on their Web site, The British Broadcasting Company reports on the three square mile Zaatari refugee camp established in the northwestern desert of Jordan near the Syrian border, giving a sense of daily life for the 130,000 Syrian refugees living there. Zaatari, the second largest refugee camp in the world, has a large infrastructure and provides many services. A video in the article gives a driving tour of the camp, which resembles a military base or a prison. It costs about \$500,000.00 to run the camp for one day. For the cost of one warship, the U. S. could run the camp for over 10 years, and for less money than the cost of the Iraq war, sufficient camps could be constructed to harbor all the refugees and provide for them for a protracted period of time.

One refugee, Mahmood Mahamid, who lives with his family at Zaatari, gave his son a pet turtle to give him a sense of home. Mahamid said, “My hope...[is] to return to our home in Syria” (Rodgers). Life is harsh but more secure than in Syria. People are productive and most refugees have jobs inside the camp. Another refugee, Abu Shadi, lives at Zaatari with his family and makes jokes to help everyone feel better. Shadi, who works as a waiter at a restaurant in the camp said, “People come here for a better atmosphere - to get away from life in the camp” (Rodgers). More than half of Zaatari’s residents are children. A new larger camp is being built, with lessons learned from Zaatari being put in place. Fleming explains, “You might imagine that being a refugee is just a temporary state...the average time a refugee will spend in exile is 17 years” (6:05).

Rachel Martin, the host of National Public Radio’s Weekend Edition Sunday, interviewed Ertharin Cousin J. D. the 12th Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Program (UNWFP), in office since 2012. Cousin described the desperate situation of Syrian people, prior to becoming refugees, “We’re seeing people pulling their children out of school. Children are working and begging on streets. We’re seeing people leaving the country (1:02).” Cousin explained refugees are returning to Syria in spite of the peril due to lack of food in countries to which they are fleeing, “...if you have no choice, if you cannot feed your child and you think that you may be able to borrow from someone who is your loved one, who will not let you go hungry when the world will allow your children to go hungry, you go back into Syria” (1:59). The UNWFP is currently feeding 4 million people inside Syria and dealing with the challenges of logistics around combat areas. Cousin explained that part of the problem is funding shortfalls, since provenance must be provided continuously to displaced persons that can’t feed themselves.

The recent attacks in Paris show us that feelings of extreme resentment can be found among Syrians today and are exploited by radical groups like ISIS. Those Syrians displaced are most vulnerable to such ideology, especially those forced by desperation to return to a war zone just to eat. The imperialistic policies espoused by Sykes-Picot to get rich quick were a fallacy at best and modern emulation of such policy has not worked either. A World War I comparison fits here: just like the last charge into no man's land using Napoleonic infantry tactics didn't take the enemy's trench - although it gave the machine gunners something to do for 5 minutes - the next charge won't work either. Although determination is a noble quality there can be times when it is unfeasible or morally wrong. The people of the Middle East understand their future is not in western hands, as Emir Feisal I told French diplomat Stephen Pichon, "But, pardon me, which of us won the Crusades?" (Meyers 139). In case Mr. Pichon was unaware, that was a rhetorical question: the Muslims won. The United States has failed to heed President Wilson's warning, and subsequently we charged into no man's land in Cuba, Syria, Iran, Iraq and a sad list of other nations, earning for our efforts long rosters of our honored dead, enemies, and debt.

At this point one has to ask: Why should the Middle East remain as parceled by Sykes-Picot to achieve prosperity in Syria and stop the flow of Syrian refugees? The answer is as complicated as the symptoms that created the current reality and is out of western hands. Arab culture is difficult to understand, especially when only given cursory consideration. Lawrence didn't fully understand it, "They are a limited narrow-minded people whose inert intellects lie incuriously fallow (Meyers 140)." This is a narrow-minded view, the result of 18th century patronizing British bigotry to which Lawrence would have been exposed, exploited in BBC comedies and is not true. Meyers doesn't understand it, "This goal [of self-rule] came into conflict...with the capacity of the Arabs themselves" (135). This is a gratuitous assertion that

can never be proven. Arabs are human beings, human beings can rule themselves, and therefore Arabs can rule themselves. The powerful Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an example of an Arab state under self-rule.

The outlook seems bleak. Blanche quotes military analyst Ralph Peters, LtCol, USA(Ret), “We are dealing with colossal, man-made deformities that will not stop generating hatred and violence until they are corrected. Correcting borders to reflect the will of the people may be impossible, for now. But given time - and the inevitable attendant bloodshed - new and natural borders will emerge. Babylon has fallen more than once” (18). Dostal writes “Foreign powers meddling in Syrian affairs from the outside have miscalculated... The short answer is that democracy will not come to Syria...in a single step or on the back of foreign intervention” (35). Meyers writes, “Arab politics [are] still dominated by bribery and corruption; by factionalism and internecine warfare; by extremism and religious fanaticism;...and especially by the disregard of human life...Lawrence's experience reveals that the Western powers cannot impose alien rule in the Middle East...The Arabs, in the six thousand years since Babylon, have never had a democratic government. Our current enterprise...will inevitably fail, and...will revert...to civil war, bloody chaos, and oppressive dictators” (152).

The West created this mess and cannot idle and continue to suffer the consequences. The West cannot embrace Sykes-Picot in another charge into no man's land; one more time will not work. Anti-Islamists would propose total war with flawed logic. The bloodiest battle in American history was the 12 hours of Antietam which resulted in over 6,500 dead, compared to the over 6,800 that have died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars of 14 years. The West has destroyed over 1,000,000 people in Iraq and Afghanistan - a better success rate than the Greeks at Thermopylae - so total warfare, although expensive, is sustainable. Then the West could

divide these empty lands to exhaust their resources. In an effort to exploit fear, anti-Islamists make sophisticated claims about Islam in the Middle East - fallacious and unverifiable - such as most Muslims are radical (most Muslims are in east Asia, in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, and mongoloid in race) or a few radicals can unite a shattered Middle East and cause great harm (neither ISIS nor Al-Qaeda is going to unite Saudi Arabia and Iran in common cause against the West). Reminiscent of Hitler's anti-Semitic speeches, when such sentiments are expressed in America, they are frequently met with applause. I find rhetoric such as this frightening and offer this observation about Arab Muslims: I fought with them and I fought against them, but I never learned to hate them. The West cannot commit to total war and the genocide of Arab people and Muslims as this would be a completely immoral act that could thrust the entire planet into chaos. In an ideological conflict, bombs will not prevail.

However, some offer practical advice. Mather writes, "Only by adhering to basic principles can we stand any chance of regaining support amongst the working class in the region." Principles which focus on the real needs of the people in whose hands rests the future of Syria: her refugee children. Cousin stated, "We are addressing a political problem with humanitarian solutions," and she feeds the hungry (Martin 3:44). Fleming asked Hany what he brought with him and why. Hany said, "I took my high school diploma because my life depended on it" (:59). Fleming adds, "...all refugee children tell us education is the most important thing in their lives" (4:15). Fleming then conveys the example of Sudanese Jacob Atem, who became a refugee as a child. Atem is currently working on his Ph. D. in public health in Florida to return to Sudan to become a force for positive change. Fleming continues, "Not investing in refugees is a huge missed opportunity. Leave them abandoned, and they risk exploitation and abuse, and leave them unskilled and uneducated, and delay by years the return

to peace and prosperity in their countries. I believe how we treat the uprooted will shape the future of our world. The victims of war can hold the keys to lasting peace, and it's the refugees who can stop the cycle of violence" (14:30).

The road to Damascus is clear. In order to protect the most vulnerable, safe havens for Syrian refugees must be constructed in the areas to which they have fled. These safe havens must meet the basic needs of the populations they house. These places must be able to provide education to allow the next generation competitive access to institutions of higher learning worldwide. Lastly, nations must make allowances and open their borders so that this generation of refugees can attend these colleges and universities and become the force of positive change or "the keys to lasting peace" (Fleming 14:30). Executing these actions through our regional allies and the already active United Nations programs will keep Americans largely out of harm's way. It will be cheaper than waging war, it will be moral, and it puts control of the future of these lands wholly into the hands where it belongs. When the dust clears these hands will point to America, let it be to say, "There are our true friends."

Among the over 6,800 Americans that gave their lives attempting to positively transform Iraq and Afghanistan were my friends and comrades EODC(EWS) Paul J. Darga, USN, ET2(SW/EOD) David S. Roddy, USN, who both died in Al Anbar province Iraq, and EODC(EWS/SW/AW/FPJ) Nicholas H. Null, USN, who died in Afghanistan. I said goodbye to my partner TSGT Jackie L. Larsen, USAF, the same day I said goodbye to "Big" Ali. Two months later, her husband met her remains at Dover Air Force Base. These are some of the rewards of Sykes-Picot. This is not a call for appeasement, neither is it an accusation of the West; it is a call for stewardship to prevent a people from destroying a thing. Syria, or the Middle East, will never be stable as long as the West uses the policies of Sykes-Picot as a

pattern. Syria's refugees will never return home and her desperate and destitute will turn to extremism for succor. It is time to take the future of Syria out of the hands of two dead greedy diplomats and put it in the hands of promising Syrian youths.

“...two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change...”

- Douglas Adams, *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

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