British bordering practices in the Middle East before Sykes-Picot: giving an edge to zones

Les pratiques britanniques de frontiérisation au Moyen-Orient avant Sykes-Picot : délimiter des zones

Richard Schofield

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ema/4279>

DOI: 10.4000/ema.4279

ISSN: 2090-7273

Publisher

CEDEJ - Centre d'études et de documentation économiques juridiques et sociales

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 June 2018

Number of pages: 149-161

ISBN: 9782900956014

ISSN: 1110-5097

Electronic reference

Richard Schofield, "British bordering practices in the Middle East before Sykes-Picot: giving an edge to zones", *Égypte/Monde arabe* [Online], 18 | 2018, Online since 15 June 2020, connection on 07 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ema/4279> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ema.4279>

RICHARD SCHOFIELD

**BRITISH BORDERING PRACTICES IN
THE MIDDLE EAST BEFORE SYKES-PICOT:
GIVING AN EDGE TO ZONES**

ABSTRACT

The significance of the Sykes-Picot territorial system of mandated territories has been both overplayed and somewhat misplaced on its centenary over the last year or so. This article reviews the legacy of Britain's bordering practices in the Middle East in the period before World War One, arguing that its importance should not be underestimated. It shows how the British Home and India governments began to think in terms of lines and zones on land and sea during the nineteenth century and how, with an intensifying Ottoman challenge in three corners of Arabia at the turn of the twentieth century, there was a perceived need to define edges to spatial zones. This account concentrates upon two of these corners – in Yemen and Kuwait.

THE UNDERSTANDABLE TENDENCY TO FOCUS UPON SYKES-PICOT

The temptation to lay responsibility for the territorial malaise so evident today in the ruptured Syrian and Iraqi states at the door of Britain and France's much-maligned Sykes-Picot treaty arrangements of 1916 was simply too good an opportunity to miss for many. ISIS's rise across the marginal desert borderlands of both states roughly coincided with the centenary of this scheme to establish post-Ottoman spheres of influence. It also highlighted the arbitrariness – even by Middle Eastern standards – of the notably vague territorial limit specified four years later in a December 1920 Anglo-French Convention to divide the new British and French mandated territories of Iraq and Syria.

Yet much of the recent attention lavished upon Sykes-Picot has been overblown and misplaced. The territorial allocations it loosely specified soon lost their defining basis with the revolutionary overthrow of the Russian monarchy in 1917 – the perceived need for a buffer French wedge (across what is now northern Iraq) to separate British and Russian imperial interests quickly disappeared. The scheme also had to compete with other contradictory wartime commitments to the Hashimites (the Husain-McMahon correspondence of 1915-1916) and the Zionist movement (the Balfour Declaration of 1917). Britain was never going to successfully juggle these, as candidly reflected upon by Balfour himself in his valedictory speech before parliament in August 1919: "in short...the Powers have made no statement of fact which is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which, at least in the letter, they have not always intended to violate" (Hurewitz 1989: vii). If time soon eroded relevance, the reach of the Sykes-Picot arrangements was also limited in spatial terms. Just look at Iraq. While the state emerged within the British sphere of influence in 1920 indicated by the agreement, none of its borders could be argued seriously to have originated from it. They resulted from a series of discrete temporal and regional episodes going back to the mid-nineteenth century. Four of Iraq's international boundaries have effectively been established or finalised by international commissions – Iran (intermittently between 1843-1914), Turkey (the League of Nations treatment of Mosul in the early to mid- 1920s), Syria (Britain and France's showcase League of Nations settlement, 1931-1933) and Kuwait (the United Nations Secretary General's exceptional treatment of 1991-1993) (Schofield 2008a). Only the Turkey and Syria treatments related in any way to Sykes-Picot but mainly in laying the grounds for or defining limits that contradicted its spatial prescriptions. To argue, however, that the Sykes-Picot scheme was completely artificial in conception was also going a bit far. It was informed where possible, if selectively, by locally observed divisions and old Ottoman administrative divisions (Joffe 2017). Given that there was going to be a European territorial scheme to replace the Ottoman Middle East, there may not have been any obviously less arbitrary means of elaboration. It might also be reasonably observed that in many ways the influential British De Bunsen Committee had already put

down on the record for reasons of both imperial strategy and political economy that Mosul needed to be part of any future Mesopotamian state as early as the summer of 1915 (Schofield 2017).

LIFE BEFORE SYKES-PICOT: BRITAIN'S TERRITORIAL DEALINGS WITH THE OTTOMANS AND PERSIANS ON LAND AND SEA

In terms of imperial territorial legacies, we might well also choose to look back before the First World War to a period when Britain sought to secure strategic space in protection of its limited and scattered interests across the Middle East. This ambition was generally underscored by the identification of zones that were loosely defined in both their defining basis and territorial extent. Only when Britain perceived that its position in these regions might be challenged was there any interest in more clearly establishing the edges of such zones – as we will witness in its dealings with the Ottomans over Yemen and Kuwait in the very early years of the twentieth century. This was the underlying logic for the boundaries or territorial deals Britain agreed with Constantinople in 1903–1905 to separate the Aden Protectorate from the Ottoman Province of Yemen, Ottoman Palestine from Egypt in 1906 and the northernmost territorial limits of Kuwait in 1913. All of these transactions have a contemporary or recent resonance, as do other territorial decisions made by Britain in this decade – for instance, the long association between territorial definition and conflict in the northern Gulf and the introduction of a formal territorial division of governance of Yemen. Even what seemed like a trivial decision to transfer one human group from one poorly defined and remote province to another six years into the Anglo-Egyptian condominium administration of Sudan in 1905 became the defining basis of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's controversial if ground-breaking Abyei award in 2009. Ground-breaking, that is, in the sense that it pointed towards the difficulties of establishing territorial limits for new states where the standard historical evidence of state and colonial acts was demonstrably lacking – having to rely instead on other human indicators such as oral traditions and burial mounds (Schofield 2015: 140).

In securing space for its strategic interests in the pre-Sykes-Picot period, Britain had to contend with dominant regional powers and rival imperial designs. Once Muhammad Ali Pasha had been cut down to size with the European Big Five's subjugation of his regional territorial designs beyond Egypt – and territorial parameters established accordingly for the latter at the turn of the 1840s (Toye, 1989), this left Persia and the Ottomans. Over the course of the nineteenth century, an increasingly pragmatic Persia began to concentrate more on securing its most basic territorial interests and definition rather than regaining its previous imperial reaches in dealings with an increasingly assertive Britain in Persian Gulf waters and a generally more powerful Ottoman Empire on its western land borders further north. In such circumstances, the

Qajar authorities were also forced increasingly into adopting the developing rules of the game in international law for advancing territorial claims including more wholesale adoption of modern cartographic techniques and less depiction of the cosmographic visions underpinning its own imperial past (Kashani-Sabet, 1999). By the turn of the twentieth century, this had translated into a practical project to project sovereign control more fully over a claimed territorial extent that had been stripped to the more basic geographical state definition of the state that is recognisable today. There would be consequences of the more pragmatic self-view and awareness that British actions, more than any other external power, had engendered. Firstly, the Tehran government would seek more fully to Persianise its territorial margins, as seen for instance in its assumption of more direct control over political and economic affairs along its Gulf shoreline (Potter, 2008). As territorial identities hardened here, the basis of Britain's leased naval facilities at Basidu and Henjam came under sharper focus (Schofield 2014: 45-61) – as did the presumed sovereignty of this or that island in Lower Gulf waters.

Territorial confrontations with the Ottoman Empire were necessarily more diffuse – here were two imperial powers – albeit one more local than the other – each trying to project their influence in safeguarding and advancing interests in the region. The scale and seriousness of confrontations also varied. Constantinople had probably learned something of Britain's regional thinking and priorities from the mid-nineteenth century Anglo-Russian enterprise to narrow the traditional frontier zone that separated the Ottoman and Persian empires (Schofield 2008b; Ates 2013). This effort had piggy-backed on the rare moment of European cooperation that had seen Muhammad Ali Pasha cut down to size as Britain sought stability for its growing economic interest at the head of the Persian Gulf and Russia tranquillity for its own expanded territorial control in Transcaucasia. While the Persian government bought into these efforts since it reckoned a better deal could be gained this way than by dealing with Constantinople alone, the Ottoman government used the whole exercise to physically extend and record control of its remote eastern borderlands – especially in their northern reaches. As we will see, the obviously unrealistic ambition to narrow the Perso-Ottoman frontier zone into a mappable line was soon moderated into a quest to map and allocate a strip of territory in which a border could then be delimited.

There had been apprehension during the mid-1860s on Britain's part at signals that the Ottoman Empire was intent on adding muscle to its claims to exercise authority over the Arabian Peninsula. Yet when Ottoman Foreign Minister Fuad Pasha told Britain's Ambassador in Constantinople that Arabia was part and parcel of the Ottoman Empire late in 1867, there was no real counter offered in response, just the statement that Britain wasn't prepared to talk about the sovereignty of Arabia (National Archives file, *FO 78/1964*) – imparting not only a dismissal of the claim but a marked disinterest in the subject matter. The appointment of Midhat Pasha as Governor of Baghdad

within the next couple of years would be instrumental in the determined push that would follow to extend Ottoman authority over eastern Arabia from the 1870s (Anscombe 1997). Ultimately, though, so long as this didn't threaten Britain's developing commercial interests in Bahrain and its maintenance of maritime supremacy in lower Gulf waters more generally, these advances did not prove of huge material concern (Schofield 1993). For the quarter century until the accession of Shaikh Mubarak as Kuwaiti ruler in 1896, Britain never once disputed that Kuwait was an Ottoman possession, for instance, and formally recognised this position on several occasions. It was more anxious about the southern limits of the territorial control or, more accurately, influence being extended by the Porte, whether this was on the western or eastern side of the Qatar peninsula. This didn't extend to any desire to see formal limits negotiated, however, since Britain had no desire to become embroiled in the affairs of the Arabian interior. Perhaps indicative of this overall lack of concern was how the British Home and India governments used the terms sovereignty, suzerainty, authority and jurisdiction interchangeably in describing the extent and character of the Ottoman presence along the western Gulf littoral (Schofield 1993: 13)

Where Britain was concerned at all with putting down lines, this ended up providing precursors of the current Arab-Iranian territorial divides we see with the Iran-Iraq land boundary and, further south, a median line running along the length of the Persian Gulf. Context and premise in the mid-nineteenth century differed significantly, however. Before Britain arrived on the scene more fully to consolidate its developing economic interests and strategic position in the third decade of the nineteenth century, political and territorial control of the Lower Gulf had been marked by fluidity and impermanence. It is probably fair to say that there were more contacts between the coastal communities on either side of the Gulf than there were between these groups and their respective Arabian and Persian hinterlands – an unsurprising consequence of the fact that Gulf waters and their resources constituted the mainstay of the regional economy. Coupled with this was the other essential territorial feature of historical Gulf geopolitics, that “power tended to be maintained – and then usually only fleetingly – from the sea by control of key coastal and insular nodes, rather than through linear control of the water body's shorelines on a contiguous basis” (Schofield 2014: 47). The relative freedom of mobility alluded to here would begin to be curtailed by the restrictive lines Britain laid down in 1820 and 1853 with the maritime truces it brokered in an effort to suppress and forestall what it saw as a local piratical threat to its developing economic interests.

While, as mentioned, Britain was never that concerned ultimately about Ottoman advances along the Arabian shoreline of the Gulf, it would firmly resist the projection of any claims to the Bahrain archipelago put forward by Constantinople. The same went for Persian claims to Bahrain, though in the 1840s – as articulated by Foreign Minister Aghassi – these were still rehearsed

on the generic, universalist basis that all the waters and islands of the Persian Gulf belonged by rights to the state, seemingly on the basis that ownership followed nomenclature (Schofield, 2008: 171). Britain's restrictive lines of the early to mid-nineteenth century would foreshadow a territorial hardening that would see the Persian state project its power and presence much more directly along its southern coastline during the last quarter of the century. It didn't make the origins of any claims to this or that insular feature any easier to establish however. Take the Lower Gulf islands, for instance, where the historical geography of connections to these features was much easier to map than the emerging sovereign landscape in the area. The first Persian claim to Abu Musa island in 1888 was seemingly extended only after the contents of the first edition of the British Admiralty's *Persian Gulf Pilot* (1864) had been digested in Tehran, recording that island's primary connection with Lingah on the northern Gulf littoral. That assertion may well have been erroneous but the point here is that the Persian port also effectively served as the northern outpost of the regional Qasimi federation, with its Arab headman who took orders from both the Qawasim in Sharjah and the Persian crown. Regional politics were much less clear than geography in this respect. (Schofield, 2014: 29-30)

The late nineteenth century territorial hardening spelt implications, too, for Britain's strategic presence on the northern shore of the Strait of Hormuz, though these would make themselves felt more keenly in the next century. A little over two decades after being granted lease facilities from the Persian government over Bandar Abbas (and its island dependencies of Qeshm, Larak, Hormuz and Henjam), the Al Bu Said rulers of Muscat granted Britain the right to station troops at Basidu (thereafter known to some as 'British Bassidore') at the western tip of Qeshm island. The coaling station they established there remained after the Bandar Abbas lease was revoked by the Persian government in 1868, though it would be transferred to the nearby island of Henjam in 1911. Despite there remaining no real basis for Britain's presence in Basidu and Henjam, these islands would be the headquarters for Britain's naval presence in Gulf waters until 1935, when they were transferred to Bahrain. After a long-running British government interdepartmental squabble, the Admiralty would finally be convinced that it had no right to be there (Schofield 2014: 45-61).

Just as the origins of the Lower Gulf islands dispute had to be seen in the context provided by the impingement on maritime mobility effected by Britain's restrictive lines and the subsequent reassertion of Persian authority over its Gulf coastline, Britain's efforts at the turn of the 1870s to subdue local maritime feuds between the Bahrain archipelago and the Qatar peninsula introduced another, if less formal, restrictive limit of sorts. It wasn't that consequential but the issue was given an interesting twist during the 1991-2001 Hawar islands legal case at the International Court of Justice. Here, in the middle phase of the dispute's treatment at The Hague, the state of Qatar was asked to account for the provenance of a number of documents (submitted with its memorial and counter-memorial) which apparently showed that

Britain and the Ottoman Empire had agreed to a maritime boundary delimitation around the time of the 1870s that definitively recognised the Hawar group as Ottoman (Qatari). Their provenance could not be accounted for and, after the Qatar government agreed that they should be discounted for evidentiary purposes, the case moved onto the merits stage.

ESTABLISHING ZONES AND DEFINING EDGES TO THEM

If restrictive lines had paved the way to a territorial hardening in and around Gulf waters, the prioritised nineteenth century European (Anglo-Russian) project to narrow what is, in truth, the region's only real traditional frontier zone further north represented a grandiose, hopelessly-overambitious and evidently misplaced effort at boundary-making. Perhaps the starting point to this exercise was its most ill-conceived aspect, with Britain reckoning it could freeze a moment in time to observe a *status quo* line through a complex and dynamic borderlands to serve as the basis for any delimitation. (Schofield 2008b). Since neither Britain nor Russia possessed the power to force through the settlement they desired – to provide territorial stability for the former's economic penetration of the southern Perso-Ottoman borderlands and relative tranquility for the latter's recently acquired Transcaucasian provinces, it proved impossible to get the local powers to agree on an interpretation of the 1847 Erzurum treaty that could be marked on the ground. So, the enterprise was modified pragmatically to mapping a narrowed frontier zone in which Constantinople and Tehran could plot their precise claims for a boundary. By the time they finally got close to doing so in the mid-1870s – an Ottoman line in gold and a Persian one in silver – the window for European cooperation was fast disappearing with the outbreak of the Serbian War. It would take until the eve of the Great War for Britain and Russia to lay down in stone the limit they had meant to introduce in the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, one important consequence of this 'phenomenon of procrastination' (Hubbard 2016) had been – much like the experience in Gulf waters further south, to instil a territorial hardening. This was evident in the attitudes of the Persian and Ottoman government but also discernible in the borderland populations themselves, "whereby territorial definition itself would become an important component of identity and rivalry" (Schofield 2008b: 149).

Elsewhere Britain thought in terms of zones – usually to afford a protective buffer around its key strategic presences in the region. Chief amongst these was, of course, Aden – long-coveted for its magnificent harbour and taken by Britain in 1839 primarily to serve as a key staging post on the old imperial route to India. It was the Ottoman reoccupation of Yemen in 1873 after a gap of 240 years that would occasion Britain to think about drawing an edge around its protective buffer. This had been provided for by the direct relations the Aden authorities had struck to somewhat amorphous spatial affect with

nine hinterland tribes – Britain rated these as independent but the Ottoman Empire now reckoned they were subject to the administration that flowed from their reinstatement in Yemen. Marking the territories of the nine tribes was difficult enough, never mind their edges. Surveys undertaken by Hunter at the turn of the 1880s and Wahab during 1891-92 represented a reasonable stab but suffered from the imprecision that was inevitable given the spatial fluidity in the borderlands they wanted to construct. At the turn of the twentieth century, the British and Ottoman governments agreed to institute a commission whose formal remit was ‘to delimit the boundary between the territory of the tribes in the vicinity of Aden having direct relations with His Majesty’s Government and the dominions of His Majesty the Sultan’ (Lee-Warner 1902). The vagueness said everything really – reflecting the reality that here were two distant imperial powers trying to draw an international boundary in remote terrain whose social and spatial organisation was unfamiliar. The word ‘dominion’ had been utilised since, as with the other side of the Arabian peninsula earlier referred to, Britain couldn’t decide what the nature of the Ottoman presence in Yemen comprised in legal terms – sovereignty, suzerainty or administration. Against the odds, the commission managed to delimit an Anglo-Ottoman boundary for the relatively short stretch between the Bab al Mandab and Wadi Bana – yet the British Government usually only got formal Ottoman approval for its deliberations by flexing its muscles, charging Constantinople with ‘outrageous’ behaviour, then sending its warships down to the Yemeni Red Sea port of Hudaida (Foreign Office 1905).

It was far more reluctantly that Britain struck up a formal presence in Kuwait. As the Permanent Under-Secretary at the India Office would comment of that state’s morphogenesis: ‘...we don’t want Kuwait, but we don’t anyone else to have it’ (Busch 1967: 196). Mubarak’s great success regionally and internationally had been in making its status a significant political question. Because of its previous and fairly consistent admission of Ottoman rights there, Britain decided to keep quiet a secret, protectorate-style bond of 1899, whereby the Ruler of Kuwait could rely upon Britain’s help and assistance against any future threat to his position – so long as Britain formally remained its chief external reference. Once that cat was out of the bag, however, it quickly arrived at a pragmatic *status quo* understanding with the Ottoman Empire. This held that so long as Britain didn’t try to materially advance its position there, Constantinople wouldn’t intervene militarily. Once Britain moved to show it was serious about resisting further Ottoman attempts to regain or improve its status there, the Kuwait question changed tack. It now revolved around the boundaries Britain was prepared to defend for it (Schofield 1993, 24-33). Accordingly, Ottoman garrisons pushed down during 1902 through the traditional no-man’s land of mud-flats comprising the north-western Gulf to emplace themselves at Safwan, Umm Qasr and the eastern tip of Bubiyan island, setting off a debate between the British Foreign Office and the Government of India about what, exactly, Kuwait comprised in spatial terms.

The Ottoman challenges to the British position in three corners of Arabia in the early years of the twentieth century – for there was also Aqaba and the Sinai to consider in addition to Yemen and Kuwait– made for a very over-worked British Ambassador in Constantinople, Sir Nicholas O’Conor. He set up the Yemen boundary commission, brokered Anglo-Ottoman consultations over Kuwait and its northern margins and also was widely accredited for his steadying hand in the Aqaba question. These far-flung territorial confrontations made for juicy quotations from Britain’s politicians – particularly over Kuwait. What had really focused Britain’s attention on here was German and Russian designs to extend the projected Berlin-Baghdad railway down to the shorelines of the north-western Gulf. Britain vacillated between the prospect of participation and opposition but mainly the latter. The Government of India, led by its Viceroy Lord Curzon, certainly calculated that by maximising Kuwaiti territorial claims in the north, it could seriously limit the shoreline on which any railhead terminus might be located and developed and thereby pretty much maintain the waters of the Persian gulf as a ‘British lake’ and a forward defence. In March 1902, British Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne commented on Britain’s recently-acquired Kuwait predicament: “[w]e have saddled ourselves with an impossible client in the person of the Sheikh...no one knows where his possessions begin and end, and our obligations towards him are as ill-defined as the boundaries of his Principality” (Schofield 1993: 24). The Foreign Office reckoned at this stage though that his influence shouldn’t be recognised as stretching beyond Kuwait Bay. This engendered a furious reaction from Curzon who pointed to the stationing of Ottoman troops at Safwan and elsewhere as evidence that the 1901 *status quo* was in danger of being ‘whittled out of existence’ (Schofield 1993: 26). Raising the prospect of the ‘Germanisation’ of the province of Basra, Curzon and the Government of India won what had become a fairly public battle, with the initial nomination of extensive northern limits for the shakhdom and Britain’s enunciation of a policy that expressly sought to maintain the Persian Gulf as a British Lake. This arrived in the shape of the Lansdowne Declaration of May 1903 whereby “we should regard the establishment of a naval base or fortified port in the Persian Gulf by any other power as a very grave menace to British interests, and we should certainly resist it with all the means at our disposal” (Schofield 1993: 28).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: A RETURN TO ZONAL THINKING BY THE EVE OF THE GREAT WAR

Later in the decade, with the arrival of the Young Turks, the territorial confrontations in those three corners of Arabia had lost much of their acuteness and resonance. As Constantinople focused its energies on issues closer to home, Britain started thinking more in terms of zones again. Or at least a mixture of lines and zones, depending on the issues at stake. A revealing juxtaposition

was provided in 1908 by the Perso-Ottoman boundary along the Shatt al-Arab and the continuing question of fixing territorial limits for Kuwait, just to the south-west. A young Arnold Wilson had noted that the locally-observed river boundary ran along its main channel in the vicinity of Muhammara (Khorramshahr), irrespective of the earlier formal treaty prescriptions that placed it along the eastern (Persian) bank (Schofield 2004). Contrast such precise talk of where within a river the international boundary should lie with the vague formula suggested for defining Kuwait put forward by the Government Of India's leading Gulf historian J.G. Lorimer, also in 1908: 'fluctuating...[its boundaries] are, at any given time, the limits of the tribes which then, either voluntarily or under compulsion, owe allegiance to the Shaikh of Kuwait' (Schofield 1993: 34). For Britain, Kuwait was not the issue it had been half a decade earlier though both comments emphasise pointedly prevailing local observations of territorial organisation.

The red and green lines of diminishing Kuwaiti territorial authority as defined by the July 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Convention: Source: map produced by the Foreign Office Research Department in May 1954 in the National Archives, London: FO 371/114644

A return to zonal thinking was reflected in the pre-WWI arrangements concluded between Britain and the Ottoman Empire over the territorial configuration of Arabia, more generally, and Kuwait in particular. A substantive Anglo-Ottoman package settlement of July 1913 rolled together a detailed Shatt al-Arab boundary delimitation, a bizarre territorial scheme for a two-tone, autonomous Kuwait and a fairly random straight (Blue) line drawn north to south from the Arabian Gulf coast south into the middle of Arabia. The latter supposedly separated British and Ottoman spheres of influence though, in truth, the Ottomans were no longer extending any here. With any perceived threats from rival European powers to Britain's 'lake' also gone, vague zonal schemes which paid no attention to prevailing social and spatial organisation would suffice. Nonetheless, the outer green line of Kuwait's vague zonal territorial settlement of 1913 would survive to constitute its future, fated boundary delimitation with Iraq, its wording to constitute the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Boundary Demarcation Commission's delimitation formula for settling that question during 1991-93 (Schofield 1993: 150-198). In 1914, another seemingly random straight (Violet) line was drawn running south-westwards from the desert terminus of the Blue line to link up with the eastern terminus of the 1903-05 Anglo-Ottoman boundary delimitation in Wadi Bana.

There has been always a line of thought in geography that we can glean much by unravelling the evolution of individual territorial limits, showing how they've been confronted and negotiated at various scales how they've materialised and dematerialised – in short providing a biography of encounter (Megoran 2012). Perhaps less attention has been focused on the horizontal axis, of looking at how various coterminous territorial acts were, as with the case here, linked by regional imperial policy and the agency of the individuals concerned. As we have witnessed, an overworked British Ambassador in Constantinople would be the Ottoman Empire's first point of contact in the first half-decade of the twentieth century on hugely-intensified issues of territorial confrontation in the corners of Arabia – where there was a sudden urgency to delimit precisely Britain's established if (previously) somewhat amorphous zones of interest. This sharp focus wouldn't last for long, but for as long as it did, various commentators would note and even exaggerate the territorial linkages. Knowing Britain's deep fears of the region being penetrated by railway schemes brokered by its imperial rivals in north-eastern and north-western Arabia at the time, Aden Residency Agent H.M. Abud of the Indian Staff Corps would raise in 1902 the possibilities of the Tiban valley being utilised to join Aden and Sana'a by rail. While any such prospects were minimal at best, they were raised to encourage Britain not to abandon its low-level material support of tribal groups in the indeterminate borderlands separating notional British and Ottoman zone sin south-west Arabia (Abud, 1902).

To a large extent, the reason why Kuwait and Yemen (with Aqaba) had become so contested in the early twentieth century revolved around the same set of considerations of strategic location that provides an essential context for

continuing territorial instability in these regions today and in the recent past – that old colonial imaginary of Iraqi access to the sea; the continuing mismatch between the extent of state and nation in south-west Arabia and the lack of an established state tradition in Sinai and Aqaba. And these had absolutely nothing to do with Sykes-Picot.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abud 1902 (April), "Abud's memorandum on other aspects of the boundary" in R. Schofield (ed.), *Arabian Geopolitics I: South-west Arabia*, Archive Editions, Farnham Common, 1, 78.
- Ansombe F., 1997, *The Ottoman Gulf: the Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Ates S., 2013, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Busch B.C., 1967, "Britain and the status of Kuwait, 1896-1899", *The Middle East Journal*, 21, 2, pp. 187-198.
- Foreign Office, 1905 (December), "Memorandum respecting the Aden frontier delimitation" in Schofield R. (ed.), *Arabian Geopolitics I: South-west Arabia*, Archive Editions, Farnham Common, 1, pp. 259-267.
- Hubbard G., 2016, *From the Gulf to Ararat: Imperial Boundary-Making in the Late Ottoman Empire*, I.B. Tauris, London.
- Hurewitz J.C., 1989, "Preface", in P. Toye (ed.), *Palestine Boundaries, 1833-1947*, 1, Archive Editions, Farnham Common.
- Joffe G., 2017, "States and caliphates", *Geopolitics*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.201.1349111> (accessed March 12, 2018).
- Kashani-Sabet F., 1999, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804-1946*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Lee-Warner W., 1902 (June), "Note by Sir William Lee-Warner on the Aden demarcation" in R. Schofield (ed.), *Arabian Geopolitics I: South-west Arabia*, Archive Editions, Farnham Common, 1, pp. 77-80.
- Megoran N., 2012, "Rethinking the study of international boundaries: a biography of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan boundary", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102/2, pp. 464-81.
- National Archives file, FO 78/1964.
- Potter L., 2008, "The consolidation of Iran's frontier on the Persian Gulf in the nineteenth century" in R. Farmanfarmaian (ed.), *War and Peace in Qajar Persia: Implications Past and Present*, Routledge, London, pp. 125-148.
- Schofield R., 1993, *Kuwait and Iraq: Historical Claims and Territorial Disputes*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, (2nd edition).
- Schofield R., 2004, "Position, function and symbol: the Shatt al-Arab dispute in perspective" in L. Potter and G. Sick (eds.), *Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of War*, Palgrave, New York, 29-70.

- Schofield R., 2007, "Borders, regions and time: defining the Iraqi territorial state", in R. Visser and G. Stansfield (eds.), *An Iraq of its Regions*, London, Hurst, pp. 167-204.
- Schofield R., 2008a, "Laying it down in stone: delimiting and demarcating Iraq's boundaries by mixed international commission", *Journal of Historical Geography*, 34, pp. 397-421.
- Schofield R., 2008b, "Narrowing the frontier: mid-nineteenth century efforts to delimit and map the Perso-Ottoman boundary" in R. Farmanfarmaian (ed.) *War and Peace in Qajar Persia: Implications Past and Present*, Routledge, London, pp. 149-173.
- Schofield R., 2014, *States behaving Badly: The Unique Geopolitics of Island Sovereignty Disputes*, Busan, Korea Maritime institute.
- Schofield R., 2015, "Back to the barrier function: where next for international boundary and territorial disputes in political geography?", *Geography*, 100, 3, pp. 133-43.
- Schofield R., 2017, "International boundaries and borderlands in the Middle East: balancing context, exceptionalism and representation", *Geopolitics*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1374246> (accessed March 12, 2018).
- Toye P., (ed.), 1989, *Palestine Boundaries, 1833-1947*, 1, Archive Editions, Farnham Common.