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**ANALYSIS
SYRIA AND THE NEW LINES IN THE SAND**

TRANSCRIPT OF A RECORDED DOCUMENTARY

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MUSIC from Lawrence of Arabia

STOURTON: Recognise the music? It's the score for one of the great epics of the silver screen, and - bear with me - I am going to try to persuade you that Lawrence of Arabia might, just might, have saved Syria from its civil war. There are villains in the story too - British and French officials.

GERGES: They played God with the modern Middle East, constructed what I call artificial frontiers, artificial entities, mutilated entities; and that's why what exists in the region is neither natural, nor viable, and it does not have the ability to basically survive in the long-term.

STOURTON: I'm in the invigilation room of the National Archives in Kew, and in front of me is a pre-First World War map. It's a beautiful thing, really very finely drawn, and this outlines the deal that was done between France and Britain in 1916 known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This map has more or less dictated the shape of the Middle East ever since. Until now, that is. There's a growing body of opinion that believes that this settlement, the settlement sketched out here on this map, is dissolving in the heat of the civil war in Syria. James Barr is the author of a book called *A Line in the Sand*. And, James, I assume the title of your book refers to this very, very clear, pretty much dead straight line that goes right across the centre of the map?

BARR: Yes, absolutely. And when Sir Mark Sykes proposed this deal to the British cabinet before he actually negotiated with Georges-Picot, he said something very, very revealing. This is in Downing Street at the end of 1915. He said, "I would like to draw a line from the 'e' of 'Acre' to the last 'k' in Kirkuk", and that gives you an idea of how this agreement was made up.

STOURTON: So that takes us right from what is today a part of Israel into Northern Iraq?

BARR: Exactly - it does, yes.

STOURTON: Sir Mark Sykes was a baronet, Tory MP and adventurer. Francois Georges-Picot a French diplomat of the old school.

In this edition of Analysis I'll explain why they've walked out of the history books, and now haunt high-powered meetings of policy-makers trying to make sense of today's increasingly volatile Middle East.

COWPER-COLES: Well I think there's a big re-examination really of what happened at the end of the First War.

STOURTON: Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles has served as our ambassador in Israel, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan.

COWPER-COLES: It was very interesting, as I travelled around the Middle East in recent weeks and months, to find how often Sykes-Picot is discussed. I've debated it

at conferences here in Britain, at conferences up and down the Gulf, and there's very much a sense that the old settlement is starting to come undone and the artificiality of some of these borders is being exposed for what it was.

STOURTON: The civil war in Syria is re-shaping the region - and the seeming certainties of the last century are disappearing. Veteran reporter of the Middle East, Patrick Cockburn.

COCKBURN: I think that you will have sort of enclaves, areas where the government doesn't have any influence within Iraq or Syria, as you do in Lebanon, although when you actually buy a map in a map shop the old lines might be there, but you have to bear in mind that they really don't mean much these days.

STOURTON: For the West, this is a moment of truth. The Sykes-Picot settlement marked the zenith of our power in the region. The passing of that settlement may also mark an end to our influence. Fawaz Gerges of the London School of Economics.

GERGES: The Western powers are coming to realise what's happening in Syria now is no longer just an internal conflict between Assad and the population. This is part of the unravelling of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This is part of the turmoil that's basically engulfing the entire region. It's not just about Syria. I mean just in May almost 700 people were killed in Iraq. Lebanon too is unravelling. Jordan is in the eye of the storm. The Syrian crisis has also spilled over into Turkey itself.

STOURTON: The story begins not in the sands of the Middle East, but in the mud of northern France.

In early 1916 Germany attacked the French city of Verdun - the struggle there was to become the biggest battle in world history. That same year, one point two million men were killed, wounded, gassed or captured at the Somme. The Middle East was something of a side-show. James Barr.

BARR: This was all part of the Ottoman Empire who the British and the French were fighting in the First World War, and the origin of the deal really is in London and Paris. It's a deal designed to relieve tensions between Britain and France during the First World War, tensions that they really worried were going to break up their alliance.

STOURTON: So it was really much more about the European War than it was about the Middle East in a funny sort of way?

BARR: Exactly.

STOURTON: And just trying to get a sense of the shape of the place at the time. I mean I'm just looking at some of the corners of the map. We've got I think Petra and what's now Jordan down here at the bottom, and we go right up into what's today's Turkey in the north. And over here, I think is that Basra down in the bottom right-hand corner? What was this area called at that time?

BARR: Well it wasn't called any of the names that we know it as today. It wasn't Syria and it wasn't Palestine particularly. These were Western names, and Roman names sometimes, that we use to refer to this part of the world, but at that time it was all just part of the Ottoman Empire and so there was a question of how to divide this up. And broadly what Britain was trying to do was to preserve a cordon of territory from the Suez Canal through to what was then the Persian Gulf that was all under their control or under their influence, so that they could keep foreign powers - including the French and the Russians - away from the Suez Canal and also from the Persian Gulf and the route to India.

STOURTON: Those strategic considerations left little room for the people who actually lived in the region. The Sykes-Picot Agreement provided the basis for peace negotiations after the end of the First World War, and those negotiations in turn created most of the national borders that make up today's Middle East. Fawaz Gerges is Professor of Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics.

GERGES: The very *raison d'être* of the post-World War One settlement - what we call the Sykes-Picot Agreement - was really the colonial and the imperial interests of Britain, France and Italy. This is the reality. Neither the people were taken into account, nor what I call either the economic sociological and historical ties that exist in the region. This is the reality - that is, the imperial interest topped everything else. And not only that. It was really the Sykes-Picot Agreement was a settlement between colonial Britain and France to basically split, divide the spoils of the Ottoman Empire between themselves. That simple.

MUSIC from Lawrence of Arabia

STOURTON: And here's where that famous film comes in. James Barr told me one of history's great "what-if" stories as we looked at the Sykes-Picot map in the National Archives. *(to Barr)* Do you think you could ... I mean it's an unfair question, but if we were to give you a pencil - not for a moment I'm suggesting you should draw on this wonderful thing - but if we were to give you a pencil, could you draw borders which in the light of the history of the place we're looking at make more sense?

BARR: Well I could, but actually the person who tried to do that was Lawrence of Arabia because after the First World War, when he went to the Paris peace conference, he actually produced a map, which I have seen, where he divides it very, very differently and tries to split the area into a Sunni area and a Shia area and a Kurdish area which were going to be ruled by sons of Sharif Hussein of Mecca who he knew - who were his wartime comrades - and in whom he had great faith. So he proposed a completely different division of the Middle East, but that didn't run in the end because the British weren't willing to accept an Arab government in the area that they wanted to control. And that was ultimately because of oil, and the reason was that the British were very sceptical that they would get in outside investment to get oil out of the ground in Iraq if the government there was Arab. They felt that it had to be a British government to give investors confidence.

STOURTON: The legacy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement has been an enduring sense of resentment against outsiders which makes life difficult for western diplomats even today. Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles learnt his Arabic and his Middle East history at the school the Foreign Office used to run for young diplomats in the hills above Beirut.

STOURTON: It was there when we first started the British spy school, as it was called by Nasser - the Foreign Office school in Lebanon above Beirut. In the Arabic text we read, there's a primer which we used called *The Way Prepared* which took us through the basic documents. And I remember decrypting for the first time in Arabic Balfour, Sykes-Picot, McMahon, as they were all translated into Arabic. And of course while these things may have been forgotten in the West, they are part of the lifeblood, the intellectual lifeblood of most Arabs, and very much part of the resentment they feel against Britain and America for the state their region finds itself in today.

STOURTON: It's probably broadly true that if you said Sykes-Picot to a university undergraduate here, not great chances that they'd know what you were talking about; but if you did it in Beirut or ...

COWPER-COLES: Or Damascus or Baghdad, perhaps not so much in Riyadh but certainly any of the great cities of the Levant. In Cairo, Alexandria, Sykes-Picot has a resonance, a resonance which is still very ... I think perhaps even more important today as one sees the post-First World War settlement, the Versailles settlement starting to unravel.

FX: NEWS MONTAGE

STOURTON: It has taken a nearly a century and a bloody civil war to expose the fault lines which the Sykes-Picot Agreement glossed over.

GERGES: I would have been shocked if the Syrian conflict had not spread to neighbouring countries because of the sociological, ethnic and religious ties that exist between the Syrian people, between the Lebanese people, between the Iraqi people and the Jordanian people.

STOURTON: Fawaz Gerges of the London School of Economics.

GERGES: Syria lies at the heart of the Arab world. Syria is also part of an entity we used to call Greater Syria - that is Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan. You realise naturally that the Syrian conflict has spread and spilled over into Lebanon, into Iraq, into Transjordan and also into the whole idea of Hamas and what have you. There is an organic unity, many links, many ties that bind between let's say the Sunnis in Syria and their Sunni counterparts in Lebanon, in Iraq, in Jordan, and the Shias and the Alawites in Syria and the Shias in Lebanon, in Iraq and other places as well. So you have sociological and ethnic and religious ties that exist. Syria is not an isolated country.

STOURTON: The most dramatic example of the way Syria's civil war is spreading to its neighbours - the one that really made people sit up and take note

- was last month's battle for Qusayr.

Syrian government forces re-captured the town, but only with the help of fighters from over the border in Lebanon; they were members of the Lebanese movement Hezbollah, which has always had close ties to President Assad. Hezbollah is also a Shia Muslim organization, backed by Iran, and thus on the same side of the sectarian divide as many of Assad's supporters.

Patrick Cockburn of *The Independent* has seen at first hand the way Syria's neighbours are being drawn into the conflict.

COCKBURN: It's not only spilling over. It has spilled over with Hezbollah participating in the fighting at Qusayr and elsewhere, fighting between Sunni and Alawites in the northern city of Tripoli. It's always quite possible for this to happen in Lebanon given its recent past, so you know it's still a little unclear whether it's going to bring us right back to the civil war days. Likewise in Iraq. I mean the last month, according to the UN, there were a thousand people killed in Iraq - mostly in sectarian killings. This is the highest figures we've had since 2008. So you can see the cross-infection, if you like, from Syria spreading to the neighbours - particularly to Lebanon and to Iraq because the sectarian situation is similar.

STOURTON: To what extent is that dissolving the borders between the countries, the physical borders?

COCKBURN: Between Lebanon and Syria, people move backwards and forwards. To a degree they always have. And these lines are pretty artificial anyway between Iraq and Syria. Map makers at the time sort of drew a line on the map that went through tribal areas of divided communities and so forth. Likewise the five hundred mile border with Turkey. Again most of the government checkpoints have disappeared.

STOURTON: And the Iraqi border, the border between Syria and Iraq?

COCKBURN: Yeah I mean that's you know easily crossed and you have the same tribes on each side - you have big Sunni areas west of Mosul, you have the Kurds up in North East Syria. But geographically they're not distinguished from the Kurds in Northern Iraq, so suddenly these borders scarcely exist anymore.

STOURTON: **The Syrian regime is now so focused on a struggle for its own survival that it simply doesn't have the resources to control its borders in the way a central government would usually do - and what's more large areas of territory along those borders are in rebel hands. So there's really nothing to stop people moving in and out of the country more or less at will.**

The implications for the region could be as serious as those of the fall of the Berlin Wall were for Europe.

And there's another factor accelerating the disintegration of the old order; the regional rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran. Professor Gerges argues that their political competition is a much more important factor than any

notional theological differences between Shias and Sunnis.

GERGES: If you read the commentary, you think that the whole thing is all about sectarianism. Muslims are Muslims. I look at sectarian tensions in the region, at communal tensions in the region as part of the big geo-strategic game that's taking place in the Middle East. If you look at the headlines in Syria, in Iraq, in Lebanon, you see, wow, the entire region is exploding along sectarian lines. It's very misleading. What's happening below the surface is very important - that there is a great geo-strategic struggle taking place in the region between the Sunni dominated states of the Gulf and Iran - and the sectarian tensions really mask deep geo-strategic rivalries and struggles. I'm not suggesting that these powers are investing tremendous resources in co-opting and mobilising their bases along sectarian lines. So Iran has become the protector of the Shias and the Alawites in the region. Saudi Arabia basically ... I mean if you read carefully what Saudi Arabia is saying and the Gulf say, they are trying to weaken and undermine the onslaught of Shia Iran into the Sunni heartland. Both camps are using sectarianism as an instrument to mask the geo-strategic rivalries.

SEGUES:

COCKBURN: To some extent I think it is a bit like Protestants and Catholics.

STOURTON: **Whatever the source of sectarian divisions, the effect is likely to be felt for a long time to come. Patrick Cockburn believes the violence between the two groups has been so extreme that neither side will readily forget what has been done, and that goes for Muslims in Syria's neighbours as well as those in Syria itself.**

COCKBURN: The feelings that people express in Baghdad or Damascus or Lebanon do remind me a bit of what people used to say to me thirty years ago in Belfast, but many other disputes get dragged into this, so I think that these historic divisions are very deep. I think people within these countries often deceive themselves and would say to me "Oh Patrick, you know some of my best friends are Sunni or Shia", but when you actually talked to them, you'd discover that it was sort of only Sunni and Shia who agreed with them who they really were on good terms with. And quietly in the background there's an extraordinary degree of fear between the different communities now that it's very difficult to see it dissipating fast.

STOURTON: It's about identity more than anything else in a way?

COCKBURN: It's about identity, yes - deep fears of the other communities and exacerbated by the backing of foreign powers that may have their own sectarian agendas whether it's Iran or Saudi Arabia or Qatar or whoever.

STOURTON: **The logic of that is a completely redesigned Middle East - one made up of political entities which much more closely represent the realities of religion and ethnic kinship. Sherard Cowper-Coles.**

COWPER-COLES: Personally I would think there is a good case for looking again at the borders. One must ask whether the Sunni Arabs of the desert really inside the arc of the fertile crescent, as it were, between the mountains and the Valley of the Tigris and the Euphrates, whether they deserve some sort of autonomy of their own. One has to ask about the Alawites, and one needs to remember that until I think 1937 the Alawites of the mountains between the desert and the sea had a small statelet of their own. So I think, you know rather as happened with the former Yugoslavia, one does have to think outside the box. I think there is a case for a Kurdish state, a proper separate Kurdish state.

STOURTON: The Kurds were the big losers of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Their historic homeland was divided up between Iran, Syria, Turkey and Iraq, and it remains a source of enduring bitterness.

But as the Sykes-Picot Agreement fades into history, the Kurdish dream of a political entity of their own has taken on new life. They have already established an autonomous region in northern Iraq, and the chaos of the Syrian civil war is giving them an opportunity to do something similar there. Fawaz Gerges.

GERGES: The Kurds now are coming into their own. I can imagine very easily a Kurdish, an autonomous state that exists from Syria to Iraq, even inside Turkey. The question is will they have autonomous state as opposed to independent state? That's a question of course very difficult to answer, but the reality is they are establishing the foundation of both autonomous and independent states in the future.

STOURTON: Israel, by contrast, may have much to fear from the new dispensation.

If the Kurds were the big losers of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the early Zionists were among the winners; a year after the Sykes-Picot carve-up, the British government published what became known as the Balfour Declaration. It committed Britain to "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" and it was a key milestone on the road to the founding of the state of Israel.

Now the influential Israeli newspaper *The Jerusalem Post* is warning its readers about the risks Israel faces as the old order disintegrates.

Matthew Wagner wrote an editorial for the paper prompted by the way the Syrian civil war has flared up along Israel's northern border in the Golan Heights. He's also worried that if the new Middle East divides along religious and ethnic sectarian lines, that will encourage Israel's sizeable Arab population to seek some sort of autonomy too.

WAGNER: A lot of Israel's challenges are challenges that exist even within the Green Line, you know the 1949 armistice line where we have 20 per cent of the population identify as Arab, Arab-Israeli. To what extent do they buy into their Israeli citizenship or their Israeli identity is unclear. Once again we're talking about 20 per cent of the population. There have been countries that have split when there's even a

smaller minority than that. I don't know what the minority is of Kurdistan in Syria. It's probably less than 10 per cent and yet we're already seeing that Balkanisation process. Here we're talking about 20 per cent of the population. Recently Balad, one of the Arab parties here in Israel, actually was talking about creating an autonomous Arab-Israeli entity within Israel. I don't know how much traction that will ever have, but I'm saying it might be a part of like the winds of the time that the Arab population here is feeling that way. At any rate, they see themselves as kind of alienated from Israel. So that's definitely an issue that we're going to have to deal with, and I think that it's definitely part of this larger picture that we're seeing happening all over the region.

STOURTON: Israel will not be the only power that resists a radical shake-up of the region. No government wants to see its territory divided along sectarian lines, and the big powers - certainly the United States and Russia - are likely to be wary of anything they see as a threat to stability in the Middle East. But in the end they may not have a choice. Sir Sherard-Cowper Coles.

COWPER-COLES: There's obviously a great reluctance in many quarters to reopen the post-First World War settlement. But the reality is it *is* being reopened and the question is do we simply try to re-impose it or do we try and make adjustments which make that settlement more enduring at a time when the great outside regulator of the Middle East - the United States, you know Britain's moment in the Middle East is long gone and there's a very strong argument for suggesting that America's moment in the Middle East is beginning to draw to a close - and without an outside regulating power, one's got to have arrangements that will be sustainable by the parties themselves, won't require too much outside intervention to keep them in place. I don't think we're even at the end of the beginning of all this. I think it's got a very, very long way to run. All I'm saying is that we need an open mind.

STOURTON: And while history runs its course, the immediate future looks messy. Patrick Cockburn.

COCKBURN: I think that you will have enclaves, areas where the Government doesn't have any influence within Iraq or Syria, as you do in Lebanon - although when you actually buy a map in a map shop the old lines might be there, but you have to bear in mind that they really don't mean much these days.

STOURTON: So the countries will still exist, but they won't really be countries as we think of a country, a fully functioning state?

COCKBURN: That's one option. Of course there will be people within those countries who will say we're not going to allow that to happen. I think you will have simultaneous shifts towards de facto federalism, but you will also have a shift towards those who say send in the tanks, you know we're going to maintain Iraq as it was, we're going to remain a unitary state. So that could also happen at the same time, and you can sort of see that in Iraq that that's happening.

STOURTON: It sounds like a recipe for a very long period of instability and conflict.

COCKBURN: Yes, I think you're exactly right. We're past the conflict which happened after the US invasion of Iraq, and we're entering a sort of new era with lots of potential conflicts, with weak states.

SEGUES:

GERGES: Look at the Westphalia settlement of 1648. I would argue it's going to take another century for the Arab Middle East to evolve institutional frameworks along the lines of what Europe did between 1648 and 1948.

STOURTON: Fawaz Gerges.

GERGES: This is the painful birth banks of a new world and, yes, it has taken a century. I think neither you nor I will see the new child that will basically be born out of the birth banks that have been taking place in the Middle East for the last 70 or 80 years.

STOURTON: I suppose if you're a Western policymaker, you could look at history and draw two different conclusions. You could look at history and say given that we make, we're responsible for so much of this message - if that indeed is the case, as you argue - we really shouldn't get involved again. Or we're responsible for the mess and, therefore, we ought to help sort it out.

GERGES: I'm sorry to say that you and I, we are thinking too deeply and too historically and too sociologically about what's happening in Syria. Do you think Barack Obama is sitting and asking his historians, "Tell me about Sykes-Picot"? This is how Western policymakers ... You're not talking about great leaders who have a historical basically imagination. You and I, we're trying to understand what's happening in the region. And what's happening in the region cannot be explained, cannot be made sense of without understanding the historical foundation - how the Middle East was invented in the first place, and how this particular invention really has played a major role in the current crisis.

STOURTON: **From today's vantage point it's easy to condemn Sir Mark Sykes and Francois George-Picot for what they did. But of course they cannot really be held personally responsible for the bloodshed of the Syrian civil war, and anyway, how can we possibly imagine ourselves into the minds of men whose priorities were driven by the horrors of the First World War?**

Perhaps the greatest diplomatic gift is the ability to project our thinking beyond the realities of the present. Sherard Cowper-Coles.

COWPER-COLES: The Foreign Office had a great inquiry as to why we failed to foresee the Iranian Revolution, and the very solemn conclusion was we didn't have enough spies or diplomats in the British Embassy in Tehran to foresee the fall of the Shah. And Sir Anthony Parsons, one of our greatest Middle Eastern experts, in his riposte to this report said it wasn't a failure of information; it was a failure of imagination. And really in wrestling with all this, what we're talking about is the need for imagination - to think beyond the gloom of the present to the uplands of a stable

and enduring settlement for the medium term.

STOURTON: As a former professional diplomat Sir Sherard knows how much he is asking for; most diplomacy has more to do with negotiation than imagination, and the way talks over Syria at the United Nations have got so bogged down underlines just how difficult it's likely to be to respond creatively to the new realities of the region.

What he wants is, in a way, exactly the boldness of vision that allowed Sir Mark Sykes to draw his line across the vast territory between the Mediterranean and northern Iraq. But if the new lines are going to hold, they'll have to be drawn by the people who live in the Middle East, and not by officials in Paris, London or Washington.