

International Boundary Study

No. 100 – May 15, 1970

Iraq – Syria Boundary

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The Geographer Office of the Geographer Bureau of Intelligence and Research

INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY

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The Geographer
Directorate for Functional Research
Bureau of Intelligence and Research

IRAQ – SYRIA BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Iraq-Syria Boundary is 376 miles in length and is delimited. Beginning at the Turkish tripoint at the confluence of the Tigris and the Khabur rivers, the boundary follows the thalweg of the Tigris downstream about 3.2 miles where it leaves the river. The boundary then trends in straight line segments first southwestward about 68 miles and then southward about 153 miles to the Euphrates (Al Furat) River near the northeastern extremity of Baghuz Island. The boundary then follows in a straight line southwestward a distance of about 152 miles to the Jordanian tripoint at approximately 33° 22' 29" North Latitude and 38° 47' 33" East Longitude.

II. GEOPOLITICAL BACKGROUND

A. Ancient History

Like other parts of the Near East, the Iraq-Syria frontier is immersed in the record of mankind since earliest historic time. At both ends of a crescent shaped fringe of fertile land long known as the "Fertile Crescent," the earliest civilizations of the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile Valleys developed. The Iraq-Syria boundary cuts across the northern arc of the crescent thus bisecting what was the ancient northern riverine civilization of Mesopotamia, or earlier, Assyria-Babylonia.

The boundary area itself is replete with the bench marks of western civilization. A listing of contributions would include domestication of plants and animals as well as the development of the alphabet, mathematics, law, warfare, and religion. Abraham, the progenitor of both Arabs and Jews, originated in the Tigris—Euphrates area. The very word Hebrew is derived from this feat of having voyaged across the Euphrates River to then "Southern Syria" lands known in the Bible as Ancient Ammon, Moab, and Edom located in the highlands east of the Jordan Valley.

The fact that the boundary area is situated across the main lines of communication led readily to flourishing trade and commerce between west and east. In later centuries the highly developed caravan trade included inter-continental traffic between Europe, Africa, and Asia. As trade and commerce developed early in history because of geography, so also did the boundary region become a route for the movement of armies and peoples. From earliest historic times, the impact of land and people imposed challenges and conflicts which took form in varied streams of influence affecting the entire globe.

In proximity of the boundary area, Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire (near present day Mosul), fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C. Under Nebuchadnassar, the Babylonian Captivity of the Hebrews (586–536 B.C.) took place until terminated by the Persian

conquests. In 331 B.C. Alexander defeated the Persians under Darius III at Arbela (Irbid). In 64 B.C. the Romans under Pompey defeated the Seleucids, Alexander's successors. Later the Syriac (Aramaic) speaking Kingdom of Palmyra (Tadmur) dominated the area until defeated in 272 A.D. by the armies of the Roman Emperor Aurelian, who also captured Queen Zenobia on the bank of the Euphrates while on her way to seek aid from the Persians. Henceforth, until the Islamic conquest the boundary region was the scene of persistent conflict among the Romans, Greeks, Syrians, and the Persians.

In the early centuries of efficient Roman rule, the boundary area, especially the nearer Syrian side, attained great economic strength as an integral part of the Mediterranean world. But more important than the flow of goods were the ideas whose impact via Christianity spread first to undermine, and then to supplant older Greco-Roman social traditions.

The universality characteristic of the early centuries of Roman rule, gave way first in the outer bounds of the Roman Empire, for example, in the boundary area. Almost as soon as Christianity was established as the official state religion by Constantine in 321 A.D., local separatist and divisive forces commenced agitation for rival and conflicting claims.

B. Early Islamic Period

By the time of the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632, the Roman Empire, long divided between west and east, was also rent by internal Christological controversy. Much of this controversy was political in nature and emanated from Syria where it foreshadowed actual separation. East of the boundary area, considerable political support against Roman or Byzantine authority came from the Sasanian Persians.

Damascus and Jerusalem fell to Arab conquest in 636; the following year lower Mesopotamia was invaded, and the Persian stronghold of Ctesiphon on the Tigris (south of present day Baghdad) was captured. With the establishment of the Caliphate in Damascus under the Umayyads (661–750), and the shifting of the center east of the boundary area to Baghdad under the 'Abbasids (750–1258), of whom Harun ar-Rashid is the most famed, the Islamic Empire achieved prosperity and a cultural brilliance, until devastation by the Mongol invasions.¹

C. Ottoman Period

The boundary area during the Umayyad Caliphate was under the control of Damascus; under the 'Abbasids it was administered from Baghdad. However, the northern

Among examples of great contributions are listed, the preservation of classical Greek scientific achievements of Galen in Medicine, Ptolemy in Geography, Aristotle-Philosophy, Euclid-Geometry, the meta-physics of the Neo-Platonists et. al., which were lost in the original but translated into Arabic from Syriac by Syriac scholars encouraged by Arab Caliphs.

Tigris–Euphrates area especially Mosul and the entire <u>Jazirah</u> area was Sunni in contrast to Shi'i Muslim of lower Mesopotamia and Persia. Later the Ottomans (1517–1918), following the Mongol destruction of the Seljuk Dynasty in Asia Minor, controlled all Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and North Africa to Morocco. By the end of the 17th century, perhaps the zenith of Ottoman Turkish domination of the Islamic World, the Empire controlled Southeastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, most of North Africa, and ranked with the greatest of Western powers.

During the ascendancy of Ottoman power, administration and organization improved significantly in comparison to the earlier Caliphates. A great effort, by the Sultan Sulayman the Magnificant, to wrest the sea-power of the Indian Ocean from the Portuguese in 1538 failed. The successful exploitation of the sea route from Europe around Africa to India and the "Spice Islands," followed by the opening of the Suez Canal, dealt serious blows to the historic caravan routes around and across the boundary area. Not until the advent of trucks and the railroad did the overland route regain importance.

Under Ottoman Islamic rule the Millet (Turkish; people united by a common faith; fr. Arabic Millah, creed) System, non-Muslim subjects were organized into separate communities under an ecclesiastical ruler who had some temporal powers. A listing of the Millets in the boundary area would include Syrian (Assyrian) Christians both Orthodox (western) and Eastern (Nestorians) whose language is Syriac, their late 19th century Uniate² counterparts, Armenians, Kurds, Sabaens, Yazidis³, Jews⁴, and others.

D. Great Power Rivalry in the 19th Century

In the 19th Century competition among the Great Powers sharpened for political and economic advantage in Ottoman lands. Hardly a single European power had not volunteered to "aid" the "sick man of Europe." Before the turn of the century, Germany, the only power that had by then acquired no Ottoman territory, gained benefits from Kaiser Wilhelm II's special efforts to favor the Sultan. Germany trained the Turkish army and received the concession to extend the railway eastward from Constantinople, across the boundary area, to become the "Berlin to Baghdad Railway." During most of the century, Britain's espousal of the integrity of the Ottoman Empire was based on her determination to keep Russia out. With new German inroads in the Near East, which the <u>Drang nach Osten</u> policy typified, Britain now turned to ally herself with Russia leading to the line-up of military forces in World War I.

At the same time, in the boundary area itself, administrative decay and maladministration became acute. The Egyptian occupation under Ibrahim Pasha (1831–1840), who had some French advisors, shook Syria including the boundary area from its torpor. In addition

² Groups which joined the Roman Catholic Church.

³ Especially in the Jabal Sinjar area.

⁴ Traced back to the "Babylonian Captivity," were more important and numerous in the Baghdad Vilayet.

to sowing seeds of reform, western influence through trade, political and religious rivalries also stimulated more unrest. Later administrative reforms included the creation of <u>Vilayets</u>, equivalent to a province, headed by a <u>Vali</u> or Governor, for Aleppo, Damascus, Mosul, and a <u>Sanjak</u> (prefecture) of Dayr az Zawr to extend authority to the Euphrates boundary area. In 1867, Dayr az Zawr was made the capital of a <u>Vilayet</u> in a further effort to assert control over this tribal area which remained relatively immune to the Sultan's authority.

E. Rise of Nationalism and World War I

Initially, the Arab nationalism and liberalism of the late 19th century looked not so much to separation from the Ottoman Empire as to the institution of a democratic constitution, decentralization, and some form of autonomy with special concessions to the Arabic language. For the most part, the objectives of the Arab reformers were not dissimilar to the demands of the Turkish Committee of Union and Progress. It was therefore to be expected that the Arabs would support the Young Turks Revolt of 1908.

But no sooner did the Young Turks gain control, when it became clear that Arab nationalist aspirations would receive no more recognition than that under the Sultan. After 1908, therefore, Arab nationalism took another direction, toward separation and independence. Secret Arab political societies soon were organized, many of which included officers of the Ottoman Army. The Vilayets of Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad and Mosul became key areas for nationalist independence movements.

Early in April 1914, Amir 'Abdullah Al-Hashimi, second son of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, asked the British High Commissioner in Cairo, what would be the British attitude if the Ottomans Arab revolted. The British response, based on its traditional policy of preserving "the integrity of the Ottoman Empire" was negative. The entry, however, of Turkey on Germany's side in World War I in November 1914, brought about an abrupt shifting of political interests in Arab Ottoman lands. Britain now exerted direct effort to encourage the Arabs to revolt. Before the Great War was to end, the Iraq–Syria boundary would be one of many completely new delineations in the Near East.

Negotiations between the British Foreign Office and the Arabs were embodied in the protracted exchange of letters between The High Commissioner in Egypt and The Sharif of Mecca, July 14, 1915, to January 30, 1916, known as the McMahon–Sharif Husayn Correspondence. The question of boundaries was essential to the discussions of an independent Arab Kingdom. Pressed by Sharif Husayn, the British Government replied on October 24, 1915, as follows:

"Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the Arabs in all regions within the limits demanded by the Sharif of Mecca; subject to certain modifications."

These modifications were: (a) the exclusion of "the two districts of Mersin and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, and (b) that of certain regions lying within those frontiers in which Great Britain was not free to act "without detriment to the interests of her ally France."

The French Government was apprised of the tenor of the negotiations with the Sharif. On May 16, 1916, Great Britain and France concluded a secret agreement commonly, though unofficially, known as the "Sykes–Picot Agreement." Embodied in notes exchanged between Great Britain, France, and Russia, the Agreement actually delimited Ottoman Territory into British and French Spheres of Influence.

Without detailing the "Sykes-Picot Agreement," key provisions included the partition of the entire Fertile Crescent into several zones, which influenced directly the eventual delineation of not only the Iraq-Syria boundary but also included most of the other areas of former Ottoman Arab lands. For all practical purposes, (a) France assumed control of northern Syria which became Lebanon and Syria including Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and also Mosul in Northern Iraq.⁵ (b) Britain assumed the Baghdad Vilayet. (c) Syria to the east of Homs, Hama, and Damascus became an "independent Arab State or Confederation" but directly under French influence. (d) South Syria, in what was to become Trans-Jordan extending northeasterly making a direct land connection across the Syrian Desert to the Tigris-Euphrates was assigned to be directly under British influence.⁶

F. The Arab Revolt

Neither the "Sykes–Picot Agreement," nor the rather arbitrary delineations on maps affixed to the Treaty were known to the Arabs when the Arab Revolt began, with the military and financial support of Great Britain, on June 10, 1916. The Bolshevik Government revealed full texts in <u>Izvestia</u> and <u>Pravda</u> on November 23, 1917, and subsequently the <u>Manchester Guardian</u> printed the texts on November 26, 1917. Another event which was to have momentous impact on the geopolitical structure of the entire Near East was the "Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917."

The publication of the secret agreements startled the Arab nationalists. Doubt and anxiety concerning Allied intentions soon spread. The Arab leadership, however, allayed somewhat by renewed assurances, seemed persuaded on balance in the good faith of Great Britain. A British Foreign Office expert stated: "The discovery did not affect their loyal cooperation with their British Ally.⁸

⁵ Essentially, the Ottoman Vilayets of Damascus, Aleppo, and Mosul.

⁶ As was Palestine, also to Britain.

[&]quot;His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

Temperley, H.W.V., A History of the Peace Conference of Paris, Vol. VI, p. 137.

Although the mainsprings of Arab Nationalist fighting took place in the Hijaz and in Syria, little organized challenge of Arabs themselves took place in Iraq. Many of Faysal's best officers, however, were Iraqi Arabs who had left the Turkish Army. After the Armistice, the Iraqi leaders returned to Iraq to foment Iraqi nationalism.⁹

The capture of Baghdad on March 11, 1917, by British Indian troops advancing from the south under General Maude was a major success. At the time of the Armistice, Turkish troops were well entrenched in the northern highlands east of the Tigris. A column of British troops was on its way to occupy Mosul, which had been evacuated by Turkish troops, when news of the Mudros Armistice was received on October 31, 1918.

The signing of the Mudros Armistice, on October 30, 1918, marked the complete Turkish defeat in Arab Ottoman lands. All of geographic Syria was occupied by Allied troops, with British troops located throughout the area, a small French force on the coast and the Arab Army of Sharif Husayn in the interior. Although General Allenby was ultimately responsible for the military government throughout Syria, the British established a provisional administration only in Palestine to the west of the Jordan River. A French provisional government controlled the coastal regions north of Palestine, and subsequently Cilicia. An Arab administration under Amir Faysal, with a small number of British and French officers on his staff, assumed control of the cities of Aleppo, Homs, Hamah, Damascus as well as the trans-Jordan area.

G. The Problems of Peace and Territorial Arrangements

The Allied victory exposed rivalries and conflicting claims previously submerged. Some aspects relating to the partition of lands need to be mentioned. Faysal had submitted to the Paris Peace Conference a Memorandum of the Arab nationalist movements "to unite the Arabs eventually into one Nation" that Syria was "sufficiently advanced politically to manage her own internal affairs" and further hoped that the Powers would "find better means to give fuller effect to the aims of our national movement." On January 30, the Conference decided that the Arab provinces should be wholly separated from the Ottoman Empire and the newly conceived mandate-system applied to them.

On February 6, Faysal, addressing the Conference, recalled Allied promises, demanded independence of the whole of Arab Asia, and suggested the establishment of a confederation. He stated that the Arabs needed help but not at the price of independence. Subsequently, a dispute between Great Britain and France relating to the spheres of influence and the "Sykes–Picot Agreement" delayed decision on various claims.

⁹ E.g., Yasin Pasha al-Hashimi, Ja'far al 'Askari and Nuri as-Sa'id, later many times Prime Minister of Iraq.

President Woodrow Wilson then recommended an international commission of inquiry to ascertain the wishes of the inhabitants. The Commission first accepted by Great Britain and France, was later rejected, and finally became the purely American King-Crane Commission. It toured all of Syria including Palestine in the summer of 1919. Its report presented to President Wilson recommended a Mandate for Iraq and another for geographic Syria to be treated as a single unit. In each of the two countries a constitutional monarchy should be set up with Amir Faysal as King of Syria. In accordance with the wishes of the people, the United States should be asked to accept the Mandate for Syria and Great Britain would be offered Iraq. The Commission opposed a French Mandate; the final report was ignored.

Faysal returned to Syria, disappointed but hopeful that Great Britain would use her influence with France in favor of the Arabs. However, the Anglo-French Agreement of September 1919, which provided for the withdrawal of British troops from Syria and from Cilicia, dismayed Faysal. Subsequently, the rise of the Kemal Ataturk movement which directly threatened French ambition in Cilicia, including Adana, Gaziantep, Urfa, Malatya, and the Turkish headwaters of the Tigris-Euphrates, led France to be even less amenable to concessions to the Arab Nationalists.

On March 20, 1920, a Congress of Syrian notables offered the crown of Syria and Palestine to Faysal, who accepted it. The action was repudiated immediately by the British and French Governments.

The Conference of San Remo, on April 24, 1920, by establishing the mandates, France for "Syria and Lebanon," Britain for Palestine and Mesopotamia, in effect, became the reality of the "Sykes–Picot Agreement." The declaration of the Mandates was rejected by Faysal and the Arabs and both sides prepared for war. On July 14, 1920, the French Commander-in-Chief and High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon, General Gouraud, issued an ultimatum which demanded unconditional acceptance of the Mandate. Faysal accepted, reportedly, against the wishes of a greater number of his supporters. The answer to the ultimatum was delayed until after the time limit set by General Gouraud, who had earlier ordered French forces to advance on Damascus.

On July 24, the French forces routed the hastily collected Arab forces at Maysalun near Damascus. The following day the city was occupied by the French Army and Faysal left for exile.

With nationalist activity frustrated by the French in Syria, agitation shifted to Iraq. Most of Faysal's Iraqi officers were members of a society, called <u>Al Ahad</u> (The Covenant), whose object was Iraqi independence from foreign control with a connection with an independent Syria. When the Syrian Congress proclaimed Faysal King of Syria in March, a council of Iraqi officers proclaimed his brother 'Abdullah as King of Iraq.

On May 3, 1920, Great Britain announced that she had accepted the Mandate for Iraq. Almost immediately in July, nationalist agitation increased rapidly to open revolt which

required considerable force to suppress. On the arrival of the new High Commissioner Sir Percy Cox, in October 1920, martial law was terminated and an Arab Council of State was established. Pacification was completed early in 1921.

Amir Faysal's nomination as king, with British support, was approved by the Council of State and confirmed in a referendum. He was enthroned on August 23, 1921. The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, in which the mandatory power decided to embody its obligations towards the League of Nations, was ratified by the Iraq Government on October 10, 1922, against determined opposition of nationalist elements, who insisted that the treaty should terminate the mandate and British influence. Ten years later on October 3, 1932, Iraq, with Britain's recommendation, was admitted to the League of Nations as an independent state.

III. ANALYSIS OF BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

As mentioned earlier, the Conference of San Remo, which allotted the Mandates for Britain and France, in effect became the "reality" of the Sykes–Picot Agreement. The Mosul Vilayet, however, was a significant departure from the 1916 "Agreement" which had assigned the district to France. At San Remo, decisions other than partition of lands also took place, among which was an agreement spelling the interests of the two Powers in the oilfields of Iraq. The British Government agreed to grant to France 25% of crude oil or 25% of the shares in development of the oilfields. Arrangements were also made to transport oil from Iraq and Persia through the French sphere of influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. In consideration of this agreement France officially conceded inclusion in Mesopotamia of the Mosul district. Furthermore the "Mosul Question," as it was known, was not settled in the Allied Treaty of Peace with Turkey of July 24, 1923, signed at Lausanne. The Turkish claim to Mosul persisted, was later ruled against Turkey by the League of Nations Council in December 1925, and finally conceded to Iraq in a Treaty between Turkey, and Great Britain and Iraq on July 5, 1926.

The Convention, which defined the boundaries of Iraq and Syria,¹⁰ is titled, the Franco–British Convention of December 23, 1920, on certain points connected with the Mandates for Syria and the Lebanon, Palestine, and Mesopotamia.¹¹ It provided for the demarcation of the frontiers by an Anglo–French Boundary Commission but delimited the boundary only in general terms, subject to later determination. On February 3, 1922, the two powers signed another agreement which differed only slightly from the original delimitation.

¹⁰ Also Jordan–Syria, see International Boundary Study No. 94, December 30, 1969.

¹¹ Parliamentary Papers, 1921, Command 1195.

The boundary as it is today is based on the League of Nations Report of the Commission entrusted by the Council with the study of the Frontier between Syria and Iraq, Geneva, September 10, 1932. The text is as follows:

1. <u>Tigris–Sinjar Sector</u>

From the confluence of the Eastern Kabur and the Tigris, the thalweg of the Tigris to about one kilometre below Pesh Kabur; thence a straight line to Tell Dahraya (point 384); thence a straight line as far as Tell Khoda-ed-Deir (point 391).¹²

2. Sinjar Sector

Majority Proposal—From Tell Khoda-ed-Deir (Point 391), a straight line to Tell Rhuli (trigonometrical point 402); thence to trig. pt. 645; thence to trig. pt. 573; thence to trig. pt. 395, and terminating at Tell Sfug (trig. pt. 332).¹³

3. Salt-deposit Sector

From Tell Sfug (trig. pt. 332) in a straight line to trigonometrical point 331; thence to trig. pt. 280; thence to trig. pt. 259; thence to trig. pt. 276; thence to trig. pt. 230; thence to trig. pt. 236; thence to trig. pt. 231; thence to the ruins of the small military post on the border of the Buara salt deposit (point 164, 3.6 kilometres W.N.W. of trig. pt. 172); thence to trig. pt. 167; thence to El Gara (trig. pt. 193); thence to trig. pt. 174; thence to the Jebel Baghuz (trig. pt. L.S. 29, not indicated on the map).

4. Euphrates Sector

From the Jebel Baghuz (trig. pt. L.S. 29, not indicated on the map), a straight line towards the thalweg of the Euphrates, which it reaches near the northeastern extremity of the island of Baghuz; thence the thalweg of the Euphrates up-stream as far as the boundary of the territories of the villages of Heri and Qseba; thence in a straight line to the Leachman boundary-stone (Point 169).¹⁴

5. Euphrates-Jebel Tenf Sector

From the Leachman boundary-stone in a straight line to the point situated 30 kilometres from the minaret of Abu Kemal on the straight line joining that minaret

¹² About 71 miles in length.

^{13 33} miles.

Sectors 3 and 4 to the Leachman boundary stone, across the Euphrates, measure a distance of about 122 miles.

to the point situated 3.2 kilometres north of Tell Romah; thence this latter line as far as its intersection with the frontier between Iraq and Transjordan.¹⁵

The tripoint with Jordan is located at approximately 33° 22' 29" North Latitude and 38° 47' 33" East Longitude.

The minority proposal in the Sinjar Sector was more favorable to French interests; it followed a line southeastward from Tell Rhuli, through a pass in the Jabal Sinjar, referred as "Bab-ech-Chilu," then to Tell Yusef Beg, then in a straight line rejoining the majority proposed line at "Tell Sfug." The League accepted the majority proposal. The French proposed version would have meant splitting the Jabal Sinjar, where most of the Yazidi people lived.

IV. SUMMARY

The Iraq-Syria Boundary, 376 miles in length, is delimited, for the most part, and includes smaller demarcated segments. Other than the initial 3.2 miles on the Tigris River and the less than 4 miles crossing the Euphrates River, the remaining 269 miles of boundary is on land. The Leachman boundary-stone near the southern shore of the Euphrates is the only known permanent boundary marker.

The boundary is essentially artificial, and a result of a division of British and French spheres of influence following Allied defeat of Ottoman Turkey in World War I. The delineation was later confirmed by the League of Nations. There are no active disputes between Iraq and Syria regarding the specific alignment of the boundary itself. Grazing and watering practice traditionally conducted by tribes crossing the boundary remain undisturbed.

The potential for political disturbances has persisted over the years since ethnic and tribal affinities are essentially identical on both sides of the boundary. An example is the conflict in Iraq between the Kurds and the Iraqi Government which, until the announced secession of hostilities on March 11, 1970, had been going on since 1958.

A reasonably accurate representation of the boundary on a medium scale is found on Army Map Service 1:250,000 scale (Series 1501), Sheets NI 37-4, NI 37-7, NI 37-8, NI 37-10, NI 37-11, NJ 37-16, NJ 38-9, and NJ 38-13. A small scale depiction of the boundary is found on Army Map Service 1:100,000 scale (Series 1301) Sheets NI-37, NJ-37, and NJ-38. It is also suggested that the map accompanying this study be used as reference.

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¹⁵ Final straight line segment measures about 150 miles.

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