

Don't Blame The West

by Michael Curtis

Everyone except barbaric jihadists will greet with delight the news that Iraqi military forces, helped by U.S. training, and allies are approaching to liberate the city of Mosul, the largest Sunni center in Iraq, that had been captured by a few thousand ISIS militants in June 2014, and been part of the Islamic Caliphate imposed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi .

The intense fighting for the city illustrates the pivotal Middle East problem, the competing interests, the mosaic of warring religious sects and ethnic and tribal groups. Shiites from Hashed al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units) are linked with Sunni jihadists, Kurdish peshmerga, and the Iraqi army against the ISIS force, now seemingly divided into foreign and local contingents.

Who are the true messengers? The Sunni Arab Nineveh Guards from the northern Iraqi province are trained and supported by Turkey which sees Mosul as part of its historic zone of influence. The Christian community is divided: some Christians are linked to Iraq to fight ISIS; others are linked to Kurdish forces. Members of the Yazidi minority have ties to almost all other groups in the fighting.

Fashionable talk of a homogenous Arab population requires suspension of disbelief. It is an arguable proposition that there is a clash of civilization between the Arab and Muslim world and western democracies based on religious and cultural identities. But more certain is the existence of continuing relentless internal war within the Arab civilization, divided as it is, and has long been, on issues of religious and ethnic identity, as well as political rivalries and struggles for supremacy.

This ought to be the first recognition of reality for the new

US president who must end the Obama passivity concerning Middle East issues and not be a party to the blame game. The area is vital for U.S. interests and for solutions to current problems, Islamist terrorism, human rights abuses, migration from Arab countries, nuclear proliferation, and Iran.

The U.S. role is crucial in spite of the assertion that the present disarray and turmoil in the area is due to Western imperialism or colonialism. This assertion became prominent on the hundredth anniversary of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement signed in May 16, 1916 and made known by the Bolsheviks in the revolution on November 23, 1917. The Agreement was blamed by Arabs for causing the ills of the area and pointed to as the illustration of western arrogance, imperialism and great power politics.

Sykes-Picot (S-P) was an agreement between Sir Mark Sykes, British diplomat and Conservative M.P., and a junior French diplomat Francois Georges-Picot. Contemplating during World War I and anticipating the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the War, they envisaged it should be replaced by creating a number of states with coherent borders. The two powers would therefore split the Middle East into spheres of influence.

S-P in hindsight has been criticized for ignoring the multiple realities and rivalries in the area. It drew a line between north and south, from the "e" in Acre (now in Israel) to the last "K" in Kirkuk in Iraq. One part of the area, the north, or Levant, which was to include Lebanon, the Syrian coast, and part of Turkey would be under French control, while the south, first called Mesopotamia then became Iraq, Palestine, would be under British control.

About the Arab resentment, envy and rancor, three points can be made. S-P was not the villain in imposing territorial arrangements to replace the Ottoman Empire in a new Middle East. It certainly proposed but did not impose the creation of states with particular boundaries. This was done by

international conferences, especially the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and the Mandate System of the League of Nations.

The city of Mosul itself is an interesting example of deference to political rivalries. At first in the British-French formula it was allocated to the new Iraq that was envisaged. Then, because of nearby oil discoveries, it became part of Syria. The problem remains even today. Turkish President Erdogan asserts, incorrectly, that Mosul has historically belonged to Turkey, and therefore his country should play a role in its future.

Two more important general criticisms arise from S-P. One is the rejection of the right of western powers to impose borders on the Arab world or to interfere to prevent chaos. In this regard S-P did not stand alone. In addition, there were the Constantinople Agreement of March 1915 between UK, France, and Russia to give Constantinople to Russia, and the Treaty of Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne of August 1917 by which Italy and France would share control of West Anatolia.

The second crucial issue was the criticism of western initiatives to create homogeneous countries in an area full of Shia, Sunni, Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Druze, Alawites in the post-Ottoman Middle East. After all, the Ottoman Empire had given autonomy to the ethnic and religious groups within it. S-P and other were accused of destroying autonomy in attempts to deal with the problem of the areas under Ottoman rule. Three provinces, Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, would correspond to boundaries of Iraq. Four others, Damascus, Beirut, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, correspond to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and a strip of southern Turkey.

Post-Ottoman had to deal with many communities. Sunni, Shiites, Kurds, Turkomans, Christians, Alawites, Druze..

It cannot be denied that the two great powers in post World

War I world were conscious of their own economic and security interests in the Middle East. But it also true that local Arab elites played a significant role in the ruling process. Local figures and forces were responsible for political development of the region.

Key figures in this were members of the Hashemite family, headed by Hussein bin Ali, Grand Sharif and Emir of Mecca. As a result of pressure, two of his sons were given prominent positions. Emir Faisal, born in Mecca (Saudi Arabia) became king of Iraq, 1921-33. Abdullah became the ruler, at first emir, of Transjordan, a territory that was originally to be part of the Jewish National Home but was hived off as a separate entity by Winston Churchill, then Colonial Secretary, in 1921. No Jews would be allowed in Transjordan, that became Jordan in 1946. Abdulla ruled there as king until 1951 when he was assassinated.

The U.S. President, even when accounting for mistakes in policy, should forgo apologies. The ongoing war in Syria and Iraq indicates that international arrangements such as the 100 year old S-P have little to do with today's problems, and the crisis of legitimacy in the area. In playing a role the West should not be blamed for local deficiencies nor for the repressive and corrupt regimes that have been supported by the abundant oil money. Instead, it should encourage Arab societies to be more open and follow the kind of reforms beginning in Tunisia and Morocco.

The new President can suggest that Kurds deprived of a state of their own after World War I, should be given one. Above all, western leaders should make clear that political stability in the Middle East should not depend on oppressive or arbitrary government, and that religious liberty and rights of minorities should be advanced.