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St. Mary's Church, Haddington, East Lothian, EH41 4BZ

John P. Mackintosh Memorial Lecture

"Has British perfidy come back to bite us? Britain and the Middle East in this century and the last."

Thank you so much for that introduction Professor Deacon.

Thank you too to Ann McGuire and the trustees for asking me to deliver the 31st John P. Mackintosh Memorial Lecture. It is a real honour to be here tonight.

[Tribute to John Mackintosh].

Having agreed to give this lecture, I wrestled for some time about what subject I should speak on.

One possibility was Scotland and the United Kingdom. That would have fitted well with John Mackintosh's profound belief that one could be both Scottish and British. But I decided in the end that it would be better, and safer, to talk about foreign policy. With the Middle East so dominating the news, my chosen subject is whether British perfidy is the cause of today's upheavals in the region.

Almost four years ago the news was filled with optimistic reports of what quickly became known as the "Arab Spring".

Undemocratic, authoritarian leaders across the region were being toppled by spontaneous, popular uprisings.

First, Tunisia, then Libya, Egypt, Syria – and signs of trouble, if not quite of rebellion, in Jordan, Morocco, the Gulf States.

One of the few countries to avoid such troubles at the time was Iraq – something which I attributed, prematurely as events have shown, to the fact that for all its internal difficulties Iraq was beginning to function like a democracy, with peaceful changes of power, and the give-and-take necessary for such a system.

(In a piece in The Times I even managed a light-hearted reference to the fact that though, post its elections, Iraq had taken months to form a government, the world record for post-election deadlock continued to be held by Belgium.)

Wind forward to late 2014, and one can quickly see that the optimism which I and so many others, in the region and outside, had had at the time was premature. We were trying to make the wish the deed, and, were naively assuming that progress from the initial upheavals of rebellion to the sunlit uplands of stability and democracy would be smooth and swift. If history teaches us one thing, it is that the progress of revolutions is never like that. Overall, I think the long term consequences will be benign, with the ultimate establishment of norms of democracy and greater freedom but for many countries in the region the process will be tortuous and slow.

Tunisia has settled to be a better place, but it is virtually alone.

In Libya, western military intervention by France, and the UK, with US backing, led swiftly to Colonel Ghaddafi's end, but the "mission" has been far from accomplished. This is a reminder that whilst overwhelming air superiority can shift the balance of power in a 'hot' war, its effect is limited. The vacuum created by Ghaddafi's removal, and the absence of any foreign troops on the ground, has been filled by a near civil war, and tribes, factions, and religious sects struggle for dominance.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi was elected President on a genuinely popular mandate. What led to his demise was his inability to appreciate that democracy can only flourish if those who have power use it lightly, and honour the rights of those who did not want them to have that power.

After vast popular protests against his rule, Morsi was removed by the military in July 2013, to be replaced – by election – by Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the former head of the armed forces.

A semblance of normality has returned to the Gulf States like Bahrain, but with the Shi'a population feeling repressed and disenfranchised.

Then there is Syria, and Iraq.

Every Arab state shares a common language, and a common religion, but these commonalities mask profound differences.

Syria has long been a nation of minorities. It's been ruled by one family, from one minority, the Alawites, for decades.

The facility of Assad father, and then of Assad son had been to combine authoritarian rule with respect for other minorities enough to gain the regime sufficient, if sullen, consent to secure stability. But when Assad's son's judgement left him, and he began to rely too heavily on repression alone, so did the people's consent. The country imploded, to be ravaged by a bloody civil war, now in its 43rd month, with an estimated 191,000 dead, and two and a half million displaced refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and within their own land. The rebel groups united only in their opposition to Assad, range from secular, relatively democratic nationalists, to barbaric Islamists bent upon imposing a medieval "caliphate" across that part of the region.

The international community, while keen to intervene in some way, has been hobbled by the reality that it is far from clear how it could make a positive difference on the ground.

It was this dilemma, not any sudden outbreak of a pacifist tendency amongst British MPs, which underpinned the decision by Parliament in August last year not to support airstrikes against Syria. My own instinct is that had we undertaken these strikes, far from stopping IS, we may in fact have further fanned the flames that are spreading their influence into Iraq and towards Turkey.

Across the border in Iraq, the Islamists have skilfully played on the alienation of the large Sunni minority in the north from the increasingly sectarian policies of Nouri al-Maliki, so that now between 20% to 30% of Iraq's population is under the rule for the time being of ISIS, or the so-called "Islamic State".

Northern Iraq is witnessing a struggle by Kurdish forces to withstand IS, while the strategically crucial Anbar province is also under threat. Baghdad has so far not come under direct attack, but the militants have moved closer to the capital in recent weeks.

There is much talk of Iraq splitting into three – Iraqi Kurdistan in the north, the Sunni heartland in the centre, the predominantly Shi'a region of the south.

The boundaries of Iraq, and of most of the Middle East, were set in the aftermath of the First World War, and the collapse of Ottoman Empire which had been one of its consequences.

Talk to any Arab diplomat, and the chances are that they will quite quickly observe that they want the UK to stay involved “because you know the region so well”.

It’s a compliment, but part back handed.

For many argue that Britain’s finger prints, along with those of other colonial powers such as France, are to be found on some of the most intractable and divisive problems in the region.

Indeed this was a view articulated by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2011, when he said, “As with so many of the problems of the world, we are responsible for their creation in the first place.”¹

The key evidence of Britain’s duplicity is three set of documents, all promulgated during the First World War - the McMahon letters, the Sykes/Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration.

The McMahon letters were exchanged between the then British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, and Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca.

Sir Henry sent these letters to secure Arab support, not least in ensuring oil supplies from Persia were not cut off by the Ottoman Empire, allied as it was with Germany. McMahon’s key letter of October 1915 set out that subject to certain modifications and conditions “Great Britain is prepared to recognise and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sharif of Mecca.”²

The hope was that the assurances would prove enough to provoke an uprising by the Arabs, beginning in what is now Saudi Arabia. The plan worked – to be immortalised in film in “Lawrence of Arabia”.

With the conclusion to the war, and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire which was one if its results, the Arabs were understandably confident that they would be able to secure the independence that had been promised them in the McMahon letters.

These hopes were to be dashed after the existence of a separate, secret, and contradictory, agreement became known.

This was the confidential Sykes-Picot Agreement made between Great British and France, with Russian support, which set out the planned, post-war spheres of influence in the Middle East.

The Agreement divided between the Triple Entente powers the spoils of the toppled Ottoman Empire. The precise details of the agreement were thrashed out between the French diplomat Francois George-Picot and Sir Mark Sykes, since the deal primarily concerned Britain and France. The Russians, then still under the Tsar, were formally, albeit marginally, part of the negotiations, which took place between November 1915 and March 1916- with an agreement formally concluded in May 1916. This was while Britain was simultaneously making separate and contradictory promises to the Arabs.

Under the Sykes-Picot Agreement Britain was to be given control of Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine. The French were allocated Syria and Lebanon.

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-12992540>

² <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1915mcmahon.html>

In 1917, Tsarist rule in Russia was overthrown. The Bolshevik regime which took power revealed the contents of the agreement to the world.

The borders drawn up under the agreement did not, by and large, correspond to sectarian, tribal and ethnic distinctions that existed, in practice, on the ground.

The third piece of evidence is the Balfour Declaration.

On 2 November 1917 Arthur Balfour, the Foreign Secretary in David Lloyd George's wartime coalition government, wrote to Lord Rothschild, the senior leader of Britain's Jewish community, in these terms:

"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."³

From the distance we have today of over a century one can see the fundamental flaws in the declaration, which, in my view, resonate more strongly today than the problems with Sykes-Picot and the McMahon letters.

Balfour's Declaration came after a sustained period of pressure on Britain to recognise the right to a homeland for the Jews and the need to solidify support from the Zionist movement during the First World War.

Lloyd George summarised this point in his 1939 memoir when he stated that, "The Balfour Declaration represented the convinced policy of all parties in our country and also in America, but the launching of it in 1917 was due, ... to propagandist reasons."⁴ - though it's worth noting that the leading Zionist, Chaim Weizmann, with whom it had effectively been negotiated had gained enormously in influence over an otherwise rather indifferent British elite through his invention of a process of industrial fermentation to produce acetone, a key component in cordite, the explosive of choice used in bullets and shells, and for which the UK suffered shortages and reliance on imports until Weizmann's invention.

Ernest Bevin, Labour's Foreign Secretary in the 1945-51 Government subsequently told David Ben-Gurion, that the Balfour Declaration was the "worst mistake in western foreign policy in the first half of the twentieth century".

Looking back it is hard to see how the events prefigured in the Balfour Declaration could have done anything other than, "prejudice the rights" of the majority living in Palestine. A Palestinian Arab delegation petitioned the British government in 1918 and argued that there was a wide difference between their sympathy for the persecuted Jews, "and the acceptance of such a nation...ruling over us and disposing of our affairs."⁵

At the time there were also concerns about the effect on the "rights and political status" of Jews living in "any other country". The London Zionists wrote in the Times a few months before the Balfour letter that "the establishment of a Jewish nationality in Palestine, founded on this theory of homelessness, must have the effect

³ <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/E210CA73E38D9E1D052565FA00705C61>

⁴ David Lloyd George, *Memoirs of the Peace Conference*, Volume II, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1939; chapter XXIII, pages 724-734

⁵ Benny Morris. *The Righteous Victims*. 2001

throughout the world of stamping the Jews as strangers in their native lands.”⁶ – a remarkably prescient view given what was to happen to millions of Jewish people driven to the gas chambers from their own native lands by the Nazis.

On the other side, Zionist leaders such as Chaim Weizman and Nahum Sokolow, argued that the declaration fell short of their expectations.

What then was the effect of these complex and controversial decisions taken by Britain and her allies during this period?

It is hard to argue that by promising independence for the Arab people, only to then dash it within a couple of years through the implementation of Sykes-Picot, and within thirty years through the implementation of Balfour, fostered a level of discontent and unfulfilled aspiration in the region that stoked decades of unrest.

This took the form, first of the struggle to remove the European powers from the region, then of the rise of Arab nationalism.

The period from the 1950s to 1970s, in particular during Nasser’s reign in Egypt, was one in which Arab nationalism gave succour to the notion that a united Arab world would be stronger, in particular by diluting ethnic, social and demographic divides. In this, Arab nationalists were strongly encouraged by the Soviet Union; as with much of world, the Cold War led to proxy struggles for influence by the superpowers across the Middle East.

Roll forward to the 1980s and 1990s and the subsequent rise of “strong men” in the Arab world, such as Assad, Saddam Hussein and Colonel Gaddafi. These “strong leaders” sought to suppress the differences between various groups, characterised in part by an effort to create a more secular society, but enforced by the extreme brutality.

Coming back to the Arab Spring, one could even argue that some of these differences, that had for so long been hidden and papered over, had once again risen to the fore.

It is therefore argued that Britain’s short-sighted and ill-thought through policy-making in the early 20th Century led, to large degree, to all of these subsequent events.

Are these accusations fair, however?

In part, yes.

British duplicity and mismanagement during the colonial era undoubtedly exacerbated tensions in the region. Be it in creating arbitrary national boundaries that took too little regard of the reality and situation on the ground, be it in double-dealing in a way which satisfied no-one and fostered ill feeling among many or be it our role in the far from ideal process that caused discontent on both sides during the creation of the state of Israel.

There’s an interesting parallel to be seen in respect of Iran.

Iran is emphatically not part of the Arab world. In many respects its history is more linked to that of Europe than it is to its southern neighbours. The word “Iran” has the same meaning as “Aryan”. None of the three documents I’ve referred to relate to Iran. But it was victim over a century or more to neo-colonial domination by the UK. Iran. It was occupied in the Second World War by the Soviet Union and the UK. Prime Minister Mossadegh was overthrown by a coup orchestrated by the CIA and

⁶ <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/08/arab-palestine-jewish-rights>

MI6 in 1953. The West fundamentally misunderstood the social and economic forces at play in the 1970 revolution until it was too late. Add to that our support for Iraq in their unprovoked war of aggression against Iran between 1980 and 1988 and one can see the deep legacy of mistrust that exists in Iran, right across society, to Britain and the West.

Add this all together, and we can see that David Cameron has a point that the seeds for many of the problems do lie at our own door.

Importantly, however, I do not think this interpretation gives us a full or fair understanding of what happened in the past or what is in fact happening now.

We should not have carved up the former Ottoman Empire with France while also promising the Arabs independence. The answers to some of the other accusations, however, are far more complex.

In terms of the borders that were created it is very easy to criticise those that were established, and I have done so many times, but it is no easier, in fact is often harder, to think of better alternatives.

As an article in *The Atlantic* magazine in September last year outlined, “Even if Britain and France had set out to divide the Middle East with the best of intentions, which admittedly they did not, it’s far from clear how they could have done better. At best, creating more countries would have just meant more borders to fight over, while fewer large countries would have turned regular wars into civil ones.”⁷

The establishment of borders, in any case, is by its very nature arbitrary.

The piece went on to state that, “Europe’s ‘real’ borders owe their current legitimacy, such as it is, to continent-wide exhaustion following several centuries of fighting. Winston Churchill may have drawn the border between Iraq and Jordan with a pen, but he was just as central in delineating the border between France and Germany when he led the allies to victory in World War II.”⁸

It concludes, pertinently, that, “Interestingly, one of the most exhaustive efforts to create scientifically accurate borders in a dizzyingly multi-ethnic region was carried out by Soviet anthropologists in the 1920s. The result was today’s Central Asian states, whose borders have repeatedly been denounced as absurdly, unworkably, squiggly.”⁹

Indeed, there are countless places around the world one could point to where national borders have been created unilaterally, often too using the infamous “straight lines” of Sykes-Picot. In many of these other areas there have not been anywhere near the level of unrest we have witnessed in the Middle East.

In this sense the national borders Britain and others created in the 1900s should not be used as an excuse to explain away current difficulties. Particularly when these accusations are not, and they are often not, attached to the caveats I outline.

In terms of the Balfour Declaration I accept some of the problems with the document that have been mentioned. It was, as I say, very difficult to envisage what type of state would not have infringed the rights of the Palestinians in any form. Coupled to the promises in the McMahon letters we set an unachievable range of goals.

⁷ <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/stop-blaming-colonial-borders-for-the-middle-east-problems/279561/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Let me come back to the essay question I have set myself, though, of whether our policy has come back to “bite us”.

As you will no doubt be able to tell I have a mixed view about this.

Put simply I believe our policies in the early 1900s played on ethnic and religious divides and sought to play different sides off against each other to achieve our own ends.

What is important, however, is to note that the ethnic and religious divides I highlight, Sunni/Shia, Kurdish/Iraqi, have existed for centuries and were not created by British policy.

In short, we exacerbated existing tensions.

We conducted ourselves in an inglorious manner with Sykes-Picot and the McMahon letters, and in our dealings with Iran, but I do not think these events fully explain what is happening in the region today.

Iran is certainly wary of the West in general, and Britain in particular, after our malevolent role in her history. That notwithstanding Iran wants to do a nuclear deal with the West.

Does Balfour explain the Israel/Palestine crisis? No I don't think it does. There is a way forward in the two-state solution that has formed the basis of negotiations since the publication of the Roadmap in 2003. What is stopping such a solution now, in my view, is Israeli intransigence.

Does the time of the British mandate explain why Iraq is facing the current difficulties it is?

Again, not fully. Shia/Sunni tensions have existed for hundreds of years. Saddam suppressed these tensions remorselessly. In the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War we did not, in hindsight, do all we could to stop these bubbling to the surface. The policy of total de-Ba'athification, impetuously decided by the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority chief Paul Bremer without full authority from across the US Administration, still less from the UK, was naïve and disastrous. This all being said what has weakened Iraq principally has been poor government by the former PM Mr Maliki and, coupled to this, the rise of a form of radical Islam that has been festering for many years. British policy in the 1900s did not create IS and it would be a baseless excuse to cite that as the reason for the current unrest.

Did French rule in Syria cause the turmoil that has led to a civil war in that country? Or, as I would argue, was the profoundly short-term and illogical approach by President Assad to recognising the demands of his people a better explanation?

Let me turn to my conclusion.

Britain has, as I mentioned in my introduction, a long and much-discussed role in the history of the Middle East. We have got many things wrong and in many cases nowhere has Albion been more perfidious than in our dealings in that region.

This history does not and should not, I would argue, offer either external commentators the easy way out of blaming everything on the former colonial powers, or allow us to say we got things wrong before and can't therefore be involved now.

Our history means we have a special bond with the Middle East and have a duty to engage constructively on the issues the region faces. How?

Britain should be at the forefront of ensuring a nuclear deal is done with Iran.

We should be helping Iraq form a credible government of national unity that will allow the country to tackle the threats it faces.

We must assist the Syrian people, where possible, in ensuring they have a chance to shape their own future.

We should be more active as an honest broker, with robust and strong engagement to solve the Israel/Palestine issue.

And part of our dialogue with our friends in the Middle East should be about what Europe learnt from centuries of its own sectarian conflict, its own religious wars. We finally arrived at the position we are in now, where religious differences are broadly respected, by a process which shifted religion, through a reformation and over a sustained period of time, from being a public, state-regulated matter to one of private decision.

Let me finish by saying that my profound hope is that Britain is not scarred, nor scared, by our past, but remembers it, learns from it and assumes the special responsibility that we have because of it.

Thank you very much.