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## The boundaries of the Middle East - past, present and future

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Gideon Biger

## The boundaries of the Middle East – past, present and future

This article presents a complicated process of shaping national borders in the Middle East. The author demonstrates the fact that present political boundaries were established mainly by the European countries, with the United Kingdom leading the way. National desires, colonial aspirations, imperial needs, all led to the unrealistic picture of the boundaries in the Middle East. The author analyzes the boundaries fallen into the following categories: those in which natural features influenced their location, boundaries which run along old Ottoman Empire administrative boundaries in the form of straight lines, the lines which follow man-made features, and ethnic lines. The aim of this paper is to focus on one of the neglected factors which determine the exact location of international boundaries in the Middle East, namely village boundaries. The examples of Israel-Palestine boundaries as well as the Syrian-Jordan boundary will be used to examine this phenomenon.

**Key words:** Middle East, international boundaries.

### 1. Introduction

The international boundaries of the Middle East were established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly by the European powers. Even the Ottoman Empire – Persian Empire boundary which was firstly established in Zohab agreement of 1637 actually was delimited in Constatinopol Agreement of 1913 and was demarcated by an English – Russian team in 1914. The boundaries between Iraq and Syria, Syria and Lebanon, Iraq and Trans-Jordan (Amadouny 1995), Palestine and Syria, Palestine and Trans Jordan etc. were all the outcome of the needs and ability of the great powers acting in the Middle East as Mandatory powers. Only lately the independent states of the Middle East redrawn their international boundaries in bi-lateral agreement – the first one was the Jordan – Saudi Arabia border that was agreed upon back in 1965. Later on Israel and Egypt had an agreement (return to the old British – Turkish agreement of 1906) (Kliot 1987), Jordan and Iraq made some changes in their boundary and lately Yemen and Saudi Arabia established their common boundary.

Much was written concerning the establishment of those and other boundaries in the Middle East (Blake and Schofield 1987, Schofield and Schofield 1994). Most research dealt with the political process, which delimitated the

boundary lines, others are dealing with the geographical and other outcomes of those decisions mainly in global terms.

## 2. The delimitation of boundaries in the Middle East

The processes in which the boundaries of the Middle East have been established are very complicated. Many decisions makers were involved in the political processes. National desires, colonial aspirations, imperial needs, all led to the unrealistic picture of the boundaries in the Middle East. Several new nations emerged as the outcome of these processes (Iraq, Syria, Trans Jordan, later Jordan), while old nations (The Kurd, the Armenians, the Druzs, the Alawis, etc.) never got a state of their own. The main players in the boundary game were the British and the French, who were the dominant forces in the Middle East between 1918 and 1950 (Cumming 1938, Monroe 1963, Blake and Drysdale 1985). Britain was involved in establishing the boundaries between the Ottoman Empire and Persia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 1).

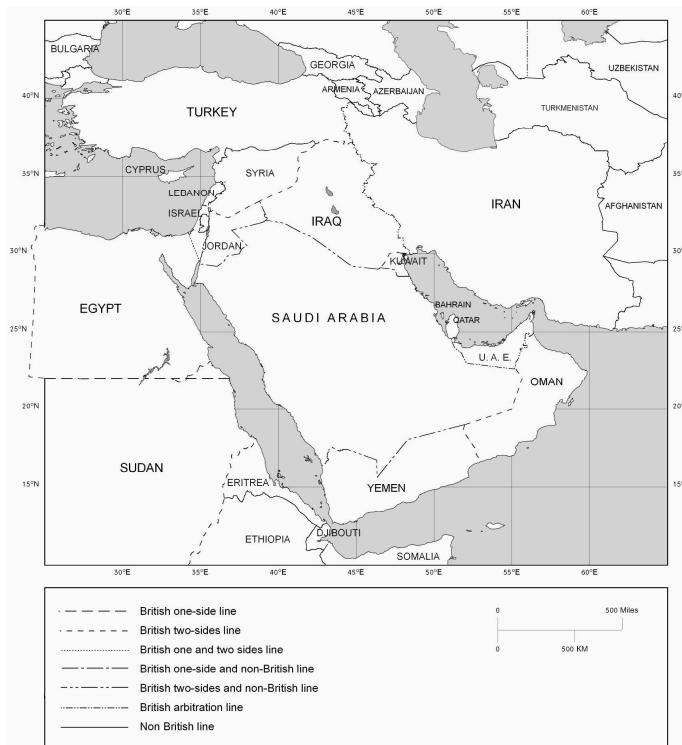


Fig. 1. Contemporary boundaries of the Middle East according to Great Britain  
Source: author's own elaboration

In western Middle East they established the boundaries of Modern Egypt. Later on they determined the boundaries of Palestine, Trans Jordan, and Iraq. Most of the Arabian Peninsula boundaries were also established by the British officials, others were influenced by them (Schofield and Schofield 1994). France established the boundaries of Lebanon and Syria (Hourani 1946), the south and southeastern lines in accordance with Britain. Only Turkey, and partly Saudi Arabia and Yemen (Wenner 1991) established their own boundary lines.

The boundaries of the Middle East can be grouped into four main categories according to their location (Prescott 1965):

- A. Those in which natural features influenced their location.
- B. Boundaries which run along old Ottoman Empire administrative boundaries.
- C. Straight lines.
- D. Line which follows man-made features.
- E. Ethnic lines

**A. Natural feature lines.** The outcome of the large number of international boundaries, which were established during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the European powers all over the world was the acceptance of these lines, which are based on physical geographical features, as the best lines (Curzon 1907). Military requirements, philosophical ideas of the good in nature, the permanent existence of the river, mountain range, desert and other physical features and the simplicity in recognition, all these made those lines the best choice. The problems concerning those lines (changing location of a river bed, difficulties in accuracy of the line in mountain crests, etc. were already known but still what Lord Curzon (Curzon 1907) described as ‘The natural boundaries’, had their strength.

When the new boundaries of the Middle East were established, some of them were located along natural phenomenon. The rivers Yarmuk and Jordan and the Arava depression separated Palestine from Trans-Jordan (Brawer 1988). The Ras el Naqura range and the watershed between the Litany River and River Jordan divided Palestine from Lebanon (Biger 1984). The Anti-Lebanon Range holds the boundary line between Syria and Lebanon. The El-Kabir River marked the northern boundary of Lebanon; the Tigris River marked the northeastern boundary of Syria. The Aras (Arkas) River marked a segment of the boundary between the Soviet Union and Persia (now that boundary is the boundary between Azerbaijan and Iran) and between the Soviet Union and Turkey (now the boundary between Armenia and Turkey). In most cases the boundary line was never demarcated, as the imperial power ad thought that this was an unnecessary project. Those lines still mark the boundaries in the Middle East although some of them were described in a more accurate manner while others may still cause problems for future demarcation.

**B. Old Ottoman administrative lines.** When General Allenby first divided the Eastern Mediterranean coast after the occupation of that area in summer 1918 he established three ‘Occupied Enemy Territories’, namely North (later called West), East and South (Biger 1994). These areas were defined according to the Ottoman administrative lines. Thus OETA South incorporated the *sanjaks* (districts) of Jerusalem, Nablus and Acre. OETA North included the sanjaks of Beirut, Lebanon and Lataqiyes and the *qadas* (*sub-districts*) of Hazbaya, Rashiyyah, Jisr-as-Sajur, Antioch, Yaniji Keli, Umm Biban and Alexandretta. Later on, after long discussions, the boundary between Iraq and Turkey (The Brussels Line) was exactly the northern border of the Ottoman *vilayet* (province) of Mosul (Biger 1995). The northwestern boundary between Syria and Turkey, ran along the southern border of the Ottoman province of Alexandretta (The Khatay region) although Syria never accepted this line. The old eastern Ottoman boundary with Persia became the new boundary line between Iraq and Iran. The boundary between Turkey and Iraq runs along the northern boundary of the Ottoman province of Mosul.

**C. Straight lines.** The geometric (using Curzon’s classification) straight lines became one of the most prominent features of the Middle East boundaries. In desert regions, where no permanent settlements exist, the simple straight lines became the regular solution for boundary delimitation. The rights and the movement of the Bedouin tribes were never been considered (except the Natural Zones in northern Saudi Arabia and the Administrative line in southeastern Egypt). Thus Astronomical straight lines (longitude 26E and Latitude 22N) marked the western and southern boundary of Egypt, a straight line (with some modifications) which runs between Rafa and Taba marked the boundary between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, which later became the international boundary between Israel and Egypt (Kliot 1987). A straight line separated Syria from Jordan; Syria from Iraq, the northern border of Saudi Arabia is marked by a series of straight lines, which separate it from Iraq in the northeast and Jordan in the northwest. The Iraq-Jordan boundary and the boundaries in eastern and southern Arabian Peninsula are also straight lines.

**D. Lines which follow man-made features.** Under this class which is very common in other parts of the world one may find only small number of boundary lines. The best known is the boundary line between Syria and Turkey which follows a man-made feature, namely along the section of the railway between Istanbul and Badgered. The western section of the Syria-Jordan boundary also runs so as to place the railway within Syria, the same holds true for the ‘green Line’ between Israel and Jordan which placed the Jerusalem – Haifa railway within Israel (Newman 1995).

**E. Ethnic lines.** This kind of boundary lines, very common in modern European and Asian boundary lines, were never adopted in the Middle East. As there were no clear-cut ethnic communities holding a large area in there, very few boundary lines took it into consideration. The boundary between Syria and Jordan place the Druz Mountain in Syria while the unique Yazidis sect living in Sinjar Mountain was left with Iraq. Otherwise, like most imperial lines, the boundary lines cut local tribes and people.

### **3. Present boundaries of the Middle East**

One of the important landmarks, which the outside agents left with the Middle East, is the boundary. Not only were most of the nations of the Middle East created by them (Jordan, Iraq, Syria, etc.), moreover, the boundaries which were drawn according to their needs later became a ‘sacred line’. Most of those still exist in the Middle East as no new nation wants to give or change the boundary line for the benefit of its own or the others’ needs. During the peace negotiation between Egypt and Israel, Egypt insisted on establishing the old line between the British Palestine and Egypt but due to this the new line cut through the town of Raffia. Iraq is insisting on having its Ottoman lines, having the Kurds with it. No change was made in the Syria-Lebanon line although it runs along the line established by the French who favoured Lebanon, taking some Moslem areas from Syria.

The independent states of the Middle East changed their common boundary through bilateral agreements. Jordan and Saudi-Arabia changed their common boundary in 1965, transferring an area of about 5,000 sq. km. and allowing Jordan better access to the sea. In 1982 Jordan also made some changes in its border with Iraq. The boundaries along the Arabian Peninsula were also delimited and changed in the 1980s and 1990s, according to the will and needs of the modern states, not by the imperial powers. The last of them was the Yemen-Saudi Arabia line established in summer 2000.

### **4. Future boundaries of the Middle East**

The Middle East was the last world region in which modern boundary lines were established. There are still some disputes concerning the delimitation of those lines. The most controversial are the boundaries of Israel. Only its boundaries with Egypt are settled, while nearly two segments of its boundary with Jordan are settled. The peace talks between Israel and Syria and Israel with the Palestinian authority were suspended because of the boundary problem. The

Palestinian authority still waits for its first established international boundaries, which will create a new state in the Middle East.

Syria never accepted its boundary with Turkey established in 1938 while Iraq is still insisting on changing its boundary with Kuwait. Iran and Iraq still have disputes concerning the exact location of the boundary along the Shatt al-Arab river, established long ago by the Ottoman and the Persian empires. Those disputes are not just as other common boundary disputes in which the parties try to delimit the exact location of the line. People are still negotiating, by talks or by wars, about the basic delimitation of the lines.

## 5. Conclusions

The boundary evolution in the Middle East is a new phenomenon, brought to it by the European powers only about 100 years ago. Those boundaries were delimited according to the need of the outsiders, never taking into consideration the needs and ability of those who lived in the Middle East. As nothing like the Organization of the African States or any common principal as *Uti Posidetis* ever apply in the Middle East, it seems that it will take a long time to settle the basic problem concerning those lines. Some have already done it but, as boundaries are diminished on some continents, boundaries in the Middle East will follow us for very long time.

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## Granice na Bliskim Wschodzie – przeszłość, teraźniejszość, przyszłość

### Streszczenie

Międzynarodowe granice na Bliskim Wschodzie ustalone zostały w XX w. za sprawą państw europejskich, wśród których prym wiodła Wielka Brytania. Przy wytyczaniu granic zostały uwzględnione więc przede wszystkim interesy kolonialne europejskich imperiów, natomiast pod uwagę nie wzięto w stopniu należytym pragnień i aspiracji żyjących na tym obszarze ludów. W zależności od lokalizacji, granice bliskowschodnie można podzielić na następujące: naturalne, biegnące wzdłuż dawnych granic administracyjnych Imperium Osmańskiego, oraz sztuczne, przybierające charakter linii prostych i nierespektujące uwarunkowań etnicznych.

Bliski Wschód jest tym regionem świata, gdzie najpóźniej ustanocono nowoczesne granice liniowe. Z tego powodu występują tam nadal spory w kwestii delimitacji tych granic. Szczególnie poważnym przypadkiem są granice Izraela. Tylko jedna z jego granic – z Egiptem – jest uzgodniona poprzez umowę międzynarodową, poza tym tylko dwa fragmenty granicy z Jordanią nie są kwestionowane. Toczone od pewnego czasu syryjsko-izraelskie rozmowy pokojowe, jak również rokowania pomiędzy Izraelem a Autonomią Palestyńską, zostały zawieszone właśnie z powodu niemożliwości rozwiązania sporów granicznych. Autonomia Palestyńska nadal liczy na międzynarodowe uznanie jej granic, co stworzyłoby nowy układ geopolityczny na Bliskim Wschodzie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Bliski Wschód, granice międzynarodowe.

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