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## Terrorism in Paris, Sydney the legacy of colonial blunders

By Stephen Kinzer

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Gertrude Bell was a key architect of the Sykes-Picot world, the Middle East that existed for much of the 20th century.

A LOT of the problems we are having to deal with now,” the British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said a decade ago, “are a consequence of our colonial past.” That was a classic piece of diplomatic understatement. Wars in the Middle East, and their recent spillover in Sydney, Ottawa, and Paris, are the legacy of reckless colonial blunders. They teach us that although outside powers may be able to control faraway lands for a long time, the final reckoning is often tragic.

In 1921 the British diplomat and spy Gertrude Bell wrote that she was “dreadfully occupied in making kings and governments.” It all seemed quite romantic. Bell spoke Arabic, charmed sheiks, and could ride a camel for hours. Nicole Kidman plays her in a big-budget film scheduled for release later this year.

Bell was a key architect of the Sykes-Picot world, the Middle East that existed for much of the 20th century. Along with diplomats like Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot — who drew

arbitrary lines creating new Arab countries after World War I — adventurers like T. E. Lawrence, and a handful of statesmen in London and Paris, she created the order that is now collapsing amid unfathomable violence. If a film about Bell had been made a generation ago, it might have been possible to give it a happy ending. Now she and her fellow colonialists may be seen as having created a long-fused time bomb whose explosion is shaking nations. The collapse of the Sykes-Picot order is the great geopolitical story of our age.

It is a mistake to see the various political and military conflicts now shaking the Middle East as isolated from each other. All are part of a broad struggle to shape a new map of the region. That map will look quite different from the one that Bell and her fellow imperialists bequeathed to us.

Some countries in the Middle East are doomed. They are unfortunate accidents of history. Lamentably, their collapse will take years, with an immense cost in human suffering.

Syria, which was created as a French protectorate, exists today only in name. Iraq, originally dominated by Britain, is likely to be the next to go. The way these countries were created — by outsiders concerned only with their own interests — all but guaranteed that they would ultimately collapse.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, Yemen is in deep turmoil. Bahrain is quiet only because its Sunni government has temporarily managed to suppress the Shiite majority. Even long-stable Oman may be in trouble after its ailing sultan passes from the scene.

Two small countries that also emerged from the imperial spasms of the 1920s, Lebanon and Jordan, may survive the coming years of war, but that is far from guaranteed. In the outer ring of the region, the long-term future of Libya is bleak, and Pakistan's prospects are highly uncertain.

The most intriguing candidate for collapse is Saudi Arabia. For more than half a century Saudi leaders manipulated the United States by feeding our oil addiction, lavishing money on politicians, helping to finance American wars, and buying billions of dollars in weaponry from US companies. Now the sand is beginning to shift under their feet.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is in his 90s and ill. One of his half-brothers will likely succeed him, but that will be the end of the line for sons of the founding ruler, Ibn Saud. After that, a power struggle within the royal family is likely. No one can say how intense or violent it might become, but the prospect of crisis comes at an especially bad time. The region is afire and oil prices are plummeting. It would be foolish to bet that Saudi Arabia will exist in its current form a generation from now.

In a region full of fake, made-up countries, one Muslim power is sure to survive: Iran. It is the opposite of a fake country. Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are less than a century old. Iran has existed — more or less within the same boundaries, with more or less the same language — for 2,500 years. Colonialists never managed to divide it, and it stands today as an island of stability in a volcanically unstable region.

The arrogance of Middle East colonialists is easy to see from the vantage point of history. Lawrence admitted before his death that they had made “clear mistakes.” Gertrude Bell wrote, “I’ll never engage in creating kings again; it’s too great a strain.” Neither could have foreseen the horror to which their decisions would lead. Today’s chaos is a result of their ignorant meddling. It is an object lesson for outsiders who today seek to shape the Middle East.