

Part I: The Modern Middle East

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most people in the United States were introduced to the Middle East through the Bible. The territories that are at the center of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict today were referred to as the “holy land.” The Middle East, which is sometimes called the cradle of civilization, is the birthplace of three of the world’s major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

During the Middle Ages, Islamic empires in the region were at the center of the world’s science, scholarship, and commerce. For example, the Safavid Empire of Iran was a thriving center of Persian culture and commerce from 1501 to 1736. A well-administered and stable governmental system allowed the Safavid capital of Isfahan, with its population of over 400,000, to become renowned for its poetry, paintings, and scholarship.

Beginning in the 1500s, the Ottoman Turks, another of those empires, skillfully ruled over the diverse peoples and religions of the area that stretched from the Persian Gulf to the western end of North Africa for three centuries. The Ottoman Empire was militarily strong as well. In 1683, an Ottoman army invaded Europe, conquering Eastern Europe as far as the Austrian city of Vienna.

World War I & The Mandate System

In the early 1800s, Protestant missionaries from the United States traveled to the Middle East hoping to convert the Muslims of the region to Christianity. To a large extent, U.S. impressions of the Middle East were filtered through the eyes of these missionaries.

Despite the earlier wealth and scholarship of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, the



A mosque in Homs, Syria. ca. 1930. The mosque is an example of Ottoman architecture. The Ottoman Empire ruled the lands of Syria for many years prior to the mandates.

United States, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-gpmc-a-18437-00011

Middle East had fallen behind the countries of Europe and the United States in science and technology by the nineteenth century. The advances that fueled the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the United States were slow to reach the Middle East. For example, during the Emperor Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, the Ottoman military was unable to match the new firepower of the French army. Napoleon also introduced a rapid and efficient printing press to the region.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire had lost strength. Throughout Europe and the Middle East, nationalist movements challenged large, multinational empires. These nationalist movements, as well as European imperialism, weakened the empire. In southeastern Europe, local independence movements took territory away from the Ottomans. In the northeastern reaches of the empire, ambitious Russian tsars interested in

Part I Definitions

Colonialism—Colonialism is the acquisition and exploitation of territory by a foreign power for its own economic and political benefit.

Imperialism—Imperialism is a policy of exerting cultural, economic, or political influence over other societies. Colonialism is a form of imperialism, but imperialism includes a broader array of policies that powerful states use to influence the affairs of weaker states.

Nationalism—Nationalism is a strong devotion to the interests of one's people or country. In the case of anticolonial movements in the twentieth century, nationalism was a broad term used to describe the desire to gain independence from foreign influence and control.

gaining more land drove them out. Meanwhile, the Ottoman economy increasingly fell under the domination of European imperial powers eager to gain access to oil, an energy source growing in importance for military and civilian uses. Britain and France, with no oil fields of their own, were especially interested in controlling the region. In addition, the Suez Canal, which connected the Mediterranean and Red Seas, dramatically reduced travel time from Europe to Asia and was an important trade route to Britain's colony of India.

To the east of the Ottomans, Russia and Britain competed to control Iran and its resources throughout the nineteenth century. Iran's economy and infrastructure suffered from being in the middle of the two great powers' struggle. In 1907, Russia and Britain, fearing that the newly established constitutional regime would limit their role in Iran, agreed to cooperate with each other. In 1912, they invaded Iran to assure "stability" and "security."

How did World War I affect the Middle East?

World War I, which began in 1914, ultimately destroyed the Ottoman Empire. In the early months of the war, the Ottoman Empire

allied itself with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although the decisive battles of the war took place in Europe, the Middle East was thrown into turmoil as well. British forces, with the assistance of their Arab allies, drove Ottoman armies out of most of the Empire's Arab provinces. Fighting between Russia and the Ottomans in southeastern Europe turned vast areas into wasteland.

During the war, parts of Iran were occupied by the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Britain. Iranian leaders had hoped to free themselves from European influence after World War I. But after the Ottomans were defeated and the Russians left during their own revolution in 1917, the British took steps to make sure they could continue to access Iranian oil.

What was the Sykes-Picot Accord?

Meanwhile, much of the most important action took place away from the battlefield. In 1916, diplomats from Britain and France signed a secret treaty concerning the postwar division of the Ottoman Empire. Under the terms of what was known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British and French agreed to divide the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire between themselves.

“It is accordingly understood between the French and British governments... [that] France and... Great Britain shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab state or confederation of Arab states.”

—Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916

How did President Wilson's principle of “self-determination” affect the Middle East?

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) presented the main obstacle to British and French plans to control the Middle East. When the United States joined World War I in 1917, Wilson insisted that his country was fighting for a higher set of ideals than the

European powers. He announced a sweeping fourteen-point peace plan that he hoped to implement at the end of the war. Among the key principles of Wilson's proposal was a call for a postwar international system (a "League of Nations") based on "self-determination," or the right of nations to govern themselves.

“The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development...”

—Point XII of the Fourteen Points, Woodrow Wilson, 1918

Arab leaders applauded Wilson's views. They saw the president's emphasis on self-determination as an endorsement of Arab efforts to govern themselves without outside interference. In contrast, the British and French realized that self-determination undermined their plan to impose the Sykes-Picot Accord and redraw the international borders of the Middle East.

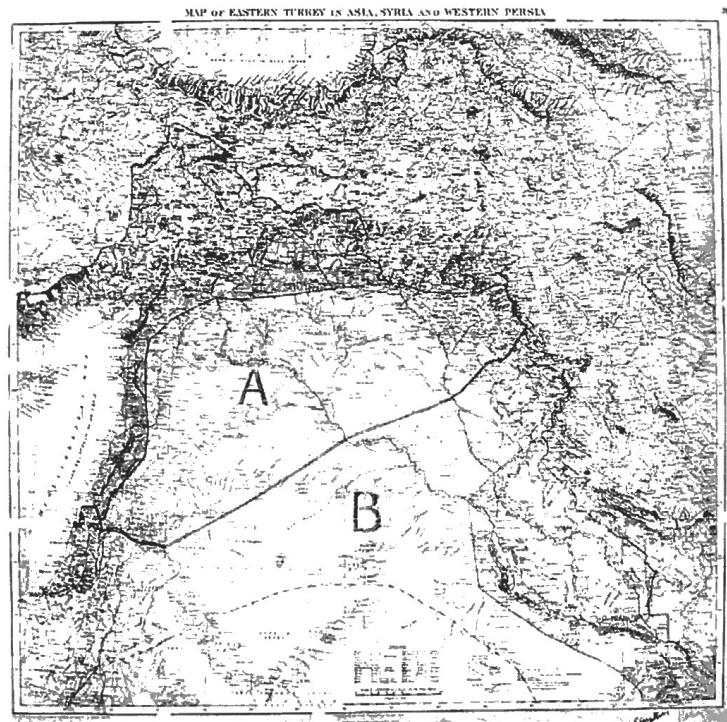
Ultimately, at the Paris Peace Conference following World War I, Wilson backed down from his call for self-determination. His European counterparts forced a compromise that allowed European countries not only to keep their existing colonies but also to expand their empires into new regions, including in the Middle East.

When Wilson returned to the United States, he encountered strong opposition to U.S. participation in the new international system he had imagined. In 1919, the

U.S. Senate rejected the treaty that Wilson had helped negotiate and refused to join the League of Nations. Over the next two decades, U.S. leaders chose to be involved in international affairs only in ways that were beneficial to the United States. Once the United States had retreated from the international scene, Britain and France were able to divide the defeated Ottoman Empire despite objections from Arab leaders.

How did the “mandates” allow European empires to exert control in the Middle East?

The newly-formed League of Nations claimed that many of the areas that had been controlled by the Ottoman Empire were unprepared for self-governance and needed time, assistance, and advice from “advanced” powers before gaining independence. The League established “mandates,” which gave Britain and France the authority to control and manage the new states that had been carved out of



The map that Sykes and Picot drew on to divide the former Ottoman Arab Provinces between Britain and France. Area A was to be under French control and area B under British control.

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the Ottoman Empire. In truth, the mandates allowed European empires to exert control over former Ottoman territories for their own economic and political gain.

While France took over Syria and Lebanon, the British controlled Iraq, Kuwait, Palestine, Jordan, and most of the coastal areas of the Arabian peninsula. Although the British and French did not call these areas “colonies,” the people living within these mandates saw themselves as subjects of European colonialism.

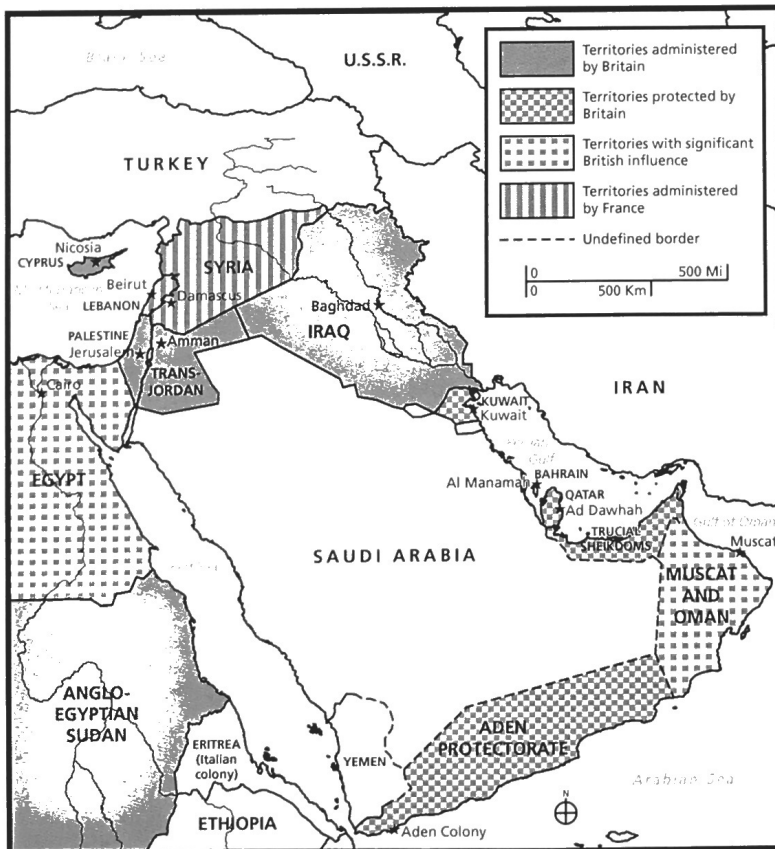
With Russia weakened by civil war, Iran increasingly fell within Britain’s sphere of economic domination as well. Turkey and Saudi Arabia were the only Middle Eastern countries to attain complete independence after World War I. In Turkey, a nationalist movement overthrew the last remnants of the Ottoman Empire and established a republic in 1923. In



Damascus, Syria, October 2, 1918, the day after it had been occupied by Allied forces. Syria became a French Mandate after the Paris Peace Conference.

the Saudi Arabian kingdom, leaders preferred not to have connections with the international world.

The outlines of the countries of the present day Middle East were clearly recognizable by the 1920s. With few changes, the map drawn at the Paris Peace Conference is the same one that exists today.



British and French influence in the Middle East, 1926.

Oil Politics

The contest for European control of the Middle East during and after World War I was driven largely by oil. The war effort had been powered mostly by coal, but far-sighted military strategists understood that the next major war would be fueled by oil. Oil was quickly becoming the lifeblood of industrial economies around the world.

“I am quite clear that it is all-important for us that this oil should be available.”

—Arthur Balfour, British foreign secretary, 1918