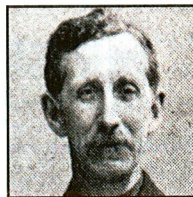


# How the MIDDLE EAST Got That Way

A century ago, two diplomats carved out lines on the Middle East map, creating new nations and sowing the seeds for much of the strife in the region today BY JOSEPH BERGER

**V**iolence, ethnic clashes, political instability—have you ever wondered why the Middle East is such a mess? It may be hard to believe, but a lot of it traces back to 100 years ago, in 1916, when two men sitting over long tables in palatial rooms sketched out lines on a map that effectively carved out much of today’s turbulent Middle East.

With World War I (1914-18) still raging and the Ottoman Empire on the verge of collapse, diplomats Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and François Georges-Picot of France set the boundaries for modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and much of the land that Israel and the Palestinians are still fighting over. They worked in secret, and, by an agreement that bore their names, largely ignored the complicated histories and interests of the many ethnic and religious groups who had been living there for centuries, including Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Muslims, Christians, and Jews.



**Mapmakers:**  
Sir Mark Sykes of Britain  
(top) and François  
Georges-Picot of France

“Sykes-Picot is at the root of many of today’s conflicts in the Middle East,” says David L. Phillips, a Middle East expert at Columbia University in New York who has advised the last three presidential administrations.

The effects of the borders the two men contrived can be felt everywhere from Syria, which is mired in a civil war that began more than five years ago and has cost tens of thousands of lives, to Iraq, which has been struggling to root out the brutal terrorist group ISIS (also known as the Islamic State or ISIL) that since 2014 has been taking over large swaths of territory in Iraq as well as in Syria.

## The Ottoman Empire

Beginning in the 16th century, the region now known as the Middle East fell under the control of the Ottoman Empire, the vast Turkish realm that at its height also controlled much of southeastern Europe and northern Africa. European military victories in

**The ‘Palestine Mandate’** gave Britain control over lands that Israelis and Palestinians are still fighting over today.

LIBYA

VIA WIKIPEDIA COMMONS (ALL IMAGES); JIM MCMAHON (MAP)



Download an annotated excerpt of the Sykes-Picot agreement at [upfrontmagazine.com](http://upfrontmagazine.com)



# The Middle East After World War I

Some of the countries affected by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement and other postwar treaties

**Under French influence, Syria** became a nation of Sunni and Shiite Muslims—sects that have feuded for more than a millennium. Syria is now in its fifth year of civil war.

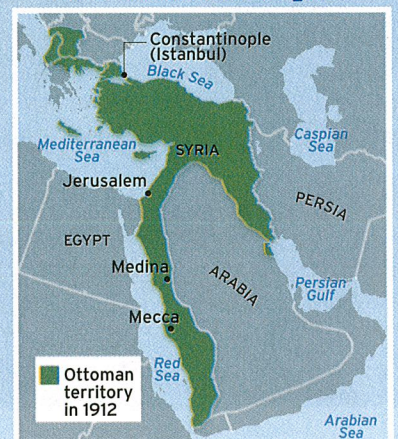
**Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish** tribes were forced together under the British. After Sunni strongman Saddam Hussein was ousted in 2003 and replaced by a Shiite government, some Sunnis formed an extremist group that eventually joined with radicals in Syria to create ISIS.

**Arabia**, as it was then called, was one of the only areas to not become a mandate. In 1927, King Ibn Saud established a dual kingdom there, and in 1932, he consolidated it into Saudi Arabia. Today, the oil-rich country is a major ally of the U.S.

- Turkey in 1923
- Ottoman territory transferred to Great Britain and France as mandates by 1922
- Present-day borders

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## The Ottoman Empire





the 19th century had already begun eating away at much of the Ottoman territory. But the Turks suffered a final blow during World War I, when they made the strategic miscalculation of joining Germany and Austria-Hungary in what would be a losing battle against Britain, France, Russia, and ultimately the U.S.

After the war, Britain and France—the two major European powers at the time—divvied up the Ottoman Empire's spoils, based on the work of diplomats Sykes and Picot. The men had convened in Paris and London from November 1915 to March 1916, marking off areas for the British and French to control at war's end (see map, p. 19). As had been true of European imperialism during the 19th century (the so-called scramble for Africa), Britain and France were primarily focused on advancing their own commercial interests, like tapping the Middle East's newly discovered vast oil reserves. They largely ignored the complex ethnic and religious allegiances of the lands in question.

"The great powers carved up the Middle East into zones of influence, without consultations and without regard to local needs," says Phillips.

When the Sykes-Picot agreement was

disclosed, Arab leaders were furious. They felt betrayed, because France and Britain had promised them autonomous lands in exchange for taking up arms against their Turkish Ottoman rulers. When world powers met after World War I to discuss the fate of the Ottoman territories, President Woodrow Wilson advocated for self-determination of these lands in his Fourteen Points. But the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which officially ended the war, as well as other postwar treaties, ultimately upheld the Sykes-Picot agreement. The League of Nations (a precursor to the United Nations) authorized "mandates" for Britain and France, which gave them broad powers to influence policy and trade in the former Ottoman territories.

"After being promised complete and independent nationhood from Ottoman

rule, Arab leaders were told, 'No, we're not going to do that for you,'" says Christopher Rose of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. "What we're going to do is set you up as these 'mandates,' and you will get independence at some time in the future."

The British and French argued that in creating modern, secular nation-states, they were essentially helping these coun-

tries. But as Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, points out, the people formerly living under Ottoman rule didn't really think of themselves as nations with firm borders, but rather as tribal and religious groups.

"The sense of being a citizen did not exist," says Hamid. "It was about being a member of a religious community, that's how you identified."

### Sunnis vs. Shiites

Sunni and Shiite Muslims, for example, are two distinct sects that have been at odds for centuries. The schism dates back to 632, when Islam's founder, Muhammad the prophet, died and disagreement arose over who should rightfully succeed him. Today, most of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are Sunni, with Shiites the majority in only Iran and Iraq.

Lumping together rival ethnicities into newly formed nations soon led to power struggles that are unresolved today. Here's how the events unfolded.

**IRAQ:** The clashing Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish\* tribes that the Sykes-Picot agreement forced together were mostly kept in check by a series of autocratic dictators and kings. Among them was strongman Saddam Hussein, who came to power in 1979. In 2003, he was overthrown by an

American-led coalition claiming he harbored weapons of mass destruction. (No such weapons were ever found.)

In the aftermath, old ethnic rivalries resurfaced. Americans tried installing a coalition government of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, but Shiites ultimately assumed power. That led some Sunnis to form an extremist group that eventually joined with radicals in Syria to create ISIS. The Sunni Muslim terrorist group is intent on exterminating Shiite Muslims, Kurds, and Westerners in its quest to establish its own brand of radical Islam in the Middle

**'The sense of being a citizen did not exist.'**



**Israeli border police** and Palestinian girls in Jerusalem last month. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has lasted for decades.

\*About 20 million Kurds live along the borders of Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Most adhere to Sunni Islam.



East. ISIS has proved remarkably successful at recruiting terrorists online from around the world, including the U.S.: In December, a married couple inspired by ISIS killed 14 people at an office party in San Bernardino, California.

**SYRIA:** Even though most of the people living in this region were Sunni, French powers installed Western-friendly leaders from the Alawite sect of Shiite Islam. In 1971, Hafez al-Assad became president and kept the country united, often through brutal repression.

In 2000, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, Syria's current president. But after the Arab Spring—the wave of democracy protests that began in 2010 across the Middle East—a civil war broke out in Syria that has so far cost more than 250,000 lives and has allowed ISIS to conquer some Syrian territory.

Several Sunni rebel factions are fighting to overthrow Assad, with powers like the U.S. and Russia intervening militarily. (The U.S. has supported moderate rebels while Russia has supported Assad.) Meanwhile, millions of desperate refugees have been fleeing both Syria and Iraq and posing a wrenching immigration problem for their neighbors and for Europe.

**LEBANON:** France carved out Syria's coastal region into the separate state of Lebanon, which was meant to be a safe haven for the Christian enclaves of the Ottoman Empire. The country gained independence from France in 1943. But from 1975 to 1990, it was ravaged by a civil war between Christians and Muslims that resulted in 250,000 deaths. Today its multi-religious government still teeters under a fragile power-sharing formula.

### 'THE PALESTINE MANDATE':

The British mandate over Palestine included present-day Israel, Jordan,



**A Syrian Kurdish boy** in the Syrian town of Kobani, which was destroyed by ISIS before the terrorist group was driven out last year.

and the West Bank and Gaza. At the time, the majority of the population living there was Arab, and most opposed the Zionist movement, which called for a Jewish state in Palestine.

But world pressure to create a Jewish homeland increased after World War II (1939-45), when 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. In 1947, Britain, with approval from the United Nations, came up with a partition plan that would create the nations of Israel and Palestine. The Jews accepted the plan, but the Palestinians and surrounding Arab countries rejected it and fought an unsuccessful war against the newly declared state of Israel in May 1948. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel expanded territory under its control by capturing lands where many Palestinians were living.

For decades, Israel and the Palestinians have been locked in a conflict that periodically explodes into violence, with no end in sight, despite the efforts of at least nine American presidents to broker a peace agreement. The occupied Palestinians continue to clamor for a state of their own.

One hundred years after Sykes-Picot, not all experts agree that it is to blame for the Middle East's troubles. Robert Danin, of the Council on Foreign Relations, notes that many nations with arbitrary boundaries in other regions of the world have managed to live in relative peace.

### Learning From the Past?

Still, many experts as well as Arab nations, see Sykes-Picot as the starting point for much of the region's turmoil today. Rose, of the University of Texas at Austin, says that as the U.S. and other world powers struggle to figure out how best to handle crises like the Syrian civil war, the mistakes colonial powers made in 1916 should serve as a lesson.

"We can't have a peace conference where the world powers sit down and say, 'Hey, here's how we're going to solve your problems,'" says Rose. "We can help, we can aid, we can partner, we can support, but Syrians have to be a key player in however the settlement is worked out." •

*Joseph Berger is a former reporter for The New York Times.*