

# 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 goes back 100 years. In 1916, two men sat down and sketched out lines on a map that basically carved out much of today's unstable Middle East.

World War I (1914-18) was still going on, and the Ottoman Empire was about to fall. 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 to create an agreement, which was named for them. The agreement mostly ignored the complicated histories and interests of the many ethnic and religious groups who had been living there for centuries. These included the 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 created can be felt everywhere. Syria is stuck in a civil war that began more than five years ago. It has cost tens of thousands of lives. Iraq is struggling to get rid of the brutal terrorist group ISIS (also known as the Islamic State or ISIL). Since 2014, ISIS has been taking over large areas of territory in Iraq and 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. This was a large Turkish empire that at its height also controlled much of southeastern Europe and northern Africa. European

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

0 200 MI  
0 200 KM

## The Ottoman Empire



military victories in 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. That's when they made the mistake of joining Germany and Austria-Hungary. This ended up being a losing battle against Britain, France, Russia, and ultimately the U.S.

Britain and France were the two major European powers at the time. After the war, they split up the Ottoman Empire's territories, based on the work of Sykes and Picot. The men had met in Paris and London from November 1915 to March 1916. They marked off areas for the British and French to control at the end of the war (see map, p. 19). Britain and France were mainly focused on advancing their own interests, like tapping the Middle East's newly discovered oil reserves. They ignored the complex ethnic and religious loyalties of the people living there.

"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 revealed, Arab leaders were angry.

They felt betrayed. France and Britain had promised them independent lands in exchange for fighting against their Turkish Ottoman rulers. World powers met after World War I to discuss the fate of the Ottoman territories. President Woodrow Wilson supported independence 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 (the organization that eventually inspired the United Nations) approved "mandates" for Britain and France. This 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 they were helping these countries by creating

modern, non-religious nation-states. But Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution points out that the people who used to live under Ottoman rule didn't really think of themselves as nations with firm borders. They thought of themselves 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 groups that have been at odds since 632. That's when Islam's founder, Muhammad the prophet, died and disagreement arose over who should replace him. Today, most of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are Sunni. Shiites are the majority in only Iran and Iraq.

Putting rival ethnicities together into newly formed nations soon led to power struggles. Many 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 ruled by a series of autocratic dictators and kings. Among them was dictator Saddam Hussein, who came to power in 1979. In 2003, he was overthrown by an American-led group. The group claimed he hid weapons of mass destruction. (No such weapons were ever found.)

Old ethnic rivalries soon resurfaced. Americans tried to establish a coalition government of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. But Shiites ultimately took over. That led some Sunnis to form a group that eventually joined with radicals in Syria to create ISIS. The goal of the Sunni Muslim terrorist group is to get rid of Shiite Muslims, Kurds, and Westerners and

**'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.

MENACHEM KAHANA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



start its own brand of radical Islam in the Middle East. ISIS has been 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. He kept the country united, often through brutal control.

In 2000, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad. He is Syria's current president. After the Arab Spring, a wave of democratic protests that rocked the Middle East beginning in 2010, civil war broke out in Syria. So far, it has cost more than 250,000 lives. It has also allowed ISIS to conquer some Syrian territory.

Several Sunni rebel groups are fighting to overthrow Assad. Powers like the U.S. and Russia have been offering military help. (The U.S. has supported moderate rebels. Russia has supported Assad.) Meanwhile, millions of desperate refugees have been fleeing both Syria and Iraq. They've also been posing a huge immigration problem for their neighbors and for Europe.

**LEBANON:** France carved out Syria's coastal region into the separate state of Lebanon. This was meant to be a safe haven for the Christian groups 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 led to 250,000 deaths. Today its multi-religious government still struggles under a fragile power-sharing formula.



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

## 'THE PALESTINE MANDATE':

The British mandate over Palestine included present-day Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank and Gaza. At the time, the majority of the population living there was Arab. Most Arabs 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). That's because 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. In 1947, Britain, with approval from the United Nations, came up with a partition plan. It would create the nations of Israel and Palestine. The Jews accepted the plan. But the Palestinians and surrounding Arab countries rejected it. They 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 sometimes explodes into violence. At least nine American presidents have tried to broker a peace agreement. The occupied Palestinians

continue to demand 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 random boundaries in other regions of the world have managed to live in relative peace.

## Learning From the Past?

Still, many experts and Arab nations see Sykes-Picot as the starting point for a lot of the region's problems today. Rose, of the University of Texas at Austin, says that as the U.S. and other world powers struggle to figure out how to best 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 how the settlement is worked out." •

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