

Violence, ethnic clashes, political instability—have you ever wondered why this is occurring in the Middle East? 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** (right) 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.

“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.

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 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. 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 countries. 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.”



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. **Use the maps on pages A40 and A41**

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 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, 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."

1. **At the beginning of World War I, the area now known as the Middle East was part of**
a Britain. b France. c the Ottoman Empire. d the Mughal Empire.

2. **According to the article, which is true of the Sykes-Picot agreement?**

- a It was accepted by Arab leaders as a path to peace.
- b It was created in secret.
- c It was based on long-standing divisions between ethnic and religious groups.
- d all of the above

3. **Britain and France had promised Arab leaders autonomous lands if the Arabs would**

- a give Britain and France access to the oil reserves in the Middle East.
- b put aside ethnic and religious differences and work toward peace.
- c denounce Russia and its rulers.
- d join Britain and France in fighting against the Turks.

4. **At the end of World War I, the League of Nations authorized mandates that**

- a gave Middle Eastern countries complete independence.
- b gave Britain and France some control over policy and trade in the Middle East.
- c dictated which ethnic and religious groups could live in which Middle Eastern country.
- d none of the above

5. **The central idea of the article is that**

- a political instability in the Middle East is here to stay.
- b the Middle East should return to its pre-World War I borders.
- c an agreement carved out during World War I may have a lot to do with the problems in the Middle East today.
- d the possibility of peace in the Middle East is currently in the hands of British and French diplomats.

6. **The article discusses the spoils of World War I. The word *spoils* as used here means**

- a goods or lands that are taken forcibly. b deaths and serious injuries.
- c intense power struggles. d devastating effects.

7. **You can infer from the article that the U.S.'s stand on the Middle East immediately following World War I was that**

- a the League of Nations must squash conflicts between rival religious groups.
- b the Middle East belonged under Turkish rule.
- c the Middle East lands should be autonomous.
- d the Sykes-Picot agreement was fair and necessary.

8. **Which phrase from the article best supports your answer to question 7?**

- a "Sunni and Shiite Muslims . . . are two distinct sects that have been at odds for centuries."
- b "... Americans tried installing a coalition government of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds . . ."
- c "... Wilson advocated for self-determination of these lands in his Fourteen Points."
- d "The U.S. has supported moderate rebels . . ."

9. How were tribal and religious differences kept in check in **Iraq** for decades following World War I?
What eventually caused these differences to resurface?

10. Do you agree with experts who say the **Sykes-Picot** agreement is responsible for much of the trouble in the Middle East today?