



The Middle East and World War I

The First World War helped lay the foundations for the modern Middle East. Imperialism, religion, and nationalism all played a role in shaping the region during this conflict.



0:01

*Text showing the quote
being read*

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

*Map of the modern Middle
East with a peek of the
Arabian Peninsula in 1914*

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

*Images of the Ottoman
role in World War I*

1:14

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

*Nate Bowling and Aimee
Genell converse, facing
camera*

*Images of cities and people
throughout the Ottoman
Empire*

*Map of the Ottoman
Empire in 1914*

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera, with the
Declaration of Jihad on the
right*

2:15

*Aimee Genell speaks,
facing camera, with the
Declaration of Jihad on
the left*

“We are a people whose character refuses, for honor, to cause harm to those who do not harm us: white are our deeds, black our battles, green are our fields, red are our swords.”

14th century Arab poet Safi Al-din Al-Hilli.

Hi, I’m Nate Bowling.

Take a look at this map. This is the modern Middle East today in 2021. I live right here in the United Arab Emirates. The UAE is one of 22 Arab majority nations across the Middle East and North Africa.

Now, look at a map of the same region from only 100 years earlier.

What happened to all those straight lines? How do we go from this map to this map?

The answers to these questions begin in 1914. On the eve of the First World War, the Middle East was divided between the Ottoman and British empires and none of these independent Arab states existed.

In October 1914, the Ottoman Empire joined the war on the side of the Central Powers and prepared for war against Britain, France, and Russia.

I knew this decision transformed the political geography of the modern Middle East, but I wanted to understand how, so I sat down with an expert on the subject, Dr. Aimee Genell, and asked her about it.

Aimee, what did the Middle East look like in 1914? Who was here?

In 1914 on the eve of the war, the Ottoman Empire was a diverse, diverse place. It was multi-confessional, which means there were peoples of different religions. There are lots of Christians, lots of Muslims, lots of Jews.

It was also a very multi-ethnic place, so there were Arabs, there were Turks, there were Armenians, there were Bulgarians. It was a very, very, very diverse place.

On the eve of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire was in a position of weakness. So the British Empire was slowly encroaching close to where Mecca, the most holy city of Islam, is located.

So we’re looking right now at the Declaration of Jihad on the screen. Can you tell us about this document? Why is it important?

So this document was issued at the very beginning of World War One. It announced the Ottoman Empire’s entry into the great European war. It called upon Muslims throughout the Allied empires, so Muslims in the British Empire and the Russian Empire and the French Empire, to rise up against their colonial overlords and fight against them on behalf of the Ottoman sultan caliph in order to win the war for the Central Powers.

Aimee Genell speaks, facing camera, with a photo of the Ottoman caliph on the left

The Ottoman sultan was also the caliph, and what is a caliph? It literally means successor. Successor to whom? Successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

Aimee Genell speaks, facing camera, followed by an image of a mosque

So what this means is that the Ottoman sultan was both the sort of worldly leader of the Ottoman Empire but was also the spiritual leader of the entire Islamic world.

Map of the British Empire in 1914

In 1914, the British Empire was actually the largest Muslim empire on Earth. We might think it was the Ottomans, but in fact Britain had more Muslims in it than the Ottoman Empire.

Aimee Genell speaks, facing camera

So this was really a document that was created to send terror or put terror in the hearts of the British really more than anything.

3:22

Map of the Ottoman Empire followed by an image of Hussein bin Ali

As Dr. Genell told me, the Ottoman sultan ruled an ethnically diverse empire, and many of these people wanted more independence. Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, was one of these people. Hussein was one of about 10 million Arabs living under Ottoman control.

Image of the flag of the Arab Revolt followed by modern flags of Arab nation states

In 1916, working with British officers stationed in Asia, Sharif Hussein and his son Faisal launched what came to be called the Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule.

Nate Bowling and Aimee Genell converse, facing camera

The rebels adopted this as the flag of their revolt. It was created by a British officer stationed in Egypt named Mark Sykes. The colors on the flag symbolized the historical Arab empires and Sharif Hussein's continuation of their legacy. The flag later inspired the national flags of many Arab nation states.

4:12

Aimee Genell speaks, facing camera, while clips of Sharif Hussein's forces play

How did Sharif Hussein and his followers get involved in World War One?

Oof, how does the Sharif of Mecca get involved in World War One?

He wants to increase his local powers. He wants autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. He wants to carve out a space of power for himself, and he thinks the best way to do that is the way that power brokers across the Ottoman Empire for the last hundred years had done that, appeal to the great powers of Europe. So this is precisely what he does.

Aimee Genell speaks, facing camera, followed by photos of British and Sharif Hussein's collaboration

Sheriff Hussein starts writing a series of letters to a British official stationed in Cairo named McMahon, and he says, hey you know I'm interested in maybe working on a deal with you guys. What do you say if you recognize me as maybe like an independent Arab chief, what if we help you with this little war against the Ottomans, and initially the British were kind of like haha this is this is exciting. We can have a tool to use against the Ottomans.

Aimee Genell speaks, facing camera

The British promised that they would recognize an independent Arab kingdom, but what did this kingdom look like?

5:06

Map of proposed Arab State followed by clips of the Middle East

It was basically the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula going up to the border of Turkey today, so it included everything in today's modern Middle East, including Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, even the Levant, so it also included Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and even parts of Iraq.

Nate Bowling and Aimee Genell converse, facing camera

So this was a large vision of a unified independent Arab state.

Map of the Middle East in the 21st century

Looking at the Middle East today, there are seven different countries alone on the Arabian Peninsula, and there's 22 majority Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Nate Bowling and Aimee Genell converse, facing camera

So it's obvious that the promises that McMahon made to Hussein weren't fulfilled. What happened?

A few different things happened.

Aimee Genell speaks, facing camera, with image of Ibn Saud on the left

On one hand, the British signed a treaty around 1915 with another power broker in the Arabian Peninsula who might be familiar to you, known as Ibn Saud, who would go on to establish modern Saudi Arabia.

Nate Bowling and Aimee Genell converse, facing camera

So Ibn Saud signed an actual treaty. Treaties in the kind of British legal imagination were far more powerful than agreements, so he signs a treaty. He gets gold and guns also to fight against the Ottomans, but instead of fighting against the Ottomans, he turns his attention at the end of World War One against Sharif Hussein. So most importantly, though Sharif Hussein and his sons were sold out by the British.

6:25

Sykes-Picot map showing European division of the Middle East with territories highlighted as they are discussed

So Aimee, I'm looking at the strange map here. There's some lines, some letters, some colors. What's going on here?

Yeah so, this is the infamous Sykes-Picot map. A lot of people, a lot of historians, also a lot of people imagine that this is the map that made the modern Middle East. Although if we look closely at it, it doesn't exactly correspond to the modern Middle East, does it?

When people say that Sykes-Picot created the modern Middle East, the state system in the Middle East, what they mean is that Britain, France, and Russia got together in secret, in the middle of World War One and hatched a plan to divide the Middle East, the Ottoman lands, the Arab provinces between themselves.

Okay, so what is the map itself? It's very confusing, isn't it?

So we have like some blue territory, pink territory, yellow territory, and we have this weird A and B territory. So if we look closely, the blue zone says direct French occupation, and the zone A just below it is French influence. Below that is the B zone is British influence. The pink zone, which those of you who are familiar with the map of the modern Middle East, will say aha that's Iraq, that looks a lot like Basra, a really important port, and that was under, according to this map, direct British control.

And then we have this little yellow spot over to the left, and what is that? That is Jerusalem. So Jerusalem is too hot to handle, and you'll see that it is supposed to be under British and French condominium, which we should interpret as no one can decide what to do.

7:57

*Aimee Genell speaks,
facing camera*

Clips of Arab crowds

When the British say independence and we think about what that word means today, the two ideas do not match up.

So one of the biggest imperialists in the British foreign office, a guy named Milner, used to say in various ways, he would say we've always meant for Arabs to be independent, and of course by independent we mean under British control without any agreements between other powers. So in other words, Britain's idea of independence was we'll have this state where sure there's a king, sure they're on paper independent, but in reality we'll control things.

8:36

*Sykes-Picot map and
proposed Arab state map
side-by-side*

*Image of the Balfour
Declaration*

*Image of Mark Sykes
followed by the flag he
created for the Arab Revolt*

I keep looking at these two maps. The one on the left is what the British promised Sharif Hussein. On the right is the Sykes-Picot agreement in which the British and the French divided the region between themselves.

In 1917, the British government also issued a public statement known as the Balfour Declaration in which they offered support for a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. The British had, in effect, promised control of the same land to three different groups.

One of the great ironies of history is that the same man who helped design the flag of the Arab revolt, Mark Sykes, also co-authored the agreement with France that betrayed Britain's Arab allies.

9:14

*Clips of the Paris Peace
Conference*

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

*Nate Bowling and Aimee
Genell converse, facing
camera*

*Map of the Middle East
in 1923, highlighting free
states*

*Aimee Genell speaks,
facing camera*

After the war ended, the victorious powers gathered at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to determine the shape of the world to come. Sharif Hussein's son Faisal traveled to Paris seeking to cash in on the promises made to his father by the British.

However, the new realities were a far cry from what had been promised in wartime nor could his father defend his claim. Hussein was defeated by Ibn Saud who incorporated Mecca into what would become Saudi Arabia.

So who are the losers and the winners in the region after World War One?

There's only three truly independent states in the Middle East after World War One: Turkey, the kind of core of the Ottoman Empire, Saudi Arabia, which on paper I mean it is independent, but the British do intervene, and also Iran.

Those are the only independent states.

What happens to those Arab provinces, some of which rebelled against the sultan during the war?

They all become League of Nations mandates.

What does that mean?

10:10

Map of the Middle East in 1923, highlighting League of Nation mandate

Syria and Lebanon ended up going under the French, but they were legally guaranteed by the League of Nations, so ostensibly maybe this is empire in a different way. It's not. Britain took Iraq. They took Palestine and Jordan as well.

Nate Bowling and Aimee Genell converse, facing camera

So those two powers were in control in the Middle East until really World War Two and a bit thereafter and exercise influence beyond that point.

European maps of the Middle East

What identities were important to people in the Middle East after 1919?

In the Arab provinces, you know, these are lines that were drawn on a map by British and French people. They don't correspond to really a logical geography. They certainly don't correspond to the logic of ethnicity or the logic of the languages in which people speak.

10:53

So how do you reorganize yourself?

Aimee Genell speaks, facing camera, with a list of post-war identities on the left

One of the ways that some historians have looked at how Arabs have reorganized themselves after World War One is that we see sort of regional solidarities. So in some cases, say for instance, in mandate Iraq, Faisal starts to create a sense of Iraqi nationalism.

For others, we see the emergence of what's known as Pan-Arabism. So Pan-Arabism becomes important for the first time in the midst of World War One but also in the 1920s and 30s, and it's the idea that, you know, this we've been broken up illegally, unfairly by these imperialist powers and what we really need is a strong unified Arab state.

And a third sort of identity that emerges at this time is kind of Islamic solidarity, and so we start seeing in the 1920s the emergence of different kinds of Islamic, kind of political organizations. The most important of which of course was the Muslim Brotherhood founded by Hassan Al-Banna in Egypt in the late 1920s.

11:51

Maps of the Middle East from 1914 to present day

The story of the modern Middle East might start in 1914, but it doesn't end there. As Dr. Genell tells us, the European powers continued to wield political power over their mandates for decades to come.

European imperialists drew lines on a map promising the same land to different groups. These lines helped set the contours of many original conflicts still playing out today.

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

The idea of the united Arab nation did not die with Sharif Hussein.

Clips of Arab nationalism following Sharif Hussein

Egypt's Gamel Abdel Nasser, for example, would later raise the flag of Arab nationalism. Other leaders would raise the flags of their new nation-states, such as Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

Still others turned to transnational identities like Pan-Islam, as they sought to counteract foreign interference in the region. The First World War was mostly fought in the trenches of the western front, but it left a lasting legacy on the peoples and nations of the Middle East.