

HISTORY

The Great Arab Revolt

Much of the trauma and dislocation suffered by the peoples of the Middle East during the 20th century can be traced to the events surrounding World War I. During the conflict, the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers against the Allies. Seeing an opportunity to liberate Arab lands from Turkish oppression, and trusting the honor of British officials who promised their support for a unified kingdom for the Arab lands, **Sharif Hussein bin Ali**, Emir of Mecca and King of the Arabs (and great grandfather of King Hussein), launched the Great Arab Revolt. After the conclusion of the war, however, the victors reneged on their promises to the Arabs, carving from the dismembered Ottoman lands a patchwork system of mandates and protectorates. While the colonial powers denied the Arabs their promised single unified Arab state, it is nevertheless testimony to the effectiveness of the Great Arab Revolt that the Hashemite family was able to secure Arab rule over Transjordan, Iraq and Arabia.



Sharif Hussein bin Ali, King of the Arabs and King of the Hijaz.
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In order to discern the motives of the Hashemites in undertaking the revolt, one must understand the policies undertaken by the Ottoman Empire in the years leading up to World War I. Following the Young Turk coup of 1908, the Ottomans abandoned their pluralistic and pan-Islamic policies, instead pursuing a policy of secular Turkish nationalism. The formerly cosmopolitan and tolerant Ottoman Empire began overtly discriminating against its non-Turkish inhabitants. Arabs in particular were faced with political, cultural and linguistic persecution. During this time, Arab nationalist groups in Syria, Iraq and Arabia began to rally behind the Hashemite banner of **Abdullah** and **Faisal**, sons of Sharif Hussein bin Ali, King of the Arabs.

When the Ottomans entered World War I on the side of the Central Powers in 1914, they upheld the ban on the official use of the Arabic language and its teaching in schools, while arresting many Arab nationalist figures in Damascus and Beirut. Arabs were further threatened by the construction of the Hijaz Railway, connecting Damascus and Mecca, which promised to facilitate the mobility of Turkish troops into the Arab heartland.

Consequently, in June 1916, as head of the Arab nationalists and in alliance with Britain and France, Sharif Hussein initiated the Great Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule. His sons, the emirs Abdullah and Faisal, led the Arab forces, with Emir Faisal's forces liberating Damascus from Ottoman rule in 1918. At the end of the war, Arab forces controlled all of modern Jordan, most of the Arabian peninsula and much of southern Syria.

Sharif Hussein's objective in undertaking the Great Arab Revolt was to establish a single independent and unified Arab state stretching from Aleppo (Syria) to Aden (Yemen), based on the ancient traditions and culture of the Arab people, the upholding of Islamic ideals and the full protection and inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities. Arab nationalists in the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula found in the Hashemite commanders of the Great Arab Revolt the leadership that could realize their aspirations, and thus coalesced around them.



The Great Arab Revolt, Wadi Rum, 1917.
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► The Clash of Promises and Interests

The political aspirations of the Arabs were not to be realized, however, due to the conflicting promises made by the British to their wartime allies. The first of these came during 1915 in an exchange of ten letters between Sir Henry McMahon, Britain's high commissioner in Egypt, and Sharif Hussein. Essentially, Britain pledged, in what became known as the **Hussein-McMahon Correspondence**, to support Arab independence if Hussein's forces revolted against the Turks.

But the agreement excluded three areas: the *wilayets* (Ottoman provinces) of Basra and Baghdad, the Turkish districts of Alexandretta and Mersin, and, most importantly, "portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo." The interpretation of the last section was to be the source of great controversy. The British later claimed that Palestine was meant to be excluded from the area of Arab rule, as it is technically located west of Damascus: for obvious reasons the Zionists took the same position. The Arabs interpreted the letter as it reads: Lebanon, not Palestine, is to the west of Damascus and the other areas mentioned.

In any case, the interests of the colonial powers took precedence over promises made to the Arabs. While accepting the principle of Arab independence laid down in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, the **Sykes-Picot Agreement**, signed by Britain, France and Russia in 1916, divided the area into zones of permanent colonial influence. The agreement recognized French interests in Greater Syria and northern Iraq, while acknowledging British designs on a belt of influence from the Mediterranean to the Gulf to protect its trade and communications links with the Indian subcontinent. The Sykes-Picot Agreement specified that most of Palestine was to be entrusted to an international administration. The agreement clearly contradicted the promises made to Sharif Hussein of Mecca.

To further complicate matters, in a totally deceitful move British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour in 1917 issued a letter to a prominent British Jew, Lord Rothschild, promising Britain's commitment and support for a Jewish home in Palestine. Known as the **Balfour Declaration**, the letter calls for the *"establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people . . . it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine..."*