

Introduction: After September 11

On September 11, 2001, terrorists angry about the U.S. military's presence in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. role in the Middle East attacked the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. The terrorists were followers of Osama bin Laden, a multi-millionaire originally from Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden had been implicated in attacks on the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998. Other reports linked him and his organization, al Qaeda (loosely translated as "the base"), to the bombing deaths of U.S. military personnel in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and the attack on the USS *Cole* by suicide bombers in 2000 that killed nineteen U.S. sailors.

Before September 11, 2001, the United States had cut its defense budget. Some U.S. troops had been withdrawn from overseas bases. Foreign aid spending on most parts of the world had been slashed. After September 11, U.S. leaders and the U.S. public began to reconsider carefully U.S. policies in the Middle East as well as the nation's role in the world. In early 2002, President George W. Bush (2001-2009) identified two Middle-Eastern countries, Iran and Iraq, as part of an "axis of evil" that threatened the security of the United States and the world.

In the spring of 2003, U.S.-led military forces raced through the Iraqi desert, swept aside Saddam Hussein's military, and occupied Iraq. Now in its eighth year, the war in Iraq has caused divisions both at home and abroad. The political and economic consequences of the occupation, as well as the physical destruction in Iraq, promise to ripple across the landscape of the Middle East for years to come.

In addition to the September 11 attacks and the war in Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict and concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions have put the Middle East at the forefront of concerns of many U.S. citizens.

Why does the United States maintain an active role in the Middle East?

The United States maintains an active role in the Middle East for four main reasons. First, the United States wants to ensure the steady flow of oil, the fuel which currently drives most of the world's economies. Second, the United States is concerned about long-term stability and about retaining power and influence in this important area of the world. The U.S. involvement in Iraq and its promotion of democracy in the region fall under this category. Third, the United States is concerned about nuclear proliferation, so it keeps a close eye on Iran, which the U.S. government believes is trying to develop nuclear weapons. Finally, the United States has long been enmeshed in efforts to settle the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Each of these reasons overlaps with the others, making the U.S. role in the Middle East very complex.

In the following pages, you will read about the debate regarding U.S. policy in the Middle East. You will confront the same questions facing U.S. policy makers: Which interests and values should provide the basis for the role of the United States in the region? How should the Middle East's enormous oil reserves and the United States' close relationship with Israel figure into policy calculations? Does the importance of Islam in the politics of the Middle East challenge the United States?

The reading will prepare you to wrestle with these questions. In Part I, you will explore the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East since World War I. In Part II, you will examine the critical issues facing the United States in the Middle East today. Finally, you will have the opportunity to consider four options for the future of the U.S. role in the Middle East.

Part I: The Middle East in the World

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most people in the United States were introduced to the Middle East through the Bible. The territories that are at the center of the Arab-Israeli conflict today were referred to as the “holy land.” The Middle East, which is often called the cradle of civilization, is the birthplace of three of the world’s major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

During the Middle Ages, Islamic empires in the region were at the center of the world’s science, scholarship, and commerce. Beginning in the 1500s, the Ottoman Turks, one of those empires, skillfully ruled over the diverse peoples and religions of the area that stretched from the Persian Gulf to the western end of North Africa for three centuries. This empire was militarily strong as well. In 1683, an Ottoman army invaded Europe, conquering Eastern Europe as far as the Austrian city of Vienna before being stopped.

To the east of the Ottomans, the Safavid Empire of Iran was a thriving center of Persian culture and commerce from 1501 to 1736. A well-administered and stable governmental system allowed the Safavid capital of Isfahan, with its population of over 400,000, to become renowned for its poetry, paintings, and scholarship.

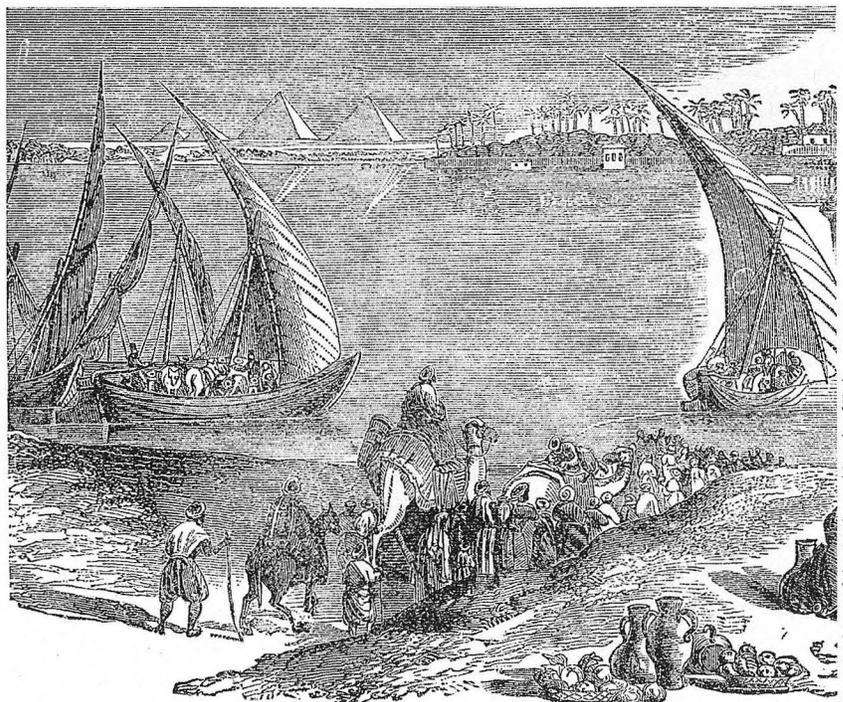
The Middle East Meets the West

In the early 1800s Protestant missionaries traveled to the Middle East, hoping to convert the Muslims of the region to Christianity. To a large extent, U.S. impressions of the Middle East were filtered through the eyes of these missionaries.

Despite the earlier wealth and scholarship of the Otto-

man and Safavid Empires, by the nineteenth century the Middle East had fallen behind the nations of the West. The advances in science and technology that fueled the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the United States, and other Western nations were slow to reach the Middle East. The Middle Easterners who greeted the missionary pioneers were surprised when they began to understand that their region lacked much of what Westerners took for granted. For instance, the Ottoman military was unable to match the new firepower of its European rivals, and the traders who followed the missionaries brought items Middle Easterners had not seen before.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire was in decline, often called the “sick man of Europe.” Throughout Europe and the Middle East at that time nationalist movements challenged large, multinational empires. For the Ottomans, this trend, as well as European imperialism, ultimately destroyed the empire. In southeastern Europe, local independence movements took territory away from



The nineteenth century Middle East in the Western imagination.

From: A History of the Empire and People of Turkey

the Ottomans. In the northeastern reaches of the empire, ambitious Russian tsars interested in gaining more land drove them out. Meanwhile, the Ottoman economy increasingly fell under the domination of European nations eager to gain access to oil, a material growing in importance for military and civilian uses. Britain and France, nations with no oil fields of their own, were especially interested in controlling the region.

To the east of the Ottomans, Russia and Britain competed to control Iran and its resources throughout the nineteenth century. Iran's economy and infrastructure suffered from being in the middle of the two great powers' struggle. In 1907, Russia and Britain, fearing that the newly-established constitutional regime would limit their role in Iran, agreed to cooperate with each other. In 1912, they invaded Iran to assure "stability" and "security."

How did World War I affect the Middle East?

World War I, which began in 1914, destroyed the Ottoman Empire. In the early months of the war, the Ottoman Empire allied itself with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although the decisive battles of the war took place in Europe, the Middle East was thrown into turmoil as well. British forces, with the assistance of their Arab allies, drove Ottoman armies out of most of the empire's Arab provinces. Fighting between Russia and the Ottomans along the Caucasus front turned vast areas into wasteland.

During the war, parts of Iran were occupied by the Ottoman Empire, by Russia, and by Britain. Iranian leaders had hoped to free themselves from European influence after World War I. But after the Ottomans were defeated and the Russians left to focus on their own revolution in 1917, the British took steps to make sure they could continue to access Iranian oil.

What was the Sykes-Picot Accord?

Meanwhile, much of the most important action took place away from the battlefield.

In 1916, diplomats from Britain and France signed a secret treaty concerning the postwar division of the Ottoman Empire. Under the terms of what was known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British and French agreed to carve up the Arab provinces of the empire between themselves.

“It is accordingly understood between the French and British governments.... That...France and... Great Britain shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab state or confederation of Arab states.”

—from the Sykes-Picot Agreement

How did President Wilson's principle of “self-determination” affect the Middle East?

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) presented the main obstacle to British and French designs. When the United States joined World War I in 1917, Wilson insisted that his country was fighting for a higher set of ideals than the European powers were. He announced a sweeping fourteen-point peace plan that he hoped to implement at the end of the war. Among the key principles of Wilson's proposal was a call for a postwar international system (a “League of Nations”) based on the “self-determination,” or right to govern oneself, of nations.

“The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development....”

—Point XII of the Fourteen Points,
Woodrow Wilson, 1918

Arab leaders applauded Wilson's views. They saw the president's emphasis on self-determination as an endorsement of Arab efforts

to govern themselves without outside interference. In contrast, the British and French realized that self-determination undermined their plan to impose the Sykes-Picot Accord on the Middle East.

Ultimately, at the Paris Peace Conference following World War I, Wilson backed down from his call for self-determination. His European counterparts forced a compromise that allowed European nations to keep their colonial possessions.

When Wilson returned to the United States, he encountered strong opposition to U.S. participation in the new international system he had envisioned. In 1919, the U.S. Senate soundly rejected the treaty that Wilson had helped negotiate. Wilson's defeat was a turning point for the United States. Over the next two decades, U.S. leaders chose to be involved in international affairs only in ways

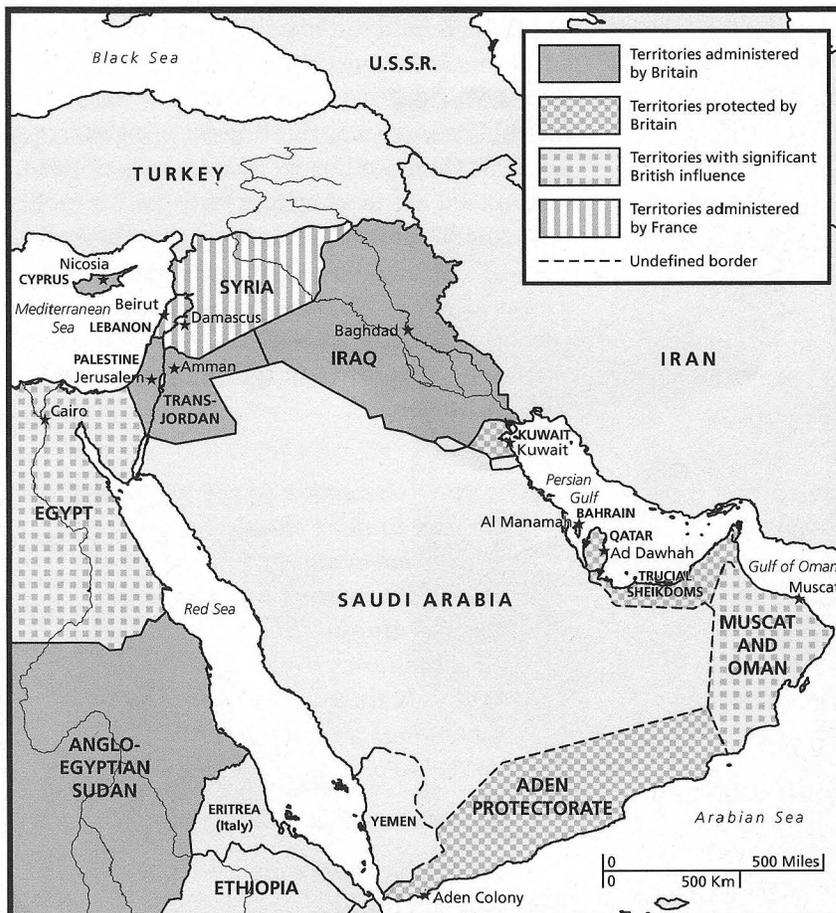
that were beneficial to the United States. Once the United States had retreated from the international scene, Britain and France were free to divide the defeated Ottoman Empire.

What were "mandates"?

The newly-formed League of Nations, precursor to the United Nations, decided that many of the areas that had been controlled by the Ottoman Empire were unprepared for self-government. The League established "mandates," which gave Britain and France the authority to control and manage the new states that had been carved out of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. While France took over Syria and Lebanon, the British controlled Iraq, Kuwait, Palestine, Jordan, and most of the coastal areas of the Arabian peninsula. Although these areas were not officially called "colonies," the Arabs within these mandates saw themselves as subjects of European colonialism.

With Russia weakened by civil war, Iran increasingly fell within Britain's sphere of economic domination as well. Turkey and Saudi Arabia were the only Middle Eastern countries to attain complete independence after World War I. In Turkey, a nationalist movement overthrew the last remnants of the Ottoman Empire and established a republic in 1923. In the Saudi Arabian kingdom, leaders preferred not to have connections with the international world.

Despite being dominated by European nations, the outlines of the countries of today's Middle East were clearly recognizable by the 1920s. With few changes, the map that the Allies drew at the Paris Peace Conference is the same one that exists today.



British and French influence in the Middle East, 1926.