

In 1916, 2 European diplomats drew new borders across the Middle East (or West Asia). The lines didn't reflect the land's geography or the diverse communities living there, and one of those borders ran straight through Syria. This was the Sykes Peco agreement, a secret deal between Britain and France to carve up the Ottoman Empire even before the war was over.

And for Syrians, it was the beginning of a painful truth, the promises made to them. During World War I, promises of independence and self-determination would not be kept. Today we're diving into how the French mandate shaped modern borders, how Syrians fought back, and how independents finally came in 1946.

This is the story of the fragile birth of modern Syria.

Welcome to Wiser World, a podcast for busy people who need a refresher on all things world. Here we explore different regions of the globe, giving you the facts and context you need to think historically about current events. I truly believe that the more we learn about the world. The more we embrace our shared humanity.

I'm your host, Ali Roper. Thanks for being here.

Welcome to part two of five of the Serial 1 0 1 series. The goal of this episode is to build on the scene that we set in part one and to cover serious history from around 1900 to the end of World War II 1946. If you haven't listened to Part one yet, please do. It's only 25 minutes long and it lays all a contextual groundwork.

You need to understand this episode. Much better. And just a reminder that this is designed to be an entry-level intro to Syria. So please know this is absolutely not fully comprehensive. Please do more research and even consider checking out my Patreon, or I share more resources that help you deepen your understanding.

I give images, maps, links, articles, videos, books, tools to help you better conceptualize what we learn here, and it adds a lot of value to your learning. All right, let's get into it. Part two. So we left off in Part One in the late 18 hundreds with greater Syria under the Ottoman Empire, who had ruled it for about 400 years.

And we have this rise of nationalism spreading throughout the region. People want self-determination and European powers, especially France, Britain, and Russia, begin intervening more while the Ottoman Empire is weakening. And the Millet system, which you'll remember from part one, was the way that the Ottoman Empire allowed minority groups to govern themselves.

While under Ottoman authority, it didn't really help a lot at this time because it worked in some ways to allow individual religious and cultural practices to remain intact. But it also reinforced divisions and people began to identify more strongly with their millet than with the Ottoman Empire as a whole.

So the Ottoman empires not in great shape. Internally or externally? When World War I starts now, when World War I broke out in 1914, the world was essentially divided into two major alliances. The Allied Powers led by Britain, France, and Russia, and the central powers, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire.

Now, while the Ottoman Empire had signed a secret agreement with Germany back in August of 1914, it didn't immediately jump into the fighting for a few months. The Ottomans kept up an appearance of neutrality, partly to buy time to prepare their military, and partly to avoid provoking the Allied powers.

Too early and the Ottomans knew they were in decline and saw an alliance with Germany as a chance to regain strength and modernize its military and possibly recover that lost territory that we talked about in part one. And Britain and Russia had been chipping away their lands for a while now. They also didn't like that, and they officially joined in November of 1914.

During World War I, the Ottoman government tightened control over Syria and implemented harsh policies like heavy taxation, conscripting, soldiers, food requisitioning, which is when a government or military takes goods or resources from civilians without paying for it fairly or at all. And many Syrians suffered under famine conditions, especially during the great famine of Mount Lebanon, which affected both Lebanon and parts of Syria.

It's estimated that about half of the population in the Mount Lebanon region died, which is about 200,000 people. And the famine was largely produced by wartime policies and outside of Mount Lebanon and other parts of Syria. The numbers are estimated to be hundreds of thousands of more, more that died of starvation.

Also during the war, beginning in 1915, there was a genocide, so this is called the Armenian Genocide, and this is where the Ottoman Empire carried out a systemic campaign to eliminate its Armenian population, which we talked about in part one, the Armenians. They were a Christian ethnic minority that mostly lived in Anatolia, modern day Turkey.

There's so much that needs to be talked about here. But for this episode and for purposes that we're talking about Syria here, you need to know that many Armenian families were forced to leave their homes and march to the Syrian desert with no food or water, and many died from starvation disease, or they were just outright killed along the way.

And it's estimated that one to one and a half million Armenians were killed between 1915 and 1923, and many of the deportations. Ended in what is now northern Syria, where there was a death camp in the desert. Others fled and survived in Aleppo, which emerged as a critical center of relief, resistance, and eventually resettlement for many Armenians.

And though the Ottoman government orchestrated the genocide, many local Syrians, both Arab Muslims and Christians and other minority groups, tried to help. They hid Armenians or brought

them food. Hence why Syria became a center for Armenians who survived, and many are still there today. And just a side note, the Turkish government still doesn't recognize this as a genocide, so that's another thing that happened during World War I.

Then a resistant movement began to grow more powerful in the Arab world, and Arab leaders began calling for independence from the Ottomans in 1916. So right in the thick of the war, a major uprising began in the Ottoman Empires. Arab provinces. This is called the Arab Revolt. It was a rebellion led by Arab nationalists who wanted to break free from centuries of Ottoman rule and establish an independent Arab state.

Now, the movement was launched by Sharif Hussein bin Ali, who was the Hashemite ruler of Mecca and Saudi Arabia, and was supported by his sons, most importantly, Faisal and Abdullah. Now why? Why would Arabs want an independent Arab state? Well, many Arabs felt politically marginalized, culturally suppressed by the Ottomans, and then these World War I policies just made things worse.

The Ottoman Empire was dominated politically and culturally by Turks, not Arabs, and many Arabs felt like they were looked down upon by. The Turks. So in 1915 and 1916, Sharif Hussein had been corresponding secretly with the British, who promised to support Arab independence if they revolted against the Ottomans.

And this back channel communication is known as the Hussein McMahon correspondence. So let's talk about it because it's one of the most important and controversial sets of letters in modern Middle Eastern history. So we have Sharif, Hussein, Binali. That is the Hamite leader of Mecca. And then we have Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt.

And let's look at it from both perspectives. So Britain is deep in World War I. It's looking for allies to weaken the Ottoman Empire. Sharif Hussein saw this opportunity to free the Arab world from Ottoman control and establish an independent Arab kingdom. And the two sides kind of saw their goals aligning, at least on the surface.

And in their correspondence, in their letter writing, Hussein offered to lead an Arab revolt against the Ottomans, and in return, McMahon promised British support for an independent Arab state after the war. That would cover most of the Arab Middle East, including modern day Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and the Arabian Peninsula.

And the language in these letters was intentionally vague, but Hussein understood it as a commitment, like fight for us after the war, you'll have your own independent state. And in 1916, Hussain's forces attacked the Ottomans in Mecca, and they started this Arab revolt. And over time the rebellion spread.

Hussein's son Faisal emerged as a key military leader, and the Arabs did receive support from the British. You might have heard of Te Lawrence. He helped coordinate between British military

intelligence and Arab fighters. Later became known as Lawrence of Arabia. Well, the Ottomans responded with force.

They tried to suppress the revolt with their own military campaigns by cracking down on Arab nationalist sentiments in cities like Damascus and Beirut. And in 1915 and 1916, several Arab intellectuals and suspected revolutionaries were executed by the Ottomans, which just deepened resentment across the region.

Now these Arab forces, including some Syrians made strategic gains in advanced northward. And in 1918, Faisal and his forces entered Damascus and he declared the establishment of an Arab government there. And they dreamed of this independent Arab kingdom stretching across the fertile Crescent. And for a brief moment, it looked like Syria would finally be free of the Ottomans and Prince Faisal again, Sharif Hussein's son was declared king of a new Arab kingdom that was based in Damascus.

People celebrated in the streets, but the celebration didn't last because the outcome of the Hussein McMahon correspondence, those letters, the two had written between each other. The outcome did not match the promise. So what Hussein did not realize was that the British had been busy making other conflicting promises at the same time.

And in 1916, they had signed a secret agreement with France, and this is called the Sykes Pico Agreement. Now we need to spend some time on this because it's very important. So this was a secret deal made between Britain and France to divide up the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, even though the war was still going on.

It's called the Sykes Pico Agreement because the two men were British diplomat, Mark Sykes and French diplomat Francois George Pico, and they agreed to essentially carve the Middle East into spheres of influence. So France would control much of modern day Syria and Lebanon. Britain would get some areas that would become Iraq, Jordan Palestine, and if you're thinking, wait.

So they just blatantly ignored the promises that they had made, implied or not about Arab leaders helping them revolt against the Ottomans and getting Arab independence. They just. Ignored those promises. Yes, I'm, I'm sorry to say that is what the history shows. So when the Bolsheviks took power in Russia in 1917, they leaked this secret agreement because even though they weren't fully involved in it, they did know about it and Arab leaders felt.

Deeply betrayed. They had fought alongside the British in hopes of independence only to learn that their lands had already been promised to European powers. And as you can probably guess, the Sykes Pico agreement is often seen as a symbol of colonial manipulation. And it was the fuel for decades of distrust between Western powers and the Arab world and its borders and consequences still shape the whole region today.

So how does this agreement affect Syria in particular? Well, it shows that the Arab Revolt was a turning point. Yes. But the start of modern Syria began with this broken promise, and it was kind of the beginning of the end for Ottoman control in the region. Leaders like Faisal and Abdullah would go on to play major roles in the modern Middle East, which we'll talk about in a little bit.

But we have a lot that just happened in greater Syria during World War I. There was an Arab Revolt. There were promises made and broken between the west and the Arab world. There were famines, there was a genocide for the Armenians. There was just war in general. This is a really difficult time. And at the end of World War I, Ottoman rule collapsed.

It was exhausted on all fronts. It lost battles. The revolts massive civilian suffering. It's surrendered to the allies in October, 1918. But here's the thing, when massive empires like this fall. It becomes a race to see what's gonna happen. It, it's helpful to think of the years from 1918 to 1920, kind of like a power vacuum.

Like what will happen to all this ottoman land? Who's gonna get it and how are they gonna get it? So Allied troops occupied key ottoman territories right off the bat, but in Syria, you'll remember that Faisal was the declared king of an Arab kingdom of Syria. And he ruled from late 1918 to mid 1920, and he was seen by many Syrians or people in Syria as a liberator and a symbol of Arab independence, and he tried to establish a modern Arab constitutional monarchy.

His government was largely civilian with many educated Arab nationalists and intellectuals in leadership positions. These were people who believed in pan-Arabism. Now pan-Arabism is the idea that Arabs from different regions share a common language, culture future, and they wanted to build a modern, independent Arab state like we talked about.

And Faisal made some major headway, but the economy was struggling, infrastructure was damaged, and the region, the different regions in Syria were greater. Syria, I should say, weren't united. Plus Faisal wasn't backed by any real military power, so he was kind of caught between his Arab supporters and the strategic interests of the French and the British.

And this independence didn't last long because back in Europe. Britain and France were already dividing up the former Ottoman lands based on the Sykes Pico agreement, and also decisions made at the San Remo conference in 1920. And so Britain and France made it official that Syria was not gonna be independent.

Instead, it would be become a French mandate, meaning that the League of Nations gave France authority to govern the territory until it was considered ready for self-rule. And these deals gave France control over Syria and Lebanon. And again, like we talked about, Britain took control of other areas in the region.

France wasted no time asserting control. So when Faisal refused to step down in 1920, French forces marched into Syria. A small Syrian army resisted, but they were hopelessly outnumbered.

King Faisal was exiled, and the French established a mandate over Syria, under the authority of the newly formed League of Nations.

And as a consolation for their broken promises, Britain essentially gifted Faisal a kingship over Iraq. Which was under a British mandate, but that's a story for another day. All right. Let's talk about the French mandate now. So under the French Syria's borders changed. They were almost the same as what we have today in 2025, but not quite.

You'll remember that the Ottomans had ruled over a greater Syria through provinces and districts and. And that the main Syrian provinces had been Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, and an autonomous Mount Lebanon. And together these had covered much of greater Syria, which had parts of lots of modern day countries in the region.

Well, when the French and British made new Borderers, they divided things up so that Syria had the Syrian core that it had had under the Ottomans, but it also added extra territories from Mesopotamian provinces like modern day Northeast Syria. The Al Jazeera region used to be part of what was called Mesopotamia and Eastern Syria also had been traditionally in control of Bedouin tribes and wasn't really seen as part of greater Syria under the Ottomans.

So this explains why parts of modern Syria, especially the Northeastern East, felt more like extensions of Iraq or Southeastern Turkey. Historically. I have a map on Patreon, so you can see how these borders shifted. Because you know, you kind of need to see those things visually. But after drawing these borders, the French did not treat Syria as a unified country.

Instead, France divided it into several separate little statelets, the state of Damascus, the state of Aleppo, the alloy state on the coast, and the Druze State in the south, and Greater Lebanon, which was carved out as a separate entity in 1920. Creating the borders of modern day Lebanon. Now, these little statelets didn't go over very well.

The Syrians strongly opposed them, and Arab nationalists rejected the division of separate states. Most Syrians resented the whole thing. They wanted national unity and independence, not division. And some wanted to focus on loyalty toward Syrian state. While other Arab nationalists were still wanting that big Arab nation.

That would stretch from Iraq to Morocco, from Syria to Oman. They wanted that big, um, Arab state as we talked about earlier. And the new borders messed with Arab unification and also ignored many historical, tribal and religious lines, which has had long-term consequences for regional identity and stability.

The French liked to recruit for the military from the alloy, Druze, Kurd, and other minority communities. They were used to. These people were used to maintain order and suppress local rebellions. Of course, not all Alloy whites and minorities worked with the French, but the French offered them some protection and opportunity in a Sunni majority country where they had long

been marginalized as poor and not considered real Muslims as far as Orthodox SUNY Muslims were concerned.

And additionally, the Kurds had been promised a Kurdish state. This also never materialized. And they were divided among these new state boundaries of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. So hopefully you're seeing here this divide and rule approach of the French is going to have long-term consequences because it's dividing people and it's giving minorities, especially the alloys a.

More access to the military than Sunnis, who typically were more on the political side of things. Now, from the French perspective, this was just classic divide and rule. By splitting the country along sectarian and regional lines, France could weaken Syrian nationalism, it could strengthen its own control, and it also planted seeds of division that Syrians would struggle with for generations.

It made it nearly impossible to create a Syrian identity. Now, Syrians did resist the French. The biggest uprising came in 1925, the great Syrian revolts it's called, and it began in the D region, but quickly spread across the country. Villages, towns and cities rose up against French rule, and for two years, gorilla fighters clashed with French forces and the French responded by.

Bombarding Damascus, they have reduced entire neighborhoods to rubble. There were heavy casualties, and by 1927, the revolt was crushed. But even in defeat, the revolt was a kind of cornerstone of Syrian identity. It showed that Syrians of different regions and backgrounds could unite against foreign control.

So the French colonial rule fueled nationalism on a local level, also on an Arab level, and in a way, a sense of Syrian identity kind of began to rise up that had not been there before. Now the French mandate lasted until 1946. So throughout the 1930s, Syrian leaders continued to push for independence.

They even made a coalition of nationalist politicians called the National Block that became the main voice for freedom. The national Block was mostly educated elites who wanted independence through diplomacy rather than armed rebellion. They negotiated with the French, they staged protests. They demanded self-rule.

In 1930, France drafted a new Syrian constitution, declared the creation of the Syrian Republic. On paper, this looked like a step toward independence, but in reality the French kept control over foreign policy, the military, much of the economy. And in 1936, the national block negotiated the Francos Syrian Treaty, which promised independence within three years so that they had the kinda this time for transition.

France was a master at dragging its feet on ratifying it though. So independence was further delayed and a sense of Syrian nationalism continued to grow. Now to add to this, in 1939, just

before World War II, France ceded a province called Sanja of Alexandria to Turkey. Hoping that they could secure neutrality out of Turkey in a coming war.

Now, this area was home to Arabs, Armenians, allops, Turks, so it was very mixed. Ethnically and Syrians were furious. They considered Alexandria to a historical part of Syria, and its loss has remained a sore point. Ever since, even today, some Syrians refuse to formally recognize it as Turkish territory, and the borders of Syria after this are the same borders that Syria has today in 2025.

In 1939, when World War II began, the French authorities tightened control, and Syrians saw another delay in their independence. Then to make matters worse, in 1940, Nazi Germany occupied France and the French government surrendered and set up the Vichy regime, which collaborated with the Nazis. So the French mandate in Syria passed to the Vichy regime.

A French general Charles De Gaulle refused to accept. Surrender. And from London, he urged French soldiers and citizens to continue fighting alongside the allies and created a government in exile sorts and a military force called the free French Forces, which fought alongside the allies. Now, the free French forces and the British were very worried that the Vichy authorities would allow German influence, Nazi influence.

Syria and most Syrians also didn't like the VCs and saw it as another layer of colonial structure. In the summer of 1941, British and free French forces invaded Syria and Lebanon with the goal to take out the pro-Nazi Vichy French. And secure the region against access powers. And it worked. The free French took control.

And after the fighting ended in July, 1941, general Dugall announced that Syria and Lebanon were now independent states. And this sounded again like a huge victory. Syrians celebrated, raised their flag, even started building their own government institutions. But here's the catch. The French didn't actually leave.

French troops remained stationed in Syria. French officials still influenced politics, and the French government delayed any real transfer of power. So in practice, Syrians had symbolic independence, but not full control. This is why historians often call this the independence that wasn't by the end of World War II Syrians were pretty fed up.

In May, 1945 protests broke out. Damascus and French forces responded by shelling the city killing hundreds of civilians. This brutality horrified the world, especially Britain and the United States. They made it clear that France could not cling to its mandate. For much longer. And so finally, under international pressure, including the newly formed United Nations, France agreed to leave and the last French soldiers withdrew on April 17th, 1946, giving Syria its true independence.

This was a big moment. There was celebration in the streets, flags, waving, parades, speeches. Syrians had fought for this moment for decades, and it was a time of great hope. But as we

know from studying a lot of independence movements, independence comes with challenges, and there were a lot of scars of the division caused during the Ottoman Empire, the French mandate many wars and divisions along ethnic and religious lines.

The political system was very fragile, and as we'll see in the next episode, instability would unfortunately define Syria's early years as a nation. So we're gonna stop there. Let's zoom out and review for a second. World War I was very difficult on Syria. Many groups wanted to get rid of the Ottomans, even partnered with the British to do it, but then when the Ottoman Empire fell.

Promises of an Arab nation were broken, and the French mandate was put into place. Syria was divided up, which most Syrians resented. And during World War II, Syria had a little stint of rule under the Vichy government, which collaborated with the Nazis. Then the free French forces came in and took over, stayed for a long time.

There was some semblance of independence, but it was more like an independence that wasn't. And after World War II, Syrians were more ready than ever for formal independence and finally gained it in 1946. And throughout all of this, we have the Pan Arab movement growing, really starting to take strong shape in the 1940s.

This idea of uniting all Arabs under an Arab identity and nation. It was a pretty novel idea at the time, because if you really think about it, it could be quite powerful. The Arab world had different religions, has different religions. Christians, Jews, different sects of Islam and more, but it shares a language, different dialects.

Sure. But a shared language. It's not like Europe where there's all these different languages. Right. And so the idea of a United Arab people was very influential at this time and will be very important in understanding things as we head into part three. Overall, the French mandate had left Syria in a unique position.

On one hand, borders had been redrawn, communities had been divided, independents had been delayed. On the other, the resistance, the great revolt, the rise of the national block gave Syrians a common enemy and shared desire for independence. And modern Syria was born in 1946 to a pretty shaky beginning.

Within just a few years, the country would face. Coup after coup searching for stability. We'll talk more in part three about how the colonial carve up of the land affected Syria, but also how Syrian leaders struggled to promote unity in their own right as well. And out of the chaos, a new political movement would rise the Baath party, and eventually a man named Hafez Al-Assad.

And that's where we're headed next in Part three. If you'd like a timeline review of this episode to help you remember what we've talked about, head over to patreon.com/wiserworldpodcast where you can grab one. I've linked it in the show notes, and if you learn something from this episode, make sure to subscribe to the podcast on your favorite app so you can know when the episodes drop.

As well as sign up for our free weekly newsletter by clicking on the link in my show notes or heading to [wiser world.com](http://wiserworld.com). You can also follow us on Instagram at Wiser World Podcast. Thank you for learning more about Syria with me today. I am excited to learn more with you when part three comes out in a few days.

Until then, let's make the world a little wiser.