

Post-war Societies (Middle East)

By [Cyrus Schayegh](#)

Summary

The immediate post-war Middle East formed part of a Eurasia-wide arc of instability, which settled only in the mid-1920s. While the Ottoman Empire's dissolution allowed France and especially Britain to expand territorially, both faced nationalist pushback. But although nationalisms emerged dominant across the Middle East, they were complex in practice and infused with transnational and international dimensions.

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Introduction

In the Middle East, World War I was the peak of a longer period of instability. From 1906 Iran experienced unrest and, from 1908, foreign intervention; in 1911–1913 the Ottomans fought wars in Libya and the [Balkans](#). And 1918 to the mid-1920s was a violent and transitional time all across western Eurasian [empires](#).¹ Cutting off Baltic and Slavic areas from [Germany](#), destroying the [Austro-Hungarian](#) and [Ottoman](#) empires, triggering [revolution in Russia](#), and degrading [Iran's](#) central government, World War I created vacuums filled by inter-state, civil, secessionist, and pan-movement wars and protracted political recalibrations. In the Middle East, Western empires peaked territorially yet faced pushback by national movements; and [nationalisms](#) triumphed, albeit very messily and linked to extra-national worlds.²

The War's Immediate Humanitarian Consequences

The war had colossal costs. Between 1914 and 1918 one in six [Ottoman civilians died](#), including 1.5 million Armenians in a state-led [genocide](#), and hundreds of thousands were (re-

)moved. Thereafter [food](#) and [health](#) remained precarious, also because of continued violence. States not only caused that violence, but sometimes tried to help certain victim groups. Societal actors also mobilized to help victims. The U.S. [Near East Relief](#) (NER), for example, raised \$100 million between 1915 and 1926; until 1918 only for Armenians and Lebanese, thereafter also for other victims, primarily Christians. At its peak in 1921 the organization fed 300,000 people in Turkey, the Soviet Caucasus, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, ending operations only in 1928.³

Russia

Of the pre-war Middle East's main European powers, Germany mattered least just after 1918. In 1917, Bolshevik [Russia](#) had published the secret 1916 Anglo-French(-Russian) [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) that charted the division of a post-Ottoman Middle East, and withdrawn all claims vis-à-vis the Ottomans. Then Russia returned and in 1919 it re-entered the Caucasus, re-annexing [Armenia](#), [Azerbaijan](#), and [Georgia](#) as the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (SFSR) between 1920 and 1922. Russia maintained contact with the nascent Turkish National Movement (TNM) from 1919, officializing relations in the Moscow Treaty of March 1921. In May 1920 Russian forces landed in northwestern Iran. First supporting the local nationalist leftist *Jangalis*, they then helped communists to establish the Soviet Republic of Gilan (SRG). But on 26 February 1921 Russia signed the Soviet-Persian Friendship Treaty, revoking the 1828 Turkmenchay Treaty averse to Iran and interdicting White Russian attacks from Iran. The SRG collapsed in September 1921.

The Encounter between National Movements and the British and French Empires

[Great Britain](#) and [France](#) were the principal European powers at the end of World War I. Britain was the strongest military power and signatory of the Allied-Ottoman [Armistice of Mudros](#) on 30 October 1918. Both powers had multiple aims. France demanded a say in the Ottoman Empire's fate and compensation for its wartime losses in the form of southeast Anatolia and Lebanon/Syria, claiming a cultural affinity from the Crusades (*la Syrie française*). Britain wished to ward off the Bolsheviks and secure [India](#) by keeping the Suez Canal and [Egypt](#), under British rule since 1882, and by protecting its glacis from Palestine to Iraq. It also had to accommodate France.

Britain and France's policy evolved in three stages. First, until early 1919, Britain and France recognized that World War I had drained them, and signaled, however tepidly, understanding of Middle Easterners' political demands. In Iran and the Caucasus, Britain's North Persia Force, established in 1918, was disbanded in 1919. While Mudros' terms were harsh – inter

alia, the Ottoman army was demobilized, non-Anatolian garrisons were evacuated, and the Allies controlled the Straits and Istanbul – Anatolia remained unoccupied. An exception was France's invasion, per the Sykes-Picot Agreement, of Cilicia, in November 1918. In the same month, Egypt's High Commissioner [Reginald Wingate \(1861-1953\)](#) received nationalists, including their leader [Sa'd Zaghlul \(1859-1927\)](#). They demanded independence, albeit conceding British supervision of Egypt's debt and the Suez Canal, and the right to address the upcoming [Paris Peace Conference](#), eventually held from January to June 1919. In July 1918, Britain's Declaration to the Seven (referring to seven Egypt-based Syrian notables) stated that the government of Arab ex-Ottoman lands "should be based upon the principle of the consent of the governed."⁴ And in November 1918 a Franco-British message recognized ex-Ottoman Arabs' auto-determination.

The second phase of British and French policy began in early 1919 as Britain and France sought to maximize their political-territorial position. They profited from Washington abandoning its internationalist posture of 1916/17–1919. They also believed Middle Easterners were too weak to resist, downplaying their independence demands; and they confronted Bolshevik Russia. In Iran, Britain signed the Anglo-Persian Treaty in August 1919, granting Britain oversight of financial and military matters, with three politicians including Prime Minister [Hassan Vossug ed Dowleh \(1868-1951\)](#). In the Caucasus, Britain supported local nationalists against the Bolsheviks and Turks in 1919–1920. In Turkey, Britain and France – keen to balance [Italy](#) that occupied Antalya in April 1919 – supported [Greece's](#) decision to land troops at [Izmir](#) in May 1919 and push eastwards to realize a key part of its long-held *Megali Idea*, the annexation of western Anatolia. In Istanbul, the Allies cornered [Mehmed VI, Sultan of the Turks \(1861-1926\)](#). In August 1920, he signed the [Treaty of Sèvres](#). In it, Thrace and Izmir were designated Greek; the Straits and Istanbul, Allied; and Anatolia's southwest and center-south, Italian and French influence zones. It foresaw a Franco-British-influenced Kurdish state and an Armenian state, too.

As for Egypt, London criticized Wingate, barred Zaghlul's nationalist delegation (*wafd*) from Paris, exiling its members in March 1919, and by July 1919 repressed the resulting multi-class, urban-rural revolt. Regarding the ex-Ottoman Arab areas, France and Britain controlled access to the Paris Peace Conference, and in 1919–1920 implemented the mandate system under Article 22 of the June 1919 [League of Nations](#) Covenant that followed the Paris conference. Per the Allied Conference of San Remo in April 1920, Iraq and Palestine along with Transjordan went to Britain; Syria and Lebanon to France. Although London and Paris had in June 1919 allowed U.S. President [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\)](#) King-Crane Commission to canvass political demands from Cilicia to Palestine, they ignored its report; Wilson acquiesced. The League officialized these mandates in 1922; and although its mandate system in principle set some bounds to British and [French](#) rule, in practice its effect

on colonial policies was light. (Borders were finalized as late as 1925, when Mosul province became Iraqi.) In [Iraq](#), Britain in 1919 forbid nationalists to address the Paris conference, and repressed the mainly tribal yet nationalistically informed uprising of June–August 1920. In [Palestine](#), military rule became civilian rule in 1920. Persistent Arab critique of the Palestine Mandate Charter, which explicitly included the [Balfour Declaration](#) – London’s promise, in 1917, to “facilitate...a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine – was in vain. Britain put down anti-[Zionist](#) disturbances in April 1920 and May 1921. Regarding Syria, Britain allowed the Hashemite Faysal ([Faysal I, King of Iraq \(1885-1933\)](#)) – a leader, like his brother Abdullah ([Abdullah, King of Jordan \(1882-1951\)](#)), of the 1916–1918 anti-Ottoman Arab Revolt, and royal head of Damascus’ nationalist government in 1918–1920 – to visit the Paris conference, but abandoned him for France. Controlling Lebanon and Cilicia from November 1918, France conquered Syria in August 1920. It evicted Faysal’s government, and refused to recognize Sunni urban nationalists until following the 1925–1927 Syrian Revolt.⁵

The third phase occurred as early as late 1919 (in Egypt) to as late as 1928 (in Syria), during which Britain and France recalibrated their policies. They reacted to nationalist pushback. This highlighted that World War I had diminished their funds and power. In Arab ex-Ottoman lands, this phase unfolded against the background of nationalist ire that the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration had nixed Britain’s wartime promise, made in the 1915 correspondence between Egypt’s High Commissioner [Henry McMahon \(1862-1949\)](#) and the Sharif of Mecca, Husayn ibn Ali ([Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz \(-1931\)](#)), to support an Arab kingdom after the war. Further, by 1920 in the Caucasus, Britain had to accept Bolshevik control. This fact, and Ottoman and Qajar pre-war independence, caused Britain and others to eventually accept Turkey’s and Iran’s independence post-war, too. Iran’s parliament refused to sign the Anglo-Persian Treaty. In 1920 an officer, Reza Khan ([Reza Shah Pahlavi \(1878-1944\)](#)), gained influence and on 21 February 1921 helped stage a coup d’état. Britain was involved, welcoming the resultant decrease of the Bolshevik threat and accepting Iran’s independence while preserving key interests, including the quasi-sovereign Anglo-Persian Oil Company in southwestern Iran. Britain also recognized Reza Shah when he established his own Pahlavi dynasty in 1925.

The TNM started in post-Armistice Anatolia with army officers organizing men and material; local notables joined, too. It was galvanized by the Allied-supported Greek landing in Izmir and the sultan’s ineffective response then and to Sèvres; and aided by Ottoman military skills honed in 1914–1918 and by Allied infighting. The TNM’s National Pact (*misak-ı milli*), calling for a Turkish nation-state in Anatolia and Thrace, was finalized at the Sivas Congress of September 1919 and confirmed in January 1920 by Istanbul’s Ottoman parliament, consequently closed by the Allies. At the same time, the TNM sidelined pan-Turkic visions, held for instance by Ottoman ex-War Minister [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#). Fleeing to

Germany in 1918, Enver worked with the Bolsheviks until falling out with them and the TNM in 1921; Bolshevik forces killed him in Central Asia in 1922. The TNM conquered the east of Turkey by 1920; harassed France in Cilicia so much that Paris recognized it in 1921, withdrawing in December 1921; and evicted Greece from Anatolia in September 1922. British recognition followed suit. In November 1922 the TNM's leader, [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk \(-1938\)](#), strong-armed the Grand National Assembly to abolish the sultanate, forcing the Allies to accept the TNM as Turkey's only representative. The subsequent Lausanne Treaty of July 1923 internationally recognized Turkey while imposing a League of Nations (non-Muslim) minority protection guarantee, like most other post-Ottoman, -Habsburg, and -Russian nation-states.

In December 1919 Britain sent the inquiry Milner Mission to Egypt, which in January 1921 recommended terminating the wartime protectorate. Subsequent negotiations with Zaghlul failed: they did not meet the nationalists' minimal requests. In February 1922, London unilaterally declared Egypt's independence, encouraged by the new high commissioner from 1919, [Edmund Allenby \(1861-1936\)](#). This was a real accomplishment, except for four "Reserved Points": British control of imperial communications, defense, Sudan, and foreign interests. Britain's Arab policy was recalibrated in March 1921 at the Cairo Conference. Directed by Colonial Secretary [Winston Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#), the conference found a Hashemite "Sharifian solution." Faysal became Iraq's king. Some companions from his Syrian days followed him to Iraq. His government was correspondingly nationalistic, and in Iraq the Mandate power was least hands-on. Between 1930 and 1932 Britain, trusting Faysal, would further lessen its expenses, granting Iraq independence light. The Cairo Conference also appointed Abdullah Emir of Transjordan, whereto he had in fall 1920 moved his troops from the Hijaz.

The resultant partition of Palestine, formalized in May 1923, displeased Zionists. But their reliance on Britain continued. So did Palestinian rejection of the Mandate Charter. After the disturbances of May 1921, Britain reacted. The Haycraft Commission of Inquiry, while making Arabs responsible, identified Jewish immigration and disregard of Arab interests as the root cause. From summer 1921 to summer 1922 a Palestinian delegation negotiated with Britain in London, visiting League officials in Geneva, too. But it rejected a legislative council plan and the White Paper of June 1922, which did not abandon the charter, hence explicitly upholding the Balfour Declaration.

France's policies differed somewhat from Britain's. In 1920 France declared the *L'État de Grand Liban*. Many though not all Christians, especially Maronites, welcomed Paris as their protector.⁶ Here, then, France elaborated rather than recalibrated its policy, issuing a constitution and declaring a republic in 1926. Syria was subdivided several times into

statelets, the most important two for Muslim minorities, the Alawis (1920/23–1936) and Druze (1921–1936). It took the 1925–1927 Syrian Revolt – which, while started by the Druze, was nationalist – for France to grudgingly recognize Syria’s nationalists.

There were two main exceptions to the above-noted three-stage pattern. In both, policy remained steady throughout the early post-war years. One concerned the Zionist *Yishuv* (settlement project), which Britain saw as useful for its empire. London never wavered from upholding the Balfour Declaration, allowing the Zionist Executive to work in Palestine. The other exception regarded Arabia, where Britain, keen to preserve stability, accepted a changing balance of power. From 1918 it stood by as Ibn Sa’ud ([Ibn Sa’ud, King of Saudi Arabia \(1875-1953\)](#)) continued his pre-war expansion from his Najdi base, evicting, among others, the Hashemites from the Hijaz in 1925. In the process he signed treaties with Britain, such as the one regarding Iraq in 1922. Until 1924 Britain paid him subsidies to help stabilize the peninsula, and through World War II Saudi independence was paired with a special British relationship.

The Complexities of Nationalisms

After the war, nation-states and nation-state movements crystallized as the dominant political choice throughout the Middle East. They had deep pre-war roots in cultural Arabism and political Ottomanism; a key alternative, indigenous multinational empires, had collapsed; and most Middle Easterners saw foreign empires as illegitimate. Even communists, most influential in Egypt, Palestine, and Iran, played the nationality card; so did the USSR, e.g. at the Conference of the Peoples of the East in Baku in 1920. Some Ottoman nationalists, like the Druze intellectual-activist [Shakib Arslan \(1869-1946\)](#), became Muslim nationalists. Basically tribal campaigns like Ibn Saud’s made tiny nationalizing steps. And small religious communities such as the Maronites and Assyrians increasingly self-identified as ethnic/national, too.

But nation-state building was messy. Urban, rural, and tribal identities still mattered, shaping nationalism and being reshaped in turn. Also, people envisioned their nation-in-the-making in multiple, often contrasting ways. While the TNM focused on Turkey, [pan-Turkism](#) survived. Arabs were familiar with both pan-Arab *qawmiyya* and single-country *wataniyyas*, although the two overlapped in practice. Leaders – many forming “the last Ottoman generation,”⁷ educated around the turn of the century – played roles in both. Greater Syria (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Transjordan) was an attractive unit, too; and Egypt, though on the margins of *qawmiyya*’s radius until the 1930s, was not entirely unfamiliar with that ideology even in the 1920s. Turkish and Arab nationalism were not a-religious, nationalizing and/or culturalizing Islam. The TNM attracted some Kurds and Arabs, too, until it abolished the sultanate.⁸ Certain

nation-state builders, e.g. the Armenians and Kurds, failed; foreign powers were too uncommitted and the TNM too strong, nixing Greece's Anatolian plans as well. Especially subalterns sometimes felt indifferent to nationalism. And facing Arab nationalisms, some small communities like the Maronites and Iraq's Assyrians looked for protection to European empires, the French and British, respectively. Meanwhile, these two powers saw their Mandate subjects through a self-serving communitarian lens. They ethnicized respective divisions, recycling Ottoman structures like the *millet* and importing colonial models e.g. from Morocco and India. In Palestine, even the Sunni majority was affected by the new Supreme Muslim Council; in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, Muslim minorities – the Shi'is, Druze, and Alawis – became more state-institutionalized.

Nation-state building also involved varying combinations of inclusion and exclusion. Facing [imperialist](#) recalcitrance, Egyptian Copts and Sunnis and Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'is cooperated in 1919 and 1920, respectively, and thereafter, too. Also, some "minorities" saw their future within a broader nationalism; many Arab Orthodox Christians were *qawmiyyun*. Conversely, Iran solidified a Perso-centric nationalism; in parallel, its military reinforced Tehran's writ, settling tribes and subduing centrifugal and/or secessionist movements in Khuzestan, Kurdistan, Gilan, and Baluchistan. The most violent and traumatic experience of exclusion happened in Turkey. The TNM refused to allow genocide survivors to return, and continued to massacre Armenians where it could, especially in the Caucasus and Cilicia, also targeting other Christians like the Assyrians. From 1925 on a massive campaign targeted the Kurds. And in the 1919–1922 Greek-TNM war both sides committed ethnic cleansing, and in January 1923 agreed, with full League support, to exchange the remaining 2 million (mostly Turcophone) Greek Orthodox, except Istanbul's, and (mainly Grecophone) Muslims. This continued the pre-war homogenization policies in the Balkans that had targeted Christians and – before 1914 numerically more important – Muslims. And it was followed by state-organized oblivion, eradicating "non-national" texts and sites such as cemeteries.⁹

Transnational and International Dimensions

Nation-state building was indissolubly transnational. This shows we cannot understand "the Middle East" exclusively from "the inside," and helps explain why there is no clearly delimited or homogeneous "inside" to begin with. To right-wing Europeans Atatürk was an admirable strongman, and Iran looked to Turkey for modernizing inspiration. Muslims from French North Africa via Soviet Central Asia to British India and beyond followed the region's affairs, perpetuating European fears of pan-Islamism.¹⁰ When Turkey abolished the Caliphate in 1924, that interest was nicked, not killed. Characteristically, in the 1920s a Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement, *taqrib*, and caliphate successorship debates transcended the Middle East.¹¹

Diasporas – especially Arab ones, in Europe, both Americas, and Africa – were instrumental though far from unified in discussing nationalisms, which were linked to global debates.¹² And as a term, the “Middle East” coexisted imprecisely with the “Near East,” a name that included Greece and was partly British imperial in coinage, reflecting London’s interwar preeminence in the region.¹³

Finally, international frameworks mattered. Wilson called for a “more wholesome diplomacy” and in January 1918 declared that the Ottoman Empire’s Turkish portion should have “a secure sovereignty,” all others “an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.” Made partly in response to Bolshevik internationalism, his [Fourteen Points](#) raised expectations among the colonized; many had never quite accepted colonialism anyway. Many Middle Easterners tried to access the Paris Peace Conference, seen as a step toward international recognition. While in 1919–1920 it became clear that Wilsonian self-determination was for Europeans, and empires – most notably France – dug in, by 1922 high-level League bureaucrats with internationalist convictions and outside pressure recalibrated the League. Mandate powers had to legitimate themselves in Geneva; in *this* sense the mandate system did represent a departure from pre-war colonialism. A “Syrian-Palestinian Congress” lobby worked out of Geneva beginning in 1920–1921, Zionists from 1924. Last but not least, diasporas mattered, too, for non-Mandate-residents could send Mandate-related comments and complaints directly to the League rather than via a Mandate power.¹⁴

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Notes

1. Manela, Erez / Gerwarth, Robert (eds.): *Empires at War. 1911–1923*, Oxford 2014. ↑
2. On the historiography of nationalism, see Gershoni, Israel: *Rethinking the Formation of Arab Nationalism in the Middle East, 1920–1945. Old and New Narratives*, in: Jankowski, James / Gershoni, Israel (eds.): *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, New York 1997, pp. 3–25; Gelvin, James: “Arab Nationalism.” Has a New Framework Emerged?, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)* 41 (2009), pp. 10–12; Wien, Peter: Preface. Relocating Arab Nationalism, in: *IJMES* 43 (2011), pp. 203–204. One overview is Choueiri, Youssef: *Arab Nationalism, a History. Nation and State in the Arab World*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000. A classic is Dawn, Ernest: *The Formation of Pan-Arab Nationalism in the Interwar Period*, in: *IJMES* 20 (1988), pp. 67–91. See also Dakhli, Leyla: *Une génération d’intellectuels arabes. Syrie et Liban, 1908–1940*, Paris 2009. ↑
3. Barton, James: *The Story of Near East Relief (1915–1930)*, New York 1930. ↑
4. Choueiri, Arab Nationalism 2000, p. 149. ↑

5. Besides the literature on Syria in the bibliography, see also Neep, Daniel: *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate. Insurgency, Space and State Formation*, Cambridge 2012; Millet, Thierry: *Violence et réseaux de résistance en Syrie de 1920 à 1925*, in: *Bulletin d'études Orientales* 55 (2003–2004), pp. 165–182. [↑](#)
6. Besides the literature on Lebanon in the bibliography, see also Hakim, Carol: *The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea. 1840–1920*, Berkeley 2013; Kaufman, Asher: *Reviving Phoenicia. In Search of Identity in Lebanon*, London 2004; Khoury, Gerard: *La France et l'Orient arabe. Naissance du Liban moderne, 1914–1920*, Paris 1993. [↑](#)
7. Provence, Michael: *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge 2017. [↑](#)
8. See e.g. Halabi, Awad: *Liminal Loyalties. Ottomanism and Palestinian Responses to the Turkish War of Independence, 1919–22*, in: *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41 (2012), pp. 19–37. [↑](#)
9. Besides the literature on early republican Turkey in the bibliography, see also Kezer, Zeynep: *Building the Nation-State. State, Space, and Ideology in Early Republican Turkey*, Pittsburgh 2015; Bayar, Yeşim: *In Pursuit of Homogeneity. The Lausanne Conference, Minorities and the Turkish Nation*, in: *Nationalities Papers* 42 (2013), pp. 108–125; Philliou, Christine: *When the Clock Strikes Twelve. The Inception of an Ottoman Past in Early Republican Turkey*, in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31 (2011), pp. 172–182. See also Mazower, Mark: *Salonica. City of Ghosts. Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430–1950*, London 2004. An early study is Ladas, Stephen P.: *The Exchange of Minorities. Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey*, New York 1932. [↑](#)
10. See Thomas, Martin: *Empires of Intelligence. Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914*, Berkeley 2008. [↑](#)
11. On taqrib, see Brunner, Rainer: *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century*, Leiden 2004. [↑](#)
12. Besides the literature in the bibliography on diasporas, see Schumann, Christoph: *Nationalism, Diaspora and "Civilisational Mission,"* in: *Nations and Nationalism* 10 (2004), pp. 599–617; Fahrentold, Stacy: *Between the Ottomans and the Entente. The First World War in the Syrian Diaspora, 1908–1922*, Oxford forthcoming. [↑](#)
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14. For international aspects, see Pedersen, Susan: *The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*, Oxford 2015; Riga, Liliana / Kennedy, James: *Tolerant Majorities, Loyal Minorities and "Ethnic Reversals." Constructing Minority Rights at Versailles 1919*, in: *Nations and Nationalism* 15 (2009), pp. 461–482; and Throntveit, Trygve: *The Fable of the Fourteen Points. Woodrow Wilson and National Self-*

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- [Conference of San Remo \(Encyclopaedia Britannica\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Shissler, Holly: After the War. In Search of the Missing, World War I in the Middle East and North Africa \(Georgetown University\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Shuster, Mike: The Middle East and the West: WWI and Beyond, 20 August 2004 \(NPR Radio\) \(Audio\)](#)
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