



## LESSON PLAN: SYRIA'S ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

### Syrian History After World War I

Much of Syria's troubled relationship with the western nations and its regional neighbors is deeply rooted in its modern beginnings at the end of World War I. In the period between 1914 and 1922 a series of complex events and power politics took place in which Syria achieved a brief moment of pan-Arab independence. This came to a disappointing end for Syrians when the allied victors, France and Britain squashed any hope for Arab unity with the division of the remains of the Ottoman Empire.

There were attempts by Syrians to gain more autonomy from the Ottomans before the war. As the Empire took its last gasps of life, groups of Syrians publicly demanded reform of the Ottoman bureaucracy that was oppressively ruling the Middle East and keeping it from progressing. Ottoman governors, sensing a further loss of territory, cracked down on the dissidents and publicly executed many for their efforts at reform.

At the height of WWI, even before victory was a sure thing, French and British diplomats devised the Sykes-Picot Agreement divvying up the post-war Middle East after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. This granted France and Britain huge swaths of land that spread from what would become modern Turkey, west to Iraq and south along the Arabian Peninsula along the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.

The British were anxious to strengthen their position in relation to the French in determining the future of the Middle East and sought the support of local Arab leaders to revolt against the Ottoman control. Arab leaders believed the British were also honoring Arab nationalism and would grant independence once the war was over. Advised by British officers like T.E. Lawrence (a.k.a. Lawrence of Arabia) Arab leaders rose against the Turks and in October of 1918, defeated Turkish troops and took the city of Damascus. Once freed from Ottoman control, Arab nationalists flocked to the city and in June of 1919 the Arab leaders took a crucial step toward independence. Leaders began to restructure Syria declaring Arabic the official language and forming a committee to draft a constitution.

The General Syrian Congress of Arab leaders called for an independent Greater Syria that would include the present day countries of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. Prince Faysal, son of the Heshemite king Sharif Husayn, was in Paris at the invitation of Woodrow Wilson to persuade the allied victors to honor the pledges Arab leaders heard of independence. But their case gained little support and in the

end both France and Britain insisted the Sykes-Picot agreement would be the determining force in the restructuring of the Middle East.

Three forces worked against Arab nationalism: One was France which was determined to remain a power and influence in the Middle East. The second was Britain, which wanted to keep Mesopotamia under control to counter Russian influence and protect oil interests. The third was Zionism and the Jewish interest in Palestine. Though the British promised Arabs an independent state or confederation that would control the area, the Sykes-Picot Agreement had also promised a national home in Palestine for Zionists. The two promises were in conflict and the Europeans believed honoring the Syrian promise would place the other European interests at risk.

At the Supreme Allied Council meeting in San Remo, Italy in 1920, each of the two European powers separated Greater Syria into mandates as arranged by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In these mandates, Syria came under French control and influence as did present day Lebanon and parts of southern Turkey. The British would control areas of Iraq, Jordan, and northern Saudi Arabia southward along the Persian Gulf. The borders of these states were arbitrarily drawn by the European allies to suit their interests. For Arab nationalists who had fought the Ottomans and pushed them back into Turkey the Sykes-Picot Agreement was a betrayal by the West that denied the dream of a Pan-Syrian state.

**Review questions:**

1. How far back had Syrians tried to gain independence?
2. How did the power politics of the two dominant European powers play in to the hands of Syrians wanting to be independent from the Ottoman Empire?
3. How did the British support of local Arab leaders fighting the Ottomans lead them to believe they could declare independence, restructure Syrian boundaries and establish a constitution?
4. Identify and explain the three factors that worked against Syrian independence and unification?