The Saylor Foundation's "Formal Breakup of the Ottoman Empire at the End of World War I"

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire (1299- 1923) was an incredibly important event in the formation of the modern Middle East. Once one of the most powerful empires in world history, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was derisively called the "sick man of Europe," a reference to its growing financial dependence on colonial European powers. In a last ditch attempt to recapture some of its former glory, the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on the side of the Central Powers, but this proved disastrous and actually accelerated its decline.

From 1828 onward, the Ottoman Empire was steadily weakened economically and militarily from invasion and occupation by Russia and European powers like France and Britain. In response, Ottoman rulers tried to improve their position by allying themselves with various European powers against other powers; this was based on the theory that the "enemy of my enemy is my friend." In the 1910s, the Ottoman Empire developed closer ties with Germany, though at the cost of expensive railroad and loan concessions as well as military assistance. Unfortunately, the empire's attempt to play the European powers against each other had the tendency to weaken the empire even further by getting it drawn into European conflicts like World War I, which in turn ultimately led to the empire's collapse.

Building on their prior relationship, the Ottomans signed a secret treaty with the Germans in August 1914, which established the Ottoman-German

Alliance. The Ottoman Empire officially entered the war after providing safe harbor to two German ships – the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* – that were fleeing the British navy. These ships were then officially transferred to the Ottoman Empire (though they remained under German control) and attacked the Russian ports of Novorossiysk, Odessa, and Sevastopol in October 1914. The following month, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire, followed shortly thereafter by the British and French. The Ottoman Empire had officially joined the Central Powers.

In response to the Ottomans joining the Central Powers, the Allies encouraged Arabs to revolt against the Ottoman Empire with promises of freedom and independence from the Turks. This appealed to the Arabs for historic reasons (Islam was founded on the Arab Peninsula) and for political reasons (the Arabs felt like second class citizens in the Turk dominated Ottoman Empire). Moreover, the Turkish nationalism that had fueled the Young Turks' seizure of power over the Ottoman Empire in 1908 exacerbated Arab antipathy toward the empire, pushing the Arabs toward revolt. Working with the famed T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia"), Sayyid Hussein bin Ali (Emir of Mecca) staged a revolt against the Ottomans beginning in 1916. At Lawrence's urging, Arab tribal leaders Faisal bin Hussein bin Ali-al Hashemi and Abdullah I bin al-Hussein joined in the revolt, which succeeded in weakening the Ottoman Empire.

Despite vigorous fighting and some important victories (including on the Gallipoli Peninsula), the Central Powers lost World War I. As a result, the Allies imposed the Treaty of Versailles, which created the League of Nations and

granted Britain and France substantial authority ("mandates") over much of the area formerly controlled by the Ottoman Empire; Britain got Mesopotamia and Palestine (later divided into Transjordan and Palestine), and France received Syria and Lebanon. The seat of the former Ottoman Empire became the independent Republic of Turkey.

The breakup of the Ottoman Empire had far-reaching and long-lasting consequences for the Middle East. In the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, the British (through the High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon) had promised the Arabs independence; the United Kingdom reneged on this deal, and instead divided up the Middle East with France under the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Hussein received the western part of Arabia known as the Hejaz, but lost it in 1927 to the Sauds, founders of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, British promises of independence for the Arabs in Palestine were issued at the same time that the Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour was promising Baron Walter Rothschild a Jewish homeland in the same region; the Balfour Declaration, as the Foreign Secretary's statement came to be known, was directly at odds with the promises made to the Arabs for their support during the war. This contributed to the later Zionist-Palestinian confrontation that continues to this day.