

WORLD WAR I

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The period from the outbreak of World War I in 1914 to the granting of France's mandate over Syria by the League of Nations in 1922 was marked by a complicated sequence of events and power politics during which Syrians achieved a brief moment of independence. Syrian intellectuals, many of them graduates of European and European- or American-run universities, were urging the study of Arab history, literature, and language. Also, groups of Syrians publicly demanded decentralization of Ottoman administration and administrative reform. As Ottoman governors such as Jamal Pasha suppressed them, Syrians went underground and demanded complete Arab independence. One of the first secret groups to form was Al Jamiyyah al Arabiyah al Fatat (the Young Arab Society, known as Al Fatat, not to be confused with the contemporary Al Fatah, or Fatah, of the Palestine Liberation Organization--PLO), of which Prince Faysal, son of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, was a member. Another group was Al Ahd (the Covenant), a secret association of Arab army officers.

Following the outbreak of World War I, Jamal Pasha determined to tighten his control over Syria. Attacking dissidents ruthlessly, he arrested Al Fatat members. Twenty-one Arabs were hanged in the city squares of Damascus and Beirut on the morning of May 6, 1915. The event is commemorated as Martyrs' Day, a national holiday in Syria and Lebanon.

Events leading to Syria's momentary independence began in the Arabian Peninsula. The British--anxious for Arab support against the Ottomans in the war and desiring to strengthen their position vis-a-vis the French in the determination of the Middle East's future--asked Sharif Husayn, leader of the Hashimite family and an Ottoman appointee over the Hijaz, to lead the Arabs in revolt. In return the British gave certain assurances, which Husayn interpreted as an endorsement of his eventual kingship of the Arab world. From the Arab nationalists in Damascus came pleas for the Hashimites to assume leadership. Husayn accepted, and on June 5, 1916, the Hijazi tribesmen, led by Husayn's sons and later advised by such British officers as T.E. Lawrence, rose against the Turks. In October 1918, Faysal entered Damascus as a popular hero.

Faysal, as military governor, assumed immediate control of all Syria except for the areas along the Mediterranean coast where French troops werearrisoned. In July 1919, he convened the General Syrian Congress, which declared Syria sovereign and free. In March 1920, the congress proclaimed Faysal king of Syria.

Faysal and his Syrian supporters began reconstructing Syria. They declared Arabic the official language and proceeded to have school texts translated from Turkish. They reopened schools and started new ones, including the Faculty of Law at the Syrian University and the Arab academy in Damascus. Also, Faysal appointed a committee to begin drawing up a constitution.

In the areas still held by the French, Syrians continued to revolt. In the Jabal an Nusayriyah around Latakia in the northwest, there was an uprising against French troops in May 1919. Along the Turkish border, the nationalist leader Ibrahim Hannanu incited another rebellion in July 1919. The French defeated these attempts but not before Hannanu and Faysal had acquired permanent places in Syrian history as heroes.

Three forces worked against Arab nationalism and Faysal's budding Arab monarchy. One was Britain's earlier interest in keeping eastern Mesopotamia under control, both to counter Russian influence in the north and to protect oil interests in the area. The second was Zionism and the Jewish interest in Palestine. Although Britain had promised to recognize "an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States" in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 16, 1916, (not published until later--see below), in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 it had also promised Zionists a national home" in Palestine. The two promises were in direct conflict. The third force was France's determination to remain a power in the Middle East. Earlier in the war, the French, British, Italians, and Russians had met secretly to decide the fate of Arab lands. After the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks published secret diplomatic documents, among them the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In this agreement, signed only six months after the British had vaguely promised Husayn an Arab kingdom, Britain and France agreed to give the French paramount influence in what became Syria and Lebanon; the British were to have predominance in what became Transjordan and Iraq.

At the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, Woodrow Wilson asked that the Arab claims to independence be given consideration, and Faysal was invited to present the Arab cause. His pleas were unavailing, as was a report recommending Syrian independence under Faysal or a United States mandate over the country. Disappointed by his failure at Versailles, Faysal returned to Damascus and declared again that Syria was nevertheless free and independent.

France and Britain refused to recognize Syria's independence, and the Supreme Allied Council, meeting in San Remo, Italy, in April 1920,

partitioned the Arab world into mandates as prearranged by the earlier Sykes-Picot Agreement. Syria became a French mandate, and French soldiers began marching from Beirut to Damascus. Arab resistance was crushed, and on July 25, 1920, the French took Damascus. Faysal fled to Europe and did not return to the Middle East until the British made him king of Iraq in 1921. Faysal's brother Abdullah was recognized by the British as the amir of the region that became known as Transjordan. The boundaries of these states were thus drawn unilaterally by the European allies after World War I. Syria had experienced its brief moment of independence (1919-20), the loss of which Syrians blamed on France and Britain. These events left a lasting bitterness against the West and a deep-seated determination to reunite Arabs into one state. This was the primary basis for modern Arab nationalism and the central ideological concept of future pan-Arab parties, such as the Baath (Arab Socialist Resurrection) Party and the Arab National Movement. Aspects of the ideology also were evolved in the 1950s and 1960s by Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt.