

# WWI & the Middle East

How the war led to much of the region's current turmoil



Abdulmonam Eassa/AFP/Getty Images

A bombing near Damascus in January

The Middle East often seems like it's in the throes of one huge conflict after another. The civil war in Syria; the decades-long dispute between Israel and Palestinians; the rise of ISIS and other terrorist groups. How did the region get this way? Historians say much of the present-day strife in the Middle East can be traced back to World War I.

At the war's end, Britain and France divided up the Ottoman Empire between themselves. The secret deal, called the Sykes-Picot Agreement, created Middle Eastern territories with almost no input from the diverse groups of people who had been living there for centuries, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

"People found themselves living in boundaries that they had no say in determining," says historian Eugene Rogan, author of *The Fall of the Ottomans*. "They saw the boundaries as illegitimate because they saw them as imposed on

them as an act of European imperialism.”

Today, the areas that were carved out in the post-World War I dealings—Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and what’s now Israel—are still being fought over or face political unrest. Rogan thinks this should serve as a warning for future diplomacy in the region.

“We should all come away from the experience of the post-war settlement,” he says, “very wary of great powers taking their pens to Middle Eastern maps.”

—Joe Bubar

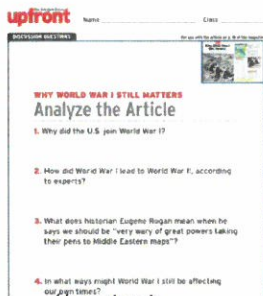
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