CHAPTER 1

How the First World War Came to the Middle East

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE OFFICIALLY ENTERED THE FIRST World War on the side of the Central Powers in fall 1914. Years of dilatory diplomatic dealings with the British Empire had failed to bring the Ottomans onto the Allied side.[1] Joining the German-led coalition that included Austria-Hungary and later Bulgaria enabled the Ottomans to pursue national interests while attempting to strengthen their empire.[2] Talaat Pasha, who would become Grand Vizier in 1917, joined war minister Enver Pasha and others in leading the Ottoman Empire into jihad and world war against the Allied Powers led by Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Japan and eventually the United States.[3]

The Allies initially cast the Middle Eastern Front as a secondary theater of war. Military strategists believed that the war would be fought and won on the Western Front.[4] This view dominated Allied thinking well into 1916 and shaped the early course of the war in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Syria, North Africa and the Caucasus. Protecting assets such as oil refineries, shipping routes and key eastern ports proved the first order of business. Even before officially declaring war on the Ottoman Empire in early November, the Allies attacked ports in the Red Sea to display their naval superiority. Meanwhile, the Ottomans planned a naval attack on Russia. Russia's invasion of the Caucasus commenced after the bombing of its Black Sea ports.[5] By late November, Britain's Indian Expeditionary Force (IEF) occupied Basra to protect refineries. Ottoman attempts to conquer Egypt during the Suez campaign of January and February 1915 ultimately ended in failure.[6] These successful opening salvos contributed to the Allied view that they had little to worry about in the fight against the Ottoman Empire.

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Small early victories bolstered Allied confidence and led to the risky and ill-fated invasion of Gallipoli. The plan, as first conceived in late 1914, was supposed to knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war with a swift, decisive blow and provide access to the Dardanelles Strait and Russian grain supplies. This would weaken Germany, deprived of its Ottoman ally and a key waterway, and refocus attention on the Western Front. The battle for the Dardanelles started on the Gallipoli peninsula and ended in disaster for the Allies.

Nine months of relentless trench warfare offered a haunting parallel to the war of attrition taking hold on the Western Front. The Gallipoli withdrawal was followed by a land war in Mesopotamia that went far beyond the initial objective of protecting refineries and ports. These included the Battle of Ctesiphon outside of Baghdad where Allied troops were forced to surrender after a five-month siege at Kut-al-Amara in spring 1916. During this time, the Allies made a new battle plan based on a series of secret agreements between themselves and potential regional allies, including Sykes–Picot and the Anglo-Arab alliance. The Russian-led war in the Caucasus achieved success starting in winter 1916, but the Allies did not fully turn the tide in their favor until the British-led conquest of Baghdad in March 1917.

This chapter traces the strategic and diplomatic maneuverings of war on the Middle Eastern Front before Baghdad. It analyzes the military alliances and humanitarian disasters that shaped the fight between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire and shows the growing importance of this front to the larger war. Here the lines between home front and battle front blurred as easily as they did on the Western Front with civilians suffering terrible loses in an escalating conflict between old imperial rivals.

GALLIPOLI

The Allied landing at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915, came after months of planning. Instead of the anticipated quick victory, however, it marked the beginning of a devastating trench war and sparked a brutal campaign against Ottoman Christian minorities. The night before the Allied invasion, the Ottoman government rounded up an estimated 250 Armenian intellectuals and religious leaders in Constantinople on unnamed

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charges, an act that would commence the Armenian Genocide.[7] In the wake of the failed Gallipoli campaign, war with the Ottoman Empire turned from easy victory to a series of military and humanitarian crises from the Gallipoli peninsula to Mesopotamia.

First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill argued that opening up the Dardanelles Strait through an invasion of the Gallipoli peninsula would leave Germany unable to fight the Allies in the East and return focus to the Western Front. But as the war plans for Gallipoli took shape, another narrative emerged that cast the fight against Germany and the Ottoman Empire in a different light. As one commentator put it at the end of 1914, “The present war is a war against German militarism and a war of liberation. If it should end in a victory of the Allied Powers, it should not merely lead to the freeing of the subjected and oppressed . . . in Europe, but also to the freeing of the nationalities who live under Turkish tyranny in Asia.”[8]

These parallel narratives suggest that fighting the Ottoman Empire required both military force and moral justification. Like the decision to go to war with Germany over the so-called “Rape of Belgium,” war with the Ottomans needed a just cause. Atrocities committed by invading German soldiers against Belgian civilians on August 4, 1914, gave Britain a reason to enter the war and defend Belgian neutrality under international law.[9] Even before the Armenian Genocide started in the spring of 1915, the British media cast the First World War as a war to defend civilian war victims. In the case of Belgium, this meant defending mostly women and girls from the “Hun.”[10] In the Ottoman Empire, it meant protecting Christian minorities from state-sanctioned massacre.[11] On the heels of the British defeat at Gallipoli, moral justifications for war became even more important. In November 1915, widespread reporting of Armenian massacres led another commentator to conclude: “Avowedly one of the chief objects of the present war is to advantage small nationalities. In this war Armenians are playing no unimportant part.”[12]

The military justification for the war hinged on imperial concerns; the moral on a commitment to a liberal imperialism that had guided British foreign policy since the late nineteenth century. Defending the rights of Christian minorities against “Ottoman tyranny” began in the aftermath of the Crimean War (1853–1856), a duty later codified in the Berlin Treaty

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that ended the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878).[13] French claims in Syria took a similar line by the end of the war, justifying occupation as a way to protect Christian minorities displaced by war and genocide.[14] Gallipoli's military purpose was to defend Egypt, now a British protectorate, as well as divert Ottoman attention from Russia's difficult fight in the Caucasus.[15] The Allies futilely hoped that victory at Gallipoli would prevent Bulgaria from joining the Central Powers, which it did in fall 1915. War planners believed that the ultimate prize, occupying Constantinople after securing the Dardanelles, was worth the risk.[16] Back at home, it was the moral argument of benevolent European empires defending subjects of a tyrannous rival empire that gave the war its purpose. Still relying on an all-volunteer army at this point, these justifications for war had real power especially in Britain and France which represented fighting for the nation as an honor and a duty to uphold democracy.[17]

The scale of a war fought on multiple fronts required centralized planning. In Britain, the war's outbreak resulted in "important alterations ... in the methods of conducting business both at the Admiralty and the War Office" and at the Committee of Imperial Defence.[18] Lord Kitchener, appointed Secretary of State for War in 1914, held important sway in this new mostly civilian comprised body. Only in the wake of the Gallipoli disaster did he face accusations of concentrating power in his own hands and not consulting the heads of departments after the War Council replaced the Committee of Imperial Defence. While Kitchener admired the boldness of Churchill's plan to take Constantinople and eventually supported the naval and ground invasion, he saw the Middle Eastern Front as a secondary theater.

The successful bombardment of the outer forts of the Dardanelles between October 31 and November 3 on the eve of the war declarations and the subsequent occupation of Basra led the War Council on November 25 to consider a full-blown naval assault on the Straits. Churchill argued that such an attack would defend Egypt. At the same time, taking the Gallipoli peninsula would secure control of the Dardanelles and "enable us to dictate terms at Constantinople." Intrigued, Kitchener nevertheless rejected proposals to send a large force to achieve these aims believing that it would pull troops away from the Western Front.[19]

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Kitchener's attitude began to change in early January. The War Council decided to "make a demonstration against the Turks." Kitchener wanted to draw attention away from military failures on the Western Front and achieve "more decisive results."[20] He began to "regard the possibility of the employment of British Forces in a different theatre of war" as a way to distract both the enemy and his critics at home.[21] Kitchener argued that a limited attack on the Dardanelles would divert Ottoman attention from the Caucasus Front where the Russians had requested British assistance. But his focus remained on home defense, and he made it clear that he was "most unwilling to withdraw a single man from France" to fight the Ottomans.[22] Eastern Mediterranean naval commander Admiral Sackville Carden put together a plan for the invasion approved on January 13.[23]

The reluctance to commit soldiers to the Middle Eastern Front led to the War Council's initial decision to rely entirely on the naval fleet for this operation. This explains Carden's central role in planning. The navy successfully repelled Cemal Pasha's attack on the Suez in early February, bolstering faith in British sea power.[24] Ground troops from across the British Empire eventually were deployed after the mission broadened to include the aim of taking Constantinople. The War Council wanted not just Bulgaria but other neutral nations in the Balkans and Mediterranean to see their interests aligned with Allied strength. As Lord Edward Grey later put it, "Diplomacy was perfectly useless without military success."[25] War planners also believed that victory would open up a corridor to channel munitions and supplies to relieve Russian's precarious position in the Caucasus made more difficult due to a lack of railway access. Kitchener made his position clear: this was a limited operation and under no circumstances would Britain engage in what he called an "Asiatic adventure."[26] In early 1915, the Allies sought to occupy Constantinople and defeat the Ottoman Empire using limited military resources.

Concerns over imperial prestige influenced this strategy. While the British had secured Russian pledges to provide reinforcements after taking Constantinople, they worried about France. The War Council feared that any misstep in this campaign would afford an opportunity to the French. Both claimed status as the most important Muslim power in the region and saw the war as an opportunity to extend their

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empires.[27] Carden led the naval forces in the assault. His second in command, Vice Admiral J. M. de Robeck, took charge in March after Carden went on medical leave. Kitchener's "vitally important" mission started badly.[28] The first bombardment on February 19 failed to destroy the forts guarding the Straits. The plan, drawn from a parallel strategy in Belgium, did not account for differences in the two battleground landscapes.[29] At the end of March, German commander Otto Liman von Sanders, took charge of operations on the Central Powers side and prepared for the Allies' next move.

Instead of calling off the attack, Kitchener committed ground troops to aid the naval assault. By late February, he dispatched 36,000 Anzac troops, assembled as part of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force under the leadership of Sir Ian Hamilton. These fighters from Australia and New Zealand joined 10,000 men of the Royal Naval Division stationed in Egypt. The French contributed 18,000 troops from the Corps Expéditionnaire d'Orient, colonial soldiers and Foreign Legionnaires by March.[30] A worried Kitchener followed Hamilton's advice to use ground troops to open up the forty-one-mile stretch of the Dardanelles: "The effect of a defeat in the Orient would be very serious. There could be no going back. The publicity of the announcement had committed us."[31]

The February bombing, however, meant that the Allies lost the element of surprise when they landed at Gallipoli. By late March, the Ottoman army with German assistance began to dig trenches and lay barbed wire which neutralized the effectiveness of Allied ground troops. Mustafa Kemal first made his name at Gallipoli by figuring out the Allied strategy and played a key role in turning the tide for the Central Powers.[32] Allied troops landed on April 25 and faced a trench war that lasted nearly nine months and resulted in over half a million men wounded, killed or taken prisoner.[33]

For those who fought in the trenches at Gallipoli, the war in the Middle East would have seemed not dissimilar to the war in Europe.[34] Protracted battles fought in close proximity to the enemy in trenches dug by the troops themselves resulted in stalemate. The size of the armies engaged in this battle also mirrored battles on the Western Front. An estimated 800,000 men fought this battle which included 410,000

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combined British forces; 79,000 combined French forces and 310,000 Ottoman forces.[35] On the Ottoman side, as many as a third of combatants came from predominately Arab provinces.[36] Eventually, the war here was fought by soldiers from all over the world. The Mediterranean Expeditionary Force alone included soldiers from England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India. The French Foreign Legionnaires forces included troops from Senegal, Guinea, Sudan and the Maghrib.[37]

Gallipoli dashed Kitchener's hope for a victory that would distract attention from the quagmire in Western Europe. He himself did not survive the war, killed on a ship sunk while he was on his way to negotiate with Russia in June 1916. When the Allies finally evacuated the Gallipoli peninsula in December 1915, it came as a relief that there was little resistance from the Ottoman forces. All 77,000 British and imperial soldiers got out alive marking the evacuation as the biggest success of the entire operation. The IEF took the brunt of these errors, making needless sacrifices for poorly conceived missions. Despite their loyalty and efforts on the battlefield, some commanders recorded holding little respect for "native troops."[38]

The strategy of seeking bold, swift victory on the Middle Eastern Front exposed false assumptions about the readiness and willingness of the Ottomans to preserve their empire. At the same time, the moral justification for the war – to defend the rights of innocent civilians – loomed large. Though the Allies continued to see the Western Front as key to winning the war, events in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and 1916 pulled military resources and public attention eastward.

GENOCIDE

Military disaster at Gallipoli found its moral counterpoint in the Armenian massacres. The Ottoman Empire's minority problem started long before the fateful night of April 24 marked the beginning of both the Gallipoli invasion and what is today called the Armenian Genocide that resulted in the deaths of over 1 million civilians.[39] Periodic massacres against Christian minorities had raged in the cities and provinces of the Empire starting in the second half of the nineteenth century.[40] In 1876,

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atrocities committed by Ottoman troops against Bulgarian civilians in the lead-up to the Russo-Turkish War received widespread press coverage as did massacres of Ottoman minorities in Crete, Macedonia, Cyprus and Anatolia (Asia Minor). The mid-1890s Hamidian Massacres and the 1909 mass slaughter of Armenians in Adana also captured the attention of the West and sparked an international humanitarian response.[41]

The plan to eliminate Ottoman Christian minorities completely from the Empire came under the cover of war. The genocide targeted Armenians, the largest minority population, as well as the smaller Greek and Assyrian communities. The rise of Turkish ethno-nationalism in the years preceding the war made the position of the Ottoman Empire's non-Muslim Christian population, long subjected to violence and social inequality, more precarious.[42] Armenian nationalism arose, in part, as a reaction to exclusionary policies and resulted in calls for more autonomy and civil rights that were supported by the European powers.[43]

The minority question played an important role in the Ottoman decision to side with Germany in the war.[44] Years of meddling with Ottoman minority policy beginning with the Greek Wars of Independence in the 1820s and continuing with the Crimean War and the Russo-Turkish War had heightened distrust of Britain and France while fueling competition over adjacent lands with Russia.[45] While diplomacy did not improve the status of minorities, it created lasting tensions between Britain, France, Russia and the Ottoman Empire.[46] German support for Ottoman resistance to pressure to improve the treatment of minorities offered the prospect of rebuffing reform and even expanding the Ottoman Empire against imperial rivals.[47]

Talaat Pasha, who had led the Empire as head of the revolutionary Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), embraced both the aggressive German model of nation building and promises of economic investment in the Ottoman Empire.[48] The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 had ushered in the CUP and a brief constitutional period that sparked hope among Armenians like Armen Garo for a pluralistic empire with room for minorities. Under Talaat, a narrowed nationalist vision of "Turkey for the Turks" made constitutionalism impossible to sustain over the long term.[49]

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Hardline nationalism took shape under the CUP leadership that by the beginning of the First World War had rejected constitutional reform in favor of autocracy.[50] The regime led the Ottoman Empire to side with Germany to protect it from what leaders increasingly saw as internal threats from minority communities and external threats to its sovereignty. This coupled with territorial losses from the Balkan Wars fed Ottoman fears of imperial decline that created a paranoia about the embrace of constitutionalism by the Empire's minorities after the 1908 Revolution.[51] The elimination of the influence of Christian minority communities in political and civic life soon followed.[52]

The 1915 massacres were the product of this history. They sparked a culture of fear after their start on the eve of Gallipoli.[53] No one knew if the massacres would run their course like they had in the past, allowing those who survived to rebuild their lives after the crisis had passed.[54] Harotune Boyadjian, for example, recalled how the villages of the Armenian region of Musa Dagh set up temporary shelter in the mountains in the ultimately futile hopes of waiting out the violence or fighting back if necessary.[55] Living together in a multi-confessional community, sometimes at war but mostly at peace, was a reality of the minority experience in the Ottoman Empire.[56] This time was different. Those who survived the Armenian Genocide experienced the rest of the war as refugees with most ending up in Mesopotamia where the main action of the war in the Middle East became focused by 1917.[57]

Lloyd George, who would take over as prime minister in December 1916, called Britain "culpable" for the fate of the Armenians: "The action of the British Government led inevitably to the terrible massacres of 1895–6, 1909 and worst of all to the holocausts of 1915." He concluded that this made the Allies "morally bound to . . . redress the wrong we had perpetrated and in so far as it was in our power, to make it impossible to repeat the horrors for which history will always hold us culpable."[58] Viscount James Bryce (1838–1922), in his role as Ambassador to the United States, used the massacres to rally American support for the Allied war effort. He wrote to his colleagues in October 1915: "I am glad to gather from what you say that the general sentiment of the United States is still strongly with us. I should hope it

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would become even more so after the frightful massacres which have been committed upon innocent Armenian population in Asiatic Turkey in which some half a million persons have perished."[59] He believed defending innocent Armenians made this a just war against a formidable and untrustworthy foe.

Britain blamed Germany for aiding and abetting the massacres. Bryce blasted attempts by the German Ambassador to the United States to explain away the massacres: "There is no foundation whatever for the defense or denial, whichever one is to call it, that [Ambassador] Bernstorff seems to have attempted of these atrocities." According to Bryce, "The Turks were in every case the aggressors, while as to the massacres themselves, the details which have reached me from day to day, are if possible worse than the things which have appeared in the newspaper."[60] Germany's crimes against Belgian civilians and, now, its defense of its Ottoman ally's treatment of Armenians legitimated Britain's "determination to prosecute the war until success is obtained." Arnold Toynbee, who later collaborated with Bryce's investigation of the massacres published as a parliamentary Blue Book, paralleled the situation to "the German incursion into Belgium fourteen months ago … What she has done is to bring us all back in the Twentieth Century to the condition of the dark ages. **That is the indictment. Let Germany cease to deserve it**."[61]

These accusations coupled with revelations about the extent of the massacres sparked humanitarian relief campaigns in the United States, France, Russia and Britain. War made relief work on enemy territory impractical but not impossible.[62] The US-based Armenian and Syrian Relief Committee, later known as Near East Relief, led efforts starting in 1915. While the United States never declared war against Turkey, it engaged in a massive humanitarian mission that raised the equivalent of a billion dollars in aid.[63] France had sent aid during the 1909 Adana massacres and aided survivors of genocide during the war starting in 1915. It also welcomed large numbers of Armenian refugees making it an important site of advocacy in Europe.[64]

Russia responded to genocidal violence heightened during its assault on the Caucasus.[65] The Russian imperial government provided humanitarian aid to villagers across the border from the fighting

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while aiding genocide survivors and those fleeing the battlefront. This work continued until the fall of the Russian Empire in spring 1917.[66] In Britain, new organizations emerged to deal with and, in some cases, coordinate relief efforts.[67] As politician Lord Robert Cecil observed, "This question of Armenian relief is one which excites a great deal of feeling."[68] Cecil was referring to a growing humanitarian ethos that drew on past British and American experiences with massacres and aid in this region. The British public might not be able to do anything about the military failures at Gallipoli and on the battlefields of Belgium and France but aid work could provide a way of mitigating human suffering. The war thus created a "humanitarian narrative" that obliged belligerents to help "distant strangers" suffering from the war's worst effects.[69]

Armenians were represented as both victims and allies in the fight against the Central Powers. France formed the Legion d'Orient in 1916 with Armenian volunteers trained in Cyprus to assist the Allied war effort.[70] Bryce supported the cause of raising Armenian volunteers to fight alongside the Allies on the Russian–Ottoman border. Armenians, however, mostly remained loyal to their respective governments. As Winston Churchill put it, the majority of both Ottoman Armenians and Russian Armenians had pledged to "do their duty" rather than "stake their existence upon the victory of either side."[71] The small number of volunteers who did fight helped support claims that Armenians deserved Allied support. Britain first made the ill-fated pledge to broker a protectorate over Ottoman Armenian lands in fall 1916 during a meeting between Armenian representatives and Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot. Sykes and Picot believed such promises would shore up regional support for the Sykes–Picot agreement finalized with Russia the previous May.[72]

Ultimately, the response to the Armenian Genocide further committed the Allies to the Middle Eastern Front. In early 1916, as the public call to provide humanitarian aid to this population grew more urgent, the military situation worsened. The unsuccessful beginning of the land war in Mesopotamia that spring at Kut cemented humanitarian aid and the defense of Armenians against massacre as a moral justification for Allied war aims.

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KUT

The disaster at Kut-al-Amara tested war strategy and increased public awareness of the Middle Eastern Front. Kut, as it came to be known during the war, showed the folly of thinking that war in the Ottoman Empire demanded fewer sacrifices than the Western Front. Kitchener gave orders to avoid the occupation "of the Asiatic side by military force" during the Gallipoli operation.[73] This strategy proved untenable as the war progressed. The attempt to capture Baghdad by Major General Charles Townshend in late 1915 ended in one of the most dramatic Allied defeats of the war after a nearly six-month-long siege at Kut and resulted in the death of 2,000 Allied soldiers. The 12,000 men taken as prisoners of war (POWs) suffered under brutal conditions widely publicized in Europe.[74]

By spring 1916, the press acknowledged what war planners were reluctant to admit. "We are now committed in Asia Minor . . . which will afford lessons without number," opined the *Saturday Review*. "A war has been evolved on a considerable scale in a sphere where we first embarked for a purpose that we thought would entail but a skirmish."[75] This became clear to others around the time of the Gallipoli evacuation. The mission, to one observer writing in October 1915, was inextricably bound up with a duty to aid the Armenians: "England needs a new gateway into Constantinople; and if Armenia is to be saved, needs it quickly . . . The Gallipoli peninsula is one tangle of barbed wire, one maze of interlocking trenches, while the waterway is fringed with cannon and torpedo tubes that sentinel the straits at every point. If England is to get to the Bosporus in time to exert any saving help on Armenia, she must find another route."[76] "Saving" Armenia thus was for some akin to winning the war.

Kut, a fortified town around 100 miles southeast of Baghdad on the bank of the Tigris River, most likely was not the route imagined by this commentator to achieve Britain's war aims. This first attempt to take Baghdad marked a new phase of the war. It incurred a high human cost and resulted in few gains.[77] Over half a million Indians served on the Middle Eastern Front in combatant and non-combatant roles including as officers, soldiers, porters and in labor corps and paid a high price for

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their loyalty. The IEF, headquartered in Shimla, India and not the War Office in London at the beginning of the war, fought some of the most dangerous and difficult battles of the war. This included the siege of Kut-al-Amara. Approximately 10,440 of the 12,000 POWs captured after Townshend's surrender on April 29, 1916, were part of the IEF.[78]

Early signs suggested that an invasion of Mesopotamia would fare little better than Gallipoli. The debate over embarking on a land war began in earnest in fall 1915. War planners raised concerns over inadequate railways and ports as well as a lack of knowledge of geography and unreliable intelligence. A relatively easy victory by Townshend's troops in Kut over the forces of Nurettin Bey in late September, however, made it possible to imagine continuing the march north along the Tigris River, first through Ctesiphon and then on to Baghdad. The merits of capturing Baghdad were debated in October. Admiral H.B. Jackson and A.J. Murray, Lt. Gen. Chief of the Imperial General Staff, argued against the advance: "We cannot under present circumstances go to Baghdad without incurring unjustifiable risks. It must be remembered that during the winter the Russians are not likely to be able to make any advance into Armenia and consequently the Turks can very well spare a division or two from the Armenian army at this season to reinforce the Mesopotamian troops."[79]

The inability to "hold Baghdad for any length of time" due to a lack of reserves led to the conclusion that "we must play a safe game and husband our sorely strained military resources."[80] But for some, occupying Baghdad "would reestablish some of the prestige which we have lost by our failure to force the Dardanelles." Gallipoli's failure shadowed war planning: "If, however, we are unable to hold Baghdad . . . our withdrawal from Baghdad might have as great and as unfortunate an effect on the Mohammedan world as our withdrawal from the Gallipoli Peninsula."[81] The invasion thus represented a calculated risk that if successful would restore British imperial prestige and establish military control over Mesopotamia.

General Townshend saw the conquest of Baghdad in terms of his own personal glory. He arrived from India on April 22 and took command of the 6th division under Sir John Nixon. In June, he captured the town of Amara and confidently set his sights on Baghdad promising his superiors

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quick victory.[82] He thought success would secure him a military governorship, believing himself destined to help lead a British Empire inherited from Rome. The War Office took a decidedly less romantic view. War aims included safeguarding the Indian Frontier; demonstrating the "power to strike"; checking Turkish "intrigues amongst the Arabs"; confirming to Arab chiefs their allegiance to Britain; and protecting oil installations.[83] These objectives coupled with Townshend's determination to make a name for himself at any cost drove the mission. Though the battle in September 1915 resulted in victory, he had not defeated Nurettin Bey's forces. Townshend instead faced a trench system constructed between June and September by Ottoman forces that extended for more than five miles and bordered marshland.[84] This allowed the Ottoman army to retreat intact and regroup.

Townshend did not engage the enemy again until the end of November with a force of 14,000 that faced over 18,000 Ottoman troops. Full of deluded hopes for his own career, Townshend marched toward Baghdad, confident but ill-prepared. From November 22–25, the Ottomans repelled Townshend's army at the Battle of Ctesiphon. This forced a retreat to Kut resulting in a standoff that lasted until April. To cover his blunders, Townshend conjectured that the Ottomans had redoubled their efforts. In January he expressed this unfounded view to his superiors: "I believe Turks are now making Mesopotamia the principal field in which they are sending their maximum forces."[85]

By this time, the battle for Kut had turned into a siege and Townshend could do little but wait for reinforcements. He blamed his superiors for Ctesiphon and the ill-fated retreat to Kut. Historians agree that the General's own blunders leading the IEF, however, played the biggest role.[86] While the disaster at Kut unfolded, the Allies engaged the Ottomans elsewhere. Russia fought the Ottomans in the Caucasus, and between mid-February and mid-April General Nikolai Yudenich succeeded in driving the Ottoman Third Army out of eastern Anatolia. Meanwhile, British commander in Egypt, Sir John Maxwell, launched a campaign to take territory on Egypt's border with Libya. By late February, Maxwell's Western Frontier Force won the Battle of Aqaqir

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and begun the process of securing the Libyan/Egyptian border to neutralize threats against the Allied position in North Africa.[87]

Townshend's defeat overshadowed these victories. After three attempts to break the blockade at Kut, the siege ended in surrender. Months of reduced rations had taken a toll on the soldiers and the townspeople. Townshend requisitioned food from civilians and steadily cut soldiers' rations. Inadequate rations weighed most heavily on the majority of Indian soldiers with religious-based dietary restrictions. The specter of the mass starvation of soldiers and civilians ultimately led Townshend to surrender on April 26 to Halil Bey who was now in charge of operations for the Ottoman army. The futile attempts to relieve Townshend's 13,000 troops resulted in 23,000 casualties.[88] The siege also strained the Ottoman army, forced to fight the Russians in the Caucasus and Townshend at Kut. This required thousands more recruits, which weakened an already depleted Ottoman force.[89]

Worse was to come for the survivors of Kut. The entering Ottoman forces shot or hanged townspeople accused of collaborating with the British.[90] They marched POWs, already in a weakened state, across the desert to Baghdad. Only the officers were spared. Townshend himself spent the remainder of the war in Constantinople in relative luxury and comfort currying the favor of high-ranking Ottoman officials.[91]

NEW STRATEGIES

The failures at Gallipoli and Kut resulted in a reassessment of the war in the Middle East. Britain launched two inquiries in the summer of 1916 to figure out what went wrong: the Dardanelles Commission and the Mesopotamia Commission. The government also commissioned a report on the costs of the war for civilians led by Bryce. *The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, like the report on German atrocities against Belgian civilians overseen by him the previous year, exposed the Armenian massacres.[92] Issued as a Parliamentary Blue Book, it chronicled the genocide against the Armenians in the wake of Gallipoli.[93]

These commissions and the Bryce report painted a grim picture. They also paved the way for a new strategy that would take hold after David Lloyd George replaced H. H. Asquith as prime minister in

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December 1916. The unusual step of launching not one but two public inquiries into the failures of an ongoing war seemed designed to undermine Asquith's premiership. But criticism of the management of the war began long before the Dardanelles and Mesopotamia Commissions started their work in August 1916. The King's Speech to Parliament the previous February had called for imperial unity to which Asquith responded with an appeal for more money to fight the war and greater economy at home. Mark Sykes used the occasion to accuse the government of "muddling through this war."[94]

Sykes, MP for Hull who had been working under Kitchener and secretly negotiating the Sykes–Picot agreement with France in the preceding months, noted both military defeats and the "extermin(ation)" of the Armenians. "We must face the situation as it is," he told his fellow MPs:

> Take the case of Armenia. The Armenians cannot be replaced, because they have been exterminated. The Gallipoli Peninsula has been left by us. The Suez Canal has been and may be now potentially menaced. In Mesopotamia the situation is not what one might wish. Even in this Island, as we shall hear in the course of the Debates in the next few days, we are menaced by Zeppelin raids. We have to remember that large tracts of France and Russia are occupied by the enemy.[95]

Sykes proposed changes to the chain of command and improvements in communication. His claim that "we are distracted, busy and confused" hit a nerve. Sykes' remarks overshadowed the King's speech and Asquith's response.[96] They also got the attention of Lloyd George who pulled Sykes aside afterwards to request a private meeting for the following day.[97]

By the time the Commissions on the Dardanelles and Mesopotamia met that summer, it was clear that Asquith was in trouble. The calling of these inquiries represented a rebuke to Asquith's leadership, and their publication in 1917 kept the debacles at Gallipoli and Kut in the news. The Dardanelles Commission, led by ten government appointees, released its finding in two phases. The first explained the "origins and inception" of the "attack on the Dardanelles" and questioned First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill's central role as he "was not himself an expert"

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and the method of conducting business at the Admiralty and the War Office. While less critical of Kitchener who by now had been drowned at sea, the Commission clearly blamed leadership failures.[98] The second report assessed outcomes.[99] Everything from military strategy to the slow speed of communications were investigated to explain the resulting stalemate in rough terrain and against a better prepared enemy. Despite these failings, the report concluded that British "prestige ... remained unimpaired."[100]

The Mesopotamia Commission opened parallel proceedings in August 1916 and held sixty meetings over ten months. It called into question both strategy and the running of the war in the Middle East from India rather than the War Office.[101] Parliament debated the report's findings when it was published a year later.[102] The resignation of Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberlain, soon followed. The report called the Battle of Ctesiphon "a tactical victory but strategical retreat" and concluded that at best the battle for Kut proved a distraction that "diverted any Turkish movement on Persia and entirely rivetted the attention of the Turks til [*sic*] later when the Russians were ready to strike both in Armenia and Kurdistan." Others compared Kut to the "retreat from Mons in Flanders" and the Dardanelles.[103] Lord Curzon in June 1917 issued a "very secret and confidential" memorandum with his own assessment of the report: "I regret to have to say that a more shocking exposure of official blundering and incompetence has not in my opinion been made, at any rate since the Crimean War." He considered suppressing the report but, in the end, had it published.[104]

The two reports served as cautionary tales of what could happen in the event of any further leadership failures in the summer of 1917. The capture of Baghdad the previous spring gave Britain, now under the leadership of Lloyd George, the upper hand in Mesopotamia. Lloyd George used the opportunity to lay blame for previous missteps in the Middle East at the feet of Asquith whom the press excoriated along with the generals. The *Irish Times* called the Dardanelles report "a lamentable exposure of the inefficiency and lack of coordination which marked the proceedings of the late Government." It had "doomed a brilliant opportunity to a tragic and impotent conclusion." While criticizing Churchill

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for his "reckless enthusiasm," *The Times* praised Lloyd George: "We can only be thankful that Mr. Lloyd George has rescued the conduct of the war from the nerveless hands which entrusted great issues to the interfering incapacity of civilians."[105] The *New York Times* had a more cynical take and questioned the timing of the report that it asserted was designed to be a "nail in the coffin of the old gang."[106]

Bryce's Blue Book report offered a further warning against failing to get it right in the Middle East. In it, Bryce represented the British Empire as defender of Armenians ruthlessly targeted for elimination by their own government. The Blue Book condemned the hardline nationalism of the CUP, which it blamed for opportunistically scapegoating the Armenians. The Armenian massacres, like the battles at Gallipoli and Kut, were not the product of what Bryce called "Muslim fanaticism" but of a paranoid and corrupt government that used the idea of a "Holy War" or jihad to further its own ends through the targeting of minorities.[107]

The Armenian Blue Book fed the Allied narrative of the First World War as a war of liberation. Russia, too, wanted the Ottoman Empire held accountable for the massacres. As the largest Orthodox Christian power, it long had challenged Britain's claim as Armenia's protector. In addition to sharing a common faith, significant numbers of Armenians lived on Russia's borderlands in the Caucasus. This was the site of Russia's most significant fighting with the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and 1916.[108] The Blue Book, published at the request of the Foreign Office, bolstered the case for protecting Armenians. In May 1915, the Allies issued the Joint Declaration accusing the Ottoman Empire of "crimes against humanity."[109] The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Sazonov, inserted this phrase into the declaration which challenged the Ottoman Empire's treatment of Armenians on the international stage.

The almost thousand-page Bryce Report chronicled atrocities committed against Armenians using eyewitness testimony, charts and maps. Presented to Parliament on November 23, 1916, its timing was important. The report had been ready the previous summer, but Charles Masterman at the War Propaganda Bureau convinced the Foreign Office to present it in the fall when it was more likely to influence public opinion in Allied countries and the still neutral United States where Armenian humanitarian aid campaigns continued to grow. Widely reported in the

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international press, the Bryce Report gave Britain's allies moral cause to keep fighting.[110]

Together these reports reveal how war with the Ottoman Empire played out in public discourse, Allied rivalries and British politics. The details of the Gallipoli and Kut disasters remain an indelible part of the memory of the war thanks in part to the two Commissions. Gallipoli, in particular, continues as one the most discussed and memorialized battles.[111] Politics clearly influenced the decision to assess the outcome of these operations during the war itself. The Joint Declaration and the Bryce Report reinforced the idea of Armenian protection as a war aim, especially for Russia and Britain. Finally, these reports discredited Asquith's handling of the war and helped deliver the office of prime minister to Lloyd George mere months after the publication of the Blue Book.

"Amateur diplomat" Mark Sykes proved especially useful to Lloyd George's approach to the war.[112] Sykes' response to the Mesopotamia report in July 1917 emphasized the need "to define our objective" instead of relying on what he called "random methods." Regarding Kut, he asserted, "even with victory in our grasp it is easy enough to lose the War by random methods when you have anything but clearcut ideas at the back of your mind."[113] Sykes already had articulated these objectives to the British government in the form of the secret Sykes–Picot agreement that guided war strategy after 1916.

SYKES–PICOT

Sykes–Picot long has been read solely as a diplomatic agreement. But in its earliest conception, it was also a military plan. In a meeting considered the origins of the notorious agreement, Sykes gave evidence to the War Committee which included Prime Minister Asquith, Lloyd George and Kitchener. Lloyd George was the first to suggest Anglo-French cooperation as a "military proposition" to protect Egypt and expand into Mesopotamia in a secret War Committee meeting on December 16, 1915. Kitchener countered that the "diplomatic proposition" needed to be settled first. Asquith agreed, arguing that "a political deal" with the French must be reached. This meant coming to terms "diplomatically"

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with what the breakup of the Ottoman Empire would mean for the French and British empires before launching an attack.[114] Sykes–Picot was thus touted as a plan to help the Allies win the war. It provided a blueprint for the conquest of Mesopotamia, Syria and parts of Anatolia in the guise of a diplomatic agreement.

Sykes-Picot was only one among many secret agreements negotiated between the Allies. In spring 1915, Britain and France signed the first: the Constantinople agreement with Russia. Never enacted, it promised Russia control over the Straits and Constantinople if it could help secure a British victory at Gallipoli.[115] France and England entered into bilateral negotiations in what would become Sykes–Picot the next fall. France had wanted to open discussions around the time of the Constantinople agreement, but Britain was busy forging an alliance with Sharif Hussein of Mecca. Sykes–Picot, initialed in secret in London on January 3, 1916, had its origins in early strategic failures at Gallipoli and mutual Allied distrust. France's small military presence made it anxious about British ambition. Britain, in turn, worried about France's historical claims over Syria.[116] Eventually, Russia was brought in and negotiations yielded the signed agreement in May 1916.

Sykes–Picot proved important to war planning. The purpose of the agreement, in the context of the war as it was in late 1915, was to turn the tide against the Ottomans. Created by two minor Allied diplomats, it captured the imagination of politicians and strategists who by 1916 had very little to show for wartime sacrifices. The reading of Sykes–Picot only as a postwar plan to divide the spoils of war has blinded historians to the uses of the agreement as a means of moving the war forward in 1916. To be sure, it *was* a plan to claim the Middle East for Britain and France and was criticized at the time for dividing "up the skin of the bear before they had killed it."[117] In 1917, however, it served the more urgent task of readying the way for the Allied invasion of Mesopotamia. Britain used the agreement to better facilitate the movement of its army. In a letter to French diplomat Paul Cambon finalizing Sykes–Picot, Foreign Secretary Edward Grey emphasized that "Great Britain has the right to build, administer, and be the sole owner of a railway connecting Haifa . . . and shall have a perpetual right to transport troops along such a line <u>at all times</u> [double underline]."[118]

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Statements like this legitimated British military leadership on the Middle Eastern Front. But French concerns over the future of Syria also had to be assuaged. The former French consul in Beirut, François Georges-Picot (1870–1951), was tasked with defending French claims. Born in Paris, Picot studied law and later joined the French Foreign Ministry. A career diplomat, his experience in the Near East as Beirut Consul was followed immediately by a post in London as First Secretary in August 1915. Ambassador Cambon assigned him the task of negotiating the "geographical limits of Syria" with the British that fall.[119] Picot represented the demands of the French clerical/colonial party that understood Syria in its maximalist form to include Palestine and Lebanon.[120] By the time negotiations started, France knew about British discussion with Hussein regarding the boundaries of "Arabia" but not the extent. France worried that these negotiations would result in a smaller Syria. Eventually, they consented to Sykes–Picot based on the belief that the British had made only vague promises regarding a future Arab state.[121]

Though excluded from the bilateral negotiations between France and Britain, Sharif Hussein (*c.* 1853–1931) was an important player in Sykes–Picot. Born in Constantinople, the head of the Hashemite dynasty grew up in the Hejaz province of Arabia and later returned to the Ottoman imperial capital to raise his four sons, Ali, Abdullah, Feisal and Zayd. Independent minded and politically astute, he successfully navigated prewar attempts to curb his power during the tumultuous Young Turk revolutionary period. Even before the First World War broke out, he saw the British as a possible ally in helping maintain his autonomy in the Hejaz, sending his son Abdullah to meet with Lord Kitchener who was then consul general in Egypt in early 1914.[122]

At a minimum, Hussein's presence as a power broker who promised to deliver Arab support for the Allies sowed distrust between France and Britain. His demands for an independent Arab state loomed large in the context of the French role in a still undefined Syria. Hussein's correspondence with the British High Commissioner in Cairo, Sir Henry McMahon, about the issue ultimately resulted in vague promises that equivocated on the issue of Arab independence but eventually led to the Arab Revolt in summer 1916. The political implications of the so-called

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Hussein–McMahon correspondence made the French nervous. While the proposed Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire boded well for the Allied war effort, the meaning of that alliance was still unclear in late 1915. For France, the question of control over Syria dominated its dealings with both British and Arab interests throughout the war.[123]

Lieutenant Colonel Sir Mark Sykes (1879–1919), played an outsized role in Britain's Middle East strategy that went beyond criticizing British war planning. Born Tatton Benvenuto Mark Sykes to an aristocratic family, he had no formal training in Middle Eastern affairs. In September 1913, he traveled to the Balkans after the Second Balkan War in an unofficial capacity and then began seeking out an official role. In January 1915, he wrote an unanswered letter to Churchill asserting that Britain should take Constantinople. Eventually, his dogged attempts to get involved in war planning captured the attention of Lord Kitchener after he became Secretary of State for War. He served as Kitchener's personal representative on the De Bunsen Committee which in the spring of 1915 had as its brief to define the objectives of war policy in the Middle East.[124] Sykes, an heir to the baronetcy at Sledmere, served as his representative at the War Office until Kitchener's death and later worked for the Imperial War Cabinet, and then as advisor to the Foreign Office. Elected Tory MP for Central Hull in 1913, he advocated British military involvement in the Ottoman Empire. Like many of his contemporaries involved in the First World War, he had fought in the Boer War where he rose to the rank of captain. He came back with a belief that the British Empire should guide global affairs.[125]

Picot's initial limited brief to negotiate the borders of Syria stood in sharp relief to Sykes' ambitions to remake Allied war policy. Sykes traveled regularly to the Middle East during the war and proposed occupying Baghdad after visiting India and Basra on a six-month fact-finding trip.[126] He soon developed a larger vision of what victory in Mesopotamia would mean for the Allies. In early 1916, Sykes went with Picot to Russia to complete negotiations on the agreement that would bear their names and later divide the Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence that eventually included Britain, France, Russia, Italy and an Arab State.[127]

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The pair also took care to court non-state interests including the Armenian and Jewish diaspora. Both Sykes and Picot met multiple times with Boghos Nubar Pasha, an influential Armenian leader living in Paris. At one meeting, Picot echoed British claims, reassuring Nubar that France was fighting "a war of liberation of oppressed peoples."[128] Sykes and Picot also met with representatives of the Zionist community about support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. These discussions intensified before the issuing of the Balfour Declaration in fall 1917. Jewish community leader Chaim Weizmann later called Sykes "one of our greatest finds . . . He was not very consistent or logical in his thinking but he was generous and warmhearted. He had conceived the idea of the liberation of the Jews, the Arabs and the Armenians, whom he looked upon as the three downtrodden races par excellence."[129]

But military victory had to happen before help came for "downtrodden" peoples. Sykes convinced his superiors of the importance of finalizing the agreement with France before starting a military offensive in Mesopotamia. In a secret memorandum, Sykes suggested "a statement" to indicate "that dependent on our success the Arabic-speaking people will be under French protection in one area and English protection in another, with the recognition of Arab nationality and of Arab participation in the official administration in both areas." While the eventual administration of the region was important, so too was its conception as a theater of war. Sykes concluded by suggesting mobilizing ground troops in Mesopotamia because "our primal success must . . . be derived from military action."[130]

Sykes successfully lobbied the Secretary of the War Committee, Maurice Hankey, for a position as Secretariat member which made him more directly involved in the War Cabinet.[131] After the fall of Baghdad in March 1917, then Secretary of State for India Austen Chamberlain at an Imperial War Cabinet meeting proposed making "the practical destruction of the Turkish Empire" which included conquering "Arabia . . . important portions of the Valley of Euphrates and the Tigris" a war aim. He further asserted that "Constantinople and Syria, Armenia and the southern part of Asia Minor" should "fall more or less under" the domination of the Allied Powers.[132]

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Sykes refused to see the agreement as a tool to facilitate the annexation of territory. He resisted the labeling of it "Sykes–Picot" in favor of the "Anglo-French Arab agreement," possibly suggesting that he knew that this was exactly how it would be read.[133] Both Sykes and Picot had committed to the idea that defeating the Ottoman Empire would create greater freedom for subject populations even if it meant trading one master for another.[134] The idea of national minorities, as Benjamin White argues, developed out of the war and the term did not necessarily correspond to the actual size of these populations or their locations.[135] The British used the term "small nationalities" to describe subject populations that they believed would accept either military or humanitarian Allied support during the war.[136] This paternalism shaped discussions surrounding Sykes–Picot and its final form.

Sykes worried that "sufficient importance" had not been paid to "the moral side of the question" of fighting a war to liberate small nationalities from the Ottoman yoke. To his mind, the agreement solved this problem. It was "founded on two axioms": "the unalterable friendship of Great Britain and France" and "The duty of Great Britain and France towards oppressed people."[137] Picot spent the war actively involved in Allied affairs in Cairo, Jerusalem and Beirut. Sykes gave public speeches emphasizing the centrality of the war in the Middle East and popularized the term "Middle East" in the process.[138] In 1916 he worked with Admiralty Intelligence on "an atlas of Western Europe and the Middle East." These maps illustrated the geography, history, language and religion of Middle Eastern peoples as closely tied to West. The Atlas he created transposed translucent maps over one another on an illuminated base map that layered the physical and human geography of the region.[139]

This project echoed Victorian ethno-linguistic mapping projects that divided the world into a cosmography of East and West, with the Near and Middle East pulled closer to the western sphere of influence.[140] This manifested itself in wartime discussions in Britain about the administration of Mesopotamia as separate from the administration of India. Here the "Middle East" found expression as a geographical entity defined in relation to the British Empire in

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Asia. Sykes suggested that the administration of Basra and Baghdad fall under the Foreign Office, not the Government of India.[141] He argued that Mesopotamia was oriented toward the West rather than the East and therefore should not be administered by the India Office. By March 1917, the War Cabinet had established the Mesopotamian Administration Committee with Lord Curzon as chair and Sykes as unofficial secretary.[142]

Mapping Mesopotamia as belonging to the West was central to Sykes' project. The Sykes–Picot map depicting the Middle East divided into imperial spheres of influence and client states continues to capture the western imagination today. The more well-known map designated the future spheres of influence of Britain and France (see Figure 1.1).[143]

1.1. Sykes–Picot map to Illustrate the Agreements of 1916. Credit: Pictures from History/ Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

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This map provided a canvas for T. E. Lawrence to later map ethnonational divisions that he unsuccessfully argued should guide the dividing up of the region (see Figure 1.2).[144] Sykes himself had relied on population maps that showed religious and ethnographic divisions to inform the original Syke–Picot map.[145] Lawrence appears to have marked on the map what already was implicit. Once revealed, Allied-imposed divisions shocked those marginalized by this cosmography, including Hussein. That happened in November 1917 when the Bolsheviks had the Sykes–Picot agreement published in order to discredit now deposed Tsar Nicholas II's wartime policies.[146]

Even before the public knew about Sykes–Picot, the Foreign Office began to make use of the wartime imperial geography.

1.2. Ethnographic Sykes–Picot map created by T. E. Lawrence, 1918. Credit: The National Archives (UK), ref. MPI1/720(1).

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The first discussions of the conquest of Baghdad started the same month that Sykes–Picot negotiations began in October 1915. It did not go forward because of the Kut disaster. However, capturing Baghdad from that moment forward symbolized wider ambitions. The mapping of the city within the British sphere of influence in Sykes–Picot happened in January during Townshend's ongoing campaign. It elevated the conquest of Baghdad from a "sideshow" into a strategic war aim. The British saw the French region as ripe for conquest as well. After the capture of Baghdad in March 1917, strategists set their sights on Jerusalem and then the occupation of the entire French zone which was achieved in fall 1918. Before the fall of Jerusalem, the Arabs had driven the Ottomans out of the Hejaz making this move possible.

Ultimately, the conquest of the Ottoman Empire followed the imperial geography of the Sykes–Picot map from the beginning of the Arab Revolt in summer 1916 onwards.[147] Sykes–Picot transformed into an occupation map after Britain's successful Mesopotamian campaigns between 1917 and 1918. A War Office map from 1918 shows the growing extent of the British occupation (see Figure 1.3).[148] By this time, the British in the name of the Allies, had conquered Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia in the French and British zones that corresponded to the designations on the Sykes–Picot map.

Sykes and Picot continued to wield influence after the tide turned in the Allies favor in Spring 1917. Picot was assigned as Commissaire de la Republique dans les territoires occupés de Palestine et de Syrie. At the time of armistice in October 1918, he served as plenipotentiary with authority to continue negotiating Anglo-French policy.[149] Sykes continued advocating the Sykes–Picot vision. He traveled around the Middle East to make assessments until his death from the Spanish flu on February 16, 1919, while attending the Paris Peace Conference.[150]

Lloyd George used Sykes–Picot to direct Britain's conquest of Mesopotamia. He later distanced himself from the agreement, calling it a "blunder" and disingenuously claiming in his *War Memoirs* that he found it "incomprehensible" that the Arabs were not notified of its

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1.3. Allied military occupation map, 1918. Credit: *A Brief Record of the Advance of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force: July 1917–October 1918* (1919), Plate 55.

contents. He went as far as to declare that he was ashamed of the document.[151] LloydGeorge also blamed France for the duplicity and accused it of not contributing enough soldiers and resources to the fight.[152] These statements reflected growing British confidence in the wake of its victories on the Middle Eastern Front. The conquest of Mesopotamia in spring 1917, largely by British forces, had changed the course of the war. But in 1916, the game of secret agreements still mattered especially regarding the Arab alliance. Although they had held up their end of the bargain that summer, the Arabs would not share the advantages of victory over the Ottomans in the Hejaz.[153]

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ARAB REVOLT

Indigenous support was important to winning the war for the Allies. Negotiations with Sharif Hussein had stalled repeatedly because of his justifiable distrust of Anglo-France imperial ambitions. Correspondence between Hussein and McMahon on a possible Anglo-Arab alliance continued through the spring of 1916; McMahon promised a "pan-Arab" empire if Hussein would lead a revolt against the Ottomans.[154] During this time, CUP leader Cemal Pasha began a brutal campaign against Arab critics of the regime many of whom were arrested for treason and either exiled or killed. Information on dissidents came from French files Picot left behind in Beirut in October 1914 and later seized by Cemal Pasha's forces.[155]

The campaign against Arab nationalists starting in June 1915 instituted what Eugene Rogan called a "reign of terror" and ultimately influenced Hussein's decision to support the Allied war effort and lead a rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in the Hejaz. The famine in Syria, which began in the spring of 1915, also may have contributed to this decision.[156] Locusts devastated crops for over a year causing widespread starvation.[157] As soldier Ihsan Turjman recorded in his wartime diary: "Locusts are attacking all over the country ... Today it took the locust clouds two hours to pass over the city. God project us from the three plagues: war, locusts and disease ... Pity the poor."[158] Ottoman authorities instituted policies including wartime requisitioning and economic sanctions that actively made things worse and created a "man-made wartime famine" that would claim up to half a million lives in Beirut and its environs.[159]

The Arab Revolt began in June 1916 under the leadership of Hussein and his sons. It ended a long era of not always harmonious relations between the Ottoman Empire and its Arab subjects. Before the war, the government moderated the previous administration's active policy of centralization in response to Arab resistance.[160] Despite promises of limited autonomy and a shared common faith with its Muslim rulers, Hussein continued to fiercely guard his independence from the imperial center. This included resisting the construction of railway lines to link Mecca and Medina to the rest of the country that could lead to closer connections with the Ottoman state.[161]

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At the same time, Ottoman Arabs felt tied by language and religion to the estimated 35–40 million Arabs in the larger Islamic World. Growing nationalist consciousness among Arabs in the Hejaz, encouraged by the British for their own ends, threatened to sever historic connections to their Ottoman co-religionists while enforcing bonds with the wider Arab world.[162] This did not happen immediately or easily. When war started, Hussein did not issue a declaration in support of the Sultan's jihad, nor did he initially accept the overtures of Britain.[163]

Eventually, discontent with Ottoman rule and growing nationalism brought Arabs under Hussein's leadership into the war. Hussein had brokered the conditions for the Anglo-Arab alliance after he learned of a plot to overthrow him by the Ottoman government. The unilateral agreement came about in part to counter France's ambitions in Syria. "We rejoice . . . that your Highness and your people are of one opinion, that Arab interests are English interests and English Arab," wrote McMahon to Hussein in August 1915.[164] Ultimately, this declaration of mutual interests proved one-sided. McMahon's declaration of mutual interests served only Britain's own imperial ambitions.[165] The final agreement rested on vaguely defined boundaries for the future Arab state and ignored Sykes–Picot. But up to this point, that agreement remained unknown to Hussein and his supporters. The revolt thus took place under the false assumption that Britain would defend Hussein's claims to part of the same region that it had promised to France months earlier.[166] A "disparate crew of irregulars," as one historian characterized the Arab fighters, continued their campaign in the Hejaz for over a year.[167]

After the war, Lloyd George praised Arab efforts and claimed that "the safety of our Arab allies in the Hejaz" had been a top priority.[168] The reality was that Britain offered only uneven assistance to the war in the Hejaz as it focused on fighting the Ottomans elsewhere. The British army advanced into Sinai in the summer of 1916 and all but ended Ottoman threats to Egypt.[169] After a series of initial successes, the Arab Revolt faltered, the result of problematic Hashemite alliances with local tribesmen coupled with a lack of personnel and resources. Britain responded by relying on an old play book used in India. The belief that a network of spies and informants would allow

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the British to better face adversaries in the Middle East first took shape along the Indian frontier during imperial consolidation efforts in the nineteenth century.[170]

In the Hejaz, this translated into supporting shadowy operations by self-declared experts who promised to infiltrate Arab communities.[171] Lloyd George referenced the usefulness of such informants in recalling his frustration with the War Office which "was strongly opposed to increasing our commitments" in the Middle East. He believed that "capable officers" "with a close knowledge of oriental people and their ways . . . knew how to get the maximum effect with comparatively small forces."[172] Although Lloyd George may have had Sykes in mind, it was T. E. Lawrence who fit this mould best. His presence looms large still today in discussions of the Arab Revolt as a romantic figure who promised to deliver victory through cloak-and-dagger tactics. Lawrence of Arabia, a moniker he took on during the war, took credit for turning the fortunes of the revolt around through cunning and daring exploits.[173] For those fighting in the revolt, he was less fabled. Instead of leading the revolt, some remembered him more as the "paymaster" who deserved minimal credit in the effort to oust the Ottomans from the Hejaz.[174]

CONCLUSION

While historians debate the extent of the effectiveness of the Arab Revolt, the episode had important implications for the course of the First World War.[175] Hussein's entry in the war undermined German attempts to weaken Arab support for the British and diminished the effectiveness of the campaign of the Central Powers in the region. Germany launched a propaganda campaign early in the war to win Muslim loyalty which included both Ottoman Arabs and Indians serving in and alongside the British army. While the Germans failed to incite outright rebellion, the most significant achievement in this effort was to sow the seeds of distrust between British commanders and Indian soldiers.[176] This was apparent at Gallipoli, Kut and in POW camps where active recruiting took place and resulted in limited but highly noticed defections from the Indian army to the Ottoman army.[177]

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The Arab Revolt also influenced discussions about future administration and the extent to which the government of India should be involved in the management of the war.[178] Britain contributed almost 1 million pounds to the success of the revolt but did not commit any of its already stretched ground troops who, starting in July 1916, were engaged in the battle of the Somme which would ultimately kill over a million British, French and German soldiers.[179] No one knew if the gains made by Hussein and his supporters would last beyond 1916 when the Ottoman army retreated from the Hejaz. Forcing the Ottoman army out of Mecca and Medina denied the Central Powers a symbolic victory in its fight for Arab support and cleared the way for the Allied conquest of Jerusalem. The ability of the Arabs to hold their ground in the Hejaz ultimately advantaged the Allies. By spring 1917, the war had taken a definitive turn in their favor.

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