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## HISTORY

### The Great Arab Revolt

Much of the trauma and dislocation suffered by the peoples of the Middle East during the 20th century can be traced to the events surrounding World War I. During the conflict, the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers against the Allies. Seeing an opportunity to liberate Arab lands from Turkish oppression, and trusting the honor of British officials who promised their support for a unified kingdom for the Arab lands, **Sharif Hussein bin Ali**, Emir of Mecca and King of the Arabs (and great grandfather of King Hussein), launched the Great Arab Revolt. After the conclusion of the war, however, the victors reneged on their promises to the Arabs, carving from the dismembered Ottoman lands a patchwork system of mandates and protectorates. While the colonial powers denied the Arabs their promised single unified Arab state, it is nevertheless testimony to the effectiveness of the Great Arab Revolt that the Hashemite family was able to secure Arab rule over Transjordan, Iraq and Arabia.



Sharif Hussein bin Ali, King of the Arabs and King of the Hijaz.  
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In order to discern the motives of the Hashemites in undertaking the revolt, one must understand the policies undertaken by the Ottoman Empire in the years leading up to World War I. Following the Young Turk coup of 1908, the Ottomans abandoned their pluralistic and pan-Islamic policies, instead pursuing a policy of secular Turkish nationalism. The formerly cosmopolitan and tolerant Ottoman Empire began overtly discriminating against its non-Turkish inhabitants. Arabs in particular were faced with political, cultural and linguistic persecution. During this time, Arab nationalist groups in Syria, Iraq and Arabia began to rally behind the Hashemite banner of **Abdullah** and **Faisal**, sons of Sharif Hussein bin Ali, King of the Arabs.

When the Ottomans entered World War I on the side of the Central Powers in 1914, they upheld the ban on the official use of the Arabic language and its teaching in schools, while arresting many Arab nationalist figures in Damascus and Beirut. Arabs were further threatened by the construction of the Hijaz Railway, connecting Damascus and Mecca, which promised to facilitate the mobility of Turkish troops into the Arab heartland.

Consequently, in June 1916, as head of the Arab nationalists and in alliance with Britain and France, Sharif Hussein initiated the Great Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule. His sons, the emirs Abdullah and Faisal, led the Arab forces, with Emir Faisal's forces liberating Damascus from Ottoman rule in 1918. At the end of the war, Arab forces controlled all of modern Jordan, most of the Arabian peninsula and much of southern Syria.

Sharif Hussein's objective in undertaking the Great Arab Revolt was to establish a single independent and unified Arab state stretching from Aleppo (Syria) to Aden (Yemen), based on the ancient traditions and culture of the Arab people, the upholding of Islamic ideals and the full protection and inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities. Arab nationalists in the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula found in the Hashemite commanders of the Great Arab Revolt the leadership that could realize their aspirations, and thus coalesced around them.



The Great Arab Revolt, Wadi Rum, 1917.  
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### ► The Clash of Promises and Interests

The political aspirations of the Arabs were not to be realized, however, due to the conflicting promises made by the British to their wartime allies. The first of these came during 1915 in an exchange of ten letters between Sir Henry McMahon, Britain's high commissioner in Egypt, and Sharif Hussein. Essentially, Britain pledged, in what became known as the **Hussein-McMahon Correspondence**, to support Arab independence if Hussein's forces revolted against the Turks.

But the agreement excluded three areas: the *wilayets* (Ottoman provinces) of Basra and Baghdad, the Turkish districts of Alexandretta and Mersin, and, most importantly, "portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Hama, and Aleppo." The interpretation of the last section was to be the source of great controversy. The British later claimed that Palestine was meant to be excluded from the area of Arab rule, as it is technically located west of Damascus: for obvious reasons the Zionists took the same position. The Arabs interpreted the letter as it reads: Lebanon, not Palestine, is to the west of Damascus and the other areas mentioned.

In any case, the interests of the colonial powers took precedence over promises made to the Arabs. While accepting the principle of Arab independence laid down in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, the **Sykes-Picot Agreement**, signed by Britain, France and Russia in 1916, divided the area into zones of permanent colonial influence. The agreement recognized French interests in Greater Syria and northern Iraq, while acknowledging British designs on a belt of influence from the Mediterranean to the Gulf to protect its trade and communications links with the Indian subcontinent. The Sykes-Picot Agreement specified that most of Palestine was to be entrusted to an international administration. The agreement clearly contradicted the promises made to Sharif Hussein of Mecca.

To further complicate matters, in a totally deceitful move British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour in 1917 issued a letter to a prominent British Jew, Lord Rothschild, promising Britain's commitment and support for a Jewish home in Palestine. Known as the **Balfour Declaration**, the letter calls for the *"establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people . . . it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.."*

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## The Arab Revolt, 1916-18 - Ottoman Empire



[Emir Feisal](#)

The Arab Revolt began on 5 June 1916. Forces commanded by Sharif Hussein ibn Ali's sons, the emirs Ali and Feisal, attacked the Ottoman garrison at Medina in an attempt to seize the holy city and its railway station. After three days the Arabs broke off their attacks, and the commander of the 12,000-strong Ottoman garrison, General Fakhri Pasha, sent Turkish troops out of the city to pursue the retreating rebels.

Meanwhile, Sharif Hussein ibn Ali publicly proclaimed the revolt on 10 June in Mecca. His forces were more successful there, seizing the city and forcing the small Ottoman garrison to seek refuge in the local fortress. Another of Hussein's sons, Emir Abdullah, surrounded and besieged the town of Ta'if.

At the same time rebel clans allied to Sharif Hussein attacked Jiddah and other ports along the Arabian coast of the Red Sea. Both sides recognised the importance of the Red Sea ports and the British immediately dispatched a naval flotilla – including the seaplane carrier HMS *Ben-My-Chree* – to support the Arab forces. The ships bombarded Turkish fortifications and aircraft from *Ben-My-Chree* attacked Turkish troops in the field, disrupting their efforts to defeat the advancing rebels on the landward approaches.



[Hejaz Army headdress](#)

By the end of July the ports of Jiddah, Yanbu and Rabegh were in Arab hands, allowing the British to greatly increase their supply of arms and equipment to the Arab forces in the Hejaz. Control of the ports also allowed the landing of the first units of the Arab Regular Army – Ottoman Army soldiers captured by the British at Gallipoli, in Mesopotamia or the Sinai, who had subsequently volunteered to fight for the Arab nationalist cause. They wore British uniforms with Arab head-dress, and were equipped with modern weapons like heavy machine guns and artillery. An artillery battery and technical specialists from the Egyptian Army provided further support.

The British Army also dispatched their own military mission to liaise between the Arab leadership and the British high command in Egypt. This mission, which from October 1916 included Lieutenant T.E. Lawrence – better known to posterity as Lawrence of Arabia – would increase in size and capability as the war went on. This assistance, especially the artillery, gave the Arab forces the means to finish off the Ottoman garrisons under siege at Mecca and Ta'if.

Sharif Hussein ibn Ali spent the rest of 1916 consolidating his hold on the Hejaz and the coastal ports, building up his army and fending off Turkish counter-attacks. The failure to seize Medina at the start of the revolt proved costly, as the Ottoman Fourth Army sent reinforcements down the entire length of the Hejaz railway to garrison the stations. Ottoman General Fakhri Pasha then sought to recapture the coastal ports, beginning at Yanbu in December. This assault was finally beaten off thanks to the decisive intervention of the Royal Navy flotilla; the same thing happened when Fakhri tried to take Rabegh in early January 1917.

### An Allied betrayal?

In November 1917 the war in the Middle East was overshadowed by the disclosure of the

Sykes-Picot Agreement by the new Russian Bolshevik regime. In this secret 1916 deal, Britain and France had agreed to divide the Ottoman Empire's Middle Eastern territories into their own zones of influence after the war. This apparent Allied betrayal caused widespread discontent throughout the ranks of the Arab Revolt. Although the Ottoman government tried to exploit the controversy, Arab leaders gambled that the reality on the ground at the end of the war would trump any paper agreement. For Feisal, Lawrence and the Arab Northern Army, the priority was now to reach Damascus before the British did.



[T. E. Lawrence](#)

Meanwhile, Emir Feisal, with Lawrence as his adviser, had captured the port of Wejh, 150 km north of Yanbu. From here Feisal's men spent most of 1917 attacking the Hejaz railway. Small raiding parties blew up sections of track and destroyed bridges, water towers and even some weakly defended railway stations. The British, planning to invade Palestine, were keen for the Arab rebels to keep the 12,000 Ottoman troops in Medina tied down.

The potential of the Arab Revolt was recognised by the new British commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), General Sir Edmund Allenby, especially after Lawrence led a group of Feisal's men on a daring raid to capture the last remaining Ottoman Red Sea port, Aqaba, in June 1917. Aqaba became the new base for Feisal's army, renamed the 'Arab Northern Army'. Attacks on the railway continued, and now extended as far north as southern Jordan; Lawrence himself led reconnaissance parties into Syria and made contact with Arab nationalists in Damascus. The spectacular victory of the EEF at the Third Battle of Gaza (Beersheba) in October 1917, and the subsequent British advance into the Jordan Valley, gave renewed impetus to Feisal's 'railway war' further east.



[Arab warriors in the desert](#)

Despite tensions over the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Arab Northern Army continued to attack the Hejaz railway and assist the British where they could. They played a valuable role in Allenby's final offensive, which culminated in the Battle of Meggido in September 1918, by attacking the key rail junction at Deraa and elsewhere.

In the wake of this victory Allenby's mounted troops advanced swiftly through Palestine and Jordan, overrunning what is now modern-day Lebanon and entering Syria. To the east the Arab Northern Army drove northwards in an unspoken race for Damascus. They reached the city on 1 October 1918 to find Australian Light Horsemen entering from another side. The debate over who got there first has continued ever since.

A month later the Ottoman Empire agreed to an armistice and the leaders of the Arab Revolt found themselves locked in tense negotiations with their former allies, the British and French, over the future of the region.

How to cite this page: 'The Arab Revolt, 1916-18 - Ottoman Empire', URL: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/ottoman-empire/arab-revolt>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012



# Flag of the Arab Revolt

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The **Flag of the Arab Revolt** was a flag used by Arab nationalists during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in World War I.

## History

The flag was designed by the British diplomat Sir Mark Sykes, in an effort to create a feeling of "Arab-ness" in order to fuel the revolt.<sup>[1]</sup> Although the Arab Revolt was only very limited in scope and concerted by the British rather than by Arabs themselves, the flag influenced the national flags of a number of emerging Arab states after World War I. Flags inspired by that of the Arab revolt include those of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Sudan, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, the Palestinian national movement (also used by the PLO and by the Palestinian Authority), Somaliland, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and Libya.



Soldiers in the Arab Army during the Arab Revolt of 1916-1918. They are carrying the Arab Flag of the Arab Revolt and pictured in the Arabian Desert

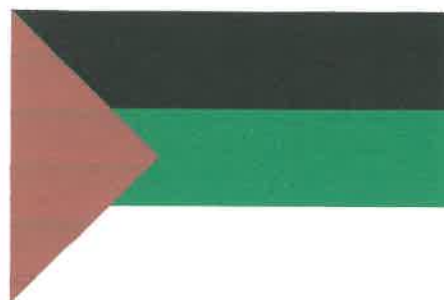
The horizontal colors stand for the Abbasid, Umayyad and Fatimid Caliphates. The red triangle refers to the Hashemite dynasty.

The Hashemites were allies of the British in the conflict against the Ottoman Empire. After the war ended, the Hashemites achieved or were granted rule in the

Hejaz region of Arabia, Jordan, formally known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, briefly in Greater Syria, and Iraq.

Greater Syria was dissolved after only a few months existence, in 1920. The Hashemites were overthrown in the Hejaz in 1925 by the House of Saud, and in Iraq in 1958 by a coup d'etat, but retained power in Jordan.

A 98.5 by 197 foot version of the flag flies from the Aqaba Flagpole, currently the fifth tallest freestanding flagpole in the world, located in Aqaba, Jordan.



Flag ratio: 2:3



The flag of the Arab revolt- Aqaba 2006

## References

- <sup>^</sup> William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden*, (2006) p. 295

## See also

- Pan-Arab colors
- Flag of Saudi Arabia
- Kingdom of Hejaz
- Palestinian flag

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