

Why the Ottomans Matter Today

The Ottoman Empire controlled much of the area known as the Middle East, or Southwest Asia, from the 1300s until the end of World War I. At its most powerful in the 1500s, the Ottoman Empire's capital was the city of **Istanbul**. By the beginning of World War I in 1914, the Ottoman Empire had shrunk in size but still included what is known today as Southwest Asia. The Ottoman Empire had weakened because it tried to rule such a huge empire with leaders who could not manage to hold on to the territory. European countries had also become more powerful. When World War I began, the Ottoman Empire decided to join force with Germany and Italy against the other European powers and the United States. Their side lost the war and as a result, the Ottoman Empire was overthrown and Ottoman territory was **partitioned** into a number of smaller countries. The 1920 treaty that divided the Ottoman's land and defined the new boundaries was called the **San Remo Agreement**. The resulting countries are a part of what is known today as the modern Middle East, or Southwest Asia.

The European politicians who decided where the boundaries of these new countries would be often paid little attention to the **ethnic and religious groups** who were already living in these areas. The new boundaries that were drawn did not take into consideration the concept of **nationalism**, which believes that countries are most successful if the people who live there share some common cultural, historic, or religious beliefs. Many different groups tried to live together in countries that were created by foreigners (Europeans) who did not realize the problems some of these new boundaries would cause. As a result there has been a lot of conflict over **stateless nations**, or ethnic groups without their own state (country). Two of these stateless nations are the Kurds and Palestinians.

KURDISTAN

Kurdistan is a region in southwest Asia. The mainly mountainous region extends over parts of Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The people of the region are known as **Kurds**. Historically, the name *Kurdistan* (meaning *Land of the Kurds*) has been used for the area where the Kurds live. Except for a brief period in northern Iran from 1945 to 1946, Kurds have never had their own government. Their desire for cultural and political independence has led to conflicts between them and the governments under which they live. Today, only a small province in Iran is officially named Kurdistan.



In the 1500's, most of Kurdistan came under the rule of largely independent Kurdish *emirates* (principalities) within the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire broke apart after the end of World War I (1914-1918). The 1920 **Treaty of Sèvres** called for new independent nations in the Middle East, including a new Kurdish state. However, Kurdistan was instead divided between Iran, Syria, and the new nations of Iraq and Turkey in the **San Remo Agreement**. As a result, in the 1920's and 1930's, Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish forces put down a number of Kurdish uprisings.

Beginning in the 1970's, the **Kurdish Workers' Party**, or **PKK**, and other Kurdish organizations rose up in Turkey. The PKK carried out armed attacks and bombings in its attempts to establish Kurdish independence and assert its own dominance among Kurdish groups. In the 1980's, the PKK spread to some neighboring nations,

including Iran and Iraq. Conflicts between the PKK and local governments killed many thousands of people, mostly Kurd civilians. In the 1990's, thousands more died as Kurdish groups fought among themselves.

Many Kurdish groups have shifted their focus toward gaining cultural and political rights within their national boundaries. But other groups—especially Kurds in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey—still strive for an independent Kurdish state.

PALESTINE

One of the areas created by the partitioning of the old Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I was **Palestine**, the land that is today known as the countries of Israel and Jordan. This area was important to Jews, Christians, and Muslims because this is where much of what is written in the Torah (Old Testament), the Bible (New Testament), and the Qu'ran took place. There are many religious sites in Palestine sacred to all three religions. The most important of these is **Jerusalem**.

In the years before **World War II**, the British divided the land they controlled into Transjordan, on the eastern side of the Jordan River, and an area known as Palestine on the western side of the river. The British were given the responsibility for ruling in Palestine until a decision could be made about how to establish a permanent government there. Most of the people living in Palestine before World War II were **Palestinian Arabs**. However, since the late 1800's large numbers of Jewish settlers had been immigrating to the area from both Western and Eastern Europe. Some of these Jewish settlers wanted to create a homeland for the world's Jews in Palestine, because they believed land in this area had been promised to them by God many thousands of years ago, as told in the stories of the Old Testament. These groups were known as **Zionists** (those who felt the world's Jews deserved to return to a homeland in **Zion**, or those parts of Palestine where the Jewish people had lived since Biblical times. Conflicts began to break out between the settlers and the Palestinian Arabs, as each group tried to hold onto the land.

During **World War II**, the Jewish people in Europe suffered terribly at the hands of the Nazi government of Germany. There was widespread **anti-Semitism** (hatred of the Jews simply because they practiced the Jewish faith) in Europe. Over six million Jews were killed in concentration camps set up by Germany and many thousands of others had to leave Europe to avoid death. This terrible time came to be known as the **Holocaust**.

At the end of the war, the Jewish people of the world wanted to take steps to be sure nothing like this could ever happen again. Many countries in the world felt tremendous guilt over the Holocaust as they began to learn the details of what had gone on in the German concentration camps. A number of Jewish groups living in Europe and the United States, even before the Holocaust, had talked of trying to set up a homeland for the Jewish people in the region of the Middle East known as Palestine. At the end of the war, the newly created **United Nations** also believed something should be done for the Jewish people because of their suffering.



In 1948, the United Nations voted to create a homeland for the Jews in part of Palestine. The Jews who were living there accepted the offer and declared the creation of the **State of Israel**. However, not everyone was happy with this new state. There were Palestinian Arabs who were living in the area who felt the United Nations had unfairly given their land away, and they along with many other Arab countries refused to accept the new state.

In May 1948, war broke out in Palestine between the Jews who supported the creation of the new state of Israel and the Palestinian Arabs who also lived there. The neighboring Arab countries supported Palestinian claims to land now in the new state of Israel. These Arab countries in Southwest Asia agreed with the Palestinians and helped them during this war. The Israelis were able to win this war and the new state of Israel survived, taking over even more land than had originally been planned by the United Nations (UN) in 1947. Many Palestinians became **refugees** (people who had to leave their homes as the result of a war). In the last 50 years, there have been additional wars between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Israel has continued to exist, and many of the Palestinians and their descendants still live in refugee camps or in parts of Israel that they feel should be a Palestinian state. The problem between these two people still exist, even though people on both sides of the conflict continue to look for ways to find a peaceful solution to their disagreements. Arab countries in the area are strong supporters of the Palestinians, while the United States is a powerful supporter of the Israelis. The Arab-Israeli conflict plays a major role in the difficulties that the United States and the rest of the world face when trying to find peaceful settlements in Middle Eastern conflicts.