

Decolonisation of the Middle-East

The decolonisation process in the Middle-East was a relatively smooth transition save for a few unpleasant incidents. But the aftermath of such a transition left a legacy of violence and instability that lasts to the present day.

This article will speak about the decolonisation of the Middle-East and the events that took place after it.

This is an important topic covered in the World History segment of the UPSC Mains exam.

The Middle-East in the early 20th Century

At the beginning of the 20th century, the British, French and the Ottoman Empire had varying degrees of control over the Middle-Eastern nations. There were growing nationalist movements that called for independence from any and all forms of foreign influence in the region in the form of Arab Nationalism.

The Ottoman Empire for its part suppressed these movements with brute force but with clandestine support from other European nations, the nationalists kept gaining momentum.

Upon the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the Ottomans joined the Central Powers camp. The Europeans, exploiting the sentiments of Pan-Arabism and the desire for independence among the Arab populace of the Ottoman Empire, made overtures with the promise of independence in return for support against the Turks.

The Arabs were not the only one to whom the Allies made such lofty promises. They even roped in the Zionist movement - a Jewish nationalist group - to support their war effort. The terms were the same but it would contrast the promises made to the Arabs. One of these, the Balfour Declaration, would have serious repercussions in Middle-Eastern politics for years to come.

Upon the defeat of Ottoman Turkey in World War I, the European powers would begin one of their last ventures in colonialism. The focus would be on the Middle-East this time. The main beneficiaries of the postwar settlement were Britain and France.

The League of Nations gave Britain trusteeship for Palestine, Iraq and Transjordan. France gained Syria and Lebanon. The discovery of oil in the Persian Gulf made these acquisitions all the more valuable to the two colonial powers.

But these acquisitions came with their own set of problems. By now there was a growing clamour against colonialism with the United States and the Soviet Union being the vociferous ones. A Syrian revolt against French rule was harshly put down while in Palestine, the British

faced opposition from the Arabs who were hell-bent on forcing the British to keep their promises made prior to the war.

The contents of the Balfour Declaration, when it became public knowledge, made the situation only worse. On top of this the Jewish emigration, following Hitler's achievement of power in 1933, led to virtual guerilla warfare between Arabs and Jews, straining the British military presence in Palestine. It would only be after World War II that the full consequences of these events became apparent.

The Middle-East post World War II

The Middle-East was the most unstable of the post-imperial regions after World War II ended in 1945. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire decades before had led to a wave of Arab nationalism with a burning ambition to create new Arab nation-states.

Syria and Lebanon won full independence from France in 1945 and 1946 respectively. Jordan was granted independence in March 1946. Despite efforts to keep a European military presence in the region, the Middle-East was genuinely independent of European Power by 1956.

The most intractable issue of all was the future of the Palestine mandate, granted to Britain by the League of Nations in 1920. Arab nationalists saw this as Arab land and demanded its independence. But the Jewish demands for a homeland of their own in what they considered the historic land of Israel, put them at odds with the Arabs. Inevitably they clashed with each other and the British during the 1940s.

Reviled by both the sides, the British struggled to maintain order. In July 1946 the King David Hotel in Jerusalem was blown by Jewish extremists with 91 people being killed. This incident turned public opinion in Britain against maintaining the mandate. In 1947 Britain asked the United Nations to resolve the issue, and on November 29, 1947, a UN resolution to divide Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state was passed. The British would withdraw from Palestine in May 1948.

On May 14 1948, the David Ben-Gurion declared the foundation of the State of Israel and became its first prime minister, with Chaim Weizmann, leader of the world Zionist movement, as Israel's first president.

Almost immediately the Arab nations would declare war on Israel and would launch the first of three Arab Israel Wars. The third and last major confrontation would be the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Although Israel won the war it saw the necessity to maintain peace with its neighbours.

But war with Israel would be the least of the Middle-East's problems. Just like the case of the decolonisation of Africa, the process was made complicated with the lumping of hostile tribes in one country and redrawing the borders of these countries as per imperialistic ambitions.

When some of these countries became independent post-1945, sectarian violence plunged some into civil war as is the case of Lebanon. Even Iraq would face the same condition but only authoritarian dictators like Saddam Hussein would help keep the peace. It was the same condition in Syria as well. However, the recent civil war in Syria has further thrown the delicate balance of the region in further disarray. Only time will tell what course will a decolonised Middle-East will take.

Timeline of Decolonisation of the Middle-East

The table below gives details about the independence of Asian colonies post-1945.

Decolonisation of the Middle-East		
Name	Date of Independence	Colonising Power
Iraq	October 3, 1932	Great Britain
Lebanon	Independence declared on November 22, 1943. Full Independence granted in 1946	France
Syria	November 30, 1943. Full Independence granted in 1945	France
Israel	May 14, 1948	Great Britain
Cyprus	August 16, 1960	Great Britain
Kuwait	June 19, 1961	Great Britain
Oman	1962	Great Britain
Yemen	November 30, 1967	Great Britain
Qatar	September 3, 1971	Great Britain
Bahrain	August 15, 1971	Great Britain
United Arab Emirates	December 2, 1971	Great Britain