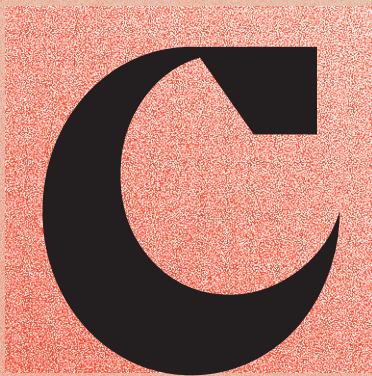


Sèvres, Lausanne, and the Invention of the Middle East



during the Paris Conference of 1919–20. Each settlement was concluded in a different suburb of the French capital.

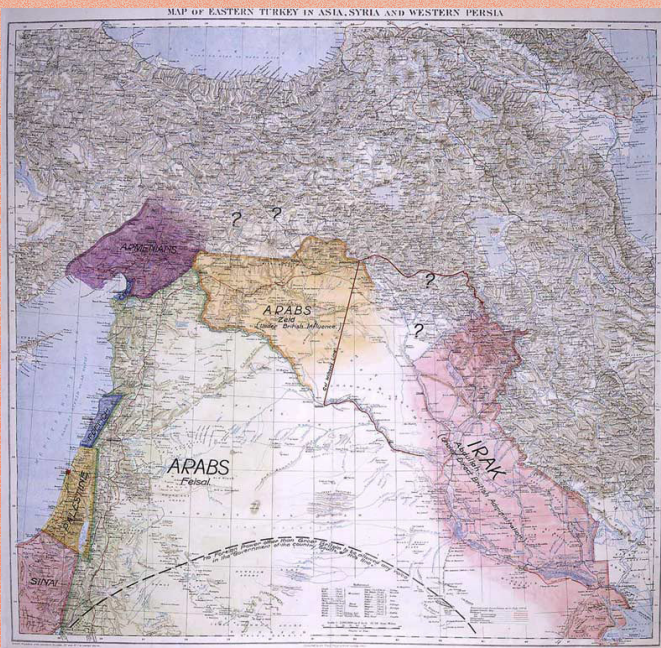
Paris Peace Treaties of 1919–20

TREATY	SIGNATORIES
Treaty of Versailles	
28 June 1919	Germany and the Allied Powers
Treaty of Saint-Germain	
10 September 1919	Austria and the Allied Powers
Treaty of Neuilly	
27 November 1919	Bulgaria and the Allied Powers
Treaty of Trianon	
4 June 1920	Hungary and the Allied Powers
Treaty of Sèvres	
10 August 1920	Ottoman Empire and the Allied Powers

Conventional wisdom holds that World War I came to an end in the autumn of 1918. Exhausted in battles and overhauled by revolution, the Central Powers called for an armistice in October. This was the prelude to the five peace treaties that were eventually signed between the Allied Powers and the defeated

The last of these accords took place in the exhibition room of the Manufacture nationale de Sèvres and addressed the future of what had been the Ottoman Empire, a region now known as the Middle East. Like the other four, Sèvres was a punitive treaty. It espoused the Wilsonian principle of self-determination selectively, re-drawing the borders and partitioning the dominions of the Ottoman Empire. New polities emerged from a crucible of inter-imperial rivalry, competing business interests, and Christian visions of the 'Holy Land'. The treaty partly de-imperialised Asia Minor by paving the way for the establishment of an independent Armenia (Article 88) and by including vague pledges to establish a Kurdish 'national home' as well. At the same time, it re-colonised formerly Ottoman lands in Mesopotamia and along eastern Mediterranean coasts, carving out new states under British (Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine) and French (Syria and Lebanon) control.

During the conferences in London (February–April 1920) and San Remo (April 1920) at which the articles of the Treaty of Sèvres were negotiated, France and Britain had largely agreed on how to share Mesopotamian oil. Even though the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 had assigned the oil-rich province of Mosul to the French, in 1920 France ceded it to British-controlled Iraq. Borders were re-drawn in line with the Great Powers' oil and other strategic interests. Future pipelines connecting Mesopotamia to the Eastern Mediterranean were considered, above and beyond the French desire to oust the defiant King Faisal from Damascus and control the Levantine coasts. Unlike Britain, France had never made hasty promises to support Arab, Jewish, or any other community's claims to a territory of their own. Her foreign policy focus lay elsewhere, in keeping



A map presented by T. E. Lawrence to the British war cabinet in November 1918 as a recommendation for the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire. Lawrence's view was clearly pro-Arab and questioned the fate of the Kurds in the Mosul region.

Germany weak for as long as possible. France's network of business interests and French Roman Catholic missionary institutions in the region nonetheless needed protecting.

In 1922, the League of Nations sanctioned the mandate system in the territories conceded by the Ottoman Empire, which was classified by the diplomats of the time as Class A mandates next to the Class B and C mandates in Africa and the Pacific islands. The overarching discourse was to supervise these Class A polities to liberation and civilisation after centuries long oppression under the Ottoman Empire. Everybody knew, however, that this was a fig leaf for Anglo-French imperial aspirations. As early as 1920, an uprising took place in Iraq to defy the new international (dis)order, only to be brutally suppressed by the British Royal Air Force.

The term 'Middle East' had been coined at the turn of the twentieth century by American and British naval strategists. It was now adopted as a semantic and geostrategic category in the sense familiar to us today. An extremely diverse body of peoples (Arabs, Kurds, Turcomans, Shiites, Sunnis, Alawites, Druzes, Yazidis, Assyrians, Jews, etc.) suddenly found themselves tucked into new, artificial, European-controlled states whose borders had been drawn—often in a straight line—far away, in Paris. The kink in the Transjordanian-Iraqi border even came to be called 'Churchill's sneeze', indicating the apparently casual spirit in which the region was partitioned by the stroke of a distant minister's pen. Egypt remained under British

influence. Nominally it emerged as an independent state under King Fuad and later his son King Farouk. As with Iraq, Iran, and (almost) Jordan, Egypt's puppet monarchy would eventually be ousted from power in the 1950s.

Like the other Paris treaties, Sèvres left deep scars in the political psyche of the vanquished. It triggered what the Dutch historian Erik-Jan Zürcher calls 'a legacy of revanchism'. But unlike the other four treaties, Sèvres was never ratified. At least in the Ottoman Middle East, World War I was not entirely over yet. It had only changed form.

After the autumn of 1918, the Great War was 'decentred', to borrow from the American historian Jay Winter. Its final phase lasted longer in the Middle East than in many other parts of the world. This was in large measure a result of the emergence of a Turkish nationalist resistance movement against the provisions of the Mudros Ceasefire of October 1918. The British occupation of Istanbul (13 November 1918) and the French invasion of Cilicia (17 November 1918) sparked piecemeal, regional defiance of national forces (*kuvâ-yı milliye*) confronting European armies of occupation. The landing of the British-backed Greek troops in Smyrna/Izmir in May 1919 further galvanised the Turkish nationalists, which steadily rallied around a senior officer named Mustafa Kemal Pasha.

In February 1920, the last Ottoman parliament proclaimed a National Pact denouncing and defying territorial partition of the empire by the Allied Powers. This parliament was soon dissolved by the British forces,

Romanticised depiction of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's entry into Izmir following the Turkish victory during the Turkish War of Independence, late 1922



however, and what remained of the empire was still ruled by Sultan Mehmed Vahdettin and his cabinet—both under British sway. Mustafa Kemal's nationalist movement swiftly responded to the dissolution of the Istanbul parliament by promulgating a new assembly on 23 April 1920—in Ankara, a nondescript dusty town deep within the Anatolian heartland.

By the time the Treaty of Sèvres was signed, therefore, there were two governments in Turkey: the Sultan's in Istanbul and Kemal Pasha's in Ankara. Neither was prepared to accept the newly signed treaty. The Sultan and his heirs Prince Selim and Abdul Halim were of the belief it would reduce the Ottoman Empire to 'insignificance and powerlessness.' Despite immense foreign pressure, Mehmed's cabinet refused to ratify it. This meant that, other than the majority of artificial borders in the so-called Arab world it determined, Sèvres was stillborn.

Differences among the Allied Powers, particularly among Britain, France, and Italy, also played a considerable role in this shift. At the London and San Remo conferences in 1920, they had assigned Smyrna/Izmir to Greece. But both France and Italy were uneasy with this decision, fearing that it would fan further confrontation and violence in Asia Minor. Exhausted by war and massively in debt, neither of them desired to engage in a prolonged armed confrontation with Turkish nationalist forces. Not that they were not happy to let the Greeks 'enforce' Sèvres. But the priority of both Paris and Rome was to advance their economic and financial interests in the post-war Ottoman Empire. As early as 20

October 1921, France and Mustafa Kemal's government signed the Treaty of Ankara, also known as the Franklin-Bouillon Treaty, following the ignominious retreat of French forces from Cilicia (in southwest Anatolia) that spring. To the dismay of her allies, Paris unilaterally recognised the new Kemalist regime.

In October 1920 a Barbary macaque bit King Alexander of Greece; the wound became infected and proved fatal. After this bizarre incident, Constantine once again ascended to the throne. The return of the popular king prompted the electoral defeat of his adversary Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos in November. It was Venizelos who had initiated Greek foreign policy on the premises of the irredentist 'Great Idea' (Megali Idea), which called for Hellenic expansionism in Asia Minor. It was Venizelos's influence on British Prime Minister Lloyd George which led him to support the Greek invasion of western Anatolia. A seasoned statesman, Venizelos was well aware that the Megali Idea could not be realised without the approval of the other Great Powers. After landing Greek troops in Smyrna in May 1919, he had therefore followed a cautious policy. His fall from power upended Athens' stance. Incoming Prime Minister Dimitrios Gounaris launched a risky offensive deep into the Anatolian heartland, seeking to capture Ankara and break Mustafa Kemal's forces.

As Venizelos anticipated, this demarche clashed with Italian interests, jeopardising as it did Rome's sphere of influence as well as her economic plans. The Italians saw in Gounaris's expedition a breach of the 1920 agreements



Greek soldiers in action during the Greco-Turkish War of 1919–1922, which left Greece the loser.

with Britain and Greece at San Remo and Paris. The Italians accordingly terminated their occupation of Antalya (Adalia, on the southwestern coast of Anatolia) and its environs in August 1921, having mended relations with the Ankara government earlier in the year.

The conflict between Greek and Turkish armies continued until September 1922. The battles in Sakarya (August–September 1921) and Dumlupınar (August 1922) determined the outcome of the war: resounding defeat of the Greek forces. As the Greeks retreated to Izmir and the Aegean coast, they adopted a scorched-earth policy, partly out of vengeance but also seeking to slow down their Turkish pursuers. In early September, the Hellenic forces' occupation of Smyrna/Izmir came to an end. At once a dreadful fire broke out in the Greek and Armenian quarters of the town, mostly likely a brutal Turkish retaliation for the invasion. The fire swept away a sizable portion of this once booming metropolis on the Aegean, pushing thousands to seek refuge on European ships. The events have gone down in Greek history as 'The Catastrophe'. Prime Minister and king paid a heavy price. In September 1922, Gounaris was executed by the Revolutionary Committee. King Constantine abdicated.

Several hundred kilometres to the north, Turkish nationalist forces came toe-to-toe with British forces occupying the Straits, notably at Chanak (Çanakkale). Faced with the prospect of going back to war, Conservative members of the British parliament turned on their leader, Lloyd George, driving him from office. On 11 October 1922, the Mudanya Ceasefire ended the Chanak Crisis. A decade after the 'Greater War' began in the region, peace was finally within sight. A new peace treaty was needed.

Lausanne in Switzerland was chosen as meeting place.

Although peace had broken out in Europe four years before, at Lausanne the wounds of battle, the refugee crisis, and the psychological scars were fresh for Greeks and Turks. A new peace was to be negotiated between the victors of 1914–18 and the victors of 1919–22. The conference was opened on 20 November at the Casino de Montbenon and lasted until 24 July 1923, with a short interruption (4 February–24 April 1923). The negotiations were grouped under three headings, 'Territorial and Military Questions', 'Regime of Foreigners', and 'Economic and Financial Questions', most of which were resolved by the end of the conference.

For the Turkish nationalists, represented by Ismet (Inonu) Pasha, the ultimate objective was to undo Sèvres and ensure Turkish sovereignty in the territories claimed under the National Pact of 1920. They looked to 'Turkify' Asia Minor, eliminating all 'foreign elements', by which they meant non-Muslims. The Greek delegation led by Venizelos recognised that the security of fellow Greeks remaining within Turkey could no longer be guaranteed. Under the terms of a convention signed in January 1923, an unprecedented population exchange was agreed upon. About one million Greek inhabitants of Asia Minor and half a million Muslims resident in Greece were forced to leave their homes for a new life. Far from being welcomed 'home', many former Ottoman Greeks found a chilly reception within Greece, and were viewed with suspicion by 'fellow Greeks'.

Of all territorial issues, the Mosul question proved to be the most challenging. The National Pact of the Turkish nationalists claimed Mosul as part of the emerging new

Turkey. Even though the Turks were ready to forsake some of their territorial claims in Thrace and the Aegean Islands, Mosul's oil reserves gave it vital importance. This was exactly why Britain also grasped it tightly, insisting that it was part of the British mandate of Iraq. Vague promises of access to Mosul's oil by Inonu succeeded in breaking the Allied front at Lausanne. The 'Mosul Question' was left to the League of Nations to decide. Only in 1926 would Turkey abandon its claims to Mosul in return for a share of the royalties.

Unlike the Paris Conference of 1919–20, the Armenians and the Kurds were not given formal accreditation in Lausanne. An Armenian delegation was actually present on the shores of the Lake Geneva to defend their national interests and ensure an Armenian National Home in Asia Minor. Their position initially seemed strong. Thanks to a shared Christian faith, disgust at the 1915 Armenian Genocide, and a powerful diaspora in western Europe as well as the United States, the Armenians had plenty of popular support among the Allied Powers. But it was a victors' peace, and the Turks knew it. The Turkish delegation was therefore adamant in its rejection of Armenian claims. They did not even allow the 'Armenian issue' to be discussed officially. As the first article in Ismet Pasha's instructions from Ankara commanded, it was 'out of question'.

In the end, Sèvres was torn up and Lausanne shaped the future of the new Middle East. Neither an Armenian nor a Kurdish state would ever emerge in Asia Minor. The Armenian and Assyrian genocides (or 'massacres' as they were known at the time) were swept under the carpet as if they had never happened. War exhaustion meant war crimes

were forgotten. As with the Mosul question, the defunct Ottoman Empire's sovereign debt, the Straits, and the border between Turkey and Syria were all left unaddressed. Desperation for peace prevailed.

Signed on 24 July 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne was the last of the peace settlements at the end of World War I. It is the only one still in force. In Turkey, Lausanne is considered the birth certificate of the new republic that was promulgated three months later, on 29 October 1923. Yet for nearly a century now its clauses, and the lands given and taken at Lausanne—especially Mosul—have been an object of heated debates, providing ample fodder for political opportunists seeking to polarise opinion. The discussions of the early 1920s are still very much alive in Turkey. For Armenians and Kurds, Sèvres remains the great hope betrayed at Lausanne. An increasing number of historians argue that World War I ended not in 1918, but in 1923. But it was only the official end date. Needless to say, for many Middle Easterners, it continues to this day.