

Aided by the Arabs, the British captured Palestine from the Ottoman Turks in 1917 and 1918. The Arabs revolted against the Turks because the British had promised them, in correspondence (1915-1916) with Husein ibn Ali of Mecca, the independence of their countries after the war. Britain, however, also made other, conflicting commitments. Thus, in the secret Sykes-Picot agreement with France and Russia (1916), it promised to divide and rule the region with its allies. In a third agreement, the Balfour Declaration of 1917, Britain promised the Jews, whose help it needed in the war effort, a Jewish “national home” in Palestine. This promise was subsequently incorporated in the mandate conferred on Britain by the League of Nations in 1922.

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In January 1916, by the terms of letters between the British government and Husein ibn Ali, Grand Sharif of Mecca, the latter promised Arab participation in the war on the Allied side in return for a British guarantee of independence for all Arab lands south of a line roughly corresponding to the northern frontiers of present-day Syria and Iraq. In May of the same year, however, Britain and France secretly concluded a separate accord, known as the Sykes-Picot agreement, by which most of the Arab lands under Turkish rule were to be divided into British and French spheres of influence. The areas now comprising Syria and Lebanon were assigned to France; and those comprising Israel and Jordan to Britain.

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