

Arab revolt

Strategy

Arab nationalism within the Ottoman Empire stretched back to the early nineteenth century and mainly focused on demands for greater autonomy within the empire and increased use of Arabic as an official language. On the outbreak of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire was allied with Germany and Austria as it sought to win back territory lost to Russia in the nineteenth century. The allied powers (Britain, France and Russia) consequently sought to weaken the Ottomans by triggering a revolt by discontented Arabs that would draw Ottoman forces away from other military objectives.

Britain cultivated Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi, Emir of Mecca, as an ally and shortly after war broke out in 1914 Britain offered its support for an independent Arab state that would encompass all of the Arabian peninsula as well as modern-day Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Israel. In mid-1916, supplied with British weapons and money, and supported by British naval forces, the Arabs launched their revolt, attacking the cities of Medina, Mecca and Jeddah.

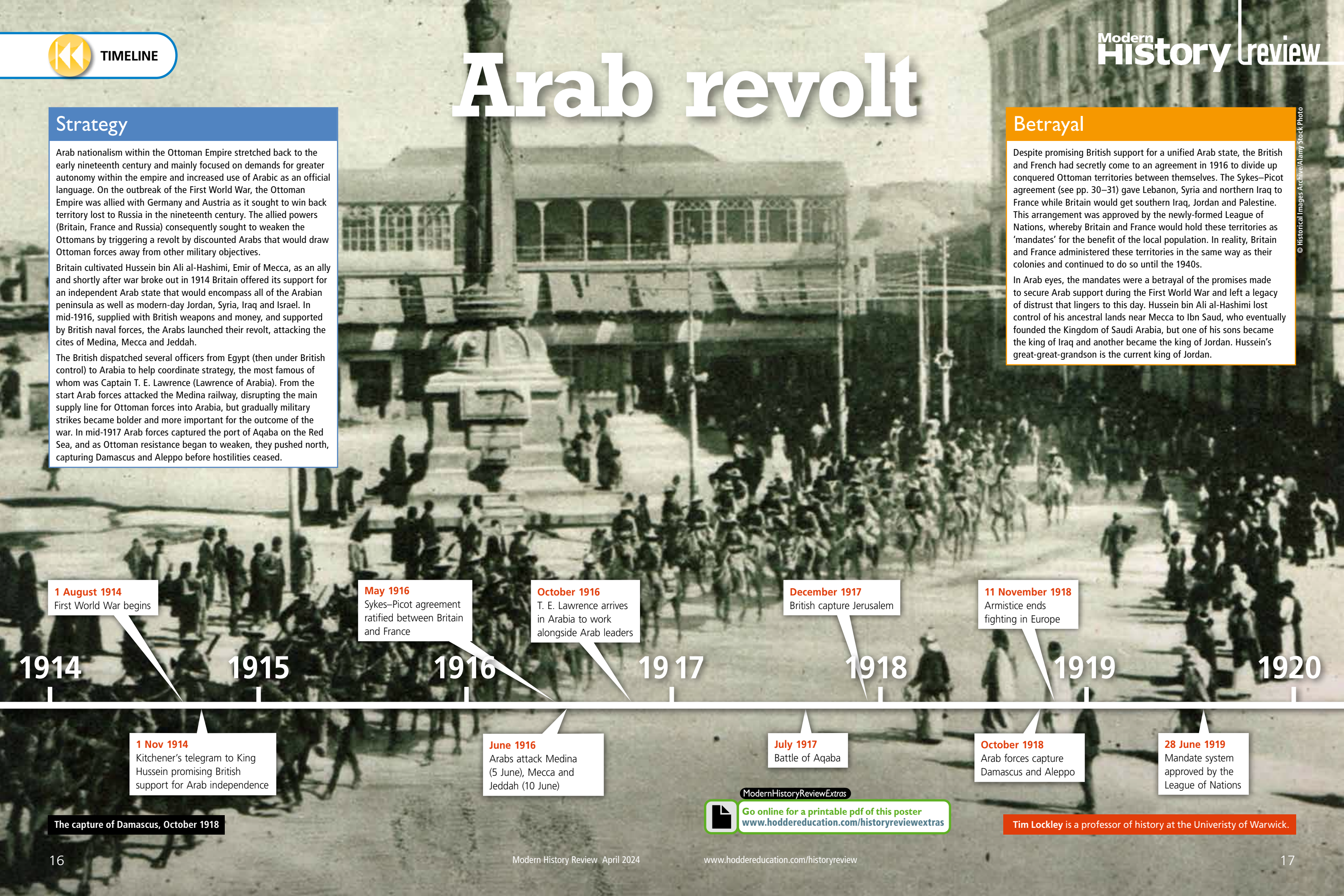
The British dispatched several officers from Egypt (then under British control) to Arabia to help coordinate strategy, the most famous of whom was Captain T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). From the start Arab forces attacked the Medina railway, disrupting the main supply line for Ottoman forces into Arabia, but gradually military strikes became bolder and more important for the outcome of the war. In mid-1917 Arab forces captured the port of Aqaba on the Red Sea, and as Ottoman resistance began to weaken, they pushed north, capturing Damascus and Aleppo before hostilities ceased.

Betrayal

Despite promising British support for a unified Arab state, the British and French had secretly come to an agreement in 1916 to divide up conquered Ottoman territories between themselves. The Sykes-Picot agreement (see pp. 30–31) gave Lebanon, Syria and northern Iraq to France while Britain would get southern Iraq, Jordan and Palestine. This arrangement was approved by the newly-formed League of Nations, whereby Britain and France would hold these territories as 'mandates' for the benefit of the local population. In reality, Britain and France administered these territories in the same way as their colonies and continued to do so until the 1940s.

In Arab eyes, the mandates were a betrayal of the promises made to secure Arab support during the First World War and left a legacy of distrust that lingers to this day. Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi lost control of his ancestral lands near Mecca to Ibn Saud, who eventually founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but one of his sons became the king of Iraq and another became the king of Jordan. Hussein's great-great-grandson is the current king of Jordan.

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1 August 1914
First World War begins

May 1916
Sykes-Picot agreement ratified between Britain and France

October 1916
T. E. Lawrence arrives in Arabia to work alongside Arab leaders

December 1917
British capture Jerusalem

11 November 1918
Armistice ends fighting in Europe

1 Nov 1914
Kitchener's telegram to King Hussein promising British support for Arab independence

June 1916
Arabs attack Medina (5 June), Mecca and Jeddah (10 June)

July 1917
Battle of Aqaba

October 1918
Arab forces capture Damascus and Aleppo

28 June 1919
Mandate system approved by the League of Nations

The capture of Damascus, October 1918

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