

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 193

### “1919 – The Near East III”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Hussein of Mecca had once been seen by the British as their most valuable friend in the Near East. That was in 1916.

But the Arab Revolt Hussein had produced had not been as large or as helpful as the British had hoped. And after the war, Hussein was unwilling to accept the British plan for the post-war Near East. Which was why, when Hussein’s own rule was threatened, the British stood aside.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 193. 1919: The Near East, part three.

This is the eighteenth episode in our 1919 World Tour, if you’re still counting. When we left off two weeks ago, I had just finished telling you the stories of how France and Britain took control of their respective League of Nations mandates in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. I want to begin today’s episode by turning to Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, the Emir of Hejaz. As you know from our previous episodes, the British induced Hussein to revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1916, in exchange for which, they promised to make him king of an independent Arab state after the war was won.

We don’t talk about cash subsidies much when we talk about history and international relations, but I’ll note that once Hussein declared his revolt, the United Kingdom began paying him £200,000 per month for the rest of the war. These funds were intended to defray the costs of administering the Hejaz and supplying soldiers to fight the Turks. After the Armistice of Mudros ended the fighting in the Near East, the British reduced the subsidy to £100,000 per month.

The British government also recognized Hussein as the now-King of the now-Kingdom of Hejaz, but there was some discontent on both sides. Hussein felt the British had promised him a larger kingdom than they were now willing to grant; the British felt that Hussein had promised more than he had delivered in terms of stirring up an Arab revolt. The Arabs of the Hejaz had fought

for the Allies, no question, but Hussein had not triggered a more general Arab uprising of the sort the British were hoping for.

Still, after all the deals were done and all the treaties signed and all the mandates approved by the new League of Nations, the situation in the Arab lands looked like this: Hussein was King of Hejaz. His eldest son, Ali, was his heir apparent. His second son, Abdullah, was Emir of Transjordan. His third son, Faisal, was King of Iraq. So collectively, the Hashemites are now rulers over most of the territory the British had promised to Hussein. The only exceptions are Syria, where the French simply refused to accept an Arab king—pfft, the French, what are you going to do?—and western Palestine, which the British are administering themselves. If that doesn't completely fulfill Britain's promises to Hussein, it comes pretty close. Or so the British Cabinet felt.

As Arthur Balfour, he of the Balfour Declaration, put it:

*I hope [the Arabs] will remember that... Great Britain has freed them, the Arab race, from the tyranny of their brutal conqueror, who had kept them under his heel for these many centuries. I hope they will remember it is we who have established the independent Arab sovereignty of the Hejaz. I hope they will remember that it is we who desire in Mesopotamia to prepare the way for the future of a self-governing, autonomous Arab State; and I hope that, remembering all that, they will not begrudge that small notch—for it is no more geographically, whatever it may be historically—that small notch in what are now Arab territories, being given to the people who for all these hundreds of years have been separated from it, but surely have a title to develop on their own lines in the land of their forefathers...*

Despite Balfour's hopes, though, they certainly will begrudge it.

This system of three Hashemite Arab states was useful to the British. If any one of these three monarchs got too uppity, pressure might be applied to one of the others, and all three were surviving on British support.

In the Hejaz, though, trouble was brewing. In 1918, even before the war ended, Hussein was querying the British government about the Balfour Declaration and this Sykes-Picot Agreement, once that agreement became public. He was also complaining about Ibn Saud, the ruler of Najd, and of religious extremists from Najd who were crossing the eastern border of Hejaz and preaching a radical form of Islam that included denunciations of Hussein and his rule.

In 1919, Hussein complained again. Raiders from Najd were now crossing into Hejaz, and Hussein pointed out to the British, with some irritation, that he was having to spend a considerable portion of the monthly subsidy the British were paying him to defend his realm

against ibn Saud, who was also receiving a monthly payment from Britain. The situation was absurd. Even British officials agreed with that, and yet British policy did not change.

I need to take a step back here and take a closer look at what is going on inside Najd. The Emir of Najd is Abdulaziz ibn Saud, as he is known in the West, and during the Great War he, like Hussein, was given money and weapons by the British to oppose the Turks. I've told you that much before, but now it's time to go into more detail, and to do that, we have to go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Muslim religious leader Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab.

In the interior of the Arabian peninsula, in the region called the Najd, or the Uplands, Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab developed a variant form of Islam and a movement to promote it. Some have described this form of Islam as "fundamentalist" "puritanical," and "severe." Its opponents have used even harsher language. Words like "deviant," "fanatical," and "a distortion of Islam." It is not my place here to arbitrate intra-Muslim theological disputes, of course, I just mention this to point out that feelings did and do run high regarding this form of Islam and its relationship to the larger Muslim world.

The form of Islam I'm talking about is usually called "Wahhabism" by those outside of the community. Those inside the community are not comfortable with that label. This is because an important element of Wahhabism is a rejection of the practice of venerating saints or Muslim holy figures of times past, though that practice is widespread elsewhere in the Islamic world. But given their rejection of the practice, it's easy to understand why the Wahhabi don't like being labeled themselves with the name of a holy figure of a time past. I'm going to continue to refer to them as Wahhabi and their doctrine as Wahhabism anyway. This is not because I mean to be disrespectful, it's just that this is the term most commonly used in the English-speaking world and there really isn't a good alternative, since the alternatives that do exist are also controversial for different reasons, so here we are. Like the Quakers, the Wahhabi have gotten stuck with a name created for them by people who disagree with them.

So what do Wahhabi believe, apart from the rejection of the veneration of holy figures? Well, a lot of things, and of course not all Wahhabis agree on every point of doctrine, but to give you a rough summary, Wahhabis believe their version of Islam is purer and closer to the original form from the early days of the faith, in much the same way Christian fundamentalists do. They believe in a strict and basic religious practice, including mandatory and punctual prayer, rejection of images of humans and animals anywhere, and even abstract ornamentation on a mosque. Wahhabis typically require modest dress, a complete prohibition on alcohol and tobacco, and strict segregation of the sexes. At least some Wahhabi oppose acts such as listening to music, playing cards or board games, celebrating birthdays, sending flowers to friends or family, performing plays, and writing fiction. Failure to observe these restrictions can be punished with flogging.

Extreme Wahhabi regard other Muslims as not really Muslims, and even forbid social contact with them or with any non-Muslims. Friendship with outsiders is regarded as dangerous and corrupting. Some go so far as to forbid smiling at non-Muslims. And as I've mentioned before, non-Muslims are barred from setting foot in Wahhabi lands, and remember, if you're not Wahhabi, you're not Muslim.

Ibn Abdul-Wahhab formed an alliance with a local ruler, Muhammad ibn Saud, in 1744, and this alliance would prove a great boon to both of them and to their respective descendants. Ibn Saud agreed to protect the followers of ibn Abdul-Wahhab and promote his version of Islam, in exchange for which ibn Abdul-Wahhab would support the political ambitions of ibn Saud. There would be a clear division of authority. The Wahhabi could freely teach and interpret Islam as they saw fit, but would defer to the rule of the House of Saud. Clerics teach the faith, but they don't get to tell the king what to do.

This arrangement worked pretty well, both for the Faith and for the House of Saud, and in fact it continues to work pretty well for both of them in our time, over 250 years later.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The Wahhabis and the Saudis, working together, managed to build a kingdom across most of the Arabian Peninsula by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. They went a little too far, though, when they sacked the Shiite holy city of Karbala, destroying shrines and killing thousands, and then taking the Hejaz and the holy city of Mecca. This was an affront to Ottoman authority, and the Ottomans sent a military expedition to retake the Hejaz.

The Saudis were restricted to the Najd for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and lost control even of that much for a time. By the twentieth century, Abdulaziz ibn Saud, the current ruler, had reclaimed the Najd, and armed with British weapons and British support and with the Turks no longer a factor, he began eyeing the Hejaz and the city of Mecca.

I also have to mention a Wahhabi religious movement of the early twentieth century, one aimed at the Bedouin. The Bedouin are nomadic Arabs who tend to move about in small family or tribal groups and have no fixed abode. There have been Bedouin in Arabia for as long as there have been Arabs. Bedouins typically keep to themselves and are difficult for established authorities to tax or regulate, often making them a thorn in the side of whoever tries to govern them. Some Bedouin groups are not above raiding travelers and settlements.

Like most settled Arabs, the Wahhabi looked askance upon the Bedouins, but in their case, the disapproval also had a religious dimension. The Wahhabi believed that the Bedouin way of life was inconsistent with proper religious practice. About 1912, a Wahhabi-inspired religious revival began among the Bedouins of the Najd, and Bedouin families began selling off their horses and their camels and settling down in agricultural communities in order to get right with God and with Sharia. The Bedouin men who joined this religious movement became known as the *Ikhwan*, the Brotherhood. These lapsed Bedouins were the most skilled fighters and horse and camel riders in Arabia, and now, infused as they were with a new religious fervor—converts

are always the worst, am I right?—they submitted to ibn Saud and became the most devout, the most zealous, and the most feared fighting force in his service.

Well, I should say that they submitted to ibn Saud for the most part. They also did some freelance raiding of non-Muslims, that is to say, non-Wahhabis, in bordering regions, including Hejaz. And that brings us back to where I started, when King Hussein of Hejaz was complaining to the British that his lands were being raided by these Ikhwan fighters from the Najd, whose leader, ibn Saud, was on the British payroll. Can you please tell them to stop?

The British government debated the matter, but no decision was taken. No one wanted to cut off ibn Saud or rein him in. It's not clear exactly why. One might speculate that the British wanted to keep ibn Saud on their payroll because they wanted to keep the Ikhwan raiders out of adjacent British-controlled territories, such as Palestine or Jordan or Kuwait or Aden. Cutting off their subsidy would be just asking for trouble. Indeed, when Winston Churchill became Colonial Secretary, he advocated *increasing* ibn Saud's subsidy, just to insure he remained a loyal friend of the UK.

But ibn Saud also had a personal grievance against King Hussein. He didn't like how Hussein had introduced motorcars and telephones and other modern contrivances into the holy city of Mecca. Many Wahhabi spurned these technological innovations, as they were brought into the Islamic world by non-Muslims. And ibn Saud took Hussein's claim to be king of all Arabs as a personal affront. Thus, Wahhabi preachers began appearing in eastern Hejaz, proselytizing for the Wahhabi version of Islam.

In July 1918, the emir of Al-Khurma, an oasis community on the Hejaz side of the frontier, embraced Wahhabism and submitted to ibn Saud. A military force from Hejaz was sent to reassert Hussein's control over Al-Khurma, but they were beaten back by the Ikhwan. A few months later, a second oasis town, Turaba, also defected to ibn Saud.

Two small towns in the desert may not sound like much, but they represented control over grazing lands and trade routes. And they represented a gradual whittling away of Hussein's kingdom. In May 1919, with the war against the Turks now over, King Hussein finally decided he'd had enough and sent out a force of 5,000 soldiers armed with the latest British military equipment and commanded by his son Abdullah, whom we met in the previous episode and will soon become the Emir of Transjordan. But for now, Abdullah and the force he commanded meant to retake Turaba from the crazy desert fanatics of Najd.

On May 21, 1919, Abdullah's forces captured and sacked the town of Turaba, prompting ibn Saud to lead his own army out of Riyadh, the capital of Najd, on a campaign to retake the town. An advance force from ibn Saud's army, of about 1,100 camel-mounted Ikhwan fighters, made contact with Abdullah's force at Turaba on the night of May 25. The camel riders, armed only with swords and a few obsolete rifles, charged into the camp, surprising their enemy and

slaughtering virtually the entire Hejazi Army. Even Prince Abdullah barely escaped, fleeing the scene still in his nightshirt.

This was too much for the British. They intervened, sending the RAF to protect the Hejazi frontier and sending diplomats to negotiate a ceasefire. Ibn Saud shrewdly agreed at once to the British armistice proposal; he blamed the whole thing on a few hotheads among the Ikhwan. Hussein actually proved the more difficult to convince. He was angry and had lost face, not to mention most of his army, but the British persuaded him to accept a ceasefire.

Ibn Saud left the Hejaz alone for the next few years, while he went on military campaigns in other parts of the peninsula, asserting his hegemony over other regions of Arabia and occasionally raiding into disputed border regions of Transjordan, Kuwait, and Iraq. When the British protested to Ibn Saud, he would again cast the blame on his loyal but sometimes overzealous Ikhwan and promise to have a word with them. Soon Ibn Saud and the British reached border agreements on the frontiers with Iraq and Transjordan and Kuwait and the other British protectorates that ring the Najd.

Ibn Saud's successes in asserting his authority over the Arabian interior and his cooperative attitude toward the British contrasted sharply with Britain's deteriorating relationship with King Hussein. By 1920, the British had cut off Hussein's subsidy. When the Allies presented their peace proposal to Turkey, Hussein refused to sign it, because he rejected the Balfour Declaration and the French mandate in Syria.

Hussein was now vulnerable to the much stronger Ibn Saud, but for the next several years, Ibn Saud continued to observe the ceasefire, not wanting to antagonize the British. This situation began to change in March 1924, when the Turkish National Assembly abolished the Ottoman Caliphate. Hussein was by this time about 70 years old and was showing signs of not thinking clearly. He promptly claimed the title of Caliph for himself, based upon his status as a descendant of the Prophet and his rule over Mecca, which is all well and good, but this claim was not widely accepted by Muslims outside Hejaz.

The annual Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, took place in July of that year, and Hussein barred pilgrims from Najd. It's not clear why he did this, or how he thought he was going to get away with this flagrant breach of longstanding custom. Perhaps he had reservations about allowing Ikhwan into his kingdom. If this was an attempt to assert authority over Najd and Ibn Saud, it backfired spectacularly. Just weeks later, on August 29, Ibn Saud declared war. Najd troops entered Hejaz, where they met little resistance. Apparently, even many Hejazi were uncomfortable with how Hussein wielded his newly claimed religious authority. Hussein appealed to the British, who declined to get involved, on the grounds that this was strictly a religious dispute between Muslims. A plea to Abdullah, the Emir of Transjordan and Hussein's son, also went unanswered.

Ibn Saud's forces continued to advance into the Hejaz, and when it became clear that Hussein did not have the support of his own army or people, he abdicated in favor of his eldest son Ali, who took the title of King, though not of Caliph. A few days later, on October 13, Ibn Saud's forces took Mecca against minimal resistance. Hussein and Ali continued to hold the cities of Medina and the port of Jeddah into 1925, but eventually the British helped negotiate a surrender in exchange for safe passage out of the country for Hussein and Ali. They would go on to Transjordan, with Hussein continuing to hold court and continuing to claim the title of Caliph until his death in 1931.

Ibn Saud, after securing control over Hejaz, was declared King in January 1926. In 1927, he elevated Najd to the status of kingdom and for the next five years ruled as king over both realms. The prospect of the extremist Wahhabis in control of the holy city of Mecca was disturbing to many Muslims. Under the Hashemites, Mecca was a tolerant place, where Muslims of different traditions and from different lands were free to express their faith in their own ways. The new administration outlawed many practices inconsistent with Wahhabism, including singing and dancing and praying at tombs. Shrines and mausoleums in and around Mecca and Medina, including those marking the tombs of early Muslim saints, even members of the Prophet's family, were destroyed. In 1926, a group of Egyptian pilgrims were beaten for the crime of playing musical instruments, sparking a diplomatic confrontation with Egypt, which forced Ibn Saud to moderate the treatment of pilgrims.

The Ikhwan became restless over these gestures toward moderation and over Ibn Saud's honoring of the borders negotiated with the British. The more radical among the Ikhwan wanted to continue the fight to spread Wahhabism into the neighboring Arab lands. This unrest led to an Ikhwan uprising against Ibn Saud's rule in 1929. The more radical elements of the Ikhwan were crushed; the others incorporated into the kingdom's army. On September 23, 1932, the now 57-year old Abdulaziz Ibn Saud combined his two realms and founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or Saudi Arabia, as most English speakers would say.

[music: *Damascus Dusk*]

The answer to most questions is, "History!" Why is the world the way it is? Why do people do the things they do? How did we come to be in this place where we now find ourselves? The answer to these sorts of questions is never a reasoned one. It never follows a logical process. The answer is, "History!" And history is usually driven by people with priorities and goals that mean little or nothing to us living today. To put it bluntly, history is the story of unintended consequences.

Those of you who are longtime listeners know I don't think much of colonialism. Colonialism doesn't have many defenders in our time, apart from the usual dead-enders, but there were still a lot of true believers in the high places of Western governments in 1919. Events of the twentieth century are proving them wrong, and will continue to prove them wrong. Remember that all the

way back in episode 1, I told you that the single most important development of the twentieth century might be that the word “empire” went from being a boast to an insult.

I mention the *ad hoc* nature of history and the disrepute of colonialism as a way of summarizing the situation we find in the Near East in the 1920s. It’s an historical irony that fifty years ago, it was British policy to preserve the Ottoman Empire, out of fear of the Great Power free-for-all that would break out if it fell. In 1914, when the Empire joined the Central Powers, it became British policy to dismember the Ottoman Empire, and Britain itself would become the freest player in the free-for-all.

As I said last episode, the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the jockeying for the best bits of Arab land during and after the war were pretty sleazy even by the colonialist standards of the time. And the British made no bones about their desire for the oil fields of Mosul. Listener Mehmet posted on our website to remind us—and by “us” I mean “me”—that it was Indian soldiers and Indian taxpayers that fought in and funded the Mesopotamian campaign. Indian blood was spilled and Indian treasure spent so that British interests would have access to Near Eastern petroleum. That’s imperialism in a nutshell.

Beyond the shortcomings of imperialism, we have to confront the other historical irony here, which is that in the five years it took British arms and British diplomacy to implement the postwar Near East that the British government had settled on during the war years of 1916 and 1917, it was already obsolete. British politicians and officials in 1922 were putting the finishing touches on a plan in which they themselves had already lost faith.

The French claim to the Levant, which Sir Edward Grey and Mark Sykes had endorsed in 1916 now looked foolhardy. The increasingly obstinate and erratic King Hussein of the Hejaz, who had once appeared to be Britain’s key asset in the postwar Arab world had proved to be more of a liability and was drawing Britain toward a conflict with ibn Saud that no one in London wanted. British officials had also soured on Faisal, whom they thought dishonest, and Abdullah, whom they thought useless.

And then there was Palestine. Talk of establishing a Jewish homeland on the one hand while protecting the rights of the Arab population on the other was cheap and easy when Palestine was still under Ottoman rule, but the British were quickly discovering that putting these principles into practice was all but impossible.

By 1922, British officials no longer had faith in their own plans, the ones their predecessors had handed down to them to implement. And so the implementation itself was uncreative and half-hearted, which only exacerbated the problem.

The days of Turkish rule over the Arabs had been numbered, its end inevitable. Absent foreign intervention, the Arabs would eventually have shaken it off themselves. But the Allies, and Britain in particular, tried to replace Turkish rule with a European-style system of kingdoms that

would have been entirely familiar to Klemens von Metternich and the Congress of Vienna in 1815, but was completely alien to the Arab world of the twentieth century. This they called modernization.

In imposing a whole new international political framework, one might expect disputes over borders, or whether this or that ruler was the right person to lead a given nation. But the disputes that will be the British legacy in the Near East will run much deeper than that. They will touch on the rights of whole peoples, such as Jews and Arabs in Palestine, or Maronite Catholics and Druze in Lebanon, or the Kurds and the Shiite Arabs in Iraq.

And beyond even those questions, the legitimacy not just of borders but of the very states themselves will be attacked. To build an international order among a group of nations whose rights to exist are open to argument is a challenge all but insurmountable.

And over all these difficulties is the overarching matter of Islam. In 1922, many Europeans believed that the Muslim world was accommodating itself to modernity. Modernity meaning the European way of doing things. But the rest of the twentieth century will see a surge in Islamic religious fervor and a rejection of many Western ideas, throughout the Muslim world really, but nowhere more so than in the band of countries stretching from Egypt to Muslim India. Here for many people faith is far more important than nation-states or the international order. It took Europeans many bloody centuries to thrash out among themselves questions of church and state and monarch and their relative places in national and international affairs. What role does the church have in restraining the state, and what authority does the monarch have over the church? Should Catholicism or Protestantism prevail, or can they coexist? How should Protestant and Catholic states relate to each other, or to their own religious minorities?

The end of Ottoman rule marks the beginning of the peoples of the Near East wrestling with an analogous set of questions. It is no slander against these peoples to note that the rest of the twentieth century will see much bloodshed over these disputes, yet with peaceful resolution remaining no more than a faint and distant hope. Remember that it took Christian Europe far longer to find its own answers to these same questions.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Olguta for her donation, and thank you, Jay, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Olguta and Jay help keep the words flowing and the bits going, for themselves and for all of us, so if you have a few bucks and would like to help out, visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show. I also post playlists of the music used on the podcast, along with composer credits and other information, so if you hear a piece of music you'd like to know more about, that's the place to look. Most of the music I use here is free and downloadable, and you'll find links to sites where you can download it, if you like.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue with our 1919 World Tour. Having now looked at the postwar Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire, we'll turn our attention to Turkey itself. We'll also include Greece in this narrative, because if you know the story, you know that Greek and Turkish history of this period is, shall we say...intertwined. Turkey and Greece, beginning next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The drawing of the borders between the new states of the Near East was a complex problem just by itself. One criterion that was important to the British was that there be a land connection between their two mandates of Palestine and Iraq. To put it in modern terms, that's the reason why there's a common border between Iraq and Jordan.

But south of the Jordan-Iraq border, there's a sharp point of Saudi Arabian territory that plunges deep into what would otherwise be Jordan. British Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill would boast later in his life that he personally drew this border at the Cairo Conference, and its peculiarity led to it being referred to jocularly as "Winston's Hiccup" or "Churchill's Sneeze." There are various stories about how it came to be. Besides the hiccup and sneeze stories, it is sometimes said that someone bumped Churchill's arm, or that he drew the line after having one too many martinis.

That makes a good story, but the truth is more prosaic. It was done intentionally to include certain towns, especially Kaf, into Najd, and later, into Saudi Arabia. But although the story is false, it is often repeated. Its popularity reflects the arbitrary nature of the borders in the region.

[music: Closing Theme]