

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

The **British Empire** includes the colonies, mandates and other territories ruled or administered by the United Kingdom. It originated with the overseas possessions and trading posts established by England between the late 16th and early 18th centuries. At its height, it was the largest empire in history and, for over a century, was the foremost global power. By 1922 the British Empire held sway over about 458 million people, one-fifth of the world's population at the time. The empire covered more than 13,012,000 square miles, almost a quarter of the Earth's total land area. As a result, its political, legal, linguistic and cultural legacy is widespread. At the peak of its power, the phrase "the empire on which the sun never sets" was often used to describe the British Empire, because its expanse across the globe meant that the sun was always shining on at least one of its territories.



Historians date the beginning of British imperialism in the Middle East to 1798, the year Napoleon from France invaded Egypt. Concerned that France would block Great Britain's access to the eastern Mediterranean and threaten trade routes to India, the British navy worked to remove French troops from Egypt. From this event until in the removal of colonies in the mid-twentieth century, British policies in the Middle East reflected the interest in expansion, trade routes, and goods.

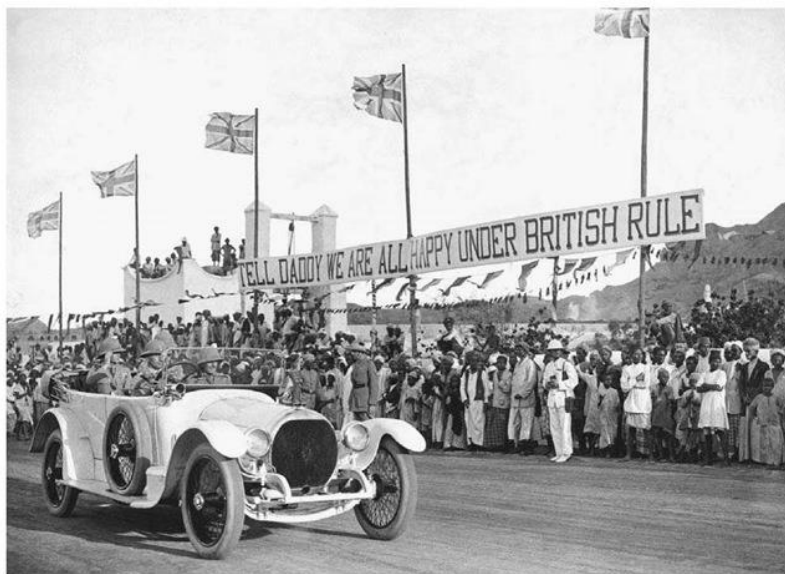
At the end of the eighteenth century, British trade in the eastern Mediterranean lands of the Ottoman Empire accounted for a small 1 percent of total British foreign trade. As a result, Britain became the Middle East's biggest trading partner in the early nineteenth century, outstripping France, Austria, and Russia. It kept this role as late as World War I. Britain was a major supplier of cheap colored cotton textiles (which constituted more than half of its exports to the Middle East until the 1870s) and also supplied what some economic historians call colonial goods— commodities such as Caribbean sugar and Indian tea that came from the

larger British empire. In return Britain secured long-staple cotton from Egypt and other food and animal products such as dates, barley, and leather. British businesses accounted for at least half of Iran's foreign trade by the mid-nineteenth century, exchanging manufactured goods and textiles for Iranian carpets, silk, and other raw agricultural materials



--The British Empire spanning "Cape to Cairo"

By the 1830s British transport from the eastern Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean occurred along two main routes: the first stretched from the Syrian Desert, down the Euphrates River, and into the Persian Gulf; the second, which became increasingly important as the nineteenth century progressed, crossed the isthmus of Suez into the Red Sea.



Edward, Prince of Wales, Visits Aden. Edward, prince of Wales, is greeted with a banner proclaiming support for his father, King George V, during a 1921 state visit to Aden, a British protectorate in what is now Yemen.

In Egypt in 1881, a nationalist uprising broke out against a backdrop of widespread economic distress and growing anti-European sentiment. Known as the 'Urabi Rebellion—after the military

officer, Ahmed 'Urabi, who emerged to lead it—this uprising prompted deep concern among Britons, who feared that instability in Egypt could threaten the Suez Canal—the British imperial lifeline to India—as well as local British investments. Much to the dismay of France, which had only recently occupied Tunisia, Britain took action in 1882 by bombarding the coast of Alexandria and occupying Egypt. Britain kept a hold over Egypt for the next seventy years.

During World War I, oil made its debut as a major political factor in the region. In Iran in 1901, a British businessman named William Knox D'Arcy had secured local oil extraction; in 1909 D'Arcy founded the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The British navy switched from coal to oil fuel in 1912; in 1914, as the war began, the British government bought most of the AIOC shares.

According to some historians, the post-World War I period was "Britain's moment in the Middle East."

Along with France, Britain played the leading role in getting rid of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and in creating new government entities in the Fertile Crescent, that is, future nation-states. The League of Nations, which was like the post-World War I United Nations, stated that mandates were territories "inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world." In what became a last burst of imperial expansion, France gained mandates over Syria and Lebanon; Britain gained Palestine and Iraq and ensured that the boundaries of the new Iraq included the oil-rich region around Mosul. France and Britain agreed up front that in running these so-called mandates they should try to prepare these regions for eventual self-rule—that is, independence on some distant horizon.

In Egypt, British colonialism after 1882 had not only provoked but had indirectly aided the development of local nationalism. In 1919 Egyptian nationalists demanded the right to Egyptian self-determination and called for an end to the British protectorate (rule). When Britain tried to prevent Egyptian nationalist leaders from airing their views at the Paris Peace Conference, a popular nationalist revolt broke out. Yielding partly to these pressures, Britain went on to declare unilateral independence for Egypt three years later in 1922.

The most controversial history of post-World War I British imperialism in the Middle Eastern region has to do with Palestine. Unlike the other Middle East mandates, the League of Nations-approved agreement for Palestine did not give self-determination as a long-term goal for the territory's native people, who were mostly Muslim and Christian Arabs. Instead, the mandate for Palestine laid out a framework for Jewish administration and settlement, according to which Britain would facilitate (help) Jewish immigration. Yet even by the outbreak of World War II, Arabs still formed a clear majority of Palestine's population.

The rapid decrease of the British Empire in the middle of the twentieth century after World War II, is due to Britain's lack of economic strength and willpower to maintain its far-flung colonies, particularly in the face of anticolonial nationalism. India's independence in 1947

represented the critical change. The Middle East followed quickly behind South Asia, with Palestine's decolonization occurring in 1948. The last of British colonial influence in the Middle East were in the Gulf region. As oil revenues began to transform this poor region into the Middle East's wealthiest corner, Britain began to withdraw. Kuwait, for example, gained independence in 1961, while Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States (later called the United Arab Emirates) gained independence in 1971.

British imperialism in the Middle East has emphasized political history and the decisions of government policymakers. Yet, Britons in the Middle East not only included government officials but also missionaries, travelers, soldiers, merchants, archaeologists, and many others—that is, a diverse group of people who gave cultural, political, and economic influences. The encounters with the Middle East and other parts of the empire had a large impact on British society, culture, and national identity as well.