

did the scholars and scientists of the Muslim world. The luxury and wealth that existed in the Muslim lands was unknown in Europe.

The book *Arabian Nights* gives a good description of the splendor of Baghdad, which was the capital of the Muslim world from 750 to 1258. Around the bazaars were merchants who brought fabulous carpets from Persia; silks from China; steel from Damascus; cotton from Egypt; leather from Morocco; spices and dyes from India; ivory, gold, and slaves from Africa; honey, wax, and white slaves from Russia. Industry and commerce prospered.

The cultural contributions of the Muslims were tremendous. This was partly due to the generosity of the caliphs who welcomed artists, writers, scholars, and scientists to their courts and encouraged them in their work. The Muslims had an ability to recognize what was best in other cultures, adopt it, add to it, and then pass it on to other people. The Muslims were especially influenced by the philosophy and science of ancient Greece and India. Most of the outstanding Greek writers were translated into Arabic. This learning was improved upon and later transmitted by the Muslims to Western Europe.

The Muslims made important advances in medicine. Various diseases were diagnosed and described, including measles and smallpox; all the medical knowledge of the day was collected and published in several huge encyclopedias; the first drug stores and schools of pharmacy were set up; druggists and doctors had to pass an examination; hospitals were built throughout the empire. Physics and chemistry also progressed under the Muslims. To advance the study of astronomy, they developed good astronomical instruments and built observatories. Most of their knowledge of mathematics came from the Hindus in India. This knowledge included the numbers we use today, but since it was the Arabs who introduced these numbers to Western Europe, they are commonly referred to as Arabic numbers. The Arabs made great progress in algebra, which is itself an Arabic word. Because of their trade with distant lands as well as their pilgrimages to Mecca, the Muslims became the most important geographers of the time. A great deal of geographical knowledge was collected, and maps were printed.

The Muslims made important contributions to literature as well. Arabs have always had the special gift of storytelling and poetry. The Arabic language itself is suited to colorful tales about life in the desert or palace. Hundreds of poets created poems of great beauty. The one most known in the West was the Persian poet Omar Khayyám. The *Arabian Nights* is a collection of tales that is quite popular all over the world. Many histories were written during this period. Arab historians specialized in biographies of Mohammed and other important Muslim leaders, accounts of the spread of Islam, and world histories.

In art the two fields in which the Muslims excelled were architecture and the decorative arts. Beautiful mosques were built with spacious interiors, large domes, great pillars, and arches. Besides the mosques, the Muslims built large palaces, of which the most famous is the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. Beautiful patterns of flowers and geometric figures were used to decorate the interior of mosques and palaces. Skilled craftspeople produced rugs, pottery, tiles, and metalwork of original and delicate designs.

The Middle East in Decline

Between the years 700 to 1200 A.D., the Muslims had the most advanced civilization in the world. Then Muslim civilization stopped advancing. By 1600, the civilization of Europe began to develop more rapidly and surpass that of the Muslims. There are a number of reasons that help to explain this decline.

1. Political disunity

By the middle of the 10th century there was no real unity in the Muslim lands. Although most of the countries recognized the caliph in Baghdad as their ruler, local leaders did pretty much as they wished. Different religious groups arose, each claiming to be the true followers of Islam. These groups plotted against and fought with each other. Arabs, Persians, and Turks rivaled one another for important positions and for leadership. Therefore, in the face of a common enemy, the Muslim lands could not really put up any resistance.

2. The Crusades

From 1097 to 1291 the Christians in Europe tried to reconquer the Holy Land from the Muslims. The coastal cities of Palestine, parts of Syria, and Turkey were captured by the Christians. During this period, Muslim rulers made alliances with Europeans against other Muslims. Finally the famous ruler of Egypt, Salah-al-Din (Saladin), was able to unite enough territory in 1187 to defeat the Christians and drive them from Jerusalem. During the 200 years of warfare there was considerable destruction in the Middle East.

3. Nomadic attacks

Periodically, over several hundred years various groups of nomads invaded the Middle East and North Africa and caused tremendous destruction from which the area never recovered. In the middle of the 11th century, nomadic Arabs invaded North Africa destroying the land and the irrigation systems. These were never repaired and as a result farming seriously declined.

During the 13th century, far greater destruction was caused by the Mongols. The Mongols were nomadic warriors on horseback who came from the steppes of Central Asia. Sweeping down on the Middle East, the Mongols conquered Persia, Iraq, and Syria. Baghdad, the capital of the Islamic world, fell in 1258. Hundreds of thousands of people died, cities vanished, and governments fell. Great disorder followed the invasion. Trade routes became dangerous and trade broke down. Industry declined. Iraq, which had been the center of the Muslim world, was ruined. The final blows by the Mongols came in 1380 under the leadership of Timur Leng (Tamerlane). The Mongols captured Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo, Ankara, and other cities. Schools, mosques, libraries, and palaces were destroyed. The Mongols left pyramids of human heads behind them in each city.

4. European expansion

In general, as the Christians in Europe grew stronger, they began to expand at the expense of Islam. Areas such as Spain, which had been part of the Muslim world, were gradually taken over by the Europeans.

5. Sea route to India

The discovery in 1497 of an all-water route between Europe and India contributed to the decline of the Middle East. Formerly Middle Eastern cities profited from the overland trade between Asia and Europe. With goods moving by sea, these cities lost their main source of income.

The Ottoman Empire

The Rise of the Ottomans

During the same period that the Arab world was declining in power and importance, a new people in the Middle East were beginning to make their strength felt. They were the Turks, who had originally come from Central Asia and over the centuries settled in the country that

is today known as Turkey. At the beginning of the 14th century they created a small, powerful state in Turkey. For the next few centuries the Turks fought a series of wars to capture territory and extend their empire. By the 16th century, southeastern Europe, North Africa, and most of the Middle East had been conquered by the Turks. These Turks were known as Ottoman Turks, and, therefore, the territory under their control was known as the Ottoman Empire.

During the 16th century, Ottoman civilization reached its peak. The Turks were great soldiers and good administrators and ruled their vast empire quite efficiently. Under their greatest ruler, Suleiman the Magnificent, who ruled from 1521–1566, the Ottomans built a strong navy and became the strongest naval power in the Mediterranean. The Turks of this period were also master builders and poets as well. Many beautiful mosques and palaces were built, and there were important achievements in literature, especially in the field of poetry, essay writing, and history.

Government in the Ottoman Empire

Although the Turks were Muslims, there were a number of other religious and ethnic (national) groups in the Ottoman Empire. The Turks allowed each group to keep its own religion, laws, language, and customs. Each group had its own courts, which tried all cases except those involving public security and crime. These groups were required to pay taxes to the Ottoman government, but in other respects they enjoyed a good deal of freedom.

The **sultan** was the ruler of the empire and the head of Islam. He had absolute authority over all matters. The second most powerful official in the empire was the grand vizier who was the sultan's chief deputy. To rule such a vast empire many qualified officials were needed. Every five years representatives of the sultan traveled through the European provinces selecting the healthiest and most intelligent Christian boys between the ages of 12 and 20. They were converted to Islam, taught Turkish, and assigned to military units. The most talented boys were brought to the royal palace and trained to govern the empire. Others were recruited for the army. Education, religious matters, and laws were exclusively in the hands of Muslim mullahs (wise men).

Decline of the Ottomans

During the 17th century, the Ottoman Empire began to decline. By the 18th century, the Ottomans were already losing territory to the more powerful Europeans. There were many reasons for this decline. In the early years the Empire was ruled by capable sultans. After Suleiman the Magnificent, however, the sultans became more interested in the luxuries and pleasures of life than in ruling the empire. In the beginning also, government officials were appointed on the basis of merit—those most qualified to do the job. Later, important positions were given to favorites who were often not suited for the job. Bribery was used to obtain many jobs, and the government became very corrupt. As the sultans grew weaker and the officials less capable, the problems of ruling a vast empire increased. At this time the Europeans were making great progress in science and industry. However, the Turks thought the Europeans were inferior to them and refused to learn new ideas from them. With the trade between Europe and Asia now controlled by the Europeans, an important source of wealth was lost. As the Ottoman Empire grew weaker, Russia and Austria tried to capture some of its territories and wars with these nations further weakened the Empire. Gradually the Turks lost control over many of their territories.

European Imperialism in the Middle East

European Interest in the Middle East

During the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire became known as “the sick man of Europe.” The Empire was falling apart and the Europeans stood by waiting to take their share of it when the opportunity arose. The Europeans were expanding just when the Ottoman Empire had reached its lowest point. They wanted to rule over the less developed countries to gain markets for the goods that their factories produced and invest their money with the promise of high profits. The Europeans at first tried to avoid sending armies to conquer and rule the people directly. They found it easier to create puppet rulers to protect European interests. When the local ruler could not control the people, the Europeans sent armies in to protect their citizens and their investments.

The Europeans Gain Control

The period of European penetration into the Middle East began with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. Napoleon defeated the Egyptians who were still part of the Ottoman Empire. A few weeks later an English fleet arrived and defeated the French forces. This incident was important for two reasons. First, it demonstrated that European military power was superior to that of the Middle East. Second, the British became the protector of the Ottoman Empire and gained a very important voice in the affairs of the Middle East.

Throughout the 19th century, Russia fought many wars against Turkey in the hope of gaining territory belonging to the Turks. It was only because of Britain’s coming to the aid of Turkey that the Russians were prevented from breaking up the Empire.

Nevertheless, the British and French began to take over parts of the Empire themselves. France gained Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881. In 1882, the British took over Egypt. In 1912, France and Spain set up protectorates in Morocco. Italy held Libya from 1911 until World War II. The Arab countries of the Middle East came under the control of the British and French after World War I.

In 1856, the ruler of Egypt granted permission to Ferdinand de Lesseps, a French engineer, to dig a canal connecting the Mediterranean with the Gulf of Suez. The Suez Canal, which was opened in 1869, shortened the sea voyage between Europe and Asia by thousands of miles. Although built by the French, the Canal soon became Britain’s most important waterway for trading with India. In 1875, when the ruler of Egypt was in need of cash, he sold his shares in the Canal Company to the British. In this way the British came to own a major share in the Canal, and their future policy in Egypt was determined by the need to protect this investment.

In 1881, rioting broke out in Egypt, and the Egyptian government called on the British for help. The British sent troops and promised to withdraw them from Egypt as soon as order was restored. British armed forces did not leave the country until 1956! Egypt never really became a colony, because the occupation was considered to be temporary. Until World War I, Egypt continued to be an Ottoman province, but the real power was in the hands of the British.

World War I and the Middle East

World War I brought about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Empire fought on the side of Germany against England, France, and Russia. Consequently, the British encouraged the Arabs to revolt against the Ottomans. In return, the British promised independence and the establishment of an Arab state for the Arab lands east of Suez. But these promises were very vague, and no boundaries were specified. Moreover Britain and France had already secretly agreed to divide up the territory between themselves. The British had also promised that they would accept the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The Arabs revolted against the Turks in 1916 and fought hard, expecting to be rewarded at the end of the war. Their leader, Sharif Hussein, dreamed of an Arab state that would stretch from Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea and would include the Arabian Peninsula.

At the end of the war, the League of Nations turned over Syria and Lebanon to the French as **mandates**. Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan became British mandates. This meant that these countries were to be ruled by the British and French until they were considered ready for independence. The Arabs were very bitter over what they regarded as betrayal by the Europeans.

The Growth of Nationalism Between the Wars

During the 1920s and 1930s, nationalist feeling grew throughout the Middle East. The nationalists demanded total independence from Britain and France. They formed political organizations to achieve their goals. They organized mass rallies, strikes, and economic boycotts against the British and French. They also engaged in many acts of violence. In 1920, there was an insurrection in Iraq. In Palestine, the Arabs engaged in guerrilla warfare against the British. Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Morocco were scenes of outbreaks against the French.

Saudi Arabia's independence was recognized in 1927. Iraq was declared independent in 1922, but the British mandate did not end until 1932. Even then British troops continued to occupy important places in Iraq, and major decisions continued to be made by the British. In Syria and Lebanon the French held absolute power until the end of World War II. Control over the foreign affairs, education, justice, and economy of these two countries was in French hands.

The Middle East During World War II

When Italy entered World War II on the side of Germany in June 1940, the Middle East became one of the main battlefields of the war. Mussolini, the Italian dictator, sent an Italian army of 250,000 to invade Egypt in August. Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, believed that Egypt was vital to the security of the British Empire and to the survival of Britain as a great power. Therefore, the British government decided to defend Egypt and the Middle East. A British offensive was begun in December, driving the Italian army out of Egypt. But British successes led the Germans to send General Erwin Rommel to take command of the Axis (German and Italian) troops in North Africa. Rommel's army moved into Egypt in April 1941 and once again the Suez Canal was threatened.

Between 1940 and 1943, the threat of Axis occupation hung over the entire Middle East. The Arab nationalists hoped to use this opportunity to finally rid themselves of British and

French domination. Some Arabs actively collaborated with the Germans and the Italians. In Egypt, King Farouk and many army officers were ready to welcome the Germans and the Italians and to turn against the British. In February 1942, the British forced the king to appoint a government that would cooperate with the Anglo-American war effort. But strong anti-British feeling remained. In Iraq a rebellion led by Rashid Ali overthrew the pro-British government. Rashid Ali's forces then attacked the British Air Force training base in Iraq. The Nazis provided Rashid Ali with aircraft and other forms of military aid, but with the arrival of more troops the British were able to suppress the rebellion. In Syria and Lebanon Nazi agents succeeded in arousing anti-French feeling among the Arabs.

The British launched an all-out offensive against Rommel's North African army in October 1942. The British victory at El Alamein in November marked the beginning of the end of the Axis' presence in North Africa. Britain remained firmly in control of the Middle East until the end of the war.

The Middle East After World War II—Nationalism and the Question of Arab Unity

The Europeans Leave the Middle East

In the years that followed the end of World War II the nations of the Middle East and North Africa gained their complete independence. (Even though a number of nations had been declared independent earlier, they were not really independent as long as Britain and France made important decisions for them and kept troops in their country.) During this same period, Britain and France lost their colonies in Africa and Asia as well. There are several reasons that explain why decolonization (giving up one's colonies) took place around the world.

1. In many of these colonies, revolutionary groups fought wars against the British and French and the other colonial powers that were expensive and bloody.
2. People in Britain were weary and exhausted after six years of fighting in World War II. They were unwilling to make any more sacrifices to hold onto the colonies.
3. The United States and the Soviet Union became the two superpowers after World War II and tried to take the place of Britain and France in many parts of the world. By 1949, U.S. power had replaced that of Britain in the Middle East.

British Decolonization

After 1945, Britain found it increasingly difficult to hold on to Palestine. (See "The Arab-Israeli Conflict," page 83). In May 1948, the British pulled their troops out of Palestine and left. Britain's position in the Middle East had begun to crumble.

In 1954, Egypt's new prime minister, Gamal Abdel Nasser, induced the British to remove all of their troops from the Suez Canal Zone by 1956. Although British troops left on schedule, Nasser **nationalized** (the government took over) the Suez Canal Company in July 1956. This marked the end of British control over this vital waterway that Britain had controlled since 1875. In 1958, the pro-British monarchy in Iraq was overthrown. Britain's