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Syria parents spurn Kurd schools over university fears

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VERDUN: In this file photo taken in 1916, French soldiers move into attack from their trench during the Verdun battle, eastern France, during the first World War. Germany's far right is trying to rehabilitate the German Empire and its role in World War I, resuming a decades-old debate ahead of the centenary of the armistice. —AFP

Europe, Mideast map redrawn by WWI

World War I overhauled the global balance of power

PARIS: Empires would fall, regions reconfigure, new countries form: the end of World War I overhauled the global balance of power and redrew the maps of Europe and the Middle East. Here is an overview.

Revolution in Russia

The war rang the death knell for a Russian empire already in bad shape. Repeated defeats, crippling military spending, famines, popular anger at the World War I bloodbath: all came together in the Marxist Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. In March that year a first revolution led to the abdication of Nicholas II, Russia's last tsar, and the formation of a new government that proved unable to assert control.

In November the Bolsheviks seized power in a second revolution. They immediately sought an exit from the devastating war, in which Russia had sided with the Allies against the Central Powers coalition of Germany, Austria-Hungary and others. By December Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin had agreed an armistice to end combat; in March he agreed to a peace treaty with Germany and its allies that saw Russia give up large swathes of territory at the cost of 30 percent of its population. Four states were created from territory once held by Russia: Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania.

Demise of old Austria-Hungary

At the outbreak of war in 1914, the Habsburg dynasty's Austro-Hungarian empire - which had dominated central Europe for five centuries - stretched from Switzerland to

Ukraine, grouping within it a dozen nationalities and more than 52 million people. By the end of the conflict, the empire had exploded into several new countries, amid a nationalist fervor for autonomy.

Czechoslovakia was the first to be created, proclaimed in October 1918, and followed immediately by Yugoslavia, made up of Slavs in the southernmost parts of the empire. Austria-Hungary's break-up was sealed in November with its signing of an armistice with the victorious Allied powers led by Britain, France and the United States. The Paris Conference of 1919, where the final post-war peace treaty was reached, recognized the new countries and also resulted in the birth of Poland, previously divided between Austria and Russia. Hungary lost two-thirds of its land, with Italy getting a section of the Alps region of Tyrol. And "the rest is Austria", as the French prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, famously put it. The separated Austria and Hungary that remained were reduced to small, landlocked countries.

Ottoman fallout

When Ottoman sultan Mehmed V proclaimed the "holy war" against France, Britain and Russia in November 1914, siding with the Central Powers, his empire had already lost most of its European possessions. The setbacks it went on to suffer on the Russian front from 1915 served as a pretext to turn on its Armenian minority, labeled as traitors and suspected of harboring nationalist sentiment. Armenians say up to 1.5 million of their people were killed during the war, and almost 30 countries have recognized the killings as genocide. Turkey refuses the term but accepts that massacres took place that, along with a famine, resulted in the deaths of 300,000-500,000 Armenians and as many Turks.

The Ottoman defeat in World War I led to the final break-up of the once-mighty empire. A first treaty signed with the victors in Sevres, France, in 1920 chopped off enormous parts of its territory, including Arab lands, and provided for an independent Armenia and autonomous Kurdistan and ceding other areas to Greece. It was rejected by Turkish nationalists, led by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who went on to topple the sultan and establish a Turkish republic. They imposed a new treaty that was signed in Lausanne in 1923 and in which the republic retained Anatolia and areas around the Bosphorus Strait.

Arab raw deal

The British were able to triumph over the Ottoman empire thanks to the revolt of the Arab tribes in Mesopotamia and Palestine, for whom they held out the promise of independence. But Britain was also in secret talks with France to share out the Middle East between them, as set out in the Sykes-Picot Agreement signed in May 1916. They decided that Lebanon and Syria were to go to France, and Jordan and Iraq to Britain. The partition would feed Arab frustration. This mounted with the 1917 Balfour Declaration that led to the establishment within Palestine of "a national home for the Jewish people". The state of Israel was created 30 years later, its troubled foundations causing a conflict that continues to disrupt the region today. —AFP

Catalan ex-leader launches a new political party

BARCELONA: A year after threatening the unity of Spain with an attempt to declare independence, the former Catalan President Carles Puigdemont launched a new party yesterday, as he tries to rally separatists from his base in Belgium. The new group, named "The Call", held a founding congress yesterday evening, marking the one year anniversary of the secession push, but it has struggled to attract a groundswell of support, with some allies languishing in Spanish jails and others choosing a more moderate political path.

"The year that separates us from this historic date did not unfold as we wished," said new Catalan leader Quim Torra, in a sombre televised address to mark the October 27, 2017 declaration of independence. "But turning back is not an option." The independence declaration threw Spain into political turmoil, with the central government ousting Puigdemont, who then fled to Belgium, dissolving parliament and imposing direct control over the wealthy northeastern region. Snap polls in December saw separatist parties once again win an absolute majority in the regional parliament.

But Torra, who regularly seeks counsel from Puigdemont, presides over a Catalan government divided between those who back disobedience to advance the cause of independence and those who favor dialogue with new Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez. The trial of 18 former Catalan leaders over their role in the separatist push, expected to start in early 2019, helps to keep the separatist camp mobilized. The meeting of Puigdemont's party yesterday is due to be held in the pro-independence town of Manresa, in the centre of Catalonia, near to the prison where the independence leaders are being held.

'Bittersweet'

Several dozen activists from the powerful grassroots separatist organisation ANC, which has previously staged massive pro-independence street protests in Barcelona, gathered at the city's regional administration offices yesterday to demand the official publication of the independence declaration. "This anniversary is quite bittersweet, a day of great hope that did not materialize," said ANC president Elisenda Paluzie. Madrid continues to refuse to allow any referendum on self-determination in Catalonia, despite Sanchez's reliance on Catalan separatist parties to pass legislation.

This has helped further fracture the independence movement. While Puigdemont's supporters are due to listen to his speech on the big screen, a more radical separatist group plan to hold a protest in front of the regional government headquarters to reproach Torra. Their slogan: "One year of relinquishment, one year of submission, that is enough!" Puigdemont is due to present a "Council of the Republic" - a sort of Catalan government in exile in Belgium - in the coming days aiming to rally support for a continued independence push. "We are not talking about a dream, we are talking about a reality, we are talking about the Catalan Republic," says a TV clip for the new party. —AFP

Radicals attack Hindu retreat as protests mount

NEW DELHI: Suspected Hindu radicals yesterday attacked a spiritual retreat founded by a preacher who backed letting women enter a renowned Indian temple, police said. The incident heightened tensions in southern India where police have rounded up more than 2,000 people suspected of taking part in protests to stop women from worshipping at the Sabarimala shrine. Attackers set ablaze two cars and a scooter outside the ashram in the early morning attack in the southern city of Thiruvananthapuram, police said.

They also placed a wreath outside the retreat condemning Swami Sandeepananda Giri, its founder, who had backed a Supreme Court order ending a long-standing ban on women of childbearing age entering the temple complex. "We are investigating the matter. No arrests have been made so far," a Thiruvananthapuram police spokesman said. Kerala state Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan condemned the attack on the ashram.

He said in social media posts that such disputes had to be "dealt with at an ideological level". "We will not let anyone take law and order into their hands," Vijayan added. Police have launched a major search operation across Kerala state this week and said more arrests are likely as they sift through video footage of attacks on women devotees and police near the Sabarimala temple. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's president Amit Shah slammed the state government for the arrests and use of "brute force" against its party workers and rightwing allies, who were among the thousands arrested.



BANGALORE: Devotees of Hindu deity Ayyappa and traditional 'chanda' drummers take part in a rally in Bangalore yesterday, urging a reversal of a Supreme Court decision to allow women of 'menstruating age' into the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala. —AFP

Shah told a public gathering in Kerala that his party would stand by its arrested followers. "It's a well-planned conspiracy to destroy the sanctity of temples in Kerala by the communists," he said. The protests erupted as the temple opened for the first time since the Supreme Court last month ended the ban on women

of menstruating age from worshipping there. The court is to hear new petitions challenging its ruling from November 13, just before the temple is due to open again. Sabarimala devotees believe letting the women in goes against the wishes of the temple's celibate deity. —AFP