

The War Outside of Europe

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The prevailing view in the British Army's General Headquarters, a view which was supported by Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was that the centre of gravity of the war was the German Army, and therefore any allocations of men and material to Africa and the Middle East were a waste of critical resources and a distraction from the main theatre in Europe. The attempt to find an alternative, any alternative, to the attritional struggle in France and Flanders in 1915 had led to operations against the Ottoman Empire, but these efforts ended stalemate in Palestine, an aborted campaign at Gallipoli, and a humiliating defeat at Kut in Mesopotamia. The two commissions to investigate these setbacks, which appeared in 1917, seemed to reinforce the idea that the war would only be decided on the Western Front.

Nevertheless, in 1917, the British forces in the Middle East seized both Baghdad and Jerusalem. The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, used these victories to argue that General Sir Douglas Haig had wasted the lives of thousands of men in fruitless offensives on the Western Front. He believed that the future of the war, and the security of national interests lay not in Flanders, but east of Suez. With his characteristic eloquence, he answered his critics who argued Africa and the Middle East were mere 'sideshowes':

The British Empire owes a great deal to 'side-shows'. During the Seven Years' War, which was also a great European War—for practically all the nations now engaged . . . were then interlocked in a great struggle—the events which are best remembered by every Englishman are not the great battles on the Continent of Europe, but Plassey and the Heights of Abraham; and I have no doubt that, when the history of 1917 comes to be written, and comes to be read ages hence, these events in Mesopotamia and Palestine will hold a much more conspicuous place in the minds and memories of the people than many an event which looms much larger for the moment in our sight.¹

The division of opinion between government and the army on this issue of priorities would be easy to exaggerate. Robertson had, in fact, given his consent to limited operations in the Middle

East, but he was consistent in his judgment that these campaigns must not interfere with the main effort in France. Lloyd George, for his part, was prepared to set aside the rhetoric on his Middle Eastern objectives and gave, for example, consent to the Third Ypres offensive. But the Prime Minister also tried to use the need for close co-operation with the French to subordinate Haig, and then Robertson, with the idea of a Supreme War Council and a supreme command under Marshal Ferdinand Foch. By early 1918, the differences of opinion had become more acute.

The arguments about the strategic direction of the war were not just based on personalities and priorities: the operational situation in the winter of 1917-18 was a bleak one for the Allies. British shipping losses from U-boat attacks had not yet recovered; Russia had been knocked out of the war by revolution; the French army was still not able to take the offensive after a series of soldiers' strikes; there was stalemate at Salonika; the Italians were routed at Caporetto; and the Americans were not yet present in great strength in Europe. At home, the public were growing weary of the conflict. On the Western Front, British soldiers expressed their anger at the duration of the war, the filthy conditions, casualties, and tyrannical discipline. Captain J.H. Dible, RAMC, believed: 'we are living on a [powder] magazine'. Private Archie Surfleet, East Yorkshire Regiment, noted: 'There is nothing but unrest and uncertainty and everyone here is absolutely fed up to the teeth.'²

Yet the British capture of Jerusalem had a particularly encouraging effect for Britain and represented, as Lloyd George put it: 'a Christmas present for the nation.'³ There was also optimism about the coming infusion of American manpower into the conflict. Furthermore, Romania and Greece formally joined the Allies, the Italians broke through in Albania linking the Allied fronts, and, in Africa, most of the German forces in the colonies had been neutralised. Only in East Africa did German resistance continue. On the other hand, there were growing anxieties in that winter of 1917-18 about the prospect of German divisions being released from

the Eastern Front, but the government believed that this was a war that was about more than the precarious operational situation on the Western Front. It was, for them, a distinctly global war and the meridian of the struggle ran through Suez and across the oceans, for it concerned Britain's relationship with the Dominions, the Empire and its share of the world's commerce. After the war, Basil Liddell Hart attributed Allied success to the long-term naval blockade of Germany but praised the 'indirect strategy' pursued by Britain in the Middle East, asserting its utility over the costly and unsuccessful direct strategies which had characterised most of the war. Deflecting the obvious point that the main fronts of Europe had absorbed the bulk of the reserves and prevented their release to other front, Liddell Hart argued that an opportunity had been missed to exploit the other fronts: 'If the British had used at the outset even a fair proportion of the forces they ultimately expended in dribblets, it is clear from the evidence of the opposing commanders that success would probably have crowned the undertaking.'⁴

Strategy and Operations in East Africa, 1918

Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, the German military commander of East Africa, had defeated two Indian expeditionary forces (Force C and D) in 1914 and threatened British colonial control in Uganda and Kenya.⁵ Obligated, therefore, to conduct a strategic defence of their possessions in the region, the British subsequently established a cordon around German East Africa. With reinforcements, Lieutenant General Jan Smuts, the local British commander, could move over to the offensive, but he knew that the Germans would seek to avoid fixed positions and engagements and use the great depth that eastern Africa offered to manoeuvre and escape the closing jaws of his enveloping forces. Smuts therefore flooded the region with troops from Britain, South Africa, India and the West Indies, and attempted to coordinate a series of thrusts from every point of the compass that would leave nowhere for the Germans to go.⁶ Much to the frustration of the Allies, the terrain and climate added considerable friction to this

endeavour, and it was relatively easy to conceal the smaller German contingents and their African partners as they sought to raid and delay Smuts' forces.

Smuts responded by pushing columns into the interior of East Africa on multiple axes. This was still designed to prevent the Germans from being able to use depth to their advantage, but it was also to throw them off balance. While Smuts advanced from the north, paralleled by Major General van Deventer's force, the Nyasaland and Rhodesian Field Force came up from the south, the Belgians drove in from the Congo in the west and the Portuguese were encouraged to close the southern border. Smuts' operations drove Lettow-Vorbeck away from the northern highlands and prevented any threat of raids on the Uganda Railway. As the columns pressed in on the German territory, a third of Lettow-Vorbeck's forces were cornered in the south east of the colony and forced to surrender on 28 November 1917. Confusion and communications problems amongst the Portuguese nevertheless allowed Lettow-Vorbeck himself and the remainder of his command to escape into Portuguese East Africa. Regardless of the losses amongst their African porters, the Germans kept moving, and escaped the cordon.

For the next ten months, Lettow-Vorbeck attempted to stay ahead of his pursuers in Portuguese East Africa. He avoided British landings at Porto Amelia in December 1917 and a thrust eastwards from Fort Johnston on Lake Nyasa designed to catch him there in May 1918. He fled south towards the coast, and was pursued first north-eastwards in July, then back north-westwards into the interior. The Germans abandoned the Portuguese colony on 28 September 1918, and moved back into German East Africa at Nagawira. In November, they marched into Northern Rhodesia at Fife, before being chased to Abercorn to the south of Lake Tanganyika. There was a brief skirmish on 12 November with the lead element of the King's African Rifles. Lettow-Vorbeck, when learning of the Armistice in Europe, surrendered on 25 November 1918.

Although some writers have chosen to praise Lettow-Vorbeck for his guerrilla war and ability to tie down Allied forces, up to 70,000 at any one time, he really achieved very little. Isolated,

forced into a protracted flight, and increasingly irrelevant to the outcome of the war, there is little of real virtue in his operations. At the end of the war, there were just 175 European and 3,000 African forces left from an original strength of 10,000. Worse, Lettow-Vorbeck's campaign had also led to the deaths of over 250,000 African civilians.⁷ If strategy is, to some extent, a balance of cost and benefit, Lettow-Vorbeck's apparent achievements seem even more diminished.⁸

After the war, Germany was considered to have forfeited the European prestige of a civilising power that would make the possession of colonies acceptable. Consequently, it was stripped of its African and Pacific territories. Smuts, by contrast, had prevented the Central Powers threatening the Allied control of Africa, and especially Sudan, Egypt and the strategically vital Suez Canal. If any commander was deserving of praise in the East African theatre, then it was surely Smuts and not Lettow-Vorbeck.

Strategy and Operations in the Middle East, 1918

At the outbreak of war, Britain had moved an Indian Army expeditionary force to the head of the Gulf to secure the oil refineries in southern Persia, since oil was already emerging as critical to the functioning of the Royal Navy and Britain's war economy. But it was not just a concern to acquire reserves of oil that drove the British into Mesopotamia; it was the far older, pre-war anxieties of regional and Great Power influence that they needed to forestall during the war and after.⁹ The 'Great Game', the rivalry for influence in order to create security zones for imperial possessions, had dominated British thinking about the region in the late nineteenth century. Concerns about German and Ottoman schemes against British interests in Persia, the Gulf and India also drove the strategy of 1914-1918. The subsequent appearance of the Bolshevik threat in 1918 ensured continuity in this policy priority.¹⁰ Sir Henry Wilson, who succeeded Robertson

as Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) in the final year of the war, believed that the Bolshevik threat and Britain's control of the Middle East far outweighed any other consideration. He wrote: 'Europe should be left to stew in its own juice' while 'from the left bank of the Don to India is our preserve'. As the war drew to a close, Wilson noted in his diary: 'All the Cabinet agreed. Our real danger now is not the Boches but Bolshevism.'¹¹

In 1915, there had seemed to be an opportunity to seize Baghdad when the Ottomans were defeated in a series of tactical engagements in southern Mesopotamia. The Government of India had encouraged the local commanders to press forward on a tenuous line of communication and the result was that the British division on the Tigris, which was dangerously over-extended, was bundled back to Kut where it was besieged. All efforts to relieve them were a costly failure, and, when the garrison capitulated in 1916, the British government stepped in to demand an end to offensive action.

By late 1916, the British and Indian forces in Mesopotamia had made significant improvements. There were steady increases in the manpower available. There was development in combined arms operations (including integration of the Royal Flying Corps), with the import of ideas from the Western Front.¹² There was more artillery, providing a superiority in firepower. There were improvements in logistics and river transport, more efficient staff work, and increased intelligence collection. More proficient in combat, more efficient in supply, and arguably more realistic about its capabilities and limits, the British and Indian forces in Mesopotamia were far more effective as a fighting force.¹³

When in February and March 1916 the Russians advanced south from Persian Azerbaijan to Khanaqin, within the Ottoman borders, there seemed a possibility that the Tsar's forces, rather than the British, might seize Baghdad. General Sir Stanley Maude, who had been building up his forces on the Tigris, was eager to make his long-awaited offensive against Kut and the Russian movements might encourage the government at home to let him go forward. Fortunately, the

Ottomans played into Maude's hands. As General Halil, commander of the Ottoman Sixth Army, thrust against the Russians on the Persian border and then into the interior of the Shah's domains in July 1916, they were drawn further away from their original positions on the Tigris. The Ottoman forces remaining around Kut were eventually reduced to 20,000. Even so, Robertson, always eager to preserve resources for France and Flanders, argued that, even if it could be taken, Baghdad had no value from a strategic point of view, and therefore he felt no advance could be justified. The War Cabinet initially agreed. For now, the British and Imperial forces on the Tigris remained where they were.

Maude was not prepared to accept the inactivity implied by his appointment to command in Mesopotamia in August 1916. He had fought at Gallipoli, and had seen action in France, where he had been wounded, so he was fully aware of the character of this war. He was no 'Chateau General' of the popular imagination, and his approach to operations mirrored the practices employed on the Western Front. He knew that taking an entrenched position required overwhelming firepower, close co-ordination of all arms, and resolution throughout every level of the army. Training and preparation were crucial. He would not be hurried, but would proceed with methodical and relentless calculation towards his objectives in his own time.

The preparations were meticulous. Reinforcements were introduced, acclimatised and trained, and formations rehearsed. His divisions enjoyed a stronger ratio of artillery to provide crucial fire support. Basra was redeveloped as a port, greatly increasing its capacity to handle large volumes of stores and munitions. A light railway was constructed up to the front lines, while new river boats and hundreds of Ford motor lorries were brought in to speed up the supply system. Depots were opened up along the route to the front, and a precise approach was adopted to the question of logistics.

At the strategic level there was much better synchronisation. On 1 October 1916, General Charles Carmichael Monro, the Commander in Chief of the Army in India, assumed overall

direction of the Middle East theatre, integrating it into the strategy of the other theatres, which offered the opportunity for truly co-ordinated action against the Ottoman Empire. In contrast to the early years of the war, Monro was served by an experienced staff.¹⁴ While the CIGS continued to insist that the theatre commanders make do with what they had, a coalition effort was emerging. The Russian General Staff agreed in principle there should be co-ordination between the Army of the Caucasus and the British forces in the Middle East.¹⁵

In December 1916, finally given the go-ahead, Maude deluged the Ottoman positions on the Tigris with artillery fire. Using a methodical series of belts of fire, the barrage proceeded with ruthless mathematical timing. Ottoman front line trenches were subjected to intensive bombardment, while rear areas were shelled to prevent reinforcements coming up. British and Indian troops advanced as close as they could behind the advancing curtain of fire. Yet, the opening bombardment, intense though it was, could not guarantee success. Some infantry units were pinned down by Ottoman machine gun fire, and others took heavy losses as they tried to get forward. In some locations, more fortunate bands penetrated the lines and started to consolidate. But this was a battle that would not be decided in one day. As had been found on the Western Front, engagements lasted weeks and even months. Ottoman positions were subjected to 'bite and hold', before reserves came up and developed the lodgements.

Maude had opened his assault with two corps advancing in parallel up both banks of the Tigris, a manoeuvre that made it more difficult for the Ottomans to concentrate their resistance. Heavy rain had impeded progress and the low lying, marshy ground dissolved into a sea of mud but it was actually Maude's concern to minimise casualties and proceed methodically from one objective to the next that made this a painstaking process. For two months, he pounded the Ottoman defences, then carefully pushed his units into the gaps.

Maude possessed a skill that made this more than a mere attritional process. While the Ottoman defenders concentrated all their attention on their immediate front, Maude transferred part of his

force across the Shumran Bend of the Tigris on a pontoon bridge on 23 February 1917 and assaulted the right of the Ottoman line. Simultaneously, his corps attacked the Ottoman left, opposite the Sanniyat defensive bastion. The crossing of the Shumran Bend, which enabled a force to establish a position some five miles upriver from Kut, threw the Ottomans completely off-balance. The bridgehead was expanded quickly and the Ottomans, whose position was unhinged, were in danger of complete encirclement. They withdrew, but Maude now unleashed a pursuit. Having proceeded so slowly hitherto, the sudden and penetrating advance threw the Ottomans into shock. Captain W. Nunn of the Royal Navy led the chase with a flotilla of five British gunboats, seizing Kut and then steaming upriver. The Ottoman rear guard caught Nunn's little fleet in an intense crossfire at point blank range from the banks, but his crews pressed on regardless, and steaming parallel to the main body of retreating Ottoman troops, they opened up with devastating results. The entire Ottoman force was destroyed or dispersed. Barely 5,000 Ottoman troops escaped Maude's offensive.

Maude regrouped his forces at Aziziyeh, restocking his logistics, resting the troops and preparing for the next pulse of the offensive. He did not wish to repeat the error of 1915 and advance so far that he risked reaching a culminating point. The Ottomans were meanwhile being forced to completely redesign their defences of Mesopotamia. Their planned advance into Persia had to be abandoned. The priority now was the defence of Baghdad, a prestigious symbol of Ottoman power in the region.

In Britain, the army and the government were divided about the next move. Robertson was adamant that there should be no further advance. While insisting the War Cabinet left the direction of the war to the military, he reasoned that if Baghdad was taken, it was not clear how it would be held and to what purpose.¹⁶ If the Ottomans reinforced the front, there was a risk that the British would merely repeat the siege of Kut but in the more exposed and extended location of Baghdad. He would permit raiding by cavalry, the extension of 'influence' into the

province of Baghdad, but he cautioned against any situation that would compel a withdrawal of British forces because of the 'objectionable political effect' that might ensue.¹⁷ He repeated his determination that the war would be won or lost on the Western Front against the main adversary Germany, and continued to regard Mesopotamia as an expensive and wasteful sideshow.

General Monro in India took a diametrically different view. He urged Maude to press on and seize Baghdad while the Ottomans were broken on the Tigris. He argued that taking Baghdad would prevent the Ottomans from reforming and it would provide an important prestige victory for the British amongst their colonial Muslim subjects.¹⁸ Maude concurred with Monro, but the deciding factor for the government was the prospect that the Russians might extend their own area of control from the Caucasus to Mosul and northern Mesopotamia.¹⁹ A renewed Russian offensive toward Baghdad could not be ruled out, particularly with Ottoman troops so significantly reduced. In a post war settlement this would give Russia enormous influence across the Middle East, and such empowerment left British officials in India concerned. Robertson relented. He permitted an advance if Maude judged it prudent, with all his previous caveats.²⁰

Maude therefore resumed his offensive on 5 March 1917 and it took just three days to reach the Diyala River where Halil had prepared defences on the confluence with the Tigris. On the 9 March, the initial British probing attacks were repulsed and Maude opted to outflank the river positions and threaten Baghdad directly. The city was 226 miles (365 km) away but Halil could not protect it if Maude's force moved around his defences. The British manoeuvre forced Halil to readjust his line, and shift the bulk of his force to face the new threat and leave the main defences in the hands of a single regiment. Maude then switched axis again, assaulted the Diyala defences frontally and overwhelmed them. The Ottomans were defeated decisively. On the 11 March, Maude was able to secure Baghdad without resistance. Some 9,000 Ottoman troops were captured in the confusion and their resistance in the area had been broken. It was an enormous

encouragement to the British government: with this achievement, they wondered whether similar progress be made in the Near East.

After the capture of Baghdad, Maude's concern was to prevent the remainder of Halil's force north of the city joining with the 15,000-strong corps led by Ali Ihsan Bey, a formation that was withdrawing from Persia under Russian pressure. Maude's solution was to seize the rail junction at Samarrah, some 80 miles (130 km) to the north. Marching out with 45,000 men, Maude planned four short attacks and his first objective was to prevent any attempt to flood the Euphrates plain and thus render further British operations impossible. A secondary objective was to secure the western approaches to Baghdad since Ottoman forces still lay out along the Euphrates. The first thrust to the north was resisted strongly but the British drove the Ottomans back 22 miles (35 km) to the Adhaim River.

Halil was therefore compelled to withdraw to a much stronger series of prepared defences at Istabulat, which lay between the Tigris and the Ali Jali Canal. Maude made a series of attacks along these defensive lines on 21 April, and some positions changed hands several times in close quarter fighting. The Ottomans were eventually pushed out, and occupied a low ridge some 10 km from the Samarrah railway junction. Maude kept up the pressure and when the Ottomans realized their position could no longer be held, Maude's force secured the town. His offensive had been a complete success.

The Russian war effort had been ebbing just as the British advanced up the Tigris. In the autumn, communist revolutionaries seized power and the Russian army began to break up and withdraw. Thus the German and Ottoman strategic dilemma in late 1917 was how to make best use of the new reserves that had been released from Europe and the Caucasus following the collapse of the Russian war effort. With the Bolsheviks in power, Russian resistance in the Caucasus and northern Persia was melting away. The divisions now available from South East Europe and the Caucasus gave Istanbul a strategic reserve, the Yıldırım (Lightning) Army Group,

and this could be committed either to the recovery of Baghdad or to bolster the Palestine front against an expected British offensive. The German contribution was the seasoned and well-equipped brigade, Pasha II, which was armed with a generous scale of machine guns and field artillery. This force was designed to support an Ottoman offensive to retake Baghdad, although General Falkenhayn, effectively now in command of the Middle Eastern theatre, was conscious that any attack in that direction would first have to ensure the security of Jerusalem and Palestine lest the Allies breakthrough and threaten the Turco-German lines of communications in Syria.

Just as the Central Powers agreed on where the strategic weight of the Ottoman Empire would be committed, namely in Mesopotamia against Maude, General Allenby commenced his operations in Palestine and the Ottoman Yıldırım Group had to be diverted. The strategic situation therefore altered again, and further operational successes for the British in both theatres began to alter the balance irrevocably in their favour.

Meanwhile, to the west of Baghdad, Maude had taken Fallujah on 19 March 1917 and his units fanned out to pacify the area. When operations were resumed here in March 1918, the 15th Indian Division took Hit without resistance, as the Ottoman garrison gave way in its path. The Ottomans adopted delaying tactics, fighting just long enough to inflict casualties, and then pulling out to new positions in the rear. In September, Ramadi was taken in a brilliant British mobile operation that had cavalry, horse artillery, armoured cars and infantry in motor transport working in close co-operation. Swinging around the Ottoman positions to get into depth, a series of cut off groups decimated the Ottomans' attempts to make their usual tactical withdrawal. The manoeuvre broke Ottoman resistance, rolled up its reserves and headquarters units, and effectively placed the Euphrates under British control.

To the north, the final phase of the Mesopotamia campaign fell to Maude's successor Sir William Marshall. The strategic direction was the British government's desire that Mosul, and its valuable oil resources, should be in British hands at the end of the war. This was to be a vital diplomatic

advantage for London in any peace negotiations, for it was anticipated that Bulgaria would soon be knocked out of the war and this would cut the lines of communications from the Central Powers to Istanbul. The British government was eager to exclude France and Russia from the region, and ensure a strong security zone could be established for the allied independent Arab territories to the south.²¹

The problem was that Marshall's Tigris force had been denuded of some of its transport by the need to convey 'Dunsterforce', a detached contingent, to Baku, where it could provide security against a final Ottoman attempt to control the oil resources of the Caucasus and Trans-Caspian region.²² Resources also had to be diverted to Palestine for Allenby's offensive beyond the Judean Hills, so the final push in Mesopotamia was made by a much smaller force than had been available to Maude.

Marshall was undaunted by the loss of his numerical advantage, defeating the remnants of Halil's Sixth Army, restyled as the *Dicle Grubu* (Tigris Group), in a series of engagements that culminated in the Battle of Sharqat. The Ottoman army in Mesopotamia were at the end of their endurance, with too few horses and mules to move, short of ammunition, in rags of uniforms and ravaged by disease. Ottoman officers feared a breakdown of discipline as their forces wasted away. Marshall had correctly deduced that he needed to keep up the pressure by advancing into depth. The armistice was declared when Marshall's force was just a few miles short of Mosul, but the city was taken in anticipation of the peace settlement that would follow.

The British and Indian troops in Mesopotamia had achieved a significant victory. Supported by modern aircraft and motor transport, they had fought their way over 600 miles up the Tigris and Euphrates, against determined resistance and in demanding climatic conditions. They had endured floods, sandstorms, choking dust and deep mud. They had broiled under the sun, and frozen in the exposed plains in the winter. Sickesses had taken their toll, and it worth remembering that more lives were lost through disease than combat in this campaign.²³ The

Ottomans had fought for virtually every mile, hurling at the British forces every available weapon of war. Maude's and Marshall's forces had fought with endurance and imagination, combining material advantages and efficient organisation with skilful manoeuvre. Yet an even more stunning campaign had unfolded in Palestine to the west, and it was here that the Ottoman armies were finally broken.

Palestine and Syria, 1918

Although they were in strong positions and had repulsed two British offensives in 1917, severe supply problems affected the Ottoman troops dug in at Gaza. But the relative weaknesses of the Ottoman forces on the Palestine front were not the immediate concern of the British War Cabinet or of the CIGS. Robertson informed the headquarters at Cairo that their request for two divisions would be denied and that, while 'every opportunity should be taken' to defeat the forces to their front, the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) in southern Palestine would simply not be required to conduct major offensive operations.²⁴ Nevertheless, the Prime Minister, given the grave situation in Russia and on the Western Front in late 1917, could not permit inactivity, and more mounted troops were despatched. The whole mobile contingent of the EEF was then reorganized as three distinct divisions, with supporting artillery.²⁵ Eventually, despite Robertson's objections, the two infantry divisions that had been requested were also despatched. Rail and water supply lines were extended to support the EEF's lines and the troops were subjected to intensive training, incorporating lessons derived from operations on the Western Front.

The British EEF therefore had the 'means' to break through at Gaza and drive the Ottomans out of the Near East. The force had been expanded to ten infantry divisions and four mounted divisions, and possessed 116 heavy guns. The EEF was supported by new aircraft, particularly the Bristol Fighter plane, which gave a technological advantage over the Central Powers' air

forces on their front. With numerical superiority, the British and Indian troops were grouped into three corps: The XXI Corps of three infantry divisions, facing Gaza and its south-eastern approaches, was commanded by Lieutenant General Edward Bulfin. Opposite Beersheba, Lieutenant General Chetwode commanded the XX Corps, with three infantry divisions with an attached Yeomanry division, while Lieutenant General Harry Chauvel's Desert Mounted Corps, on the right flank of the EEF, faced Beersheba's south-eastern approaches.

What the EEF needed was the 'ways'. The arrival of the new commander, General Edmund Allenby, seemed to herald the end of the stalemate that had prevailed for months. The appointment of a new commander, the soldiers believed, increased the likelihood of an advance into the more temperate landscape of Palestine out of the exhausting desert conditions of southern Palestine. Allenby's confidence, his physical presence, his experience from the Western Front, his willingness to talk to soldiers, and his intolerance of oversights amongst his officers had a positive and energizing effect across the army.²⁶

The strategic situation was becoming more urgent by the day. There was growing concern that, with the situation in Russia deteriorating, more Ottoman troops might be released from the Caucasus front and deployed against the EEF. According to Lloyd George, Allenby was expected to defeat and then pursue the enemy to the limit of his resources. Robertson was more cautious. He wrote to Allenby that 'it will be a good thing to give the Turk in front of you a sound beating, but that the extent to which we shall be justified in following him by an advance into Northern and Central Palestine is a matter which for the moment must be left open'.⁴³ Referring to the Clausewitzian problem of a culminating point, he added: 'The further we go north the more Turks we shall meet; and the greater will be the strain upon our resources.' He added a 'PS', in which he pointed out it was not so much going forward that he opposed, but how to 'maintain ourselves after going forward and to a useful purpose'.

Allenby therefore devised a plan with his corps commanders to unhinge the Ottoman defences. The Third Battle of Gaza (31 October–8 November 1917) opened with a sustained artillery bombardment on the defences of the town lying on the extreme left, and was then extended by Chetwode's XX Corps against Beersheba on the extreme right flank. Along the line in the centre, the infantry of the 60th and 74th Divisions approached methodically from the south-west, the troops following just 30 yards behind a curtain of explosions, suffering some casualties from Ottoman retaliatory fire. Significant features such as Hill 1070 were captured, but progress was slow because of the resistance shown by Ottoman units.²⁷ It was not until the evening that all their objectives were secured.

Then, in an unexpected manoeuvre, the Desert Mounted Corps used the cover of darkness overnight on 30–31 October to ride around to the east of Beersheba. As planned, the XX Corps' attack from the south-west and west had compelled the Ottoman III Corps commander, Colonel Ismet Bey, to push his reserves against Chetwode's infantry. As a result, Chauvel's Desert Mounted Corps outnumbered the Ottomans on the extreme right. The Australian 7th and 5th Light Horse regiments drove back the Third Ottoman Cavalry Division north of Beersheba, while the 6th Light Horse acted as a reserve in support of the New Zealanders' attack on the hill at Tel es Sabe. An Ottoman battalion was dug-in on this high ground, and their commanding position gave them wide fields of fire across Beersheba's eastern approaches. It took the New Zealand Mounted Rifles brigade most of the day to assault and capture this tactically vital position.²⁸

Clearing this feature made it possible for the Australian 4th and 12th Light Horse regiments that evening to charge through the twilight, 800 strong, towards the town. Under machine-gun and small-arms fire, the leading squadrons dismounted when they reached the Ottoman trenches and engaged in a close-quarter battle, mostly with bayonets.²⁹ The squadrons behind them continued to fight their way into the town on horseback. The result was the capture of Beersheba and a

haul of Ottoman prisoners. The Ottomans' attention was fixed on their extreme flank, but before reserves could be committed, they had to consider that Beersheba was a feint as the British attacks were now developing near the coast.

The attack on Gaza itself began on 1 November with Bulfin's XXI Corps artillery hammering the Ottoman defences, before mounting an infantry assault with the advancing troops keeping just behind the belt of exploding shells. Attacks were made on the advanced strong points, and raids made against others, but what the Ottomans did not realise was that the full weight of the offensive had not yet come.³⁰ This was understandable since Bulfin's artillery barrage was the largest outside Europe to date in the war, with 15,000 rounds smashing into the ground around the settlement before the infantry reached the position. Despite the staggering volume of fire, the Ottoman garrison defended their blasted and collapsing trenches with courage and determination.³¹ Believing that the British would press home the attack, more Ottoman units were rushed into these defences, while the line beyond Hebron was stripped of available manpower. Allenby had also succeeded in weakening his enemy's positions in the centre, at the 'hinge' of Hareira and Tel el Sheria, two settlements at the heart of the Ottoman defences. On the 6 November, the main attack went in against this section, and the Ottoman line was cut.³² A gap 7 miles wide was opened up, through which his reserves now advanced, and kept moving, right into the Judean Hills.

After Third Gaza there was continuing debate between Robertson and Lloyd George over the ends and means of the Palestine operations, and how the campaign fitted into the overall strategy of the war. Impatient with the CIGS, the Prime Minister forced Robertson out in February 1918. In December 1917, Robertson had stated: 'it is for serious consideration whether the advantages to be gained by an advance [in Palestine] are worth the cost and risk involved'. He added: 'The answer depends to some extent upon whether the conquest of Palestine would put Turkey out of the war.'³³

Nevertheless, on 9 December 1917, it was Allenby's entry into Jerusalem that mattered to the Prime Minister. It was strategically important, not least for Britain's prestige and its bargaining position in the post-war world. Lloyd George told the House of Commons: 'The capture of Jerusalem has made a most profound impression throughout the whole civilised world . . . the name of every hamlet and hill occupied by the British Army . . . thrills with sacred memories.'³⁴ Allenby, conscious of the sensitivities in the city and globally, chose to walk in on foot in simple khaki service dress. After a brief ceremony lasting 15 minutes, he returned to the soldiers' business of finishing the Ottomans in the Near East.

Allenby had been instructed to resume his offensive in February 1918 but he could not progress north into Syria until he had neutralized the 20,000 Ottoman troops on his eastern flank in Amman. His first manoeuvre, to take Jericho, was successful, with the town falling to Allied troops on 21 February. Next, Allenby seized the hills above Wadi Auja, which put Jericho and its line of communications beyond the reach of Ottoman artillery. In March, an attempt to raid towards Amman met with defeat, largely because of the weather and topography. Heavy rains made all movement arduous and prevented the deployment of field artillery. A second attempt was then delayed because divisions were being withdrawn for service in France to face the massive German offensive of the spring.

The second raid, when it came in May, also met with failure. General Liman von Sanders, now the commander of the Yıldırım Group of Ottoman reserves, had called in his more exposed posts in order to concentrate his forces around the city. He knew that Amman represented the last rail link with the garrison in Medina, and therefore was a vital junction for the entire campaign theatre.³⁵ He called for further reinforcements from the north and despatched Ottoman cavalry to threaten the British lines of communication astride the Jordan River. Meanwhile, Allenby's force was struggling with the rain and mud, and a decision was made to transfer as much arms, equipment, and baggage as possible to camels and mules because of the

difficulty in moving wheeled transport. Such were the conditions that men and animals died of exposure on the wind-swept slopes of the valley. Consequently, the British force that arrived in front of the Ottoman positions was exhausted before the fighting had even begun.³⁶ The EEF's brigade, with the ammunition and guns they could carry, launched four days of assaults against strong positions. Some 2,000 defenders were dug-in, armed with seventy machine guns and supported by field artillery which had been zeroed in on prearranged targets and beaten zones. Further Ottoman reinforcements arrived during the fighting. Yet Liman von Sanders was so concerned about the mounting casualties and wavering resolve of the defenders that he ordered their positions to be held regardless of the cost. The British and imperial forces could not, however, continue the attacks indefinitely. On 30 March 1918, they commenced their withdrawal, accompanied by large numbers of refugees from Es Salt who feared Ottoman retribution.³⁷

Nevertheless, Allenby's aborted attack convinced the German and Ottoman commanders that more reinforcements must be sent to this city that commanded the British right flank. If the British could not secure Amman, it was reasoned, they would not be able to press on into Syria.

In fact, Allenby went to great lengths to conceal the direction of his intended offensive. Some 15,000 wooden and canvas horses were built and dummy camps erected to persuade intrusive reconnaissance pilots that the EEF intended to attack from the Jordan valley towards Amman. Units were moved at night, and camouflaged by day. Air patrols did their best to deny access over Allenby's formations. Bridges were built across the Jordan to give the impression of an impending thrust against the city, and false wireless traffic was generated to support the idea of intense preparations.

The Arab Northern Army played their part in creating the deception. With the bulk of the Arab force laying siege to Ma'an, a detached contingent advanced to within 50 miles of Amman. On 16 September, covered by aircraft of the Royal Air Force, Colonel T. E. Lawrence's Arab

irregulars conducted a series of guerrilla actions on the railway line either side of the junction of Daraa. Lawrence reported he: 'burnt a lot of rolling stock and two lorries, broke the points, and planted a fair assortment of 'tulip [mine]s' down the line.'³⁸ Despite considerable harassment from German and Ottoman aircraft, and the resistance of the local garrisons, the Arabs repeatedly cut the line and succeeded in generating a rout in some of the Ottoman Fourth Army troops. Some of the Ottoman troops exacted a terrible retribution against the civilian population of the village of Turaa. This inspired more local Arab tribes to join the revolt and drew in Ottoman reinforcements to defend the area. The Arab Northern Army caught the Ottoman forces trying to evacuate Daraa and exacted revenge by taking no prisoners.³⁹ This overwhelming Arab victory was possible because Allenby had unleashed his long-awaited final offensive, not against Amman as the Ottomans had anticipated, but right along the line, fifty miles wide, between Jericho and the sea.

The Battle of Megiddo, which opened at 04.00 hours on 19 September 1918 with a tremendous artillery barrage, was fought between the three corps of the EEF and the remnants of the Ottoman Fourth (near Amman) and the Seventh and Eighth Armies of Yıldırım. Allenby had deployed 35,000 infantry, 9,000 cavalry, and 400 heavy guns, the bulk of which were concentrated on a 15-mile front close to the Mediterranean coast, north of Jaffa. The shelling was the most intense delivered outside a European theatre, with 1,000 rounds a minute detonating on the Ottoman positions in this sector.

The engagement developed as Allenby had planned. The infantry assault of the XXI Corps carried the first two Ottoman lines and overcame the resistance of the third and fourth lines soon after. In just two and a half hours, they had penetrated 7,000 yards into the Ottoman positions, and broken open a wide gap in their defences. Chauvel's cavalry exploited the gap perfectly, chasing the routed Ottoman troops up to Tulkarm, which was captured. The cavalry pressed on with aircraft above them, seizing depots, rounding up prisoners, and destroying the

telephone communications' nodes on which the Yıldırım depended to allocate its reserves. Megiddo, the Biblical site alleged to mark the end of times, was reached soon after, more than 30 miles beyond the front line. The speed of the advance seemed to exceed all expectations: the British 4th Cavalry Division covered 70 miles on 20 September, while the Australian Mounted Division in one bound advanced 11 miles in just sixty minutes. The Ottoman forces began to disintegrate in the confusion: entire Turkish battalions found themselves encircled or under relentless air attack. A key manoeuvre was the decision of the cavalry to switch to a new axis to the south-east, from Nazareth and Beth Shean, which cut off the retreat of the Ottoman Seventh Army. On 23 September, British and Indian cavalry took Acre and Haifa. Resistance from Ottoman forces in Palestine was ebbing away.

British and Indian cavalry circled round to cut off Ottoman forces making for Beirut and Homs. Deraa was taken on 27 September and the race was on to drive northwards into Syria before the Ottomans could create any new defensive line. But the rout of the Ottomans was complete. By 30 September, the combined British and Arab force was on the edge of Damascus. A ceremonial entry was arranged for the Arab Northern Army, accompanied by T.E. Lawrence 'of Arabia'. The British entry was more prosaic, but Emir Feisal was accorded the honours of a conqueror for a short time before being informed, by Allenby, that, according to standard procedure, the city was under British military occupation. It had been a whirlwind campaign which had driven the Ottomans pell-mell out of the Near East. The pursuit continued and Aleppo was taken on 26 October, but resistance had almost ceased altogether by that stage. Just four days after Aleppo was captured, on 30 October, the Ottomans concluded an armistice, agreeing to all the Allied terms.

Robertson's successor as CIGS, Sir Henry Wilson, wrote to Allenby soon after the victory and he concluded that the German strategic plan had been 'command of the sea [and] the Near and Middle East'. Wilson believed Britain had prevented German command of the sea and 'I was

always casting about in my mind how this second objective [German domination of the Middle East] could be frustrated.²⁴⁰ He concluded: ‘You [Allenby] and [General] Franchet [D’Esperay, the French commander in the Balkans] did that. The collapse of the main theatres followed almost automatically.’ In 1918, in Mesopotamia, East Africa and the Near East, the central Powers had been defeated. Despite their determined resistance, both Germany and the Ottoman Empire were stripped of their territorial possessions. The Allies had achieved decisive operational and strategic victories, achieved all their objectives, and acquired new security responsibilities in the process.

¹ *Hansard*, 5th series, vol C., col. 2211.[1917]

² Both sources cited in Malcolm Brown, *Tommy Goes to War* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1978), p. 256.

³ Archibald Wavell, *Allenby: A Study in Greatness* (London: 1940), p. 186; John Grigg, *Lloyd George: War Leader* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 150.

⁴ Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1954), p. 179.

⁵ Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶ Brigadier General J.H.V. Crowe, *General Smut's Campaign in East Africa* (London: John Murray, 1918).

⁷ Edward Paice, *Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa* (London: Phoenix, 2008).

⁸ The logistical cost and commitment in shipping was the largest burden on the British. See Geoffrey Hodges, *The Carrier Corps: Military Labour in the East African Campaign, 1914-1918* (London: Greenwood Press, 1986).

⁹ S.A. Cohen, *British Policy in Mesopotamia, 1903-1914* (London: Ithaca, 1976; republ., 2008), p. 308.

¹⁰ Robert Johnson, *Spying for Empire: The Great Game in Central and South Asia, 1757-1947* (London: Greenhill, 2006), pp. 218-222; Keith Neilson, ‘“For Diplomatic, Economic, Strategic and Telegraphic Reasons”: British Imperial Defence, the Middle East and India, 1914-1918’, in G. Kennedy and K. Nielson, eds., *Far Flung Lines: Essays on Imperial Defence in Honour of Donald Mackenzie Schurman* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 103-23.

¹¹ C.E. Callwell, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and Diaries*, vol II, (London, 1927), pp. 147-8.

¹² Kaushik Roy, ‘The Army in India in Mesopotamia from 1916-1918: Tactics, Technology and Logistics Reconsidered’ in I.W.F. Beckett, *1917: Beyond the Western Front* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 131-58.

¹³ This is also the verdict of E.A. Cohen and J. Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 156-63.

¹⁴ George Barrow, *The Life of General Sir Charles Carmichael Monro* (London: Hutchinson, 1931), p. 132.

¹⁵ F. J. Moberly, *The Campaign in Mesopotamia*, III, (London: HMSO, 1924–7), pp. 79, 86-90; William Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen, 1914–1918*, II, (London, 1926), pp. 79, 227; Paul Guinn, *British Strategy and Politics, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 219.

¹⁶ Guinn, *British Strategy*, pp. 113-14

¹⁷ Moberly, *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, III, pp. 204-211.

¹⁸ Guinn, *British Strategy and Politics*, p. 157; Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, II, p. 74.

¹⁹ Moberly, *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, III, pp. 125-6, 159, 199; Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, II, p.77; Guinn, *British Strategy*, p. 200.

²⁰ Eugene Rogan, *Fall of the Ottomans*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 323.

²¹ Rob Johnson, *The Great War and the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 253-4; James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2011), pp. 70-73, 89-92.

²² Major General Dunsterville, the inspiration for Kipling’s ‘Stalky and Co’, was tasked to secure northern Persia and Baku on the Caspian with a brigade known as ‘Dunsterforce’. L.C. Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce* (London: E. Arnold, 1920).

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- ²³ In general terms, for every battle death, there were just over 2 deaths through disease, with a higher proportion on the Ottoman side. An estimated 800,000 Allied troops were listed sick at some point in the campaign, although the majority returned to duty. It is thought that almost 90,000 died. Ottoman losses are unknown precisely but estimates are some 60,000 deaths from combat and 325,000 casualties overall.
- ²⁴ Lt. Gen. Sir George McMunn and Capt. Cyril Falls, *Military Operations, Egypt and Palestine*, I, (London: HMSO, 1927-29), pp. 355, 356
- ²⁵ McMunn and Falls, *Military Operations, Egypt and Palestine*, I, p. 357.
- ²⁶ Matthew Hughes (ed.), *Allenby in Palestine* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), p. 8.
- ²⁷ Cyril Falls and A. F. Becke, *Military Operations, Egypt and Palestine* (London: HMSO, 1930), II, p. 50.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 56.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 59.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 66–9.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 64.
- ³² *Ibid.*, II, pp. 95–101.
- ³³ Sir William Robertson, *Future Operations in Palestine*, 26 December 1917, CAB/24/37/12, The National Archives.
- ³⁴ Cited in Grigg, *Lloyd George*, p. 344.
- ³⁵ Otto Liman von Sanders, *Five Years in Turkey* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1927), p. 211.
- ³⁶ Falls and Becke, *Military Operations, Egypt and Palestine*, II, p. 337.
- ³⁷ Falls and Becke, *Military Operations, Egypt and Palestine*, II, p. 346.
- ³⁸ T. E. Lawrence, XXXVIII, 'The Destruction of the Fourth Army', *Arab Bulletin* No. 106, 22 October 1918, available at http://www.telstudies.org/writings/works/articles_essays/1918_destruction_of_the_fourth_army.shtml (Accessed 18 July 2017).
- ³⁹ T.E. Lawrence, XXXVIII, 'The Destruction of Fourth Army', dated 22 October 1918, originally in T.E. Lawrence, *Secret Despatches from Arabia* [compiled by his brother] (London: Golden Cockrell, 1939) and reproduced in Malcolm Brown (ed), *T.E. Lawrence in War and Peace* (London: Greenhill, 2005), pp. 171-2.
- ⁴⁰ Wilson to Allenby, 7 December 1918, Wilson Papers, Imperial War Museum, HHW2/33B/1.