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THE MIDDLE EAST:
INTRODUCTION

The British involvement in the Middle East was the inevitable result of the conquest of India. There first arose the need to protect the line of communication between Britain and India which from the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign onwards ran through the Mediterranean, across the Isthmus of Suez and thence down the Red Sea and across the Indian Ocean.

Next came the requirement to defend India against possible Russian, and later German, attack. For much of the nineteenth century, Russia was steadily extending her territory eastwards until eventually her frontier marched with Afghanistan's along the banks of the River Oxus. It was held in London that Russian ambitions included a protectorate over Persia, thereby ensuring her an ice-free port in the Gulf, and much of British diplomatic effort was directed toward thwarting this supposed Russian aim. When, in the years immediately before the outbreak of the First World War, there was talk of a Berlin to Baghdad railway, accompanied by German intrigues in south Persia and elsewhere along the shores of the Gulf, there was equally a British desire to counter such ambitions. For many British statesmen—in London as well as at the seat of British government in India—Afghanistan, the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian and Arabian shores of the Gulf were essential outworks for the defence of the Indian Empire.

Finally, there was the matter of Oil. It has to be admitted, however, that by the time oil came to play such a vital part in the economies of the West, British influence in the Middle East was rapidly declining. Control of the sources of Middle East oil was a vital strategic aim during the Second World War, and to a much lesser extent during the First World War, but it played little part in the formulation of British policy during the nineteenth century; and it was then that Britain became, for a time, inextricably involved in the affairs of the Middle East.

This involvement, or perhaps a better description might be entanglement, caused Britain to become engaged in numerous international disputes that might otherwise never have come the way of a people so remotely situated from the centres of conflict. It profoundly affected British strategic policy for nearly two centuries.
For better, for worse, the British could not afford to ignore the Middle East and the many different races who dwelt there. They sought constantly to extend their influence in the region, sometimes by diplomacy, at other times by the sword; and they were equally determined to prevent any other power from matching it.

When India first began to loom large on the British political scene it was governed, after a fashion, by the Honourable East India Company. It was important only as a source of raw materials and as a market for British goods. But a change in British thought and attitude began to manifest itself towards the end of the eighteenth century. In the short space of twenty to thirty years India was transformed from a market into a satrapy. Those responsible for governing Britain succeeded in convincing themselves, and later some of those they ruled, that the British had been given some kind of divinely inspired mission to extend their rule overseas.

It was in 1839 that the British established their first foothold in the Middle East. Captain Stafford Haines of the East India Company's Marine seized Aden from the Abdali Sultan of Lahej. Aden was the first colony to be acquired during the reign of Queen Victoria and its importance grew rapidly as the age of sail gave way to the age of steam. Lying where it did, it became a great coaling port, at one time handling more tonnage than New York. But it was also strategically placed to control the entrance to the Red Sea; not surprisingly, therefore, it was regarded for much of its history under British rule as a fortress, and it was governed for nearly a century from India.

Forty-three years later, on 13 September 1882, a British army under General Sir Garnet Wolseley defeated an Egyptian army under Arabi Pasha at Tel-el-Kebir, not far from Ismailia on the Suez Canal. The long and often tragic British involvement in Egypt dates from that battle; it was to continue through various vicissitudes until it vanished in a puff of smoke after the Anglo-French intervention in Egypt in October 1956. During the intervening years the maintenance of the security of the Suez Canal as a vital link in Britain's line of communication with India was one of the principal factors in British strategic policy.

During the First World War the Turks came perilously close to severing that link. After a leisurely advance from Gaza they attempted to force a crossing over the Canal on the night of 2/3 February 1915. It was an inept performance and they were easily repulsed by the British and Indian troops defending the Canal. Among those were the 62nd Punjabis, whose machine-guns were commanded by Captain Claude Auchinleck. It was the future Field-Marshall's baptism of fire. The Turks withdrew in as leisurely a fashion as they had come, across the Sinai wastes, followed
cautiously by the British, and the Palestine campaign had started. It was not to end until Allenby entered Damascus on 2 October 1918. The British involvement with Palestine and Trans-Jordan had begun.

At the same time as Captain Auchinleck's Punjabis were repelling the Turks, other Indian troops were fighting the same enemy in Mesopotamia, on the far side of Arabia. They had first been landed at Basra in early November 1914—the Poona, Ahmadnagar and Belgaum Brigades. The original aim had been modest enough: to ensure control of the Gulf and the supply of oil from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company's field at Mohammerah. That aim was achieved without many losses, and a Turkish counter-attack was successfully repulsed. Reinforcements followed from India, a considerable force was built up—far larger than was logistically sound—and an advance began up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers towards Baghdad. The Turkish soldier fights best in defence; and he was falling back on his communications, whereas the British were extending theirs. The climate was appalling, but after a series of successful battles the army got as far as Kut on 29 September 1915. This was the time to stop until the administrative chaos behind the forward troops could be sorted out. But the Army Commander, Lieutenant-General Sir John Nixon, was optimistic, and Major-General Townshend, commanding the forward troops, had already won some convincing victories over the Turks. The Army pressed on, arriving within thirty miles of Baghdad by 12 November, when Townshend won a pyrrhic victory by capturing the first line of the Turkish defences. But he could go no farther, having lost 4,500 men (more than a third of his force), and he retreated to Kut. There the Turks besieged him until 29 April 1916, when he was compelled to surrender. He went into captivity and Nixon was sacked. It was a sad ending to what had been at one stage a brilliant little campaign.

It was the failure to appreciate the importance of logistics that brought the British to surrender. Matters were righted later in 1916 when a new commander, Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude, arrived from Britain, and with him the logistic support which had been so lacking. Baghdad was taken on 11 March 1917, and by the end of the war Mosul was in British hands. The involvement with Iraq, as Mesopotamia was renamed, had begun, and it was to continue until the RAF was finally withdrawn from Habbaniyah in 1955.

Finally, there was the Gulf. This was very much the bailiwick of the Government of India until almost the end of British rule in the sub-continent. Most of the great names connected with the Gulf—Sir Percy Cox, W. H. I. Shakespear, H. R. P. Dickson, Sir Arnold
Wilson—began their careers in the Army and later transferred to the Indian Political Service. They served as consuls or consul-generals at Kuweit, Bandar Abbas, Muscat and elsewhere up and down the Gulf, on both the Arabian and Persian shores; their main task was the gathering of intelligence and the extension of British influence among the tribes. It was not until after the Second World War that, to protect the exploration teams and later to ensure the exploitation of the oil fields, the British Government raised a force of Arab soldiers, trained and led by British officers. This force, originally known as the Trucial Oman Levies and later as the Trucial Oman Scouts, was first formed in March 1951.

Farther down the Gulf there was the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, once known as much for the backwardness of its people as for its blazing climate. Here again the discovery of oil jolted an impoverished and inward-looking people out of a medieval lifestyle into the mid-twentieth century in less than a decade. The Sultan’s tiny army, composed mainly of Baluchis recruited from Muscat’s dependency across the Gulf in Baluchistan, proved inadequate to control the interior of the country. As the Sultan’s Armed Forces were expanded with British assistance, more and more British officers were required to train and lead the new soldiers. This was a commitment that only began to manifest itself in the late 1950s, but it soon began to absorb an increasing number of seconded British personnel.

It seems strangely apt that the long British connection with the Middle East should have begun in that God-forsaken place, Aden, and be ending in Muscat, which is—if anything—hotter than Aden, and little more attractive. The spell of Arabia, which enthralled so many men and women from these islands, is now part of our history, as much as our history is a part of the Arabs’. 
IRAQ LEVIES

'Any officer seconded to this force has a unique chance of seeing active service in a most interesting country with fine native troops whose keenness and efficiency are of a very high order and amongst whom are to be found some of the best fighting material in the world.'

(From an article in the Royal Artillery Journal, 1926, by Lieutenant K. F. McK. Lewis, MC)

Iraq is now one of the principal Arab states. In 1914, however, it formed part of the Ottoman Empire, and comprised the three wilayats (provinces) of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, each with its own governor and owing allegiance to the Sultan in Constantinople. It was commonly known as Mesopotamia.

Iraq contains a variety of races and religions, but Islam is predominant; most of the population are Arabs and Kurds. The Arabs are more homogeneous than the Kurds and occupy the centre, west and south of the country. The Kurds, who have racial affinities with the Persians, live mainly in the north and east; together with the Yezidis and Assyrians they make up about 18 per cent of the population, and in both culture and religion they frequently differ from the Arabs.

It was the Viceroy and the Government of India who initiated the operations in Mesopotamia in November 1914. The strategic reasons were simple enough: to secure British influence in the Gulf; to prevent a joint Turkish–German penetration of south Persia, that would threaten India; and to safeguard the oilfields at Abadan, which had begun production two years previously. As limited aims these were reasonable, but, unfortunately, early and easy successes against the Turks led the British commanders on the spot to underestimate the
difficulties of terrain and climate, as well as the fighting qualities of the Turkish soldier. As a result the Mesopotamian campaign demanded ever more men and resources for strategic aims which, in the wider context of the war, were relatively unimportant.

Iraq is a large country, comprising the twin valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, high mountains to the north and east, and the desert to the west. Turkish rule had been largely confined to the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, where the bulk of the population lived. Little attempt was made to control the Bedouin tribes of the desert, nor the tribes who lived in the vast marshes of the Tigris below Baghdad, and not much more to control the Kurds in their mountains, provided their forays into the lowlands stayed within reasonable limits. Land communications were poor and the climate was harsh. In summer it was almost unendurably hot, in winter bitterly cold. When the rains came in early January the ground was turned into glutinous mud, impeding the progress of men, animals and wheels alike. Consequently the Turks seldom ventured far from their permanent garrisons, and the average inhabitant of Iraq therefore tended to be independent, clannish, fanatical and 'agin the government'. The violent extremes of climate may also help to account for the fact that the Iraqi is considered to be the hottest tempered and the most excitable of Arabs. He is not easily ruled.

The campaign in Mesopotamia was long and arduous. By 31 October 1918, when an armistice with the Turks became effective, a cavalry force under Major-General Cassels was within striking distance of Mosul, Iraq's most important northern city; but the Turks did not finally evacuate it until 17 November, almost four years to the day since troops of the 6th (Poona) Division had occupied Basra. In between there had been both disaster and triumph. Although the ordinary regimental officers and soldiers of the British and Indian armies fought as well in Mesopotamia as elsewhere, the conduct of the campaign has been severely criticized: 'The military command was needlessly ill-informed of Iraq conditions; its Intelligence and Political officers were almost all unacquainted with the territory ... The Turkish Army was underrated, the deficiencies of the Indian military machine only gradually revealed; but these considerations hardly explain a persistent lack of precision in the objectives of [Indian Expeditionary Force 'D']. To the defeat of the Turco-German armies the Expedition made from first to last, and in spite of all its successes, a contribution quite unequal to its own cost and grievous losses.'* That verdict, although it may seem harsh, is, on the evidence, fully justified.

This being so, it is surprising that the British, having made such a

* Iraq 1900-1950, p. 78. See bibliography.
The British contribution to the building of Iraq is one of the most remarkable instances of post-war reconstruction... It can without exaggeration be said that the modern state of Iraq owes its existence largely to the efforts of its British officials... By a lucky accident of circumstance Iraq was fortunate in getting the services of an unusually capable and conscientious band of British officials... The achievement is all the more striking as Iraq, with its large tribal population, its sectarian division and the scarcity of its means of communication in proportion to its size is a particularly difficult country to administer on the usual lines of bureaucratic routine... It was fortunate for Iraq that, in many important respects, Great Britain's interests marched with her own... The British desire to control the sources of oil in the wilayat of Mosul resulted not only in the incorporation, thanks entirely to British diplomacy, of that province into the Arab state, but also in effective Anglo-Iraqi cooperation towards the solution of the Kurdish problem.*

This handsome tribute was well earned, and not least by those British officers and senior NCOs who played such a prominent part in raising, training and commanding the Iraq Levies, and the Iraq Army which in due course replaced the Levies.

The Iraq Levies traced their origin to a body of Arab Scouts raised in 1915 by Major Eady at Nasiriyah on the lower Euphrates. The Turkish Army was withdrawing up-river and some kind of local force was needed to gather information. Eady's Arab Scouts, who provided their own horses, arms and ammunition and to whom discipline was unknown, filled this bill admirably, and, as the British pressed on towards Baghdad, various other local forces were raised to escort the Political Officers who had taken over the administration. It was not until 1919-20 that the various irregular forces were brought together and regularized as the Iraq Levies. Headquarters was established in Baghdad and the command was divided into three Areas—Hillah, Baghdad and Mosul. The strength of the force was about 5,000, its basic unit being the cavalry squadron or infantry company. Major C. A. Boyle was the first Inspecting Officer; he drew up proper regulations and introduced the .303 Lee Enfield rifle as the standard weapon. Whereas the Turks had conscripted Arabs into their army, in the Levies every man was required to be a volunteer. This was the first and most notable step in the force's transformation into a disciplined and regular formation. Recruitment at the beginning was mainly from Arabs, including a high proportion of the Marsh Arabs.

*The Arab Awakening, pp. 363-7.*
who had been scorned by the Turks. There were also Kurds and Kirkuklis (Turkomans). Several of the local officers had served in the Turkish Army, as had some of the soldiers, but the main problem was the lack of British officers of suitable calibre; 'hostilities only' officers were understandably anxious to return home for demobilization, while regular officers wanted to rejoin their regiments.

The entire country was seething with unrest. The Ottoman administration had collapsed and had yet to be replaced; meanwhile Britain and Turkey were at loggerheads over Mosul, which the Turks still claimed. It was intended that Iraq would eventually be an independent state, but that it would be under British tutelage until judged fit for independence. This was the Mandatory system established by the League of Nations in April 1920—but it meant little to the ordinary Arab, who felt he had merely exchanged Turkish rule for British. After four years of war the Arabs possessed large numbers of rifles and there was no shortage of ammunition. On 1 July 1920 a rebellion began; it soon spread all over Iraq and was quite beyond the capacity of the British garrison to contain. Nearly three divisions had to be deployed before peace was restored at a cost of nearly 2,000 officers and soldiers killed and wounded.

The rebellion subjected the newly-formed Levies to considerable strain, and it is much to the credit of their British officers and the soldiers themselves that for the most part the Levies remained loyal. They were besieged in Rowanduz and other places. They were spat at in the streets and their families were intimidated. At Mahmudiyeh on 30 June 1920 they lost five killed and eight wounded, and again on 9 July in defence of Khan Jadwal station they lost an officer and ten men killed, and another twelve were wounded. This was the pattern all over Iraq, and one can only wonder that so few deserted. It was not until the end of 1920 that the country returned to normal.

At a time when the British Government's principal concern was to bring home the troops and demobilize them as quickly as possible, in order to get the wheels of industry turning, the unrest and uncertainty in the Middle East was a desperately complicating factor. Decisions on future policy were urgent, and it was for that reason that Winston Churchill, the newly appointed Colonial Secretary, convened a conference in Cairo in March 1920. It was attended by a galaxy of talent which included Allenby, T. E. Lawrence and Sir Percy Cox, who had been Chief Political Officer in Mesopotamia. High on the agenda for discussion was the need to reduce the number of British and Indian troops and make cuts in military expenditure. The outcome of the long discussions of this thorny problem was probably the most pregnant decision taken at Cairo.