
The Northern Front

The Influence of the Northern Threat on the Conduct of the North African Campaign:

Australian and New Zealand Divisions' Roles in the Development of the Syrian Bastion Defence Line in Early 1942 and the Subsequent Defence of Egypt

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to examine the influence of military activities on the Eastern Front on decisions taken by Middle East Command in the period 1939 to 1942 concerning its Northern Front and to place the Mediterranean Theatre into a wider strategic context.

This threat from the north had been underappreciated as a major factor influencing the decisions made in the Middle East in 1941 and 1942. Australian and NZ historians and military writers have tended focus on operations conducted by national divisions, air squadrons and naval ships. Studies of higher level decisions have tended to focus on Blamey and Freyberg's relations with Middle East Command and the political decisions to return Dominion troops to the Pacific Theatre. Little attention has been given to the wider strategic factors and their influence on Middle East developments.

Many military writers have produced excellent histories of individual battles or units, but few have gone beyond the immediate tactical or operational aspects of their subjects. Generations of Australian officers preparing for promotion exams in military history studied Colonel EG Keogh's 'Middle East 1939-43' which placed the North African campaigns in their broader geo-political context and describes the build-up of logistic and transport facilities in the theatre in 1939 and 1940. Keogh describes and analyses the progress of the campaigns in North Africa, Syria, Greece and Crete, and their consequences. While acknowledging the strategic importance of the Northern Front in several places and briefly referring to the 'Syrian Box' defence plan against an attack from the north in discussion events of 1942, his focus remains resolutely on the Western Desert battles and he fails to cover the Australian role on the Northern Front and the redeployment of 9 Aust Div to Egypt and its participation in the early Alamein battles.

Focusing on the 9th Australian Division and the New Zealand Division which both played a significant role in the Alamein battles, the popular Australian narrative has been that 9 Aust Div suddenly appeared at Alamein and reinforced the South Africans on the northern flank and saved Egypt and the 8th Army from defeat by Rommel's forces. Some Australians are aware that the NZ Division also participated in the Alamein battles, but few appreciate the vital role that was played by both the New Zealanders and Indian forces in stopping the Axis advance into Egypt. Even fewer readers are aware of the planning and preparation by successive Commanders in Chief of Middle East Command which enabled this successful defence of Egypt to be mounted and the challenges which the Commanders-in-Chief faced managing the multitude of demands on their limited resources.

My purpose in writing this paper is to fill in some of the gaps in this story.

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT OF THE MIDDLE EAST

For a maritime power such as the British Empire, the Mediterranean Sea routes and the Suez Canal were key links between the United Kingdom, the Dominions and Middle East oil supplies. The defence of the Suez Canal and domination of the adjacent lands of Egypt and the Palestine Mandate were key planks of British policy in the 1930s. With the Royal Navy at Alexandria, RAF Squadrons and limited military forces in both Egypt and Palestine, the British felt that the canal was secure. Their immediate threats were from local nationalist rebellions and dealt with unrest in Egypt, Palestine and Iraq at various times, utilising both military options and diplomacy to this end. Also, an undertaking had been given to Romania and Greece in the late 1930s that Britain and France would guarantee their independence and provide military assistance if needed.

To meet changing strategic imperatives, Middle East Command was created in 1939 under GEN Sir Archibald Wavell. At the time of its creation, its area of responsibility was huge, covering Egypt and Palestine/Transjordan, south to East Africa and west to the Balkans. Wavell is reported to have initially identified the main threats facing Middle East Command as:

- Attack by sea and air on Egypt and British possessions and their lines of communications through the Mediterranean and Red Seas by Italian forces;
- Advance by German and/or Russian forces into the Balkans to seize Romania's oil and grain production; and
- Advance by Russia into Iraq to acquire the oilfields.

Wavell was under no illusions as to the immensity of his task and set about his task with great vigour and forethought. The task facing him was diverse and complex. In mid-1941, the British Government stationed a Minister of State for the Middle East in Cairo to handle the political dimensions of the decisions which had to be made to safeguard British interests in the region. Wavell was replaced by Sir Claude Auchinleck in August 1941. Middle East Command boundaries were amended from time to time by adding the Persian Gulf (originally under India Command) and the captured territory in Africa and the Levant.



Middle East Command 1940-41

The Oilfields

The Middle East oil resources are important to understanding many of the strategic decisions made in the Middle East by the British, Russian and Axis Governments. The main oil resources at this time were located as follows:

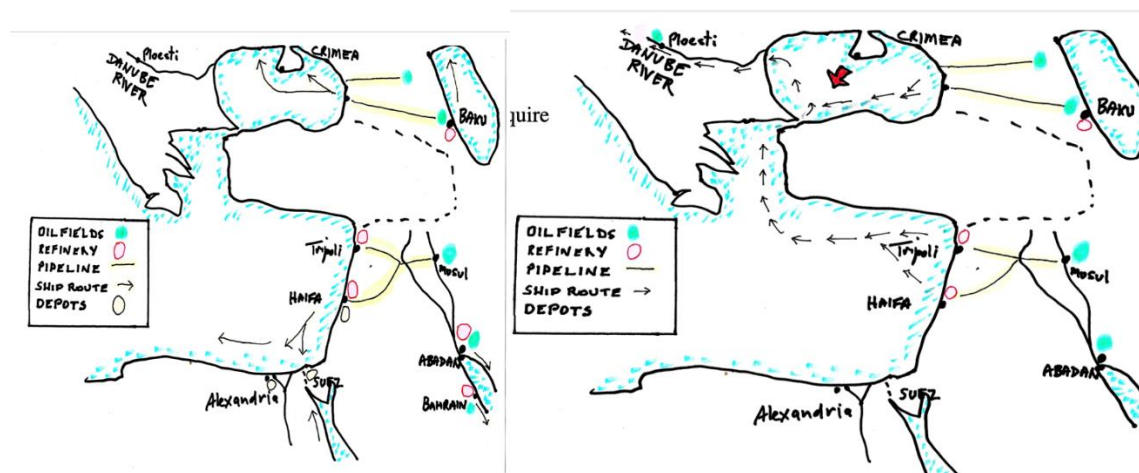
- Persian Gulf oilfields in southern Iraq and Bahrain, plus Abadan refinery.
- Upper Mesopotamia oilfields at Mosul and Kirkuk, linked by pipeline to Haifa and Tripoli refineries.
- Baku, the main Caucasus oilfield.
- North Caucasus oilfields at Maikop and Paitigorsk.

The British war effort depended significantly on the major refinery at Abadan on the Persian Gulf. This refinery was operated by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and commenced production in 1913. In 1914 at Churchill's initiative, the British Government bought a 51% share to ensure continuing access to this world-class strategic resource to fuel the Royal Navy. It later became a public company, British Petroleum (BP) in 1954. In 1941, British forces, mainly Indian, entered Persia to protect the refinery and to secure the overland route to USSR.

The Iraq Petroleum Company held the concessions to exploit the Iraq oilfields. Of major interest to this paper is the pipeline network which ran from Upper Mesopotamia at Kirkuk west to the Mediterranean Sea. Separate branches led to French facilities at Tripoli and British facilities at Haifa. The pipelines were completed in the mid-1930s and construction of a large oil refinery commenced at Haifa in 1938. The first units came on production in 1939 and reached full production in 1944. Despite sporadic Axis bombing these refineries continued to supply essential oil and petrol to Allied forces throughout the war.

The Caucasus oilfields in the southern USSR centred on Baku on the Caspian Sea coast. Oil was barged from here up the Volga River into the Russian heartland and sent by pipeline to the Black Sea coast. The Baku oilfields were a major supplier of world oil in the early 20th Century. Smaller oilfields at Maikop and Paitigorsk also were located closer to the Black Sea coast.

The British Government focused on securing the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamian oilfields while defence of the Baku and Northern Caucasus oilfields was a matter for the Soviets. The German Government also cast its eyes on the Middle Eastern oilfields. With its only major oil source in continental Europe being the Ploesti oilfields in Romania, supplemented by German synthetic oil-from-coal plants, the eastern oilfields became a German strategic objective, together with securing the sea route for such oil supplies across the Black Sea and up the Danube Valley to central Europe.

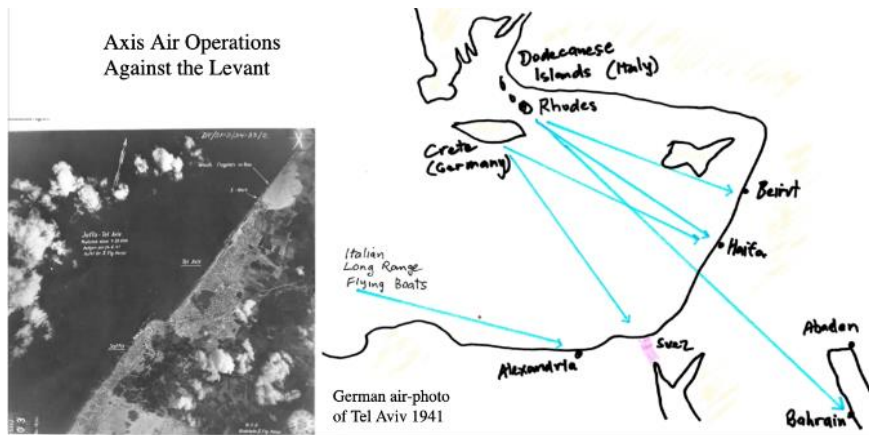


Allied oil movement

Planned Axis oil movements after capture of Middle East oilfields.
Note the potential Soviet interdiction of routes from Sevastopol

The Italian strategists had rightly identified the key role of oil. Denial of a supply of petroleum to the Royal Navy from the refinery at Haifa and for the French Fleet from the refinery at Tripoli as important strategic objectives in Italy's plans for Mediterranean naval dominance. In the late 1930s, they developed military airfields in the Dodecanese Islands off the southern coast of Turkey with the intent of removing these refineries by aerial bombing. Following the declaration of war against Britain and France in June 1940, the Italian Air Force commenced air attacks on the Haifa refinery, hitting six oil tanks July 1940, setting some alight. A subsequent attack on Tel Aviv and Jaffa resulted in over 100 casualties, mainly civilian but including refinery staff and one Australian soldier. These attacks saw the formation of LAA units manned by Jewish volunteers using captured Italian light AAA as British resources were stretched thin. A system of smoke screens and dummy fires was also implemented at Haifa to shield the refinery.

Attacks followed by Italian, German and some Vichy French aircraft into 1941. In October 1940, one daring, but ineffective, Italian air raid flew from Rhodes to bomb the Bahrain oil refinery on the Persian Gulf, flying on to Italian East Africa. In July 1941, RAF Intelligence noted the withdrawal of German air resources from these attacks and their redeployment to the Eastern Front.



Axis air operations against Allied forces and logistics in the Levant

The Allied cause – Supplies to Russia

With Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of Russia, launched in June 1941, the Allies resolved to supply Russia with military equipment for their war against the Axis forces. Quantities of tanks, trucks, aircraft, munitions, raw materials and food were shipped through Murmansk via the North Atlantic, Vladivostok via the north Pacific and through the Persian Corridor via the Indian Ocean.

British forces entered Persia in August 1941 to secure the overland route to Russia. The Allies then divided Persia into a northern zone of Russian influence and a southern zone of British influence. Supplies and vehicles were unloaded at Persian Gulf ports and moved overland by road and rail to ports on the Caspian Sea in USSR. From here, they were moved by water into Russia along the Volga River or by the rail system. The routes across Persia crossed difficult terrain. A rail route through Tehran and a parallel road route further west were utilised. Supplies were delivered to the Russian Zone in the north of the country from where they entered the Russian supply system, much by barge up the Volga corridor. A minor land route also existed from Pakistan.

For the German military, cutting this supply route became a longer term objective for its Eastern Front operations. For Middle East Command, this was a further draw on its limited manpower resources and was another potential threat to address on its Northern Front.

Threats to the Suez Canal

In the 1930s, the defence of the Suez Canal focused on the naval defence from Alexandria in the north and Red Sea ports of Port Sudan and Aden in the south. Air resources became increasingly important as the capabilities of air power increased over the 1930s. As the land approaches were over long distances of inhospitable desert terrain which permitted raids but not large scale invasion, the primary task of land forces appears to have been maintaining political stability and securing infrastructure facilities. Despite lukewarm official support, some visionary British officers in Egypt confronted these challenges and commenced development of doctrine and practice for modern desert warfare with the formation of the Western Desert Force in mid-1940.

In the 1930s, with the rise of the Axis Powers, Italian ambitions to establish an empire in Africa presented a new threat of land invasion from Libya. The possibility of an Italian Coup de Main from the sea was also considered to be a viable threat in the late 1930s. Italian expansion into Abyssinia saw a response by British forces to secure Italian Somaliland at the entrance to the Red Sea, to secure sea approaches from the south.

The Impact of Japan's Entry to the War

The entry of Japan into the war changed the equation with Japan's expansion of its Asian War with attacks on Pearl Harbour and Hong Kong in December 1941. With Japan's advance into South East Asia, Middle East Command faced losses of troops for the defence of British interests in the Far East. Both Australian and New Zealand Governments sought the immediate return of their divisions to defend perceived threats against their homelands.

The Axis powers are claimed to have adopted a high-level strategic objective of linking German and Japanese forces at the Persian Gulf. Plan Orient envisioned a Japanese naval thrust into the Indian Ocean and by land through India, and an Axis thrust through the Caucasus and Mesopotamia, meeting at the Persian Gulf to deny oil to the Allies and isolate the Far East from the European Theatre. However, with the loss of momentum of Axis forces on the Eastern Front and in Asia in 1942, the Axis Powers never had the resources nor the opportunity to implement Plan Orient. This threat to the Middle East from the east was unlikely, but following the rapid advances made by Japanese forces on the outbreak of the Pacific War, could not be dismissed completely in 1941, particularly if conducted in conjunction with attacks on other approaches. It ultimately came to nothing.

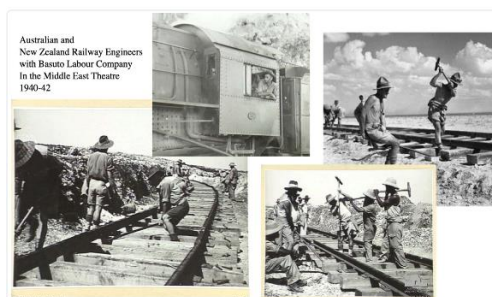
WAVELL'S PREPARATIONS FOR THEATRE DEFENCE

After his appointment as Commander in Chief, Middle East, Wavell put in place a program of development of the logistic base and transport links to enable the coming war to be fought successfully. His foresight is prescient and often unrecognised by writers who focus on the tactical aspects of campaigns.

Both Australia and New Zealand deployed Railway Engineering Groups which built and operated significant rail links which supported operations in the theatre. They also were used to construct airfields, wharves and field defences. Wavell also used other Command-level Engineer resources for similar works including establishing a system of civilian contractors who built many field defences and roads. Indeed, the withdrawal of the 8th Army to the Alamein position was successful in part due to the defence works prepared by Egyptian civilians. There are reports of Egyptian workers still wiring positions when the NZ Division arrived at its new locations.

Projects of note include:

- Extension of the Egyptian Rail line west from Alexandria, ultimately reaching to near Tobruk;
- Akaba port development and road/rail connection to the Hejaz Railway
- Duplicate the rail line between Cairo and Ismailia
- Expansion of the capacity of Palestine Railways
- Rail Extension from Haifa north to Tripoli
- Additional wharfage and expanded rail network at Suez and Port Said
- Rail Link to new port on the Red Sea
- Expansion of barge and rail capacity of the Nile River corridor to Sudan



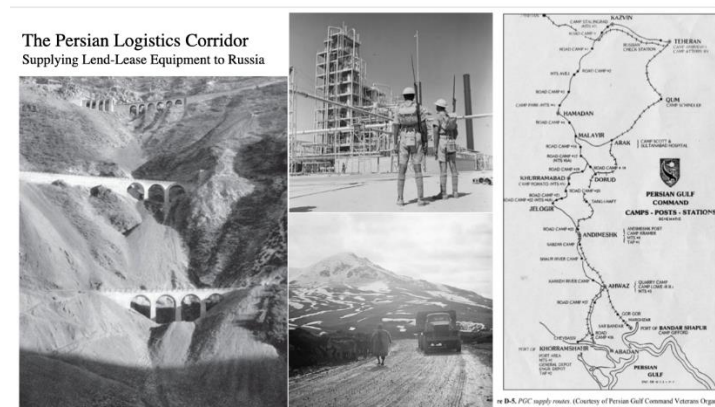
Wavell's logistic and transport buildup in the Middle East Theatre 1939-41

SYRIAN AND GREECE CAMPAIGNS 1941

Middle East Command provided forces in 1941 for the campaigns in Syria and Greece in 1941. As these campaigns are dealt with in detail in other sessions of this conference, I will confine my comments to placing them in the context of the broader strategic problems facing the Middle East Command at that time. The Syrian Campaign of 1941 was necessary to prevent Vichy Forces concurring in the use of Syrian territory for the lodgement of Axis forces which could threaten the Mesopotamian oilfields and the approaches through Palestine to the Haifa oil refinery and the Suez Canal. The Greek Campaign both met British diplomatic obligations in the region and sought to deny Axis forces air and sea approaches to the Levant to protect British interests in the Middle East.

OPERATION COUNTERNANCE - OCCUPATION OF PERSIA August 1941

In 1941, the Allies made the decision to utilise overland road and rail routes of the Persian Corridor to deliver Lend-Lease equipment to Russia. An early British operation was conducted in April-May 1941 to remove known pro-Nazi elements in the Persian Government. In August 1941, Allied forces entered Persia to secure these transport links. Russian forces entered Persia from the north while British forces conducted Operation Countenance entering Persia from the east, west and south. The main British objectives were to secure the Abadan refinery and its oilfields, and to secure the two main land routes from Persia into Mesopotamia. These were the Paiaik Pass route east of Baghdad was the route from Persia to central Iraq and the northern route through the mountains from Mosul to northern Persia. Management of the Persian Corridor was in the hands of US Army Transportation Corps. The British forces were provided by India Command and included the 10th Indian Division commanded by MAJGEN W Slim. The RAN ships HMAS Kanimbla and HMAS Yarra were involved in transporting these forces to Persian Gulf ports.



Allied intervention in Persia 1941

THE TURKISH QUESTION: THE BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITIES AND PLANS

In London, the threat of a German advance on the Levant through Turkey towards the Suez Canal and the Mesopotamian oilfields engaged serious attention at the highest level, involving Churchill and the CIGS. Despite diplomatic approaches to enter the war both from the German and British sides, Turkey chose armed neutrality. The Germans sought access to the Turkish railway network to support any advance into the Levant and Iraq, while the British saw Turkish resistance to a German transit of Turkey providing time for them to reinforce their northern defences, enacting contingency plans for a defence on the Turkish borders.

In late 1941, the War Office in London planned on the basis of no German thrust through Turkey before early 1942 and optimistically assuming that the threat in North Africa had been eliminated and no other emergencies arose, a force comprising four infantry divisions, two armoured divisions, two army tank brigades

and 24 RAF squadrons would be deployed to Anatolia to provide depth to the defence of the Suez Canal and the oilfields. Forces would be deployed along the Taurus Line, the mountain barrier across southern Turkey.

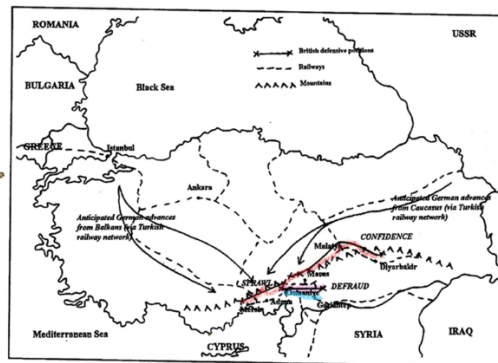
However, following the failure in 1941 to defeat the Axis forces in North Africa, this was revised and Plan Wonderful was adopted involving the commitment of Sprawl Force comprising 26 RAF squadrons, a substantial proportion of the 9th Army's AA resources, 3 armoured divisions and 3 infantry divisions. This would be deployed along the Confidence Line where the Turkish railway system came out of the Taurus Mountains.

Following the renewal of Rommel's offensive in early 1942, plans were further revised downwards with a less-ambitious defence line, the Defraud Line, located south of the Confidence Line. This line was to be held by Bluff Force comprising two infantry brigade groups and two armoured car regiments, tasked with delay and demolition. RAF squadrons would be deployed in northern Syria and cover the withdrawal of Bluff Force. Construction of a short railway line between Arada and Diyarbakir to link the Turkish and Syrian railway systems to supply the forward deployed elements was proposed. Wiser heads cancelled this aspect of the plan as it was considered that it would be of greater utility to the German forces after the British forward elements withdrew.

SOE was also actively planning a campaign of railway tunnel demolition should the German forces gain access to Turkey. A wider program of industrial disruption and demolition was also planned. The Turkish Government was not impressed with SOE's plans and did not sanction these British proposals. Auchinleck withdrew his support for SOE activities in Turkey due to the risk of alienating the neutral Turks who had threatened to withdraw future liaison with the Middle East Command over the issue.

Slide 13

Contingency plans for British intervention across the Turkish border in the event of an Axis advance through Turkey



Map from Tamkin (2008)

Figure 1 British plans for the defence of the Northern Front, 1942
Based on maps and documents in WO 201/1094, 1099 and 1236, The National Archives.

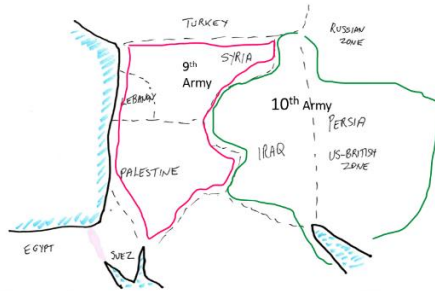
SPAN OF COMMAND ISSUES – CREATION OF THE 9th AND 10th ARMIES

At the beginning of the war, Middle East Command was spread thinly over extended areas of responsibility. With the emergence of a danger on the Northern Front, command structures were put in place to meet this threat. Separate field armies were created for the Levant and for Iran/Iraq, replacing headquarters which were more appropriate to peacetime needs and garrison security duties.

With the emergence of credible threats on the Northern front, two new field armies were created to meet these threats. In late 1941, PERFORCE which commanded British forces in Persia and Iran was stood up as the 10th Army under LTGEN Sir Edward Quinan and HQ British Troops (Palestine and Transjordan) was stood up as the 9th Army under GEN Sir Henry Maitland Wilson. These changes provided appropriate command and control resources on the Northern Front. Subsequently in late 1942, a separate Persia and Iraq Command was created and split off from Middle East Command.

Slide 9

Creation of the 9th Army covering Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, and the 10th Army covering the US-British Zone of Persia 1941



Creation of the 9th Army and 10th Army to strengthen the Northern Front

MIDDLE EAST COMMAND'S NORTHERN DEFENCE PLAN 1942

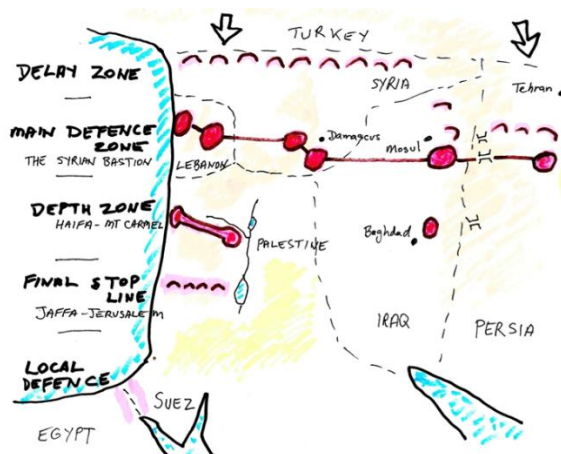
Defence of the Levant-Caspian Front

In London, the planners and diplomats explored the prospect of cooperation with the Russians on a joint force of British and Soviet military elements for the defence of the Caucasus Front. Some writers refer to this as the Levant-Caspian Front, although the status of the term is disputed. Despite Churchill's personal urging, the Russians were not agreeable to the proposal. Later when the Persian Corridor for Lend-Lease supplies was opened in 1942, the Americans approached the Russians about coordinating air defences in the region, but also were rebuffed. The defence of the Northern Front remained a British and Commonwealth undertaking.

Auchinleck's outline plan comprised the following:

- A deep delay zone on the Turkish and Russian borders with Syria, Iraq and Persia;
- A defence line comprising series of prepared defended locations well south of the borders, each holding one (sometimes two) divisions, fortified and prepared for extended defence against attack, denying key north-south routes and subsequently disrupting Axis Lines of Communications;
- A Palestine Fortress defending Haifa and the base area, with a final defence line Jaffa-Jerusalem; and
- Local defences in the Suez Canal Zone.

The Concept of Operations was to fight a delaying battle from the borders to the Fortresses which were prepared for an extended static defence. While these could be bypassed by advancing Axis forces, they would subsequently serve as a base for operations attacking enemy lines of communication, denying resupply to the Axis advance. This defence would provide time for reinforcement of Egypt and defeat of a diminished attacking force north of the Suez Canal. The battle would be fought by land forces with extensive air support from the RAF.



Auchinleck's 1942 Concept of Operations for the Northern Front

The invasion routes south from southern Russia face significant terrain obstacles which limit them to a number of routes. Several high mountain ranges channel any advance, particularly regarding their resupply. The Caucasus Mountains themselves blocked the German advance to the Black Sea coast and channelled their southward advance between the eastern end of the Caucasus Range and the Caspian Sea at Baku. If German forces reached Baku, they then faced the mountainous region of eastern Turkey where access to the Turkish rail system would be necessary for transit to the Syrian border. This rail system was vulnerable to air attack and sabotage, particularly where it emerges from the Taurus Mountains adjacent to the Syrian border.

Once through the northern mountain barrier and onto the plains of Syria and Iraq, the attackers faced an advance of up to several hundred kilometres where defenders would demolish infrastructure and fight a delaying defence, before closing up on a line of major well prepared defence positions.

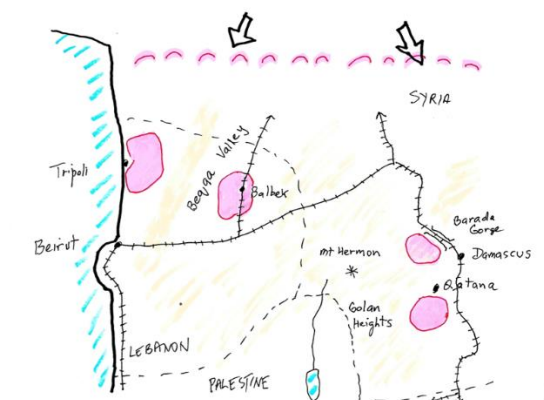
This defence line was anchored on Tripoli in the west and stretched across Syria to the Mosul area of Iraq. The line extended east into Persia with a defended locality in mountainous country favourable for defence on the major north-south road route through Persia, with the eastern flank ending in hostile desert terrain. Each fortress comprised networks of positions, with concrete pillboxes, command posts, gun positions, medical facilities including surgical units, and concrete water cisterns, linked by minefields, wire and anti-tank ditches.

This concept may have been chosen following the success of the Tobruk Fortress in holding out against Axis attack and recognising the limited number of available divisions for such an extended defence. Although capable of being bypassed by fighting formations, their existence provided a base for operations against the lines of communications of the advancing enemy and had to be destroyed or contained.

Auchinleck's Syrian Bastion Plan of February 1942

The so-called Syrian Bastion comprised five such Fortresses astride major north-south land routes, as follows:

- The Tripoli Fortress which denied the coastal route from the Turkish border through Tripoli, Beirut and Acre. It was developed by the 9th Army Engineers and 9 Aust Div.
- The Bekaa Valley Fortress (also known as the Djedeide Fortress) This position controlled the Becca valley which is a major north-south route through northern Lebanon from the Aleppo region to Beirut. This was developed initially by 9 Aust Div and subsequently by the NZ Division.
- Barada Gorge Fortress which controlled the road and rail routes from coastal Lebanon to Damascus.
- Qatana fortress near Damascus overlooking the main route from Central Syria to the Jordan Valley in Palestine.
- Little Zam River, Iraq which controlled both viable routes from Northern Iran to Mesopotamia and defended the Mosul and Kirkuk oilfields and the vital oil pipeline to Haifa and Tripoli.



Auchinleck's 1942 layout of the Syrian Bastion

Defence of Iraq and Persia – Securing the Eastern Flank

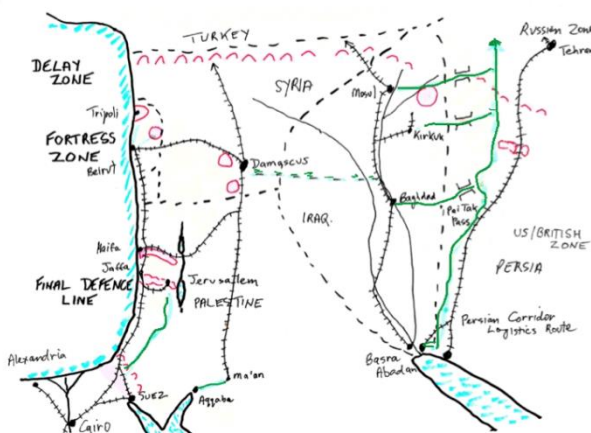
Defence of the eastern flank of the Northern Front rested on two defended areas. If Axis forces defeated the Russians and penetrating beyond Baku, and sought to enter Persia, two main land routes would be available to them to reach Mesopotamia and the oilfields.

The first is the Little Zam Fortress, near Mosul, Iraq which controlled both major routes from northern Iran to Mesopotamia. This position potentially denied an advance from Northern Iraq through the Zagros Mountains and was sustained by the Baghdad to Mosul railway.

The second position is located near Qum where the Persian Corridor road and rail routes leaves the Trans-Iranian Mountains and enter the northern plains. The rugged country here is well favoured for defence. Like the Alamein position, it could not easily be bypassed because of desert wastes to its east. It also was well placed to control the road routes into northern Iraq and the Mosul oilfields. Allied forces, mainly American, operated the road corridor and the Trans-Iranian Railway delivering Lend-Lease equipment to the Russian Zone. The defence of northern Persia was in the hands of Russian forces, although coordination was limited.

Forces around Baghdad provided depth in the defence of Iraq and denied the major land route from Central Persia to the Mesopotamian plain through the Pai Tak Pass.

The 10th Army also was responsible for the local security of the Abadan refinery and the southern oilfields.



Plan for the defence of the eastern portion of the Northern Front including development of the route to transfer forces east if required

Defence of Palestine – Provision of Depth to the Northern Defence

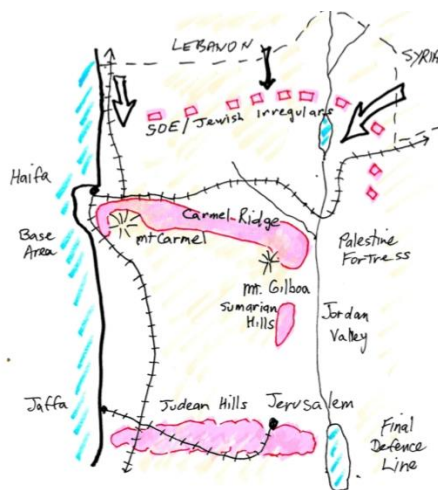
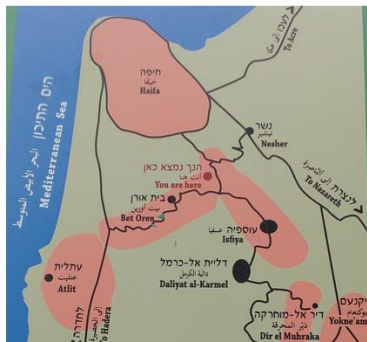
Before 1941, the British Army in Palestine focused on internal security tasks following the Arab uprising of the late 1930s and increasing tensions with Jewish settler organisations. In 1941, changing circumstances forced a pivot to providing depth to the defence of the Northern Front. Its tasks were to secure the Haifa refinery and the base areas in southern Palestine from attack while delaying any Axis advance from the north to provide time for strengthening the close defences of the Suez Canal.

The main defence positions, the Palestine Fortress, were anchored in the west on Mt Carmel on the high ground behind Haifa and in the east on Mt Gilboa which overlooked the Jezreel Valley and the Jordan Valley, denying these routes to the enemy and covering the Haifa port and base area. Positions were also developed on the Judean Mountains to defend Jerusalem from any advance down the Jordan valley. To deny minor axes of advance to the enemy, the SOE armed and trained members of cooperating Jewish settler organisations to carry out demolitions and harassment of any Axis forces bypassing the main defence positions. Jewish political leaders were divided about the degree to which they should assist the British. Some settler organisations planned a final stand on Mt Carmel, a second Masada, in the face of impending Nazi persecution.

The final British defence line was planned further south on the line Jaffa-Jerusalem which was a relatively narrow position with secure flanks, the Mediterranean Sea on its west and the Dead Sea and desert on its east, which blocked all viable routes for an advance to the Suez Canal from the north.

Palestine defence arrangements to provide depth to the Syrian Bastion

Below: Tourist map at Mt Carmel



Planned Northern Front depth positions in Palestine 1942

Retention of 9 Aust Div and 1 NZ Div in Lebanon

The rising threat from Japan in late 1941 saw pressures to redeploy forces to the Far East. Both the Australian and New Zealand Prime Ministers sought to have their troops withdrawn from the Middle East and returned for the defence of their homelands. Churchill fought to retain some experienced divisions in the Middle East. He engineered a deal where American divisions would be provided to Australia and New Zealand allowing the battle hardened 9 Aust Div and the NZ Division to be retained in the Middle East. In early 1942, both of these divisions were in northern Lebanon preparing the defence of the Northern Front.

In early 1942, the Australian Corps HQ and 6th and 7th Australian Divisions concentrated at Suez for return to Australia by sea. 9 Aust Div and the NZ Division remained in place in Lebanon and the American Divisions arranged by Churchill proceeded to Australia and New Zealand.

An examination of the Unit Diaries of 9 Aust Div units shows that they were very busy during their time in Lebanon both with the development of the northern defence positions and in further training for operations. The impression given by some writers that they were merely engaged in garrison duties is quite misleading. Notably, 7 Div Engineers and later 9 Div Engineers managed extensive civilian contractors building reinforced concrete structures, roads, anti-tank ditches and wiring projects for the construction of the positions. Preparation of demolitions in the delay zone was also undertaken and the border zones were patrolled. Theatre-level engineering resources were also extensively employed in constructing these defences.

Defence of Cyprus

Middle East Command had identified Cyprus as a potential assembly area for any Axis air and sea assault on the Levant. Accordingly, British forces maintained a small presence on Cyprus, including for a time elements of 7 Aust Div. To supplement these, Cypriot units were formed in 1939, but enlistment did not pick up until after the Axis invasion of Greece. Whitehall determined that SOE should establish irregular forces on the island. A 'Cyprus Commando' of 60 local personnel under a British Officer was established and trained to disrupt any occupying Axis forces and to stoke Greek/Turk ethnic tensions to make the occupier's task more difficult. SOE also planned 'stay behind' groups but was unable to find officers to lead these groups, largely due to hostility of the Regular Army to the SOE plans. Later, a deception plan was put into action to convince Axis intelligence that a British Division was stationed on the island.

Deception Plans

As mentioned in the preceding discussion of the defence of Cyprus, Middle East Command engaged in a serious effort to deceive Axis intelligence about its ORBAT in an attempt to conceal its weaknesses. The intelligence staff of Middle East Command undertook Operation Cascade, a deception operation which sought to create a false and inflated ORBAT. While the actual Allied force in the Middle East was 5 armoured and 10 infantry divisions, the plan was to create 8 armoured and 21 infantry divisions, including a fictional 12th Army and the division on Cyprus. Vehicles were driven around Cairo with false crests and tac signs. False radio traffic was generated, and Intelligence ran a double agent network named 'Cheese'. Postwar analysis indicated that the operation was successful in misleading Axis intelligence estimates of British strength.

THE CRISIS OF MID-1942

The Situation Facing Middle East Command in Mid-1942

In Spring 1942, British Intelligence was expecting an advance into Egypt by Axis forces and there was widespread pessimism as to the 8th Army's ability to hold Rommel's forces back. The threat from the north was still present but was not developing as an immediate problem. The development of the Syrian Bastion Fortresses was proceeding, as was the development of associated anti-tank ditches and minefields.

Axis Forces on the Eastern Front – Plan Blau 1942

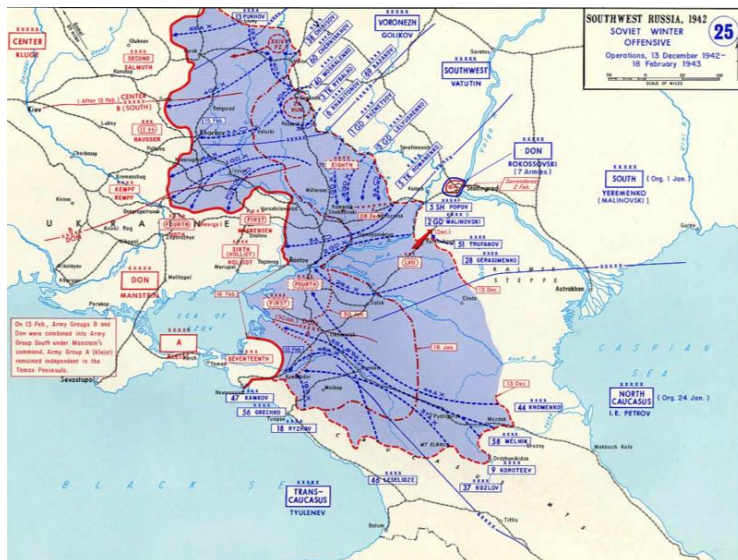
In London, the planners watched the successes of the Axis forces on the Eastern Front in the 1941 campaigns and monitored the buildup of Axis forces for a renewed campaign in 1942. They were aware of the German intentions towards the Middle East and Caspian oilfields and their overtures to the Turkish Government to join the Axis powers, or at least to permit passage of Turkish territory for Wehrmacht forces. They looked with concern at the prospect of the renewed German offensive in the summer of 1942.

Hitler's Directive No.41 of 5 April 1942 laid out the German operations for 1942. It sought to finally destroy the Soviet fighting strength and take Russia's resources for Germany. It directed destruction of the Soviet forces forward of the Don River, capture of the Caucasus oilfields and securing passage over the Caucasus mountains. Crimea and the Soviet naval base of Sevastopol were to be occupied. This later move would enable German shipping to use the Black Sea route to carry oil from the captured Caucasus oilfields to Central Europe via the Danube River. The plans included an operation against the city of Stalingrad, primarily to secure the flanks of the main offensive in the south and to close the Volga River to Russian shipping.

The Plan Blau offensive commenced in late June 1942 and met immediate success, advancing into Crimea and the Don Region. The Soviets however conducted staged withdrawals and did not suffer the collapses seen in the 1941 campaigns. After a failed counterattack, the Soviets suffered heavy losses. Hitler Directive No.45 of 23 July 1942 required simultaneous attacks to Stalingrad and to the Caucasus. The new Plan Brunswick replaced the carefully staged operations with simultaneous new objectives. Accordingly, Army Group South was split into Army Group A responsible for the Caucasus operation and capture of Black Sea oil ports, while Army Group B was responsible for operations on the Don and Volga sectors, including Stalingrad. Army Group B was then to cut the Volga River, denying a major logistics route into Russia for Caspian oil and Lend-Lease equipment delivered via the Persian Corridor.

German operations however did not proceed as planned. Army Group B was delayed on the Don by renewed Soviet offensives, ultimately leading to the surrender of the 6th Army at Stalingrad. Army Group A advanced towards the Caucasus but were halted by effective Soviet defences along the line of the Caucasus Mountains, reaching as far south as Grozny but neither reaching the Baku oilfields nor the Black Sea coast oil ports.

The slow progress of the Axis 1942 Eastern Front operations would have been received with relief by the planners in London who presumably were kept informed of the progress of Army Group A through ULTRA intercepts. The risk of an immediate Axis advance southwards into the Middle East had receded.



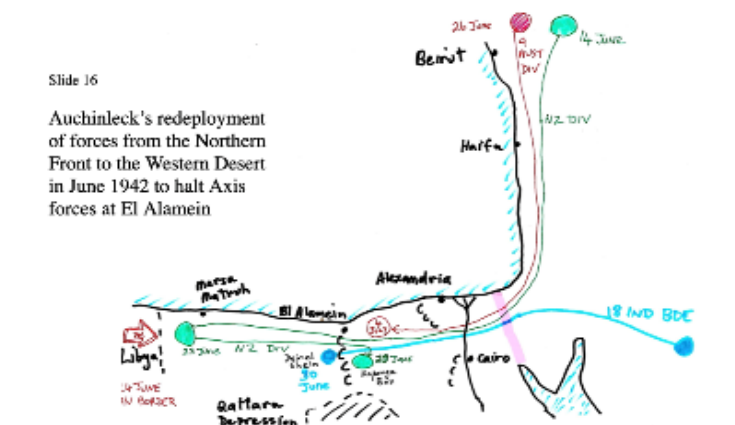
The maximum Axis penetration east into the Soviet Union 1941-42
Axis operations failed to reach the Caspian and Middle East oilfields.

The Situation in North Africa 1942

The main threats to Egypt and the Suez Canal in 1942 were as follows:

- From the Western Desert, from Libya into the north coastal plain (most likely);
- From the north through the Levant from the Russian Caucasus and/or through Turkey, with or without the agreement of the Turkish Government (less likely);
- From air and sea to Lebanon, through Cyprus (less likely); and
- From the east by Japanese sea and land forces (considered most unlikely).

While in early 1942, Commander-in-Chief Auchinleck prepared the defence of the Northern Front where a major Axis advance was feared, 8th Army Commander Ritchie initially held Rommel's forces west of the Libyan border but subsequently suffered reverses as Rommel commenced his eastward advance towards Egypt. Auchinleck had not been idle in preparations for such an eventuality and had commenced preparation of a major defence position at Alamein which by mid-1942 was wired and stocked to some degree.



By May 1942, Auchinleck had lost confidence in Ritchie and in late June took direct control of the 8th Army. Auchinleck assessed that the threat to the Northern Front was less urgent than the threat in the Western Desert and ordered a redistribution of forces within the theatre. The NZ Division was moved from Lebanon to the Egyptian border in May-June and 18th Indian Brigade was ordered from Iraq to Egypt. The NZ Division went on to play a key role in the withdrawal from the border to the Alamein position and its subsequent defence. 18 Ind Bde was rushed to Alamein in late June and its heroic, but unsuccessful, defence of the Deir el Shein

position delayed Rommel's closing up to the Alamein position, permitting its consolidation and subsequent defence. On taking command from Ritchie, Auchinleck ordered 9 Aust Div from Tripoli to Egypt, where they arrived as Rommel was closing on Alamein, initially occupying a counter-penetration position behind the Alamein Box. Auchinleck also had assembled formidable artillery resources for the defence. While other speakers will address the detail of the Alamein battles, the redeployment of formations from the Northern Front was critical to the outcome and was due to the thorough preparations overseen by Wavell and Auchinleck as Theatre Commanders-in-Chief.

Auchinleck subsequently lost Churchill's confidence and was relieved of his command, taking the position of C-in-C India where he served with distinction. His reputation was damaged by Churchill's actions and subsequent writings on the matter. Consequently, Auchinleck's skilled handling of the 1942 crisis in North Africa has not been recognised as widely as it might have been.

Subsequent Military Operations

By late 1942, the situation was looking different. Montgomery had taken over the 8th Army and seen off Rommel's final attempt to crack the Alamein position at Alam Halfa. In late 1942, Montgomery dislodged Rommel and commenced pushing him out of North Africa in conjunction with Allied forces from the Torch landings. The Italian Campaign followed and the threat to North Africa was over.

In late 1942, the Russians pushed the Axis forces back on the Eastern front after the Axis 1942 campaigns faltered. The capitulation of the 6th Army at Stalingrad was the end of Axis push in southern Russia. In 1943, Axis forces were pushed east and the threat to the Middle East from the Caucasuses was over.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of the Northern Threat to the C-i-C's decision making

Many writers on the Mediterranean and North African campaigns have failed to appreciate the role of the so-called Northern Front in the decisions taken by both Wavell and Auchinleck during 1941 and 1942.

Tamkin (2008) sums up the issue as follows:

Close reference to the private papers and recollections of the key protagonists, and the archival record of each of the bureaucracies involved, in London and Cairo, demonstrates that a greater awareness of the centrality of the Northern Front to British thinking is essential for a comprehensive understanding of British strategy in the Middle East during 1941 and 1942.

Problems of balancing forces and threats

Both Commanders in Chief faced impossible dilemmas concerning the allocation of resources and troops to tasks. The success of the Wehrmacht in both Greece and Russia in 1941 presented a real threat to the Suez Canal and other British interests in the Middle East. Continuing the war after a loss of the Persian and Iraqi oilfields and German possession of the Caspian Sea oilfields would have presented both Britain and Russia with existential challenges having been cut off from their major sources of petroleum.

Importance of theatre-level preparations and infrastructure before the battle.

While Rommel said that the outcome of his battle was determined by the Quartermasters, the ultimate victory of the British forces was ultimately enabled by the port facilities, roads, railways, airfields, depots and fuel storages put in place in 1940 and 1941 at Wavell's direction and built by his engineers and civilian contractors. These actions contributed significantly to the later tactical successes of the 8th Army under Montgomery. The importance of theatre-level engineer resources cannot be underestimated.

Planning and deception

Both Wavell and Auchinleck successfully utilised deception plans to hide their weakness in forces from the enemy. This was confirmed in post-war interviews with German intelligence officers.

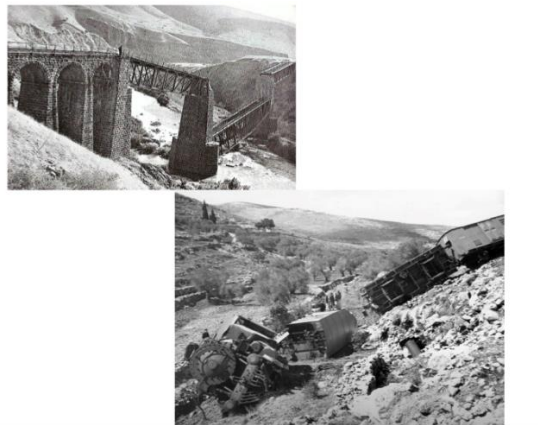
Conflict between Army and SOE

While SOE contributed capability delivered by irregular forces, conflicts developed between the Army and SOE over the political consequences of their plans in Cyprus, Turkey and Palestine. In Palestine, the consequences of training a SOE sabotage force amongst Jewish settlers backfired on the British Army post-war.

Slide 19

Unforeseen Consequences

SOE trained and equipped a number of Jewish settler groups in Palestine who subsequently utilised their training and munitions against the British in the postwar independence struggle



Reassessment of Sir Claude Auchinleck

Sir Claude Auchinleck's reputation and judgement was called into question by Churchill who removed him from his post. This view has been carried forward by many writers on the events in the Middle East in 1941 and 1942. The work which he undertook as C-i-C Middle East under difficult circumstances and with limited resources has been underestimated. His concern for the northern front after the failure of Crusader led to decisions which did not please Churchill's political agenda, but which were soundly based. His Concept of Operations for the Northern Front defence was innovative in its use of limited forces and intelligently drawn from his understanding of earlier Western Desert operations. History has not dealt kindly with him, unfairly in my view. His sound work at operational level paved the way for Montgomery's subsequent tactical successes.

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