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The Middle East during World War One

By Professor David R Woodward

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The Ottoman Empire called for a military jihad against France, Russia and Great Britain in November 1914. How did this affect subsequent Allied campaigns in the Middle East? David Woodward charts the demise of an empire and a dramatic shift in the region's balance of power.

The opening moves

Few events in world history have had a more profound impact than that of World War One (1914-8). Although the German attempt to dominate Europe was thwarted in the end, the equilibrium of the region was also destroyed by the fierce fighting between its different elements.

At the beginning of November 1914, the Ottoman Empire ...abandoned its ambivalent neutrality.

The Middle East was no less affected by the conflict. After four centuries of continuous rule, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, creating a vacuum that contributed to tensions between local inhabitants and external powers or interests. The 'war to end all war' had not achieved its aim.

At the beginning of November 1914, the Ottoman Empire, the world's greatest independent Islamic power, abandoned its ambivalent neutrality towards the warring parties, and became a belligerent in the conflict, with the sultan declaring a military jihad (holy war) against France, Russia and Great Britain.

The Ottoman Empire had recently been humiliated by setbacks in Libya and the Balkans. Participation in what had begun as a European war might seem to outside observers, therefore, to have been suicidal, but key elements in the government, impressed by German industrial and military power and motivated by dreams of imperial glory, greeted the expanding war as an opportunity to regain lost territories and incorporate new lands and nationalities into the empire.

In a pre-emptive strike, London immediately landed an Anglo-Indian force at Basra.

The Ottoman/Turkish army (some 600,000 troops divided into 38 divisions) was of an unknown quality. But with Germany as an ally, the Ottoman Empire represented a serious threat to the British Empire, so in a pre-emptive strike, London immediately landed an Anglo-Indian force at Basra, near the estuary of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. This was done to protect the Anglo-Persian oil pipeline, which was vital to the British navy, and to show the Union Jack in this strategically important area in the Persian Gulf.

Within weeks the Central Powers struck back with a surprise attack against Britain's 'jugular vein', the Suez Canal. This attempt, in early February 1915, to breach British defences on the Suez Canal and raise an Islamic revolt in Egypt, failed however, and resulted in heavy losses for the attackers.

Defeat at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia

Unwilling to commit all of its emerging military resources in 1915 to the Western Front, where trench warfare prevailed, the British leadership embraced a naval offensive against Istanbul to force the Ottoman Empire out of the war. When the Royal Navy in February and March was unable to fight its way through the Dardanelles to place the Ottoman capital under its big guns, the military authorities hastily assembled an expeditionary force to land on the Gallipoli peninsula.

The limited, defensive stance at Basra had evolved into a distant and risky advance.

The muddled thinking that led to this campaign continued during the savage fighting, and the predominantly British force suffered heavy losses (205,000 British soldiers, and 47,000 French - with the sick included in the figures) and had to be withdrawn. The Ottoman/Turkish Fifth Army, well armed and fighting from strong defensive positions, had proved more than a match for the Allies.



British troops advance at Gallipoli, 1915 ©

As the Gallipoli campaign wound down, an Anglo-Indian force was cut off and surrounded at Kut-el-Amara, a town about 100 miles south of Baghdad. The limited, defensive stance at Basra had evolved into a distant and risky advance up the Tigris toward Baghdad, and this had been the result.

A strong British presence in Mesopotamia had no connection to the defeat of Britain's primary strategic rival, Germany.

Political objectives, as had been the case in the Dardanelles/Gallipoli venture, had trumped military considerations - the Anglo-Indian force did not have the necessary reserves or logistical support to retain Baghdad, even if they had been able to capture it. Moreover, a strong British presence in Mesopotamia had no connection to the defeat of Britain's primary strategic rival, Germany. But the Indian government were concerned that a holy war might be ignited in Persia and Afghanistan, thus threatening India, and they wanted British prestige upheld in the Islamic world to avert such a war.

A more difficult theatre in which to fight would be hard to imagine. Flies and mosquitoes attacked the troops, many of whom became sick. Soldiers froze during the winter nights, and were overcome by heat during the summer. Dust turned to mud when the banks of the Tigris overflowed during the rainy season.

Britain regains the initiative 1916-17

London reacted to the retreat from Gallipoli and the eventual surrender of the Anglo-Indian force at Kut-el-Amara in April 1916 by redoubling its efforts against the Central Powers in the Middle East. As a wealthy industrial power, Britain had the resources that the Ottoman Empire (even with German assistance) could not hope to match. In Mesopotamia a new commander, General Sir Stanley Frederick Maude, assembled a large force of some 150,000 men, equipped with modern weapons of war. Basra was transformed into a modern port, a railway and metal road was constructed, and river transportation on the Tigris was dramatically expanded.



Arab prisoners of war in a camp in Mesopotamia, 1916 ©

The Sinai Desert, with its sand storms and searing temperatures, had to be crossed.

In Egypt, too, British forces gained a new commander, General Sir Archibald Murray, and additional resources. By stages the mission of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) evolved from a defence of Egypt to an invasion of Palestine.

First, the Sinai Desert, with its sand storms and searing temperatures, had to be crossed, a test of endurance as well as of engineering for the troops involved. Access to water dictated what could be achieved. Tens of thousands of camels and drivers were required to supply the thirsty soldiers, while a water pipe and a railway were extended to the borders of Palestine.

War on several fronts

In early 1917, Britain seemed on the verge of knocking Turkey out of the war, and was enjoying success on several fronts. On 11 March, Maude's forces captured Baghdad. Two weeks later, Murray's advance force, having cleared Ottoman/Turkish forces out of the Sinai, launched a lightning strike with infantry and cavalry against Gaza, the gateway to Palestine, which was also occupied by the Ottoman Empire. The attempt to take Gaza, however, failed, when Murray's commanders broke off battle with victory within their grasp. Encouraged by Murray's misleading report of this battle, London ordered another assault, but this second Battle of Gaza (17 -19 April), a frontal assault with inadequate artillery support against strong defences, was a disaster.



The Indian infantry made a key contribution to Allied campaigns ©

Britain now faced the frightening prospect of being the mainstay of the war.

The war now took a turn for the worse, although more because of a downturn in Allied fortunes in Europe than because of Murray's failure to capture Gaza. Germany's resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare took a terrible toll on Allied shipping, and this threatened Britain's ability to supply and maintain the so-called 'side shows' taking place outside Europe.

The March Revolution led to a paralysis of the Russian military effort against both Germany and Turkey, and on the Western Front, the failure of the Spring French offensive prompted a mutiny of the French Army. Britain now faced the frightening prospect of being the mainstay of the war against the Central Powers, both in Europe and in the Middle East.

Defeat of the Ottoman Empire

Murray's failure to capture Gaza led to his replacement by General Sir Edmund Allenby, a soldier of great vigour and imagination, who was able to create a personal bond with his troops. His government hoped to achieve a concrete victory to boost morale at home, and gave him the flexibility to advance on Jerusalem.

In October, when the weather was more favourable, Allenby made good use of his infantry and a large mounted force, which included many troopers from Australia and New Zealand, to break through the Gaza-Beersheba Front. And after a difficult advance across the Judean hills, he walked through the Jaffa Gate on 11 December 1917 as the 34th conqueror of Jerusalem, the first Christian conqueror since the Crusades.



General Allenby entering Jerusalem on 11 December, 1917 ©

He walked through the Jaffa Gate...as the first Christian conqueror since the Crusades.

Many of Allenby's soldiers were deeply conscious that they were fighting on sacred soil, and some viewed themselves as modern-day crusaders, but their leader was acutely aware that many of his soldiers and workers were Islamic, and he vigorously played down any notion of a crusade.

Convinced that neither side had the means to achieve victory in France in 1918, Prime Minister David Lloyd George sought to make Allenby's theatre the focus of his country's military effort. Germany's massive offensives closer to home during the first half of 1918, however, forced the government to recall most of Allenby's British soldiers to France. Allenby, who retained his cavalry, received replacements for his infantry in Egypt from many sources, predominately from India but also from many other diverse nations ranging from Burma to the West Indies.

Since 19 September Allenby's forces had advanced hundreds of miles and netted over 75,000 prisoners.

Allenby returned to the offensive at the Battle of Megiddo, on 19 September 1918. With a decided advantage in manpower, artillery, air power and morale, and assisted by Arab allies on his flank, he quickly destroyed the Ottoman/Turkish armies facing him.

Once the enemy front was broken, the EEF's cavalry dominated the campaign. Damascus fell on 1 October, Aleppo, the last city to fall in the campaign, on 26 October. Five days later an armistice with the Ottoman Empire came into effect. Since 19 September Allenby's forces had advanced hundreds of miles and netted over 75,000 prisoners.

The aftermath

The war ended with the British occupying the territory that was to become Iraq, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. With the Ottoman Empire destroyed, Russia paralysed by foreign intervention and civil war, and French influence limited somewhat by their minor military role in the Middle East, Britain's military success made her the dominant power in the region. The resulting settlement, which fostered an instability that continues to be a source of conflict today, generated much controversy at the time and has continued to do so ever since.

They believed that the western powers, especially the British, had acted with arrogance.

Employing bags of gold, the diplomacy of Lawrence of Arabia, and promises of Arab independence, the British had encouraged an Arab uprising in 1916 against the Turks. Although the Hashemite Arabs were rewarded with considerable territory, they and other Arab nationalists believed that they had been 'robbed' when the British did not fully deliver on their pledges of independence. They believed that the western powers, especially the British, had acted with arrogance, drawing borders and creating nations with little or no regard for the wishes of the local inhabitants.

The fate of Palestine, occupied by the British, especially provoked Arab frustration and anger. (In 1917 the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, had supported a Jewish home in Palestine.)

But in important respects the Arab view of the peace settlement (which is supported by many western historians) is a caricature of what actually happened. In a revisionist work, Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh have made a convincing argument that many forces, both local and foreign, were at work at the time the settlement was agreed. In their words, 'even at the weakest point in their modern history, during the First World War and its immediate wake, Middle Eastern actors were not hapless victims of predatory imperial powers, but active participants in the restructuring of their region.'

And if the French and British had granted 'self-determination'...it is possible that the result would have been the balkanisation of the area.

They argue, for example, that Iraq and Trans-Jordan were not simply British inventions, but owed their existence to a compromise between Hashemite imperial greed and well-intended British efforts to meet local needs and allay the fears and suspicions of their allies.

It is perhaps only proper to note that if Germany had won the war, the Ottoman Empire would have been expanded, subjecting many Arabs and other nationalities to its rule. And if the French and British had granted 'self-determination' to the inhabitants of this region it is possible that the result would have been the balkanisation of the area, with fragile and often antagonistic fiefdoms and kingdoms prevailing. It seems likely that, no matter how this war in the Middle East had been resolved, the region was destined to suffer instability and conflict in the years ahead.

Find out more

Books

The Neglected War: Mesopotamia 1914-1918 by AJ Barker (Faber & Faber, 1967)

The Last Crusade: The Palestine Campaign in the First World War by Anthony Bruce (John Murray, 2002)

Allenby and British Strategy in the Middle East 1917-1919 by Mathew Hughes (Frank Cass Publishers, 1999)

Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1789-1923 by Efraim Karsh & Inari Karsh (Harvard University Press, 1999)

Paris 1919 by Margaret MacMillan (Random House, 2001)

Gallipoli 1915 by Tim Travers (Tempus Publishing Inc, 2001)

Field Marshal Sir William Robertson: Chief of the Imperial General Staff by David R Woodward (Praeger, 1998)

About the author

David R Woodward is Professor of History at Marshall University, West Virginia. He has written numerous books on the diplomatic and military history of World War One, including *David Lloyd George and the Generals* (Associated University Presses, 1983; Frank Cass, 2003) and *Trial by Friendship* (University of Kentucky Press, 1993). He is currently working on a book, *Tommies and 'Johnny Turk': A Personal History of British Operations in Egypt and Palestine, 1914-1918*.



General Allenby with Iraq's King Feisal I, c 1920 ©

