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AN ANALYSIS OF THE BRITISH MIDDLE EAST FORCE'S CONDUCT OF OPERATIONS DURING THE OPENING YEARS OF WWII, DISCUSSING IMPLICIT CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CONDUCT OF MULTI-FRONT WARFARE EMPLOYING A COALITION FORCE. THROUGH REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE CAMPAIGNS CONDUCTED BY THE MIDDLE EAST FORCE VARIOUS PROBLEMS IN MANAGING A MULTI-NATIONAL COALITION FORCE ARE EXPLORED, CENTERING PRIMARILY ON THE ACTIONS AND CONCERNS OF THE THREE MIDDLE EAST THEATER COMMANDERS IN RELATION TO THE COMMONWEALTH TROOPS AVAILABLE TO THEM DURING THE CONFLICT. THE DECISIONS THE THEATER COMMANDERS TOOK IN FORGING THESE DISPARATE FORCES INTO A COHESIVE AND EFFECTIVE WHOLE WILL BE DISCUSSED, PARTICULARLY WITH REFERENCE TOWARDS THOSE PROBLEMS WHICH THEY WERE ULTIMATELY UNABLE TO EFFECTIVELY DEAL WITH AND WHICH MAY HAVE ULTIMATELY PROLONGED THE WAR.				
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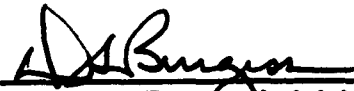
The British Middle East Force, 1939-1942:
Multi-Front Warfare with Coalition Forces

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.


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Abstract of
THE BRITISH MIDDLE EAST FORCE, 1939-1942:
Multi-Front Warfare with Coalition Forces

An analysis of the British Middle East Force's conduct of operations during the opening years of World War II, discussing implicit concerns associated with the conduct of multi-front warfare employing a coalition force. Through review and analysis of the campaigns conducted by the Middle East Force various problems in managing a multi-national coalition force are explored, centering primarily on the actions and concerns of the three Middle East theater commanders in relation to the Commonwealth troops available to them during the conflict. The decisions the theater commanders took in forging these disparate forces into a cohesive and effective whole will be discussed, particularly with reference towards those problems which they were ultimately unable to effectively deal with and which may have ultimately prolonged the war.

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Introduction

An analysis of the British Middle East Force's conduct of operations during the opening years of World War II provides a valuable case study for many of the implicit concerns associated with coalition warfare in a multi-front environment. The British theater commanders, Generals Wavell, Auchinleck and Alexander, often failed to consider the military-political ramifications inherent in their various multi-national forces, an error which caused uncoordinated and inadequate responses to battlefield conditions. British allocation of their available in-theater assets was poor as a result of their fundamental lack of understanding of the inherent strengths and weaknesses of their available troops. Although the British apparently mastered the basic principles in employing their coalition force by the Second Battle of El Alamein, their earlier confusion and difficulties prolonged the war in the Middle East, and possibly lengthened the entire course of the war.

The Middle East was of vital strategic importance to Britain: from the area, or through the Suez Canal, came almost half of Britain's petroleum supply: 30% of Britain's total 1940 oil imports came from Persia (7,485,000 Bbls), 10% from Iraq and Bahrain (2,780,000 Bbls), and 5% from Burma and India (1,030,000 Bbls).¹ Without access to Middle Eastern oil the British war effort would grind slowly to a halt. When the Middle East became an active theater of operations, with Italy's entry into the war on 11 June 1940, there was a direct threat to this oil supply, one to which Britain had to respond.

After Germany conquered France, most British troops were kept in England to defend against expected invasion, and Middle East Force was forced to rely on coalition forces, primarily troops provided by the Commonwealth Dominion states, to defend its area of responsibility. The Dominions, however, did not regard the Mid-East with the same level of importance or urgency as Britain. Britain's failure to account for this and other allied political concerns, coupled with British inflexibility and superior attitude, resulted in an inability to merge the coalition forces into a cohesive and effective combined army.

Historical Overview

Established in June 1939, Middle East Command's area of responsibility encompassed a huge area, 1700 miles by 2000 miles in size. The theater contained eastern North Africa (Egypt and Italian Libya), the Eastern Mediterranean (including Malta and Cyprus, and later extended to include Greece as well), the Levant (Palestine, Transjordan, and the French colonies of Syria and Lebanon), Persia, Iraq, Arabia, Aden, and the whole of West Africa (British controlled Sudan, Uganda and Kenya, French Djibouti, and the Italian colonial possessions which constituted *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI) - Abyssinia, Eritrea and Somaliland).² Directing the multi-front allied war effort proved to be a major operational challenge, two British theater commanders (Wavell, Auchinleck) were relieved before overwhelming allied material superiority, not the operational skill of the third theater commander, Alexander, was able to finally defeat the Axis forces in the Middle East.

At the outbreak of the Second World War the Middle East was a backwater theater; Germany had no direct access, and only limited influence, in the area. Britain's pre-war intentions were to use the theater as a staging area for her Dominion allies, keeping only a small number of forces there for local defense. Primarily, the Mid-East was to be used to acclimate and train Dominion troops to "European" standards preparatory to committing them to the main theater of combat (presumably somewhere in western Europe).³ The British felt such a period of training and upgrade was essential before the Dominion troops would be militarily effective. In comparison, the British unrealistically felt that their own overseas forces, which had suffered from almost two decades of benign neglect, were fully capable of modern mobile warfare.

When the war broke out, each of the Commonwealth Dominions followed Britain in declaring war on Germany. In Australia and New Zealand the declaration was more or less without debate,⁴ but in South Africa there was widespread opposition to joining the allied side, particularly on the part of the Afrikaans speaking portion of the population, the more

extreme of whom even advocated backing the Axis.⁵ While Britain's Indian and African colonial forces were simply an extension of British military strength and could basically be employed as Britain desired, the Dominion allies were self-governing independent states and, though Anglocentric subjects of the Empire, retained the right of full control over their own military forces.⁶ Further, the Dominions had decided they would only deploy volunteers for "overseas" duty, limiting the number of troops available and restricting the manner in which they could be employed.

Initially, there were 90,000 Commonwealth troops (mostly British) deployed in the Middle East – about half in Egypt with the rest scattered about in various garrisons from Iraq to Kenya.⁷ As the war progressed and reinforcements arrived in the theater, the majority of forces were no longer British, but came from either Dominion states of the British Commonwealth (South Africa, Australia and New Zealand) or various British colonies (chiefly India, but also various East and West African colonies). Additionally, a number of exile "free" state allies (French, Greeks, Poles and Czechs), whose home countries had been conquered by the Axis, contributed forces. Unable to provide forces of her own to defend the area, Britain had to rely on extensive coalition support.

Though coalition member states may have contributed the bulk of forces to any given operation, overall theater command was held by exclusively by Britain. Though the Allies generally had a common goal in fighting the Axis, each member of Britain's coalition often had separate concerns: Australia and New Zealand were more interested in Japanese adventurism in the Far East,⁸ and South Africa was wracked with bitter internal disputes.⁹ Occasionally, coalition members had very different objectives than did Britain, such as De Gaulle's Free French movement. These conflicting goals created significant complications in the allocation and control of forces within the theater.

Egypt, the central hub of Middle East Force's logistical and operational base, was an independent and ostensibly neutral state. Britain was permitted to base troops in Egypt by right of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty, and counted on the support of the Egyptian army in

event of any invasion of Egypt. The Egyptian "Wafdist" movement, however, had generated considerable anti-British sentiment and thoroughly infiltrated the Egyptian army. A similar situation existed in Iraq, where high placed anti-British nationalists had formed the secret "Golden Square" organization which had established close links with Germany.¹⁰ Additionally, there was considerable anti-colonial sentiment in Britain's colonies of Transjordan and Palestine, and internecine hostility between the Arab and Jewish populations in the latter. Throughout the Mid-East, Britain faced not only external threats from Axis forces, but the threat of internal rebellion.

The Mid-East was largely undeveloped, the local base and industrial structure was inadequate to support the modern equipment and forces needed to defend it. Difficult terrain and environmental conditions further complicated operations. On his arrival in theater, General Archibald Wavell, the first British theater commander, realized that extensive expansion of local facilities was needed, he recommended immediate base growth to accommodate 14 divisions. The Imperial General Staff (IGS) approved expansion of facilities for nine divisions, and soon after to 14 divisions (ten months later the base structure was again raised, to 23 divisions).¹¹ Wavell's early foresight minimized logistic limitations, but they were still a significant constraint, particularly during 1940.

With Italy's declaration of war in June, 1940 active hostilities commenced in the Middle East. Italy had over a half million men in the theater: 350,000 in the *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI),¹² and 225,000 troops in Libya.¹³ The British had a justifiable concern that Italian forces in Libya could attack along the Western Desert coast road, while those in Ethiopia could march up through Sudan, potentially capturing Egypt and severing Britain's oil supply -- the Middle East had to be defended.

The Western Desert:

With Italy's declaration of war in June, 1940 active hostilities commenced in the Middle East. There were two primary threats: Italian armies in *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI) and Libya. The British briefly seized the initiative in Libya through a series of mobile raids, and thought they did achieve noteworthy successes against the superior Italian forces massing for an offensive into Egypt, the paucity of front line assets was unable to sustain the effort for long.¹⁴ Commitments in France, and later in defense of the home islands, meant only very limited British forces were available for the Middle East, and increasingly the bulk of forces in the theater would come from the Dominion and other coalition allies.

It is illustrative of the problems in managing their coalition that few of the Indian troops, and none the Australians, which were in Egypt during these opening months were deployed to the front, forces which would have given the British near parity in front-line strength against the Italians. British commanders were almost blatant in their lack of confidence in Dominion troops' reliability, and in early 1940 were extremely reluctant to commit them to action, using the excuse that Dominion troops lacked adequate training, heavy weapons and artillery, when in fact British units were equally unprepared.

Australia's commitment to the Mid-East was quite large, at its height involving three divisions, with plans for two more.¹⁵ The Australian government, however, demanded that their troops be employed as a unified national force, under an Australian commander.¹⁶ This conflicted with the British concept of how the war should be run, and became the source of constant debate, eventually resulting in all Australian forces being withdrawn from active operations during a critical period.

As predicted by British intelligence, Italy invaded Egypt on 9 September, 1940. British forces, badly outnumbered, conducted a pre-arranged withdrawal from the border to their railhead base at Matruh after vigorously harassing the Italian columns. Throughout the period fairly substantial Australian and New Zealand forces remained inactive in the Nile delta region, which Wavell would doubtless have committed had the Italians pressed on with

their offensive, but his main intent was to employ them en-masse in a counter-offensive (Operation "Compass").¹⁷ Churchill wanted an immediate counter-attack, and expressed doubts as to Wavell's actions: "While not in full agreement with General Wavell's use of the resources at his disposal, I thought it best to leave him in command."¹⁸ In any event, Wavell's husbanding of forces for "Compass" was overtaken by events, when on 28 October 1940, Italy invaded Greece.

"Compass", began on 9 December, 1940. Originally conceived as a "five day raid" to disrupt Italian preparations for further advance into Egypt, "Compass" succeeded beyond all expectations. By 5 January 1941 the ports of Bardia and Tobruk were in British hands; "Compass" then cut off the retreating Italians and destroyed their Libyan army at Beda Fomm. In only two months, with a force never comprising much more than two divisions (half of them ill-equipped Australians), the Italians were driven out of Egypt and Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), losing ten divisions and 130,000 prisoners.¹⁹ Wavell wanted to continue the offensive and expel the Axis from North Africa altogether, but the troops needed to do so had been sent to Greece. While it cannot be stated with certainty, the chance of driving all the way to Tripoli in January were good: there were only five understrength and demoralized Italian divisions left in North Africa, and the vanguard of Rommel's German reinforcements would not arrive in Tripoli for another month.²⁰ The reallocation of troops from "Compass" to Greece meant that Britain missed what was probably their best chance for an early and decisive victory in the Middle East.

By February 1941, advance elements of LTG Rommel's *Deutsches Afrika Korps* (DAK) had arrived in Tripolitania.²¹ In late March, against orders, Rommel launched a daring attack into Cyrenaica. Allied forces in the Western Desert were badly understrength and the DAK quickly overran most of Cyrenaica. Stunned by the rapid German advance, Wavell redirected some of the forces destined for Greece to shore up the crumbling Western Desert front.²² By April, realizing that the situation in Cyrenaica was hopeless, Wavell withdrew to Egypt, leaving a strong garrison of primarily Australian troops in Tobruk.

Churchill sent a barrage of cables to Wavell, pressing him to use the limited forces available in the Western Desert to relieve the besieged Australians in Tobruk.²³ Wavell countered with a demand for reinforcements, and a large convoy with enough tanks double British armor strength in the Middle East was rushed from England. Three days after the arrival of the convoy, without waiting for the new tanks to arrive at the front, Wavell launched a weak two brigade attack with British troops, called Operation "Brevity," which failed to achieve any of its objectives. The condition of the Australian troops besieged in Tobruk continued to deteriorate, causing the Australian government to become concerned and demand their withdrawal.²⁴

Churchill continued to apply considerable pressure on Wavell for another offensive. Against his better judgment Wavell began preparations for Operation "Battleaxe." Though using larger forces and the new tanks from England, "Battleaxe" was basically the same plan as "Brevity".²⁵ A British armored division and an Indian infantry division were the primary troops used for the offensive; no Dominion troops were involved. Though the main coastal escarpment passes were taken, "Battleaxe" as a whole was a failure for it failed to relieve Tobruk, and decimated two Allied divisions in the process.

Wavell was relieved by General Claude Auchinleck the day after "Battleaxe" was called off. Almost immediately, Churchill began pushing for another offensive, but with some effort Auchinleck convinced Churchill that "Unless situation changes very greatly in our favour no land offensive is possible in September. . . . we should be able to undertake limited offensive to relieve Tobruk in November..."²⁶ Churchill grudgingly agreed; the five month delay gave Auchinleck time to assemble forces for his offensive, Operation "Crusader."

With the end of fighting on the other Middle Eastern fronts at the end of 1941, the British could at last mass their theater assets. For "Crusader" they assembled a force of six full divisions, six independent brigades, and nearly 500 tanks.²⁷ But difficulties with the coalition allies complicated preparations for "Crusader" -- understrength South African units resisted incorporating non-European replacements sent by Pretoria to bring them up to

strength.²⁸ The New Zealand government refused to participate in "Crusader" unless Allied air superiority was assured (eventually, the British had to doctor their intelligence reports to convince New Zealand Prime Minister Fraser of Allied air strength in the theater).²⁹

Because of the extremely high casualties the Australian forces had suffered, and because the British had routinely violated the charter under which Australian troops had been sent to the Middle East (that they would fight as a unified national force under their own commanders), the Australian government was very sensitive to any issue involving their forces in theater. As it became increasingly obvious that Rommel was preparing to launch a major assault on Tobruk, General Thomas Blamey, the Australian forces commander, began demanding the withdrawal of their troops from Tobruk and pressed for greater Australian involvement in the Allied planning process. Auchinleck and Churchill refused to withdraw the Tobruk garrison, but agreed to make Blamey the Deputy Commander, Middle East Force (a powerless position, called by Blamey "...rather a fifth wheel to the coach...").³⁰ It took direct and repeated pressure from Australian Prime Minister Menzies before the British were to agree to the demands.³¹ The resentment generated over this issue meant that the bulk of Australian forces in the Mid-East would not be used during "Crusader".

"Crusader" began on 18 November 1941. The battle quickly dissolved into a confusing series of small unit engagements south of Tobruk in which German forces were badly attrited and forced to fall back to Gazala.³² Auchinleck had difficulty in coordinating the pursuit and the badly mauled DAK escaped relatively intact. By the end of December Rommel was back at El Agheila, where he had started from in March.³³ To Auchinleck, the Germans seemed badly beaten, and he expected no Axis offensive action for some time.

Unwisely, Auchinleck decided to use this opportunity to refit his army, and though Allied troops in the Western Desert actually outnumbered the depleted DAK, they were scattered in small non-supporting groups. The Japanese attack in early December 1941 necessitated diversion of considerable amounts of equipment, and most Australian forces, from Egypt to the Far East. On 21 January 1942, a mere month after retreating from

Cyrenaica, Rommel launched a surprise attack which inflicted severe losses on the Allied force, he was able to regain his earlier position around Gazala in early February, before losses and exhaustion forced him to a halt.³⁴

For four months the lines held at Gazala as both sides entrenched and prepared to renew the offensive; again, sizeable Allied forces (mostly Dominion and exile troops) were idle in Egypt during this period. When it became obvious in mid-May that the British rebuilding effort was outstripping his, Rommel attacked. In the ensuing Battle of Gazala the Germans unhinged the extreme southern end of the Allied line at Bir Hacheim (held by a Free French brigade) and threatened to encircle the Allied army.³⁵ The Allies hurriedly fell back into Egypt, leaving a South African division to hold Tobruk.

One of the chief factors in the German breakthrough at Gazala was Axis air supremacy, achieved by Rommel "borrowing" the aircraft which were bombarding Malta in preparation for Operation *Herkules*, a planned Italo-German airborne-amphibious invasion of the island. Malta had been a constant thorn in the Axis logistic link with North Africa, responsible for sinking an average 15% of all Axis materials loaded for North Africa; after Rommel "borrowed" the aircraft for Gazala this figure rose to an alarming 35%.³⁶ Malta's interdiction of Axis supply lines had a profound influence on the fighting in the Western Desert, an effect which Rommel failed to appreciate.³⁷ The "borrowed" aircraft were never returned, *Herkules* was called off, and Malta was not subjected to intense aerial suppression again.³⁸ A British possession, Malta received minimal reinforcement, the bulk of the island's defenses being provided by Maltese militia.

Tobruk fell to a quick German attack on 21 June. In South Africa the reaction to the surrender of the South African division garrisoning Tobruk brought on a parliamentary crisis, Prime Minister Jan Smuts suffered considerable public ridicule and the Afrikaans speaking population began to agitate strongly for South Africa to withdraw from active participation in the war.³⁹ The situation became so severe that the already understrength South African

forces in the Middle East were not reinforced to their full complement, and after Alamein were withdrawn back to South Africa as a political move by Smuts to regain his position.⁴⁰

After taking Tobruk the DAK continued to drive into Egypt. Rommel reached the Allied positions at El Alamein on 30 June, and for the next two weeks, during the First Alamein, he attempted to penetrate the Allied lines without success.⁴¹ Auchinleck counter-attacked but lacked sufficient strength to break through; again there were substantial coalition troops sitting idle in Palestine and Iraq. Auchinleck's actions at First Alamein were badly misunderstood: though Rommel had advanced almost to the Nile, he had been stopped, and stopped by his own mobile warfare methods. Churchill, however, only saw the loss of territory and replaced Auchinleck with General Harold Alexander.⁴²

Alexander rebuffed Churchill's demands for an immediate offensive and continued with Auchinleck's plans, continuing to reinforce his army -- now with mostly British troops. By September, seeing that the Allied build-up far surpassed his own, Rommel launched a last futile attempt to reach the Nile. It was, as one Italian historian put it, "a battle without hope," and Axis offensive strength was decisively broken.⁴³

After massing an overwhelming superiority Alexander commenced the Second Battle of El Alamein on 23 October. Operation "Supercharger" was a methodical set-piece attack, reminiscent of a World War I "big push" offensive. The majority of troops involved were British, particularly those conducting the breakthrough.⁴⁴ Though unimaginative, the plan worked and Rommel was forced to retreat, salvaging the mobile core of the DAK in the face of an extremely cautious pursuit. Had all available coalition forces been employed in the pursuit, it may well have been able to complete the annihilation of the DAK.

Greece:

The Italian invasion of Greece began a major period of crisis for Middle East Force. Allied forces were already committed on three separate fronts: in the Western Desert, the Sudan and Kenya. As Greece was the only area in Europe where Axis forces were currently

engaged in ground combat, and because it was felt necessary to demonstrate to Turkey (who was perceived as vacillating on the issue of cooperating with the Axis) that the Allies would honor their treaty obligations and come to the aid of minor states who were attacked, the British decided it was essential to send major forces to aid the Greeks.

Greece, however, refused to allow British troops onto Greek territory, fearful that British intervention would provoke German invasion: Hitler would not tolerate Allied aircraft based in Greece, able to strike at the Ploesti oil fields in Rumania, from which virtually all of Germany's non-synthetic petroleum came.⁴⁵ The Greeks were not short of troops, but they desperately needed military equipment and supplies: ammunition, machine guns, anti-tank guns, artillery of all sorts and, most especially, aircraft.⁴⁶ So, instead of ground forces, Britain dispatched material aid and a few RAF fighter squadrons to Greece, but continued to press to be allowed to send troops.

Much of the equipment sent to the Greeks was taken from stores originally destined for use in equipping the Dominion troops still training in Egypt, the very troops Wavell was planning to Greece as part of Operation "Lustre".⁴⁷ However, after only a few days the Italian offensive stalled without taking appreciable territory, and a subsequent Greek counter-attack in mid-November not only retook the Italian gains, but drove some 30 miles into Italian owned Albania -- the Germans decided to send limited reinforcements to Albania to help shore up the collapsing Italian front (Operation *Alpenveilchen*).⁴⁸

There was no longer any real need for Allied forces in Greece, but the British persisted in their attempts to convince the Greek government to allow them to send troops. The Greeks had continued to resist, but following the death of General Metaxas (the virtual dictator of Greece) in January 1941, the new Greek President-Minister, Keryzis, acquiesced to British demands.⁴⁹ After assuring the Greeks for months that they could send five divisions, Wavell had to scramble to find forces for "Lustre". The only forces available were partially equipped Dominion troops training in Egypt or units already involved in "Compass." Even with the expedient of stripping "Compass" there were problems: Indian troops could

not go to Greece because of the cold winter climate, and the Polish brigade required special arrangements to be made with the Polish exile government as Poland was not at war with Italy.⁵⁰ The British had made promises they were simply unable to fulfill.

British intelligence was aware of German plans for Operation *Marita*, the invasion of Greece as early as November, 1940.⁵¹ Though they knew some 35 German divisions were massed in Bulgaria and Rumania, Churchill and Wavell still decided to proceed with Operation "Lustre."⁵² Through much of January and February of 1941, there was considerable debate about the advisability of sending of Allied troops to Greece. The Australian and New Zealand commanders, whose troops formed the majority of the planned expeditionary force, felt "Lustre" was too small to achieve anything of significance and that given the probability of German invasion felt their forces were at considerable risk of being overrun. Churchill and Wavell had to apply considerable pressure before the Dominion governments would agree to commit their troops to the operation.⁵³

"Lustre" forces began arriving in Greece in early March, but lack of prior coordination with the Greeks before their arrival, and confusion over their precise operational role, delayed their arrival at the front for over a month.⁵⁴ Allied forces had still not fully deployed to their planned positions, and were badly understrength due to diversions to deal with Rommel's offensive in the Western Desert, when Germany invaded on 6 April, 1941.⁵⁵ Resistance to *Marita* collapsed after only a few days, and Allied forces were soon in retreat, scrambling to evacuate Greece. After abandoning the bulk of their heavy equipment and roughly 8000 men in Greece, the "Lustre" expeditionary force was withdrawn to Crete.⁵⁶

Though Wavell felt Crete was strategically important he sent no reinforcements to bolster the island's defenses. When British intelligence obtained the plans for the German airborne invasion through "Ultra" intercepts, they did not release the information to the island's commander, New Zealand General Freyberg. Doubtful of the sanitized information he did receive, Freyberg deployed troops to cover the entire island, rather than the actual drop sites.⁵⁷ German paratroops began landing on 20 May, and though they suffered

appalling casualties, took the island from the disorganized Allied defenders in just ten days. The Dominion forces were again evacuated, after losing nearly half their strength.

The Horn of Africa:

Lacking any significant forces in the East African area, Britain elected to remain on the defensive until scheduled South African and colonial African reinforcements arrived in theater. Wavell viewed the area as posing no serious threat, for the bulk of Italian forces in the AOI were untrained and ill-equipped native levies, completely cut off from resupply. After Italian forces invaded and conquered virtually undefended British Somaliland in August 1940 (Italy's only successful conquest during World War II), Churchill sent Wavell a lengthy telegram indicating that Egypt should remain the priority area of concern.⁵⁸ Wavell disagreed, stating that diversion of reinforcements to Sudan and Kenya was the proper course of action.⁵⁹ One of Wavell's reasons was that South African troops were volunteers for service in "defense of the Union (of South Africa)", and moving the South Africans north to Egypt was politically unacceptable for South African Prime Minister Smuts, whose parliamentary majority was a narrow thirteen votes; Smuts did not want to present his opposition with a reason to reopen debate on South African war participation.⁶⁰ Even so, there were problems in getting Pretoria to agree to allowing South African troops to be committed to offensive operations, and only after a personal visit to Kenya by Smuts in November, 1940 were the South Africans authorized to participate.⁶¹

A strange series of intra-theater transfers ensued to prepare an offensive against the AOI: 4th Indian division, involved in Operation "Compass," was sent to Sudan, while 6th Australian division in Egypt was sent to replace the Indians.⁶² After overcoming significant logistical problems, Allied forces in Kenya (two divisions of African colonial troops and a division of South Africans) were able to push through weak Italian forces and take the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, while two divisions of Indian troops were able to drive down from Sudan and defeat the bulk of the AOI army in a set-piece battle at Keren in late

March, 1941. It was, Wavell said, "...an improvisation after the British fashion of war."⁶³ The offensive campaign against the AOI was reaching its culmination at the same time that "Compass" was underway and "Lustre" forces were being rushed to Greece. Though most Italian resistance in the AOI essentially ceased after Keren, mopping up operations continued into November -- the lengthy campaign was a confused sideshow, tying up troops and supplies better employed elsewhere.

Iraq and the Levant:

On 3 April 1941, encouraged by the British defeats in Greece and Cyrenaica, a group of nationalist Iraqi military officers, known as the "Golden Square", staged a coup.⁶⁴ The rebels had not coordinated their plans with the Axis, and Germany, already involved in the Balkans and preparing for the invasion of Russia, could spare little aid. The Germans pressured Vichy France to allow passage for some munitions and a few aircraft squadrons through the Levant.⁶⁵ Wavell diverted Indian reinforcements for Egypt to Basra and stripped the Palestinian garrison mount a quick attack against the coup. Surprised by the determined and rapid British reaction, and without the German aid they had expected, the rebellion fell apart at the end of May.⁶⁶ Iraq fell into a nebulous area of dual Middle East Command and India Command responsibility. A large garrison was kept in Iraq after the revolt, to more readily respond to potential unrest in India or the Far East, and for the rest of the war Iraq was a heavy drain on Indian reinforcements, though there was no longer any real threat.

Prior to the Iraqi coup the main British concern with the Levant (French Lebanon and Syria) had been whether, and how capably, the Vichy garrison would resist German invasion.⁶⁷ General De Gaulle, however, had for some time had been stridently demanding British support for a Free French invasion of the Levant. Britain had been hesitant to provide such aid, fearing it might push Vichy closer to the Axis. But when German aircraft began staging out of Syria into Iraq, Britain embraced De Gaulle's request and planning began in earnest for Operation "Exporter", an Allied invasion of the Levant.

Early Gaullist hopes for Free French forces to stage a quick bloodless coup were dashed when a defecting Vichy officer indicated the Levant would strongly resist any incursion, particularly a Gaullist one.⁶⁸ Wavell resisted using Free French forces to invade the Levant, fearing that they "...would be ineffective and likely to aggravate the situation. . . the original action must be British, to be followed by the Free French if successful."⁶⁹ Churchill, however, demanded rapid action, and given the lack of other available assets roughly a third of the forces involved in "Exporter" ended up being Free French. Still, last minute disputes with De Gaulle, centering on relations with the Arab population, almost prevented "Exporter" from occurring at all.⁷⁰ "Exporter" began on 8 June 1941, and ran into unexpectedly tough resistance, taking almost two months to force the Vichy forces into capitulating. "Exporter" accomplished little except enhancing De Gaulle's image, while diverting almost three divisions from the main effort in the Western Desert.

Analysis

Conduct of coalition warfare by the various Middle East Force commanders was mediocre. Poor coordination of planning and conduct of operations with Britain's coalition allies, and the failure to incorporate allied troops into an effective combined force, caused serious degradations to the overall war effort in the theater. Had efforts to improve integration of coalition forces on an operational level been made, overall Allied performance in the theater would have been significantly better. The end result was that though Britain's vital petroleum supplies were kept secure and the enemy expelled from Africa, several opportunities to inflict major defeats on the Axis and possibly shorten the war were missed, largely through mismanagement of their coalition forces.

From early on, the British had achieved a high degree of interoperability with their coalition allies on a tactical level. By virtue of their close ties with Britain, Dominion forces had a commonality of organization, doctrine, language, and experience. Also, as coalition forces generally used standard British equipment, many problems normally associated with supporting such a disparate force were somewhat simplified. Many Dominion officers had formerly served with the British army, easing the command and control interface at lower levels. As time progressed, frontline troops were more familiar with the differences of the various nationalities, and became increasingly willing to trust and rely on their coalition partners, enhancing combat effectiveness.

At the higher operational and strategic-operational levels, however, there were major problems between the British and Dominions. From the beginning, British commanders had an extremely poor opinion of the Dominion military establishments. Prior to the war none of the Dominions had had sizeable standing forces and were normally equipped with obsolescent equipment. Dominion officers were looked down upon, generally being from lower social class origins than their British counterparts.⁷¹ Dominion troops were thought of as indisciplinable petty criminals.⁷² But Dominion units were easily equal to British units, as the performance of British forces was generally execrable up through late 1940.

Indian forces also suffered from parochial problems: Indian units were recruited ethnically, and certain groups saddled with unjustified reputations of poor military performance. Further, the legacy of the Sepoy mutiny of 1857 still caused some British officers doubt the reliability of Indian troops, and they frequently brigaded Indian units together with British units 'just to make sure.' In general, however, the English-officered Indian forces (and, to a lesser extent, the East and West African colonial troops) were seen as an extension of the British army.

The smaller exile contingents were not well thought of by the British: they had already lost their homelands to the Germans and so were felt to be incapable of reliably fighting them again. This view was erroneous as the exile units were largely made up of highly motivated volunteers, many of them former officers, who often had made long and dangerous journeys to join their contingents. The major shortcoming of the exile units was their extremely brittle nature, as they had great difficulty in replacing combat losses. This problem was alleviated somewhat for the Poles after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, when Stalin released thousands of former Polish prisoners (eventually the Polish exiles were to field four divisions and two independent brigades).

The Free French forces were even more problematic, for De Gaulle had his own political agenda, which he considered of higher priority than the overall Allied war effort. "Exporter" was conducted primarily to further De Gaulle's interests and help eliminate his political enemies, well after most of the real strategic reasons for invasion had disappeared. Free French forces also suffered from logistic problems as they were still equipped with French equipment until late in the Western Desert campaign. French troops could also be of questionable reliability when employed against other Frenchmen: during "Exporter" some Free French units refused to fire on Vichy forces. Also, like other exile forces, Gaullist units had difficulty in replacing combat losses. Overall, however, the Free French fought well.

Because coalition troops were considered incapable of performing acceptably on their arrival in-theater, they were kept in rear areas for training and reequipping for long periods.

Simultaneously, local security concerns required British military presence in Egypt, Iraq and Palestine. Oddly, the option of using coalition forces held in the rear to fulfill these garrison needs was never explored. Particularly during the 1940 crisis period, assigning so many troops to rear areas because of coalition mismanagement was extremely wasteful.

Coalition members brought with them their own baggage of preconceptions and limitations. Australians and New Zealanders, based on the World War I ANZAC experience during Gallipoli campaign, viewed the British high command with suspicion. Gallipoli had been Churchill's idea when he had been First Sea Lord – with Churchill as Britain's Prime Minister the Dominion doubts were increased. After the debacles in Greece and Crete, the Dominion governments began to develop a perception of British disregard for non-British lives, feeling that Dominion troops were put into precarious situations more often than English troops. Repeated displays of inept British strategy led most Dominion governments bitterly dispute any move that risked their troops. The Dominion governments put restrictions on the use of their troops, and demanded their forces serve only under their own commanders. British either argued with or ignored these restrictions, continuing to use the coalition troops as they saw fit.

Occasionally, supplies and equipment were either denied to or taken from coalition units for British use, leaving allied forces to operate at a disadvantage in combat situations. During "Compass" Wavell stripped the equipment from two Dominion divisions (6th Australian and 2nd New Zealand) so that two others (7th British Armored and 4th Indian) would be capable of offensive operations. It was felt that infantry:

"...however well trained and equipped, are no good for offensive operations in this terrain against enemy armoured forces. Infantry divisions are and will be needed to hold defended localities . . . but the main offensive must be carried out by armoured formations supported by motorized formations."⁷³

Yet only two months later 6th Australian division, still lacking the bulk of its equipment, was sent into combat to replace 4th Indian division for "Compass."

The Middle East Force commanders' most pressing task was to determine how to best employ his limited assets. During the early years many of the forces available in the Mid-East were coalition units, and any confusion or dispute with the allies would restrict the flexibility with which the theater commander could employ those forces. Through the conclusion of the 1940 crisis period, Middle East Force's resources were severely stretched by the demands of fighting on several widely separated fronts, and so minimizing problems with the coalition partners should have been a high priority task, but the British decided to essentially ignore it.

The personalities of British commanders and their staffs, and the perceived arrogance of the British, created an undercurrent of resentment which created major difficulties in British-Dominion relations. The failure to work harmoniously with the allies and be sensitive to their concerns needlessly complicated Middle East Force's efforts. As time went on these complications became almost insurmountable, severely limiting the theater commander's flexibility to freely employ the forces available to him.

The British commanders made little effort to work with or understand their coalition allies. While the common objective of the alliance was to defeat the Axis, each coalition member state had political preoccupations which directly effected how they felt their forces should be employed. Rather than adopting measures to address these concerns, such as establishing a combined staff to coordinate the allocation of coalition forces within the Middle East, or to deploy coalition contingents as unified forces under their own commanders on separate fronts, the British CinCs became increasingly resistant to the requests of their allies. Finally several of the coalition members became so frustrated that they withdrew all but a token number of their troops, leaving the British in a position where they were forced to finish the campaign essentially without coalition support.

Events back in the coalition member's home countries could also have profound effects on the employment of their troops. Lack of support for the war and lack of volunteers kept South African divisions notoriously understrength. When Japan entered the war most

Australian forces were immediately recalled, and the New Zealand division remained in the Mid-East only as a result of a special arrangements made with the American government to garrison that country with a division of U.S. Marines. The British remained unsympathetic to such concerns, further exacerbating their relations with the coalition states.

Rather than share command with the coalition allies the British consciously excluded them. Although many senior Dominion officers were obvious choices for higher command, they were passed over for less senior members of "the British general's club." Even when Commonwealth forces often comprised the bulk of troops involved in several operations, only once was a non-British officer placed in command (Freyberg at Crete). This British attitude generated considerable resentment. Had they been more willing to treat their allies as equals and permit them greater involvement in the conduct of the war it would have eased the ill will which came back to haunt them later.

In addition to keeping their allies from command positions, the British kept them out of the staff planning process as well. Intelligence was not fully shared with allies, or was doctored so that coalition force commanders would act according to British wishes. Auchinleck's disagreement with the Australian government over their troops in Tobruk eventually led to the withdrawal of all Australian forces from "Crusader," had he been less strident in his opposition to earlier Australian requests, or had he afforded Blamey greater influence as his deputy commander, such difficulties would likely have been avoided. The British tended to break up coalition forces, keeping them from acting as unified national contingents and keeping their officers in less responsible positions, where they could exercise little influence on operational planning: even though two South African divisions were available in the Western Desert for "Crusader", only one was committed to the offensive, so no South African corps commander was appointed. Attempts to reduce the staff integration problem received minimal command support and in the end accomplished virtually nothing.

Responding to the Greek crisis in 1940 placed significant demands on Middle East Force. Churchill and Wavell understood that sending an Allied expeditionary force to Greece would probably trigger German intervention, and that no expeditionary force which could be sent would be able to help the Greeks stop a German invasion. That the vast majority of troops actually sent or scheduled for the doomed expedition were either Dominion or exile state forces (two Australian and one New Zealand divisions, a Polish brigade, but only a single British armored brigade) was a blunder of major proportions. Wavell's arbitrary decisions in selecting forces for "Lustre" established a level of mistrust with the Dominions which impacted all subsequent operations.

As a result of his two predecessors mismanagement of the coalition Alexander faced considerably reduced allied contingent support. He was able to overcome this problem by building up sufficient British strength to ensure success while minimizing coalition involvement. Though this decision to avoid using coalition forces avoided the problems associated with controlling allied troops, it also meant that his margin of numerical superiority was smaller. After "Supercharger" broke out of the Alamein position, the pursuit of the DAK was conducted with more restraint than necessary had more coalition troops been involved, prolonging the subsequent Tunisian campaign. Alexander's success came not from mastering the intricacies of coalition warfare, but from finally being able to mass sufficient British troops attack without needing coalition support to achieve victory.

When the war broke out Britain was in a position where she was forced to rely on the support of a coalition to protect her strategic center of gravity in the Middle East. As the war progressed, the British manner of directing the coalition's efforts, and the methods she used in employing coalition forces, placed increasing stress on the coalition members until, finally, the coalition began to show signs of coming apart. Only after it was too late did the British attempt to address the grievances of their coalition partners, and even then their reforms were both too limited in scope and too slow to solve the problem.

Overall, the British were only grudgingly willing to accommodate the demands of their coalition allies. Several of the Commonwealth states, Australia in particular, had wanted to establish a war cabinet of Dominion leaders similar to the one convened during the last two years of World War I, but Churchill was adamant in his refusal. Britain was the senior member of the coalition, most of the material and troops for the war effort would come from her, and the coalition members were willing to accede to overall British direction of the war effort -- they merely wanted to be dealt with on an equitable basis and consulted as to their views and concerns. But the British treated their allies not as partners but as tools, and this conduct adversely impacted their ability to prosecute the war.

Each theater commander was presented with a chance to bring about an early conclusion to the war in the Middle East, and each missed the opportunity by ignoring the implicit problems associated with employing coalition forces. Because of this, the Middle East commanders were unable to utilize the forces at their disposal to full effect. The end result was needlessly prolonged campaigns, tying up forces which could have been available earlier for other Mid-East fronts, or to open a "Second Front" elsewhere in Europe.

Conclusions

Britain had to employ a coalition force in the Middle East. British forces could not be released from defense of the home islands, and Dominion forces were therefore essential to provide the troops needed for defending the region. Exile forces, though small, also provided the Allies a strong claim of legitimacy in opposing the Axis.

The British were unable to overcome the problems of command interoperability with their coalition forces. From the beginning they neither viewed or conducted operations as combined. As they saw it, the war in the Middle East was a British affair -- coincidentally involving non-British troops. Their unrealistic assessments of their coalition allies became self-imposed limitations on employing their theater assets. British resistance to change their attitudes and operating methods increased resentment within the coalition, until finally the coalition states began to withdraw their support. The primary reason for their inability to forge the coalition into an effective military force was Britain's failure to address Political-Military issues inherent in combined operations. By establishing a foundation of mutual cooperation and respect, being more sensitive to political realities by dealing with their coalition members on a more equitable basis, the British could have significantly improved the interoperability and performance of their coalition. In the end the British decided to simply ignore the challenge: freed from the threat German invasion, Britain began transferring troops from England, transforming the coalition force into an solely British one.

On 8 November 1942 Operation "Torch" landed an American army in French North Africa, and a new coalition relationship began for Middle East Force. Though technically subordinate, the Americans quickly became the dominant member of the coalition. Shortly after the fall of Tunis in May 1943, the American Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO) assumed control of the regional Allied war effort. For the remainder of the war a more diverse coalition force was controlled by MTO with far fewer problems: the Americans were better at adapting to the demands of combined operations than their predecessors had been.

Appendix 1

Middle East Force Unit Dispositions⁷⁴

Significant forces deployed in-theater, broken down by month and assigned campaign area.

Numbers: represent division equivalents; totals are cumulative
half values represent badly depleted divisions or large brigade groups

Upper-case letters: denote unit national origin

A = Australian, B = British, C = British Colonial (African), F = Free French, G = Greek exile,
I = Indian, N = New Zealand, P = Polish exile, S = South African

Lower-case letters: denote unit type for British units; for all other nationalities units are infantry:

a = armor, c = cavalry, i = infantry

	<u>Egypt</u>	<u>Palestine/Syria</u>	<u>Ethiopia</u> (Sudan & Kenya)	<u>Greece</u>	<u>Iraq</u>
Italy declares war					
Jun 1940	1Ba, 1Bi 1I, 1A	1Bc	- / 1C	-	-
Jul 1940	1Ba, 1Bi 1I, 1A	1Bc	- / 1C	-	-
Italy invades British Somaliland					
Aug 1940	1Ba, 1Bi 1I, 1A	1Bc	- / 1C	-	-
Italy invades Egypt					
Sep 1940	1Ba, 1Bi 1I, 1A	1Bc	- / 2C	-	-
Italy Invades Greece					
Oct 1940	1Ba, .5Bi 1I, 1A	1Bc	1I / 2C, .5S	-	-
Nov 1940	1Ba, .5Bi 1I, 1A	1Bc	1I / 2C, .5S	.5Bi	-
Operation Compass					
Dec 1940	1Ba, .5Bi 1I, 1.5A	1Bc	1I / 2C, 1S	.5Bi	-

	<u>Egypt</u>	<u>Palestine/Syria</u>	<u>Ethiopia</u> (Sudan & Kenya)	<u>Greece</u>	<u>Iraq</u>
Jan 1941	2Ba, .5Bi 1.5A	1Bc	2I / 2C, 1S	.5Bi	-
*Battle of Beda Fomm*DAK arrives in Tripoli* Feb 1941	1.5Ba, .5Bi 2A	1Bc	2I, .5F / 2C, 1S	.5Bi	-
*Operation Lustre*1st DAK attack in Cyrenaica*Battle of Keren* Mar 1941	1.5Ba, .5Bi 2A	1Bc, .5P	2I, .5F / 2C, 1S	.5Bi, .5Ba, 1N	-
Coup in Iraq Apr 1941	1.5Ba, .5Bi 2A, 1I, .5P	1Bc	1I, .5F / 2C, 1S	.5Bi, 1N, 1A	1I
*Operation Brevity*Invasion of Crete* May 1941	1.5Ba, .5Bi 2A, 1I, .5P	1Bc, .5F	1I / 2C, 1S	.5Bi (Cyprus)	1I
*Operation Battleaxe*Operation Exporter* Jun 1941	1.5Ba, 1Bi 1A, 1I, .5P	1Bc, 1A, 1F	1I / 2C, 1S	1Bi (Cyprus)	1I
Jul 1941	2Ba, 1.5Bi 2A, 2I, 1S, .5P	1Bc, 1A, 1I, 1F	- / 2C, 1S	1Bi (Cyprus)	1I
Aug 1941	2Ba, 1.5Bi 2A, 2I, 1S, .5P	1Bc, 1A, 1I, 1F	- / 2C	1Bi (Cyprus)	1I
Sep 1941	2.5Ba, 2Bi 2A, 2I, 2S, .5N, .5P	1Bc, 1I, 1F	- / 2C	1Bi (Cyprus)	1I
Oct 1941	2.5Ba, 2Bi 2.5A, 2I, 2S, .5N, .5P	1Bc, 1I, 1F	- / 2C	1Bi (Cyprus)	2I
Operation Crusader Nov 1941	2.5Ba, 3Bi 3A, 2I, 2S, 1N, .5P	1Bc, 1I, 1F	- / 2C	1I (Cyprus)	3I
Dec 1941	3.5Ba, 3Bi 3A, 2I, 2S, 1N, .5P	1Bc, 1Bi, 1I, 1F	- / 2C	1I (Cyprus)	3I

	<u>Egypt</u>	<u>Palestine/Syria</u>	<u>Ethiopia</u> (Sudan & Kenya)	<u>Greece</u>	<u>Iraq</u>
Jan 1942	3.5Ba, 3Bi 3A, 2I, 2S, 1N	.5Bc, 1F	- / 2C	1I (Cyprus)	3I
2nd DAK attack in Cyrenaica Feb 1942	3.5Ba, 2Bi 2A, 2I, 2S, 1N	.5Bc, 1F, .5G	- / 2C	1I (Cyprus)	3I
Mar 1942	3.5Ba, 2Bi 1A, 2I, 2S, 1N	.5Bc, 1F, .5G	- / 2C	.5Bi (Cyprus)	3I
Apr 1942	3.5Ba, 2Bi 1A, 2I, 2S, 1N	.5Bc, 1F, .5G	- / 2C	.5Bi (Cyprus)	3I
Battle of Gazala May 1942	3.5Ba, 2Bi 1A, 2I, 2S, 1N	.5Bc, 1F, .5G	- / 2C	.5Bi (Cyprus)	3I
Jun 1942	3.5Ba, 2Bi 1A, 1I, 1S, 1N	1F, 1I, .5G	- / 2C	.5Bi (Cyprus)	3I
First Battle of El Alamein Jul 1942	4.5Ba, 3Bi 1A, 1I, 1S, 1N, .5G	1F, 1I	- / 1C	.5Bi (Cyprus)	3I
Battle of Alam Halfa Aug 1942	3.5Ba, 4Bi 1A, 1I, 1S, 1N, .5G	1F, 1I	- / 1C	.5Bi (Cyprus)	3I
Sep 1942	4Ba, 4Bi 1A, 1I, 1S, 1N, .5G	1F, 1I	- / 1C	.5Bi (Cyprus)	3I
Operation Supercharger Oct 1942	4Ba, 4Bi 1A, 1I, 1S, 1N, .5G	1F, 1I	- / 1C		1Bi, 3I

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