

# STRATEGIC DISSONANCE: BRITISH MIDDLE EAST COMMAND IN WORLD WAR II

A Monograph

by

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AY 2014-001

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<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>					<i>Form Approved</i> OMB No. 0704-0188							
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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 22-05-2014		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master's Thesis			<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> JUL 2013 - MAY 2014							
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b>  STRATEGIC DISSONANCE: BRITISH MIDDLE EAST COMMAND IN WORLD WAR II					<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>  <b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>  <b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>  <b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>  <b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>  <b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>							
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  Major Gamble L. Monney, United States Army					<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>							
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD 100 Stimson Ave. Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301					<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>  <b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>							
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>					<b>12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b>  Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited							
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>												
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> This paper examines the causes and effects of dissonance between the British strategic command and the British Middle East Command during the summer of 1941. Relying on historical research, this paper finds that multiple conflicts spread across an immense geographic area complicated the operational response and contributed to the strategic misunderstanding of the operational challenges. Further, the strategic interjections into the operational sphere, choosing tactical operations against the advice of the military commander, resulted in failure to win the most important campaign. The victorious campaigns, undertaken against the advice of the military commander, proved to have no strategic value, and may have ultimately cost the British forces far more than any possible benefit they could provide.												
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> World War II, operational objectives, strategic objectives, British Army, Middle East Command, Archibald Wavell, Vichy, Syria, Levant, Egypt												
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 2px;">a. REPORT</td> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 2px;">b. ABSTRACT</td> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 2px;">c. THIS PAGE</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Unclassified</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Unclassified</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Unclassified</td> </tr> </table>			a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE	Unclassified	Unclassified	Unclassified	<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  UU		<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  48	
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE										
Unclassified	Unclassified	Unclassified										
<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>					<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b>							

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other government agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

STRATEGIC DISSONANCE: BRITISH MIDDLE EAST COMMAND IN WORLD WAR II, by MAJ Gamble L. Monney, United States Army, 40 pages.

This paper examines the causes and effects of dissonance between the British strategic command and the British Middle East Command during the summer of 1941. Relying on historical research, this paper finds that multiple conflicts spread across an immense geographic area complicated the operational response and contributed to the strategic misunderstanding of the operational challenges. Further, the strategic interjections into the operational sphere, choosing tactical operations against the advice of the military commander, resulted in failure to win the most important campaign. The victorious campaigns, undertaken against the advice of the military commander, proved to have no strategic value, and may have ultimately cost the British forces far more than any possible benefit they could provide.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must express my gratitude for my wife and her limitless patience. This monograph is as much a result of her determination as mine. My daughters, Sage and Hope, have excused my absences as I spent far too much time in the library over the last year. To my peers of Seminar 5, thank you for challenging me to widen my mental horizons. To Major Andrew Nicklin and MAJ Jeffrey Quail, my peer editors, you gave me invaluable assistance that enabled me to achieve this mission.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYMS .....	vi
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
BRITISH STRATEGIC CONTEXT .....	4
British-Vichy Divide.....	5
Middle East Threats Multiply .....	7
Vichy Support for the Axis .....	10
Political Pressures.....	11
WAVELL’S OPERATIONAL UNDERSTANDING.....	13
Archibald Wavell – The Man.....	13
Commander in Chief, Middle East .....	14
Threats to Middle East Command .....	15
Italian Threats .....	15
Routs in North Africa (March – June 1941) and Greece and Crete (March – May 1941) ...	17
Iraq Rebellion (April – June 1941) .....	19
Vichy Syria Unlikely to Threaten British Strategic Interests.....	21
Vichy Levant Fighting Capabilities .....	22
Vichy Motivations .....	25
British Logistical Challenges for Levant Invasion .....	25
CONSEQUENCES OF STRATEGIC DISSONANCE .....	26
Conduct of the Operation.....	27
British Troop Strength .....	27
Materiel Weakness.....	28
German and Vichy Inability to Reinforce Iraq Rebellion.....	29
Incompatible Perspectives between Strategic and Operational Commands .....	31
Increased Distrust Among Allies.....	36
CONCLUSIONS .....	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	40

## ACRONYMS

MEC	Middle East Command
CINC-ME	Commander-in-Chief, Middle East

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: The Mediterranean Basin, 1941 .....	3
Figure 2: Threats Contributing to Britain's Strategic Context .....	8



My forces are stretched to limit everywhere, and I simply cannot afford to risk part of forces on what cannot produce any effect.

- Commander in Chief, Middle East, General Archibald Wavell to Prime Minister Winston Churchill, May 2, 1941

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1941, Vichy forces in the Levant posed little threat to Britain's control of the Suez Canal, strategically important as Britain's lifeline to the Empire.<sup>1</sup> However, despite the inability of the Vichy forces to attack the British in Palestine and Egypt, poorly resourced British forces attacked fortified Vichy positions on the roads to Damascus and Beirut. At the insistence of the British Prime Minister, Middle East Command committed scarce men and materiel to fighting the Vichy, even as it struggled to respond to greater threats around the Mediterranean Sea. The unnecessary British assault on the Vichy Levant demonstrates the dissonance between Prime Minister Winston Churchill's strategic command and General Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East. The split in operational imperatives between the strategic and operational commands resulted in worthless tactical victories, failing to promote the desired strategic end state and ultimately increased other threats in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

Middle East Command suffered from tactical meddling by London, decoupling the tactical actions from the aims of the British strategists. General Wavell commanded forces fighting in—or retreating from—Libya, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, Ethiopia, Greece and Crete. With his forces spread over this vast arid arena, General Wavell made the difficult prioritization decisions

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<sup>1</sup>The "Levant" as described here consists of the French mandate in the Middle East proposed in the Sykes-Picot agreement and formalized by the San Remo Peace Conference in April 1920 and by the League of Nations in September 1922. This region encompassed approximately 76,000 square miles of mountains and elevated plain and was home to 20 million people of many ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. It included the modern countries of Syria and Lebanon, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the borders of modern Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan. Howard Morley Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East, 1936-1954*. (New York: Knopf, 1972), 6, 8.

<sup>2</sup>In this paper, "British forces" or "Allied forces" will include all of the forces under British command, regardless of their national origin: Arab, Commonwealth (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, and South Africa), Czech, Free French, and Polish.

regarding which tactical actions his command could execute to promote the strategic interests of Britain. Rather than advising General Wavell on the overall strategic imperatives, Prime Minister Churchill demanded that British forces retain every inch of British Colonial or Allied soil. In an overwhelming position of relative disadvantage, with less than one-fourth the combined Italian, German and Iraqi forces, General Wavell became the proverbial man with his finger in the dike, plugging leaks even as great torrents open around him.

This monograph will describe the British strategic context in the summer of 1941, contrast it with Middle East Command's operational understanding of the Vichy threat in the Levant, concluding with the consequences of the strategic and operational dissonance. Part one begins with a review of the factors shaping the British strategic context, including recent military defeats, perceived German vulnerabilities, and the strategic demands of the British Empire. This part then discusses Vichy logistical support for Axis operations in the Levant and around the Mediterranean, and Vichy aid to Iraqi rebels at Germany's behest. The discussion of the strategic context concludes with a survey of the political pressures upon Britain's strategic leaders from their domestic audience and the Free French forces.

Part two contrasts the operational assessment of the threat posed by Vichy forces in the Levant to the strategic assessment. This part begins by describing General Wavell's unmatched experience and scholarship of British operations in the Middle East. Understanding the foundations of General Wavell's professional estimate aids the reader in evaluating his assessment of the Vichy forces in the Levant and his conclusion that they could not threaten Britain's strategic position on the Suez Canal. Because of critical equipment and troop shortages, General Wavell prioritized the other threats around the Mediterranean Sea as far more urgent than an unlikely Vichy threat from the Levant. The operational assessment concludes with General Wavell's conclusion that he did not possess the logistical capability to support an assault hundreds of miles north into Vichy Lebanon and Syria.

Part three documents the consequences of the strategic and operational dissonance regarding the Vichy threat in the Levant. This unnecessary campaign by Allied forces cost many casualties among both the Allied and Vichy forces, among whom the Free French forces would later try and recruit. In a time of critical equipment shortages across the Allied forces, the equipment and resources expended or destroyed during this fight failed to secure any appreciable gain in Britain's strategic position. This part concludes with the impacts on other Allied forces and campaigns around the Middle East, contributing to operational and tactical failures throughout the theater.

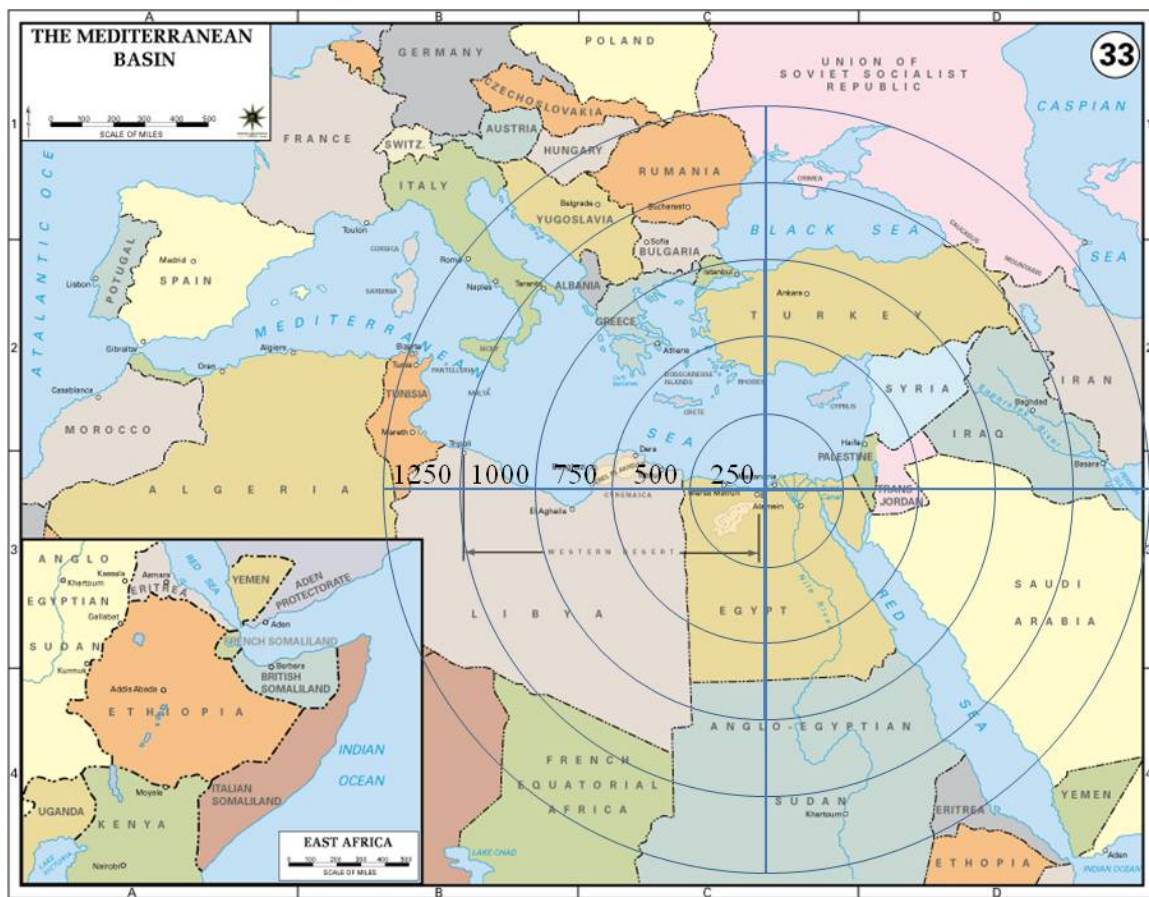


Figure 1: The Mediterranean Basin, 1941. Distances in miles.

Source: Westpoint Department of History; <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/World%20War%20II%20Europe/WWIIEurope33.gif> (accessed 2 April 2014).

## BRITISH STRATEGIC CONTEXT

In the first months of 1941, threats against Great Britain and its global empire were greater than at any time in the previous 100 years. France's defeat and capitulation destroyed the unassailable British-French alliance.<sup>3</sup> With thousands of British civilians dying every month, the Battle of Britain presaged Germany's intended invasion of Great Britain. German submarines imperiled British shipping in the Atlantic Ocean, slowing American replacement of the equipment lost at Dunkirk.<sup>4</sup> In the overseas empire, nationalist movements in the Middle East and India worried British leaders about the dependability of these vital economies.

Though prosperous, Great Britain in 1940 had long since passed the point where the island's inhabitants could feed themselves or provide all of the necessary materials to supply Britain's great manufacturing capability. Even before the war, the trade from the British Empire sustained the British Isles. Sea lines of communication connected Great Britain to her worldwide colonies, which provided food, oil, rubber, tin, cotton, and other vital raw materials.<sup>5</sup> Under the pressures of war, the raw materials from the empire became critical to British national survival.

Britain's most important sea-lane linked the British isles to Asia through the Suez Canal. Bypassing Africa greatly reduced the time, costs, and risks of transporting goods and materials. British and Allied forces controlled Egypt and most of the Middle East, ensuring Allied access to

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<sup>3</sup>Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 14.

<sup>4</sup>Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely: The Royal Navy in the Second World War* (New York: Norton, 1991), 262.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East, 1914-1971*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 26.

this vital sea-lane and denying the Suez Canal to Axis warships or commercial vessels.

For a few months in early 1941, the British position astride the Suez Canal appeared secure from Axis invasion. British forces in Africa repelled the Italian threats to Egypt and the Suez Canal from the west and south and then systematically defeated Italian forces in Ethiopia and Libya. Safe from invasion on the Africa front, Turkey and the Vichy Levant buffered British interests and forces in Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt despite looming German threats to Greece and the Balkans.

### British-Vichy Divide

The radical shift in British attitudes towards France became a significant factor in the British strategic mindset. In 1939, a year prior to the Franco-German Armistice of 1940, Mr. Churchill presupposed an unassailable alliance between Great Britain and France.<sup>6</sup> Immediately following the armistice, French commanders in North Africa and Syria stated their opposition to any reconciliation with Germany and the Vichy government. However, within a week the French colonial commands in Africa and the Levant reversed their positions and acceded to Vichy control. While Britain had hoped that the French colonies would continue their fight against Germany, the vacillation of French colonial leaders heightened British fears of envelopment, rather than calming them.<sup>7</sup>

Justifying their growing paranoia over Vichy collusion with Germany, the British pointed to a specific example of Vichy perfidy. Allied forces in France captured over 400 German pilots while fighting for the survival of France. The Vichy French returned these pilots to Germany under the terms of the Armistice, violating French assurances to her former allies that the pilots

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<sup>6</sup>Winston Churchill and Martin Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers: At the Admiralty, September 1939 to May 1940* (London: Heinemann, 1993), War Cabinet Paper 52.

<sup>7</sup>Geoffrey Warner, *Iraq and Syria: 1941, The Politics and Strategy of the Second World War* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1979), 31-32.

would not be returned. Germany, testing the limits of Vichy adherence to the Armistice, immediately employed these repatriated pilots in the Battle of Britain.<sup>8</sup>

The British used this fear of further Vichy concessions to Germany to justify the Royal Navy's attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir. Following the Armistice, Prime Minister Churchill demanded that French naval vessels join the fight against Germany from Britain or France's overseas empire. Failing this, the British demanded that the French take their fleet to British ports in the Caribbean, or Britain would sink the French ships, rather than risk Germany using them against Britain.<sup>9</sup>

For the first time in over 125 years, the British fired on the French, setting the stage for later British attacks against Vichy forces.<sup>10</sup> Britain's destruction of the French warships in their harbor killed almost 1,300 French officers and sailors. Occuring at the hands of their former ally, the French bitterly condemned Britain's attack and compared Britain to the ruthless Germans. The unprovoked attack revealed a degree of French public rancor that was unexpected in London and eliminated any feeling of goodwill between the armed forces of the two nations.<sup>11</sup>

The British destruction of the French Fleet at Mers-el-Kebir in July 1940 angered key figures in the Vichy government, causing them to distrust the British<sup>12</sup> and aid the Axis by varying degrees.<sup>13</sup> Though Marshal Philip Petain complained in May 1941 that Germany "compelled" Vichy to collaborate, Vichy officials abetted the Axis almost immediately following

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<sup>8</sup>Warren Tute, *The Deadly Stroke* (New York: Coward, 1973), 16.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 210.

<sup>11</sup>Howard Morley Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East, 1936-1954* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 117.

<sup>12</sup>Aviel Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows: Britain and France in the Middle East During the Second World War*, Studies in Middle Eastern History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 77.

<sup>13</sup>Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168.

the Armistice in June 1940.<sup>14</sup> Vichy forces in North Africa allowed Italian and German forces extensive use of port facilities and shipped them fuel and other critical supplies, as well as transferred French military trucks to German forces fighting the British.<sup>15</sup>

Admiral Darlan, the Vichy war minister, was representative of Vichy officials that were not enamored with the Axis but were equally unwilling to sacrifice France to aid the Allies. Darlan aided and sustained Axis forces as they fought the British around the Mediterranean and transferred twenty-six warships and seven submarines to Italy.<sup>16</sup> With these acts, he hoped to increase Vichy's military rearmament and autonomy and lessen the burdens of the armistice.<sup>17</sup>

As Britain observed Vichy support for German and Italian forces across North Africa, in clear violation of the Armistice, British attitudes toward Vichy continuing darkening. Despite these ominous indicators of Vichy complicity, the British hoped that Vichy control of the Levant would continue to act as a buffer against German or Italian aggression, more out of desperation than any expectations of Vichy adherence to their treaty obligations.<sup>18</sup>

### Middle East Threats Multiply

From March to May 1941, threats to British interests around the Mediterranean dramatically multiplied, increasing the burden on General Wavell's already taxed forces. In North Africa, German forces bolstered the inept Italian forces. Beginning in March, German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel led his forces across North Africa and erased the gains from Britain's

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<sup>14</sup>Robert John Collins and Jan Christiaan Smuts, *Lord Wavell (1883-1941): A Military Biography* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1947), 429.

<sup>15</sup>Johannes Steel, *Men Behind the War: A "Who's Who" Of Our Time* (New York: Sheridan House, 1942), 193.

<sup>16</sup>Tute, *The Deadly Stroke*, 206.

<sup>17</sup>Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows*, 62-63.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Buckley, *Five Ventures: Iraq, Syria, Persia, Madagascar, Dodecanese; The Second World War, 1939-1945: A Popular Military History* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1954), 44.

victory over the Italians in Libya. British forces eventually stymied Rommel's advance, but only after Rommel pierced the borders of Egypt.

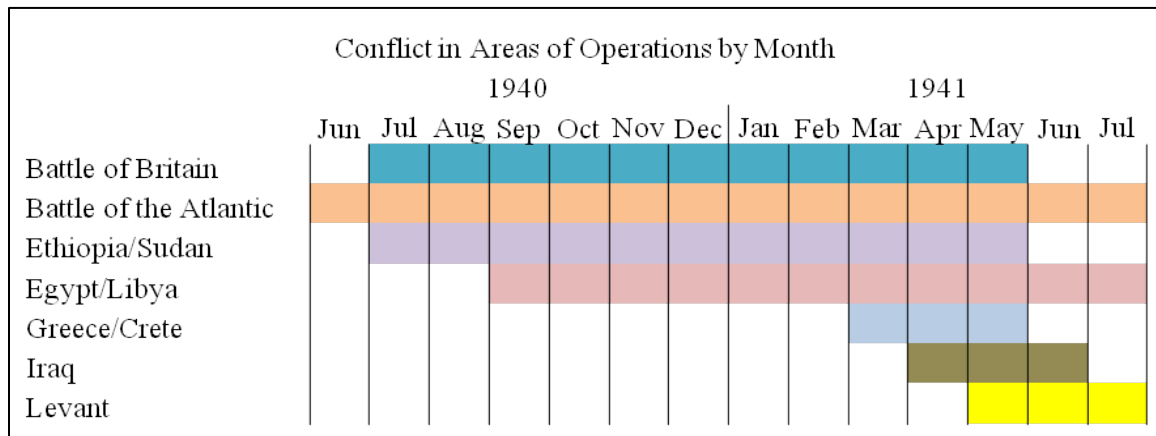


Figure 2: Threats Contributing to Britain's Strategic Context

Source: Created by author from Robert Goralski, *World War II Almanac, 1931-1945: A Political and Military Record* (New York: Putnam, 1981), 115-167.

Simultaneous with Rommel's offensive maneuver operations across North Africa, German armor swept through the Balkans and into Greece in March and April 1941, defeating British forces possessing less than one-tenth Germany's armor. While 50,000 British soldiers were rescued from Greece, they were forced to abandon their equipment just as they had at Dunkirk less than a year earlier.<sup>19</sup> Crete fell only weeks later, its paltry defenses overwhelmed by German air dominance, paratroopers, and amphibious landings. Allied forces retreated to Cairo, where they could reconstitute and eventually refit with new equipment.<sup>20</sup>

Germany's rapid advance through the Balkans, Greece, and North Africa caused Britain's leaders to fear Axis envelopment of the Suez Canal by enemy forces in Africa and Europe.

<sup>19</sup>Harold E. Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East, 1939-1941: A Study in Generalship* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 164.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 228.



British leaders observed modest Vichy support for Axis operations in North Africa and the Levant. They feared that Germany might add the Vichy Levant to its conquests, surrounding the neutral Turks and pressuring them to enter the war in support of Germany.<sup>21</sup> Britain's strategic leaders calculated that if Germany were to add Turkey to its conquests of Greece and Romania, the Germans could threaten Iran and Iraq and their invaluable oil supplies. Bolstered by increased petroleum, Germany could later exploit their success in a drive toward the Suez Canal and Egypt.<sup>22</sup>

The German military actions in North Africa, the Balkans, and Iraq confirmed British predictions of German war needs. The British Chiefs of Staff believed that lack of petroleum would be the great vulnerability in Hitler's war machine. Despite the oil production of the Soviet Union and the recently conquered Romania, oil would ultimately limit German offensive operations. The British Chiefs of Staff reasoned that Germany must necessarily seek additional oil resources in the Middle East and Mediterranean littoral.<sup>23</sup>

The Axis threats built upon the Arab dissatisfaction roiling the Middle East. For more than two decades, Arab nationalist movements across the Middle East advocated severing allegiances and treaties with Britain and France. Recognizing an opportunity, Germany contributed to the Middle Eastern turmoil by making public "expressions of sympathy" in support of freeing the Arab states from the League of Nations mandates to Britain and France.

Germany's actions reinforced its words in March 1941, promoting an Iraqi revolt that deposed the Iraqi child-monarch and his regent. Ardent Arab nationalists, the Iraqi rebels sought to expel the British forces and British commercial interests, violating the Anglo-Iraqi treaty that

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<sup>21</sup>John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay: A Personal Narrative* (New York: Harper, 1961), 37.

<sup>22</sup>Ian Stanley Ord Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East: The Germans Come to the Help of Their Ally*, vol II of *History of the Second World War: United Kingdom Military Series* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1956), 197.

<sup>23</sup>Warner, *Iraq and Syria: 1941*, 21-22.

had granted Iraq independence from the League of Nations Mandate in 1930.<sup>24</sup> The illegitimate, coup-installed Iraqi Prime Minister diverted the British-owned oil from the Royal Navy at Haifa to Vichy Tripoli and ordered Iraqi forces to attack British garrisons throughout Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

Germany immediately proclaimed its support for the Iraqi rebels and provided as many as sixty German and Italian fighter and bomber aircraft, pilots, and training for Iraqi pilots. Unable to deploy land forces through Turkey or the Royal Navy-dominated eastern Mediterranean Sea, Germany attacked Britain in the Middle East through an indigenous Arab proxy.

### Vichy Support for the Axis

The Vichy forces in the Levant made German military support for the Iraqi rebellion possible by allowing German aircraft to transit Vichy airfields in Syria and Lebanon. Britain warned Vichy France that any attempt at offensive action by either German or Italian forces<sup>26</sup> from the French mandate would violate Vichy neutrality and lead to a speedy British response.<sup>27</sup> Despite unequivocal British warnings, the Vichy Minister of War gave a stunning endorsement for Britain's enemies. He directed the Vichy commander in the Levant to offer all possible aid to German and Italian aircraft, yet attack British aircraft "by all possible means."<sup>28</sup> In the spirit of Axis cooperation, Vichy forces in the Levant surrendered an air base in northern Syria to

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<sup>24</sup>Daniel Silverfarb, *The Twilight of British Ascendancy in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq, 1941-1950* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>25</sup>Buckley, *Five Ventures*, 10.

<sup>26</sup>Warner, *Iraq and Syria: 1941*, 33.

<sup>27</sup>Buckley, *Five Ventures*, 42.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

exclusive Axis use. The Luftwaffe promptly employed the airfield to stage German and Italian<sup>29</sup> air attacks against British forces defending against the rebel-led Iraqi army.<sup>30</sup>

Under pressure from Germany, Vichy agreed to send military aid to Iraq from their Levantine war stocks, which had been sealed as a condition of the Armistice. During May 1941, while the British were actively fighting the army of the rebel-led Iraqi government, Vichy forces in the Levant sent Iraq as many as four trainloads of arms, ammunition, a battery of artillery, and aviation fuel.<sup>31</sup> When the Allied forces captured the Vichy shipments to Iraq, the incident further reinforced the British sense of betrayal by the Vichy government.<sup>32</sup>

Britain's leaders considered Vichy's logistical support for Axis forces a gross violation of the Armistice of 1940, indicating that Vichy France had allied itself with Germany, rather than remaining a neutral observer. The violation of Vichy neutrality led the British war cabinet to fear that the British position in the Middle East might not be viable, unless Britain seized and secured the Vichy Levant. Prime Minister Winston Churchill declared that Britain "must" eliminate the threat of German aggression and Vichy complicity from the Levant.<sup>33</sup>

#### Political Pressures

British public and political pressure upon Britain's strategic leaders became a factor contributing to Britain's invasion of the Levant. Popular British sentiment, having found hope in Wavell's African victories in 1940 and early 1941, demanded accountability for the losses in

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<sup>29</sup>Buckley, *Five Ventures*, 32. No mention of whether the Italian aircraft were confirmed using the Vichy airfields of northern Syria. However, given the limited range of the aircraft, the Italians were probably also operating through Syria.

<sup>30</sup>Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, 195.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*,

<sup>32</sup>Buckley, *Five Ventures*, 21.

<sup>33</sup>A. B. Gaunson, "Churchill, De Gaulle, Spears and the Levant Affair, 1941," *The Historical Journal* 27, no. 3 (1984), 697.

Greece and Eastern Libya. The public unease led to the House of Commons holding a vote of confidence on Mr. Churchill's government.<sup>34</sup> Churchill survived the threat to his war leadership by implying that the blame rest on General Wavell, arguing that Wavell commanded nearly 500,000 soldiers. In fact, Wavell's force was only one-sixth of Churchill's claim. Only 50,000 British, Colonial, and Allied combat troops defended Egypt, with approximately 30,000 additional soldiers spread thousands of miles around East Africa and the Middle East.<sup>35</sup>

While British Royal Navy still controlled the Mediterranean Sea at significant cost in men and ships, the Germans or Italians were unlikely to disembark significant combat forces on Syrian shores. However, the trickle of German planes through the Levant to Iraq led to fears of the German threat creeping into the Vichy Levant while British forces fought elsewhere around the theater of operations.<sup>36</sup> Given the strain on British forces, new operations would compound the British problems. The Free French offered easy conquest of the Levant as a solution to growing British fears of Vichy-German complicity.

Whitehall believed, based on reports from Free French Generals Charles de Gaulle and Georges Catroux, that the Vichy regular and colonial troops would offer only token resistance and welcome the British. Free French commanders argued that an operation into Vichy Levant would be essentially unopposed, the road to Damascus was "open," and all Vichy French forces had withdrawn to Lebanon. In abandoning Syria to German occupation, the Free French claimed that Vichy had provided a propitious window to strike and seize Syria. General de Gaulle, from his perch in West Africa and later in Egypt, insisted that Wavell should immediately

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<sup>34</sup>Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East*, 212.

<sup>35</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 392-393.

<sup>36</sup>Donald Cowie, *The Campaigns of Wavell: The Inner Story of the Empire in Action; Part 2, Sept. 1940 to Sept. 1941* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1942), 210.

dispatch the inadequately organized and equipped Free French division from Palestine to take Damascus.<sup>37</sup>

### WAVELL'S OPERATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Like the British Chiefs of Staff, General Wavell concluded that the Axis must seek oil around the Mediterranean, bringing the Italians and Germans into conflict with the British forces in the Middle East.<sup>38</sup> His assessment of the Italian and German menace to Allied forces and British interests in the Middle East shaped his command's priorities. Unlike Churchill and other leaders who pressed for an immediate invasion of the Vichy Levant, Wavell concluded that Vichy forces posed little threat to British interests.

#### Archibald Wavell – The Man

Shortly before the First World War, Britain wrestled with Home Rule for Ireland and the consequences it would have upon Britain's army. Several senior Irish officers in British service warned that they would not order their troops to fire upon Irishmen, preferring instead to resign, if necessary. Supported by many of their peers, the incident was resolved only after the resignation of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the Secretary of War. Wavell served on the Imperial General Staff throughout this dramatic episode, closely observing the participants and examining their arguments. He came away from this experience with a strengthened belief in the officer's responsibility to obey his orders, even if he disagreed with them.<sup>39</sup>

World War I tested Wavell's adherence to onerous orders. He was wounded in one of the hopeless massed infantry charges of the First World War, among the three-fourths of his brigade's officers who were wounded or killed in the action. This experience, among others in the

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<sup>37</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 421.

<sup>38</sup>Warner, *Iraq and Syria: 1941*, 21-22.

<sup>39</sup>Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East*, 11.

First World War, impressed upon him the futility of frontal assaults and the imperative of “mobility and surprise” against the enemy.<sup>40</sup>

#### Commander in Chief, Middle East

Among his contemporaries, no one understood the political and military environment of the Middle East better than General Wavell. Acknowledged by some of his German enemies as the best British general and “very, very good,” Wavell had a unique perspective on the manifold pressures on his forces across this vast arena.<sup>41</sup>

More than twenty years earlier, Archibald Wavell served on Field Marshal Lord Allenby’s staff during World War I, and Allenby appointed Wavell the chief of staff during the Palestine campaign of 1917-1918.<sup>42</sup> Wavell authored a comprehensive study of the Palestine campaign against the Turks and a biography of Allenby during the interwar years, earning him a place among the notable soldier-scholars Britain produced following World War I.<sup>43</sup>

The British Chiefs of Staff recognized and relied upon Wavell’s expertise when faced with intractable problems in the Middle East. In 1937, Wavell took command of the British forces in Palestine, tasked with separating the belligerents in the increasing lethal Arab-Jewish conflict.<sup>44</sup> Two years later, the Chiefs of Staff appointed General Wavell as the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, in part because of his regional expertise.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>41</sup>Steel, *Men Behind the War*, 49.

<sup>42</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 85-86.

<sup>43</sup>Ian Beckett, “Archibald Wavell,” in *Churchill's Generals*, ed. John Keegan (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 70-71.

<sup>44</sup>Steel, *Men Behind the War*, 51-52.

<sup>45</sup>Beckett, “Archibald Wavell,” in Keegan, *Churchill's Generals*, 74.

His combination of scholarly knowledge and practical experience in the environment elevated him to lead the defence of the British Middle East.<sup>46</sup> His responsibilities in 1939 encompassed nearly three million square miles at the intersection of Europe, Africa, and Asia. By 1941, the area of Middle East command had multiplied many times and spanned from the Atlantic coasts of Africa to Persia and from the Balkans to East Africa.<sup>47</sup>

### Threats to Middle East Command

#### Italian Threats

Events in the Middle East tested General Wavell immediately following the Franco-German Armistice of June 1940. Less than two weeks after France's capitulation, Italian forces in East Africa attacked British forces in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, quickly followed by attacks against Kenya and then British Somaliland. The British forces in Sudan and Kenya ceded some border positions to the Italian assaults. However, the constabulary British forces in British Somaliland wisely retreated before the vastly larger Italian force and were evacuated from the shores of the Red Sea in August 1940.<sup>48</sup> While Churchill imagined that British forces were the equal of any enemy, the truth was that the soldiers garrisoning the African colonies were not equipped for operations against a much larger and armored foe.<sup>49</sup>

Launching from Libya, Italy attacked British-aligned Egypt in September. Gains in East Africa encouraged Italy to continue expanding its influence in Africa. In only five days, Italian forces drove 60 miles into Egypt while British forces withdrew and established a base at Sidi Barrani.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 170.

<sup>47</sup>Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East*, 127

<sup>48</sup>Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1970), 124.

<sup>49</sup>Beckett, "Archibald Wavell," in Keegan, *Churchill's Generals*, 76.

<sup>50</sup>Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 28.

Mussolini, unaware of the deliberate British withdrawals from East Africa and the Egyptian border, imagined that Italian forces could invade Greece and seize European territory in addition to Italy's new African territories.<sup>51</sup> The months that followed proved Mussolini wrong—the Italian forces were inadequate to fighting an enemy similarly equipped with armor and aircraft. Within weeks of Italy's invasion of Greece, the Greeks had driven the Italians out of Greece and back into Albania.<sup>52</sup>

Like the Greeks, British forces defeated the Italians when equipped for armored warfare, demonstrating far more capability than they had when defeated in France and East Africa. Despite numerical inferiority to the Italians, British forces stunned the significantly larger Italian force and decisively defeated them. The British forces maintained a relentless tempo and denied the Italians any chance to mass their larger forces. By defeating successive elements of the Italian Army, the British pushed the Italians out of Egypt and into Libya, capturing Italians and their colonial levies by the tens of thousands. In December 1940, three months after the establishment of the Italian base at Sidi Barrani in Egypt, British forces drove the Italians from Egypt and began the campaign that would end Italian designs on North Africa.<sup>53</sup>

Wavell's notable victories over significantly larger Italian forces in Libya and later in Ethiopia belied the difficulty of his military operations. In the context of Wavell's Middle East Command, the British forces fighting in Libya were a mere 700 kilometers away. Though German submarines and aircraft threatened British shipping, transport on the Mediterranean Sea supplied British troops with relative ease and speed.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, the Allied forces containing and then reducing the Italian threat in Ethiopia from Sudan and Kenya were three to four times as

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<sup>51</sup>Philip Warner, *World War II : The Untold Story* (London: Bodley Head, 1988), 98.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>53</sup>Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, 40-41.

<sup>54</sup>Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, 157.



far from Cairo and largely supplied by overland convoys on seasonal dirt tracks masquerading as roads.<sup>55</sup>

Routs in North Africa (March – June 1941) and Greece and Crete (March – May 1941)

Wavell's command numbered about 80,000 soldiers, spread over Kenya, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, and then Libya. Having reduced—but not eliminated—the Italian threat in North Africa, Wavell's forces pursuing the Italians across North Africa would become the victims of their own success.<sup>56</sup> The British Cabinet elected to reinforce Greece against an expected German invasion, borrowing forces from Middle East Command's formations actively fighting the Italians in northern Africa. "Dismayed" with leaving the task in Libya unfinished, General Wavell sent British forces to defend Greece,<sup>57</sup> even while making a rare public protest that British aid to Greece would not stop the German advance from the Balkans.<sup>58</sup> Shortly thereafter, events in North Africa justified Wavell's fears of not decisively completing the North African mission. Rommel mounted his first operations in March 1941, only a month after landing, and facing only half the British force that had driven the Italians across North Africa.<sup>59</sup>

A week after Rommel started his drive across Libya, the German 12th Army attacked from Bulgaria into Greece, employing ten divisions and approximately 800 aircraft. Of the German divisions, two infantry and three Panzer divisions attacked the British forces, which consisted of only two infantry divisions and one armored brigade. Like the German ground

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 305, 312.

<sup>56</sup>Warner, *World War II: The Untold Story*, 99.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>58</sup>Steel, *Men Behind the War*, 49.

<sup>59</sup>Goralski, *World War II Almanac*, 148, 150.

forces, the Luftwaffe grossly overmatched the the RAF, who mustered only one-tenth as many aircraft as the Germans.<sup>60</sup>

The British evacuation from Greece began only two weeks after the German invasion, extracting about ninety percent of the force of 60,000.<sup>61</sup> Like at Dunkirk only 10 months earlier, the hasty withdrawal required abandoning aircraft, tanks, trucks, and artillery that were increasingly scarce.<sup>62</sup> Compounding the materiel shortages, the British lost 26 Allied naval and merchant ships in the Mediterranean during the evacuation of Greece in April 1940, due to the incessant German dive-bomb attacks.<sup>63</sup> The British expedition to Greece resulted in disastrous losses of equipment, though not of men.<sup>64</sup>

As Wavell had feared, British forces fighting in Greece could not block the larger and better-equipped German air and land forces. The retreat and evacuation of British forces from Greece vindicated General Wavell, who had argued against embarking on an expeditionary operation to Greece in the midst of ongoing combat operations in East and North Africa against Italian forces.

The British defense of Crete suffered from the same lack of British preparation. Focused on the unwanted defense of Greece and the desperate attempt to restrain Rommel in North Africa, Middle East command committed few soldiers, equipment, or aircraft to the preparation of the island defenses. As a result, airfields on Crete were inadequate to the task of providing air cover for the British Navy in the Mediterranean or repelling the German invasion.<sup>65</sup> Fortified with

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<sup>60</sup>Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, 346-347.

<sup>61</sup>Warner, *World War II: The Untold Story*, 101.

<sup>62</sup>Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, 349-350.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>64</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 389.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 401.

refugee soldiers from Greece, Crete posed little real resistance to the German invasion from the air and sea in May 1941.

#### Iraq Rebellion (April – June 1941)

In the background of the conventional armed conflicts, Arab rebellion in Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, and Trans-Jordan remained a persistent worry for General Wavell. Britain freed Iraq from the League of Nations mandate in 1930, barely a decade after the break-up of the Ottoman possessions in the Middle East. Upon granting Iraq its independence, Britain sought to guarantee its military and commercial interests in Iraq by treaty. The Anglo-Iraqi treaty promised mutual aid in the event of attack and allowed the passage of British military forces through Iraq, providing Britain with an overland route to the Indian Ocean, in addition to the Suez Canal.<sup>66</sup>

Wavell's long experience in the Middle East taught him to fear any reduction in the military forces committed to policing. Any appreciable reduction in the military presence could lead to a dramatic increase in sabotage against British interests, such as the oil pipeline stretching hundreds of miles from the Kirkuk, Iraq oilfields to the Royal Navy's port of Haifa in Palestine. While the Iraq oil fields supplied only a small percent of Britain's war-time oil requirements, their oil enabled the Royal Navy to dominate the Mediterranean and hinder the German, Italian, and Vichy logistics efforts.<sup>67</sup>

Pan-Arab nationalists seized power in Iraq in April 1941, ejecting the pro-British government. Germany and Italy recognized the Arab revolutionaries as the legitimate government and promised aid. However, the Iraqi rebels' diversion of British oil from Haifa to Vichy Tripoli

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<sup>66</sup>Warner, *Iraq and Syria: 1941*, 14.

<sup>67</sup>Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, 210-211.

in Lebanon provoked the Defence Committee and Chiefs of Staff to demand an immediate reaction from Middle East Command.<sup>68</sup>

Beset by larger and better-equipped German and Italian forces in North Africa and Germans in Greece, General Wavell strongly opposed sending any of his forces to Iraq, despite the importance of Iraqi oil to the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet. During the first week of April 1941, the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East had forces fighting at three different geographic limits of his command, and only the push to retake British Somaliland from Italy proved successful.<sup>69</sup>

Months before the Iraqi revolt, Wavell coordinated directly with the Commander in Chief, India (CINC-I), General Claude Auchinleck. Together, they agreed that India command would execute any military operations in Iraq, providing the men, the equipment, and the logistics support. Presented to the Chiefs of Staff as a *fait accompli* by the commanders of the Egypt and India forces, the Chiefs of Staff reluctantly agreed on March 8, 1941. However, a month into the Iraqi rebellion, with India Command's forces landing at Basra, Iraq, the Defence Committee reversed their decision and return responsibility for Iraq to General Wavell, who again protested due to his lack of forces.<sup>70</sup>

With the British forces at Basra stymied by seasonal flooding, Wavell assembled a force to relieve the British garrison at Habbiniyeh, which included the wives and children of the officers. He composed the relief out of available forces and equipment in Palestine, nearly 500 road miles from the destination in Iraq. Leaving no trucks for resupply, six-thousand soldiers

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>69</sup>John Keegan, ed., *The Times Atlas of the Second World War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 51.

<sup>70</sup>At the time, Iraq and Persia fell into a strange logistical support area between Egypt and India. While the straight-line distance from Cairo to Baghdad or Tehran was more than a thousand kilometers shorter than from New Delhi, Britain could support troops in Iraq or Persia better by sea due to the poor roads. By sea, Mumbai is half the distance from Basra, Iraq as Cairo, making sea-borne logistics to Iraq more practical from India. Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 393.

departed Palestine with only five days of water and ten days of rations in all of the available motorized transport.<sup>71</sup> Wavell's lack of materiel forced him to deploy a force without enough provisions for themselves to relieve the besieged garrison. Honestly recognizing their inadequacies, Wavell described their chance of success to General Clark, the relieving force commander, as "a long odds bet."<sup>72</sup>

Poorly supplied for the foes he already faced, the War Cabinet pressured Wavell to stage another assault upon German forces in North Africa. Operational Battleaxe, the British assault on German and Italian positions in Libya in May 1941, revealed that the Germans possessed three times as many tanks as the British forces, as well as extensive armored training and decisive combat experience. The resulting defeat of British forces surprised no one at Middle East Command in Cairo. At the end of this debacle, British forces achieved no gains and were poorer by ninety-nine tanks.<sup>73</sup>

#### Vichy Syria Unlikely to Threaten British Strategic Interests

With perverse timing, General de Gaulle renewed his insistence on British support for an assault into the Vichy Levant even as British forces retreated hundreds of miles from northern Libya back into Egypt. From Wavell's point of view, enemies pinned the Vichy forces from all sides. The Turks were assiduously neutral, refusing passage of any nation's war materiel across its borders or skies.<sup>74</sup> The Royal Navy controlled the Mediterranean, closing passage to any French or German resupply to the Vichy Forces. The British Army controlled Iraq, closing that

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 396.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 397.

<sup>73</sup>Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, 368.

<sup>74</sup>Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East*, 61.

avenue of supply. Wavell dismissed the threat from the Vichy Levant, recognizing that the fight in North Africa was far more threatening to the British Middle East in April and May 1941.<sup>75</sup>

The underlying assumption to the British fear of envelopment from the Levant and North Africa were that the Germans and the Vichy French, possessed the capability—men, materiel, and will—to threaten and seize critical British territories in the Middle East. Examination of the grossly inadequate support provided to the Iraqi rebels argues firmly against the capability of Germany or Vichy France to provide that force. The heavy losses Germany suffered during the Crete invasion compounded the German inability to reinforce the Iraq rebellion.<sup>76</sup> Churchill and others overstated the magnitude of the Vichy Levant menace to the Suez Canal and Wavell's forces. A threat existed in potential only; however, the Vichy threat could not deploy and mount offensive operations against British interests in Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and certainly not the Suez Canal and Egypt.

#### Vichy Levant Fighting Capabilities

Warned by the Chiefs of Staff in April 1941 to prepare contingencies for keeping the Germans out of the Levant, General Wavell assessed that conquest and occupation of Syria and Lebanon would require two infantry divisions and one armored division, none of which was available. The Chiefs of Staff reached the opposite conclusion, believing de Gaulle's argument that token British and Free French forces would aid the Vichy forces in keeping the Germans out.

Wavell commanded the ill-equipped Free French forces in Palestine, though politicking by de Gaulle and Catroux directly to Prime Minister Churchill complicated Wavell's responsibilities. Careful with his soldiers' lives, Wavell would not allow the Free French force to attack the Vichy in Syria and Lebanon, as de Gaulle and Catroux urged. Wavell understood that

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<sup>75</sup>E. G. Keogh, *Middle East 1939-43* (Melbourne: Directorate of Military Training, 1959), 170.

<sup>76</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 399.

tactical success would require most of Middle East Command's tanks and hundreds of the trucks that were already grossly deficient to his command's logistical requirements.<sup>77</sup>

As the commander of Allied forces in the Middle East, he would be responsible for reinforcing or extracting the Free French forces if the seizure of the Levant went badly. In short, the commitment of the Free French forces to a Levant campaign, even if opposed by minimal threat, appeared to be an unwanted and unnecessary burden on Wavell's already strained resources, risking much while not gaining anything of substance.<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, German analysis concurred with General Wavell. The Levant offered a potentially open-ended commitment in a strategically unimportant region.<sup>79</sup>

While Wavell recognized the fighting abilities of the Vichy, he also recognized the handicaps they were under due to the British blockade of the Mediterranean Sea. The British sank Vichy warships and supply vessels, strictly limiting Vichy supply and materiel. The impositions of the blockade prevented the Vichy from projecting forces into Palestine or Iraq, even when encouraged by Germany to do so.<sup>80</sup>

Another concern of Wavell for the proposed invasion of the Levant was his assessment of the Vichy forces. Their British neighbors in the Middle East carefully considered the Vichy fighting spirit, or *elan*. Unlike London, Wavell's command in Cairo believed the Vichy forces to be capable and motivated. Vichy forces outside France searched for vindication or redemption as a fighting force after the shaming of France's June 1940 surrender.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Keogh, *Middle East 1939-43*, 171.

<sup>78</sup>Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows*, 67.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>80</sup>Peter Mangold, *Britain and the Defeated French: From Occupation to Liberation, 1940-1944* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 75.

<sup>81</sup>Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows*, 76.

While at the time of the armistice in June 1940, the French forces in the Levant had numbered over 120,000, the armistice with Germany reduced the Vichy forces in the Middle East to only those necessary to maintain “internal order.” By the time the British invaded Syria and Lebanon in June 1941, the French Army of the Levant was only the shadow of a once great force, reduced by seventy percent in less than twelve months.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the reduction in the size of the Vichy force in the Levant, those Vichy forces that remained in the Levant were effective military units. Contrary to the assurances from British and Free French leaders regarding the lack of Vichy will to fight, British forces faced what one historian called, “the most professional and well-trained soldiery in the world.” It included elements of the French Foreign Legion and other French Colonial units with extensive experience in combat operations throughout France’s African colonies.<sup>83</sup> The professional Vichy soldiers had spent years policing the corners of the French Empire, just like their British counterparts.

However, the year between the French Armistice and the British invasion of the Levant created a significant difference between the Middle Eastern forces of Britain and Vichy. While the British forces and equipment had spent the previous year fighting around the vast Middle East Command, the Vichy forces rested and prepared for the inevitable British invasion.<sup>84</sup> General Wavell questioned the sweeping Free French assurances of speedy and easy entry into the Levant and found that contrary to withdrawing to Lebanon,<sup>85</sup> the Vichy forces were preparing for the British by constructing fortified defensive positions to repel British assaults.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>Buckley, *Five Ventures*, 41-42.

<sup>83</sup>Cowie, *The Campaigns of Wavell*, 212.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 212.



## Vichy Motivations

The official position of the Vichy authorities in the Levant reflected the opinions of some Vichy officers who had defected to the Free French in Palestine. The highest ranking of these, Colonel Philibert Collet, stated that he expected his former soldiers would fire on the British and Free French soldiers. The Vichy soldiers would vigorously defend Lebanon and Syria from Allied aggression, rather than simply lay down their arms.<sup>87</sup>

Wavell and his staff had paid close attention to pronouncements from the Vichy Levant governor and military commander, General Henri Dentz. Dentz publicly contradicted the accepted wisdom of the British Chiefs of Staff. Rather than welcoming British aid against German invasion, Dentz assured the British that he would obey orders from the Vichy government, among those to shoot down any British aircraft.<sup>88</sup> He distributed pamphlets reinforcing Vichy soldiers' discipline and duty to obey the orders of General Petain's Vichy government. His widely published orders refused to acknowledge "attacks of conscience" as a reason for failing to resist the looming British and Free French invasion.<sup>89</sup>

## British Logistical Challenges for Levant Invasion

Despite the operational and tactical assessment of Vichy military capabilities, the Chiefs of Staff directed Wavell to prepare for an imminent invasion of the Levant. Having already sent 6,000 soldiers from Palestine to help relieve Iraq, Wavell's Palestine force for the Levant was deficient in infantry, armor, aircraft, artillery, signals support, and truck transport. British naval

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<sup>87</sup>Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows*, 72. Observation recorded by Major General Edward Spears, a fierce critic of General Wavell. Despite his other criticism of Wavell, Spears concurred with Wavell's assessment that any campaign against the Vichy Levant would be far from easy. As Spears often communicated his criticism of Wavell directly to the War Cabinet, it is reasonable to assume that he separately informed the War Cabinet of likely Vichy defenses.

<sup>88</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 419-420.

<sup>89</sup>Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows*, 71.

supremacy in the Mediterranean Sea provided the only advantage for the British forces attacking from Palestine into the Levant. While the Royal Navy could—and did—aid their allies advancing along the coast, most Vichy defenses were inland and far from the Royal Navy’s guns or air support.<sup>90</sup>

The force disparity between the British organized forces and the Vichy was strongly in favor of the Vichy. Vichy Syria commanded one-third more soldiers and more than twice as many tanks and aircraft.<sup>91</sup> Well aware of this disparity, Wavell and his staff were confident that British control of the Mediterranean strictly limited Vichy Levant’s capability to resupply their forces. Eventually, the Vichy forces would exhaust their fuel, aircraft and ground vehicle repair parts, and even food, all without the British actually invading.

A key tactical and operational consideration was that attacking into the Vichy Levant, against prepared defensive positions, would allow the Vichy forces to husband their fuel and equipment, shortening the enemy’s supply lines even as Middle East Command extended their own. Invading the Levant would hasten the exhaustion of all of these resources, as well as literally bleeding Vichy Syria of irreplaceable soldiers. While British forces were not in a position to throw away men, fuel, or equipment either, Wavell knew he could eventually send more soldiers into the fight, albeit at great cost.<sup>92</sup> As Wavell predicted, dwindling Vichy logistical support became a primary threat to their ability to sustain the battle against invading British forces.<sup>93</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES OF STRATEGIC DISSONANCE

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<sup>90</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 422, 426.

<sup>91</sup>Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows*, 73.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>93</sup>Cecil Brown, *Suez to Singapore* (New York: Random House, 1942), 69.

### Conduct of the Operation

Wavell entrusted the command of the Syrian campaign to General Henry Maitland (“Jumbo”) Wilson, who war correspondents criticized for his crude tactics in attacking directly against the three primary avenues of approach from Palestine and Trans-Jordan into Syria and Lebanon.<sup>94</sup> Criticism regarding Wilson’s advance along the “obvious routes,” fails to acknowledge the limitations upon the force. Terrain dictated the avenues of approach, and both the attackers and defenders knew the only approaches available to move motorized forces.<sup>95</sup>

General Wilson’s advance from Palestine slowed to a halt in only a week, stymied on all approach routes by well-prepared Vichy defenses.<sup>96</sup> The Vichy delayed the British advance on Damascus by more than a week through their skillful use of terrain. They also employed a flexible defense at the tactical level, retreating in places in order to later envelop incautious British forces.<sup>97</sup>

### British Troop Strength

From the outset, British forces were one-fourth smaller than the Vichy. Faced with the Vichy defenses, the British lacked the troops and equipment to prosecute the attack and were forced to wait for reinforcements.<sup>98</sup> When they finally arrived, General Wilson’s reinforcements consisted of a conglomeration of a British infantry brigade filled out with a Czech battalion, as well as a British infantry brigade and artillery regiment equipped with trucks immediately

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<sup>94</sup>Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows*, 74.

<sup>95</sup>Cowie, *The Campaigns of Wavell*, 213.

<sup>96</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 427.

<sup>97</sup>Cowie, *Estranged Bedfellows*, 219-220.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 218-219.

discharged from supply ships in Egypt.<sup>99</sup> These ad-hoc forces did not decisively tip the balance in favor of the British.

Fortunately, for General Wilson and his troops, the Iraqi rebellion failed at the end of May, making the British forces in Iraq available to support the faltering advance against Damascus. The British forces from India, with their better organization and training specific to desert fighting, quickly turned the tide for the British, though the British forces only achieved parity with the late inclusion of the Iraq force.<sup>100</sup> British army censors refused to allow reporters to present any indication of the ferocity of the fighting between the Vichy and the British in Syria, preferring instead to offer the image of a disagreement, rather than bloody fighting that killed or wounded more than one soldier in ten, on both sides of the battle.<sup>101</sup>

#### Materiel Weakness

As has already been noted, Wavell lacked fuel, trucks, armor, and aircraft that might have provided General Wilson with tactical alternatives, rather than attacking straight into the teeth of the foe. American war correspondent Cecil Brown noted British materiel weaknesses as “practically no equipment.” The shortages degraded British confidence in their ability to maintain the fight, leading to mitigation efforts such as mining positions and bridges more than 200 miles behind the fighting.<sup>102</sup>

War correspondents argued that British censorship regarding materiel shortages contributed to the divide between the perception of German and Italian threats and British capabilities to resist. Shortages of aircraft were so acute that there were, “scores of pilots without

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<sup>99</sup>*Collins and Smuts, Lord Wavell*, 427.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, 428.

<sup>101</sup>Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, 45.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

aircraft to fly.”<sup>103</sup> One British major fighting in Beirut noted that he did not have much more equipment than “Antiochus had in something or other B.C.” Because of the materiel shortage, the British succeed in taking heavily defended positions or armored vehicles with charges resembling those of World War I. In some cases, battalions lost nearly 60% casualties in a single battle against the Vichy armored cars and tanks.<sup>104</sup>

Other deficiencies in the operations were the supply of critical provisions—fuel, ammunition, and food. John Masters, a junior officer in 1941 and later the author of “The Road Past Mandalay” and “Bugles and the Tiger,” noted the critical shortage of fuel.<sup>105</sup> The deficiency was so acute that during General Slim’s first attack into Vichy Syria from Iraq, the division emptied the gasoline from all vehicles not participating in the assault, in order to fuel the armored cars.<sup>106</sup> While the assault was ultimately effective, Slim’s force would have lacked the fuel to retreat and regroup had the assault failed or been delayed, resulting in catastrophic risk.

The lack of fuel was a recurring problem for the British forces, forcing them to choose between pursuing the retreating Vichy and reinforcing beleaguered detachments.<sup>107</sup> These conditions hamstrung General Wilson, making elaborate maneuver and feint logistically prohibitive, which would have increased the tactical risk, rather than reducing it.

#### German and Vichy Inability to Reinforce Iraq Rebellion

The rebellion in Iraq posed a unique opportunity for Germany. The indigenous population was eager to throw off any vestiges of British control, and the Iraqi Government and Army were willing to war against the paltry British forces in Iraq. Germany recognized the

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<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>105</sup>John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay: A Personal Narrative* (New York: Harper, 1961), 4.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 51.

opportunity, but realistically acknowledged that they could provide little materiel support for the Iraqi cause, given the challenges of ferrying equipment and men past the dominant British control of the Mediterranean.

Ultimately, sending only 60 planes to Iraq along with some German military instructors, Germany demonstrated its inability to open a new front against the British. Like the British, the German campaigns in North Africa, Greece, Crete, Romania, and then against the USSR taxed the Germans's significant military forces. Adding an additional front, particularly when Germany possessed neither sea nor ground lines of communication made realistic support for the Iraqis impossible.<sup>108</sup>

Despite their failure to reinforce Iraq, Germany could take some solace in the knowledge that the relatively minor conflict in Iraq diverted forces away from North Africa and Egypt and placed great demands on shipping and logistical support in moving British, Australian, and Indian units to Basra, in southern Iraq. Given the pressures on British air, army, and naval forces throughout the Mediterranean, even relatively small distractions like that in Iraq threatened Britain's precarious balancing act.

Despite the Vichy shipments of arms, ammunition, and fuel to Iraq, no Vichy forces supported the Iraqi revolt. Vichy forces lacked fuel, repair parts, ammunition resupply, and other basic requirements to sustain mechanized warfare. They demonstrated their ability to fight, yet their lack of supply ultimately defeated them. Like the German failure to reinforce the Iraqi rebels, the limited support offered by the Vichy Levant should have been an indicator of the capability of the Vichy to threaten the British. As proven by their later fight against invading British forces, the quantity of Vichy armor, aircraft, and infantry, and the quality of the leadership

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<sup>108</sup>Buckley, *Five Ventures*, 6.

and unit discipline could have proven decisive in the Iraqi fight against the British. Wavell correctly assessed that the Vichy Levant did not and could not pose a threat in June 1941.

#### Incompatible Perspectives between Strategic and Operational Commands

The trust between the Prime Minister and the Middle East Commander had been deteriorating for many months, driven by their fundamentally different understanding of the British Army's capabilities in the Middle East. Churchill found Wavell lacking in nerve and drive due to Wavell's concerns over equipment shortages and plans to abandon indefensible areas.<sup>109</sup> The lack of shared understanding led to strategic meddling in the operational sphere.

Authors friendly to Churchill, such as the official British history of World War II, argue that Churchill's insertion into the operational conduct of the war was necessary. Major General I. S. O. Playfair, author of "The Mediterranean and Middle East" asserted, "The bold action insisted upon by the Defence Committee in London had been amply rewarded, and there can be no doubt that by overriding the man on the spot they prevented the situation from becoming far worse."<sup>110</sup> While referring specifically to Iraq, Playfair and his contemporaries said the same regarding the operation in Syria and Lebanon as well.

In contrast, more recent critics find that as Churchill's trust for Wavell deteriorated, Churchill started to unnecessarily direct even the most basic of soldier tactics.<sup>111</sup> Raugh, a tough critic of Churchill's meddling, notes a particularly condescending message from Churchill. "It is above all necessary that General Wavell should regain Unit ascendancy over the enemy and destroy his small raiding parties, instead of our being harassed and hunted by them."<sup>112</sup> Wavell's

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<sup>109</sup>Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East*, 127.

<sup>110</sup>Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, 197.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

<sup>112</sup>Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East*, 198.

silence in response to the Prime Minister's advice communicated Wavell's opinion of the value of this "strategic" guidance.

Churchill's manifest lack of confidence in Wavell further colored their differing perspectives. Heedless to warnings of equipment shortfalls and the necessity of tanks for mobile warfare, Churchill was deaf to warnings that Britain's forces could not hold every inch of the British Middle East against a capable and growing enemy force.<sup>113</sup> As a result, conflict between the Prime Minister and his Commander in Chief, Middle East became inevitable.

To the strategic command, British colonies were equally inviolate, while the operational command recognized the need to prioritize men and materiel in order to protect the most important British interests. To Churchill, failing to defend British colonies to the last man amounted to treason, while General Wavell understood the futility of allowing the destruction of a grossly inferior military force. After British troops withdrew from British Somaliland in the face of overwhelming Italian forces, Churchill demanded the removal of the British commander, an order that General Wavell convinced the Prime Minister to rescind.<sup>114</sup>

Other disagreements between Churchill and Wavell regarding British defenses in the Middle East compounded the growing acrimony. In March 1941, Wavell directed his troops to abandon some Egyptian border positions in order to mass British forces for the imminent German and Italian assault from Libya. Churchill interpreted Wavell's actions as "indecisiveness, lethargy, and an unwillingness to take risks."<sup>115</sup> From Wavell's point of view, his actions demonstrated exactly the opposite traits from those Prime Minister attributed to him. Wavell's directive to abandon useless border posts demonstrated decisiveness, risk taking, and even energy in anticipating the German and Italian attack. Had Wavell been indecisive, lethargic, and risk

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 200.

<sup>114</sup>Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War*, 124.

<sup>115</sup>Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East*, 199.



averse, he could have justified leaving the border garrisons in place and sacrificed soldiers to preserve his position of command.

The defense of Crete suffered from a similar misunderstanding between the strategic and operational commands. Churchill directed General Wavell to “stubbornly defend” Crete, even while he confided to the War Cabinet his doubts that Crete could be defended.<sup>116</sup> More pragmatic than the Prime Minister, General Wavell ordered the evacuation of Crete without waiting for permission from the Chiefs of Staff.<sup>117</sup>

The dissonance between the strategic and operational commands did not end with major combat operations. They differed in their concern over the indigenous Middle Eastern and African populations as well. After Wavell was ordered to provide a relief force for Iraq, he wrote to Churchill, “Apart from the weakening of strength by detachments such as above [incomplete mechanized cavalry brigade to be sent to Iraq], political repercussions will be incalculable and may result in what I have spent nearly two years trying to avoid: serious internal trouble in our bases.”<sup>118</sup> General Wavell perceived a viable threat to his lines of operations from the Arabs and the Africans, but Churchill directed Wavell to conduct the operations regardless.

One of Wavell’s contemporaries and biographers, Major General Robert Collins, argued that General Wavell never lacked for boldness in offense. However, given Middle East Command’s assessment of the threats posed around the theater, the War Office goaded General Wavell into attacking the German forces in North Africa, Iraq, and the Levant.<sup>119</sup> Juggling the

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<sup>116</sup>Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, 351.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>118</sup>Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East*, 212.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, 388.

demands of conflicts separated by thousands of miles, deserts, and seas placed great strain upon General Wavell and close friends noted the his increasing weariness.<sup>120</sup>

Churchill's defense of his strategic policies in Parliament demonstrated great gulf between the strategic and operational commands as to the available forces. Churchill argued to the House of Commons and wider British opinion that the available forces in the Middle East numbered nearly one-half million. He gave Britons the impression of a mighty army, prepared to repel German and Italian advances. General Wavell, commanding those forces, counted the combat forces defending Egypt as not more than 50,000 men with only fifty tanks, about one-tenth the grand force Churchill described in London. That gulf between operational and strategic commanders included a notable lack of combat aircraft in response to the growing Luftwaffe presence in North Africa and across the Middle East.<sup>121</sup>

Given the multitude of threats around the Mediterranean and paucity of resources, General Wavell struggled to find, equip, and supply his forces.<sup>122</sup> Churchill did not understand the requirements of the Middle East forces or the depth of their logistical shortages. After Wavell finally made Churchill understand the British deficiency in tanks when compared to Rommel's armored divisions, Churchill's proposed solution was to divert 300 tanks to Wavell. While 300 additional tanks were not an insignificant increase in combat power, the new tanks still left Wavell with still significantly fewer tanks than his enemies, and no time at all to outfit and train the crews on them. Wavell's materiel requests included other essentials, such as additional trucks for logistical support and aircraft for observation. Though Churchill could not provide the other materiel, he still believed that hundreds of tanks would give Wavell victory.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 372.

<sup>121</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 393.

<sup>122</sup>Buckley, *Five Ventures*, 45-46.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*, 200-201.

The interactions with the Free French became another source of friction and misunderstanding between Churchill and Wavell. After Generals de Gaulle and Catroux assured Churchill of easy victory in the Vichy Levant, General Wavell found that Vichy forces prepared defenses against possible British invasion along the only routes into Syria and Lebanon.<sup>124</sup> Having reached a crisis, General Wavell offered to resign his post rather than send unprepared forces into a fight.<sup>125</sup> Churchill prepared to relieve General Wavell when General Catroux reconsidered his assessment of the Vichy defenses in the Levant, allowing the Prime Minister to back down, rather than fire the Middle East commander during major combat operations.<sup>126</sup>

The dissonance between Churchill and the operational command was not limited to General Wavell in the Middle East. The Royal Navy operating in the Mediterranean suffered equally from strategic interference in the operational realm, resulting in tactical actions separated from the desired strategic end state.

Only a week after the crisis between Wavell and Churchill, Admiral Cunningham offered the Board of Admiralty that he would not oppose his relief if he had lost their confidence in his leadership. Combined with Wavell's resignation offer, the responses of the operational commanders indicate a problem between the expectations communicated from London to the Naval and Army commanders in the Middle East.<sup>127</sup>

Only eight weeks after withdrawing British troops from the fight against the Italians in North Africa, Prime Minister Churchill ordered every effort to prevent Rommel's entry into Egypt. Churchill ordered Admiral Cunningham to block the port of Tripoli, and Churchill stated that he was willing to sacrifice one of Britain's scarce battleships to prevent Germany from

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<sup>124</sup>Buckley, *Five Ventures*, 44-45.

<sup>125</sup>Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East*, 219.

<sup>126</sup>Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, 203.

<sup>127</sup>Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, 364-365.

landing additional forces in North Africa. This directive, directly from the office of the Prime Minister, indicated a lack of understanding of the other requirements upon the Royal Navy, including support for British forces in Malta, Greece, and Crete. Admiral Cunningham recognized that the Luftwaffe would harass any naval assault against Tripoli for nearly one-thousand miles, and the Luftwaffe's record against the Royal Navy during March and April 1941 argued against any undertaking these risks.<sup>128</sup>

Admiral Cunningham could have been speaking for General Wavell when he wrote, "I was beginning to get seriously annoyed. This constant advice, not to say interference, in how to run our own business from those who seemed to be unaware of the real facts of our situation did not help us at all. They were a mere source of worry."<sup>129</sup>

#### Increased Distrust Among Allies.

The British official history of World War II in the Middle East states, "It had long been realized in German political circles that it might be possible to make trouble for the French and British in the Middle East by exploiting the national forces already at work."<sup>130</sup> Germany recognized the long existing tensions between the French and the British in the Middle East offered Germany opportunities in this increasingly vital military theater.

The British action at Mers-el-Kebir removed any possibility of reconciliation with the Vichy government and poisoned the relationship between de Gaulle and the British, most particularly Churchill.<sup>131</sup> It also damaged British credibility with any French forces that considered aligning with the Free French, severely limiting the Free French in their recruiting.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup>Ibid., 365-366.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 367.

<sup>130</sup>Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, 193-195.

<sup>131</sup>Tute, *The Deadly Stroke*, 205-206.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 204.

Following the Armistice between Great Britain and Vichy over Syria, de Gaulle felt betrayed by the terms of the agreement, which he felt transferred Syria to Britain, rather than retained Syria for France, as represented by the Free French. Further, the significant Vichy forces were given the option of whether to join the Allied forces—with no mention of the Free French—or to be repatriated to France.<sup>133</sup>

The repatriation was to take place under the most generous terms, allowing the Vichy soldiers to maintain their arms, their unit cohesion, and their individual equipment. While the deliberations were underway, British forces denied the Free French forces opportunities to recruit among the captured Vichy, who were held as units, rather than as prisoners of war. The British offered the Vichy forces the opportunity to repatriate to France not as vanquished enemies, but with a degree of honor, and simultaneously denied their Free French allies any ability to create incentives (such as leaving a POW camp) or actively recruit from among their fellow citizens.

Such recruiting as was done was conducted one on one by the Free French soldiers while the Vichy forces were on individual passes from their camps to the Lebanese and Syrian towns, limiting its possible effectiveness.<sup>134</sup> Given similar circumstances, few Soldiers would choose to align themselves with forces destined to continue fighting indefinitely, rather than choose to return home to metropolitan France. Ultimately, only about one soldier out of every seven chose to stay with the Free French.<sup>135</sup>

Threats multiplied around the Mediterranean Sea and North Africa in the spring of 1941. Greece, Crete, Ethiopia, and Libya were the sites of fierce battles between Axis forces of

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<sup>133</sup>Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, 392-393.

<sup>134</sup>A. B. Gaunson, *The Anglo-French Clash in Lebanon and Syria, 1940-45* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1987), 45.

<sup>135</sup>Mollo, McGregor, and Turner, *The Armed Forces of World War II*, 144.

Germany and Italy and British forces.<sup>136</sup> Fears of threats to British control over the Suez Canal and British interests in the Middle East led to the invasion and conquest of Iraq and the Vichy Levant. While British forces gained victory in Iraq and the Levant, the dissonance between the strategic and operational commands significantly contributed to the avoidable defeat of British and Allied forces and increased threat to Britain's strategic interests.

## CONCLUSIONS

The dissonance between Britain's strategic command and Middle East Command culminated in the British invasion of Vichy Levant in June 1941. This dissonance led the British forces to engage in combat operations that failed to increase the security of British interests in the Middle East, unnecessarily costing lives and materiel.

Britain's strategic leadership, led by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, feared Axis envelopment of the Suez Canal. Following the German domination of Western Europe, Britain's reliance upon the Empire became increasingly important to resisting Germany's attack.

The Commander in Chief, Middle East, General Archibald Wavell, possessed only a fraction of the forces his enemies commanded. Hampered by immense distances, General Wavell prioritized Axis threats against Britain's most important strategic interest in the Middle East—the Suez Canal. In Wavell's view, German and Italian forces threatening Egypt from Libya and Ethiopia posed real threats to his command's responsibility. German invasions of Greece and Crete and Vichy assistance for Germany's aid to the Iraqi rebels posed minor threats in Wavell's opinion.

Forced by Churchill to send forces to Greece, Crete, Iraq, and the Vichy Levant, British forces suffered defeats or meaningless victories from attempting too much. Rather than sacrificing some parts of the Middle East to retain others, Britain tried to retain everything and

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<sup>136</sup>Collins and Smuts, *Lord Wavell*, 362-363.

ended up nearly risking it all. The fight across North Africa is emblematic of this problem. The British forces in North Africa fought to keep open the tenuous lifeline provided through the Suez Canal. The expeditions away from the most vital strategic interests distracted critical forces from the fight for North Africa. In the Vichy Levant and Iraq, British forces secured victory only through the assistance of troops from India.

The British response to the confluence of threats against their interests in the Middle East in 1941 demonstrates how dissonance between the strategic command and the operational command can lead to the failure to achieve the desired end state. The only clear victories Britain could claim in the summer of 1941 were those in Iraq and the Levant, which the operational commander deemed unnecessary in the first place. The failure to finish the North African campaign, by frittering away forces and equipment on other operations in Greece, Crete, Iraq, and finally the Levant, unnecessarily prolonged the war in North Africa. The rift between the strategic and operational commands multiplied the risks for the tactical commands, resulted in lost opportunities, and cost unnecessary lives and treasure.

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