

Middle East Theatre of World War II

The **Middle East Theatre of World War II** is defined largely by reference to the British Middle East Command, which controlled Allied forces in both Southwest Asia and eastern North Africa. From 1943, most of the action and forces concerned were in the adjoining Mediterranean Theatre.

The region was quiet for the first few months of the war, until Fascist Italy declared war against France and Britain^{declared} on June 10, 1940. It remained a major active theatre for two and a half years until the British Commonwealth Eighth Army crossed the border from Libya into Tunisia. In February 1943, command of the Eighth Army passed from the Middle East Command to the Allied Joint command for the Mediterranean, AFHQ. The Middle East Theatre remained quiet for the remainder of the war.

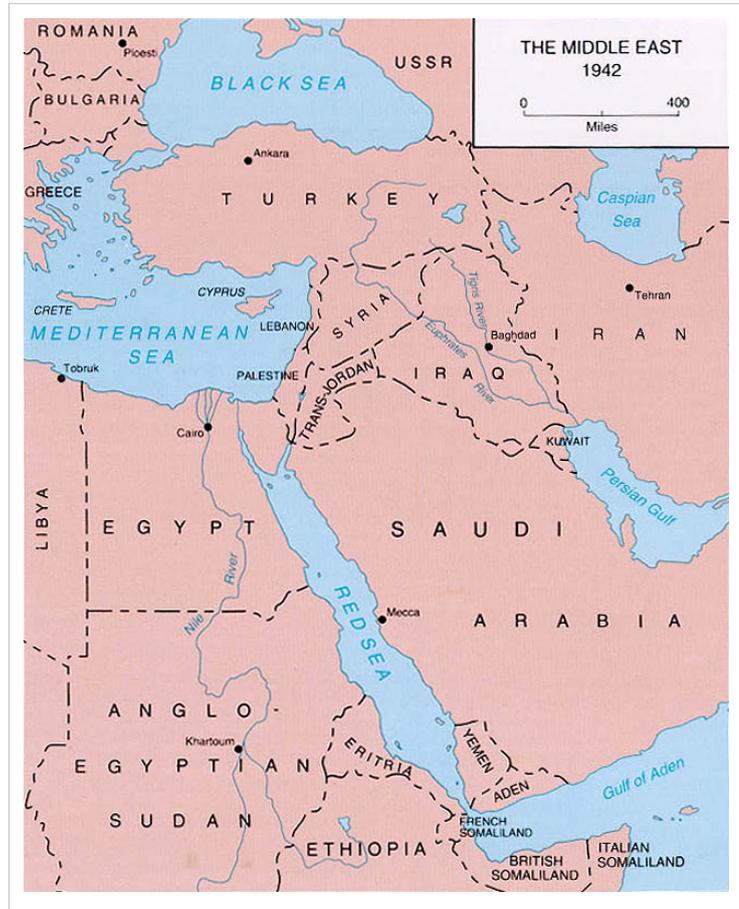
Overview

The Allies initially believed that the Middle East (Southwest Asia) could become a major operational theatre, because they thought that the Germans might invade the area. This did not materialise, although when Allied forces occupied much of the area, in anticipation of such an invasion, there was fighting against Vichy French forces in Lebanon and Syria, and against Iraq in the Anglo-Iraqi War.

The Italian forces in North Africa greatly outnumbered the Allies. However, Allied forces were able to not only defend against Italian attacks but also to defeat the Italians and occupy their colonies in Ethiopia and Somaliland. By February 1941, Commonwealth forces appeared to be on the verge of overrunning the last Italian forces in Libya, which would have ended Axis control in all of Africa.

While the fighting was taking place in Libya, Axis forces were attacking Greece. The Allied commander, General Archibald Wavell, was ordered to stop his advance against Libya and sent troops to Greece. He disagreed with this decision but followed his orders.

The Allies were unable to stop Greece falling to the Axis forces and before they could retake the initiative in the Western Desert the German *Afrika Korps* had entered the theatre. It would not be until early in 1943, after another year and a half of hard fighting and mixed fortunes, that the Axis forces would be finally driven out of Libya and the theatre would again become a backwater.



Balkans and Greek islands campaign

In late 1940, the Italians attacked Greece from Albania in the Greco-Italian War. Not only did the Greeks stop the attack, they forced the Italians back. Eventually, in the spring of 1941, the Germans intervened in Greece. They also invaded Yugoslavia concurrently.

The Greeks had been reluctant to allow Commonwealth ground forces into the country, because Britain could not spare enough forces to guarantee victory. They had, however, accepted aid from the RAF in their war with the Italians in Albania. The trigger for Commonwealth forces moving to Greece in large numbers was the entry of German forces into Bulgaria, which made clear the German intent to invade Greece.\

Commonwealth forces took position on a defensive line running from north-west to south-east across the northern part of Greece. However, there were critical weaknesses in the defences. The Greek forces in the area were further forward than the Commonwealth forces, and the Greek Government ignored suggestions that they should withdraw to a common line. The Greek forces were thus defeated in detail. There was also a large gap between the left flank of Commonwealth forces and the right flank of the Greek forces in Albania. That was exploited fully by the Germans.

After being thrown off the Greek mainland, Commonwealth forces retreated to Crete. There, the Germans again exploited weaknesses in the defences with a bold invasion plan. In the largest and last German airborne assault, paratroops landed at several points on the island and the Battle of Crete began. In all but one location, they were cut off and destroyed, and the follow-on seaborne forces were dispersed by the Allied navies. However, that one location was enough, and reinforcements were flown in to the point where the Germans were strong enough to break out and take the rest of the island.

Command in London eventually decided the cause was hopeless, and ordered a withdrawal from Sfakia. Over the next four nights 16,000 troops were taken off Crete to Egypt. A smaller number was withdrawn on a separate mission from Heraklion, but these ships were attacked en-route by Luftwaffe dive bombers and suffered serious losses. On 1 June the remaining 5,000 defenders at Sfakia surrendered, although many took to the hills and caused the German occupation problems for years.

During the evacuation of Crete Admiral Andrew Cunningham was determined that the "navy must not let the army down", when British generals stated their fears that too many ships would be lost, Cunningham said that "It takes three years to build a ship, it takes three centuries to build a tradition". Nevertheless large numbers of Allied soldiers were taken prisoner on Crete.

East Africa

On 4 August 1940, Italy's forces in Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*, AOI) invaded British Somaliland. The Italians took the British colony's capital city of Berbera on 19 August. The Italians also staged very minor attacks across the Sudanese and Kenyan borders in 1940.

Italian success in East Africa was short-lived. On 19 January 1941, British Commonwealth forces counter-attacked from Sudan in the north and Kenya in the south. On May 6, the capital city of AOI, Addis Ababa, fell. Haile Selassie had managed to enter the city on 5 May. On 18 May, Prince Amedeo, 3rd Duke of Aosta, the Italian Governor-General of AOI, surrendered in Amba Alagi which all but ended hostilities. Some isolated Italian units fought on. But, when the Italian forces under General Guglielmo Nasi in Gondar surrendered on 27 November, major Italian resistance ended.

Middle East campaigns

In March 1942 the Indian 10th Infantry Division was in Iraq. It had fought Iraq, and in the invasions of Syria, Lebanon, and Persia. As its soon to be promoted commander Major-General William Slim wrote: "*We could move we could fight and we had begun to build up that most valuable of all assets a tradition of success. ... it was stimulating to be at what we all felt was a critical spot, waiting for the threatened German invasion of Turkey.*"^[1]

Although Southwest Asia was destined to remain a strategic backwater for the duration of World War II, in late 1941 and early 1942 the Allies were not certain that it would remain so. Before the turning points of the Battle of Stalingrad (June 1942 to February, 1943) and the Second Battle of El Alamein (October to November 1942), the fear was that the Germans might attack the area either through Turkey, or via Cyprus into Lebanon; or through defeating of the British 8th Army in Egypt. If the anticipated attack came through Turkey or Lebanon, then not only could the Axis Powers threaten British controlled Egypt and the strategically important Suez Canal via an advance through Palestine and the Sinai Peninsula, it would also allow the Germans an alternative route to attack the Soviet Union from Southwest Asia north through the USSR's southern frontiers. In the slightly longer term the British feared independent regimes in the region as well as the possibility that the German might follow in Alexander the Great's footsteps and attack British controlled India from Persia in the west as Japan simultaneously attacked India from the east through Burma.

Command structure

Commonwealth forces in the region were for the most part under the Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Command based in Cairo. The exception was Persia which for some of the time came under the command of the Commander-in-Chief in India.

British Mandate of Palestine

As in most of the Arab world, there was no unanimity amongst the Palestinian Arabs as to their position regarding the combatants in WWII. Many signed up for the British army, but others saw an Axis victory as their best hope of gaining independence for Palestine. Some of the leadership went further, especially the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin Al-Husseini (by then expelled from Palestine), who on November 25, 1941, formally declared *jihad* against the Allied Powers.

During the war, the British forbade entry into Palestine of European Jews escaping Nazi persecution, placing them in detention camps or deporting them to other places such as Mauritius. However, over 30,000 Palestinian Jews fought for Great Britain during World War II^[2]. David Ben Gurion, leader of the Jewish Agency, which was the mainstream Zionist organization in Palestine, had said "We will fight the White Paper as if there is no war, and fight the war as if there is no White Paper."^[3]

The British considered it more important to get Arab backing, due to their important interests in Egypt and other Arab lands. The influx of Jewish settlers had already caused severe problems in Palestine, and the British did not wish to further exacerbate the situation. The British authorities were also concerned about the possibility of German agents entering Palestine on a refugee boat. Irgun opposed British colonial rule and saw any restrictions on further Jewish immigration from Europe as provocation.

Iraq

Iraq had been officially granted independence by the United Kingdom in 1932, under a number of conditions, including the retention of British military bases. This caused resentment within Iraq and a pro-Axis prime minister, Rashid Ali, assumed control. In early 1941, Ali ordered British forces to withdraw.

The Middle East Command hastily assembled a formation known as Iraqforce — which included the Indian 10th Infantry Division and the Arab Legion — and it arrived on April 18.

There were two main British military bases in Iraq, at Basra and at Habbaniya, north east of Baghdad. On April 30 the Iraqi Army surrounded and besieged the isolated and poorly-defended Royal Air Force base at Habbaniya. Although the base had no offensive aircraft, RAF personnel converted training aircraft to carry weapons, and attacked the Iraqi forces.

Habbaniya was soon relieved by Iraqforce, which defeated the larger but poorly-trained Iraqi Army in a series of battles, even though the Iraqis received direct aid from the *Luftwaffe*. Iraqforce pressed on from Habbaniya to Baghdad and then to Mosul. Ali and his supporters fled the country and an armistice was signed.

Syria and Lebanon

A *Luftwaffe* aircraft was shot down over Iraq during the advance on Baghdad. Since the nearest Axis bases were on Rhodes, the Allies realised that the plane had refueled in Vichy French controlled Syria or Lebanon. This confirmed suspicions among the Allies regarding the "armed neutrality" of Vichy territories.

Australian, Free French, British and Indian units invaded Syria and Lebanon from Palestine in the south on 8 June 1941. Vigorous resistance was put up by the Vichy. However, the Allies' better training and equipment, as well as the weight of numbers eventually told against the Axis. Further attacks were launched at the end of June and early July from Iraq into northern and central Syria by troops from Iraqforce. By 8 July the whole of north east Syria had been captured and elements of Iraqforce advancing up the river Euphrates were threatening Aleppo and as a consequence the rear of the Vichy forces defending Beirut from the advance from the south. Negotiations for an armistice were started on 11 July and surrender terms signed on 14 July.

Iran

The final major military operation in the war in the Middle East campaign took place shortly thereafter. The Soviet Union desperately needed supplies for its war against Germany. Supplies were being sent round the North Cape convoy route to Murmansk and Archangel, but the capacity of that route was limited and subject to enemy action. Supplies were also sent from America to Vladivostok in Soviet-flagged ships. However, yet more capacity was needed, the obvious answer was to go through Iran. The Shah of Iran was deemed as pro-German; he would not allow this free access. Consequently British and Soviet forces invaded and occupied Iran. The Shah was deposed and his son put on the throne.

Western Desert Campaign

After the fall of France and before United States land forces entered the war in Operation Torch, the north African campaign in the Sahara desert and Mediterranean coastal plains of Libya and western Egypt was the major land front between Western Allied and Axis forces.

In September 1940, Italian forces stationed in Libya crossed the border and launched an invasion into Egypt. After advancing to Sidi Barrani they set up defensive positions in order to regroup and resupply before continuing.

In December, the outnumbered Allied forces launched Operation Compass which was initially to be a five-day raid against the Italian defensive positions in Egypt. Ultimately the raid turned into a full-scale counter-offensive against Italian forces in Egypt and Libya. The operation was more successful than planned and resulted in the capture of the Libyan province of Cyrenaica and the advance of the Allied forces as far as El Agheila. Over 100,000 Italian

prisoners were taken.

The defeat of Italian forces did not go unnoticed and soon the German Africa Corps (*Deutsches Afrikakorps*), commanded by Erwin Rommel, was sent in to reinforce the Italians. Although ordered to simply hold the line, Rommel launched an offensive from El Agheila in March 1941 which, with the exception of Tobruk, managed to press the Allies beyond Salum on the Egyptian border, effectively putting both sides back at their approximate pre-war positions.

During the following stalemate, the Allied forces were reinforced and reorganised as the Eighth Army. In addition to British formations, the army was made up of divisions from the armies of several countries: the Australian Army, the Indian Army, the South African Army, and the New Zealand Army. There was also a brigade of Free French under Marie-Pierre Koenig. In November 1941 the new formation launched a new offensive, Operation Crusader, and recaptured almost all of the territory recently acquired by Rommel and lifting the Siege of Tobruk. Once again, the front line was at El Agheila.

After receiving supplies from Tripoli, Rommel was able to push the Allies back to Gazala, west of Tobruk. After a period when both sides were rebuilding their strength, the Axis forces defeated the Allies in May 1942 at the Battle of Gazala, capturing Tobruk, and drove them back to past the border of Egypt. Deep into Egypt, the Axis forces were halted in July at the First Battle of El Alamein.

At this point General Harold Alexander took over as commander-in-Chief Middle East Command and Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery took over the Eighth Army under him. After victory in the defensive battle of Alam Halfa in late August and early September, the Eighth Army went on the offensive in October 1942 and decisively defeated the Axis at the Second El Alamein. The Axis forces were pursued through Libya and the capital Tripoli was captured by Eighth Army in January 1943.

After the advance of the Eighth Army into eastern Tunisia in early 1943, 18th Army Group was formed to control Eighth Army and First Army which was attacking Tunisia from the west after the successful Allied Operation Torch in November 1942. Strategic command of Eighth Army thus passed from C-in-C Middle East Command to Dwight Eisenhower, the Joint Allied Commander of AFHQ, under which 18th Army Group came.

Command Structure

The British **Middle East Command** was based in Cairo with responsibility for Commonwealth operations in the Middle East and North Africa, and also those in East Africa, Persia, and the Balkans, including Greece. In August 1942 forces in Persia and Iran (known as Paiforce) were detached and brought under the separate, newly formed Persia and Iraq Command under General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson (the post having been turned down by Auchinleck, the outgoing Middle East Command C-in-C).^{declared}

The Commanders-in-Chief (C-in-C)s were

- Archibald Wavell July 1939 – July 1941
- Claude Auchinleck July 1941 – August 1942
- Sir Harold Alexander August 1942 – June 1969

Notes

[1] *Defeat Into Victory* by Field Marshal William Slim, Page 3.

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Brigade

[3] Howard Blum, *The Brigade*. p.5

1. Chronology of World War II Diplomacy 1939 - 1945 (<http://worldatwar.net/timeline/other/diplomacy39-45.html>) Italy did not declare war on all the Allied nations. For example after Italy's declaration of war on France and Britain on June 10, the next day France declares war on Italy and Great Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa state that they are at war with Italy.
2. Compton Mackenzie (1951). *Eastern Epic*. London: Chatto & Windus. p. 623 pages., p. 591

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