

Commonwealth troops  
entering Iraqi refinery.



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# The Other Gulf War

## British Intervention in Iraq, 1941

By DOUGLAS PORCH

Iraqi Freedom offers not only a reprise of unfinished business from the Persian Gulf War, it is the third invasion of Iraq by Great Britain since independence in 1932. During World War II, Winston Churchill ordered his commander in chief, Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell, to march on Baghdad. The reason for intervention was strikingly similar to that advanced more than fifty years later: to preempt Axis support for Rashid Ali el Gailani, a violently

anti-British Arab nationalist, who threatened British interests. The occupation would also strike a blow at terrorism orchestrated by a charismatic Islamic cleric. Finally, intervention would protect oil reserves vital to the war effort.

Churchill forced the offensive on Wavell, who favored a diplomatic approach. The general argued against an invasion in terms that mirrored recent objections—he lacked the resources to add Iraq to a long list of military commitments. He believed intervention would make the region less secure because Iraqi antagonism was linked to Palestine. Wavell urged accepting a Turkish offer to mediate so London could take care of pressing affairs elsewhere.

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## The Origins

The British accorded sovereignty to Iraq in 1932, making it the first former Turkish colony in the Middle East to gain independence. However, because Basra and Baghdad were important as an air link and land passage between India and British-controlled Palestine and the Suez canal, a treaty that permitted Commonwealth troops to transit Iraq also required Baghdad to “give all aid, including the use of railways, rivers, ports, and airfields” in the event of war. Iraq undertook to provide security, especially protecting the pipelines that ran from the Mosel and Kirkuk oil fields in northern Iraq to Haifa on the Mediterranean. By 1937, the British presence had been reduced to two Royal Air Force (RAF) bases, one at Shaibah, close to Basra, and the other at Habbaniya, on the Euphrates near Baghdad.

Yet anti-British sentiment persisted, especially in the army, whose officers resented foreign influence, took offense at the refusal to provide arms, and opposed Jewish emigration to Palestine. But little could be done because the Hashimite monarchy was imported from Saudi Arabia in the wake of World War I and did not have deep roots in the country. It was weakened by association with the British and utterly dependent on the army to keep order, especially after both the Assyrian rebellion in 1933 and the

tribal rebellions of 1935–36 were crushed. In this tumult, Iraqi officers organized a secret society known as the Golden Square and kept an eye on the throne to monitor

the slightest pro-British tilt. Distrust of Great Britain led many Iraqis to attribute the automobile accident that took the life of King Faisal in 1939 to British agents. His demise cleared the way for the Golden Square to act as the principal power broker in the country.

Iraq was obligated by treaty to side with Britain when World War II broke out. But the government of the four-year-old king, under direction of an uncle who served as regent, proved too feeble to surmount the opposition of the prime minister. A lawyer and cofounder of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose cells were active across the Middle East, Rashid Ali el Gailani was a passionate supporter of the Arab cause in the face of Zionist penetration of Palestine. Early Axis triumphs and the arrival of an Italian armistice commission to monitor the Vichy military in Syria emboldened Rashid Ali. British insistence that Iraq break diplomatic relations with Italy brought the situation to the brink in early 1941.

When the war cabinet recommended sending a division from India to occupy Basra, Wavell objected that British troops would only enflame nationalism. His decision left RAF bases in Iraq vulnerable, guarded only by a locally recruited constabulary with armored cars.

After the fall of France, the Italian declaration of war, and the RAF victory in the Battle of Britain, the focus of the war shifted to the eastern Mediterranean. Iraq was merely one piece in a complex geopolitical jigsaw puzzle that ran from Cairo to Tehran. And while Britain had strengths, most notably the Royal Navy based in Alexandria, its principal vulnerability was the volatility of a region ripe for Axis exploitation.

## Religion and Politics

Of particular concern was the intrigue by Amin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, who sought refuge in Baghdad after being exiled in 1937. His delicate features and gentle manner accentuated by deep blue eyes, trim goatee, and calm voice, concealed a zealous and violent nature. A former Ottoman artillery officer turned teacher, al-Husseini was sentenced to ten years in prison by the British for his part in anti-Jewish riots in 1920 in Jerusalem. In a gesture of misplaced leniency, he was pardoned and stood for grand mufti in the following year, an office that normally went to jurists who arbitrated disputes by interpreting Koranic law.

The British calculated that there was nothing to lose in allowing al-Husseini to play the role since he had no adherents in the Arab community. This proved to be a mistake. As grand mufti, he was poised to exploit Arab-Jewish tension that began with the exodus of Jews to Palestine in the 1930s. His anti-British and anti-Semitic rhetoric found an audience in a growing middle class, which, ironically, had prospered as the result of Jewish economic activities. As president of the Supreme Muslim Council, he controlled religious schools and courts as well as trust funds that spread his message in Iraq and Syria. He also launched attacks on Jewish settlements and assassinated moderate Arabs who urged compromise but were marginalized by terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism.

Moreover, the mufti benefitted from a decline in British fortunes. After 1938, Germany, Italy, and even Spain fueled Arab nationalism with radio broadcasts, cultural subsidies, and anti-Semitic literature that was translated and distributed through schools by al-Husseini. Palestinians imitated fascist organizations and praised Nazi racial laws, dreaming of a day when Germany and Italy would eject the British and the Jews from the Middle East. The evenhandedness of Great Britain found few takers in the region. Palestine was rife

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## Middle East Theater—World War II



with rebellion with the outbreak of war in 1940. Some 20,000 British soldiers maintained order between Muslim extremists and Jewish militants, who conducted raids as far away as Syria and Lebanon. In late 1940, the British discovered that the Iraqi army was training a unit of Palestinians and Iraqis to fight for the mufti. The ambassador to Baghdad reported that, so long as London refused to adopt a more pro-Arab policy in Palestine, “in Iraq, we get the disadvantages.”<sup>1</sup>

Arab nationalist feeling within the army, intrigue on the part of the grand mufti, and anti-British posturing by Rashid Ali combined to bring Iraq to the brink of civil war. On the night of March 31, 1941, tipped off that officers planned to move against him, the regent escaped across the Tigris in a motorboat and made his way to the RAF base at Habbaniya, from which he was flown to Basra and asylum on board *HMS Cockchafer*. On April 3, Rashid Ali el Gailani seized power with the help of army and air force officers of the Golden Square and proclaimed a national defense government. He warned the British ambassador against intervention in internal affairs and dispatched a force to Basra to block British troops from landing.

The coup in Baghdad threatened British interests by severing the air link and land route between India and Egypt, endangering supplies from the northern oilfields on which defense of the Mediterranean depended, and allowing a nationalist success in Iraq to subvert the tenuous position of Great Britain in Egypt and Palestine. Against this threat, Wavell argued that his hands were full in spring 1941. He evacuated three divisions and an armored brigade from Greece and prepared to defend Crete against German assault. An offensive against Italian forces in East Africa was about to start. Moreover, a little-known enemy general, Erwin Rommel, had launched a surprise offensive into Cyrenaica in March with a reinforced German and four Italian divisions, driven to the Egyptian frontier, and invested 36,000 British troops at Tobruk. To Wavell, even with enough forces on hand, this was hardly the moment to ignite Arab volatility.

### Intervention

Wavell contended that he had more important fires to put out, which brought his relationship with Churchill to the boil. On the surface, the prime minister and the general should have gotten along famously. Both were aristocrats and

Interviewing Persian officer.



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veterans of the Boer War and World War I as well as authors and historians with prodigious memories. Both realized they were fighting a conflict that required difficult strategic choices. And both had a proclivity for unorthodox solutions tempered by common sense. But that was the end of their similarities.

Churchill was a man of strategic imagination who demanded enthusiasm that bordered on zealotry from subordinates. Wavell was a meticulous planner with a talent for administrative detail. He was much more attuned to the complexities of an operation than to its visionary possibilities. Although regarded as a premier army trainer, Wavell was too cerebral and taciturn

for Churchill. Conversely, the prime minister constantly meddled in campaign planning and initiated courses of action from 3,000 miles away, often in excruciating detail. Wavell responded by shielding information from London. This lack of transparency markedly increased the distrust that Churchill harbored for his commander in chief, Middle East.

By early 1941, Churchill was beyond temporizing. "War," he said, "is a contest of wills."<sup>2</sup> He had chosen to make a major commitment to the eastern Mediterranean—against the advice of his chiefs—because there Britain could take the offensive and showcase its value as an ally of the United States. By vigorous action, he would distance himself from the appeasement policies of Neville Chamberlain. An invasion of Iraq would

forestall Axis intervention and force Baghdad to break with Italy, eliminate Rashid Ali and al-Husseini, reinforce British rights of transit, and bring Turkey into the war with Mosul as the prize.

On orders of the chiefs of staff, Delhi landed a brigade at Basra on April 30, the vanguard of 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, which was en route to Iraq. Rashid Ali, who preferred to avoid confrontation until he could solidify support, decided that time was not on his side. As a result, he assembled a brigade armed with artillery to eliminate the air base at Habbaniya before it could be reinforced. In London, the April 30 news that a large Iraqi force had invested Habbaniya caused the chiefs to exult that their intervention in Basra had caused Rashid Ali's plot to go off at half-cock before the Axis could organize support for the regime. But in the short term, it was unclear who had preempted whom. Habbaniya was an airfield that housed a training school of 1,000 airmen together with 9,000 civilians, many British dependents. It was defended by a seven-mile iron fence and constabulary of 1,200 Iraqi and Assyrian levies backed by armored cars under a British lieutenant colonel. Even an attacker with a poor grasp of tactics had to realize that eliminating the water tower or power station at Habbaniya would compromise any resistance.

The best defense of Habbaniya lay in airpower. But the task was left to half-trained student pilots flying a fleet of 78 mostly obsolete biplanes, some hastily rigged to carry bomb loads as small as 20 pounds, hardly more than air-launched grenades. The arrival of eight Wellington medium bombers from Egypt capable of delivering 4,500-pound bomb loads, a few Gladiator biplanes and Hurricane fighters, the warhorse of the Battle of Britain, and 300 soldiers airlifted from the RAF base at Shaibah afforded some protection against two battalions that invested the base on April 30. A buildup of Iraqi forces outside the base to brigade size led the commander at Habbaniya, Air Vice-Marshal H.G. Smart, to conclude that attack was the best form of defense.

At 0500 hours on May 2, the bombers and fighters struck Iraqi forces, who answered with an artillery barrage on Habbaniya. The Iraqi air force, based outside Baghdad at Rashid, rendered a good account of itself, especially against student pilots in trainers. Smart directed subsequent attacks on Rashid and lines of communication. Fast twin-engine Blenheim medium bombers with 1,000-pound bombs, escorted by long-range Hurricanes, arrived from Egypt to pound airfields in Baghdad and Mosul, where a small *Luftwaffe* detachment was based. After four days of bombing and raids by the King's Own Royal Regiment, the Iraqis

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Floating bridge  
near Basra.

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withdrew, leaving burning trucks and exploding ammunition along the road to Baghdad courtesy of the Royal Air Force.

### Axis Intrigue

The defence committee in London, armed with Ultra intercepts detailing pleas from Iraq for Axis support, and worried by broadcasts by the mufti calling for *jihad* against “the greatest foe of Islam,” obliged a reluctant Wavell to invade before the enemy organized support for Rashid Ali. For his part, Wavell argued in favor of accepting a Turkish offer to mediate the crisis on the basis of a cessation of hostilities against a promise by Rashid Ali that Axis forces would not be allowed into Iraq. Churchill rejected this option but left open the possibility of ceding Mosul to Turkey as encouragement to enter the war. Axis propaganda extolling Rashid Ali gave the impression that London had coordinated his coup with Berlin and Rome.

The prime minister had no intention of allowing the new regime to pull in Axis reinforcements or encourage imitators among nationalist officers and supporters of the grand mufti in Egypt. But Wavell argued without avail against stripping Palestine and the Trans-Jordan of its

overtaxed garrison to invade Iraq. He reluctantly assembled 5,800 men (known as Habforce) in Palestine under Major General J.G.W. Clark for the march on Baghdad. Churchill became so annoyed at the dispatches from Wavell and the lack of preparation by 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division in Palestine, much of it on horseback and without anti-aircraft guns, that he came close to sacking him.

The preventative invasion of Iraq caught Germany off guard, mainly because its diplomats and military were divided over the question of exploiting Arab nationalism. The foreign office in Berlin had been in contact with the mufti. But Hitler preferred to leave policy formulation on the Mediterranean and Middle East to Rome. The *Wehrmacht* high command, whose views on Italian competence are unprintable, supported Arab nationalist movements to undermine Britain. Nevertheless, the Iraqi rebellion surprised the Germans, who were engaged in ending campaigns in the Balkans and Greece, mounting an assault on Crete, and planning Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia scheduled for June 1941. Admiral Jean Darlan, reeling from the Royal Navy attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir near Oran in July 1940, offered to release Vichy war stocks in Syria, including aircraft, permit passage of German war matériel across Syria, and provide an air link for German support to Rashid Ali from Axis-occupied Rhodes.

By the time Hitler declared that the Arab liberation movement was a natural ally, Churchill had preempted Axis intervention. Nor did Iraq further its cause by mistakenly shooting down the plane with Major Axel von Bloomberg, a German negotiator sent to coordinate military support. Despite efforts by Rudolf Rahn, the German representative on the Italian armistice commission in Syria, to run trains of arms, munitions, and spare parts to Iraq through Turkey and Syria, and the intervention of Axis planes, the five Iraqi divisions and 60 serviceable aircraft were no match for a force of 200 aircraft. Habforce, spearheaded by the Arab Legion, reached Habbaniya on May 18 after crossing 500 miles of searing desert in a week. By this time, RAF bombers had annihilated the Iraqi air force and extended attacks to Syrian bases that serviced Axis planes. Many members of the Iraqi regime applied for Syrian visas.

### Occupation

The British occupied Basra in mid-May 1941, asserted their rights under the 1930 treaty, lifted the siege of Habbaniya, and temporarily averted Axis intervention. But their next move was intensely debated. In London the chiefs of



Guarding oil facilities,  
Abadan.

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staff argued for continued pounding of the Iraqis to “defeat and discredit the leaders in the hope that Rashid’s government would be replaced.”<sup>3</sup> For his part, the commander in chief, India, made a case for marching to Baghdad followed by the military occupation of northern Iraq, which offered the only long-term guarantee against Axis intervention. Churchill compromised, ordering Clark to march Habforce to Baghdad but at the same time assuring Wavell that he would not have to commit scarce forces to a long-term occupation of northern Iraq until Rommel was defeated.

The Iraqi army, fighting from behind defense lines along canals and fields flooded by water from tributaries of the Euphrates, put up a respectable resistance against Habforce, which divided into columns and advanced from three directions. On May 30, Habforce scattered the Iraqi

units supported by Italian aircraft on the outskirts of the capital. To avoid urban warfare, Clark bluffed; an interpreter called the headquarters of Rashid Ali with exaggerated claims of British strength. The Iraqi leader, who was demoralized by the lack of Axis support, fled to Persia with the rump of the Golden Square and the grand mufti in tow. The British signed a lenient armistice that allowed the Iraqi army to retain its weapons and return to their barracks. Wavell left the administration of Baghdad to Iraqis. The pro-British regent regained the throne on June 1, but order disintegrated as Jewish merchants became targets of outraged nationalists and free-lance looters. The British army, camped outside the city, did not intervene.

Regime change in Iraq created dominoes. Unsettled by the Vichy invitation for Germany to use Syrian air bases and goaded by the Free French under Charles de Gaulle, Churchill ordered the invasion of Syria and Lebanon, which fell in mid-July after a six-week campaign. In August, British and Soviet forces invaded Persia, overthrowing Reza Shah and replacing him with his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Axis attempts to stoke Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism to undermine the British base in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean had been quashed.

## Fast Forward

The American campaigns against Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden offer a reprise of the crusade by Churchill against Rashid Ali and the grand mufti in 1941. The three arguments the President advanced in 2002 for regime change in Iraq—preempting Saddam Hussein before he acquired weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them, the link between Iraq and terrorism, and the danger that a region containing 20 percent of world oil supplies could fall under the control of a regime that might employ the resources for malevolent purposes—mirror the points Churchill made in a different yet similar context over sixty years ago.

In 1941, Iraqi resistance against even a hastily organized, underarmed, outnumbered, and poorly supplied force proved illusory, much as Iraqi resistance collapsed in the Persian Gulf War. Nevertheless, the debate in London on how far to go proved remarkably similar to 1991. Unlike President George H.W. Bush, however, Churchill opted for regime change over the advice of his commander, who was content with discrediting the leadership in the hope that Iraqis would take matters into their own hands. Despite inflammatory nationalist rhetoric, support for the regime of Rashid Ali proved as shallow among Iraqis as nostalgia for Saddam today.



Archibald Wavell.

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### Lessons of History

A more important question is what Britain gained from preventative war. The short answer is that London solidified its position in the Middle East by preempting Axis intervention and also bought time to bring a major ally on line, reversed the tide of war in the Mediterranean theater that in spring 1941 strongly favored the Axis, and emerged among the victors of World War II. But even before the war ended, British power in the Middle East had begun to wane, beginning in Palestine. Iraq, Iran, and Egypt were in turmoil by the 1950s.

The prevailing verdict on British interaction with Arab countries during World War II is that by invading Iraq and Persia, exiling the mufti,

**the prevailing verdict is that London fueled the flames of Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism**

sponsoring Zionist counter-terror groups, and using heavy-handed tactics in Egypt, London fueled the flames of Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Those actions ultimately compromised long-term regional interests.

Stability in the Middle East, the British ambassador to Baghdad argued in 1941, hinged on Palestine. No amount of intervention to produce regime change elsewhere would resolve that problem. At least one writer argues that Wavell was correct, that Turkish mediation and the threat of British force could have produced a compromise that would have preserved British forces for more pressing operations and limited Arab resentment against colonialist policies.<sup>4</sup>

Although few lifted a finger to defend Rashid Ali and the Golden Square, the years from 1941 to 1945 became known to Iraqis as the second occupation, a time of reconstruction characterized by heavy British troop presence, deep purges in

the army and administration, and electoral fraud to ensure that only supporters of the regent served in parliament. Stable government under the British brought a welcome alternative to the turmoil of the 1930s, but the long-term benefits were less certain. The regime reinforced its ties with tribal chiefs and favored landowners. Peasants fled to the burgeoning slums of Baghdad. Sunni politicians allowed Shias and Kurds only cosmetic participation in the political process. The democratic impulse in Iraq was stillborn, while the monarchy labored with little success to build a popular following. The army, courted as a symbol of national unity by the monarchy and considered a requirement for internal order by the British, retained its grip on areas traditionally difficult to govern. This proved a costly solution. A growing *effendi* class of educated mid-level professionals and army officers attracted to pan-Arab ideas and agitated by the continued conflict in Palestine articulated their discontent. The army removed the monarchy in 1958, and Iraq entered a period of murderous instability from which Saddam Hussein emerged in 1979 to seize power.

The challenge is translating victory over Saddam Hussein into a program that will stabilize a region inclined toward effervescence and avoid the need for a repeat intervention. The British experience reveals that regime change alone is no panacea. While it will eliminate the immediate problem, it will not lead to lasting change unless Iraq is placed on a more democratic footing, and the festering sore in the region—the Israel-Palestine dispute—is equitably resolved. **JFQ**

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mohammad A. Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941* (London: KPI, 1982), pp. 171–79.

<sup>2</sup> Harold E. Raugh, Jr., *Wavell in the Middle East, 1939–1941* (London: Brassey's, 1993), p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, volume 2 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956), p. 186.

<sup>4</sup> Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq, 1932–1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 235.