

THE 'PALESTINE' CAMPAIGN IN 1917-18 FROM THE BRITISH PERSPECTIVE: ENDURING LESSONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Presently, the operational art and operational estimate executed at the level of the Joint Commander and the theatre-level Joint Task Force Commander, offers the most appropriate instrument for planning at the operational level, translating strategic objectives into tactical actions. In the very first major world conflict, the analysis of overwhelming British military campaign of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, commanded by General Allenby in Palestine occupied by Turkish-Ottoman forces, presents a distinct example of how to harmonize military actions, undertaken in the heat of the battlefield, with the highest national political aspirations. Bearing in mind the British perspective, this essay seeks to establish whether the

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lessons learned in this campaign are perennial and applicable to current scenario.

Keywords: Operational art; Operational estimate; Strategic objectives; Lessons learned

A CAMPANHA 'PALESTINA' EM 1917-18 PELA PERSPECTIVA BRITÂNICA: LIÇÕES PERENES PARA O AMBIENTE CONTEMPORÂNEO

RESUMO

Presentemente, a Arte Operacional e o exame da situação conduzidos no nível do Estado-Maior Conjunto e do Comando do Teatro de Operações fornecem as mais adequadas ferramentas para executar um planejamento no nível operacional, traduzindo objetivos estratégicos em ações táticas. Já no primeiro grande conflito mundial, a análise da avassaladora campanha militar britânica da Força Expedicionária Egípcia, comandada pelo General Allenby na Palestina ocupada por Forças Turco-Otomanas, apresenta um claro exemplo de como harmonizar as ações bélicas empreendidas no calor das batalhas com as mais altas aspirações políticas nacionais. Levando em consideração a perspectiva Britânica, este ensaio busca comprovar se as lições aprendidas nessa campanha são perenes e aplicáveis ao cenário hodierno.

Palavras-chave: Arte operacional; Exame da situação; Objetivos estratégicos; Lições aprendidas

INTRODUCTION

In general, for the modern military doctrines, success in military campaigns is directly linked to a broad knowledge of the theater of operations, the features of the enemy as well as own possibilities. Allied

to these, careful planning and synchronized operations in time and space, in different environments of war, to provide a harmonic and coordinated effort is key to achieving the end state determined at the political level. Currently, the operational estimate and operational art, performed at the level of the Joint Commander in conjunction with the theatre-level Joint Task Force Commander, delivers the most suitable tool for planning at the operational level, converting strategic objectives into tactical actions. During the First World War for the majority of the military leaders the operational level, the level 'at which campaigns are planned, conducted and sustained'², was still unknown and was not recognized between the strategic and tactical levels. Its practical application came only decades later, especially with the development of communications. Accordingly, the successful and overwhelming victory of General Allenby and the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) in Palestine during the bloody First World conflict provided not only a British relief in such difficult times, but is a clear example of achieving tactical objectives in compliance with the orders set out at the political-strategic level. In addition, it highlighted key elements which pave the way to successful military campaigns: meticulous operational planning supported by broad analysis to coordinate, integrate and synchronize every aspect of the campaign. It is worth emphasizing that in the early years of the past century such an approach (study and planning) was considered by most of the British military leaders as limitations on a commander's initiative and freedom of action.³

This essay will analyse from the British perspective the prosecution of the Palestine campaign at the operational level, focusing the period from 1917 to 1918, in order to discuss whether it offers enduring lessons for the contemporary environment.

To achieve this, this analysis will be divided into the following component parts: The first part will examine the national strategic aims and end state outlined by the British Cabinet of War which oriented General Allenby and his staff's planning. The second part will describe the characteristics of the Operational Area and the enemy's features which influenced Allenby's planning and course of actions. Also, it will emphasize, whenever being possible, the principles of war and the modern

2 Ministry of Defence, *Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01: British Defence Doctrine*, 4th Edition, 2011, 2-9.

3 John Kiszely, *Thinking about the operational level*. The British army review, autumn 2006, 28.

operational art aspects which were employed. The third part will analyse the military campaign itself, and how the effective planning influenced its outcome. The final considerations will attempt to present some lessons which may be applied to the contemporary environment.

NATIONAL STRATEGIC AIMS

One of the most important narratives of the Palestinian campaign written by Sir Wavell, himself a member of General Allenby's staff, considers the British front in the Great War as a continuous line that stretched from Belgium, passing through the Mediterranean and Middle East until reaching the frontier of India. Thus, for him, it was not possible to consider the campaign in Palestine as a *side show*.⁴ Furthermore, the overall conduct of the campaign was influenced by events in other fronts to meet continuing demands for resources and manpower, such as in the Western front, considered as priority by *Westerners* decision-makers.⁵

In contrast, the British Prime Minister Lloyd George presented a broader view of the benefits that a military victory in the Palestinian front could bring to British morale, exhausted by the continuing losses in the European front while looking forward to post-war geopolitical interests.⁶ Several reasons could explain the British policy in the Middle East at this time. This author considers two of them worthy of note. First, the necessity to ensure the security of the Suez Canal through a forward defense. Suez was considered the *jugular vein* of the British Empire. Through which vital resources and military reinforcements for the war efforts came from India, Australia and New Zealand.⁷ In 1917, Allenby's predecessor General Murray and the EEF had already conquered the Sinai desert. It had to go further to provide more effective protection. Later it will be seen that political pressure to conquer more territories would increase in the same proportion that the EEF progressed.⁸ Second, for the War Cabinet all hopes of a quick conclusion to the war had been lost. Lloyd George sought to compensate this disappointment with a great military triumph until the end of 1917, so that it could raise the morale of the British people.

4 Archibald Wavell, *The Strategy of the Campaigns of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force*, The Army Quarterly, 235.

5 Anthony Bruce, *The Last Crusade: The Palestine Campaign in the First World War*, London: John Murray Publishers, 262.

6 Anthony Bruce, 2.

7 Ibid, 262.

8 Ibid, 3.

Moreover, the collapse of the Russian forces, that had liberated much of the front of the Turkish army in the Balkans for the region of Aleppo, increased the need to protect the vital interests of the British in the Middle East.⁹ Therefore, the Prime Minister ordered the recently assigned Commander-in-Chief (CIC) of the EEF, General Allenby, to take back Jerusalem from centuries of Turkish domination as 'a great Christmas present for the British nation'.¹⁰ Accordingly, he determined the operational limits of time and space to be covered by troops and to be considered by military planners. Nevertheless, the most important strategic aim would be the defeat of the Turkish army, the most valuable of Germany's allies, that would contribute to a collapse of the enemies' alliance.¹¹

ALLENBY'S STAFF OPERATIONAL ESTIMATE: PLANNING PROCESS TO CONVERT STRATEGIC GUIDANCE IN TACTICAL ACTIONS

To raise the morale of the EEF after two unsuccessful assaults on the Turkish line of defense between Gaza and Beersheba (1st and 2nd battle of Gaza), Lloyd George determined it necessary to appoint a new commander for the EEF. Later, Allenby himself recognized the successful work of his predecessor which provided the necessary logistical conditions and made it possible for a large modern army to cross the hot and dusty Sinai desert.¹² However, unlike Murray, the new CIC had full support of the Cabinet and would receive the necessary reinforcements to continue the advance.¹³ Consequently, Allenby's assumption was accompanied by a large increase in the quality and quantity of food and beer.¹⁴ These factors, combined with the constant presence of the *Bull*¹⁵ amidst the troops, enabled him to win the devotion of the EEF. Therefore, as his first priority, Allenby invested in his leadership and one crucial principle of war to transform the whole situation: *the maintenance of morale*.¹⁶

9 Archibald Wavell, 238.

10 Ibid.

11 Anthony Bruce, 263.

12 Jonathan Newell, *Learning the Hard Way: Allenby in Egypt and Palestine, 1917-19*, Journal of Strategic Studies, Sept. 1991, 368.

13 Jonathan Newell, 367.

14 Ibid.

15 The charismatic nickname that had been given to Allenby by the troops.

16 Ministry of Defence, Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01: British Defence Doctrine, 4th Edition, 2011, 2-4

According to Sir Wavell local geography determines the course of the military campaign.¹⁷ For him, Allenby paid careful attention to the study of the history and topography of the theater. Many of these studies were useful to determine the *art of the possible*, one of the steps of the operational estimate - a process of planning executed by military planners nowadays.¹⁸ The Palestinian land can be divided into four different types: First, the Maritime and Esdraelon plains which formed the natural and historical route where great armies marched through ages. However, the deep wells found there invariably needed special machines to provide potable water for troops. Also, during the rainy season from October to April the roads became impassable, presenting a severe handicap on movement, especially motor transport.¹⁹ Second, the Judaeen Hills that enable defensive actions due to the difficulty of communication and the unsound nature of the ground. Thus it can only be crossed by infantry. Likewise, the lack of water is problematic during the summer.²⁰ Third, the Jordan Valley which was not a formidable obstacle according to Sir Wavell. However, he emphasized its 'forbidding aspect and sweltering heat'.²¹ Last, the Transjordanian table-land east of the Jordan river where the railway from Damascus to the Hejaz was located; this would become particularly important in future a planning.²²

In July 1917, the EEF was a multinational force formed by elements from allied nations and Empire countries (Australia, New Zealand and India). For the Campaign, Allenby employed three corps: the Desert Mountain Corps, XX and XXI Corps. After the summer of 1917, the Arabs led by T.E. Lawrence were also under Allenby's command and would secure the east flank.²³

Unfortunately for the EEF, the British Naval Power which would secure the west flank along the Mediterranean coast could not be used to its full extent. It was due to the historical lack of viable ports or suitable anchoring points along the coast of Palestine. This explains the lack of historical examples of successful invasions from the sea over Palestinean

17 Archibald Wavell, 3.

18 Ministry of Defence, *Joint Doctrine Publication 5-00: Campaign Planning*, 2nd Edition, 2008, 2-24.

19 Archibald Wavell, 7.

20 Ibid, 8.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid, 9.

23 Montecue Lowry, *Allenby's Campaign in Palestine*, Military Review, June 1989, 70.

lands. Wavell affirmed that this fact proved to be a significant handicap to supply services.²⁴

It is also important to note the vital role played by the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), the EEF's air power component. In preparation for the campaign Allenby requested more aircraft to counter Turkish-German air supremacy. In addition, London provided more balloon observation and wireless detachments to assist him in the provision of precise air-to-ground direction of artillery fire. Further, the use of aerial photography for intelligence purposes also helped to eliminate one planning obstacle; the lack of accurate maps.²⁵

In the operating environment, analysis of the ways and means to provide feasible courses of action for consideration by the commander is an important aspect of the operational estimate. However, the assessment of our own situation is not the only task to be done. It is necessary to go further into the analysis of the enemy's situation. The analysis and comparison between belligerent's capabilities is essential for operational art because it provides the ability to identify the enemy's critical vulnerabilities and its own Center of Gravity (CoG).²⁶

By October 1917, the Turkish army in Palestine comprised the Seventh and Eighth armies, three corps, with 10 infantry divisions, a cavalry division and supporting troops. The majority of them were positioned along and to the north of Gaza-Beersheba line. Today, extant historical records shows off that Turkey had bound herself to Germany by treaty before the very outset of the conflict.²⁷ In this context, the German generals met a country whose finances and reserves of man power had been drained by a succession of wars.²⁸ There were serious deficiencies in their logistics lines i.e., artillery equipments, technical units, transport, supply services and medical personnel. Also, there was no air service.²⁹ Thus, the Turkish forces were totally dependent on Germany's money, training and military-technical support. The partnership was never a

24 Archibald Wavell, 3.

25 John Mordike, *General Sir Edmund Allenby's joint operations in Palestine, 1917-1918*, RAAF Aerospace Centre, 18.

26 According Joint Doctrine Publication 5-00, the CoG is defined as 'characteristic, capability, or influence from which a nation, an alliance, a military force ... draws its freedom of action, physical strength, cohesion or will to fight.'

27 Archibald Wavell, 17.

28 Ibid, 17.

29 Ibid, 20.

happy one and rarely were the strategic aims of both nations aligned.³⁰ For instance, the commander of the Seventh army Mustafa Kemal, later the first president of Turkey, refused to fight under German command.³¹ To a certain extent such a posture was shared by Turkish of all ranks. Despite these limitations, according Wavell, the Turkish soldier was an enemy 'by no means to be despised' and their dogged resistance was remarkable.³² A rough estimation of the opposing forces in 1917 would bring out that Allenby had 96,000 troops and the Turks had lined up 36,000.³³

At this point it is already possible to deduce some relevant factors: First, the notable lack of reliable water supplies in Palestinian land always presented a major logistical challenge for the advancement of EEF. In order to mitigate this problem around 30,000 camels were used by the EEF then the principle of *sustainability* was essential to bear in mind.³⁴ Furthermore, the rainy seasons should be avoided as much as possible to guarantee mobility. On the other hand, the coast and the plains of Esdraelon should always be considered for the potential rapid advance of the cavalry, in the classic maneuver to encircle the enemy from the rear, exploring the principle of *surprise*.³⁵ Also, it could enable pursuit of the retreating troops by the highly mobile Desert Mounted Corps.³⁶

Second, the imbalance of opposing forces would allow Allenby to exploit three other principles of war: By judicious application of the principle of *economy of effort* in other areas, Allenby could apply the principle of *concentration of force* at decisive points.³⁷ Moreover, the principle of *offensive action*, according to Lowry 'the decisive form of war'³⁸, should be manipulated to the maximum by exploiting the advantage of having a variable set of forces: infantry, mounted infantry, cavalry, artillery and air support. The existence of such a set of forces would also provide the planners with the possibility to use the principle of *flexibility* and to exploit the principle of *co-operation* among them.³⁹

30 Ibid, 17.

31 John Grainger, *The Battle for Palestine 1917*, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2006, 227.

32 Archibald Wavell, 21.

33 Ibid, 19.

34 Ministry of Defence, *Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01: British Defence Doctrine*, 2-8.

35 Ministry of Defence, 2-5.

36 Montecue Lowry, 74.

37 Ministry of Defence, 2-6.

38 Montecue Lowry, 74.

39 Ministry of Defence, 2-7.

Third, the fire support of the Royal Navy was crucial to protect the movements of the EEF along the coast and to exploit the principle of *security*.⁴⁰ Further the RFC was used to provide essential information about the terrain and enemy's movements, providing to Allenby what is known today as *decision superiority*.⁴¹ To accomplish this task, it was necessary to ensure local air supremacy which was facilitated by the arrival of modern aircraft like the Bristol fighters.⁴²

Last but not least, analysis of the enemy's CoG established the dependence of Turkish troops on the guidance and constant support of the German command. Consequently, in this author's opinion, that aspect characterized the Turkish operational CoG. Its critical vulnerability was expressed by the lines of communications which linked the commanders of the Turkish Corps with the mobile German General Headquarters in Palestine. Once blocked those lines the Turkish troops dispersed on the ground would be without command and control, freedom of action and cohesion as proved at the Battle of Megiddo, in 1918.

Successful practice of operational art involves the appropriate application of the principles of war.⁴³ From this author's experience, it is noteworthy the importance granted by Brazilian military doctrine to consider the principles of war throughout the planning. Moreover adjusting the lines of operation envisaged in the campaign's planning to consider each principle whenever is possible is key to Brazilian planners.⁴⁴ Hence, the balanced exploitation of the following principles of war: maintenance of morale, offensive action, security, surprise, concentration of force, economy of effort, flexibility, co-operation and sustainability, were fundamental to the maintenance of freedom of action of the EEF. Also, it inspired and helped the British planners to co-ordinate the lines of operation (maritime, land, air components, logistics and information) so widely used in operational art of the twenty-first century.⁴⁵ It is relevant to note that all the principles of war extant within modern British military

40 Ibid, 2-5.

41 According de Jong, *decision superiority* is 'The state in which better informed decisions are made and implemented faster than an adversary can react'. J. H. de Jong, *Centralised Planning and Decentralised Execution: Have the Fundamental Principles of Air Control and Control Changed?*, RUSI Defence Systems, Spring 2007, 59.

42 John Mordike, 18.

43 Montecue Lowry, 68.

44 Brazil, *Defence Military Doctrine – MD51-M-04*, Ministry of Defence, Second Edition, 2007, 37.

45 Ministry of Defence, *Joint Doctrine Publication 5-00: Campaign Planning*, 2G2-3.

doctrine have been mentioned in this essay, except the principle of the *selection and maintenance of aim*.⁴⁶ That principle, which necessarily stem from the political-strategic level, was carefully respected by Allenby and his staff, albeit London's demands changed as EEF successes mounted, putting more pressure on them to take more and more territory.⁴⁷ To sum up, Allenby's planning was executed in a careful manner and each detail was briefed to every subordinate commander, allowing synchronization and coordination of tactical actions. It was undoubtedly a successful operation which occurred almost a century ago. This merit belongs to Allenby and his staff.

EXECUTING AND ADJUSTING THE PLANNING: THE MILITARY CAMPAIGN

According to Lowry, Allenby envisaged the operation in Palestine as two interconnected campaigns. First, the aim would be the conquest of Jerusalem as determined by the Cabinet. Second, the aim would be to carry out operations north of Jerusalem to push the enemy as far as possible.⁴⁸

The EEF's first task was not easy due to two successive defeats imposed by Turkish forces in the well defended Gaza-Beersheba line. The analysis of the terrain showed a relatively open and flat ground. Accurate maps and intelligence information were provided by photographs taken by the RFC.⁴⁹ The maps placed Gaza 2 miles from the coast and Beersheba 27 miles further to the west. The Turkish army had positioned itself on the road connecting both cities. A long line of trenches and fortifications which united the two cities hindered any progress.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it was possible to identify a gap in the line which Allenby wanted to exploit, especially some weak points along the shore near to Gaza and on the flank at Sheria.⁵¹

Allenby's plan was to carry out a major attack with XX Corps southwest of Beersheba.⁵² The main goal was to capture Beersheba and its

46 Ministry of Defence, *Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01: British Defence Doctrine*, 2-3.

47 Anthony Bruce, 3.

48 Montecue Lowry, 69.

49 John Mordike, 20.

50 Montecue Lowry, 71.

51 John Grainger, 229.

52 Ibid.

precious water wells, essential to the continued advance of the EEF.⁵³ The secondary attack would be made by the XXI Corps against Gaza. Given the proximity of the coast, the Royal Navy would provide intense naval fire support guided by airborne observers. This was a deception plan which aimed to deceive the Turkish commander leading them to believe that the main attack would be executed in Gaza.⁵⁴ To ensure the security of the eastern flank, a regiment of cavalry would be deployed southeast of Beersheba.⁵⁵ The logistic lines and the distribution of essential water and ammunition supplies were ensured by motor lorries and thousands of camels.⁵⁶

The effective command and control of operations was achieved using telegraph lines which connected each corps commander in the battlefield. In addition, each command had a liaison officer in charge of the communications task. Air observers would increase the speed with which essential information would arrive at Allenby's headquarters in the south. That would allow him to be aware of any emerging threats and adjust the planning accordingly.⁵⁷ Arguably, command and control and information activities are essential tools for the operational commander.⁵⁸ These tools can not only aid prioritization but also provide coordination and synchronization of several independent activities.⁵⁹ Moreover, they enable decentralized decision-making and appropriate freedom of action to tactical commanders, a concept known as *mission command*.⁶⁰ It is laudable that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Allenby had clearly thought about the importance of rapid and effective communication to overcome the enemy. It also enabled the principle of *flexibility* to modify the operational planning and redirect forces in a more appropriate way.⁶¹ For this author, it is one of the most important reasons that explains the EEF's operational success.

The operation began on 27th October. A deception maneuver was performed three days before the main attack in Beersheba. Relentless

53 John Mordike, 20.

54 Ibid.

55 Montecue Lowry, 71.

56 John Mordike, 20.

57 Ibid.

58 Ministry of Defence, *Joint Doctrine Publication 3-00: Campaign Execution*, 3rd Edition, 2009, 3A-8.

59 Ministry of Defence, *Joint Doctrine Publication 3-00: Campaign Execution*, 4-2.

60 Ibid, 4-3.

61 Montecue Lowry, 72.

bombardment by naval and land-based artillery punished Gaza. It succeeded in deceiving the Turkish forces about the real intentions of the EEF.⁶² The movement toward Beersheba started on 31st October. XX Corps approached from the south whilst the Desert Mounted Corps executed a flank approach to the east. Beersheba was taken quickly on the same day by a bold offensive by the Australian Light Horse. Because of the speed of the attack, the Turks did not have enough time to destroy the water wells. As Allenby later described in a letter to his wife: 'It was a smart little battle'.⁶³ Gaza was conquered on 6th November by the XXI Corps. The military success there was largely due to the movement of cavalry which made a 25 mile night march to turn the Turks left flank and surprised the enemy rear at Gaza.⁶⁴

To apply constant and decisive pressure against the enemy and to maximize the momentum, Allenby ordered continued exploitation of the offensive action. As the Turkish eighth army withdrew from Gaza marching along a coastal path, multiple engagements were executed by mounted forces, by Royal Navy ships guided by aerial observers and, more heavily, by RFC airplanes which bombed and strafed the confused Turkish retreat.⁶⁵ According to James, Allenby was certainly impressed by the destructive effects delivered by his airmen, so he asked the War Cabinet for more machines to be sent from France.⁶⁶

At this point one question should be addressed: Why did the actions of Allenby and Murray achieve such different results? Indeed, Allenby had received more troops but this fact alone does not explain his absolute success. The key difference and the distinguishing feature was the employment of his forces - expressed by Allenby's planning.⁶⁷ Murray's troops also outnumbered the Turks, however he concentrated his forces on very narrow fronts leaving a large number of troops unused. Acting in this way he facilitated defensive actions. By contrast, Allenby used his forces to attack several points in a co-ordinated way which allowed him to replace them after relatively short periods. Doing this he induced the weary Turks to commit successive mistakes.⁶⁸ However, the most relevant was

62 John Mordike, 20.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 John Mordike, 21.

66 Ibid.

67 John Grainger, 227.

68 John Grainger, 229.

that he exploited the previously identified enemy's weak points, unlike his predecessor, who repeatedly launched attacks against the strongest Turkish positions. As Grainger noted, the defence based on trenches and fortifications which characterized the static war in the Western front, could not prevail under successive, coordinated, multidimensional and well planned attacks.⁶⁹ On 8th November the King himself sent congratulations to Allenby. The Allies' victory in Gaza-Beersheba was a 'psychological blow' against the Central Powers and indicated the path of success to the military planners in France.⁷⁰

Operational plans must be sufficiently flexible to allow changes. If there is any new information that changes the combat conditions, the commander must reassess his planning and redirect his forces in order to choose the quickest and most economical course of action to accomplish the mission. Living Gaza behind, Allenby had two options: he could reinforce XX Corps or he could redirect XXI Corps units to maintain the advance to Jerusalem. So, on 15th November, Allenby chose the latter and ordered two divisions of XXI Corps to march to east towards the Judean Hills.⁷¹

The Turkish army was pushed back from Gaza to the outskirts of Jerusalem being defeated in every combat. At Neby Samwill the EEF faced a ferocious resistance and its advance stalled.⁷² The Turks executed the most difficult of military operations and retreated for 70 miles, a distance 'over which most armies would have disintegrated'.⁷³ On 4th December, after a lengthy period of intense combats, the British executed a brief relief in place.⁷⁴ The concept of the operational pause is indispensable for a military planner. Sometimes, due to logistical constraints or tiredness of the troops, it is vital to order periodic pauses. It allows military commanders to regain better conditions to sustain the fight, regenerate combat power and, as a consequence, raise the morale of the troops.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, Allenby improved communications enabling XX Corps to come up and position itself over the line of the hills, providing support to XXI Corps and concentrating its forces to launch a final and

69 Ibid, 230.

70 John Grainger, 230.

71 Montecue Lowry, 72.

72 Ibid.

73 John Grainger, 227.

74 Montecue Lowry, 72.

75 U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Campaign Planning – Joint Publication 5-00.1*, 2012, 12.

coordinated attack.⁷⁶ On 8th December, a successful attack was executed and, as a result, the Turkish army evacuated to the north. The EEF took control of Jerusalem on 9th December. The Christmas gift for the British people was delivered and the strategic aim ordered by the political establishment had been fulfilled. Lloyd George himself announced to the Members of the Parliament the EEF's outstanding achievement.⁷⁷

At Jerusalem, by that moment, was almost impossible for Allenby to halt due to the perilous proximity of Turkish artillery.⁷⁸ It was necessary to repulse the Turks as far as possible. Yet, more important was to exploit the momentum to achieve further strategic goals: the complete defeat of the Turkish forces in Palestine and, as a likely consequence, the elimination from the war of the most capable German ally.⁷⁹

Allenby reorganized his forces and set his general headquarters on the Jaffa-Jerusalem road, the main artery of communications from east to west. The Turks had not given up and, during the last days of 1917, performed a sequence of counterattacks in an ineffective effort to retake Jerusalem. A successful counter-attack by the EEF on 28th December allowed allied forces to move 7 miles north of Jerusalem.⁸⁰

Notwithstanding these triumphs the situation on the Western front became the main issue for the Cabinet. It was absolutely vital for the allies to resist the German offensive, planned by Luddendorf. Moreover, defeat in France meant the loss of the war.⁸¹ Therefore it was necessary to gather all available forces from the less decisive sectors of the continuous line, described by Sir Wavell, to guarantee security in the West.⁸² In view of this, Allenby was ordered to cede many of his best troops. Two divisions went in April and a further 9 cavalry and 23 infantry battalions were transferred soon after. Indeed, only one of Allenby's initial divisions, the London, remained in Palestine.⁸³ In their place Allenby received primarily Indian troops. Consequently, in many cases the troops were not acclimatized and were barely trained for the situation they would face in Palestine theatre.

76 Archibald Wavell, 244.

77 John Mordike, 21.

78 Ibid, 22.

79 John Mordike, 22.

80 Montecue Lowry, 73.

81 Archibald Wavell, 244.

82 Ibid.

83 John Grainger, 231.

Allenby felt like as if he was reliving the situation he had faced when he took over the command in the summer of 1917.⁸⁴

Despite the total transformation of his forces, Allenby planned extensive attacks across the Jordan river to establish control over the east towards Amman, the extant Turkish headquarters in the area. It was essential to capture this area as the Damascus-Hejaz railway crossed the plateau there. Thus, it would contribute decisively to compromise the Turkish logistical lines.⁸⁵ Two attempts were made, both were unsuccessful. The difficult terrain, the lack of Arabs cooperation, and last but not least the bold Turkish response, contributed decisively. Nevertheless, both raids delivered the desired effect of alarming the Turks who subsequently positioned one-third of their forces east of the river Jordan. Consequently it weakened the Turkish forces in the west.⁸⁶

During the summer of 1918, the EEF had been mainly involved in training and organizing, just as in 1917. To keep alive the Turkish fears about the security of eastern flank, Allenby maintained a considerable force there despite the intense heat of the Jordan valley. Indeed, he planned to execute an opposite action than the action he had carried out in Gaza-Beersheba line, exploring again the surprise principle. His intention was to break through along the coast, taking advantage of his high mobility, whilst keeping the enemy apprehensive of their left flank.⁸⁷ Also, a very fast movement through the Turkish line would allow a deep penetration into their rear. In fact, the previous experience in Gaza had demonstrated the broad Turkish capability for recovery as well as their use of the land to establish deep defensive positions. This was not to be allowed this time. Thus, extensive exploitation would be carried out to avoid Turkish organization. Their headquarters near to Nazareth, where the German commander controlled the Turkish army, regarded by this author as their operational CoG, was to be captured and its lines of communication neutralized.

As Grainger stated, the large scale maneuver planned by Allenby was a classic military formulation, but it was also clearly a mark of the confidence he had in his army and staff who enabled him the achievement of

84 Ibid, 231.

85 Archibald Wavell, 246.

86 Ibid, 247.

87 Ibid.

such an audacious planning.⁸⁸ For a military planner, more important than knowing the enemy's capabilities, is to keep a broad knowledge of your own possibilities, a decisive truth perceived by Sun Tzu millenniums ago.⁸⁹

The emergence of the operational level demonstrated that strategic success could not be achieved through a single decisive battle, but through the co-ordination and synchronization in time and space of multiple tactical actions.⁹⁰ Carefully, Allenby had planned to mass four infantry divisions (XXI Corps) in the western coastal plain where they would face an estimated weaker force of two Turkish infantry divisions. Furthermore, Royal Navy gunfire support and RFC bombardment would contribute to punch a large hole in the Turkish line so that cavalry divisions could exploit and surround the whole Turkish army.⁹¹ Later, a detachment of cavalry would be tasked to capture the enemy's commander-in-chief, General Von Sanders.⁹² Meanwhile, the ANZAC Mounted division and a few other infantry battalions would conduct demonstrations east of the river Jordan, contributing to the success of deception operations. In addition, further to the east, the Arabs under T. E. Lawrence's guidance, would cut the rail links, denying vital lines of communications.⁹³

The RFC played an important role during the battle. On 19th September, its aircraft delivered powerful blows against the previously identified enemy's communications system – the telegraph and telephone centers. The Seventh and Eighth armies' headquarters were also bombed without interference from enemy aircraft.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, XXI Corps launched its assault on the left flank. They quickly overruled the enemy and took its positions and then speed and maneuver took place and the cavalry exploited the breakthrough. The western Turkish line was literally defeated by noon.⁹⁵ At the same time, air reconnaissance revealed that the remainder of the Turkish force was retreating towards Nablus. Heavy bombardment was ruthlessly executed against the Turkish columns. As Mordike highlighted, the bombardments had so demoralized the Turks that

88 John Grainger, 233.

89 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, London: Wordsworth Edition, 1998.

90 David Jordan et al, *Understanding Modern Warfare*, Cambridge: University Press, 2008, 89.

91 John Grainger, 234.

92 John Mordike, 27.

93 Ibid.

94 John Mordike, 33.

95 John Grainger, 235

in almost every occasion they were captured without offering resistance.⁹⁶ The Western line showed the power of the synergy obtained by cavalry in tandem with air support. By rapidly exploring information superiority and maneuver, Allenby had cut the Turkish lines of communication and destroyed the entrenched enemy.⁹⁷

The battle of Megiddo, the given name of the combat on the coastal plain, demonstrated the virtual destruction of Turkish resistance and, after this, political objectives tended to take a central role.⁹⁸ Further movements were performed by XX Corps in the east and they captured Amman on 25th September. The Desert Mounted Corps was detached to Damascus which was occupied with an Arab army on 1st October. The campaign continued through to October and on 6th October, French and British warships anchored at Beirut. On 13th October, XXI Corps conquered Tripoli. Finally, on 26th October the British cavalry entered Aleppo facing only light opposition. Von Sander and 12,000 men fled further to the north, however, due to the signature of the armistice at Mudros on 30th October, Allenby halted the pursuit – it meant the end of the Palestine campaign.⁹⁹

LONG-LASTING LESSONS LEARNED FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENT

Although almost a century ago, the British campaign in Palestine is still capable of providing numerous examples of successful actions at the operational level. However, without disregarding other important lessons, and taking into account those exposed so far, this author believes that three key points deserve special attention: careful planning, extensive mobility of troops and air superiority.

First, the meticulous planning executed by the command of the EEF was key for success in all lines of operation and environments. The planning allowed optimum employment and synchronization of actions. In addition, the previous knowledge of enemy positions and movement made possible Allenby's concentration of force against identified enemy weak points. Indeed, the EEF's performance reflects the memorable Chinese general Sun Tzu, who stated the importance of gathering broad

96 John Mordike, 34.

97 Ibid, 36.

98 John Grainger, 235.

99 Montecue Lowry, 78.

knowledge to win 'hundred battles'.¹⁰⁰ The careful study of the operation's theater, through maps and information provided by the RFC, in addition to the well-established lines of communication, enabled great security for precise command and control in the heat of the battle. The well-planned logistical support also contributed to the security of operations. Nonetheless, the greatest proof of the exceptional job conducted by Allenby resides in perceiving, even today, that all enduring principles of warfare are noteworthy in analyzing this historical campaign.

Sun Tzu was also mentioned by Sir Wavell when he was asked about the key characteristic of a victorious army, to which he replied: "lightness".¹⁰¹ The rapid mobility of mounted troops provided several opportunities for the use of feint, surprise and deception to overwhelm the enemy. This allowed the exploitation of momentum by not providing enough time for the recovery of enemy defenses. However, mobility and maneuver are only able to be exploited by a well-trained and coordinated army. Consequently, it demonstrates the importance of the operational pauses executed during rainy periods, when Allenby took advantage to enhance the readiness of his troops.

Last, it is key to mention the vital importance of securing air superiority, as the first line of operation to be established and enforced in modern warfare, without which there can be no safe advancement. The overarching control obtained by British aircraft was decisive in providing valuable information for military planners. Also, it ensured fast and effective communication among the forces on the ground. No less important, the aerial bombardment which caused attrition and panic within the Turkish lines, perhaps may deliver one of the first historical examples of the devastating effects caused by that type of military action.

In conclusion, the Palestine campaign entails a clear example of successful application of operational art to achieve strategic objectives set by the political level. But above all, it has demonstrated that every successful campaign primarily depends on the competence, determination and leadership of commanders able to grasp the process of strategy by which war is used for political effect. Leaders with the ability to assess difficult situations deciding wisely and quickly and able to restore the strength of troops affected by low morale. Without these features it would not be possible to provide mobility, flexibility and boldness to

100 Sun Tzu, 118.

101 Archibald Wavell, 234.

the EEF's movements. Undoubtedly, Allenby offers to historical records a classic example of 'military genius' highlighted by another renowned general, Clausewitz.

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