

CHAPTER I.

Mesopotamia: A brief sketch of its history in relation to the Eastern Policy of Great Britain; of its geographical and climatic characteristics; and of certain other factors which affected the problem of taking military action there.

In Lower Mesopotamia, six or seven thousand years before Christ, the temples and villages of Sumeria—the first evidence of a social organisation among men—began to arise on the banks of the Euphrates and the Tigris: it was in Mesopotamia, and in Persia, and Armenia that this primitive social organisation expanded and developed into the first conception of Empire; it was in the Middle East that the conquests of Babylonia, of Darius, of Alexander, of Rome and of Islam made history. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, after a long history of conquest and counter conquest, Mesopotamia was a fertile, flourishing and civilised country; then came the Mongol invasion, when the savage hordes of Jenghis Khan—and, later, Hulaku Khan—poured down out of the north upon Persia and Armenia, sweeping everything before them by the bitterness and violence of their animosity against Islam. In 1258 A.D. the invaders reached Baghdad. The capital was sacked, and the scientific, literary, and artistic records of centuries were wiped out; the system of irrigation, upon which the country depended for its existence, was destroyed; and, after a period of civilisation which had lasted for eighty centuries, Mesopotamia once more lay waste—an arid desert save for the two great rivers which wound their way, past a few scattered vestiges of humanity, towards the Persian Gulf. It was not until four hundred years later, when the Ottoman Turks occupied Baghdad in 1638, that the country began to revive. At this time the traders of the West were endeavouring to exploit the commercial possibilities of the East, and the trade routes into Persia from the south and west ran through Baghdad. In these endeavours British commerce was largely concerned—so largely, in fact, that in the eighteenth century England undertook responsibility for the protection of shipping from the pirates which then infested the Persian Gulf and the Shatt-al-Arab.

At this time, English foreign policy began to concern itself more and more with Eastern affairs; and as English interests in India increased, so did the importance of the Middle East become heightened—so much so, that, early in the nineteenth century, we find the possibilities of an overland route to India via Mesopotamia and Persia being considered; and, in 1834, a special reconnaissance of the Euphrates valley being made by the Chesney expedition to report upon them. However, ultimately M. de Lesseps' project for constructing the Suez Canal relegated to the background the proposition of an overland route.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the Middle East had begun to assume political, as well as commercial, importance to British Statesmen, who had considerable apprehensions over Russia's very natural desire to obtain a warm-water port, which, it was thought might well cause her to seek to acquire territory on the shores of either the Dardanelles or the Persian Gulf, and thus to achieve a strategically advantageous position with regard to British communications with the East. Alarmed for the security of India by the prospect, the British Government of the day felt impelled to adopt a policy of supporting Turkey against Russia and of seeking firmly to establish British influence in Baghdad and in Persia as a "set-off" to Russian ambitions in the Middle East and South West Asia.

Consequently, in the Russo-Turkish War of 1878, the Turks had the support of our foreign policy and of our popular sympathy. For a time, British prestige stood high in Constantinople and in Baghdad, but the peculiarly cynical diplomatic coup by which the British Foreign Minister secured the cession of Cyprus to Great Britain in return for a pledge to Turkey, which he knew he would never be called upon to redeem, caused Turkish gratitude to falter. Gradually, too, other factors—such as jealousy of our commercial interests in Mesopotamia, and resentment of our occupation of Egypt in 1882—brought about a distinctly anti-British attitude in Turkish foreign policy.

Meanwhile, the German Empire was beginning to compete with British interests in the Middle East, and, naturally, at once seized the opportunity to "cut out" Great Britain. Consequently we find, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, every effort being made by Germany—and being made very successfully—to increase her prestige at Constantinople, at least in proportion to the decline of British influence there.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there occurred two events which had an important bearing on the political situation in the Middle East. The first was the "convention" between Germany and Turkey (to the almost total exclusion of French and British commercial interests) for the construction of the Constantinople-Baghdad railway; the second was the discovery of oil in Southern Persia, in the neighbourhood of Shustar, by the late Mr. W. K. D'Arcy, who obtained concessions from the Persian Government for five hundred thousand square miles of territory there and, helped by Lord Fisher (who was then First Sea Lord at the Admiralty) formed, in 1909, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company—an all-British Company. A few years later, the then First Lord (Mr. Winston Churchill), after a special Commission of Enquiry had examined the prospects of the company, acquired a controlling interest for the British Government by purchasing £2,200,000 worth of Ordinary Shares. It is interesting to note that this transaction was not put forward for the sanction of Parliament until *after* the purchase of the shares had been made, a fact which has a parallel in the action of Disraeli in 1875, when he, as Foreign Minister, bought on his own responsibility £4,000,000 worth of Suez Canal shares from the Khedive of Egypt. Both actions were chiefly due to personal initiative on the part of Ministers of the Crown; both had very far-reaching strategical effects.

The general result of the Baghdad railway convention—which appeared to be aimed directly against Great Britain's position in the Middle East, and therefore to form a menace to India—and the British monopoly of the Persian oil fields was still further to prejudice Anglo-Turkish political relations, and to drive Turkey more and more to look to Berlin for support. In 1908, when Enver Pasha and the "Young Turks" overthrew the then-existing regime in Turkey and set up the "Committee of Union and Progress" under German auspices, Turkish policy became markedly anti-British and aimed at the destruction of British prestige in Mohammedan eyes. In this, the chief agency which Turkish policy sought to use was a "religious" one—that is, the hatred of Islam for Christianity—because about this time there had arisen two important politico-religious movements which were stirring the Middle East profoundly. These movements were "Pan-Islamism" and "Pan-Turanianism." Although the two were mutually antagonistic in principle—the first being inspired by religious

aspirations, and the second by racial ambitions—the C.U.P. cleverly managed simultaneously to exploit them with some effect—Pan-Islamism in Persia, Afghanistan and India; Pan-Turanianism in Turkey and Central Asia.

To ensure the security of India and her communications with England has been the basic aim of our Eastern policy ever since Great Britain added India to her Empire. As ruler of India, as chief owner of the Suez Canal, as Controller of the Anglo-Persian oilfields, Great Britain was (in 1908 just as in 1926) vitally interested in the affairs of the Mohammedan world, and here, in the Middle East—a focal point of interest—Turko-German policy was straining to bring about a coalition between the Mohammedan countries of Turkey, Persia, Arabia and Afghanistan, a coalition based on anti-Christian, anti-British doctrine.

However, in the area about the head of the Persian Gulf, British prestige and interests had a firm foundation. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company had run a pipe-line through the territory of the Sheikh of Mohammera from Shustar to the island of Abadan, and with this semi-independent ruler, the paramount sheikh in Southern Arabistan, who for years had bitterly resented and resisted Turkish aggression, had contracted definite mutual obligations for the protection of the pipe-line. Similar obligations had been concluded with the Bakhtiari Khans, the chiefs of a group of tribes in the oilfields area; the Sheikh of Koweit, an independent ruler of a territory on the south shores of the Persian Gulf, definitely looked to Great Britain to support his independence against Turkish claims; Ibn Sa'ud, Emir of Nejd, the most powerful chief in Arabia, was violently anti-Turk and was in very friendly relationship with the Government of India; in Persia, too, British prestige stood high. Persia, a close neighbour to India, had for many years been in fairly cordial relations with Great Britain, and there seemed little reason why she should ever form a coalition with Turkey, with whom she had been in constant disagreement and discordance politically, and from whom she differed on an important point of religious belief—the difference between the Shiah and Sunni Mohammedan. On the other hand, when, in 1907, Great Britain entered upon the Anglo-Russian agreement, Persia felt that an alliance had been made with her hereditary enemy Russia, and this was a feeling which Germany—herself inclined to proclaim a grievance over the agreement—lost no opportunity to exploit. In spite of this, however, in the years between 1908 and 1914

there did appear to be a strong bloc of pro-British feeling in the Middle East which, as a "set-off" against Turko-German propaganda was of distinct value to British Eastern policy, and this policy, in turn, aimed at maintaining that feeling—deeming it to contribute considerably to the security of India itself.

Whether the importance of the political situation in the Middle East was over-appreciated, it is unnecessary to enquire; the fact remains, that to maintain British prestige at the head of the Persian Gulf and in Persia was a leading principle in British policy in the Middle East in the years immediately preceding 1914, while strategically, the chief interest of Great Britain in Persia and in Mesopotamia lay in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company's wells at Shustar; the hundred and forty miles of pipe-line which connected them with the refineries, and the refineries themselves, on the island of Abadan, at the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab.

From the Turko-German point of view, Mesopotamia was of strategic interest, because so long as Great Britain had command of the sea it was only by land that India could be approached from Europe. Mesopotamia forms a corridor of approach to south-west Asia, an approach which is immune from attack from the sea; from Turkish territory routes run through Baghdad and Qasr-i-Shirin, which outflank the Caucasus and lead through north-east Persia into Afghanistan. Its capital, Baghdad, therefore formed an effective centre from which propagandist missions could be despatched into Persia and Afghanistan—countries which were peculiarly liable violently to react to the stimulus of religious fanaticism.

From the German point of view, the importance of Great Britain's political and strategical interests in Mesopotamia must have been sufficiently obvious to encourage German policy to aim at playing upon the fears of India, and—at the cost of a comparatively small expenditure of man-power and resources to herself (the brunt of the burden being borne by her Ally)—to force us to make a strategic detachment in the Middle East to the prejudice of our effort in the main theatre of war.

Bearing in mind the main points of this very sketchy outline of the political and strategical situations, we can summarise British policy in the Middle East generally as being to ensure the security of India, Egypt and the Suez Canal; while in Mesopotamia and in Persia it aimed at retaining the allegiance of our Mohammedan friends as a

“set-off” to Turko-German attempts to produce an anti-Christian reaction; at increasing our commercial interests; and at politically consolidating our strategic position at the head of the Persian Gulf, a position which safeguarded the oil supply, blocked approach by land towards India, and denied Basra to the submarines of a possible enemy. The policy in itself was definite; the responsibility for giving effect to it was divided. The Foreign Office dealt with Turkish and Persian affairs, and the Government of India dealt with the affairs of the Persian Gulf Littoral. Similarly, the responsibility for military intelligence in the Middle East was divided between the General Staff at the War Office and the General Staff at Army Headquarters in India. To acquire accurate and comprehensive information about all likely theatres of war is one of the most important functions of a General Staff in peace time, but it is doubtful whether, before 1914, this importance was fully realised—that is, as far as concerned the Middle East. To be of real value, information must be exact; it must be comprehensive; above all, the intelligence coming from various sources must be collated, and the deductions drawn from it must be co-ordinated with information arriving through political and commercial channels. It is easy to realise that divided responsibility for collecting and collating intelligence in an area largely increases the difficulty of effective co-ordination—and this difficulty appears to have occurred over Middle Eastern intelligence which, considering the opportunities afforded us by our intimate association with the area, was neither exact nor comprehensive.

The physical and climatic characteristics of Mesopotamia were, of course, comprehended in a general way. But it was not until a considerable military force had been thrust out into the country that we appreciated the truth of the Arab proverb:—“When Allah had made Hell he found it “was not bad enough. So he made Iraq—and added flies.”

Iraq as far as concerned us before the war—that is, the area lying between Baghdad, Southern Arabistan, and the head of the Persian Gulf, and the river Euphrates—is one flat plain of alluvial clay. It is unrelieved by hills, or by a single eminence of any importance. Baghdad, five hundred miles from the Persian Gulf, is little more than a hundred feet above sea level; between the capital and the sea lies a vast area of featureless desert, of which the monotony is broken only by the great rivers, and

the marshes into which they "spill" when they are flooded by the melting snows at their far-off mountain sources. If we except the palm groves which straggle here and there along the banks of the rivers, this inhospitable plain is treeless; stoneless, and—away from the rivers—waterless. When dry, the surface of the land is passable by all arms, excepting where deep irrigation channels hinder the passage of wheels; but a few hours of rain turn it into a quagmire of greasy mud through which only small parties of infantry can flounder—and that with difficulty. In the flood season, huge areas of desert are converted into stretches of open water or into impassable morasses. South of the line Kut-Kufa flooded rivers are apt to rise above the level of the surrounding country, so that, to prevent wholesale inundation, great earthworks, or "bunds" (which are very liable to damage) are built at the sides of their courses to hold in their swollen waters.

In its climate, Iraq is scarcely more inviting than in landscape. It is pre-eminently a country of extremes. Between May and October the heat is intense—rising to as much as 134° Fah. *shade* temperature. Away from the sea the heat is dry, but south of Amara the climate is damp, sticky and unhealthy. Between November and April, the weather is cool, and in the months December to March it can be decidedly cold. The change from six months of intense heat to the days of the winter, when a biting wind drives a cold rain across the desert, is very great—and it was felt with particular severity by Indian troops. November and the middle of December are probably the best months of the year, because, unlike the remainder of the cool season, they are not liable to violent storms of wind and cold rain. After even quite a few hours of rain the whole country becomes a sea of glutinous mud which makes movement of troops almost impossible. In extreme heat, aeroplanes could not fly between the hours of about 9.0 a.m. and 5.0 p.m. on account of the difficulty of climbing through the layer of rarified air which was super-heated by radiation from the ground; in wet weather, pilots could not always rely on taking off from the mud.

Of all the characteristic features of Mesopotamia, perhaps "mirage" was the most remarkable. In the open desert, troops would appear to advance, to recede, to become invisible; a small bush would turn into a platoon of infantry; a few sheep would become a squadron of camelry; at a distance of a thousand yards quite large bodies of troops

might be invisible, while at three or four hundred yards it was not always possible to distinguish objects, or even to be sure if an object existed. Whatever its form, mirage was a most disconcerting accompaniment to military operations, because it interfered with reconnaissance, with observation of fire and with visual signalling.

From a health standpoint, Iraq had little to recommend it. Apart from the very trying climatic conditions, health was threatened by disease: plague, smallpox, malaria, sand-fly fever, dysentery, and Baghdad boils (this last a most dispiriting and undecorative affliction) were endemic; cholera, typhus, scurvy, and heat-stroke were epidemic. Sickness was spread by the insects—mosquitoes, sandflies and (until the hot weather killed them) incredible numbers of flies.

The one and only port of Iraq was Basra "the Key to Mesopotamia." Previous to the war, Basra possessed not one of the essential qualifications to fit it for use as a base port for a military expedition. It had no quays, harbour works, nor facilities for disembarking troops, guns and stores, nor assembly places for them when they were on shore. Shipping (which was restricted to vessels drawing not more than sixteen feet), had to be unloaded in mid-stream into a swarm of small native craft—which then dispersed itself among the net-work of small channels which lay between the swamps and palmgroves. In the town itself, labour was scarce, the climate was bad, and sanitary conditions were deplorable. Between Basra and the interior the main arteries of communication were:—The Shatt-al-Arab—formed by the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates and navigable as far as Nahr Umbar by vessels up to twenty feet draught; the Tigris; the Euphrates, and, to a less extent, the Karun. By the Tigris, Baghdad could be reached by steamer, but at all times of the year navigation was apt to be difficult. The channel is liable to frequent alteration by the floods in May and June, and by the perpetually shifting sandbanks; during floods, a very sudden rise of water and very strong currents are apt to occur. In the flood season, vessels drawing five feet of water could reach Baghdad, but in the dry season navigation was limited to vessels of three feet draught. The journey took any time from five days onwards. The Euphrates, on account of the extreme shallowness of its channel through the Hammar Lake, had little utility as a main line of communication. The Karun was navigable along a narrow, tortuous channel only

by vessels drawing two feet of water (five feet in the flood season).

To these waterways, land routes were entirely subordinate—so much so, that from a military standpoint there was no Mesopotamia away from the rivers. Excepting the small portion (about fifty miles) of the Baghdad railway, which had been constructed between Baghdad (five hundred miles from Basra) and Samarra, and a narrow-gauge line connecting Baghdad with the Euphrates at Falujah, there were no railways in the country. Such "roads" as existed were mere tracks for pack transport, which wandered over the desert, interrupted here and there by deep irrigation cuts. After rain had fallen they were quite impassable for any wheeled transport excepting light vehicles in small numbers.

Naturally, where roads do not exist, wheeled vehicles are scarce. In Iraq even pack transport was not very plentiful. It might be expected, as a corollary, that river transport would be abundant, but the expectation was not justified. Two small steamers and a very varied collection of small native craft—sailing craft called "mahellas" and row-boats called "bellums"—were all that was available, and there were no facilities in the country for construction, or even for the repair of steamers or their machinery.

The chief products of Mesopotamia were dates, rice, barley, wheat, wool, sheep and cattle. These make an imposing list of local resources, but the deficiency of transport, the absence of roads, and the uncertain friendliness of the Arabs made the collection of supplies a matter of considerable difficulty. Neither firewood for cooking purposes nor material for road-mending existed in the country, and this greatly complicated the problem of maintaining troops beyond the base.

The population of Iraq, before the war, was approximately two-and-a-half millions—thinly-scattered over an area of about a hundred and eighty thousand square miles of desert, river, and oasis. Out of this total some two millions were Mohammedans, of whom about a million and a quarter were Arabs, the remainder consisting of Turks, Persians and Kurds. The non Mohammedan element consisted of Christians (Syrian, Armenian, and Chaldean), Jews, and a few Yezidis, or devil worshippers. Therefore, the feeling displayed by the Arab—the dominant race—towards the stranger within his gates was of considerable importance. Had the various tribes and clans been able to unite in common policy, their attitude would have been a decisive factor in the

local political situation. As it was, differences of religious dogma, and conflict between tribal interests and pursuits were so acute as to prevent any unity of policy. About one-half of the Arab population consisted of settled cultivators and town dwellers; the remainder could be classed as Nomads (who wander about Upper Mesopotamia, the Western Desert, and Arabistan, the movements of the various tent-dwelling tribes being governed by the incidence of pasturage and water) and Semi-Nomads. Turkish Administration in Mesopotamia sought to govern the Arabs by fostering inter-tribal jealousies and by playing-off one tribe against another, and there was very little effort to enforce any law and order other than those concerned with the collection of taxes. The Mesopotamian Arab generally is quick and intelligent, but he is idle and uncreative, and is swayed by the impulse of the moment rather than sustained by any constant motive; consequently he lacks power to co-operate with his fellows, either politically or militarily, and is given to sudden and violent intrigue. By nature a skilled thief, treacherous and clever, used to perpetual inter-tribal warfare and a life of plunder, the Arab possessed capabilities of forming a dangerous opponent in guerilla warfare. As matters turned out, it was found that Arab action against organised troops was almost entirely confined to harrassing rear guards, raiding supply dumps, and stripping the wounded, and their general policy was to throw in their lot with the victor of the moment. From a military standpoint, therefore, the Arab was a grave nuisance rather than a serious menace; but it was not until he had been tested by months of warfare that this fact emerged; before this, far too high an estimate was placed upon his political and military capabilities.

The essentials of the policy of Great Britain in peace towards Mesopotamia have been briefly outlined. How was this policy to be sustained in war?

Militarily, Mesopotamia came within the sphere of responsibility of the Government of India—a sphere which included the North West Frontier, in itself a military problem upon which thought was focussed to the inevitable exclusion of more remote and comparatively unlikely theatres of operations. The shortcomings of the system of Army organisation in India that were displayed in the Great War have been the subject of peculiarly bitter criticism. It must be admitted at once that, for some years prior to 1914, military expenditure in India had been so far reduced as to reach

almost starvation limit, with the result that in organisation and equipment the Army in India was twenty years behind the times. In peace, there is a perpetual conflict between the requirements of the fighting Services and the demands of financial economy, and in India the conflict has always been peculiarly acute. India is a poor country; its revenue is all too scanty to provide the money required for necessary social, administrative, and educational measures, and, in these circumstances, it was only natural that her Government should take the opportunity to "economise" whenever possible. Nevertheless, when, in 1904, the Commander in Chief, Lord Kitchener, insisted upon certain essential military reforms in India, he succeeded in getting his programme accepted—in view of a definite contingency which then appeared probable, namely an invasion of the North West Frontier by Russia. In 1907, when his projected re-organisation was only partly completed, the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Agreement* entirely altered the political and military situations. With the Russian menace gone, and with Afghanistan friendly—as she then was—the military horizon in India seemed clear. By leaving Lord Kitchener's programme unfinished, by relinquishing the projects for an increase in establishments and for the provision of up-to-date equipment, it seemed possible to save money without incurring dangerous risks, since the Army as it stood was capable of carrying out its rôle of enforcing order among unorganised tribesmen on the Frontier. The possibility of India's taking part in a Great War beyond her own shores did not enter into the calculations of the Imperial Government, and it was not until 1912, three years after the creation of an Imperial General Staff, that the extent to which the Army in India was fitted to co-operate overseas with other Imperial Forces was made the subject of enquiry. Still later, a Special Committee was appointed to examine military conditions in India, and after many delays, arrived at the opinion that the Army in India should be made "capable of affording ready overseas co-operation." This opinion, in which the Imperial General Staff concurred, was recorded not long before the outbreak of war.

On account of the straitened financial resources of the Army, the severest economy in military expenditure and a policy of makeshift had become accepted military traditions

* It was the Anglo-Russian Agreement which somewhat prejudiced our political position vis à vis Persia.

in India. How firmly these traditions became established is well illustrated by the attitude of the Finance Member of the Viceroy's Council, who, in 1915, in introducing the Financial Statement for the year 1915-16—eight months after the outbreak of war—said, "Our chief economy occurs under the Military Services ..." and proceeded forthwith to budget for half-a-million pounds less for the Army than he had asked for in the previous year. Confusion of thought is apt to arise over the word "economy"—of which the true meaning is expenditure to the best advantage. In India "economy" produced an Army which was not properly equipped for modern war, even as the term was understood in 1914, and resulted in "under-insurance," which for some years remained unattended by disaster, but which led the Army in India to take the field deficient of reserves of artillery, small arms and materials for their manufacture; of clothing, boots and equipment; of modern machine-gun and signalling equipment; of wire-cutters, grenades and flares. (In these respects, indeed, the Turks, under German organisation, were better equipped than ourselves).

The Army Medical Service was neither adequate nor efficient; there were not sufficient British reinforcements in India; motor transport, either for Medical or maintenance purposes, was practically non-existent. The standard type of transport-vehicle was the "A.T. Cart," a two-wheeled, springless vehicle drawn by two mules at an "official" rate of progress of two-and-a-half miles an hour, and even Cavalry—the *mobile* troops—were unprovided with any faster-moving transport for their second line. None of these deficiencies could be quickly remedied because India was entirely dependent upon Great Britain for the supply of British personnel and war material.

In tactical training the Army lacked uniformity, administrative training was practically non-existent. On the North West Frontier and generally in the north of India, the standard of training was high and units were most efficient; in the peaceful south, matters were less satisfactory. The immense distances which separated headquarters of formations, the wide dispersion of subordinate formations and of their units, and the adherence to a semi-territorial distribution of regiments (caused by widely-varying characteristics of the personnel drawn from different districts) made it difficult to ensure the inculcation and practice of a common doctrine. Between the Imperial General Staff at the War Office

and the General Staff at Army Headquarters in India there was not a very effective liaison, and the results of modern teaching at home were slow to find their way to the East. Staff-work, particularly that of the Administrative branch, was hindered by endless and minute regulations regarding expenditure, and—a most important point—the Staff was not preparing for the participation of the armed forces of India in any large-scale military operation overseas.

From this very general outline of Great Britain's political and strategical interests in the Middle East, of the characteristics of the possible theatre of operations and of the condition of the Army in India, it is obvious that on the part of the Indian Government only a very strictly limited military enterprise in Mesopotamia could have been contemplated. Policy and strategy required only the consolidation of our position at the head of the Persian Gulf; beyond that, any military operations were liable to be severely hindered—in the winter by rain and mud, in the spring by floods, in the summer by heat and sickness, in the autumn by exhaustion following upon the summer, at all times by the extreme difficulty of maintaining an Army in a country which has neither communications nor local resources; moreover the Army in India was not organised, equipped, or maintained on a scale which suited it for service overseas, or for carrying out extended and mobile operations.

This then was the general political and military situation which confronted the Government of India when, on August 3rd, 1914, there emerged from the mass of rumour revolving round the attitude of Turkey, the definite fact that mobilisation of the Turkish Army had been ordered.