Consisting of no more than one infantry brigade, IEFD was ordered to occupy the head of the Persian Gulf prior to the outbreak of war with Turkey in October 1914. By November, Basra was occupied. The immediate objectives had been outlined in Brigadier-General W.S. Delamain’s initial instructions: to protect for the Admiralty the refineries, tanks and pipelines of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company at Abadan and to assure pro-British Arab shaikhs of the Persian Gulf of Britain’s support against Turkey.¹ These stated aims were underpinned by a determination to maintain British supremacy in an area deemed vital to the defence of India and communications to the east in general.² The growth of German influence within the Ottoman Empire, prominent after the turn of the century and manifested in the construction of the Baghdad Railway, threatened British influence and trade in the Persian Gulf and moreover was viewed as a threat to India.³ British intervention in Mesopotamia in 1914 appeared to mark a departure from the previous governmental policy of preserving the Ottoman Empire. In reality, however, it underlined a continuity of strategic and economic policy that sought overwhelmingly to protect both India’s land and maritime frontiers from rival European powers.⁴ Dovetailed to this policy were factors of ‘face’ or ‘prestige’, maintained

by a reputation for military strength. This, as David French declares, became almost an end in itself.\(^5\)

War with Turkey nonetheless concerned the British policymakers. The Turkish sultan as *caliph* provided political and religious leadership for the British Empire’s considerable Sunni Muslim population in both Egypt and India. Fears of possible Turkish and German activity to incite pan-Islamism through subversion and military missions were confirmed by the *caliph*’s declaration of *jihad* on 14 November 1914. The British policymakers considered that if “Britain took steps to uphold her established position in the Gulf and perhaps expand it, such seditious activity would be less likely to be of real significance.”\(^6\)

These strands of unstated policy underpinned much of the subsequent decision making in London. And the GOI at Delhi was first to accept and then to advocate a forward policy in Mesopotamia during 1915. Major-General Charles Townshend’s defeat of Colonel Nurettin (Nur-ud-Din) and the Turkish 35th and 38th infantry divisions at Kut-al-Amara on 28 September 1915 created the very real possibility of Baghdad’s capture. However, Townshend’s subsequent defeat at Ctesiphon in November 1915 was followed by a 4 month siege that extensive relief operations failed to dislodge, and culminated in the surrender of over 13,000 British and Indian soldiers in April 1916. It marked the nadir of Britain and India’s military efforts in Mesopotamia.

Those who occupied positions of command in the IEFD during the 1915 offensive to capture Baghdad and the subsequent failed efforts to effect Townshend’s relief, have not fared well in subsequent analyses. The 1917 *Report of the Mesopotamia Commission*, established to investigate the origin, inception and conduct of the campaign to April 1916, cited Indian mismanagement of medical and transport provision, outdated equipment in consequence of pre-war retrenchment, and confused policy due to division of responsibility between London and India. The Commission, however, heavily criticized poor decision making amongst India’s senior military command for exacerbating material shortages, and so served to reinforce and illuminate the critical perception of command.

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