CHAPTER FOUR

THE INDIANIZATION OF THE EGYPTIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE, 1917–18: AN IMPERIAL TURNING POINT

Dennis Showalter

When Sir Edmund Allenby ceremonially walked into Jerusalem on 11 December 1917, he symbolized the end of the British Army’s most successful major campaign to date in the Great War. Relieving Sir Archibald Murray in command of the EEF in April, Allenby had transformed a directionless, demoralized army into a military instrument that hammered a Turkish opponent remarkable for its staying power, and whose effectiveness was significantly greater than generally recognized.1 The EEF’s 7 infantry and 3 cavalry divisions had developed into a battle winning instrument: a mix of veterans, some dating back to Gallipoli days, and replacements initiated into trench warfare under Middle Eastern conditions without suffering the casualties that were breaking morale in Europe. Allenby had shown unusual—and unexpected skill in handling this combined arms force, in particular making maximum use of mounted troops relegated almost everywhere else to marginal roles.

As the year turned, the question became what to do with this well calibrated military instrument. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George had initially supported a major offensive in Palestine as a means of refocusing a Eurocentric effort he regarded as counterproductive. Jerusalem’s fall in particular encouraged the volatile Welshman to seek a decisive blow in the eastern Mediterranean. Sir William Robertson, CIGS and a confirmed ‘Westerner’, was a good deal less sanguine.2 Allenby spoke pessimistically of the need to rest his men and improve his logistics. When consulted on the prospects of an advance to Aleppo,

1 Edward J. Erickson, Ottoman Army Effectiveness in World War I. A Comparative Study (New York: 2007).
cutting Turkey’s communications with Mesopotamia and perhaps knocking her out of the war, Allenby replied that he would need at least 16 more divisions, plus additional artillery and mounted troops.³

Lloyd George was dissatisfied with that answer—particularly after he was able to maneuver Robertson’s dismissal in February 1918. Instead, he convinced the newly established Entente Supreme War Council to accept a Joint Note calling for a decisive offensive against Turkey at the expense of offensive activity on the Western Front.⁴ The premier then sent his chief troubleshooter and factotum, Jan Smuts, to Egypt, with the mission of converting the Joint Note into a plan of campaign.⁵ Allenby more or less ignored recommendations that became irrelevant within weeks. On March 21, the Germans launched their final offensive in the West. A hard-hammered BEF turned to Palestine for reinforcements eventually totalling 2 full divisions, over 30 battalions of infantry, and a dozen regiments of cavalry. Allenby was left with one fully British infantry division as a military security blanket, 3 more skeleton ones, 2 cavalry divisions, and a near random collection of smaller units whose reliability he openly questioned.

An eviscerated EEF was euphemistically advised that “the situation in France necessitates the cancelling of instructions…. You will adopt a policy of active defence in Palestine for the time being.”⁶ In subsequent weeks, two raids across the Jordan River ended in defeat. Attempts to increase cooperation with the Arab Revolt foundered on mutual suspicion and misunderstanding—or perhaps they understood each other too well.⁷ In the words of the British High Commissioner in Egypt, “…the Arabs can’t be relied upon to any great extent until they are quite certain our side is going to win the war….they talk a

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⁴ Joint Note 12 was largely the work of General Sir Henry Wilson, and is one of the first examples of a policy paper based on modern methods of war gaming. Keith Jeffrey, Field Marshal Sir Henry Maitland Wilson. A Political Soldier (Oxford: 2006), 213–7.