PART III

SOUTH-WEST PERSIA
CHAPTER TWELVE
THE KARUN FRONT

At the end of September 1916 His Majesty’s Government redefined the mission of the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force as being “to protect the oil fields and pipe-lines in the vicinity of the Karun river, to maintain our occupation and control of the Basra vilayet, and to deny hostile access to the Persian Gulf and Southern Persia”. The instructions attached to the definition also stated: “…Military and political considerations connected with Nasiriyya, the Muntafik and Bani Lam tribes and the Pusht-i-Kuh—Bakhtiari country suggest retention of our present positions, if this can be achieved without undue sacrifices. Further, the Mesopotamia Expeditionary force should ensure that hostile parties do not work down south across the line Shustar-Isfahan”.¹

At this point I must pause to summarize, as briefly as I can, the military situation in Western Persia as it had developed since the entry of Turkey into the war.

The presence of Russian troops on Persian soil was pretext enough for a Turkish force to occupy Tabriz at the beginning of January (1915). Another Turkish column later advanced up the high road from Baghdad to Kirmanshah and Hamadan, where it was joined and welcomed by the Persian Governor-General of Burujird, Luristan and Kuzistan (a grandee entitled Nizam as-Saltana*, who had been heavily bribed and subsidized by the German holy-war missions to raise large numbers of irregulars), by gendarmes under their Swedish officers, and by groups of rabidly anti-Russian members of the ‘democratic’ party. Russian reinforcements under General Baratov had indeed landed at Anzali, but by October they had advanced only as far as Qazvin, just far enough to ward off the immediate threat to the capital, Tehran.

In December Baratov, with a column 11,000 strong, resumed his advance, feeling his way very slowly forward through Hamadan, Kangavar and Kirmanshah to Karind, which he occupied in March (1916). Here he was bogged down by snow and supply difficulties till the early